

Constitutional reform

Controversy or Consensus on how the UK should be governed?

It is arguably important in any democracy that there is a measure of agreement with and support for the constitutional rules that are in place. This chapter analyses public opinion on two constitutional issues which have become the source of debate: electoral reform and how the different parts of the UK should be governed. This chapter highlights the shifts in public opinion on these subjects over time and identifies a growing divergence in attitudes between England and the devolved nations, between supporters of different political parties, and between Leavers and Remainers.

Attitudes towards electoral reform, 1983-2021



Source: British Social Attitudes, except 1983, 1992: British Election Study

Overview

The constitution has become an increased source of political division

Conservative and Labour supporters have drawn apart from each other in their attitudes towards how the UK should be governed. Equally, Conservative and SNP supporters are now further apart in Scotland, as are DUP and Sinn Féin identifiers in Northern Ireland.

- In 2011 24% of Conservative supporters in England said that Scotland should become independent, as did 25% of Labour supporters. Now only 16% of Conservatives express that view, compared with 30% of their Labour counterparts.
 - While 74% of Conservative identifiers think that the laws for England should continue to be made by Westminster as now, that view is shared by only 52% of Labour identifiers.
 - While 82% of SNP supporters now back independence, up from 51% in 2012, at 5% the proportion of Conservative identifiers who do so is little changed.
 - And while the proportion of Sinn Féin identifiers who back Northern Ireland being part of the UK has fallen from 37% in 2010 to just only one in ten (10%) now, at 94% support among DUP identifiers is undiminished.
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A majority of opposition party supporters now favour changing the electoral system

Support for introducing proportional representation in elections to the House of Commons is at its highest level since the survey began, primarily as a result of an increase in support among Labour party identifiers.

- Around half of the public (51%) are now in favour of introducing proportional representation for Westminster elections, up from 27% in 2011 immediately following the alternative vote referendum.
 - For the first time a majority of Labour supporters (61%) are in favour of electing MPs using proportional representation (PR). At the time of the alternative vote referendum in 2011 only 27% held that view.
 - Now 69% of Liberal Democrat supporters are in favour of a switch to PR, up from 46% in 2011.
 - Conservative party supporters remain in favour of the status quo – only 29% support changing the system.
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Increased support in Scotland for Scottish independence and in Northern Ireland for Irish reunification

Support in Scotland for Scottish independence and in Northern Ireland for Irish reunification has increased in recent years, particularly among supporters of nationalist parties.

- Just over half of people in Scotland (52%) favour independence, up from 23% in 2012, when the UK government agreed to the independence referendum that was held two years later.
- Only one in four (25%) of people in England think that Scotland should be independent, unchanged from 2012.
- Support in Northern Ireland for Irish reunification has increased from 14% in 2015 to 30% now.
- In contrast, those in Britain who support Irish unification has fallen from 52% at the time of the Good Friday agreement in 1998 to 41% now. In contrast, 49% believe now that Northern Ireland should be part of the UK, compared with 26% in 1998.

Brexit has played a role in shifting attitudes towards the constitution

Some Remain voters appear to have reacted to being on the losing side in the EU referendum by now wanting to change the rules under which the UK is governed.

- 73% of pro-European Labour supporters back a change to proportional representation, compared with 52% of Labour Eurosceptics.
 - 65% of Remainers in Scotland now back Scottish independence, up from 44% in 2016.
 - In 2016, 64% of people in Northern Ireland who voted Remain were in favour of being part of the UK. Now only 37% are.
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Introduction

Recent years have witnessed a number of significant changes to and controversies about the constitutional rules under which the United Kingdom is governed. The relationship between the Government and Parliament and between them both and the judiciary (Craig, 2020; Elliott, 2021), the rules about elections, the relationship between both Scotland and Northern Ireland and the rest of the UK, and how best to govern England have all been the subject of change and/or controversy. But where does the public across the UK stand on these debates and disputes? That is the question addressed by this chapter.

We focus, in particular, on two topics. The first is the rules about elections. In October 2019, Parliament decided for the second time in two years to bypass the provisions of the Fixed Terms Parliament Act 2011, under which elections should normally only be held every five years, thereby triggering the 2019 general election (Ford et al, 2020). The Fixed Terms Parliament Act has since been repealed, and, as a result, a Prime Minister once more has the near unfettered right to call an election at a time of their own choosing, a change that was opposed by the House of Lords. Meanwhile, there continues to be debate about whether MPs should still be elected by the single member plurality electoral system, or whether some form of proportional representation (as is already used in elections to all the devolved legislatures) should be introduced instead. Such a change has long been backed by the Liberal Democrats (who, as part of their coalition agreement with the Conservatives, secured a referendum on the non-proportional alternative vote system in 2011). Meanwhile, Labour contemplated making such a move before it regained power at the 1997 general election (Butler, 1993), only to drop the issue once they were in government. However, after a decade in opposition the issue has resurfaced in the party – a motion backing PR was supported at the 2021 Labour conference by 80% of constituency parties, and was only overturned as a result of the overwhelming opposition of trade union delegations (Walker, 2021).

Our second topic is the territorial governance of the UK. The decision to leave the European Union, a decision that was opposed by 62% of voters in Scotland, has led to repeated calls from the Scottish Government for it to be allowed to hold another referendum on whether Scotland should become independent, calls that have been rejected by the UK government (Sturgeon, 2017; Mnyanda, 2022). At the same time, Brexit has provoked a still unresolved debate about how best to manage Northern Ireland's relationship with the rest of the UK, given that there is a shared wish that there should not be a 'hard' border on the island of Ireland even though, in the wake of Brexit, it now represents an external border of the EU single market. The solution that was eventually agreed between the UK and the EU – to keep Northern Ireland in the single market – entails checks on goods that cross the Irish Sea from Great Britain to Northern Ireland. These checks have drawn the opposition of unionist politicians in Northern Ireland, opposition that has led to the de facto suspension of Northern

Ireland's devolved institutions and to a proposal from the UK government to repeal, unilaterally, the terms of the EU Withdrawal Treaty (Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office, 2022). Meanwhile, in England the government has scrapped a parliamentary procedure that enabled English MPs to veto English-only legislation, but has sought to introduce further devolution in England as part of its 'levelling up' agenda (Gover and Kenny, 2021; HM Government, 2022).

These are clearly important debates. When and how elections are held can determine who holds the reins of power. How the various parts of the country are governed potentially has implications for the territorial integrity of the UK. Meanwhile, it is arguably important in any democracy that there is a measure of agreement with and support for the constitutional rules that are in place (Baier, 1989; Rawls, 1996). To secure the compliance of citizens with decisions with which they disagree, democracies need the consent of the governed, and that consent is more likely to be forthcoming if there is widespread public support for the rules under which political power is attained and exercised (Levi, 1997). But to what extent are the debates about elections and the territorial governance of the UK an indication that all is not well in that regard? Is the controversy that surrounds these issues among politicians reflected in a divergence of attitudes between voters of different partisan outlooks and identities? And what might be the implications for how the UK is governed in future?

We begin by examining trends in attitudes towards the rules of elections and the territorial governance of the UK among the public as a whole. Are the current arrangements as popular as ever or is there evidence that significant sections of the electorate are unhappy with the rules under which they are governed? We then assess the extent to which those with different party political sympathies and those with different views on Brexit hold divergent attitudes on these subjects. Are disagreements about how the UK should be governed part of a partisan battle, and thus potentially a point of political dispute? In each case, where relevant, we look separately at attitudes in England, Scotland and Northern Ireland, availing ourselves, where necessary, of the results of separate surveys conducted in the devolved nations. We conclude by considering the implications of our findings for the future governance of the UK.

Have attitudes towards current constitutional arrangements changed over time?

Attitudes towards electoral rules

On our latest British Social Attitudes (BSA) survey, we repeated a question about changing the system for electing MPs to the House of Commons that has been asked on numerous occasions since 1983. It summarises for respondents two of the key arguments that are often made for and against changing the system (Renwick, 2011) and then elicits their own view as follows:

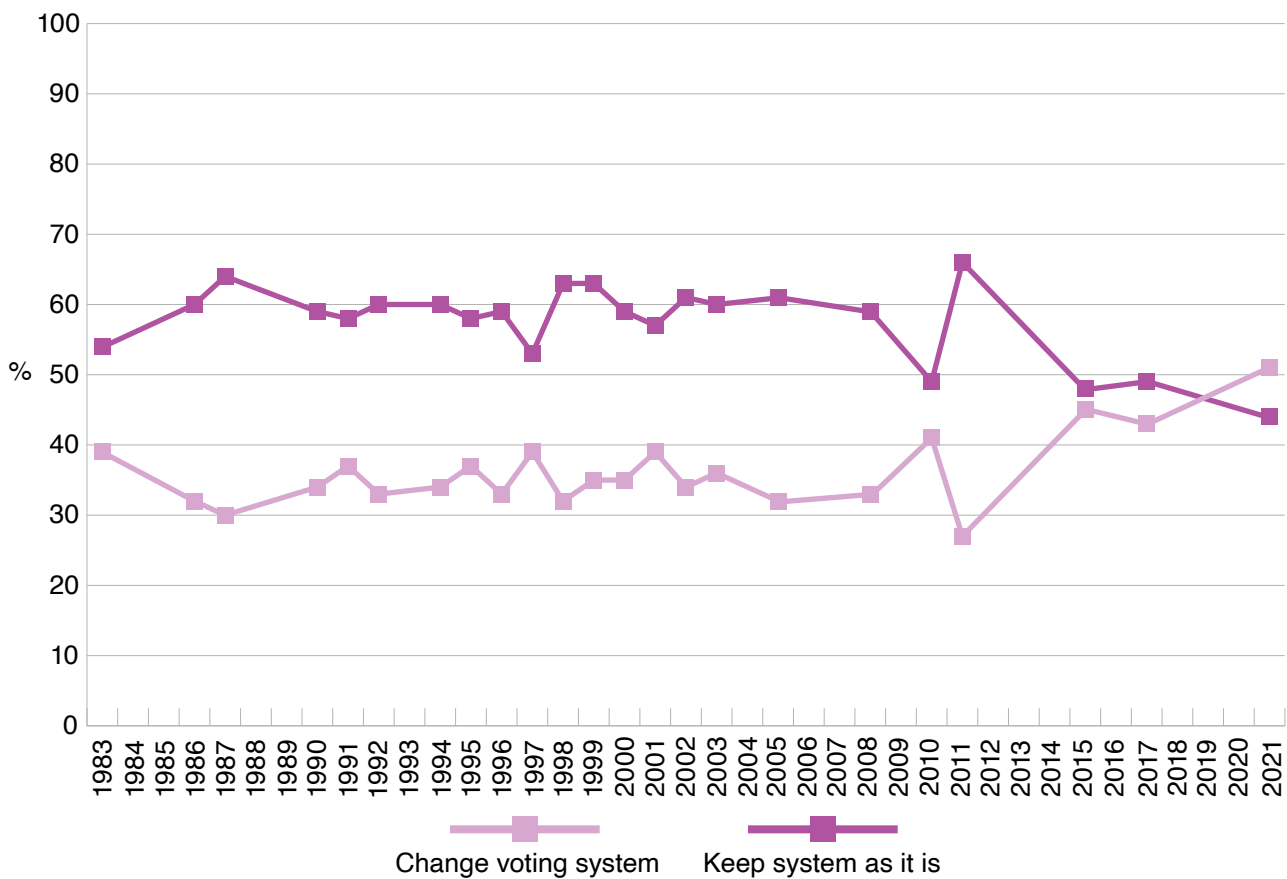
Some people say we should change the voting system for general elections to the UK House of Commons to allow smaller political parties to get a fairer share of MPs.

Others say that we should keep the voting system for the House of Commons as it is to produce effective government. Which view comes closer to your own?

The first option implies a switch to a system of proportional representation, while the second refers to the existing single member plurality system.

Figure 1 shows that there has been a marked and consistent change in the pattern of responses to this question in recent years.

Figure 1 Attitudes to electoral reform, 1983-2021



Source: British Social Attitudes, apart from 1983, 1992: British Election Study
 The data on which Figure 1 is based can be found in Table A.1 in the appendix to this chapter

Before 2010, the proportion who backed changing the voting system never reached 40% while those in favour of keeping the existing system never fell below a half. In 2010, for the first time, less than half (49%) were in favour of maintaining the status quo, while, at 41%, those who backed change exceeded two in five for the first time. However, attitudes shifted sharply back in the opposite direction the following

year, after the rejection of the alternative vote in the 2011 referendum. Indeed, at 66%, support for keeping the current system was at a record high. However, by 2015, the position had shifted again, such that those supporting the retention of the existing system were now only between four and six percentage points more numerous than those who wanted a change. Meanwhile, in our latest survey, the balance of opinion has tilted in favour of change—slightly more than half (51%) now back switching to proportional representation, while only 44% want to keep the existing system. It appears that the single member plurality system is less popular than it has been at any point in the last forty years.

But what of the decision to dispense with fixed terms parliaments and restore the ability of a Prime Minister to call an election at a time of their choosing? On this topic, we asked respondents the following:

Which of these statements comes closest to your view?

General elections should be held on a fixed date every four or five years,

Or, the Prime Minister should be able to hold a general election whenever they decide?

When we previously asked this question in 2011, just as the Fixed Terms Parliament Act was being passed, no less than 79% said that elections should be held on a fixed date, while just 16% felt that the timing of an election should be left to the Prime Minister to decide. The change seems to have been popular. Despite the bypassing of the Act in recent years and now its repeal, the public's position has not markedly changed. Still as many as 75% favour elections being held on a fixed date, although 23% support giving Prime Ministers the ability to choose. Either voters are not keen at being asked to appear too often at their polling station or they feel that giving Prime Ministers control over election dates is an unacceptable concentration of power in one pair of hands.

Attitudes towards the governance of Scotland

We now turn to people's attitudes towards how the different parts of the UK should be governed, beginning with Scotland. Although a referendum on Scottish independence was held only eight years ago, the question of Scotland's constitutional status has become hotly contested once more. The Scottish First Minister, Nicola Sturgeon, has indicated that she wishes to hold a referendum in October 2023, while in the meantime her government is issuing a set of white papers making the case for independence (Mnyanda, 2022; Scottish Government 2022a; 2022b). The Scottish Government has also asked the Supreme Court to rule on whether it can hold a referendum without Westminster's say so. In opposing a referendum, the UK government has taken a stance that is widely believed to be popular in England, where some commentators have suggested there has been an increase in an English nationalism that is resentful of the privileges

and advantages that Scotland has acquired through devolution (Henderson and Wyn Jones, 2021). We might note too that, because the public health decisions about how to handle the COVID-19 pandemic were made separately in the devolved nations and they sometimes made different, well-publicised decisions from those the UK government introduced for England, devolution has recently had an unusually high level of visibility for the public in England and that might also perhaps have influenced English attitudes.¹ Against this backdrop, first we assess what constitutional settlement for Scotland people resident in England think should be put in place and then examine attitudes in Scotland itself.

Attitudes in England

Since the advent of Scottish devolution in 1997, BSA has asked on a regular basis the following question about how Scotland should be governed:

Which of the following statements comes closest to your view?

Scotland should become independent, separate from the UK and the European Union

Scotland should become independent, separate from the UK but part of the European Union

Scotland should remain part of the UK, with its own elected parliament which has some taxation powers

Scotland should remain part of the UK, with its own elected parliament which has no taxation powers

Scotland should remain part of the UK without an elected parliament

Table 1 shows how people living in England have responded to this question. To simplify matters, those who said that Scotland should be independent, either inside or outside the EU, are combined, as are those who said that Scotland should have its own devolved parliament within the framework of the UK, irrespective of their view on what tax powers it should have. The table reveals that only a minority support independence. In the first decade of devolution just under a fifth of people in England tended to take that view, a figure that since has done no more than edge up to between a fifth and a quarter. At the same time, however, there is little sign of much opposition to Scotland having its own parliament. Only 15% currently oppose a Scottish parliament, a little lower than the proportion between 2011 and 2015 and largely on a par with the figures being recorded before then. Meanwhile, a little over half (54%) back the status quo – Scotland having its own parliament – much as has been the position in most (though not all) years since 1999.

¹ On how attitudes towards health care during the pandemic differed between Scotland and England, see the chapter by Deeming in this report.

Table 1 Attitudes in England towards how Scotland should be governed, 1997-2021

	1997	1999	2000	2001	2002	2003	2007
How Scotland should be governed	%	%	%	%	%	%	%
Independence	14	21	19	19	19	17	19
Devolution	55	57	52	60	52	58	48
No Parliament	23	14	17	11	15	13	18
<i>Unweighted base</i>	2536	902	1928	2761	1924	1917	859
	2011	2012	2013	2015	2017	2020	2021
	%	%	%	%	%	%	%
Independence	26	25	21	22	22	24	25
Devolution	44	43	48	50	55	54	54
No Parliament	19	23	18	19	15	14	15
<i>Unweighted base</i>	967	939	925?	1865	891	1164	1804

Source: British Social Attitudes, except 1997: British Election Study

Base: Respondents in England only

One reason why it has been suggested that people in England might object to Scotland's devolution settlement is that, not only can the Scottish Parliament make decisions for Scotland that are different from those made in England (and, has, for example, abolished university tuition fees and charges for personal care for older people) but also that devolution is accompanied by a financial settlement (inherited from before devolution) that means that public spending per head is higher than south of the border (McLean and Macmillan, 2003; Scottish Government, 2022c). During the last two decades, BSA has occasionally asked the following question:

Would you say that compared with other parts of the United Kingdom, Scotland gets pretty much its fair share of government spending, more than its fair share, or less than its fair share of government spending?

Table 2 reveals that the single most popular response among people living in England has always been that Scotland obtains pretty much its fair share of spending. We should note too that, in response to this question, a high proportion of people say "don't know", suggesting that it is an issue that has a low level of visibility for many people in England.² That said, between 2003 and 2011 the proportion who said that Scotland secures more than its fair share of spending increased from 22% to 44%. However, that proportion has since fallen back

² It will be noted that the proportion saying "don't know" did fall in 2021 to 13%, after having previously always been above 20%. At the same time, it will be noted that there has been a nine-point increase in the proportion saying "pretty much its fair share". In the 2021 survey respondents answered this question online (with "don't know" not immediately offered as a response option) rather than in response to an interviewer. This change may well have encouraged some respondents to choose the more immediately available middle option rather than opt to say "don't know".

somewhat, and in our latest survey stands at around a third (34%). There is evidently an undercurrent of concern in England about Scotland's share of government spending, albeit it is one that has become somewhat less marked in recent years.

Table 2 Attitudes in England towards Scotland's share of government spending, 2000-2021

	2000	2001	2002	2003	2007	2008	2009
Compared with other parts of the UK, Scotland's share of government spending is...							
	%	%	%	%	%	%	%
More than its fair share	21	24	24	22	32	41	41
Pretty much its fair share	42	44	44	45	38	33	30
Less than its fair share	11	9	9	8	7	3	4
Don't know	25	23	22	25	22	23	25
<i>Unweighted base</i>	<i>1928</i>	<i>2761</i>	<i>2897</i>	<i>1917</i>	<i>859</i>	<i>982</i>	<i>980</i>
	2010	2011	2012	2013	2015	2021	
	%	%	%	%	%	%	
More than its fair share	38	44	43	36	39	34	
Pretty much its fair share	29	30	30	37	31	40	
Less than its fair share	4	4	5	4	8	13	
Don't know	28	23	22	22	22	13	
<i>Unweighted base</i>	<i>913</i>	<i>967</i>	<i>937</i>	<i>1084</i>	<i>1078</i>	<i>1804</i>	

Base: Respondents in England only

A second reason why people in England might object to the devolution settlement in Scotland is that, while decisions north of the border about a wide range of domestic matters are made by members of the Scottish Parliament, and thus are decisions over which elected representatives from England do not have any influence, decisions for England about the same matters are made by the UK Parliament in which Scottish MPs (and those from Wales and Northern Ireland) have a vote. Consequently, it could be the case that legislation that only affects England is passed even though a majority of MPs representing English constituencies are opposed. This was the case, for example, when university tuition fees were increased to £3000 in England in 2006 (Lynch, 2004). True, in 2015, following the outcome of the Scottish referendum, a new procedure was adopted by the House of Commons that, in effect, gave English MPs the ability to reject laws that only apply to England even if among all MPs a majority were in favour. However, more recently the UK government has taken a different view as to how best to manage England's position in the Union and in 2021 the procedure was abolished (attitudes in England towards how England should be governed are discussed further below) (Gover and Kenny, 2016; 2021).

The fact that Scottish MPs can vote on laws that only affect England has always struck most people in England as an anomaly. As early as 2000, 64% agreed with the proposition that:

Now that Scotland has its own parliament, Scottish MP's should no longer be allowed to vote in the House of Commons on laws that only affect England

That proportion has remained relatively stable ever since and stands at 61% in our most recent survey (see Table 3). What, however, has changed is that, whereas in the early years of devolution slightly less than one in five agreed strongly with the proposition, since 2010 the figure has typically been at or around three in ten, suggesting that there has been an increase in some people's intensity of feeling about the issue. Although the new parliamentary procedure that was introduced in 2015 did not stop Scottish MPs from having a vote on English laws, it is far from clear on our evidence that the government's decision to abandon that procedure was consistent with the sentiment on the issue among voters in England.

Table 3 Attitudes in England towards Scottish MPs voting on English laws, 2000-2021

	2000	2001	2003	2007	2010	2012	2013	2015	2018	2021
Scottish MPs should no longer be allowed to vote in the House of Commons on laws that only affect England	%	%	%	%	%	%	%	%	%	%
Agree strongly	18	19	22	25	31	29	29	28	26	29
Agree	45	38	38	36	35	36	33	32	33	32
Neither agree nor disagree	19	18	18	17	17	15	26	20	19	23
Disagree	8	11	10	9	6	7	7	9	8	8
Disagree strongly	1	2	1	1	1	1	1	2	3	4
<i>Unweighted base</i>	1695	2341	1530	739	773	802	962	1812	2309	860

Base: Respondents in England only

In all years apart from 2013 and 2021 "can't choose" was offered as an explicit response option.

Attitudes in Scotland

How do the attitudes of people living in Scotland on the issue of independence compare with the attitudes of those living in England? In short, our data suggest that attitudes north of the border towards how Scotland should be governed are very different from those in England. Table 4 is based on data from the Scottish Social Attitudes (SSA) survey, a parallel survey to BSA, which has regularly asked the same question about Scotland's constitutional status as asked on BSA (see the appendix to this chapter for more details on SSA). It shows that a little over half of people in Scotland (52%) now say that they are in favour of independence (compared with a quarter in England). This represents a substantial change from the position when

the 2014 SSA was conducted shortly before the 2014 independence referendum. Until that ballot was held, support for independence oscillated between no more than a quarter (or even a little below) and a third. But since 2014 there has been a marked increase in the level of support for independence, and especially so since the EU referendum of 2016, after which leaving the UK became more popular than devolution for the first time. Against this backdrop, it is perhaps not surprising that Scotland's constitutional status should have become an issue of lively debate once more. The Union has certainly become decidedly less popular north of the border.

Table 4 Attitudes in Scotland towards how Scotland should be governed, 1999-2021

	1999	2000	2001	2002	2003	2004	2005	2006	2007	2009
How Scotland should be governed	%	%	%	%	%	%	%	%	%	%
Independence	27	30	27	30	26	32	35	30	24	28
Devolution	59	55	59	52	56	45	44	54	62	56
No Scottish parliament	10	12	9	13	13	17	14	9	9	8
<i>Unweighted base</i>	1482	1663	1605	1665	1508	1637	1549	1594	1508	1482
	2010	2011	2012	2013	2014	2015	2016	2017	2019	2021
	%	%	%	%	%	%	%	%	%	%
Independence	23	32	23	29	33	39	46	45	51	52
Devolution	61	58	61	55	50	49	42	41	36	38
No Scottish parliament	10	6	11	9	7	6	8	8	7	8
<i>Unweighted base</i>	1495	1197	1229	1497	1501	1288	1237	1234	1022	1365

Source: Scottish Social Attitudes except 2021: ScotCen Panel

Attitudes to the governance of Northern Ireland

However, the more immediate issue so far as the territorial governance of the UK is concerned has been the position of Northern Ireland. As we noted earlier, the implementation of Brexit has resulted in the introduction of checks on goods crossing from Great Britain to Northern Ireland, opposition to which by the Democratic Unionist Party (DUP) has meant that, since May 2021, the Northern Ireland Assembly has been unable to meet. The DUP's disquiet is shared by the UK government, which, keen to ensure that Northern Ireland remains a full part of the UK single market and, in turn, of the Union, is now contemplating overturning the terms of the post-Brexit arrangements for Northern Ireland that it originally agreed with the EU (Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office, 2022). But is the government's commitment to keeping Northern Ireland within the United Kingdom in line with public opinion, both inside and outside Northern Ireland itself?

Attitudes in Great Britain

In order to ascertain attitudes in the rest of the UK, in our latest survey, we reinstated a question that was regularly asked on BSA until 2008 but had not been included since then:

Do you think the long-term policy for Northern Ireland should be for it to remain part of the United Kingdom or to unify with the rest of Ireland?

The pattern of responses to this question has consistently suggested that there is a lower level of commitment in the rest of the UK to keeping Northern Ireland within the Union than there is for retaining Scotland's membership. As Table 5 shows, as many as 41% of people in Great Britain think that Northern Ireland should unify with the rest of Ireland, well above the 25% of people in England who think that Scotland should become independent. That said, support for keeping Northern Ireland as part of the UK is far higher now than it was throughout the eighties and nineties, and even in the early years of this century. Throughout that period, consistently over half of people in Great Britain thought that Northern Ireland should unify with the rest of Ireland. Now nearly half (49%) believe it should remain in the UK. It may well be that the negative impression of Northern Ireland created by the 'Troubles' resulted in a feeling among some that the rest of the UK would be better off if it left. If so, that sentiment appears gradually to have faded somewhat after the Good Friday agreement of 1998 heralded a final end to the civil strife of the Troubles, and paved the way for Sinn Féin, once the political wing of the pro-nationalist Irish Republican Army, to play a prominent role within Northern Ireland's new devolved institutions (Fenton, 2018).

Table 5 Attitudes in Great Britain on the long-term policy for Northern Ireland, 1983-2021

	1983	1986	1989	1991	1993	1995	1998
Northern Ireland should...	%	%	%	%	%	%	%
Remain in UK	28	27	30	28	28	29	26
Unify with Ireland	58	57	55	54	54	52	52
<i>Unweighted base</i>	1761	3100	3029	1445	1461	1227	1035
	2000	2002	2004	2006	2007	2008	2021
	%	%	%	%	%	%	%
Remain in UK	25	27	32	34	32	44	49
Unify with Ireland	57	49	45	39	40	35	41
<i>Unweighted base</i>	2293	1123	1062	1077	4124	992	2073

This question was administered by an interviewer as part of the main survey in 2006 and 2007 and asked on a supplementary questionnaire in 2008 (and online in 2021).

Attitudes in Northern Ireland

The recent trend in attitudes in Northern Ireland itself, however, has been in the opposite direction (see also Hayward et al., 2022). Since 2007, the annual Northern Ireland Life and Times survey (NILT, see the appendix to this chapter for more information on this survey) has asked its respondents:

Do you think the long-term policy for Northern Ireland should be for it to...

...remain part of the United Kingdom, with direct rule?

...remain part of the United Kingdom, with devolved government?

...reunify with the rest of Ireland?

...be an independent state?

As Table 6 shows, up until 2017 the proportion saying that Northern Ireland should reunify with the rest of Ireland rarely exceeded 20%, while only very small proportions indeed said that it should become an independent state. A half or more backed being part of the UK with devolution, while a further 15% or so preferred Northern Ireland being ruled directly by the UK government. In short, consistently around two-thirds of people in Northern Ireland wanted to remain part of the UK.

Table 6 Attitudes in Northern Ireland towards its constitutional status, 2007-2021

	2007	2008	2009	2010	2012	2013	2014
Northern Ireland should...	%	%	%	%	%	%	%
Remain in UK, direct rule	11	17	18	15	12	12	16
Remain in UK, devolution	55	53	51	58	50	54	50
Reunify with Ireland	23	18	21	16	16	15	17
Be independent	5	6	4	3	5	6	4
<i>Unweighted base</i>	1179	1215	1228	1205	1204	1210	1211
	2015	2016	2017	2018	2019	2020	2021
	%	%	%	%	%	%	%
Remain in UK, direct rule	19	12	14	21	16	15	12
Remain in UK, devolution	51	54	47	41	44	40	37
Reunify with Ireland	14	19	20	19	22	26	30
Be independent	3	4	3	2	3	7	7
<i>Unweighted base</i>	1202	1208	1203	1201	1203	1292	1397

Source: Northern Ireland Life and Times

However, that is not the position now. There were already signs in 2019 and 2020 that opinion might be shifting away from being part of the

Union. Now, in the latest survey, slightly less than half (49%) say that Northern Ireland should remain in the UK, while as many as 30% say it should reunify (and 7% chose being an independent state). This pattern is also reflected in the responses to a second question that appeared on the latest NILT survey. As many as 34% say that, in a referendum, they would vote in favour of unification, while slightly less than half (48%) say they would vote against.³ It seems that the efforts made by the UK government to maintain Northern Ireland's links with the rest of the UK in the wake of Brexit have not helped persuade voters in Northern Ireland that that is where their interests now lie.

Attitudes towards the governance of England

As we have already noted, the establishment of devolved institutions in the rest of the UK has resulted in a debate about how England should be governed. Apart from the question of which MPs should be able to vote on laws that only apply to England, there is a continuing debate about whether there should be some form of devolution for England (Hazell, 2006; Kenny et al., 2018). The last Labour government contemplated having regional assemblies in each region of England, but this was dropped after voters in the North East of England rejected the idea in a referendum (Sandford, 2009). More recently, in most of England's major metropolitan areas the current government has introduced combined local authorities headed by a Mayor. At the same time, there continues to be a campaign in favour of England having its own devolved parliament (Campaign for an English Parliament, nd).

Since 1999, BSA has periodically asked people in England the following:

With all the changes going on in the way the different parts of Great Britain are run, which of the following statements do you think would be best for England...

For England to be governed as it is now, with laws made by the UK Parliament

For each region of England to have its own assembly that runs services like health

For England as a whole to have its own new parliament with law making powers

As Table 7 shows, faced with these three options, only on one occasion have less than half of the public said that the laws for England should be made by the UK Parliament. Moreover, there is no consistent sign of this proportion declining over time – indeed, at 58% the figure in our latest survey is the second highest that BSA has recorded. There is

³ A similar balance of opinion was obtained in an online survey of 364 people in Northern Ireland conducted for the NatCen Panel at the same time as the most recent BSA survey (see appendix to this chapter for details). In response to the same question that appeared on BSA, 61% said that Northern Ireland should remain part of the UK, while 37% indicated that it should reunify with the rest of Ireland.

evidently a more limited appetite in England for the kind of devolution that the rest of the UK enjoys, a difference that may be thought to make it difficult to establish a symmetric system of devolution throughout the UK. True, around two in five are in favour of some form of devolution, but that support is evenly divided between those who would like an English Parliament akin to the legislative bodies elsewhere in the UK and those who would prefer a more limited form of regional administrative devolution, of which the current government's 'metro mayors' may be thought a variety. This division makes it even more difficult to devise a system of devolution for England that is likely to acquire widespread public consent.

Table 7 Attitudes in England towards how England should be governed, 1999-2021

	1999	2001	2003	2005	2007	2009
How England should be governed	%	%	%	%	%	%
Governed as it is now	62	57	50	54	57	49
Each region to have its own assembly+	15	23	26	20	14	15
England to have its own Parliament	18	16	18	18	17	29
<i>Unweighted base</i>	<i>2718</i>	<i>2761</i>	<i>3709</i>	<i>1794</i>	<i>859</i>	<i>980</i>
	2011	2013	2015	2018	2020	2021
	%	%	%	%	%	%
Governed as it is now	56	56	51	52	55	58
Each region to have its own assembly	12	14	22	18	20	19
England to have its own Parliament	25	20	19	22	22	20
<i>Unweighted base</i>	<i>967</i>	<i>925</i>	<i>1865</i>	<i>2535</i>	<i>1164</i>	<i>1804</i>

Base: Respondents in England only

+ In 2005, the second option reads "that makes decisions about the region's economy, planning and housing". The 2003 survey carried both versions of this option and demonstrated that the difference of wording did not make a material difference to the pattern of response. The figures quoted for 2003 are those for the two versions combined.

Summary

Two key patterns emerge from the trends in attitudes towards the constitutional questions discussed above. First, on elections and the governance of the country at least, the UK's current constitutional arrangements face some new challenges. Public opinion has turned against the current electoral system, while allowing the Prime Minister to be able to choose the date of an election has never been popular. Meanwhile, support for the Union has weakened in both Scotland and Northern Ireland. Second, a gap has now opened up between those two devolved territories and public opinion elsewhere in the UK, where support for the Union is higher and, so far as Northern Ireland at least is concerned, seems to have strengthened somewhat. At the same time, England also shows little sign of becoming keener on the idea of devolution for itself – other than not allowing Scottish MPs to vote on

English laws, where a procedure that might be thought to address that sentiment has now been withdrawn. Finding a set of constitutional arrangements that would satisfy public opinion across the UK appears to have become more difficult.

Political differences in support for existing constitutional arrangements

If there are debates and disagreements about how a country is run, one potential consequence is that these disagreements become part of the battle between the political parties. One or more parties might want to see the electoral system changed, while others might wish to keep the status quo. Some parties might wish to change how the different parts of the UK are governed, others not. In these circumstances, rather than being regarded as impartial rules that everyone accepts and abides by, a country's constitutional rules may be viewed as giving a partisan advantage to one side or the other, thereby making it more difficult to secure voters' consent to the decisions that government makes (Levi, 1997; Anderson et al., 2007). Indeed, at worst such a situation can lead to civil strife and armed conflict, as the Troubles in Northern Ireland all too vividly illustrated.

Meanwhile, the decision to leave the EU split public opinion down the middle – and, it seems, continues to do so (Curtice, 2021a). It is also a subject on which many people feel strongly, such that many people regard themselves as Remainers or Leavers (Hobolt et al., 2020). Moreover, we have previously demonstrated that in the wake of the Brexit decision those who voted Leave now have greater trust and confidence in how Britain is governed (Curtice and Scholes, 2021). In short, here perhaps is a decision to which some of the losers are reluctant to consent. If so, then perhaps those who voted Remain have become more likely to feel that the constitutional rules should now be changed, in the belief that a change to those rules might help pave the way for a reversal of some or all of the decisions that have been made about Brexit. Has dissatisfaction with Brexit helped stimulate demand for constitutional change?

We have already seen that, in many respects, the balance of public opinion is now often tilted against the constitutional arrangements that are currently in place, and that, in some respects, public opinion in England on how the devolved territories should be governed is at variance with that elsewhere in the UK. But is it also the case that underneath these overall results there is evidence that those who support different parties and those who have different views about Brexit have come to have different attitudes towards Britain's constitutional rules? And, if so, does this development help explain some of the changes in the balance of opinion over time that we have identified? We consider these questions with respect to how public opinion is divided on each of the four constitutional questions – electoral reform, the governance of Scotland, the situation in Northern Ireland, and English devolution – discussed above.

Electoral rules

We begin by looking at how those of a different political persuasion have responded over the last 35 years to the question we introduced in Figure 1 above. Table 8 shows, for each party, the net level of support for changing the system, that is the percentage who say we should change the electoral system (to one that is fairer to small parties), minus the percentage who indicated that we should keep the electoral system as it is. A positive score thus indicates that more people favour than support reform, while a negative score means the opposite. People are classified as Conservative, Labour, etc. supporters according to BSA's measure of party identification, about which more can be found in the Technical Details. This measure is intended to identify those who have a degree of emotional and perhaps more long-term commitment to a party rather than simply people's current voting preference (Dalton, 2021).

Table 8 Net support for electoral reform, by party identification 1986-2021+

	1986	1987	1990	1991	1994	1995	1996	1997	1998	1999	2000
Party identification											
Conservative	-47	-62	-52	-47	-52	-49	-53	-38	-50	-42	-39
Labour	-29	-27	-16	-18	-17	-21	-23	-14	-35	-34	-29
Liberal Democrat	+11	+8	+29	+32	-1	+12	+19	+35	+10	+2	+19
None	-36	-40	-13	-17	-22	-16	-17	-9	-31	-23	-21
	2001	2002	2003	2005	2008	2010	2011	2015	2017	2021	
Conservative	-36	-41	-41	-42	-39	-37	-65	-29	-32	-39	
Labour	-30	-36	-34	-44	-28	-10	-41	-5	-1	+27	
Liberal Democrat	+32	+17	+10	+16	-19	+43	-3	+47	+45	+43	
None	-7	-21	-8	-14	-17	-12	-25	-15	-6	+3	

+ Net support = % in favour of changing the electoral system minus the proportion who wish to keep it as it is.

The unweighted bases for each entry in this table are shown in Table A.2 in the appendix to this chapter

There has always been some disagreement between those of different political persuasions about the electoral system. In most years, Liberal Democrat identifiers have been more likely to back changing the system than keeping the existing system.⁴ However, for most of the period there has always been high levels of support among Conservative and Labour identifiers for keeping the current system, albeit that view was somewhat more popular among Labour

⁴ That said, it might be thought that the level of support often appeared to be surprisingly low for supporters of a party that has long backed a switch to proportional representation and has often been significantly disadvantaged by the current system.

identifiers between 1998 and 2008, when the party was in government, than it had often been previously when the party was in opposition. In any event, at least so far as the supporters of Britain's two largest parties were concerned, there was a broad consensus in favour of keeping the first-past-the-post electoral system.

However, that consensus has now broken down. There were already signs of this in our 2015 and 2017 surveys, when, after a further considerable spell in opposition, the Labour Party's supporters were nearly evenly divided on the subject. However, in 2021, for the first time, the proportion of Labour supporters in favour of electoral reform is higher—indeed much higher (61%)—than the proportion who would prefer to keep the current system (34%) (thereby producing a net level of support of +27). These figures represent almost a complete reversal of the equivalent results just a decade ago when, in the 2011 BSA survey, undertaken shortly after the referendum on the alternative vote, only 27% of Labour supporters were in favour of electoral reform and 69% were in favour of keeping the system as it is. In comparison, attitudes among Conservative supporters towards electoral reform have remained relatively stable. Around seven in ten Conservative supporters (68%) are in favour of keeping the current electoral system, while 29% support change (a net score of -39), figures that are consistent with most of the readings we have obtained during the last two decades.

Much of the explanation for our finding earlier that, for the first time in response to our question, we now see a majority in favour of electoral reform, lies, then, in a sharp change in the attitudes of Labour identifiers during the course of the last decade. Meanwhile, since 2015, when the party suffered a severe reverse in its fortunes after a spell as part of a coalition government, support for change among Liberal Democrat supporters has hovered around a record level of seven in ten (while those who do not identify with a party are for the first time marginally in favour of a change). It would seem that, in the event of a future hung parliament in which Labour and the Liberal Democrats might be seeking to reach an agreement that could pave the way to the formation of a new government, a commitment to take steps towards electoral reform would be likely to prove popular with the supporters of both parties.

Has a difference of outlook also emerged between Remainers and Leavers? Table 9 shows attitudes towards electoral reform broken down by where people stand on Britain's relationship with Europe. On the right-hand side, we divide people according to how they say they would vote now on the question that appeared on the ballot paper in 2016. However, this is not an analysis that we can take back to before the 2016 referendum. In order to assess how the attitudes of 'Eurosceptics' and 'Europhiles' compare now with the position before the EU referendum we classify respondents according to their answer to the following question:⁵

⁵ Before 2016 the question began 'Do you think Britain's long-term policy should be...'

Leaving aside the result of the referendum on Britain's membership of the European Union, what do you think Britain's policy should be? Should it be to...

Be outside the European Union

Be part of the EU but try to reduce the EU's powers

Be part of the EU and try to keep the EU's powers as they are

Be part of the EU and try to increase the EU's powers

Work for the formation of a single European government

'Eurosceptics' are those who give either of the first two responses, while 'Europhiles' are those who select one of the last three. The last time before 2016 that both this question and that on electoral reform was asked of the same respondents was in 2008, and so that is the year for which this analysis is also provided alongside that for 2017 and 2021.

Table 9 Attitude towards electoral reform, by attitudes towards Britain's membership of the EU 2008, 2017 and 2021

	Europhiles	Eurosceptics	Remain	Leave
2008	%	%	%	%
Change the voting system	31	37	n/a	n/a
Keep it as it is	62	59	n/a	n/a
<i>Unweighted bases</i>	391	642		
2017	%	%	%	%
Change the voting system	49	42	54	38
Keep it as it is	46	51	41	56
<i>Unweighted bases</i>	467	1450	800	704
2021	%	%	%	%
Change the voting system	71	43	63	36
Keep it as it is	25	52	33	60
<i>Unweighted bases</i>	649	321	1248	658

The table reveals that, in our latest survey, those who are opposed to Brexit are much more likely to be in favour of changing the voting system than those who back leaving the EU. No less than 63% of those who would vote Remain in another referendum say they would like the electoral system changed, whereas only 36% of Leave voters express that view. It also appears that all of the increase in support for changing the voting system between 2017 and 2021 has occurred among those who voted Remain, while the gap between 'Eurosceptics' and 'Europhiles' is wider now than it was in 2017.

Indeed, even though Eurosceptics include those who would back staying in the EU if the EU were less powerful, the gap between 'Eurosceptics' and 'Europhiles' is now as big as the difference between Remain and Leave. This measure still evidently captures much of the difference of opinion between those who are more and less supportive of Brexit. And from it, we can also see is that back in 2008 'Eurosceptics' (37%) were, if anything, slightly more likely than Europhiles (31%) to support electoral reform. It would appear that the current divide on the issue of the electoral system between those who would prefer to be in the EU and those who would not is a new development.

Of course, at this point we might ask which is the more important influence on people's attitudes towards the electoral system – people's party identification or their attitude towards Brexit? In truth, the two are very difficult to disentangle because there is a strong link between people's party identification and their attitude towards Brexit. In our latest survey, for example, 66% of Conservative identifiers say they would vote Leave, whereas 77% of Labour identifiers and 89% of Liberal Democrats state that they would back Remain. All that we can say is that support for electoral reform appears to have increased more sharply among Labour identifiers who we classify as 'Europhiles' than it has done among those who are 'Eurosceptics' – though it has increased among both – and that, as a result, 73% of Labour 'Europhiles' back reform, compared with 52% of 'Eurosceptics'. In contrast, the minority of Conservative identifiers who would now vote Remain are no more likely to favour reform than their Leave-supporting counterparts. In short, it looks as though both party identification and attitude towards Brexit are influencing people's attitude towards electoral reform.

Given, as we saw earlier, that having a fixed parliamentary term is much more popular than allowing the Prime Minister to set the date of the next election, it is not surprising that there is majority support for a fixed term among the supporters of all parties and of none. However, the idea is now less popular among Conservative identifiers, two-thirds of whom are in favour, than it is among the supporters of other parties (see Table 10). In contrast, back in 2011 there was very little difference between the parties' supporters. It looks as though the decision by the Conservative government to repeal the Fixed Terms Parliaments Act may have helped change the minds of some Conservative supporters, and thereby opened up something of a partisan gap on an aspect of Britain's constitutional rules on which hitherto there had been an all-party consensus.

Table 10 Attitudes towards fixed term parliaments, by party identification 2011 and 2021

	Conservative	Labour	Liberal Democrats	None
2011	%	%	%	%
General elections should be held on fixed date	80	82	86	72
Prime Minister should be able to hold election when they decide	17	14	11	18
<i>Unweighted bases</i>	642	677	166	111
2021	%	%	%	%
General elections should be held on fixed date	66	80	73	70
Prime Minister should be able to hold election when they decide	33	18	24	25
<i>Unweighted bases</i>	313	335	83	105

There is also some evidence that attitudes on this issue are influenced by attitudes towards the EU. Just under eight in ten (78%) of those who would vote Remain in a future EU Referendum think general elections should be held on a fixed date, compared with 69% of those who would vote Leave. Indeed, if we look at those Leave supporters who identify with the Conservatives the proportion slips to as low as 60% (whereas among Labour-identifying Leave supporters the figure is 77%). Given that the bypassing of the Fixed Terms Parliament Act in 2019 paved the way for the Conservatives to win the parliamentary majority that enabled them to ‘get Brexit done’, it perhaps should not come as a surprise that Leave supporting Conservative identifiers are the group least keen on having fixed term parliaments.

The governance of Scotland

But are there similar partisan differences – and perhaps growing differences – in attitudes towards how Scotland should be governed? As before, we look first at the attitudes of those living in England before examining partisan divisions north of the border.

Attitudes in England

It might be thought the question of how Scotland should be governed would not be a source of division between Conservative and Labour identifiers in England. Both parties, after all, say that they want Scotland to remain part of the UK, and both, along with the Liberal Democrats, campaigned in favour of that position in the 2014 Scottish independence referendum. Yet it was a Labour government that introduced Scottish devolution, in the face of what, at the time, was opposition from the Conservatives. Perhaps more importantly, the issue did become a source of division between the parties in the 2015 general election, when the Conservatives suggested during the campaign that the then Labour

leader, Ed Miliband, would, in the event of a hung parliament, be in the pocket of the SNP. Moreover, more recently the party has returned to this theme, suggesting that the Labour party might be willing, after the next election, to accede to a second independence referendum in return for SNP support for a minority Labour government (Massie, 2021; Peretz, 2021). Perhaps this means that Conservative supporters in England are more inclined than Labour identifiers to oppose Scottish independence?

Indeed, Table 11 shows that this has indeed become the case. In our latest survey, only 16% of Conservative supporters say that Scotland should become independent, little more than half the equivalent figure among Labour supporters of three in ten (30%). This gap of 14 percentage points is the widest it has been at any point in the past decade. Indeed, between 2011 and 2017 there was no consistent evidence of one of the two groups of supporters being more inclined than the other to back independence. Meanwhile, throughout the last decade consistently around one in five Conservative identifiers have said that Scotland should not have its own parliament at all, whereas such opposition as there was in the ranks of Labour identifiers has waned. Attitudes towards how Scotland should be governed have become more of a political divide south of the border.

Given that membership of the EU is central to the SNP's vision of independence, it is perhaps unsurprising that those in England who are sympathetic towards the European Union are now more favourable to Scottish independence than those who are more Eurosceptic. In 2012, the proportion of Eurosceptics (27%) supporting independence for Scotland was higher than the proportion of Europhiles (22%), while, as recently as 2017, there was relatively little difference between the two (26% of Europhiles and 24% of Eurosceptics). Now the relationship is reversed. Over three in ten (32%) Europhiles in England support Scottish independence, while around a quarter (23%) of Eurosceptics do so. The debate about Scottish independence in England has to some degree become intertwined with that about Brexit.⁶

⁶ This conclusion is supported if we undertake the same analysis by people's current preference for Remain and Leave. As many as 35% of Remain supporters say that Scotland should become independent, compared with just 19% of their Leave counterparts. There was little difference between the two in 2017. Among Conservative identifiers there is still no difference between the two groups. In contrast, 35% of Labour Remainers are now in favour of independence, compared with just 16% of Leavers, a gap that did not exist in 2017. Between them these results suggest that both party identification and attitude towards the EU make a difference to people's views on this subject.

Table 11 Attitudes in England towards how Scotland should be governed, by party identification 2011-2021

	Conservative	Labour	Liberal Democrats	None
2011	%	%	%	%
Independence	24	25	20	34
Devolution	45	50	58	26
No Scottish parliament	25	14	18	20
<i>Unweighted bases</i>	<i>301</i>	<i>278</i>	<i>82</i>	<i>181</i>
2013	%	%	%	%
Independence	19	15	24	26
Devolution	55	55	44	39
No Scottish parliament	21	16	13	15
<i>Unweighted bases</i>	<i>262</i>	<i>289</i>	<i>55</i>	<i>167</i>
2017	%	%	%	%
Independence	22	23	21	18
Devolution	55	57	68	46
No Scottish parliament	20	12	9	17
<i>Unweighted bases</i>	<i>288</i>	<i>357</i>	<i>57</i>	<i>99</i>
2020	%	%	%	%
Independence	19	31	16	17
Devolution	57	53	69	50
No Scottish parliament	20	9	11	14
<i>Unweighted bases</i>	<i>432</i>	<i>394</i>	<i>108</i>	<i>95</i>
2021	%	%	%	%
Independence	16	30	22	26
Devolution	60	54	69	41
No Scottish parliament	22	9	7	20
<i>Unweighted bases</i>	<i>605</i>	<i>594</i>	<i>169</i>	<i>192</i>

Base: Respondents in England only

As we might anticipate, the relative scepticism of Conservative identifiers towards Scottish devolution is accompanied by a more critical attitude towards Scotland's share of public spending (see Table 12). Although the proportion is somewhat lower than a decade ago, still a half of Conservative identifiers in England say that Scotland receives more than its fair share of public spending. In contrast, just a quarter of Labour supporters express that view, a proportion that is more markedly down on the two in five who supported that position a decade ago. So here too there has been a widening of the partisan divide. Meanwhile, Eurosceptics (41%) are

more likely than Europhiles (18%) to say that Scotland receives more than its fair share of funding, but here the difference between them is much the same as it was in 2012, well before the EU referendum.⁷

Table 12 Attitudes in England towards Scotland's share of government spending, by party identification 2011-2021

% saying Scotland gets more than its fair share	2011	2013	2015	2021
Party identification				
Conservative	58	50	48	50
Labour	41	28	37	25
Liberal Democrat	39	36	32	34
None	34	33	25	26

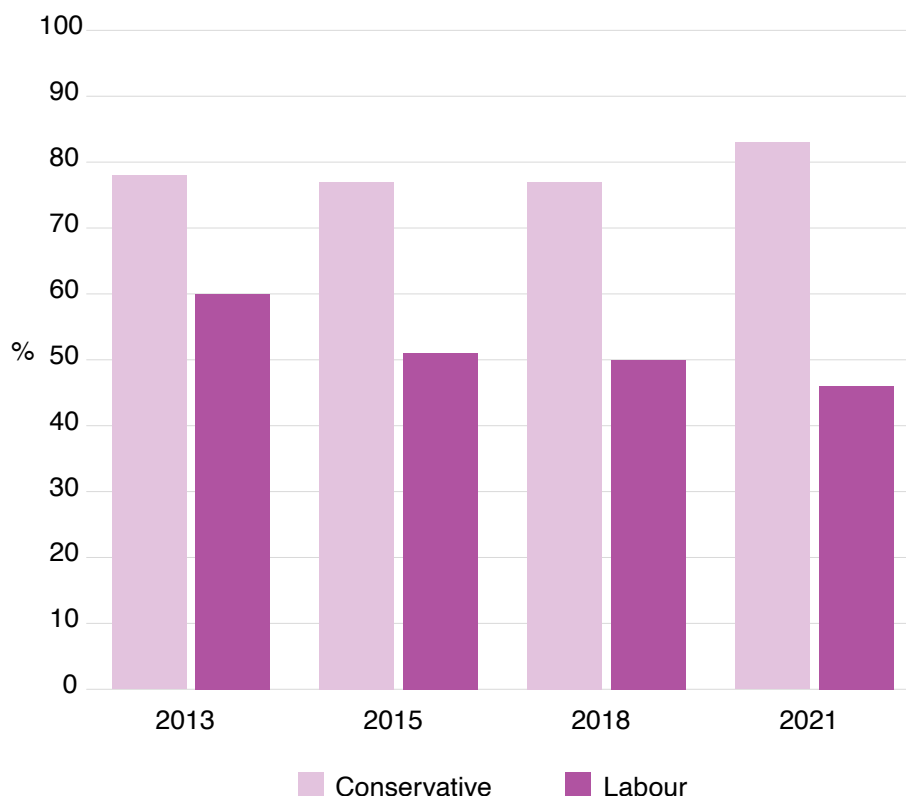
The unweighted bases for this table can be found in Table A.3 in the appendix to this chapter

The Conservatives have long been relatively weak in Scotland, and since 1997 have never won more than a dozen Westminster parliamentary seats. Labour, in contrast, dominated Scotland's representation at Westminster until the party crashed to defeat in 2015, winning just one seat. Thus, the Conservatives have long had an apparent interest in not allowing Scottish MPs to vote on English laws, while more recently it has been less obvious that such a step would harm Labour's interests. This might lead one to anticipate that any difference of outlook between supporters of the two parties would have narrowed. On the other hand, attitudes might also reflect where people stand on the constitutional question (with those who do not think that Scotland should have its own parliament also more critical of Scottish MPs being able to vote on English laws given that Scotland does have its own parliament), an issue on which we have just seen the two sets of supporters have drawn somewhat apart.

In practice, they have indeed diverged on the question of Scottish MPs in Westminster (see Figure 2). Labour identifiers have never been as supportive as Conservatives of the idea of stopping Scottish MPs from voting on English laws. However, while as many as three in five Labour identifiers backed the idea in 2013, now the figure has fallen to less than half (46%). Among Conservative identifiers, meanwhile, support for stopping Scottish MPs from voting on English laws has never been much less than four in five and now stands at 83%. This perhaps makes it even more remarkable that the Conservatives should have abandoned the limited step that was taken in this direction after the 2014 independence referendum (Gover and Kenny, 2021).

⁷ In this instance, the difference is apparent among both Conservative and Labour identifiers, but equally does not account for the difference between them, again suggesting that both attitudes to the EU and party identification are independently related to people's views.

Figure 2 Proportion in England who agree that Scottish MPs should not vote in the House of Commons on laws that only affect England, by party identification 2013-21



Base: Respondents in England only

The data on which Figure 2 is based can be found in Table A.4 in the appendix to this chapter

A similar divergence is evident if we compare the attitudes of ‘Europhiles’ and ‘Eurosceptics’. In 2013, just under seven in ten (68%) English Eurosceptics agreed that Scottish MPs should not be able to vote on English laws, compared with just under six in ten (58%) Europhiles, a difference of 10 percentage points. However, the gap has widened now to 37 percentage points. While it is still the case that around seven in ten Eurosceptics (74%) agree that Scottish MPs should not be able to vote on English laws, now less than two in five Europhiles (37%) do so.⁸

Attitudes in Scotland

All of our indicators have pointed to a widening divide between English Conservative and Labour identifiers in their attitude towards the governance of Scotland. But what has happened north of the border, where we saw earlier that, among voters as a whole, support for independence has increased over the last decade? Using data from SSA, Table 13 shows how the attitudes of the supporters of each of Scotland’s main parties have evolved during the course of the last decade.

⁸ In this instance also, the division between the two camps is evident among both Conservative and Labour identifiers.

Some patterns of party support are largely unchanged. Support for independence among Conservative identifiers in Scotland has never risen above one in eight – and has often been well below that. The figure of five per cent in our latest survey is typical. What, however, has changed is the balance of opinion among those who identify with the Scottish National Party (SNP) (see also Curtice, 2019). Prior to the UK and Scottish governments reaching an agreement towards the end of 2012 that there should be an independence referendum in 2014, those SNP identifiers who wanted Scotland to become independent were only slightly more numerous than those who felt that Scotland should have its own parliament within the framework of the UK. However, by the time of our 2014 survey (conducted before that year's referendum) as many as 73% of SNP supporters were in favour of independence. That figure did not drop once the referendum had concluded, and at 82%, the figure in 2021 is even higher than it was in 2014. Of course, this change may reflect both an increased tendency for supporters of independence to back the SNP as well as, perhaps, the SNP being successful at persuading their own supporters of the merits of independence (Curtice, 2019). But either way, supporters of Scotland's two largest parties, the SNP and the Conservatives, are now far apart from each other on the constitutional question. And although Labour are now somewhat more successful at drawing support from both supporters of independence and of the Union, the change in the character of SNP support means that, overall, attitudes towards how Scotland should be governed are now polarised along party lines to a greater extent than ever before.

The question of Scotland's future relationship with the EU was much debated during the 2014 Scottish independence referendum campaign (Curtice, 2021b). The Yes side argued that, on independence, Scotland would be able to stay in the EU without interruption, while the No side claimed that an independent Scotland would have to apply afresh for membership. In the event, as Table 14 shows, at the time of the referendum there was more or less no relationship between people's attitudes towards the EU and their view on how Scotland should be governed. Those who we can classify as Eurosceptics differed little from Europhiles in their level of support for independence versus the Union. In so far as both engaged in the referendum debate about EU membership in order to try and persuade voters to vote Yes or No, their efforts appear to have been wide of the mark.

Table 13 Attitudes in Scotland towards how Scotland should be governed, by party identification 2010-2021

	Conservative	Labour	SNP	None
2010	%	%	%	%
Independence	7	18	56	24
Devolution	63	69	40	54
No Scottish parliament	28	9	1	9
<i>Unweighted bases</i>	<i>215</i>	<i>485</i>	<i>256</i>	<i>205</i>
2011	%	%	%	%
Independence	5	20	54	36
Devolution	73	70	44	45
No Scottish parliament	19	6	*	10
<i>Unweighted bases</i>	<i>124</i>	<i>353</i>	<i>397</i>	<i>147</i>
2012	%	%	%	%
Independence	6	14	51	26
Devolution	69	72	42	48
No Scottish parliament	25	10	3	13
<i>Unweighted bases</i>	<i>152</i>	<i>403</i>	<i>290</i>	<i>176</i>
2013	%	%	%	%
Independence	4	19	68	24
Devolution	73	69	25	48
No Scottish parliament	20	8	2	8
<i>Unweighted bases</i>	<i>203</i>	<i>441</i>	<i>347</i>	<i>208</i>
2014	%	%	%	%
Independence	6	23	73	25
Devolution	77	60	19	45
No Scottish parliament	15	9	1	10
<i>Unweighted bases</i>	<i>191</i>	<i>443</i>	<i>363</i>	<i>181</i>
2015	%	%	%	%
Independence	5	21	66	24
Devolution	73	69	30	49
No Scottish parliament	20	6	2	5
<i>Unweighted bases</i>	<i>177</i>	<i>247</i>	<i>529</i>	<i>116</i>
2016	%	%	%	%
Independence	12	29	77	32
Devolution	67	59	19	39
No Scottish parliament	18	10	2	13
<i>Unweighted bases</i>	<i>224</i>	<i>227</i>	<i>439</i>	<i>143</i>

Table 13 Attitudes in Scotland towards how Scotland should be governed, by party identification 2010-2021

	Conservative	Labour	SNP	None
2017	%	%	%	%
Independence	9	33	77	40
Devolution	68	52	19	36
No Scottish parliament	21	9	1	10
<i>Unweighted bases</i>	219	275	405	135
2019	%	%	%	%
Independence	5	39	82	38
Devolution	66	52	14	37
No Scottish parliament	23	7	1	9
<i>Unweighted bases</i>	154	169	342	134
2021	%	%	%	%
Independence	5	38	82	47
Devolution	69	53	17	35
No Scottish parliament	25	8	1	14
<i>Unweighted bases</i>	247	244	520	54

Source: Scottish Social Attitudes except 2021: ScotCen panel.
On the Panel respondents' party identification is as measured when they were originally interviewed for SSA or BSA.⁹

However, the table also shows that since the 2016 EU referendum the picture has gradually changed (Curtice, 2022). In the 2016 SSA survey, conducted shortly after that referendum, Europhiles were already more likely than Eurosceptics to back Scottish independence and less likely to support devolution, though at this point an equivalent difference was not apparent between those who had voted Remain and those who had supported Leave. Thereafter, a widening gap has emerged on both measures, such that in the most recent survey, those whose current preference would be to Remain in the EU are nearly three times as likely as those who would back Leave to say that Scotland should become independent. Attitudes towards the EU have evidently become intertwined with attitudes towards Scotland's constitutional status, and the consequent swing in favour of independence among those who back Remain has helped occasion the increase in support for independence since the referendum that was observed in Table 4 above.¹⁰

⁹ As this means the data on party identification will have been collected a year or more previously, the data for 2021 in Table 13 may well underestimate the current relationship between party identification and constitutional preference.

¹⁰ The relationship between how people actually voted in the 2016 referendum and attitudes towards Scotland's constitutional status is rather weaker than that shown in Table 14, where Remain and Leave refer to current preference. Among those who voted Remain in 2016, 56% now support independence, compared with 39% of those who back Remain. It may well be that some people who were already supporters of independence may have swung from Leave to Remain, and that this partly accounts for the strengthening of the relationship since 2016. However, it is still the case that support for independence among those who voted Remain in 2016 is 22 percentage points higher now than it was in 2016, while in the case of 2016 Leave voters there has been a fall of six percentage points.

Table 14 Attitudes in Scotland towards how Scotland should be governed, by attitudes towards Britain's membership of the EU 2013-2021

	Europhiles	Eurosceptics	Remain	Leave
2013	%	%	%	%
Independence	30	29	n/a	n/a
Devolution	55	57	n/a	n/a
No Scottish parliament	8	10	n/a	n/a
<i>Unweighted Base</i>	484	913		
2014	%	%	%	%
Independence	31	35	n/a	n/a
Devolution	49	53	n/a	n/a
No Scottish parliament	9	7	n/a	n/a
<i>Unweighted Base</i>	476	893		
2015	%	%	%	%
Independence	39	41	n/a	n/a
Devolution	51	50	n/a	n/a
No Scottish parliament	5	7	n/a	n/a
<i>Unweighted Base</i>	394	787		
2016	%	%	%	%
Independence	53	44	44	45
Devolution	37	45	48	40
No Scottish parliament	7	8	6	13
<i>Unweighted Base</i>	337	835	601	327
2017	%	%	%	%
Independence	56	40	48	41
Devolution	33	48	42	44
No Scottish parliament	7	9	7	12
<i>Unweighted Base</i>	407	763	811	282
2019	%	%		
Independence	62	43	57	39
Devolution	31	42	33	44
No Scottish parliament	4	10	5	12
<i>Unweighted Base</i>	413	568	680	234
2021				
Independence	n/a	n/a	65	22
Devolution	n/a	n/a	32	57
No Scottish parliament	n/a	n/a	2	21
<i>Unweighted Base</i>			952	331

Source: Scottish Social Attitudes except 2021: ScotGen Panel

Remain/Leave is current preference, except 2016 when it is reported referendum vote.

Governing Northern Ireland

We have shown that attitudes on both sides of the border towards how Scotland should be governed have diverged markedly between the supporters of different parties and between Leavers and Remainers. Is any similar such pattern also evident in attitudes towards Northern Ireland's constitutional status?

Attitudes in Great Britain

Policy in respect of Northern Ireland has, for the most part, not been a source of division between the parties on the mainland. The initial steps that eventually led to the Good Friday Agreement were made during John Major's tenure as Prime Minister while the agreement itself was secured by Tony Blair's administration. That said, the Conservative party has long been relatively close to unionist politics and parties in Northern Ireland, whereas the nationalist Social Democrat and Labour Party (SDLP) shares the UK Labour party's left of centre orientation. Meanwhile the Conservatives' commitment to the Union means, as noted earlier, that at present the government is in the midst of passing legislation that would revoke some of the terms of the Northern Ireland Protocol.

Table 15 Attitudes in Great Britain on the long-term policy for Northern Ireland, by party identification 2006-2021

	Conservative	Labour	Liberal Democrats	None
2006	%	%	%	%
Remain part of the UK	40	31	36	34
Unify with the rest of Ireland	36	39	41	38
<i>Unweighted bases</i>	276	354	119	161
2007	%	%	%	%
Remain part of the UK	40	33	26	26
Unify with the rest of Ireland	36	44	44	37
<i>Unweighted bases</i>	1070	1421	383	668
2008	%	%	%	%
Remain part of the UK	46	44	42	43
Unify with the rest of Ireland	32	39	35	34
<i>Unweighted bases</i>	346	281	94	152
2021	%	%	%	%
Remain part of the UK	61	46	45	46
Unify with the rest of Ireland	34	42	49	36
<i>Unweighted bases</i>	661	657	179	218

The question was administered by an interviewer as part of the main survey in 2006 and 2007 and asked on a supplementary questionnaire in 2008 (and online in 2021).

Table 15 reveals that Conservative identifiers are somewhat more likely than Labour identifiers to say that Northern Ireland should remain part of the UK. In our latest survey, 61% of Conservatives take that view, compared with 46% of Labour supporters (who are only slightly more likely to back the Union rather than reunification). At the same time, the gap between the two sets of supporters is somewhat wider now than it was when we last asked the question in 2007 and 2008. That said, it looks as though that supporters of all parties, and of none, are now rather more likely to back keeping Northern Ireland in the Union now than was the case a decade and a half ago.

We might anticipate that those people in Great Britain who voted Remain would be more likely to support a reunification that, among other things, would enable Northern Ireland to be part of the EU once more – and perhaps especially so given that a majority of people in Northern Ireland voted to remain in the EU. Indeed, this does seem to be the case. Among those who would now vote Remain, slightly more (48%) say that Northern Ireland should reunify with the rest of Ireland than say it should stay part of the UK (41%). In contrast, as many as 62% of Leave supporters think that Northern Ireland should remain part of the UK, while just 32% think it should reunify. This is, of course, an even bigger gap than there is between the parties, and, indeed, even when we take into account someone's party identification, Leave supporters continue to be more likely than their Remain counterparts to support Northern Ireland remaining part of the UK.¹¹

Attitudes in Northern Ireland

Of course, in Northern Ireland itself, the division between unionists and nationalists has dominated its politics ever since the partition of Ireland in 1922 (Whyte, 1991). However, we cannot assume that everyone who supports a party necessarily backs that party's stance on the constitutional question. Table 16, shows data from the NILT survey on the level of support since 2010 for the various constitutional options we introduced at Table 6 among those who support one of the principal political parties in Northern Ireland (or none at all).¹² It reveals that in fact there has been a marked change in the constitutional preferences of the supporters of the two principal nationalist parties, together with those of the non-aligned Alliance Party, a change that has primarily occurred since the EU referendum.

¹¹ Among Conservative identifiers, 65% of Leave supporters say that Northern Ireland should remain part of the UK, compared with 54% of their Remain counterparts. For Labour identifiers, the equivalent figures are 64% and 41% respectively.

¹² Party support is ascertained on NILT by asking the same sequence of questions as on BSA (see Technical Details)

Table 16 Attitudes in Northern Ireland to its constitutional status, by party identification 2010-2021

	DUP	UUP	Alliance	SDLP	Sinn Féin	None
2010	%	%	%	%	%	%
Remain in UK, direct rule	24	23	10	8	2	15
Remain in UK, devolution	69	70	69	48	35	52
Reunify with Ireland	3	3	14	30	48	9
Be independent	2	0	2	3	5	5
<i>Unweighted base</i>	202	185	113	199	132	256
2017	%	%	%	%	%	%
Remain in UK, direct rule	26	30	8	6	2	9
Remain in UK, devolution	66	59	65	43	27	39
Reunify with Ireland	1	3	15	37	60	17
Be independent	1	3	3	3	6	4
<i>Unweighted base</i>	230	90	119	98	1436	255
2019	%	%	%	%	%	%
Remain in UK, direct rule	23	22	12	8	4	29
Remain in UK, devolution	74	68	48	25	13	37
Reunify with Ireland	0	3	25	52	78	9
Be independent	2	4	1	0	1	4
<i>Unweighted base</i>	178	111	181	105	104	190
2020	%	%	%	%	%	%
Remain in UK, direct rule	27	31	9	3	2	22
Remain in UK, devolution	64	57	43	24	15	30
Reunify with Ireland	1	2	29	45	72	15
Be independent	1	3	10	12	5	8
<i>Unweighted base</i>	216	134	313	160	116	105
2021	%	%	%	%	%	%
Remain in UK, direct rule	34	16	5	3	3	15
Remain in UK, devolution	60	70	43	24	7	31
Reunify with Ireland	0	5	31	45	70	15
Be independent	2	2	7	12	9	14
<i>Unweighted base</i>	175	194	283	184	147	136

Northern Ireland Life and Times

The supporters of all three of these parties are more likely to back Northern Ireland being outside the UK than was the case a decade ago, and especially since 2017. Even though Sinn Féin was once the political arm of the IRA, an organisation that was wholly committed to

ending any British presence on the island of Ireland, a decade ago a little over a third of those who supported the party said that they would prefer Northern Ireland to remain part of the UK, a figure that by 2017 had only dropped a little. Meanwhile, in the case of the SDLP's supporters, over half took that view in 2010. Now, in contrast, just one in ten Sinn Féin supporters and around a quarter of SDLP supporters espouse that position. Meanwhile, despite the fact that the party was non-aligned on the issue, a decade ago over three-quarters of the Alliance Party's supporters said that Northern Ireland should remain in the UK (and almost as many still did so in 2017). Now slightly less than half take that view, while nearly two in five back unification or Northern Ireland becoming an independent state.

In contrast, the supporters of Northern Ireland's two principal unionist parties are as supportive now of Northern Ireland being part of the UK as they were a decade ago, with over nine in ten backing that position. In so doing, most say that Northern Ireland should have its own devolved institutions, though there has always been a substantial minority that have favoured Northern Ireland being run directly by Westminster. In the latest survey, however, that stance has become less popular among UUP supporters who are now less than half as likely as their DUP counterparts to back direct rule. We might note that the UUP opposed the decision of the DUP in 2022 to stop the devolved institutions from functioning as intended in the hope that this would pressure the UK government into ending checks on goods moving from Great Britain to Northern Ireland as part of the Northern Ireland protocol.

The division between Remainers and Leavers in Northern Ireland is not as wide as that now to be found between supporters of a unionist party and those of a nationalist one – but it is far from absent (Murphy and Evershed, 2022a; 2022b).¹³ Among Remainers slightly over half (52%) say that Northern Ireland should either unify with the rest of Ireland (44%) or become an independent state (8%), while only a little over one in three (37%) say that it should remain part of the UK. In contrast, as many as 82% of Leavers want Northern Ireland to stay in the UK, while just 14% support unification (10%) or an independent state (4%).¹⁴ Moreover, the division is much sharper than it was immediately after the EU referendum. While at that point, 83% of those who had voted Leave were in favour of Northern Ireland being part of the UK, this was also a position backed by nearly two-thirds (64%) of those who had voted Remain.

In short, the decline in support for Northern Ireland staying in the UK discussed above (Table 6) occurred entirely among those who voted Remain. That was the way that most supporters of the two main nationalist parties, together with those of the Alliance Party, voted

¹³ Respondents to the 2021 NILT survey were asked: 'Even though the UK has left the EU, some people still think of themselves as Remainers and some as Leavers. Which position is closest to how you personally feel? Is there one side that you feel a little closer to than the other?'

¹⁴ This picture is broadly corroborated by data collected via the NatCen Panel in Northern Ireland. An online survey of 374 people conducted in 2021 asked people the BSA question on the constitutional status of Northern Ireland (see Table 5). This found that 87% of those who voted Leave in 2016 wanted Northern Ireland to remain part of the UK, whereas only 44% of Remain voters said the same.

in 2016. On this evidence, it looks highly likely that the implementation of Brexit has played a key role in persuading those who were still inclined to stay in the UK, even though they were supporting a nationalist party, that unification with the rest of Ireland might now be the better option. In contrast, the minority of unionist supporters who think of themselves as Remainers are no less likely than those who regard themselves as Leavers to say that Northern Ireland should remain in the UK – for them their commitment to the Union seemingly trumps their views on Brexit.

The result is that there is now a sharp division on the constitutional question between the supporters of Northern Ireland's nationalist and unionist parties. At one end of the spectrum are supporters of the DUP, over nine in ten of whom want Northern Ireland to remain in the UK. At the other, nearly eight in ten of those who support Sinn Féin believe it should leave. To that extent, the implementation of Brexit appears to have served to make Northern Ireland's constitutional status a sharper focal point of political division, an outcome that might be thought to be inconsistent with some of the aspirations for the Good Friday Agreement. At the same time, however, the Alliance Party, which despite its non-aligned stance was once predominantly backed by those who wanted Northern Ireland to stay in the UK, has now not only become more popular (the party won 14% of the first preference vote in the 2022 Northern Ireland Assembly election, compared with 8% in 2011), but has now gathered a coalition of both pro-unifications as well as pro-Union supporters.

Comparing attitudes in Scotland and Northern Ireland

There is clearly an interesting parallel between the trends we have observed in Scotland and the pattern we have seen in Northern Ireland. In both cases supporters of the political parties have polarised on the constitutional debate because of a swing away from remaining in the UK among those who support a nationalist party. As a result, both countries find themselves divided between a pro-Union party, nearly all of whose support comes from those in favour of their part of the UK remaining in the Union, and a nationalist party that secures around four-fifths of its backing from those who would like to leave the UK. Attitudes to the constitutional question now play a dominant role in structuring party preference in the two countries – and, indeed, are now at least as important in Scotland as they are in Northern Ireland.¹⁵

There is also another trend that the two countries share – the role of Brexit in undermining support for the Union in what, of course, were the two constituent parts of the UK where a majority voted to remain in the EU. In both countries those who voted Remain have swung away from staying in the UK, and their movement can be said to account for all of the increase since 2016 in support for leaving the UK. The debate about the constitutional status of Scotland and

¹⁵ Indeed, given that supporters of the Alliance Party in Northern Ireland are more evenly divided on the constitutional question than are Labour Party supporters in Scotland, it might be argued that the political division on the constitutional question in Scotland is even sharper than it is in Northern Ireland.

Northern Ireland is now a debate about their relationship with the EU as well as with the rest of the UK.

English Devolution

As we have just seen, attitudes towards the governance of Scotland and Northern Ireland are starkly divided, but what about attitudes towards how England (as opposed to the UK) should be governed? We showed earlier (see Table 7) that attitudes towards how England should be governed have proven to be relatively stable, with typically a little over half saying that the country should be governed as it is now, with its laws made by the UK Parliament at Westminster. Even so, as shown in Table 17, on this issue too, the attitudes of Conservative and Labour identifiers in England have drawn apart. In 1999, just as devolution was being introduced in Scotland and Wales by the then UK Labour government, around two-thirds of both Conservative (67%) and Labour (64%) supporters said that, nevertheless, England should continue to be governed as it is now. There was evidently little enthusiasm within Labour's ranks for the programme of regional devolution in England on which the government also hoped to embark. By 2015, when Labour had been out of power for five years, and was beginning to talk of introducing some form of 'federalism' across the UK (Smith, 2020), some of its enthusiasm for rule from Westminster was waning, and only just over half of Labour supporters wanted to keep the current arrangement. The opposite trend has recently been apparent among Conservative identifiers, nearly three-quarters of whom now say that England should continue to be governed from Westminster as it is now. While, as we saw above, most Conservative supporters think Scottish MPs should not be voting on English laws, this does not necessarily mean they want a devolution settlement for England or its regions. This is despite the fact that a measure of devolution is a significant element of the current Conservative government's 'levelling up' strategy (HM Government, 2022).

Table 17 Attitudes in England towards how England should be governed, by party identification 1999-2021

	Conservative	Labour	Liberal Democrats	None
1999	%	%	%	%
Governed as it is now	67	64	58	49
Regional assemblies	11	16	18	19
Own parliament	20	16	18	23
<i>Unweighted bases</i>	722	1148	280	370
2007				
Governed as it is now	59	64	58	45
Regional assemblies	11	16	19	15
Own parliament	22	12	17	19
<i>Unweighted bases</i>	249	292	89	138
2015				
Governed as it is now	60	52	47	41
Regional assemblies	17	26	28	23
Own parliament	20	18	24	14
<i>Unweighted bases</i>	636	539	102	279
2018				
Governed as it is now	61	52	53	45
Regional assemblies	11	19	28	19
Own parliament	25	21	13	19
<i>Unweighted bases</i>	805	894	168	376
2020				
Governed as it is now	71	43	56	53
Regional assemblies	6	29	24	23
Own parliament	23	25	17	14
<i>Unweighted bases</i>	432	394	108	95
2021				
Governed as it is now	74	52	56	52
Regional assemblies	8	25	23	19
Own Parliament	17	20	20	24
<i>Unweighted bases</i>	605	594	169	192

Base: Respondents in England only

Given the gap that has opened up on this issue between Conservative and Labour supporters, there is, as we might anticipate, also some disagreement between people based on their preference for Leave or Remain. While 54% of those in England who currently would vote Remain say that England should continue to be governed as it is now, among Leave supporters the figure is, at 66%, rather higher. However, among Conservative identifiers those who support Remain (78%) and those who back Leave (73%) differ little in their level of support for the status quo. In contrast, among Labour supporters – only a half (50%) of those who back Remain want England to be governed as it is now, whereas among Leave supporters the figure stands at two-thirds (66%). But for the most part, the question of how England should be governed has not become interrelated with attitudes towards Brexit to the extent that we have seen they have been in Scotland and Northern Ireland.

Summary

A near universal theme has emerged from our analysis of how the attitudes of party supporters towards the UK's constitutional rules have evolved during the last decade or two. In each case their attitudes have diverged. In Britain, Conservative and Labour supporters who once largely agreed on the subject now disagree on introducing proportional representation in elections to the House of Commons. Where once the balance of opinion on whether Northern Ireland should remain in the UK or unify with the rest of Ireland was much the same among the two sets of supporters, now most Conservatives want Northern Ireland to stay in the UK, while Labour supporters are divided on the subject. Meanwhile, in England where once Conservative and Labour supporters were of a similar mind on whether Scotland should become independent, now Labour supporters are rather more sympathetic to the idea than their Conservative counterparts (among whom there continues to be a minority opposed to Scotland having its own parliament at all). The two camps have also become further apart on whether Scotland secures its fair share of public spending and on whether Scottish MPs should be allowed to vote on English laws, while they have also diverged somewhat, for the first time, on whether England itself should still be governed from Westminster.

Meanwhile, both Scotland and Northern Ireland have witnessed a sharp polarisation of attitudes. In both places, supporters of nationalist parties have swung away from backing their country's continued presence in the UK, while those who identify with avowedly unionist parties have retained their near universal commitment to staying inside the UK. The constitutional question is now a firm dividing line in both countries.

Brexit has played a role in generating some of these trends. Certainly, in Scotland and in Northern Ireland, Remain supporters who do not identify with a unionist party have swung in favour of leaving the UK, and it is this movement that is largely responsible for the rises in

support for independence that have been evident in both countries since 2016. It also looks as though, even after taking into account their party identification, Remain supporters in Britain are especially inclined to back changing the electoral system while Leave supporters are more likely to say that Northern Ireland should remain part of the UK. Meanwhile, within England, there is some evidence that those of a Europhile disposition are now somewhat more likely to say that Scotland should leave the UK, contrary to the position before Brexit, while Eurosceptics are now particularly keen that Scottish MPs should not vote on English laws. Only attitudes towards how England should be run seem not to have been influenced much by people's stance on the Brexit debate.

Conclusions

We noted at the beginning of this chapter that it might be thought desirable that there was broad public support for the constitutional rules under which the UK is governed, and that this support should be found irrespective of the party that someone supports. Of course, it may be doubted whether this criterion has ever been fully satisfied. However, what our analysis has shown is that public opinion is now significantly further away from that picture than it was just a decade or two ago. There is seemingly a new widespread appetite for changing the electoral system, while there has been marked increases in support in both Scotland and Northern Ireland for leaving the UK. In both cases this means there is a divergence of view on the territorial governance of the UK between England (which still shows only minority interest in devolution for itself) and the rest of the country. Meanwhile, Conservative and Labour supporters are well apart on these issues, as are the supporters of unionist and nationalist parties in Scotland and Northern Ireland. Not least of the reasons for this is Brexit, where some Remain voters appear to have reacted to being on the losing side in the EU referendum by now wanting to change the rules under which the UK is governed. Far from securing the consent of the losers in that contest, the outcome of that referendum appears to have helped fuel partisan disagreement about the country's constitution.

It is a picture that suggests that governing the UK has become more difficult. Its politics are now beset by some fundamental disagreements about the rules and the structures that should be in place, and these disagreements are reflected in divergent views between supporters of different parties and those living in different parts of the UK. As a result, far from representing a set of conventions and procedures on which most people agree, the UK's constitution appears at risk of becoming a political battlefield on which the parties seek electoral advantage. Still, it will be up to politicians to decide whether to pursue that advantage or try to find and build a new consensus.

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Appendix

Table A.1 Attitudes to electoral reform, 1983-2021

	1983	1986	1987	1990	1991	1992	1994	1995	1996	1997	1998	1999
	%	%	%	%	%	%	%	%	%	%	%	%
Change voting system	39	32	30	34	37	33	34	37	33	39	32	35
Keep system as it is	54	60	64	59	58	60	60	58	59	53	63	63
<i>Unweighted bases</i>	3955	1548	1410	1397	1445	3534	1137	1227	1196	1355	1035	1060
	2000	2001	2002	2003	2005	2008	2010	2011	2015	2017	2021	
	%	%	%	%	%	%	%	%	%	%	%	%
Change voting system	35	39	34	36	32	33	41	27	45	43	51	
Keep system as it is	59	57	61	60	61	59	49	66	48	49	44	
<i>Unweighted bases</i>	2293	1099	2287	1160	1075	1128	1081	2215	2140	2009	2073	

Source: British Social Attitudes, except 1983, 1992: British Election Study

Table A.2 Additional information for Table 8 - Net support for electoral reform, by party identification 1986-2021

% party supporters saying..,	1986	1987	1990	1991	1994	1995	1996	1997	1998	1999	2000
Conservative: Change system	24	17	22	25	23	25	20	29	23	28	29
Conservative: Keep as is	71	79	75	72	75	74	74	67	73	70	68
<i>Unweighted base</i>	508	543	487	515	326	316	331	378	285	277	624
Labour: Change system	33	33	39	38	39	37	36	39	30	32	33
Labour: Keep as is	61	61	55	57	56	58	59	54	65	66	62
<i>Unweighted base</i>	552	432	538	510	471	529	501	560	450	428	920
Lib Dem: Change system	53	53	64	64	49	56	59	66	55	51	57
Lib Dem Keep as is	42	45	35	32	49	43	40	31	44	49	38
<i>Unweighted base</i>	265	259	108	167	161	165	126	129	90	120	241
None: Change system	18	18	30	34	27	34	31	33	30	33	32
None: Keep as is	54	58	44	50	49	50	48	42	61	56	52
<i>Unweighted base</i>	120	93	115	110	88	118	110	141	128	139	308
	2001	2002	2003	2005	2008	2010	2011	2015	2017	2021	
Conservative: Change system	30	28	28	26	29	30	16	34	33	29	
Conservative: Keep as is	66	69	70	68	68	66	81	63	64	68	
<i>Unweighted base</i>	257	572	299	255	372	299	642	677	615	661	
Labour: Change system	33	30	31	25	33	41	27	46	47	61	
Labour: Keep as is	62	66	65	69	60	51	69	51	48	34	
<i>Unweighted base</i>	486	956	447	431	316	315	677	617	760	657	
Lib Dem: Change system	65	56	54	56	40	68	46	71	70	69	
Lib Dem Keep as is	33	39	44	40	58	24	50	25	25	26	
<i>Unweighted base</i>	149	246	121	136	95	138	166	114	126	179	
None: Change system	46	32	40	36	30	33	29	34	35	44	
None: Keep as is	54	53	48	50	47	46	54	49	41	41	
<i>Unweighted base</i>	128	277	182	142	191	185	406	322	259	218	

Table A.3 Bases for Table 12 - Attitudes in England towards Scotland's share of government spending, by party identification 2011-2021

% saying Scotland gets more than its fair share	2011	2013	2015	2021
Party identification				
Conservative	301	262	314	605
Labour	278	289	278	594
Liberal Democrat	82	55	52	169
None	181	167	136	192

Base: Respondents in England only

Table A.4 Attitudes in England towards Scottish MPs voting on English laws, by party identification 2013-2021

	Conservative	Labour	Liberal Democrats	None
Scottish MPs should no longer be allowed to vote on laws that only affect England	%	%	%	%
2013				
Agree	78	60	55	49
Neither agree nor disagree	11	29	31	41
Disagree	8	9	12	6
<i>Unweighted bases</i>	232	252	51	141
2015				
Agree	77	51	54	46
Neither agree nor disagree	11	25	17	32
Disagree	6	17	28	7
<i>Unweighted bases</i>	557	452	87	218
2018				
Agree	77	50	58	46
Neither agree nor disagree	12	23	19	20
Disagree	7	15	19	6
<i>Unweighted bases</i>	669	691	141	274
2021				
Agree	83	46	62	60
Neither agree nor disagree	11	29	28	27
Disagree	3	22	10	7
<i>Unweighted bases</i>	284	294	78	90

Base: Respondents in England only

Data sources

As well as data from the annual BSA surveys, this chapter makes use of data collected in the devolved nations from three sources.

Scottish Social Attitudes (SSA): This partner survey to BSA has been run almost every year since 1999. Each year around 1,200 respondents 18+ are asked questions on a range of topics, including many questions which are also asked on BSA. Respondents are drawn from a random probability sample of Scottish addresses (including the Highlands and Islands). The final data are weighted to be representative of the adult population resident in Scotland (see <https://www.ssa.natcen.ac.uk/> for more details). With the exception of SSA 2021, which was conducted mainly online via the ScotCen Panel, the survey has been conducted face to face.

Northern Ireland Life and Times Survey (NILT): The Northern Ireland Life and Times (NILT) Survey was launched in the autumn of 1998 to monitor the attitudes and behaviour of people in Northern Ireland. It follows on from the Northern Ireland Social Attitudes Survey (NISA) which ran from 1989 to 1996 as a sister survey to BSA. The annual survey is run by Queens University Belfast and Ulster University and collects data from a random sample of adults aged 18+ living in Northern Ireland (see <https://www.ark.ac.uk/nilt/2021/> for more details).

NatCen Panel: The NatCen Panel is a mixed mode random probability panel, which comprise people who were originally selected for interview on other surveys conducted across the UK (the British or Scottish Social Attitudes survey, the National Values Survey and the Consumer Protection Study) and who have agreed to participate in further follow-up interviews, usually online but in some instances by phone. The panel was used to field questions for SSA in 2021 and to run questions from BSA among a sample of 364 respondents in Northern Ireland at the same time as BSA 2021, both of which are used in this chapter. Panel cases are weighted to make the sample representative of the British/Scottish/Northern Irish adult (18+) population. The weighting adjusts for unequal chances of selection and non-response to the recruitment survey, refusal to join the panel, and non-response in the survey of panel members itself.

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