



The Shameful Conquest of England

The Future of England Study 2024-25

Ailsa Henderson & Richard Wyn Jones



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Executive Summary

Following nearly a decade and a half of fieldwork, the Future of England Survey offers an unrivalled perspective on the political and constitutional attitudes of the UK's most populous nation. As in previous surveys, we explored the English attitudes to their neighbours in the UK, the mechanics of the Union, the UK's relationship to the EU and the governance of England itself.

It is striking that, throughout this edition of the survey, we once again find language such as 'scepticism', 'grievance', 'ambivalence' and 'dissatisfaction' best suited to describe the politics of Englishness a quarter of the way into the 21st century. In this survey, we explored two new entrants into the lexicon of English – as distinct from British – politics: 'Anger' and 'Fear'. They did not disappoint; we found that those voters in England who identify primarily as English rather than British are made both angry and fearful by contemporary political life.

We found little to give solace to Keir Starmer's government. As we have found in previous surveys, the Union's largest member offers little of the enthusiastic gravity that might hope to keep the UK's smaller nations in orbit. Rather, among those English-identifiers, we found ambivalence towards the Union as a project and a commonly held sense of grievance about the perceived cost and political influence of the other nations.

Generally, English-identifiers skew towards the right of the political spectrum, particularly and increasingly focussed on support for Reform, as they were for the party's previous manifestations.

In terms of the UK's former external union, the EU, we found a striking difference between English- and British-identifiers. Those who think of themselves mainly or exclusively as English rather than British continue to be consistently Eurosceptic. However, we also found that while they see the relationship with the EU as settled, they remain deeply dissatisfied with the consequences. By contrast, those identifying as British rather than English, which overwhelmingly includes Labour voters, see the UK's relationship with the EU as their top constitutional concern and are overwhelmingly Europhile in their attitudes. Among those who voted Labour in 2024, 77% see the relationship with the EU as not close enough, 80% would vote to rejoin, and 79% describe it as their top constitutional priority.

Finally, we find that while the government continues to hold its predecessor's enthusiasm for regional governance in England, that is not supported by the English electorate, which continues to prefer England-wide models for its future governance. It will offer some comfort to Labour that a bare majority of its own supporters (54%) prefer meso-level solutions to any alternatives, but the lack of support elsewhere does not bode well for firmly embedding an option that is often presented as a cure-all to everything that ails the body politic.

Introduction

*That England, that was wont to conquer others,
Hath made a shameful conquest of itself.*

William Shakespeare

Anger is an energy

John Lydon

Since the Future of England Survey was first fielded in 2011, the resulting data have offered a unique insight into the political attitudes, social values and, in particular, the constitutional aspirations of the English – the most numerous and powerful of the United Kingdom’s constituent national groups. Our own analyses of these data (available at theunionsurvey.com) have resulted in a series of publications focused either directly on England and the English (Henderson et al. 2016, 2017; Henderson and Wyn Jones 2021a; Jeffery et al. 2014, 2016; Wyn Jones et al. 2012, 2013), or on England and the English in broader comparative context (Henderson et al. 2021; Henderson and Wyn Jones 2021a, 2021b, 2023a, 2023b).¹ *Englishness: The political force transforming Britain*, published in 2021, remains to date our most developed account of the political views associated with English national identity.

We have identified and examined a number of individual themes across this body of work including, *inter alia*:

- The very strong relationship between English national identity and Euroscepticism. On average, the more a given individual prioritises their sense of English identity the more Eurosceptic their views are likely to be;
- The strong sense of identification among the English in particular with some parts of the UK state’s imperial history and with the peoples of some of its former colonies, namely what used to be known as the ‘White Dominions’. There is no escaping the racialised dimensions of what we have termed the ‘English worldview’;
- The very strong relationship between English national identity and what we have termed *devo-anxiety*, namely a sense that England is unfairly treated

¹ In undertaking this work we have been fortunate in being able to collaborate with a number of excellent colleagues whose input and influence we gratefully acknowledge.

within the domestic union with a sense of grievance focused particularly on Scotland, a country regarded as enjoying an undeserved and unfair level of political influence and resources compared to England;

- A striking degree of ambivalence about the continuing territorial integrity of the UK state among English-identifiers, including a tendency to regard the goal of Brexit as being far more important than maintaining the place of either Scotland or Northern Ireland in the United Kingdom; and finally,
- A strong sense of dissatisfaction with the current arrangements for English governance combined with a sense that the proffered alternative, namely 'English devolution' – the buttressing of a regional or meso-level of government within England – is also inappropriate and/or insufficient. Again, this is particularly the case among English-identifiers, although it is also worth stressing that in this case even those in England who identify as British and not English also tend to favour treating England as a single entity rather than as a collection of distinct units.

Given the demographic realities that ensure that England is by some distance the most politically significant part of the state – indeed, its significance has only increased over time to the point that England is now home to 85% of the state's population, compared to some 74% at end of the first decade of the 20th century and around 59% at the start of the 19th – the implications of these various individual dimensions of English attitudes are clearly profound. But it is also worth considering the common thread that unites them.

As these references to 'scepticism', 'grievance', 'ambivalence' and 'dissatisfaction' make clear, the overriding sense derived from a study of English attitudes is of discontent, of an English nation that is unhappy, even mutinous. We emphasise English rather than British simply because the overwhelming evidence suggests that, **within England**, it is those who embrace English identity – whether alone or in combination with a sense of Britishness – who are by far the most discontented. By contrast, those who emphasise their British identity tend to feel rather differently. They are, on average, much less sceptical, aggrieved and/or dissatisfied. (While we will not pursue the point further here, it is worth reminding readers that, **outside of England**, those attitudes that align with Englishness in England tend to align with *British* identity in Scotland, Wales or Northern Ireland. In other words, the views associated with Britishness not only vary but contrast across the state.)

While our data and analysis are very much contemporary in focus, in making sense of them it may be worth recalling a passage that follows almost immediately from one of the most famous and widely-quoted lines on England, from John of Gaunt's soliloquy in Shakespeare's *Richard II*:

*[T]he envy of less happier lands
This blessed plot, this earth, this realm, this England.*

Yet within only a few stanzas a very different vision emerges of a country that is

*...now bound in with shame,
With inky blots and rotten parchment bonds:
That England, that was wont to conquer others,
Hath made a shameful conquest of itself.*

It is predominantly the latter, much darker version of England that features in the following pages: an England whose English-identifying inhabitants, at least, are deeply conscious of what they clearly regard as a jarring contrast between past glories and a present brought-low; an England whose eponymous national group seems to feel besieged both from within and without; an England that has secured major changes (not least, Brexit) in order to assuage its concerns, yet remains deeply dissatisfied with the results; an England that is *angry* at its lot.²

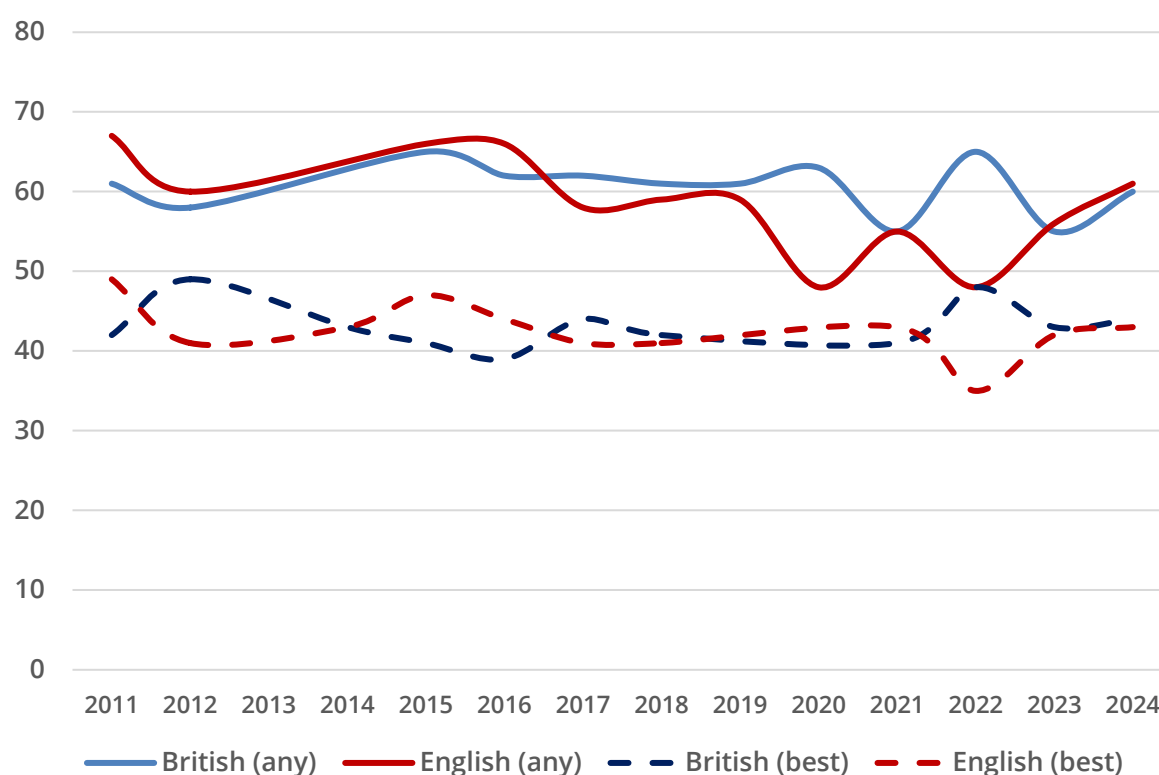
Here we take the pulse of political Englishness by drawing predominantly on data from the latest iteration of the Future of England Survey, namely the November 2024 wave. These data are contextualised by comparing them to data from previous waves extending back to our first survey fielded in 2011. Our analysis proceeds in five steps. First, setting the scene for what follows, we provide an overview of the pattern of national identities in England, and in particular the inter-relationship between English and British identity. Second, we focus on attitudes towards the domestic Union, including views of the rest of the state of which England forms the dominant part. Third, we focus on attitudes to English governance, a subject made particularly timely by the priority that the new UK government is affording its plans for English devolution. This is followed, as a fourth step, by a review of attitudes in England towards the EU five years since the UK's withdrawal from what was previously its external union. A final section considers political Englishness through the prism of national populism. In addition, utilising new data focusing on emotional responses to contemporary British politics, we show how anger and fearfulness are particularly associated with English national sentiment. We suggest that this in turn helps explain why it is those political and indeed constitutional concerns and issues that link to Englishness that are the focus of wider dissatisfaction with the political system.

² It bears repeating that other, very different understandings of Englishness as well as visions for the future England are available – a theme we have discussed at length elsewhere but particularly in Henderson and Wyn Jones 2021. Our point here is rather that these are the attitudes *currently* most likely to be associated with English national identity.

National Identity in England

We begin by considering the prevalence and strength of different senses of national identity in England. This is not a straightforward task. Among the complicating factors are: the prevalence of what is sometimes termed ‘nested’ identities, which in this case tends to mean a sense of being *both* English and British; the evidence suggesting that many of those in England who emphasise their English identity tend to populate this with meaning derived from Britain’s past and present, thus *eliding* Britishness and Englishness; and the fact that different survey measures of national identity can provide contrasting and sometimes inconsistent perspectives on how national identity is experienced at the individual level (all issues explored at some length in Henderson and Wyn Jones 2021a: 35-56). Further muddying the waters is the decision of those designing the questionnaire for the National Census in England to change the order of responses to their national identity question between the 2011 and 2021 iterations, leaving analysts unable to examine any changes over time in England or to compare England with other parts of the UK where the original question wording remained unchanged (Henderson and Denham 2022).

Figure 2.1 National Identity (any and best), England 2011-2024 (%)

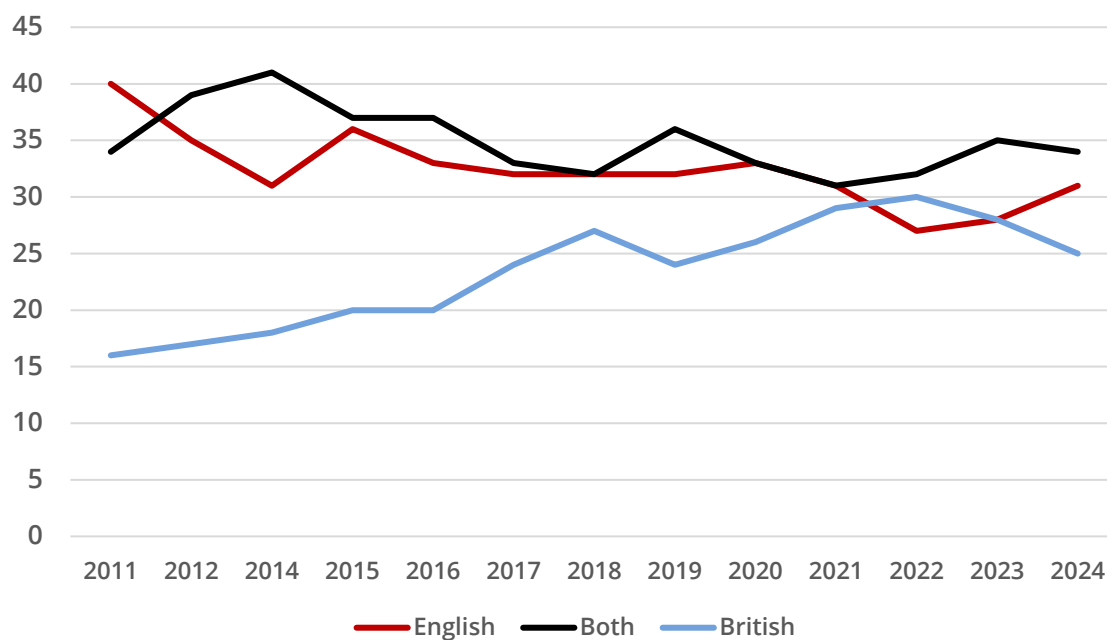


Source: FoES2011-24.

In the current context, however, our task is simplified by the fact that we have been asking the same questions about national identity in the same way since 2011. This affords a degree of confidence in pronouncing on any change over time in the intervening period.

Figure 2.1 shows responses to questions that first invite respondents to note **any** sense of national identity they feel applies to them and, as a subsequent step, asks them to choose the one identity which they regard as the **best** fit (the ‘forced choice’ question). As can be clearly seen, utilising this measure we find that both British and English identity appear almost equally prevalent. For ‘any’ identity we see a decrease in English identity in the years during which Brexit was being negotiated, a bump for Britishness following the COVID pandemic and a rise in Englishness again post 2022.

Figure 2.2 National Identity (Linz-Moreno), England 2011-2024 (%)



Source: FoES 2011-24.

The so-called Moreno or, more correctly, Linz-Moreno question is a survey measure designed to probe patterns of national identity in territories characterised by dual or ‘nested’ identities – originally, Catalan and Spanish identities in Catalonia and Scottish and British identities in Scotland. In the English context, the response categories are: British not English; more British than English; equally English and British; more English than British; English not British; and, Other. For ease of comparison, and setting aside Other and non-responses, we have collapsed responses into three categories (Figure 2.2): ‘English’ combines the English not British and the more English than British responses; ‘Equally’ refers to those respondents who choose the equally English and British option; and

'British' combines the British not English and more British than English respondents. Between 2011 and 2024 we find evidence that the proportion of respondents emphasising a British identity has increased. Thus, while the balance of the identity profile currently remains toward the English (31%) rather than the British end (25%) of the Linz-Moreno spectrum, this is less pronounced than was the case when the Future of England Survey was first fielded (40% and 16% respectively).

Table 2.1 Party Support by National Identity (best), England 2024 (%)

	All	Reform	Conservative	LibDem	Labour	Green
British	44	33	42	53	56	46
English	43	64	53	30	28	27
European	6	1	1	11	10	13
N	1514	252	295	123	328	123

Source: FoES2024. Party support as measured by voting intention, November 2024.

In the aggregate, therefore, Englishness and Britishness remain prevalent across the population of England. In 2024, when forced to choose, near identical proportions of respondents pick English and British as their identity of choice (Figure 2.1). That said, there are some striking differences in the national identity profiles of party supporters (see Tables 2.1 and 2.2). Specifically, supporters of parties on the right of the political spectrum – both the Conservatives and especially Reform – are much more likely to embrace and/or emphasise an English identity compared to supporters of parties of the centre and the left – including the Greens – who are notably less likely to describe themselves as English and more likely to describe themselves as British and European (as measured by the forced choice question).

This should not come as a surprise. We know that support for one of Reform's predecessor parties, UKIP, was strongly associated with English identity (Jeffery et al 2014; Wyn Jones et al. 2012, 2013), something which has long been the case for what has historically been England's dominant party, the Conservatives. Relatedly, as will become clear in the remainder of this report, Englishness is also closely

associated with many of the key themes and talking points of what appears to be an increasingly radical right. It is equally true to say that the Labour and the Liberal Democrat party leaderships (but cf. Lucas 2024) remain deeply uncomfortable with any political manifestations of English identity, apparently regarding Britishness as inherently more progressive (to the chagrin of some internal party critics – see Denham 2016; Denham and Devine 2018). Support for the left and centre left parties also tends to skew towards the British end of the identity spectrum.

Table 2.2 Party support by National Identity (Linz-Moreno), England 2024 (%)

	All	Reform	Conservative	LibDem	Labour	Green
English not British	11	23	11	9	4	4
More English than British	20	30	28	11	14	13
Equally English and British	34	32	38	26	33	28
More British than English	18	9	15	33	27	24
British not English	7	2	5	12	13	15
Other	4	3	2	5	5	9
Don't Know	5	0	1	4	4	8
N	1514	252	295	123	328	105

Source: FoES2024. Party support as measured by voting intention, November 2024.

It would be a mistake to view the parties of the left and the right as mirror images of each other in this regard. Quite simply, in England – though not, it should be noted, elsewhere in the UK – national identity tends to be more important for supporters of parties of the right than for supporters of their opponents on the left. This is confirmed by Table 2.3, which shows responses to a question asking respondents to choose three characteristics they considered ‘important for their identity’, selecting from the following long and comprehensive list: being working class; being middle class; being bilingual or multilingual; being English; being British; being European; being a parent; being a spouse/partner; your hometown or home region; your age group/generation; your religion or faith; your gender/sex; your sexuality; your occupation; your political party; being a Leaver/Brexititeer; being a Remainer/pro-EU; being a unionist; being a nationalist;

supporting independence for my part of the UK; your sports team; your health/disability/fitness; a particular political cause; and, finally, none. Other than the final option the list was randomized so that each respondent saw these options in a different order.

Table 2.3 Top 3 important identities by voting intention, England 2024 (%)

Reform	Being English	45
	Being a parent	32
	Being British	27
Conservative	Being a parent	41
	Being English	31
	Being British	29
LibDem	Being a parent	25
	Being British	22
	Age group / Generation	22
Labour	Age group / Generation	29
	Gender / Sex	27
	Being a parent	26
Green	Age group / Generation	32
	Gender / Sex	32
	Hometown / Region	23

Source: FoES204. Party support as measured by voting intention, November 2024.

For supporters of the Conservatives and Reform, the two national identity options were both among the top three choices, with almost half of Reform supporters emphasising the centrality of their sense of their Englishness. On the other side of the political spectrum, it was only among Liberal Democrat supporters that national identity (in this case 'being British') featured in the top three, and – as can be seen – even in this case the focus on national identity was less emphatic. Not only are patterns of national identity different across the political spectrum in England, but national identity also matters more to those who cleave to an English rather than a British identity. There are other notable findings, including the prevalence of hometown for Green supporters and the absence of emphasis on class identity among supporters of any party, including Labour.

England and the Union

As noted in the introduction, our previous work on attitudes in England has drawn attention to a sense of grievance focused on the allegedly unfair treatment of England within the Union – with comparisons to Scotland being apparently *the* key source of contention. In addition, we have also identified a notable degree of ambivalence in England about the territorial integrity of the UK state. In the case of Northern Ireland’s place in the Union, this ambivalence begins to tip over into a relatively widespread sense that the territory should no longer remain part of the Union. We have gone on to show that both grievance and ambivalence are most strongly in evidence among those in England who emphasise their sense of English national identity and are weaker among those who embrace a more exclusively British identity.

Given that we have recently published two extensive reports analysing comparative data on the attitudes to the Union in the four component parts of the state – including, of course, England – we do not intend to go into such exhaustive detail here (see Henderson and Wyn Jones 2023a, 2023b). That said, our most recent Future of England Survey data serve to highlight a number of developments that are worthy of further consideration.

First, in an overall context in which the future of the Union is arguably less politically salient than it has been for any time in more than a decade, attitudes towards the Union in England seem to have *equalised*. By this we mean that even if Scotland is still the country that most in England think gets ‘more than their fair share’ of economic resources, in other ways Scotland is now less of an outlier. Rather attitudes in England towards Wales and Northern Ireland are broadly similar to attitudes towards Scotland. Secondly, the recent fracturing of patterns of party support renders more relevant the attitudes towards the Union of supporters of the insurgent parties of right and left – Reform and the Greens. As we shall see, these views are distinctive and challenge some of the nostrums associated with the traditional parties.

Table 3.1 displays responses to the question: ‘Would you say that compared to other parts of the UK, each of these gets pretty much their fair share of government spending, more than their fair share, or less than their fair share?’ As can be seen, we have disaggregated the responses by party support and national identity. There are several points to note. First and perhaps most obviously, the proportions choosing the Don’t Know option are always high. That said, even here a pattern familiar to those of us interested in attitudes towards the Union is apparent: respondents are most likely to have a view about the treatment of their own part of the state (in this case, England) and least likely to have a view about

Northern Ireland. (The same is also invariably the case when voters in Scotland and Wales are asked their views of other parts of the Union.)

Table 3.1 Financial winners and losers in the Union, attitudes in England by party support and national identity 2024 (%)

		All	Reform	Conservative	LibDem	Labour	Green	English not British	More English than British	Equally English & British	More British than English	British not English
England	More than fair share	16	5	4	26	24	29	9	11	11	26	32
	Fair share	25	24	29	22	25	20	13	27	31	20	26
	Less than fair share	26	50	41	22	18	12	43	32	24	25	14
	Don't know	33	21	26	29	33	39	35	30	34	29	27
Scotland	More than fair share	33	56	53	33	26	18	42	45	31	33	22
	Fair share	19	18	19	19	22	18	13	19	22	21	23
	Less than fair share	9	5	1	15	10	20	9	4	5	12	20
	Don't know	39	21	27	34	42	44	35	33	41	34	35
Wales	More than fair share	19	37	33	13	14	9	30	28	18	16	10
	Fair share	25	30	29	28	26	23	18	25	30	27	29
	Less than fair share	13	8	4	21	16	23	10	7	10	22	24
	Don't know	42	25	34	38	44	45	42	39	43	35	37
Northern Ireland	More than fair share	15	25	23	11	12	7	25	18	13	13	8
	Fair share	23	31	28	21	22	22	15	26	27	21	28
	Less than fair share	15	11	7	25	17	25	14	10	11	24	25
	Don't know	48	33	42	44	48	37	45	46	49	42	39
	N	1514	252	295	123	328	105	171	305	512	276	113

Source: FoES2024. Party support as measured by voting intention, November 2024.

Second, Scotland is most likely to be regarded as the part of the Union receiving more than its fair share of government spending. Support for this position is driven by the fact that it is the majority perception among both Reform and Conservative supporters (who are both twice as likely as Labour supporters to

view Scotland as receiving more than its just desserts). Relatedly, it is the predominant view among those who identify solely or predominantly as English. By striking contrast, those in England who identify as British not English are more likely to say that England itself is the part of the state than receives more than its fair share of spending – the same is also true of Green Party supporters.

Finally, while Conservative and Reform supporters – and those who emphasise their English identity – are particularly emphatic in their views about Scotland, they are also the most likely to view Wales and Northern Ireland as receiving more than their fair share of government spending. Indeed, this is the plurality view of Wales among those intending to vote Reform, which might be regarded as somewhat ironic given that Nigel Farage chose to launch his party's 2024 general election manifesto in Merthyr Tydfil.

Table 3.2 Attitudes towards the devolved territories, England 2024 (%agree)

	Northern Ireland	Scotland	Wales
[The devolved legislature] should be given control over majority of taxes raised in devolved territory	50	51	48
Levels of public spending in [devolved territory] should be reduced to the levels in the rest of the UK	38	41	39
MPs from [devolved territory] should be prevented from voting on laws that apply only to England	56	61	56
No MP from [devolved territory] should ever be a member of the UK government	18	17	17

Source: FoES2024.

Even if Scotland continues to stand out in the context of perceptions of (un)fair shares, when we focus on attitudes in England as to how the devolved territories should be funded as well as the role they should play in the central political institutions of the state (Table 3.2), what is particularly noteworthy is the consistency of the results. The table displays raw percentages, so 50% of English respondents believe the Northern Ireland Assembly should be given control over the majority of taxes raised in the devolved territory, a slightly higher amount believe the same of the Scottish Parliament (51%) and it is slightly lower for the

Welsh Senedd (48%). The table reveals that English respondents are most likely to support the exclusion of devolved MPs from voting on English legislation and financial self-sufficiency and much less likely to support excluding devolved MPs from involvement in government.

As might be expected, there are differences in attitudes between, for example, Reform supporters and Labour supporters (77% of the former support excluding Welsh MPs from votes on English laws compared to 42% of the latter) as well as between those who identify as English not British and those who view themselves as British not English (focusing again on the same question, 73% of the former want Welsh MPs excluded as compared to 45% of the latter.) Nonetheless, at the aggregate level, there is little variation in attitudes towards the three territories.

Turning next to attitudes towards the future of the Union, we have previously noted what is, in comparative terms at least, a striking degree of ambivalence about the territorial integrity of the state. While political leaders at the UK level invariably declaim the central importance and sacrosanct status of what Theresa May termed the 'precious Union', a substantial proportion of our respondents disagree. Indeed, the proportion who *either* actively want their own part of the state to become independent *or* say that they are content for other parts of the state to become independent if they so wish regularly amounts to more than half of those expressing a view in each of the four parts of the UK (Henderson and Wyn Jones 2023a).

To evaluate attitudes to the Union, our question pits the status quo and independence for one's own part of the UK against an ambivalent 'so be it' attitude should one or more other parts of the UK decide to go their own way. Our latest English data (Table 3.3) suggests an electorate that is somewhat less ambivalent in the aggregate than has previously been the case. Beyond that, there is much here that is familiar. Most obviously, even if 29% of the English not British support independence for England, this is still a substantially lower proportion than we expect to find supporting independence for their part of the state among those who prioritise their sub-state national identity in Scotland and Wales, or among Irish identifiers in Northern Ireland. Rather, the plurality position on the Union among both the exclusively and predominantly English-identifying parts of the electorate is ambivalence ('so be it'). This serves to underline yet again the differences in the political implications and associations of English national identity when set alongside the national identities of the countries of the so-called Celtic fringe. Also familiar is the fact that it is those towards the exclusively British end of the national identity spectrum who are most likely to prioritise the maintenance of the Union, though in this case it remains the case that one in three of the British not English choose the more ambivalent position.

Table 3.3 England and the Union, 2024 (%)

	All	Reform	Conservative	LibDem	Labour	Green	English not British	More English than British	Equally English & British	More British than English	British not English
I want England to become independent	8	16	6	7	8	6	29	10	5	3	6
It's a priority for me that the UK stays together	45	45	63	48	42	28	24	39	49	56	57
I don't want England to become independent but if other parts of the UK want to go so be it	34	31	25	38	38	49	32	40	32	34	32
Don't Know	13	7	8	6	11	16	15	11	13	6	5
	N 1514	252	295	123	328	105	171	305	512	276	113

Source: FoES2024. Party support as measured by voting intention, November 2024

What is new in these data is the way that the fracturing in the patterns of party support evident in England at the time of the 2024 general election allows us to explore differences in attitudes towards the Union among different supporters of the different political parties in ways that have not previously been possible. On the right of the spectrum, we find an interesting difference in the proportions of Conservative and Reform voters – 63% vs 45% – who say that maintaining the Union is a priority. While this difference should of course not be exaggerated, it becomes potentially significant if it allows the insurgent right greater scope to mobilise and exploit English grievances than has usually – but not always – been the case for the Conservative and Unionist Party (an obvious exception being the successful Conservative campaign in the 2015 general election on which see Henderson and Wyn Jones 2021a: 8-34).

On the left of the political spectrum, the position of Green supporters on the Union appears truly distinctive, with almost half opting for the ambivalent unionist option. Given that the Northern Irish Greens are part of the wider Irish party, that the Scottish Greens are constituted as a separate, independence-supporting party, that the Greens in Wales, even though part of an English and Welsh party, formally support the principle of Welsh independence, and that senior figures in the party have been developing their own distinctive position on England and Englishness (Lucas 2024) – this should perhaps come as no surprise. Nonetheless, it is noteworthy that only just over a quarter (28%) of Green

supporters say that they prioritise the Union. We might say, therefore, that the position of Green supporters on the Union tends to be roughly consistent with the structures and policy positions of their own party. While the current significance of these findings should again not be exaggerated, they may become more so, especially if the Greens become the beneficiaries of any disillusionment with Labour among that party's more left-wing supporters.

The Governance of England

One very obvious feature of the victorious Labour Party's 2024 general election manifesto was that further devolution for – by which is meant *within* – England featured heavily in a document that was otherwise effectively silent about any further devolution of powers to Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland (Labour Party 2024). If only by omission, it is clear that the new UK government views English devolution as representing the only substantial piece of 'unfinished business' on the UK's territorial reform agenda – with the more ambitious proposals developed for Labour while in opposition by former Prime Minister Gordon Brown apparently jettisoned (Commission on the UK's Future 2022).

Since the election, the new government has gone on to publish its *English Devolution White Paper* in whose foreword Deputy Prime Minister Angela Rayner makes clear her view that:

“England is one of the most centralised developed countries. Too many decisions affecting too many people are made by too few. The controlling hand of central government is stifling initiative and development throughout the country. It is no wonder that the UK has more regional inequality, slower wage growth and a relative decline in living standards compared to other developed countries. Micromanaging from the centre combined with short-term, sticking-plaster politics has left England's regions in a doom loop, unable to achieve their potential.”

(Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government 2024)

The new government views English devolution as the solution to these problems and, in launching its self-styled 'devolution revolution', is determined to ensure – again citing Rayner – that '[d]evolution will no longer be agreed at the whim of a Minister in Whitehall, but embedded as a default into our country's constitution.'

It remains to be seen how long these lofty aspirations survive contact with the 'Treasury mindset' let alone electoral losses in any subsequent mayoral elections. Low-turnout, mid-term electoral contests would seem tailor-made to ensure embarrassment for the governing party (Denham and Morphet 2024). Yet, for the moment at least, it cannot be denied that the Starmer administration is treating English devolution as a real priority. Which in turn raises the question, to what degree do the government's proposals chime with both the priorities and views of the English electorate?

Let us begin with first of these: to what extent is English devolution a priority for voters in England? Table 4.1 reports responses to a long-running Future of

England Survey question probing the electorate’s preferences for constitutional change. As can be seen, in 2024 reforming English government was the fifth most cited priority behind (1) the UK’s relationship with the EU, (2) introducing a more proportional electoral system, (3) strengthening local government and (4) Lords reform. It should be noted, however, that it has been a higher priority in previous years. Thus, while the relationship with the EU is *always* the highest priority (see also Section 4 below), in 2012, 2013 and 2021 English governance was the second most cited priority.

Table 4.1 Preferences for constitutional change, England 2012-2024 (%)

	2012	2014	2015	2016	2017	2018	2021	2022	2023	2024
UK’s relationship with the EU	59	56	64	64	77	68	66	55	54	56
Reforming the House of Lords	26	24	39	29	28	33	39	33	38	36
How England is governed now that Scotland has a Parliament and Wales has an Assembly**	42	30	36	32	24	24	47	26	30	25
A more proportional system for electing MPs at Westminster	29	29	36	39	43	35	44	40	39	40
Strengthening local government	27	28	19	25	25	24	39	26	28	31
Scotland’s future relationship with the UK	25	30	18	12	16	14	30	16	16	12
The future of Northern Ireland	5	5	10	4	9	16	21	17	17	7
None of these	4	5	4	5	3	5	4	7	6	7
Don’t know	11	13	9	12	9	11	10	11	11	9

Source: FoES2012-2024.

Question: Below are a list of possible changes that could be made to the way the UK is run. Which THREE, if any, of the following areas do you think require urgent action or change at this time? (Please select up to three options)

** from 2022 onwards, question wording changed to ‘How England is governed now that Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland have their own legislatures’

But of course, in politics it also matters for whom a particular issue is a priority. If a governing party's supporters view a matter as one requiring 'urgent action' then the fact that it is not viewed in the same light by the supporters of other parties may be less significant. Given the priority that Labour is affording English devolution, the findings in Table 4.2 on the different preferences of party supporters for constitutional change offers a mixed picture for the Starmer administration. On one hand, to the extent that English devolution is framed as a response to (or continuation of) devolution for other parts of the UK – a framing adopted by both the Conservative and Labour parties including, for the latter, in the recent White Paper – the question of English governance is a much higher priority for Conservative and Reform supporters than it is for Labour supporters.

Table 4.2 Preferences for constitutional change by party support and national identity, England 2024 (%)

	All	Reform	Conservative	LibDem	Labour	Green	English not British	More English than British	Equally English & British	More British than English	British not English
UK's relationship with the EU	56	30	50	76	79	74	35	45	56	69	75
Reforming the House of lords	36	55	32	40	36	40	42	41	35	34	39
How England is governed now that Scotland has a Parliament and Wales has an Assembly**	25	37	35	20	16	13	38	35	23	17	18
A more proportional system for electing MPs at Westminster	40	56	39	49	35	51	39	43	39	45	40
Strengthening local government	31	20	30	31	40	35	28	27	33	33	34
Scotland's future relationship with the UK	12	8	14	13	13	15	7	13	10	11	26
The future of Northern Ireland	7	7	7	8	10	8	5	9	7	8	12
None of these	7	8	8	2	5	4	12	5	6	5	5
Don't know	9	5	7	7	5	4	9	9	11	6	2
N	1514	252	295	123	328	105	171	305	512	276	113

Source: FoES2024. Party support as measured by voting intention, November 2024.

On the other hand, however, 'strengthening local government' is the second highest priority for Labour supporters (albeit with the relationship between the UK and EU almost twice as important again). Thus, to the extent that English devolution is regarded as a way of strengthening local government, it may well

chime with the priorities of these voters. The danger, of course, is that far from pulling powers down from Whitehall, English devolution may well end up aggregating up the remaining powers of England's beleaguered local authorities. This is therefore a framing that creates its own challenges.

Since its inception, the Future of England Survey has probed levels of support for the various options – both actual and potential – for English governance. Again, to the extent that the new government is intent on investing significant political capital in what it terms 'widening' and 'deepening' English devolution, then our findings suggest challenges for Labour while also raising questions about the previous decisions of the opposition Conservatives.

Table 4.3 displays attitudes to five options. Three have been floated at various points but never implemented: a Minister (or Secretary of State) for England in the UK Government; Government Ministers for each English region; and an English Parliament. A version of another option – English Votes for English Laws – was implemented for a brief period before subsequently being axed during the COVID pandemic. The fifth option is the one favoured by the current administration building on the work of its Conservative predecessors, namely regional authorities led by metro mayors.

There are two points to note. The first is that English Votes for English Laws (EVEL) is not only *always* the most popular option, but that this is also the *only* option that consistently secures majority approval with consistent support across both party and national identity lines. Long supported by the Conservatives as a necessary response to the creation of legislatures in Belfast, Cardiff and Edinburgh, a version of EVEL was implemented in 2015 by the then David Cameron-led government in the aftermath of the Scottish independence referendum. The procedure was subsequently suspended (in 2020) and quietly abolished (in 2021) by the Boris Johnson administration.

This is not the place to enter a discussion of the wisdom of a reform that, in some quarters at least, was regarded as hugely controversial. But focusing purely on public attitudes, it seems clear that only a tiny proportion of the English electorate was ever aware that EVEL had been introduced (Henderson 2021). Given that the version of EVEL adopted amounted to (only) a change in the procedures of the House of Commons – and a highly technical and complex change, at that – this should come as no surprise (Glover and Kenny 2018, 2020; Henderson and Wyn Jones 2021a). At any rate, the introduction of EVEL clearly did not assuage the demand for EVEL (Henderson 2021). All the available evidence suggests that in casting aside its support not only for the procedure but for the principle of EVEL in 2021, the Conservatives surrendered their hold on what was a potentially popular policy.

Table 4.3 Preferences for English governance 2011-2024, % agree (strongly agree)

	2014	2015	2016	2017	2018	2019	2020	2021	2022	2023	2024
UK government minister for England	53 (22) *	47 (17) *	42 (13) *	50 (11)	37 (12)	36 (10)	58 (22)	55 (19)	38 (18)	43 (13)	38 (12)
UK government ministers for each of the regions of England	51 (18)	44 (11)	41 (9)	41 (8)	42 (9)	41 (8)	66 (19)	58 (15)	40 (18)	44 (19)	42 (8)
An English Parliament	54 (26)	49 (22)	46 (19)	42 (17)	43 (16)	36 (15)	50 (19)	54 (22)	36 (26)	38 (27)	39 (14)
New regional authorities based around the major cities in England (Sometimes called city-regions)	NA	35 (8)	34 (7)	35 (6)	36 (6)	34 (7)	56 (17)	48 (13)	34 (20)	38 (21)*	34 (6)*
Changing the rules in parliament so that only English MPs can vote on laws that would apply in England (sometimes called English Votes for English Laws)	69 (40) **	65 (39)	63 (34)	62 (30)	61 (29)	53 (26)	55 (22)	65 (31)	56 (15)	55 (14)	57 (26)
N	3705	3451	5103	3168	2741	1595	1509	1603	1600	1621	1514

Source: FoES2014-2024.

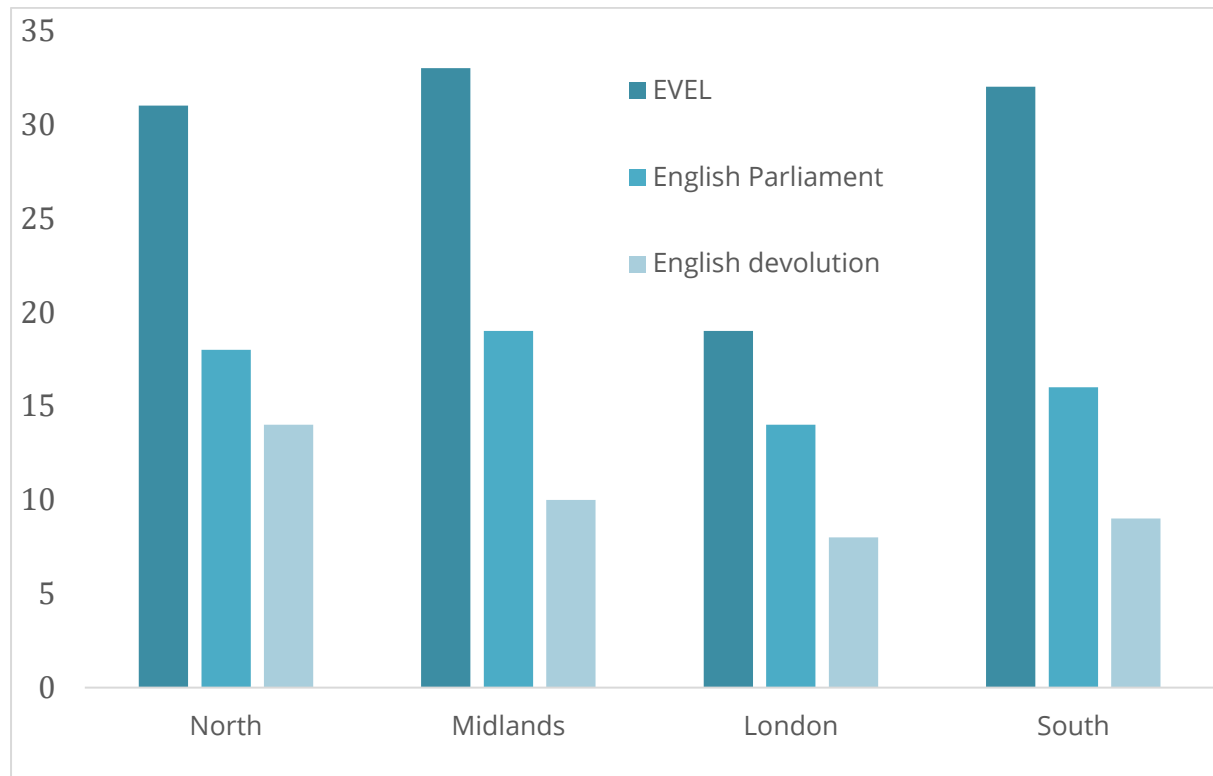
* 2014 to 2016 question wording was Secretary of State for England

* 2014 The words '(sometimes called English Votes for English Laws)' were omitted.

The second point to note is that with the sole exception of 2020, English devolution as championed by the current government is always the least popular option for English governance across the electorate as a whole. In 2024, even such support as it enjoyed must be regarded as unenthusiastic, with only 6% strongly agreeing with the idea. It should also be noted that when we disaggregate these findings by region (in this case by aggregating England's nine administrative and statistical regions into four broader areas: North, Midlands, London, and South) the preference order remains the same (see Figure 4.4), although support for any

form of change is lowest in London. Even in the North, where English devolution is most popular, it is supported by fewer than 15% of respondents.

Figure 4.4 Support for options for English governance by region, 2024



Source: FoES2024.

The saving grace for Labour, however, is that English devolution is the most popular option among Labour supporters (Table 4.5). Indeed, it is *only* among Labour supporters that regional authorities led by metro mayors is more popular than EVEL, although the policy also enjoys significant support among Green and Liberal Democrat supporters. On the right of the political spectrum, despite the fact that previous Conservative governments have promoted ‘English devolution’, this support is not echoed among party supporters for whom it is – by some distance – the least favoured option. Meanwhile among Reform supporters, alongside opposition to regional authorities (opposed by 38%), we find overwhelming support not only for EVEL but for an English parliament.

These findings present two major challenges for Labour’s current plans for English devolution. First, the absence of popular support across the political spectrum suggests that they will struggle to gain the wider legitimisation necessary to ensure their entrenchment over the longer term. As we have discussed elsewhere, regional level governance in England has long been bedevilled by almost constant churn in which both the boundaries and the powers of the meso-level units have been constantly questioned, revised and rejigged (Henderson and Wyn Jones 2021a: 167-94). Not only does every UK government tend to have its own, often

very different ideas, but one can sometimes be forgiven for concluding that every Secretary of State has been hell-bent on leaving his or her own individual imprint. The impact of the ‘whim of a minister in Whitehall’ has indeed been very apparent. Without an extended period of stability underpinned by a degree of consensus about roles, powers and boundaries, it is hard to see how public understanding of or support for English devolution can be generated and maintained. Yet, when support for these structures is both tepid and politically polarised, building such a consensus is likely to prove very challenging.

Table 4.5 Preferences for English governance 2024, % agree (strongly agree)

	All	Reform	Conservative	LibDem	Labour	Green
A UK government minister for England	38 (12)	52 (23)	49 (17)	36 (6)	34 (8)	28 (9)
UK government ministers for each of the regions of England	42 (8)	44 (11)	43 (8)	43 (6)	47 (8)	46 (8)
English Parliament	39 (14)	64 (32)	47 (19)	32 (7)	27 (8)	26 (8)
Regional authorities based around the major cities in England (sometimes called city-regions led by metro mayors)	34 (6)	21 (3)	29 (3)	44 (7)	54 (11)	45 (16)
Changing the rules in parliament so that only English MPs can vote on laws that would apply in England (sometimes called English Votes for English Laws)	57 (26)	77 (51)	69 (38)	55 (17)	45 (11)	48 (18)
N	1514	252	295	123	328	105

Source: FoES2024. Party support as measured by voting intention, November 2024

This is especially the case when we consider that, if and when English devolution is framed as a choice between treating England as a single unit or as multiple regional units, the former option is *always* by far the most popular across the electorate as a whole. It is worth noting that this is true not only in England itself but also in the other constituent parts of the UK (Henderson and Wyn Jones 2023b: 24). It is also true across party and national identity divides, a finding that is all the more noteworthy since the preceding pages have highlighted the wide range of other issues on which voters diverge along both party and national identity lines. As is clear from Table 4.6, supporters of every party are much more supportive of treating England as a single unit than treating regions within

England as distinct units – this is very much the case even of Labour supporters (by a 2:1 margin). The same is true for all national identity groups in England, including those who feel British not English (by a 3:1 margin). In this context there would seem to be an obvious opportunity for parties on the right to mobilise opposition to the UK government’s plans for English devolution on the basis that they are an attempt to ‘divide England’. This is a message that is likely to resonate well beyond their current core of English-identifying supporters.

Table 4.6 England single unit vs regionalised by party support and national identity, 2024 (%)

	All	Reform	Conservative	LibDem	Labour	Green	English not British	More English than British	Equally English & British	More British than English	British not English
For the whole of England to be treated as a single unit	62	76	76	58	56	52	67	68	65	58	58
For each English region to be treated as a different unit	21	18	13	25	26	25	23	21	18	25	19
Other	1	0	2	3	0	3	0	0	0	2	4
Don't Know	16	6	10	14	18	20	10	11	17	15	19
N	1514	173	295	123	328	105	171	310	512	276	113

Source: FoES2024. Party support as measured by voting intention, November 2024.

English devolution has been promoted as a remedy to a multitude of ailments assailing the body politic. These include, *inter alia*, the chronic overcentralisation of English governance after decades during which successive governments (Labour and Conservative alike) have reduced the powers and budgets of traditional local government; the huge regional disparities in patterns of economic growth and prosperity across England; the widespread sense of alienation from the central state; the apparent need to provide recognition for the more local identities that exist at the substate level in England; and the anomalies and potential injustices that England faces as a result of the devolution of power to the other constituent parts of the state. Indeed, for many advocates, English devolution is a means of addressing all of these problems simultaneously (see for example Commission on the UK’s Future 2022) – truly the public policy equivalent of a magic pill.

It will be clear from the preceding discussion that we remain sceptical. While there may well be compelling functional reasons to strengthen meso-level government

in England, there would appear to be only limited public support for any serious moves in this direction. Moreover, even should successive UK administrations somehow manage to maintain a consensus around the form that English devolution should take for a period long enough to allow a genuinely robust structure to take root, this would still leave the wider 'English question' – that is, the place of England within a post-devolution UK – unaddressed.

England, Englishness and Europe

The Euroscepticism so characteristic of those in England who mainly identify as English was a key driver of the 2016 vote to leave the European Union (EU). In terms of the formal modelling, while English identity wasn't the only thing that mattered, notwithstanding the other variables included in the model, Englishness always remained significantly associated with Leave sentiment (Henderson et al. 2021). As we shall see, while much has changed in the almost nine years since the referendum – and the five years since the UK's withdrawal from the EU – it remains the case that most of those who view themselves as exclusively or predominantly English continue to embrace Eurosceptic views even as the remainder of the population has become increasingly Europhile.

Perhaps the best place to start to investigate this pattern of continuity and change is by considering who in England regards the UK's relationship with the EU as a key priority. As already discussed in relation to Table 4.2, this topic is always the constitutional issue afforded the highest priority by England's electorate. But there is very significant variation in terms of which parts of the electorate prioritise the state's European relationship – a variation that moreover represents a complete reversal of the situation that pertained a decade ago (as illustrated in Table 5.1). Then it was Eurosceptics who were more likely to be focused on the UK's relationship with the EU, that is those who identified as more English than British and supporters of the Conservative party or the then populist right challenger, UKIP. Now, by contrast, those who embrace an exclusively or predominantly English identity are much less likely to prioritise Europe than those who emphasise their Britishness. Similarly, supporters of the left and centre-left parties are much more likely to be preoccupied with Europe than supporters of the Conservatives and Reform – indeed the latter are, by some distance, the least likely to prioritise the UK-EU relationship.

Table 5.1 Europe the key constitutional priority, 2014 and 2024 (%)

		UKIP / Reform	Conservative	LibDem	Labour	Green	English not British	More English than British	Equally English & British	More British than English	British not English
2014	56	78	71	55	47	28	73	71	61	63	64
N	1827	191	482	163	535	47	208	422	596	208	96
2024	56	30	50	76	79	74	35	45	56	69	75
N	1514	252	295	123	328	105	171	305	512	276	113

Source: FoES2014 & 2024. In both cases, party support as measured by vote intention at the times the surveys were fielded.

One plausible explanation for this sea change is simply that the Eurosceptics won. Having succeeded in removing the UK from the EU, they may simply regard the UK's relationship with Europe as having been resolved. This does not seem to be the case, however. Rather, as is clear from Table 5.2, the most Eurosceptic parts of the electorate – that is those who identify as English only and Reform voters – believe that the UK's relationship with the EU continues to be too close. Indeed, only among Conservative supporters do we find a plurality (though still only 38%) saying that the post-Brexit relationship with the EU has settled in what we might term 'the Goldilocks zone' – it's 'about right'. This view is rejected not only by a plurality of the most Eurosceptic but also by very large majorities of those who support the parties of the left and centre-left and who feel exclusively or predominantly British.

Table 5.2 Attitudes to the UK's post-Brexit relationship with the EU by party support and national identity, England 2024 (%)

	All	Reform	Conservative	LibDem	Labour	Green	English not British	More English than British	Equally English & British	More British than English	British not English
Relationship with the EU still too close	15	44	23	0	4	0	32	21	14	9	6
Relationship with the EU not close enough	50	18	30	83	77	79	30	34	44	69	76
Relationship about right	19	29	38	7	11	12	17	28	22	15	11
Don't Know	16	9	9	9	8	9	22	17	20	8	6
	N 765	129	148	54	172	58	72	161	263	143	58

Source: FoES2024. Party support as measured by voting intention, November 2024.

Clearly these findings – in particular, the attitude of Labour supporters – raise all kinds of interesting questions about the long-term viability of the Starmer government's current softly-softly approach to EU relations. But the key point to note in the current context is that they do not suggest that Eurosceptics are deprioritising the UK's relationship with the EU because they are satisfied with the results of Brexit. Quite the opposite, in fact: on the whole, they are dissatisfied with the outcome. Just as the introduction of EVEL failed to assuage demand for change, neither has the actuality of Brexit assuaged the demand for Brexit at least among the most ardent Brexiteers. Meanwhile, the more Europhile are

remarkably united in their view that there should be a closer relationship between the UK and EU.

Table 5.3 Attitudes to EU membership by party support and national identity, England (%)

		All	Reform	Conservative	LibDem	Labour	Green	English not British	More English than British	Equally English & British	More British than English	British not English
In hindsight, was the UK right or wrong to vote to Leave (2024)?	Right to leave	36	77	58	10	13	10	58	51	37	21	16
	Wrong to leave	55	16	37	86	83	86	31	41	51	74	83
	Don't Know	9	7	5	4	4	4	11	9	12	5	1
How would you vote in a referendum on the EU? (2016)	Leave	45	91	57	26	28	13	73	59	43	31	34
	Remain	40	5	33	66	61	80	14	28	45	58	57
	Wouldn't vote	4	1	0	1	1	0	4	3	3	2	2
	DK	11	4	10	8	11	7	10	10	10	9	8
N		5103	536	1551	317	1205	144	606	1067	1893	706	322
How would you vote in a referendum on the EU? (2024)	To stay outside	34	76	57	9	13	11	52	50	36	22	16
	To rejoin	49	11	32	82	80	78	29	33	45	65	78
	Wouldn't vote	9	5	5	1	4	4	12	10	10	5	5
	Don't know	7	7	6	7	4	4	7	7	9	8	1
N		1514	252	295	123	328	105	171	305	512	276	113

Source: FoES2016 & 2024. In both cases, party support as measured by vote intention at the times the surveys were fielded.

Even if it is now pro-Europeans rather than their opponents who tend to prioritise the UK's relationship with the EU, what remains the case is that English identity still positively correlates with Eurosceptic sentiment (Table 5.3). Whatever their misgivings about the outcomes of the Brexit process, a majority of those who feel exclusively or predominately English continue to feel that the UK was right to leave the EU and, similarly, a majority also say that they would vote to stay outside the EU should a referendum be held on the question of rejoining. What is different, however, is that these groups are overall somewhat less strongly Eurosceptic than was the case at the time of the 2016 referendum. Meanwhile those groups that tended to be more Europhile then are even more so now. In other words, English Euroscepticism has clearly been tempered by the

Brexit experience, even if the relationship between English national identity and Euroscepticism remains robust. Meanwhile those in England who emphasise their British identity are now overwhelmingly and most emphatically Europhile.

Having desired and eventually secured Brexit, English-identifiers appear dissatisfied with the result – yet they remain largely unrepentant about their original choice and regard the issue of the UK's relationship with the EU as, at best, a very low priority for the future. Their wish in this regard may well be granted – we have already alluded to the apparent preference of the new UK government for letting sleeping dogs lie. Yet, it is also clear that Brexit and all that it has come to symbolise has generated a very substantial response – “backlash” might be a more appropriate word – among other parts of England's population, which may yet force a reckoning, especially if the UK's economy continues to stagnate and the Trump administration increasingly pursues an aggressively isolationist position on international affairs and an America First trade policy.

Englishness, National Populism and Anger

Thus far, we have outlined and contextualised our most recent data on patterns of national identity in England, exploring how national identity associates with party support and, relatedly, to which parties' supporters national identity matters most. As a next step, we focused on English attitudes to the Union of the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland, demonstrating that while levels of public funding for Scotland continue to be a particular source of concern and grievance, there appears to have been an equalisation of attitudes to the three devolved territories on other dimensions. In this sense, Scotland is less of an outlier than has previously been the case. What remains unchanged is that it is English-identifiers who are most concerned about the implication for England of devolution to Northern Ireland, Scotland and Wales, with those who identify as primarily or exclusively British most sanguine.

The presence of significant numbers of both Reform and Green supporters in our sample has also allowed us to highlight and explore the extent to which supporters of insurgent parties of both left and right challenge traditional assumptions about the value of the Union. We found that, in line with their party's distinctive position, Green supporters are ambivalent about its future. Meanwhile, Reform supporters tend to be most certain that England is being disadvantaged by the current arrangement, most adamant that spending in devolved territories should be reduced and that the power of those territories at the centre of the state should be curtailed.

Our investigation of attitudes towards English governance showed (yet again) that English Votes for English Laws remains the most popular option for English governance, even if that option has already been tried once, to no one's apparent satisfaction. In addition, we have drawn attention to the risks that public attitudes in England – in particular, the very strong preference for an all-England as opposed to a regional solution – pose for Labour's plans for English devolution.

Returning to the UK's relationship with Europe, we have shown that having succeeded in their objective of securing Brexit, the most significant change in the state's geopolitical positioning in more than half a century, English-identifying Eurosceptics are nonetheless largely dissatisfied with the outcome. Notwithstanding this, the association between Englishness and Euroscepticism remains robust, even as, in response, those who identify as mainly or exclusively British have now become overwhelmingly Europhile. What is different is that English-identifying Eurosceptics are far less likely than was once the case to prioritise the UK's relationship with its European neighbour as a matter requiring urgent action.

Despite the apparent disappointment of ‘actually-existing Brexit’, neither can it be said that politicised English national sentiment has lost its ability to discombobulate the British body politic. Rather, as we have seen, support for Reform UK is concentrated among those in England who emphasise their English identity while being notably weaker among those who consider themselves exclusively or predominantly British. Given the strength of that party’s performance in the 2024 general election and the fact that both the Labour and the Conservative parties very clearly feel themselves to be under siege from Reform, we can confidently predict that politicised Englishness will continue to shape much of the wider state’s politics for the foreseeable future.

The sustained impact of politicised Englishness on British politics since it was very deliberately mobilised by the Conservative party in their successful 2015 UK general election campaign has been nothing short of remarkable. Yet as a force it remains much misunderstood. One way to clarify and illuminate both its appeal as well as the particular constitutional, political and even cultural preoccupations that currently align with English national identity is through the prism of **‘national populism’**.

The rise as well as the various manifestations of national populism – often simply ‘populism’ – has generated an avalanche of commentary running the gamut from the horrified to euphoric and is underpinning a veritable academic industry of conferences, books and papers, including those probing its role in Brexit (e.g. Eatwell and Goodwin 2018, Gamble 2020, Mandelbaum 2020, Langlois 2024).

The *national* element of national populism varies from context to context reflecting different national pasts and of course different narratives and myths about them. The story in Hungary is different to the story in Norway which is different to the story in Ireland and so on. Understanding these specific national contexts (or what some might refer to as their national ‘political cultures’) is therefore vital if we are to understand the substance and the appeal of some of the particular messages emanating from national populists. Thus, in the English case, we have previously highlighted the contemporary significance of a tendency to venerate the past, long noted as a key feature of English political culture:

“Hankering for a return to the past, or at least its best approximation [through English Votes for English Laws or Brexit, for example], is also, therefore, a hankering for a time in which it was felt that they (or people like them) actually mattered; a time in which the English felt valued in England and Britain, and an England-dominated Britain knew its proper (elevated) place in the world – and, naturally, the rest of the world knew it too.”

(Henderson and Wyn Jones 2021a: 133)

The perception that the England once ‘wont to conquer others, Hath made a shameful conquest of itself’ now links to and powers a sense of individual and collective disempowerment and a demand for often radical change as means of securing re-empowerment – or to coin a phrase, a desire to ‘take back control’.

Table 6.1 Attitudes to immigration, Islam, multiculturalism and English values by party support and national identity, England 2024 (%)

			Reform	Conservative	LibDem	Labour	Green	English not British	More English than British	Equally English & British	More British than English	British not English
Should the number of immigrants to the UK be decreased, increased or stay the same	Decreased	57	96	80	42	27	24	81	71	61	40	34
	Increased	7	0	1	9	14	24	6	3	5	10	15
	Stay the same	24	1	15	38	43	39	6	16	24	38	33
	Don't know	12	3	3	11	17	13	7	10	11	12	18
Islam is compatible with Western Values (strongly disagree)	Total Agree	18	4	10	22	34	36	7	15	14	27	39
	Neither Agree/Disagree	19	7	17	30	23	29	15	14	19	25	17
	Total Disagree	49 (28)	84 (70)	64 (35)	37 (16)	29 (11)	24 (8)	65 (50)	59 (37)	47 (26)	40 (19)	36 (11)
	Don't know	15	4	10	11	13	13	13	13	19	8	9
English culture is not valued as highly in England as other culture are (strongly agree)	Total Agree	55 (20)	87 (53)	69 (25)	49 (10)	32 (6)	31 (8)	71 (39)	72 (31)	55 (18)	44 (11)	33 (6)
	Neither Agree/Disagree	19	8	17	24	27	17	16	11	21	21	21
	Total Disagree	18	2	11	22	32	37	2	12	14	27	35
	Don't know	9	2	4	5	9	14	8	12	14	27	35
In England our values make us different from the rest of the UK	Total Agree	21 (4)	33 (11)	28 (5)	16 (1)	15 (2)	11 (1)	44 (14)	29 (4)	16 (4)	15 (1)	12 (0)
	Neither Agree/Disagree	31	39	35	23	24	30	31	35	37	23	22
	Total Disagree	40	25	34	58	56	54	19	31	40	57	59
	Don't know	8	3	3	3	5	5	6	6	7	5	7
N	1514	252	295	123	328	105	171	305	512	276	113	

Source: FoES2024. Party support as measured by voting intention, November 2024.

But as well as these nation-specific dimensions of national populism, there also appear to be more generic features that form a common denominator between its various manifestations, at least across the global North.³ In their recent survey, Rita Abrahamsen and her colleagues point to the way that the various “articulations [link] working-class material interests and discontent, the predations of economic globalisation, cultural and symbolic opposition to liberal elites and ‘wokeism’, and the privileged position of experts and expert institutions” (Abrahamsen et al. 2024: 66). Immigration is, of course, one of the key perceived negative impacts of globalisation, with the ‘multiculturalism’ allegedly promoted by global elites regarded as a means of diluting the specificities and downgrading the status of indigenous national cultures. To review attitudes in England towards these various tropes and issues is to underline the extent to which, even as the reality of Brexit proves a disappointment for its most ardent proponents, English national sentiment is likely to provide fertile ground for populist political entrepreneurs.

Table 6.1 shows how attitudes towards immigration, the extent to which Islam is compatible with ‘Western values’, multiculturalism (how ‘English culture’ is valued in England) and the distinctiveness of English values even within the UK, are all very strongly associated with national identity as well as voting intentions – and all in what will now have become the expected direction.

In similar vein, if we consider the influence of *Environmentalists*, *Feminists* and *Left-Wing Activists* to be examples of ‘wokeism’, we find that those who emphasise their English national identity and supporters of Reform (and to a lesser extent the Conservatives) are all significantly more likely to regard these groups as enjoying ‘too much influence’.

Thus, using a scale of 1 to 5 where 1 is ‘Too little influence’ and 5 ‘Too much influence’ and focusing only on those respondents who scored 4 or 5, we find that 51% of those who identify as English not British thought that ‘Environmentalists’ have too much influence compared to 23% of the British not English. The scores for ‘Feminists’ and ‘Left wing activists’ were 35% vs 20% and 46% vs 30%, respectively. On the right of the political spectrum and using the same measure, 72% of Reform supporters and 50% of Conservative supporters regard Environmentalists as having too much influence, 33% of Conservatives and 44% of Reformers believing the same about Feminists, and fully 60% of Conservatives and 68% of Reformers saying the same of Left wing activists.

There is clearly much more to unpack here but even so, it is abundantly clear that many of the more generic tropes and ideas associated with national populism find

³ Some of the common themes characteristic of the various manifestations of national populism found in the global South are different – see Abrahamsen et al. 2024: 144-178.

particular resonance among those in England who emphasise their English identity, with those who feel exclusively or predominantly British far less drawn to their appeal. It is therefore no surprise that it is among those voters who emphasise their English identity that an increasingly national populist Conservative party and, of course, Reform are currently making most inroads.

Table 6.2 Emotional responses to British politics by party support and national identity, England 2024 (%)

		All	Reform	Conservative	LibDem	Labour	Green	English not British	More English than British	Equally English & British	More British than English	British not English
Makes me feel angry (strongly agree)	Total Agree	60 (20)	82 (40)	59 (18)	57 (15)	52 (10)	76 (27)	66 (29)	69 (25)	60 (18)	58 (16)	55 (19)
	Neither Agree/Disagree	24	12	25	28	28	13	18	19	25	24	32
	Total Disagree	11	5	13	14	17	10	11	10	11	17	11
	Don't know	4	1	3	2	2	0	6	3	4	1	2
Makes me feel fearful (strongly agree)	Total Agree	55 (15)	67 (27)	53 (16)	62 (13)	44 (6)	74 (20)	61 (21)	58 (18)	56 (16)	52 (11)	50 (12)
	Neither Agree/Disagree	24	21	27	18	29	20	18	24	27	24	31
	Total Disagree	16	11	16	17	25	5	15	14	14	22	17
	Don't know	5	1	3	3	3	0	5	4	3	3	1
N		1514	252	295	123	328	105	171	305	512	276	113

Source: FoES2024. Party support as measured by voting intention, November 2024.

One further set of findings from the latest iteration of the Future of England Survey allows us to better grasp the current dynamism of the populist right, this

even in the wake of what might appear at first glance to be a crushing Labour victory in the 2024 UK general election. Specifically, we asked respondents to what extent thinking about contemporary British politics triggered different emotions, namely to what extent did it make them feel 'hopeful', 'angry', 'frustrated', 'happy' and 'fearful'. It will come as no surprise to any observer that, overall, respondents rejected the notion they were 'hopeful' by a ratio of 7:1, agreed they were 'angry' by a ratio of margin of 5:1, were 'frustrated' by a margin on 16:1, rejected the idea that they might be 'happy' by a staggering 24:1 margin, and were 'fearful' by a more modest if still decisive 3:1 margin.

Given the strength of the emotions on display, there is often little differentiation in the responses. Clearly, almost no one is 'happy' about the state of British politics whatever their partisan predilections or sense of national identity. The mood is rather one of fear and anger. But Table 6.2 allows us to zoom in on two sets of responses where potentially significant differentiation is apparent.

As can be seen, in the context of both anger and fearfulness – emotions that are interconnected and powerful motivating forces – the party support and national identity breakdowns do not follow the left of centre/more British vs right of centre/more English pattern that will have become familiar over the preceding pages of this report. Here it is Green and Reform supporters that stand out as being most angry and fearful. Given the analysis of and the scientific evidence for climate breakdown that underpins the Green project, the position of this party's supporters should come as no surprise. The position of Reform, by contrast, is consistent with what we might expect from the national identity profile of responses. Those respondents who emphasise their English identity are more likely to be angry – and are angrier – than those who cleave to a primarily or exclusively British identity. They are also most fearful.

Here, we suggest, is an insight into the way that the specific issues and concerns associated with politicised Englishness have served as a way of channelling the more generalised frustrations with contemporary society and the contemporary political economy that underpin the wider, apparently global, populist revolt. English-identifiers tend to be among the very angriest, perhaps because they feel they have lost the most and fallen the furthest. These same voters also tend to believe that they have the most credible solution for society's travails: credible because what they desire represents (merely) a return to what in their view had previously existed – a previous 'golden age' with which we remain within touching distance. Given that this understanding of the past is itself part of a wider national narrative underpinned by the mythologies and practices of the Anglo-British state itself, we should not be surprised at its power. Not only is anger 'an energy' in the broader sense, but specifically English anger serves as a lens through which wider anger and resentment can be and is focused.

The danger – in our view, the likelihood – is that, by its nature, the politics of often aggressive nostalgia that results from this dynamic is destined to disappointment.⁴ Thus, the introduction of EVEL did not satisfy the demand for EVEL. Brexit did not satisfy the demand for Brexit. This is because what was and is being pursued is ultimately a chimera, a simulacrum of a past world that almost never existed then and could certainly never be recreated. Yet even if this is the case, a decade after political Englishness was successfully mobilised in the run-up to the 2015 UK general election and five years since the UK withdrawal from the EU, political Englishness retains its transformative power.

⁴ We will be returning to the theme of nostalgia in forthcoming work.

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Useful links:

Data and other information is available on the Union Survey's website: www.theunionsurvey.com

Additional updates will be disseminated through the Union Survey's Bluesky account: [@theunionsurvey.bsky.social](https://bsky.app/profile/theunionsurvey.bsky.social)

The Centre on Constitutional Change's website is: www.centreonconstitutionalchange.ac.uk

The CCC also disseminates its work through X / Twitter: https://twitter.com/ccc_research

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