

Polling paper

What matters to the English after Covid?

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What matters to the English after Covid?

Introduction

Three of the most important issues in British politics right now are: the Johnson government's declared ambition to 'level up' some of Britain's poorer regions; the aftermath and consequences of Brexit; and conflicts over the future of the UK's own union.

England is the only part of the UK which is directly affected by all three of these areas of British government policy. Reflecting this, we conducted a new polling study in order to shed light on how people in its different regions feel about these major issues. We focused on taking the temperature of England for another reason too. Ever since a clear majority of people living in the largest part of the UK voted to leave the EU, and since Johnson's election victory in December 2019, it has been widely suggested that a new form of "English nationalism" has coalesced in non-metropolitan parts of the country and is being harnessed by the current Conservative government.^{1,2,3}

This new polling allows us to subject this characterisation to greater scrutiny and to explore whether – now that Brexit is 'done,' and following the major disruption caused by the coronavirus pandemic – this mood still prevails. Our survey included questions about national identity which enable us to explore whether there is a different political outlook associated with 'English' as opposed to 'British' feelings of national identity. And we also included questions that enable us to look closely at what people in England feel about the emerging crisis of the domestic union.

Levelling up, the challenges of territorial governance and the idea of 'place-based' approaches to public policy are themes that lie at the heart of the intellectual agenda which we have developed at the Bennett Institute for Public Policy. This new collaboration with the long-established YouGov-Cambridge Centre for Public Opinion Research has given us a unique opportunity to understand more fully how these issues play out within popular consciousness.⁴

Levelling up

Since coming to power in 2019, Boris Johnson has made the ambition to 'level up' the fortunes of Britain's poorer regions the main focus of his government's domestic policy programme. And as the keynote speech he delivered in July made clear, this commitment has become even more salient for him in the wake of the Covid-19 pandemic, with a White Paper on this subject due to be published in the autumn.⁵

A good deal of the debate triggered by this idea has focused upon the absence of a clearly communicated definition of levelling up, and a lack of clarity about the metrics that will define its success. There has been some speculation about how different groups of voters respond to this idea, with some suggesting that the Conservatives' poor showing in the Chesham and Amersham by-election may have been the result of a growing feeling in so-called 'Blue Wall' seats that the

¹ Wooldridge, A. (2021) '[The Disruptive Rise of English Nationalism](#)', *The Economist*, (March).

² Henderson, A. and Wyn-Jones, R. (2021), *Englishness*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

³ Stephens, P. (2021) '[Boris Johnson's Tories Have Given Up on Saving the UK Union](#)', *The Financial Times*, 29th April.

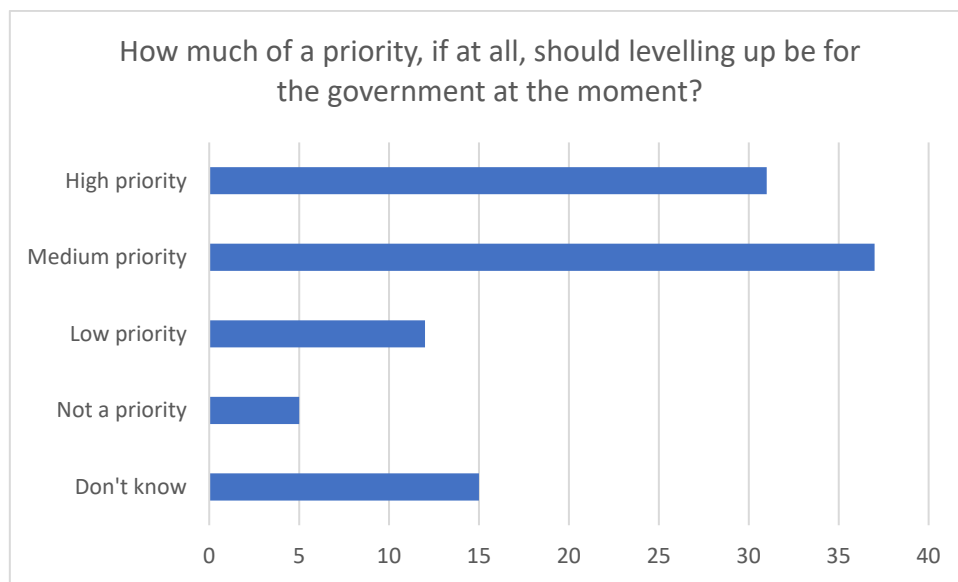
⁴ Polling fieldwork was conducted online by YouGov between 17-18 May 2021, with a total sample size of 1467 English adults. Results have been weighted and are representative of all English adults aged 18+. See the full results [here](#).

⁵ Johnson, B. (2021) [The Prime Minister's Levelling Up Speech](#), 15th July, London.

commitment to level up signals a shift of attention and resources away from their localities towards post-industrial Northern regions.^{6,7}

Our survey helps us understand how voters in different parts of England feel about this agenda, and make an assessment as to whether it really is the case that levelling up is viewed distinctively in different parts of the country. We also asked questions that help us probe whether people think that it is likely to spawn a policy programme that will make a meaningful difference to Britain's poorest regions, and understand whether and how they feel it will affect them personally.

Whereas some commentators have expressed doubt that the concept of levelling up means very much to the wider public,⁸ we found clear majorities that both recognise the concept as a current priority of the government and support it in principle. More than two thirds of our respondents said it should be a high (31%) or medium (37%) priority for government. Only 17% think it should be a low priority, or not a priority at all.

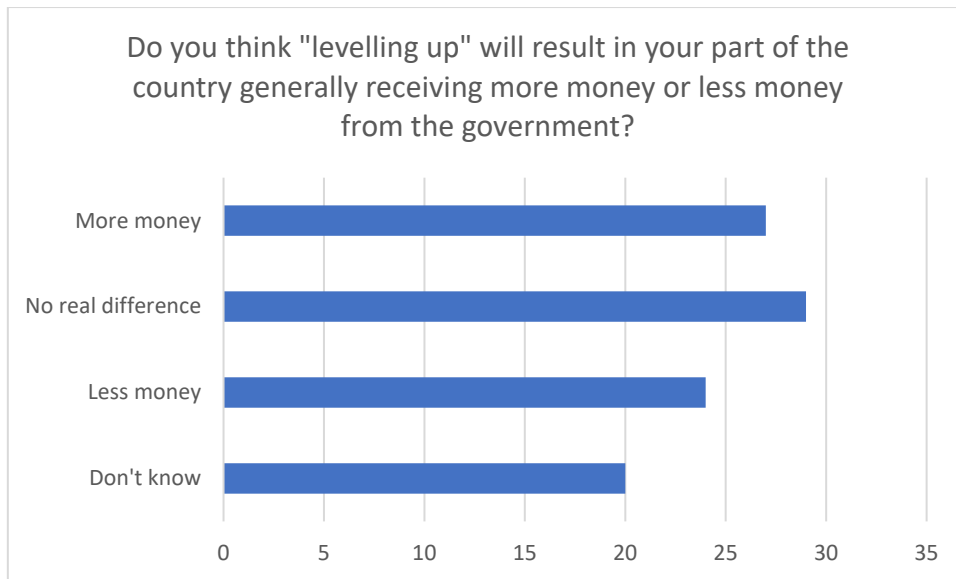


But our survey also suggests that there is an important gap between generalised support for levelling up as an idea, and a widespread sense of scepticism that it will yield benefits for the areas that need it most. Thus, while 27% of our respondents believe that levelling up will mean more money from central government for their part of the country, more than half (53%) think it will either make no real difference or will actually result in less money for their local area. Similarly, while 32% of English people say levelling up will be good for their local economy, 36% take a neutral view and 14% believe it will actually do harm to their own locality.

⁶ Riley-Smith, B. (2021) '[Chesham and Amersham By-Election Defeat Shows PM May Be Paying Price for Red Wall Focus](#)', *The Telegraph*, 18th June.

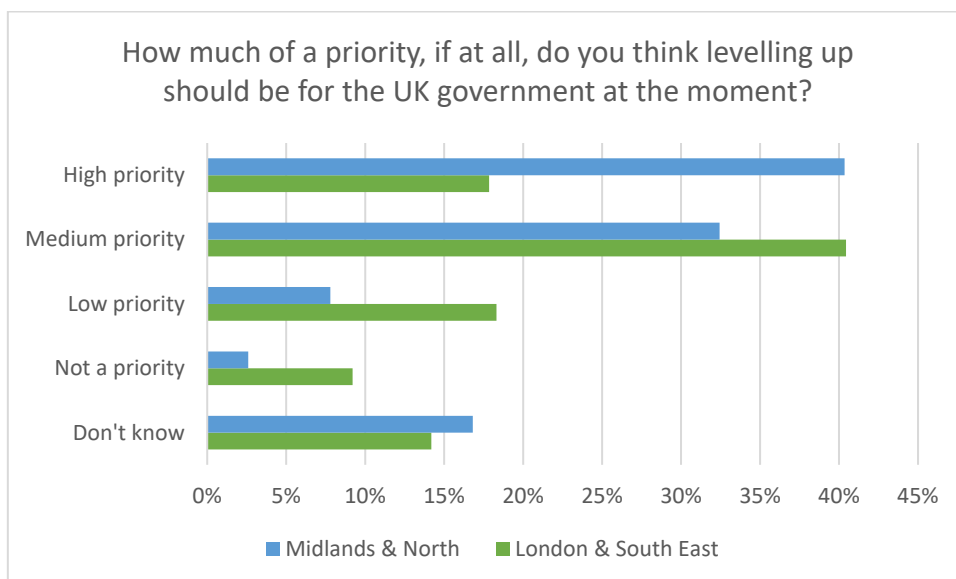
⁷ Morales, A., Ross, T. and Ashton, E. (2021) '[Ministers Warn Johnson of Tory Revolt After UK Election Shock](#)', *Bloomberg*, 18th June.

⁸ Opinium (2021) [The Political Report: 5th August 2021](#).



We find too that there are very marked regional differences in popular views of this agenda. People in the London and South East region are much less favourably disposed towards levelling up than their counterparts living further north, and much less likely to think that it will benefit their area. This finding suggests that those Conservatives who have raised the potential impact of this focus upon support for the party in the 'Home' Counties – like Oxfordshire, Cambridgeshire, Hampshire, Surrey and Kent – are right to be worried.⁹

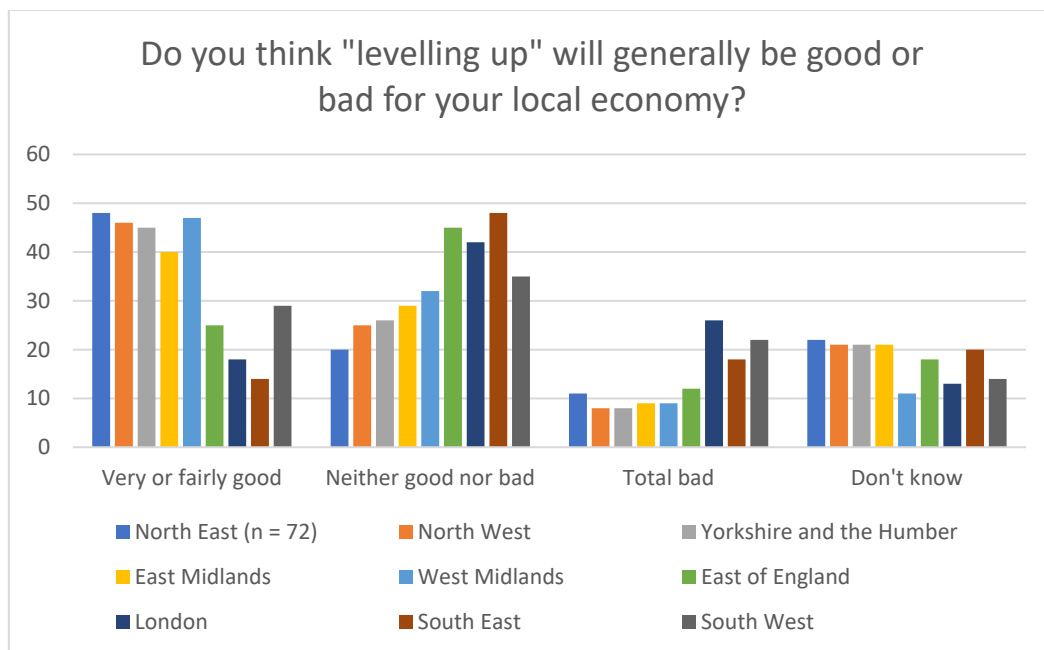
In London and the South East, only 18% of people think levelling up should be a high priority for government, compared to 40% of people in the Midlands and North. And, whereas 41% of the latter group believe that it will result in more money being invested in their locality, only 9% of people in London and the South East believe this to be true for their own area. In fact, almost half (47%) of those in London and the South East anticipate that levelling up will result in less money for their region, whereas only 8% of people in the Midlands and North have the same concern.



⁹ Parker, G. (2021) '[Boris Johnson's Levelling-Up Agenda Takes Toll on Southern Tories](#)', *Financial Times*, 14th May.

Similarly, there is a marked regional gap between the proportion of respondents who think that levelling up will be good for their local economy. Whereas 45% of people in the Midlands and North think their local economy will benefit from levelling up, only 16% of people in London and the South East feel the same way.

There is a clear North-South divide at work in perceptions of levelling up. In the North East, North West, Yorkshire and the Humber, the East Midlands and the West Midlands, between 40% and 48% of people think that levelling up will be good for their local economy.¹⁰ In the East of England this falls to 25%, and then falls further again in London (18%) and the South East (14%). There is one exception to this pattern. In the South West, a slightly higher proportion of people think that it may bring benefits to their region.



While these regional differences are notable, and will concern Tory party strategists and supporters, it is also clear from this polling that the majority of the English public remain sceptical that this ambitious-sounding plan will deliver meaningful change. In every region other than the North East and Yorkshire and the Humber, 50% or more think that it will be neither good nor bad for their own standard of living (although this may well be true of people’s feelings towards most government policies). Equally, however, it is clear that in the Midlands and North, which include many historically Labour seats, larger number of voters than elsewhere are currently willing to buy into Johnson’s rhetoric, a finding that underlines the depth of the challenge facing Keir Starmer in seats in these regions.

Finally, it is not clear that those voters who are optimistic about levelling up share the same understanding of how investments under this policy agenda ought to be distributed as the government. Whereas the vast majority of funding has to date been allocated towards large-scale physical infrastructure and transport projects, only 2% of our respondents listed transport as one of the most important issues facing the country at the moment.

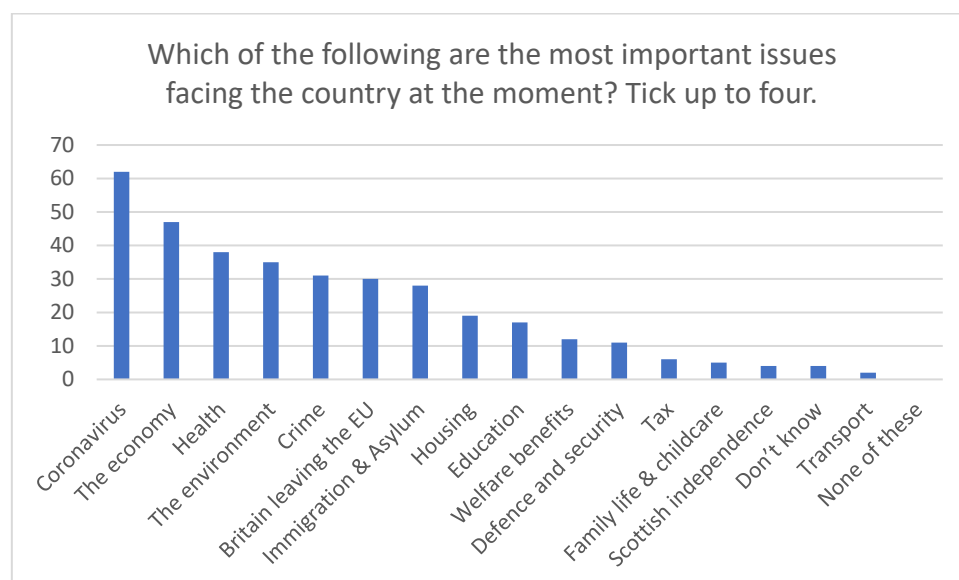
¹⁰ Note, the base size of the North East break (n = 72) is smaller than that of the other regions and this estimate is therefore less reliable.

Brexit

Two years on from the end of the political and constitutional crisis triggered by Brexit, and 5 years after the Referendum itself, how do the English feel about the decision to leave the European Union?

There has been much interest in the media in the question of whether ‘buyer’s remorse’ has set in for some of those who supported ‘Leave’, and various polling studies have suggested a small growth in support for ‘Remain’ since 2016.^{11,12} And there has been considerable discussion among expert commentators about whether Brexit remains the defining measure of political allegiance, and if this issue is as important for English voters now as it was in 2019, when the desire to get Brexit done contributed markedly to Johnson’s electoral victory.

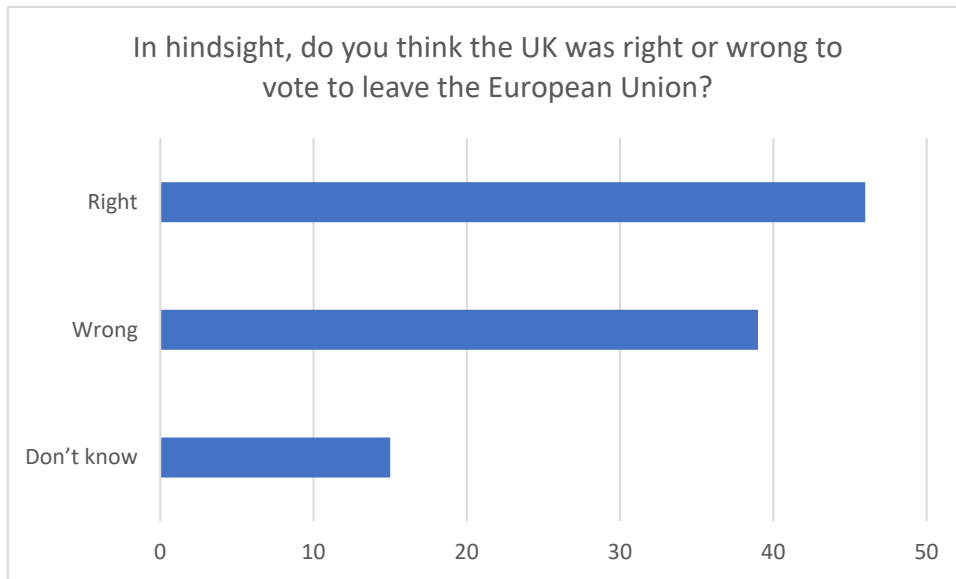
Our polling shows that Brexit is still seen as a political priority by a significant minority of English voters. When asked to identify up to four of the most important issues facing the country, 30% of respondents included Brexit in their list. Not surprisingly, the pandemic was the issue that respondents were most likely to identify as a priority. But issues like crime and the environment were also mentioned by many respondents, and it may well be that Brexit is starting to fade in importance for some parts of the English electorate.



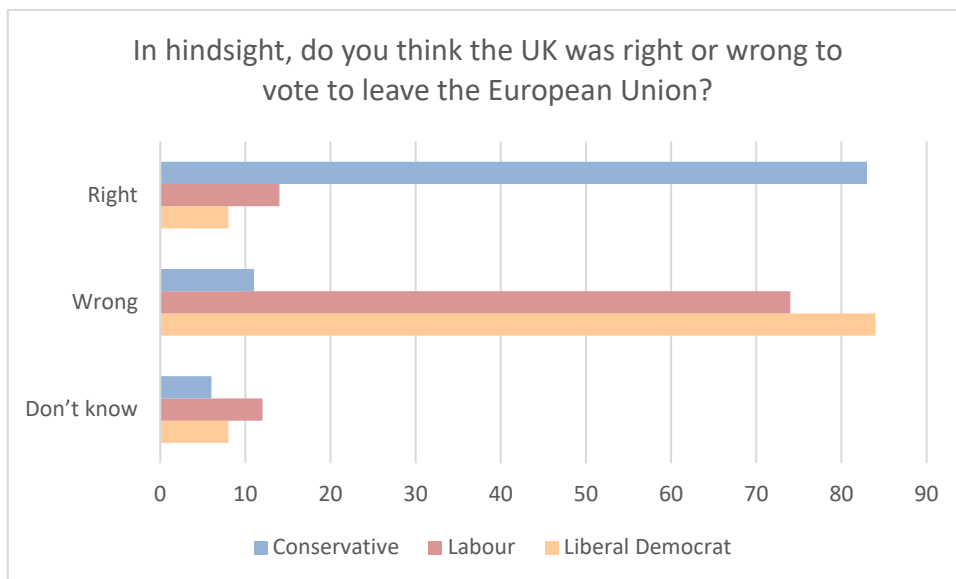
On the question of how people feel about the decision taken in 2016, our survey shows that Leave continues to be the preferred option for most English people. Specifically, 46% overall stated at the time this fieldwork was undertaken, in May 2021, that the UK was right to leave the EU, compared with 39% saying it was wrong to do so. Results also suggest that slightly more English voters may have switched their preference from Remain to Leave than *vice versa*: while 11% of English people who voted Remain in 2016 now described Brexit as the right decision, a smaller portion (4%) of English Leavers said it was a mistake. And similar proportions of each group said they were now unsure about whether Brexit was the right decision or not (8% of English Remainers, 10% of English Leavers).

¹¹ McGee, L. (2020) [‘Four Years After Brexit, Support for the EU Surges in Britain’](#), *CNN*, 26th June.

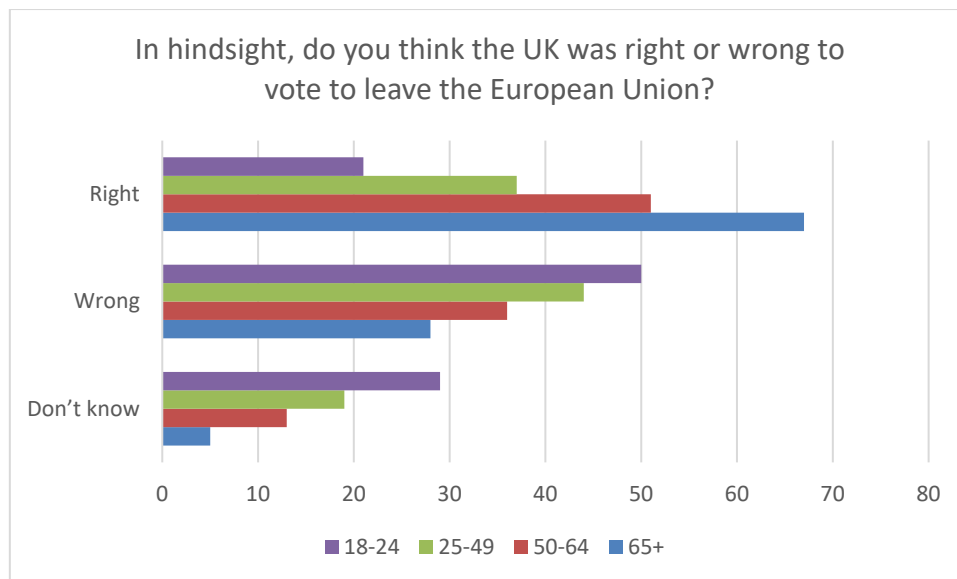
¹² Curtice, J. (2019) [‘Has There Been a Shift in Support for Brexit?’](#) *What UK Thinks: EU*, 8th February.



Perspectives on whether leaving the EU was the right choice for the UK divide clearly along partisan lines. Whereas 83% of English respondents who voted Conservative in 2019 said Brexit was the right decision in hindsight, only 14% of Labour voters and 8% of Liberal Democrats agreed. Conversely, more than 80% of Liberal Democrats described Brexit as the wrong decision, alongside 74% of Labour voters. Only 11% of Conservative voters thought it was a mistake.



Analyses of voting patterns in the Referendum showed that age was a good predictor of voting behaviour, with younger people across the UK more likely to vote to remain and older people more likely to vote to leave. Our findings suggest that in England the correlation between age and attitudes on this issue remains strong. The older somebody is, the more chance that they are in favour of Brexit. Whereas 21% of 18-24 year olds described it as the right decision and 50% thought it was wrong, these figures were 67% and 28% for those aged 65 and over. The confidence and certainty that people in England exhibit with respect to this question also varies by age, with older people far less likely than younger people to say that they are not sure what they think on this issue. Whereas 29% of 18-24 year olds responded 'don't know', only 5% of the over-65s did so.



English nationalism?

There has been much talk, since 2016, of the rise of a dangerous current of ‘English nationalism’ which is depicted by some commentators as the driving force behind Brexit and as an outlook which has been harnessed politically by the contemporary Conservative party. And some pundits suggest that this species of majoritarian nationalism is now a destabilising factor within the UK’s domestic union.^{13,14} Others have observed the increasingly polarised character of national affiliation in the English setting, identifying a growing divide between those who identify primarily as ‘English’ and hold more socially conservative views, and progressively-minded voters who identify with multi-cultural ideas of Britishness.¹⁵

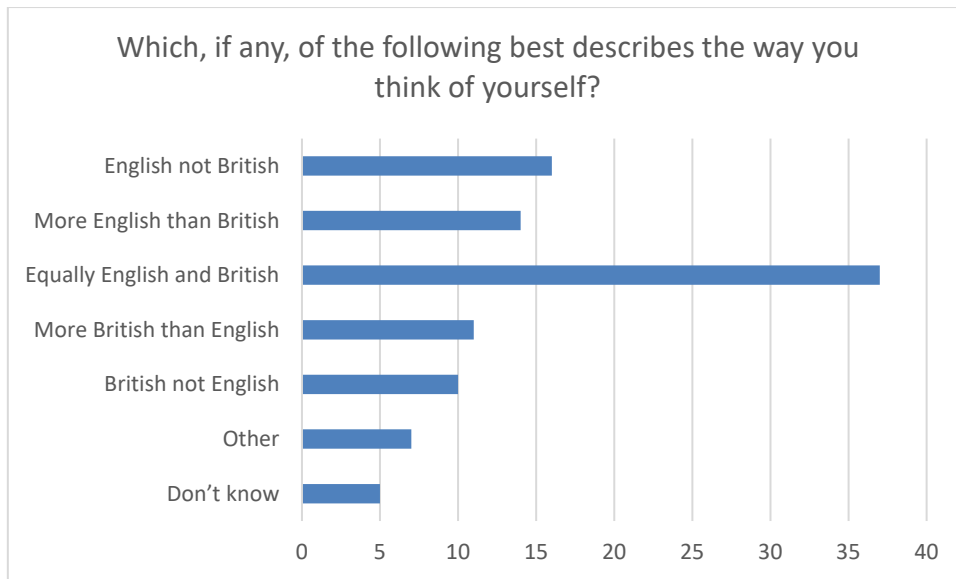
Our polling study allowed us to put some of these characterisations to the test, with questions about national identity as well as attitudes towards globalisation, immigration and the future of the UK’s own union. The findings it has generated suggest that talk of a rising sense of English nationalism at the popular level may need some qualification. They also reveal a divergence of outlook on some, but not all, issues between those who identify as British and those who see themselves as English in their national identity.

One key finding, which echoes previous surveys, is that a plurality of people in England choose to see themselves as both English and British. 37% of people in England identify in this way. By contrast, 30% identify as either ‘English not British’ or ‘more English than British’ and 21% see themselves as ‘British not English’ or ‘more British than English’.

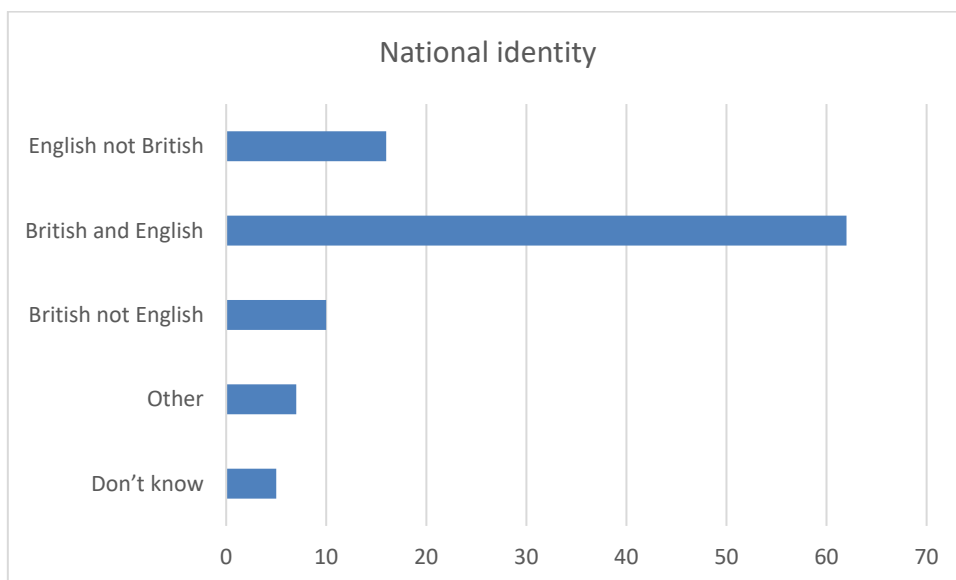
¹³ Wooldridge, A. (2021) [‘The Disruptive Rise of English Nationalism’](#), *The Economist*, 18th March.

¹⁴ Esler, G. (2021) *How Britain Ends: English Nationalism and the Rebirth of Four Nations*. London: Head of Zeus.

¹⁵ Denham, J. and McKay, L. (2021) [‘England: The Forgotten Nation that Remade the Politics of the UK’](#), *Prospect*, 14th June.



Roughly one quarter of respondents see themselves in exclusive national terms, with 16% identifying as 'English not British' and 10% as 'British not English'.

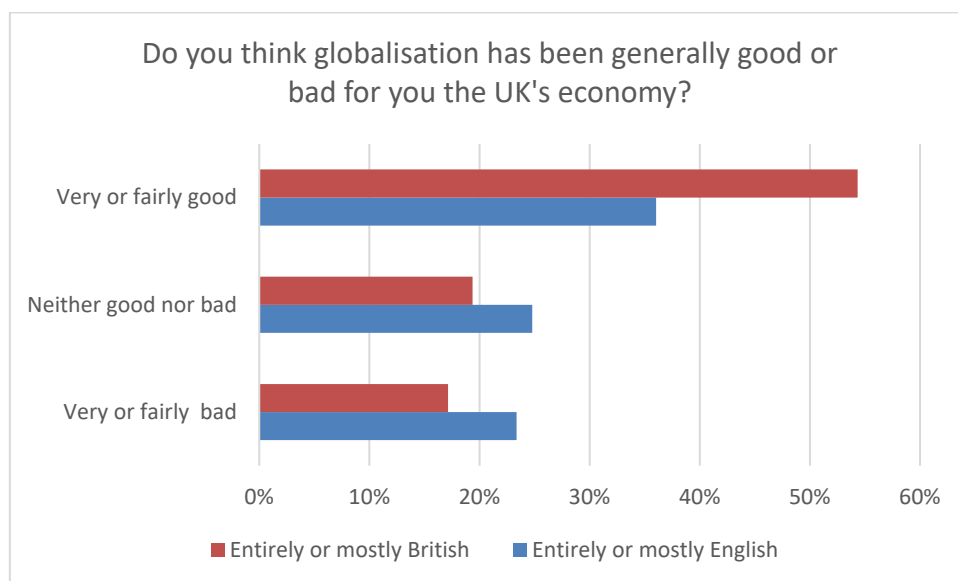


Do these different national identity preferences correlate with distinctive kinds of worldview? These results would suggest that a nuanced answer to this question is required.

There is a very marked correlation between English-identifiers and support for Brexit. 66% of those who identify as entirely or mostly English think the UK was "right" to leave the EU, as opposed to only 30% of British identifiers. But on other questions we put to our respondents, the answers generated were not as dichotomous. This was especially true of attitudes to globalisation, with only some small differences between these groups' views apparent on this topic. Thus, 17% of those who see themselves as entirely or mostly British think globalisation has been 'very good' for the UK's economy, as opposed to 4% of those who identify as English or mostly English. Likewise, whereas 15% of British identifiers think globalisation has been 'very good' for their own standard of living and

22% think it has been 'very good' for the cultural life of the UK, only 3% and 7% respectively of English-identifying respondents feel the same way.¹⁶

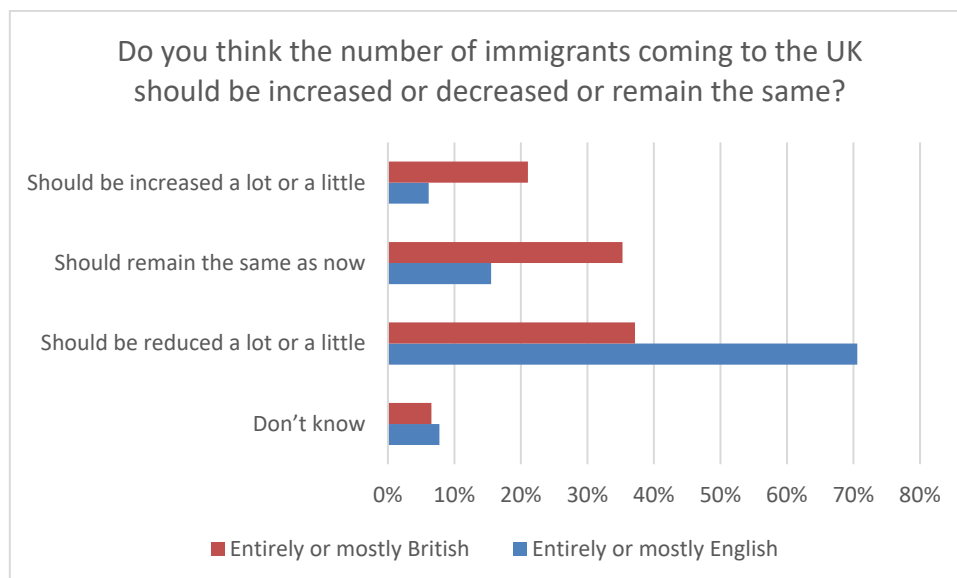
But, strikingly, if we combine those who think globalisation has been 'very good' for these outcomes with those who think it has been 'fairly good', we find that English-identifiers are, like their British-identifying counterparts, more likely to feel positive than negative about the effects of the global economy. Over a third (36%) of English respondents think that globalisation has been 'very' or 'fairly' good for the UK's economy, and less than a quarter (23%) think it has been 'very' or 'fairly' bad. Similarly, 29% of English identifiers feel that globalisation has been 'very' or 'fairly' good for their own standard of living, which is almost double the percentage who feel it has been bad (16%). Finally, those who identify as English are also more likely to feel that globalisation has been generally good for the cultural life of the UK (34%) than to feel it has been bad (29%). These results suggest the need to avoid easy assumptions about the beliefs of those who identify with a sense of English, rather than British, nationhood.



There is no clear division by national identity preference on attitudes in this area. Both groups are more likely to feel that globalisation is a force for good than a source of economic and cultural harm, although people who identify as British tend to be a little more positive about globalisation's impact than those who see themselves as English. Nonetheless, consistent majorities of both English and British identifiers express a mix of positive to neutral sentiments about engagement with the wider world, a finding that undermines the force of the binary characterisations of public opinion in this area, framed variously as "open versus closed" or "globalism versus nativism".

On the issues posed by immigration, however, the more divided pattern which some commentators observe is apparent in our polling. A majority (56%) of British identifiers think the number of immigrants entering the UK should be maintained at current levels or increased, but less than a quarter (23%) of English-identifying respondents agree. In fact, the vast majority (71%) of English-identifying respondents think that levels of immigration should be reduced, as opposed to 38% of those who identify as entirely or mostly British.

¹⁶ Respondents were given a brief definition of globalisation before being asked whether they thought it has been generally good or bad for a range of outcomes. The question read: "The word 'globalisation' is sometimes used to describe the trend towards a global economy and the way countries have developed closer interaction with each other, making it easier for companies and people to live, work, trade and travel overseas. From what you know, do you think this process has been generally good or bad for each of the following?"



But on one issue above all – climate change – there is not much of a difference in outlook between these groups. Large majorities of both the British (96%) and English (84%) groups believe that the climate is changing and human activity is either mainly or partly responsible for this – a finding which suggests a broadly shared national consensus on this issue. However, there is a more noticeable divergence between them on the question of how important the environment is as a policy challenge for the UK at present. Whereas 46% of the British group identified the environment as one of the four most important issues facing the country, only a quarter (25%) of the English group did the same. A majority of people in both groups do not list the environment as one of the four most important issues in the UK at the moment.

Devolution and the future of the UK

Does the picture of a rising English nationalism contributing to the increasingly fraught territorial politics of the UK stack up? And are English citizens who live away from London increasingly likely to support more devolution as a result of the experience of the pandemic, and the protests against the approach the government took to regional lockdowns during 2020? Based on our survey, the answer to both of these questions is “Not really”.

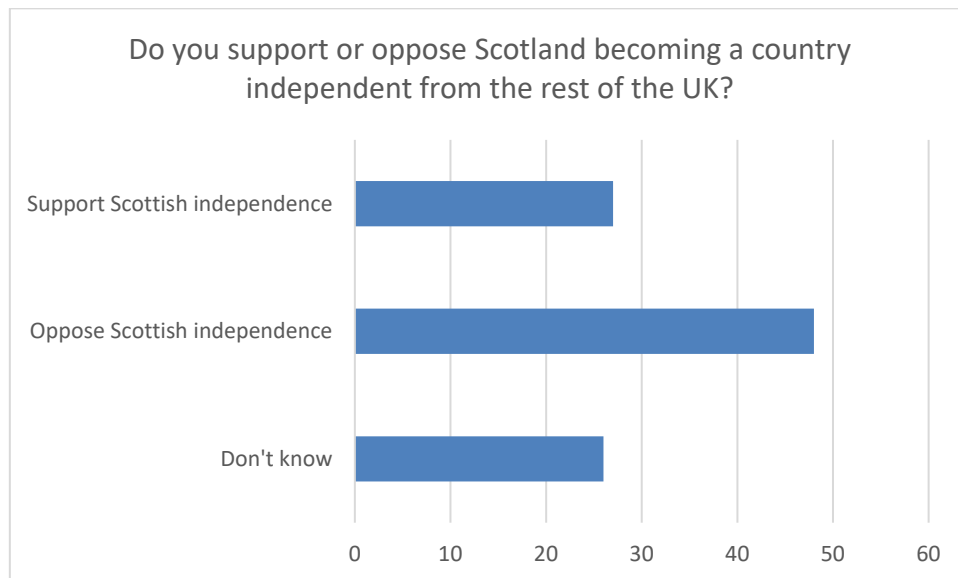
This polling provides a picture of a nation which is divided in terms of its level of engagement with the Scottish situation. It suggests that a fairly large number of people do not have formed views about Scotland’s future within the UK and reveals that most do not see the survival of the domestic union as a first-order issue.

When asked to identify up to four of the most important issues facing the country from a closed list of options, only 4% of respondents to our survey included Scottish independence in their selection. This finding echoes other polling research which suggests that the abiding attitude towards the future of the Union among people in England is indifference or ignorance, rather than nationalist grievance.¹⁷

When asked about Scottish independence and its implications for the future prospects of Scotland and the remainder of the UK, a large number of people did not express a view: over a quarter (26%)

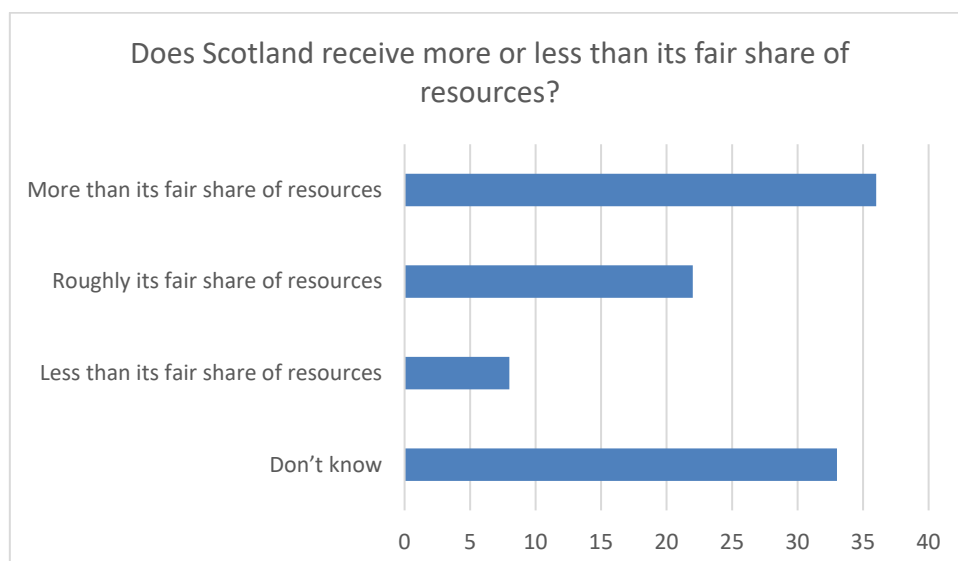
¹⁷ Smith, M. (2020) [‘How Do English and Welsh People Feel About Scotland Leaving the UK?’](#)

of respondents say that they do not yet know if they favour Scottish independence. This is almost the same proportion who declare support for this goal (27%). But, notably, nearly half of our sample (48%) said that they opposed Scottish independence.



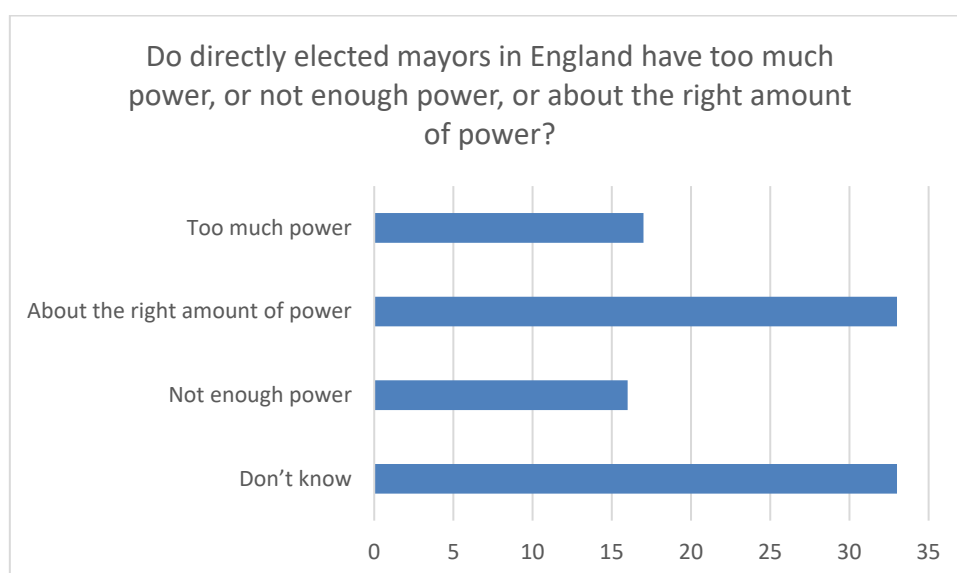
A similar proportion was unsure whether or not Scottish independence would damage or harm the financial prospects of the remainder of the UK and Scotland itself in future, while just over a quarter (28%) believe that Scottish independence would make the rest of the UK financially better off, as opposed to 21% who think the opposite would happen. 28% of people who answered this question said they thought it would make no real difference to the financial strength of the UK as a whole. However, quite strikingly, 55% of respondents were convinced that independence would be bad for Scotland financially.

A similar pattern emerged in responses to questions about the current devolution arrangements. On this issue, an even larger proportion of people reserved judgement – an indication perhaps of relatively low levels of understanding of devolution in England. When asked whether Scotland receives its fair share of resources from the government in Westminster, 33% said they did not know. Another third said that they felt that Scotland receives 'more than its fair share' (36%), and a smaller proportion (22%) said they feel that Scotland receives 'roughly its fair share of resources'.



In the wake of the determination of the Johnson government to make the promotion of the Union (in both financial and rhetorical terms) one of its core policy goals, and to signal its scepticism about key aspects of devolved government, we asked our English respondents whether they felt the Scottish government currently has the right amount of power or not. One quarter (27%) said it had too much power, but a larger (36%) number signalled assent to the current arrangements. But here too, a fairly sizeable proportion of people (25%) said they did not know. These findings do not suggest that there is a great deal of public support in England for the activist and ‘muscular’ unionist approach being pursued by the Johnson government. But they do indicate that around 1 in 4 English people are inclined to think that Scotland has too much power and 1 in 3 believe that it is treated too generously in fiscal terms by the British state.

And, finally, in terms of devolution within England itself, our survey found that about a third of people (33%) think that directly elected mayors, like Andy Street and Andy Burnham, have about the right amount of power at the moment. A smaller number said they had too much power (17%) and about the same proportion (16%) said they had too little – a finding that suggests the need for caution about the contention that there is growing support for sub-national devolution within England.



Conclusion

The results of this polling offer a window onto the various priorities, hopes, fears and national outlooks of England’s disparate publics.

Above all, they suggest that, as an idea, ‘levelling up’ attracts markedly more support in the North and Midlands than it does in London and the South East. Contrary to the Prime Minister’s insistence that levelling up will not mean ‘robbing Peter to pay Paul’, residents of England’s southern regions appear to suspect that this agenda will, in fact, involve some spatial redistribution and that they will be on the losing end of such a programme.

But while it is appealing to some, there is also a marked scepticism about what exactly will be achieved in relation to it. Although two thirds of people support the *idea* of levelling up, there is also

wide-spread scepticism that, in practice, this agenda will deliver meaningful, material improvements to people's standard of living or their local economy.

On one of the other major issues in British politics – Brexit – these findings suggest that, while the UK's departure from the EU has lost some of its salience in England's public consciousness, it still remains a priority for a significant minority. And whereas some commentators have suggested that a sense of 'buyer's remorse' has set in for those voters who supported Brexit, our polling does not find evidence of such a mood.

And, finally, in relation to the domestic union, this polling suggests that, as yet, only small numbers of people in England are paying much attention to what is happening in Scotland and Northern Ireland. One in four people have not yet formed a view on the issue of Scottish independence. But when they do engage with this issue, most people would prefer the UK to remain as it is currently constituted; half of those polled expressed their opposition to Scottish independence.

[View the full polling results.](#)

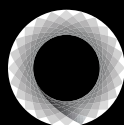
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