Democracy

Brexit, the pandemic and trust and confidence in government

The effective delivery of public policy, including not least in a pandemic, is often thought to require a reasonable level of trust and confidence in the political system. However, there has been a long-term decline in political trust in Britain, which fell to an all-time low during the parliamentary stalemate over Brexit in 2019. This chapter examines the impact that the delivery of Brexit and the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic had on levels of political trust and on some of the debates about constitutional reform in Britain.

Levels of trust and confidence have risen back to pre-Brexit levels

- Levels of trust and confidence have risen back to pre-Brexit levels. 23% now say that they trust governments to put the national interest first, up from 15% in 2019 and slightly above the average of 20% recorded between 2010 and 2017.
- 32% now say that the system of governing Britain needs little if any improvement, up from 20% in 2019, and only a little below the average level of 34% between 2000 and 2014.
- 44% say they almost never trust politicians to tell the truth, down from 51% in 2019, and similar to the level found in 2013 and 2016.

The delivery of Brexit has helped restore trust and confidence – but only among Leave voters

- Among Leave voters, the proportion who trust governments to put the national interest first has increased from 12% in 2019 to 31% in 2020. Only 17% of Remain voters share this view.
- 46% of Leave voters think that Britain's system of government is in little need of improvement, up from 17% in 2019. Only 24% of Remain voters say the same.
- Despite a 'rally-round-the-flag' effect early on during the pandemic, those who are most concerned about the disease are not more likely to put their trust and confidence in government.

Brexit has had little impact on attitudes towards constitutional reform

- There is little sign that Brexit has discouraged Remain voters from backing referendums on other subjects. 65% of them believe the electoral system should be settled by a referendum rather than decided by MPs – exactly the same proportion as among Leave voters.
- 42% of people in England back either an English Parliament or regional assemblies, the same proportion as did so in 2015, before the EU referendum
- 24% of people in England think that Scotland should become independent, much the same as the 22% who did so in 2015.

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Introduction

The effective functioning of a democracy is often thought to be reliant on the public having a fair degree of trust and confidence in how they are governed (Levi and Stoker, 2000; Citrin and Stoker, 2018). If people have low levels of trust and confidence they may be less willing to participate in the political process, including not least at elections (Hooghe, 2018). As a result, government may prove less adept at responding to the needs and wishes of its citizens. Meanwhile, given that democracies impose limits on the exercise of the coercive powers of the state, the ability of government to implement public policy is heavily reliant on the willingness of citizens to accept and comply with the decisions that government makes. Low levels of trust and confidence are often thought to put such acceptance and compliance at risk.

It is, then, little wonder that widespread concern has been expressed about what has been a well-charted long-term decline in levels of political trust and confidence in Britain (Clarke et al., 2018; Curtice and Montagu, 2020a; Jennings et al., 2017). It has, for example, been suggested that it helps explain why levels of turnout in general elections have tended to be lower during the last twenty years (Uberoi and Johnston, 2021). It has also been argued too that those with low levels of trust and confidence are more likely to support constitutional reform (Seyd et al., 2018). But more recently, interest in the subject has been stimulated by two phenomena – Brexit and COVID-19. Voters with a low level of trust were more likely to have voted Leave, leading some to suggest that the majority vote in favour of exiting the EU was an expression of generalised dissatisfaction with the political system (Clarke et al., 2017; Curtice, 2017; Fox, 2021). More recently, the parliamentary stalemate over the implementation of Brexit appeared to undermine political trust and confidence further (Blackwell et al., 2019; Curtice and Montagu, 2020a). Meanwhile, the government's ability to handle the coronavirus pandemic rested heavily on the public's willingness to adhere to unprecedented restrictions on their social life. That willingness might have been undermined if the public lacked trust and confidence in the government that was imposing those restrictions (Devine et al., 2020) – and while the early days of the pandemic witnessed a 'rally-round-the flag' effect that boosted political trust and confidence, subsequent research has suggested that effect faded the longer the pandemic wore on (Davies et al., 2021; Fancourt et al., 2021; Jennings, 2020).

In this chapter, we examine what has happened to people's trust and confidence in how they are governed in the wake of Britain's exit from the EU in January 2020 and the onset of the coronavirus pandemic just a few weeks later in March 2020. We assess whether the eventual delivery of Brexit reversed some of the decline in trust and confidence during the course of the Brexit process – and, if so, whether this reaction was shared by Remain and Leave voters

alike, or was confined to those who had voted for Brexit in the first place. We examine too the relationship between trust in government and people's levels of concern about the impact of the pandemic. Meanwhile, we consider how between them the Brexit process and the pandemic may have affected attitudes towards some specific aspects of how Britain is governed. Brexit was, of course, the product of a referendum and perhaps that experience has affected people's attitudes towards the merits of making major policy decisions in that way. Meanwhile, after a referendum vote that saw Scotland vote very differently from the rest of the UK and a public health crisis in which the profile of the devolved administrations across the UK was raised because of the significant role they have played in the pandemic's handling, we consider where attitudes in England towards how both England and Scotland should be governed now stand.

The data we use come from two surveys conducted during the first year of the pandemic. The first survey was conducted in July 2020 using NatCen's mixed mode random probability panel. This panel comprises people who were originally interviewed for a previous British Social Attitudes (BSA) survey (the potential respondents to which are selected at random) who have agreed to answer either (mostly) online or by phone occasional follow-up surveys (Jessop, 2018). The second is the latest BSA survey conducted some months later between October and December last year – though, in contrast to previous years, by inviting a random selection of households to complete an online survey rather than be interviewed face to face (see Technical details). Both surveys contain questions on trust and confidence in government that have been asked on previous BSAs – and in some instances on other surveys too – and thereby enable us to examine how the prevalence and structure of attitudes may have changed in the wake of the delivery of Brexit and the onset of the pandemic.

True, both these surveys were conducted differently from previous BSA surveys – and this may raise questions as to whether any differences between the results of these surveys and those of previous BSAs may be occasioned by the difference of methodology rather than any real change in public attitudes. However, given that the two 2020 surveys were themselves conducted differently from each other, if a finding is supported by the results of both of those surveys, the risk that the change is an artefact of a change is much reduced. Meanwhile, because in the case of the panel survey the respondents comprised people who had answered previous BSA surveys we have often been able to check that the change we report is also in evidence among those who answered our questions on an earlier BSA and on the July wave of the panel.

Trust and confidence

Our first indication of people's perceptions of how well Britain is governed comes from a question first asked on a survey conducted in the early 1970s for the Royal Commission on the Constitution, which was established by the Labour government of 1964-70 to assess how best to respond to an apparent increase in support for devolution (Kilbrandon 1973a; 1973b). This question has been asked on numerous occasions since, not only on the British Social Attitudes survey, but also on a number of other surveys including, most notably, a series on the 'State of the Nation' commissioned by the Joseph Rowntree Trust. It asks people whether they feel the present system of governing Britain 'works extremely well and could not be improved', 'could be improved in small ways but mainly works well', 'could be improved quite a lot', or 'needs a great deal of improvement'. In Table 1 we combine those who gave either of the first two responses and those who selected either of the last two.

The table reveals that there have been occasions when a relatively high proportion have expressed the view that the system works well. Not only was this true of the Royal Commission's own survey, but also of ones conducted in the late 1990s, and after the 2001 and 2010 general elections, suggesting that the election of a new government could help renew people's confidence in how they are governed. However, there have also clearly been some low points – most notably in 1995 when the then unpopular Conservative administration was mired in allegations of 'sleaze' (Smith, 1995), immediately before the 2010 election when the government was having to deal with a financial crash and an MPs' expenses scandal (Crewe and Walker, 2019), and most notably in the midst of a parliamentary stalemate over Brexit in 2019, when an all-time low of just one in five (20%) said that the system was working well.

Table 1 Attitudes towards how Britain is governed, 1973-2020

Present system of governing Britain...	1973	1977	1991	1994	1995	1996	1997	1998	1999
	%	%	%	%	%	%	%	%	%
Could not be improved/ Could be improved in small ways	48	34	33	29	22	35	56	46	48
Could be improved quite a lot/A great deal	49	62	63	69	75	63	42	52	50
Unweighted base	*4892*	*1410*	*1034*	*1137*	*1034*	*1180*	*4214*	*2071*	*1060*

	2000	2001	2002	2003	2004	2008	2010 (1)	2010 (2)	2011
	%	%	%	%	%	%	%	%	%
Could not be improved/ Could be improved in small ways	35	43	38	34	34	37	22	41	35
Could be improved quite a lot/A great deal	62	56	59	65	63	60	74	54	62
Unweighted base	*2293*	*1099*	*2287*	*4432*	*2373*	*1128*	*2288*	*1083*	*2215*

	2014	2019	2020 (1)	2020 (2)
	%	%	%	%
Could not be improved/ Could be improved in small ways	34	20	39	32
Could be improved quite a lot/A great deal	63	79	61	66
Unweighted base	*2373*	*1088*	*2413*	*1332*

Source: 1973: Royal Commission on the Constitution, Memorandum of Dissent; 1977: Opinion Research Centre Survey; 1991, 1995, 2004, 2010(1), 2014: MORI/ICM/Rowntree Trust State of the Nation Surveys; 1997: British Election Study; 2020 (1): Natcen Mixed Mode Panel; 2020 (2): BSA online survey

Note that the unweighted base for 1997 includes an over-sample of respondents in Scotland, a feature for which due allowance has been made in the weighting of the sample.

That most recent drop has since been reversed. Our July 2020 survey found that nearly two in five (39%) now felt the system was working well, although later in the pandemic the proportion had subsequently fallen back to around one in three (32%), a level very similar to the average level (33%) recorded between 2002 and 2014. It would appear that the delivery of Brexit and/or the onset of the pandemic coincided with a restoration of confidence in how Britain was being governed to levels not dissimilar to those that were in evidence prior to the EU referendum.

Table 2 Level of trust in British governments, 1986-2020

Trust government to place needs of the nation above the interests of their party	1986	1987 (1)	1987 (2)	1991	1994	1996	1997 (1)	1997 (2)	1998
	%	%	%	%	%	%	%	%	%
Just about always/ Most of the time	40	37	47	33	24	22	25	33	28
Only some of the time	48	46	43	50	53	53	48	52	52
Almost never	12	11	9	14	21	23	23	12	17
Unweighted base	*1548*	*1410*	*3414*	*1445*	*1137*	*1180*	*1355*	*3615*	*2071*
	2000	**2001**	**2002**	**2003**	**2005**	**2006**	**2007**	**2009**	**2010**
	%	%	%	%	%	%	%	%	%
Just about always/ Most of the time	16	28	26	18	26	19	29	16	20
Only some of the time	58	50	47	49	47	46	45	42	45
Almost never	24	20	24	31	26	34	23	40	33
Unweighted base	*2293*	*1099*	*2287*	*3299*	*3167*	*1077*	*992*	*1143*	*1081*
	2011	**2012**	**2013**	**2016**	**2017**	**2019**	**2020 (1)**	**2020 (2)**	
	%	%	%	%	%	%	%	%	
Just about always/ Most of the time	22	18	17	22	20	15	23	23	
Only some of the time	45	49	51	51	48	49	53	47	
Almost never	31	32	32	26	29	34	23	30	
Unweighted base	*2215*	*1103*	*1063*	*974*	*2986*	*1088*	*2413*	*1332*	

Source: 1987 (2), 1997 (2): British Election Study; 2020 (1): NatCen Mixed Mode Panel; 2020 (2): BSA online survey

Columns that are shaded indicate they are taken from surveys conducted shortly after a general election. The 2016 survey was conducted after the EU referendum.

Not only have perceptions of how well the country's system of government is working varied considerably over the last fifty years, but so also has the level of trust in British governments since BSA first asked its respondents in 1986 how much they trusted 'British governments of any party to place the needs of the nation above the interests of their own political party'. The elections held in 1997, 2001 and 2005 all seemed to be followed by an increase in the level of trust (see Table 2), though the elections of 2010 and (especially) 2017 did not have the same apparent effect. More broadly, however, there has clearly been a long-term decline in the level of trust. The proportion who said that they trusted governments 'just about always' or 'most of the time' fell markedly from an average of 39% before the 1987 election to 24% between 1994 and prior to the 1997 election. It is a drop that has never been reversed. Rather, levels of trust fell yet further and between 2000 and 2009 when the proportion saying they

trusted governments at least 'most of the time' was often below 20%. It reached a nadir of 16% in the wake of the MPs expenses scandal in 2009, when, at the same time, the proportion who said that they 'almost never' trusted government reached an all-time high of 40%. Trust continued to be relatively low after 2010, when nearly a third were still saying that they 'almost never' trusted governments, while a slight rise in the level of trust after the EU referendum was not sustained. Indeed, in 2019, a record low of just 15% said that they trusted governments at least 'most of the time'.

However, our two 2020 surveys suggest that there has been some recovery in the level of trust in government. Nearly a quarter have said that they trust government at least 'most of the time', and our July 2020 survey was the first since 2007 in which that proportion matched rather than fell below the percentage who said they 'almost never' did so. That said, the level of trust in government in our two 2020 surveys is still well below what it was in the 1980s. These figures are not suggestive of a public mood that would have necessarily made it easy for government to secure compliance with its public health measures.

A somewhat different picture is, however, painted by the responses that people gave to a second question about trust. This asks respondents how much they trust 'politicians of any party in Britain to tell the truth when they are in a tight corner' (see Table 3). Here the question was not asked until 1994, by which time, according to the previous measure, trust in government had already declined, while the level of trust in politicians to tell the truth has consistently been lower than the proportion who at the same time trusted government to put the nation's interests first. Thus, it was already the case in the mid-1990s that less than one in ten said that they trusted politicians to tell the truth at least 'most of the time', while approaching half said that they never did so. However, in tandem with the trend in trust in government, from 2002 onwards, the latter figure was regularly above half and it reached 60% in the wake of the expenses scandal in 2009. However, the level of distrust in politicians fell to below a half even before the EU referendum, and after temporarily reaching that level again in 2019 fell to record, or near record, lows of 39% and 43% respectively in our 2020 surveys. Doubts about the veracity of politicians may still have been widespread during the pandemic, but they were at least apparently somewhat less widespread than usual.

Table 3 Level of trust in politicians, 1994-2020

Trust Politicians to tell the truth in a tight corner	**1994**	**1996**	**1997**	**1998**	**2000**	**2002**	**2003**	**2005**
	%	%	%	%	%	%	%	%
Just about always/ Most of the time	9	9	8	9	11	7	6	8
Only some of the time	40	38	40	43	42	37	39	39
Almost never	49	49	50	46	46	55	54	52
Unweighted base	*1137*	*1180*	*1355*	*2071*	*2293*	*2287*	*3299*	*3167*
	2006	**2007**	**2009**	**2010**	**2011**	**2012**	**2013**	**2016**
	%	%	%	%	%	%	%	%
Just about always/ Most of the time	7	9	6	7	8	6	10	11
Only some of the time	35	39	39	35	39	40	38	44
Almost never	57	49	60	56	53	53	42	45
Unweighted base	*1077*	*992*	*1143*	*1081*	*2215*	*1103*	*1063*	*974*
	2019	**2020 (1)**	**2020 (2)**					
	%	%	%					
Just about always/ Most of the time	6	11	10					
Only some of the time	42	51	46					
Almost never	51	39	44					
Unweighted base	*1088*	*2413*	*1332*					

Source: 2020 (1): NatCen Mixed Mode Panel; 2020 (2): BSA online survey

A further, rather different measure of people's perceptions of how they are governed comes from their responses to three questions, set out in full in Table 4, that are intended to measure people's sense of political efficacy, that is, how well the political system is thought to respond to citizens' demands. In truth, the political system has never emerged well from these measures – as Table 4 reveals, in both 2010 and 2011 between 67% and 76% agreed with each of three items that suggest that MPs are out of touch, parties are not interested in people's opinions, and that it does not make much difference which party is in power. The readings in 2010 and 2011 are not untypical of those that were obtained on numerous BSA surveys from 1986 onwards. However, in 2019, when we have seen that, on a number of measures, levels of trust and confidence were relatively low, the proportion agreeing that 'those we elect as MPs lose touch with people pretty quickly' and that 'it doesn't really matter which party is in power' had fallen somewhat and stood at 66% and 64% respectively. Meanwhile, the two surveys conducted in 2020 have both registered further falls, such that, for example, now only around a half say that 'it doesn't really matter which party is in power'. The

drop is particularly noticeable in the latest BSA survey, and this should perhaps be treated with a degree of caution. One consequence of the fact that this survey was conducted online rather than face to face was that, as compared with previous BSAs, the sample contained fewer people who did not vote at the last election (in 2019) (see Technical details for other information). Given that non-voters tend to be somewhat less likely to feel efficacious, the BSA figures may overestimate whatever movement may have occurred since 2019. Even so, between them the two 2020 surveys suggest that, following on from the drop recorded in 2019, people have become somewhat less likely to feel that those who govern them are unresponsive to their needs and wishes.

Table 4 Perceived efficacy of the political system, 2010-2020

% agree	2010	2011	2019	2020 (1)	2020 (2)
Generally speaking those we elect as MPs lose touch with people pretty quickly	73	76	66	61	57
Parties are only interested in people's votes, not in their opinions	73	75	73	70	65
It doesn't really matter which party is in power, in the end things go on much the same	67	71	64	58	49
Unweighted base	*1081*	*2215*	*1088*	*2413*	*1332*

Source: 2020 (1): NatCen Mixed Mode Panel; 2020 (2): BSA online survey

Attitudes to Brexit

But what role might the resolution of Brexit have played in bringing about the apparent recent improvement across the various measures we have examined in the level of trust and confidence in how Britain is governed? One possibility is that now the UK has left the EU, those who wanted to stay in the EU have come to accommodate themselves to the fact that Brexit has happened, and that the issue is no longer as divisive as it clearly once had been (Curtice and Montagu, 2019; Menon, 2019). An alternative possibility, however, is that 'Remainers' and 'Leavers' are still far apart from each other, and that the rise in trust and confidence in how Britain is governed registered in our 2020 surveys has mostly occurred among those who voted Leave.

Table 5 shows how people have responded on BSA since 1992 when presented with five possible options for Britain's relationship with the EU, ranging from on the one hand leaving the EU to on the other working for a single European government. The pattern of responses certainly suggests that scepticism about the EU is relatively widespread. As many as two-thirds (67%) say either that Britain should be outside the EU or that, while being a member should be looking to reduce the EU's powers. However, this pattern is far from

new. As many as two-thirds chose one or other option as long ago as 2012, while as many as three-quarters did so in the immediate wake of the referendum on the UK's membership in 2016. There is not a clear sign here that voters have come to regard the EU less favourably since the UK left in January 2020.

Table 5 Attitudes towards Britain's relationship with the EU, 1992-2020

	1992	**1993**	**1994**	**1995**	**1996**	**1997**	**1998**	**1999**	**2000**
	%	%	%	%	%	%	%	%	%
Leave the EU	10	11	11	14	19	17	14	13	17
Stay but reduce EU's powers	30	27	25	23	39	29	36	43	38
Leave things as are	16	22	20	20	19	18	23	20	19
Stay and increase EU's powers	28	22	28	28	8	16	9	11	10
Work for single European government	10	9	8	8	6	7	8	6	7
Unweighted base	*2855*	*1461*	*1165*	*1227*	*1180*	*1355*	*1035*	*1060*	*2293*
	2001	**2002**	**2003**	**2004**	**2005**	**2006**	**2008**	**2012**	**2013**
	%	%	%	%	%	%	%	%	%
Leave the EU	14	15	15	18	16	15	20	30	26
Stay but reduce EU's powers	38	35	32	38	36	36	35	37	39
Leave things as are	21	23	27	23	24	27	24	16	19
Stay and increase EU's powers	10	12	11	7	10	9	9	9	6
Work for single European government	7	7	6	5	4	4	3	2	3
Unweighted base	*1099*	*3435*	*2293*	*3199*	*4268*	*1077*	*1128*	*1103*	*2147*
	2014	**2015**	**2016**	**2017**	**2018**	**2019**	**2020**		
	%	%	%	%	%	%	%		
Leave the EU	24	22	41	36	34	36	32		
Stay but reduce EU's powers	38	43	35	33	33	33	34		
Leave things as are	18	19	16	19	20	21	21		
Stay and increase EU's powers	10	8	4	4	4	2	4		
Work for single European government	4	3	2	3	3	3	4		
Unweighted base	*971*	*1105*	*1965*	*2009*	*2926*	*1088*	*1332*		

Source: 2020: BSA online survey

In 2020 the options were revised to read 'be outside the EU', 'be part of the EU but try to reduce the EU's powers', 'be part of the EU but try to keep the EU's powers as they are', 'be part of the EU and try to increase the EU's powers', and 'work for the formation of a single European government'

The same is true if we examine how people say they would vote if there were to be a rerun of the 2016 referendum on the UK's membership of the EU. No less than 92% of those who voted Remain in 2016 say in our latest BSA survey that they would vote the same way again, exactly the same proportion as in our 2019 survey. Just 6% say that they would vote Leave. But similarly, as many as 85% of those who voted Leave in 2016 say they would vote the same way (slightly higher than the 82% who in 2019 said they would do so), while just 10% indicate that they would vote Remain. In short, it is still the case that relatively few of those who voted in the EU referendum have changed their minds, while among those who did not participate in the referendum, more than twice as many (43%) say they would now vote Remain than indicated that they would back Leave (18%). Meanwhile, as many as 46% say in our latest BSA that they identify 'very strongly' as either a 'Remainer' or as a 'Leaver', much the same proportion as the 45% recorded in 2019.

Public opinion in Britain remains then heavily divided on the issue of Brexit. So perhaps the increase in trust and confidence is the result of a partisan reaction among Leave voters, who, unlike Remain voters, have become happier about how Britain is being governed now that Brexit has been delivered? Table 6 examines this possibility by showing separately for Remain and Leave voters their perceptions since 2016 of how well the system of government is working, and the extent to which they trust government and politicians. In each case, it is clear that most of the change in the distribution of responses has occurred among Leave voters. In 2019 Remain and Leave voters had almost identical views on how well the system of government was working – among both groups only around one in five felt that it 'could be improved in small ways but mainly works well' or that it 'works extremely well and could not be improved'. Yet in both surveys conducted in 2020, Leave voters were only a little less likely to evaluate the system positively than they were to say that the system needs considerable improvement. In contrast, while in our July 2020 survey there appears to have been a notable increase (from 20% to 32%) in the proportion of Remain voters who reckoned the system mainly works well, most of that increase has disappeared in our later BSA survey (the figure now stands at 24%).

Table 6 Political trust and confidence by EU referendum vote, 2016-20

	2016		2017		2019		2020 (1)		2020 (2)	
EU Referendum Vote	**Remain**	**Leave**	**Remain**	**Leave**	**Remain**	**Leave**	**Remain**	**Leave**	**Remain**	**Leave**
System of government	%	%	%	%	%	%	%	%	%	%
Could not be improved/ Could be improved in small ways	–	–	–	–	20	17	32	47	24	46
Could be improved quite a lot/ A great deal	–	–	–	–	80	81	68	52	75	54
Trust government to place needs of the nation above the interests of their party										
Just about always/ Most of the time	27	18	22	22	14	12	19	29	17	31
Only some of the time	54	50	53	46	58	48	57	52	56	44
Almost never	19	32	24	31	28	40	24	19	26	25
Trust politicians to tell the truth in a tight corner										
Just about always/ Most of the time	13	6	–	–	7	3	8	12	7	14
Some of the time	53	37	–	–	49	35	50	51	50	44
Almost never	34	56	–	–	43	61	40	37	53	43
Unweighted base	*386*	*378*	*1163*	*1046*	*402*	*397*	*1053*	*878*	*635*	*463*

Source: 2020 (1): NatCen Mixed Mode Panel; 2020 (2): BSA online survey

Meanwhile, Table 6 also reveals that between 2016 and 2019 Leave voters were more likely than Remain voters to say that that they 'almost never' trusted governments to put the national interest before party interests, a pattern that is consistent with the argument that some people may have been motivated to vote for Brexit because of dissatisfaction with how they were being governed. However, while both our 2020 surveys show little change in the proportion of Remain voters expressing that view, the proportion of Leave voters doing so was, at 19% and 25% respectively, well down on the 40% who had done so in 2019. Not only does this mean that Leave voters are now no more likely than Remain voters to say that they 'almost never' trust governments, but, in contrast to the position before 2020 they are now more likely to say that they trust governments at least 'most of the time'. A similar picture also pertains in respect of trust in politicians. In both 2016 and 2019 Leave voters were much more likely than Remain voters to say that they 'almost never' trusted politicians to tell the truth in a tight corner, whereas, thanks to an increase in the proportion of Remain voters expressing that view, in our most recent BSA survey the opposite is the case.

It seems that most, if not indeed almost all, of the increase in trust and confidence in how Britain is being governed that was registered

in the two surveys conducted in 2020 occurred among those who voted Leave. In contrast, the views of those who voted Remain appear largely to have been unchanged. As a result, a group of voters who had hitherto been relatively critical about how they were being governed have now become the more approving of the two groups.

Indeed, just how marked has been the change in the relationship between attitudes towards the EU and levels of political trust is underlined in Table 7. This table has been constructed by using the responses to the question introduced at Table 5 above to divide people into 'Eurosceptics' (who either want Britain to be out of the EU or at least for the EU to have fewer powers) and those of a more 'Europhile' frame of mind (who think that Britain should be part of the EU, and that the EU should be at least as powerful as it has been or even more so). It reveals that twenty years ago, long before the EU referendum, those who were sceptical in their attitudes towards the EU were less likely to say that they trusted governments at least most of the time. That gap closed in the wake of the 2016 referendum, thanks to a decline amongst Europhiles, and now it has been reversed after an increase in the level of trust among Eurosceptics and a fall - to a new low - among Europhiles. Much the same pattern is uncovered if we undertake a similar analysis of our other indicators of trust and confidence in government.

Table 7 Trust in government by attitude towards Britain's relationship with the EU, 2001-20

	% always/mostly trust government to place needs of the nation above the interests of their party		*Unweighted base*	
	Europhiles	**Eurosceptics**	***Europhiles***	***Eurosceptics***
2001	33	26	*430*	*564*
2003	26	17	*489*	*563*
2016	23	22	*182*	*753*
2017	20	22	*467*	*1450*
2019	19	20	*261*	*772*
2020	17	26	*463*	*635*

Source: 2020: BSA online survey

Europhile: Britain should be part of the EU and either keep the EU's powers as they are, or try to increase the EU's powers, or work for the formation of a single European government. Eurosceptic: Britain should be outside the EU or be part of the EU but try to reduce the EU's powers

Meanwhile, Table 8 reveals that there has also been some narrowing of the gap between the two sets of voters in their level of political efficacy. For example, between 2019 and 2020 there was as much as a 16-point fall among Leave voters in the proportion who agreed that 'parties are only interested in people's votes, not in their opinions', whereas among Remain voters there was only a three-point drop.

That said, it appears that the fall in the proportion who say that 'it doesn't really matter which party is in power' has been much the same among Remain and Leave voters – but perhaps this reflects a recognition on the part of Remain voters that the Conservative victory in the 2019 election did make a difference.[1]

Table 8 Political efficacy by EU referendum vote, 2019-20

	2019		2020 (1)		2020 (2)	
EU Referendum Vote	**Remain**	**Leave**	**Remain**	**Leave**	**Remain**	**Leave**
% agree						
Generally speaking, those we elect as MPs lose touch with people pretty quickly	61	74	56	67	54	60
Parties are only interested in people's votes, not in their opinions	67	82	68	72	64	66
It doesn't really matter which party is in power, in the end things go on much the same	52	70	49	66	41	60
Unweighted base	*402*	*397*	*1053*	*878*	*635*	*463*

Source: 2020 (1): NatCen Mixed Mode Panel; 2020 (2): BSA online survey

Our analysis suggests that the delivery of Brexit has served to increase the level of trust and confidence in how Britain is governed. However, this is not a consequence of an end to the division and polarisation on the issue of the UK's relationship with the EU. Rather, it has for the most part been the product of a partisan reaction on the part of Leave supporters, among whom what appears to have been a relatively long-standing scepticism about how they were being governed has largely disappeared now that the Brexit for which they voted has been delivered. In contrast, for the most part the views and perceptions of Remain voters are still much as they were, while there has been a marked increase in the proportion of Remain voters who distrust politicians. Whether such a pattern represents an improvement in the health of Britain's democracy is perhaps itself a potential subject for debate.

Reactions to the Pandemic

Certainly, one possible implication of our analysis is that the pandemic itself has not had any lasting impact on the level of trust and confidence in government – if it had done so we would have expected it to have increased among Remain as well as Leave voters. However, we can pursue this subject a little further using the data from our July 2020 survey, which as well as asking many of our

1 Remain voters (46%) were slightly more likely than Leave voters (42%) to say that there was 'a great deal' of difference between the Conservative and Labour parties. The same was true after the 2017 election.

questions on trust and confidence also asked people about their experience of and reactions to COVID-19.

Both psychologists and political scientists have noted that levels of trust in government and in leaders can rise sharply in the immediate wake of a crisis – such as a pandemic or a war – and have attempted to explain why. According to the psychological literature, a crisis can leave people feeling they have little control over the threat that they face and in order to secure at least some subjective sense of control about the situation in which they find themselves, they invest their faith in the political leaders who are meant to be dealing with the crisis (Kay et al., 2008; Rothbaum et al., 1982). At the same time, people may also feel a stronger sense of affinity with their social group (such as a nation) and thus be more willing to trust the leaders of that group (Kramer and Brewer, 1984; Hogg, 2001), while leaders may be effective in providing explanations that help them make sense of the crisis (Hasel, 2013). Meanwhile, in a similar vein, political scientists talk of a 'rally-round-the flag' effect during a crisis, not least because the public look to leaders to protect them from the threat to which they feel vulnerable, as well as because of a felt need for national unity (Hetherington & Nelson, 2003; Mueller, 1970; Jennings, 2020).

Such a 'rally-round-the-flag' effect was certainly ascertained early on in the COVID-19 pandemic by studies of the aggregate level of trust reported in opinion polls (Jennings, 2020; Davies et al., 2021). However, what is less clear is whether it was necessarily those individuals with the highest level of concern about the pandemic who were most likely to react in that way. At the time of our July 2020 survey, concern about the possible consequences of the pandemic was relatively widespread though far from universal. For example, while 41% said that they were 'very concerned' about the impact that COVID-19 was having on the health of themselves and their family, 30% said that they were either 'not at all' or only 'a little concerned'. While 28% said they were 'very concerned' about its impact on law and order, as many as 40% indicated that they were no more than 'a little concerned'. Only in the case of the economy was a high level of concern near universal – here as many as 68% said that they were 'very concerned'.

In each case, however, there is little consistent evidence that those who expressed concern about the pandemic were more likely to express trust and confidence in how they were being governed. Table 9 shows how answers varied according to their reported level of concern about the impact of COVID-19 on their health. Those who said they were very concerned about the impact on their health were in fact a little less likely to say that the system of governing Britain needs little improvement or that they trusted government at least 'most of the time', while they were no less doubtful than anyone else that politicians tell the truth. Moreover, this is despite the fact that they were somewhat more likely to have voted Leave than were those who expressed less concern about the health impact of COVID-19. True, those who were more concerned about the impact

of COVID-19 on law and order were rather more likely to express trust and confidence in how they were being governed. However, this largely reflects the substantially higher level of Leave support among those who expressed such concern.[2] Meanwhile, concern about the impact of COVID-19 on the economy was unrelated to political trust and confidence.

Table 9 Political trust and confidence by level of concern about impact of COVID-19 on health, July 2020

	Level of concern about impact of COVID-19 on health		
	Not at all/ only a little	**Somewhat**	**Very**
	%	%	%
System of governing could not be improved/only in small ways	42	41	35
Trust government just about always/most of the time	25	28	20
Almost never trust politicians	41	34	40
Unweighted base	*773*	*694*	*922*

Source: NatCen Mixed Mode Panel

The July 2020 survey also asked people how, in the midst of the pandemic, they felt about the situation they faced over the next year or so. They were asked 'how certain or uncertain do you feel about the situation you are facing in the next year or so?', then how calm or anxious they feel, and how angry or contented? In Table 10 we divide people on the basis of their answer to these three questions into three groups, those who felt most positive about the future, those who felt most negative, and those in between. Even though there was little difference between the three groups in how they voted in the EU referendum, those who felt negatively about their future were least likely to express trust and confidence in how they were being governed.

2 If we examine the relationship between concern about the consequences of COVID and the measures in Table 9 separately for those who voted Remain and those who backed Leave, we find that the apparent relationship between those measures and concern for the impact on law and order largely disappears, while the tendency for those who are most concerned about its impact on health is even stronger than shown in the first two rows of the table.

Table 10 Political trust and confidence by feelings about personal situation, July 2020

	Feelings about situation in next year or so		
	Positive	**Mixed**	**Negative**
	%	%	%
System of governing could not be improved/only in small ways	46	39	34
Trust government just about always/most of the time	31	22	18
Almost never trust politicians	32	37	46
Unweighted base	*815*	*705*	*877*

Source: NatCen Mixed Mode Panel

Respondents are classified according to their answers to three questions that asked on a 5-point scale whether they were (1) certain or uncertain, (2) calm or anxious, and (3) angry or contented about the situation they were facing in the next year or so. 'Positive' refers to those respondents whose combined score across these three items put them among the one-third most likely to respond certain/calm/contented, while 'negative' refers to those whose score indicated that they were among the one-third most likely to say uncertain/anxious/angry.

That a high level of concern about COVID-19 was not associated with higher levels of political trust and confidence may well be a reflection of the timing of our surveys. The 'rally-round-the flag' effect, that was apparent in the early weeks of the lockdown had disappeared by the summer, not least as a result of the controversy surrounding Dominic Cummings' trip to Durham (Fancourt et al., 2021). Thus, by this stage in the pandemic, concern about the future might well have no longer been reflected in greater confidence in the government – but rather the reverse. Such a development would certainly be consistent with our apparent evidence that the increase in political trust and confidence in our 2020 surveys was occasioned primarily by the reaction of Leave voters to Brexit.

Referendums

The 2016 referendum on whether Britain should remain in or leave the European Union is one of only three referendums that have been held across the whole of the United Kingdom. Ballots were held previously on the UK's membership of the Common Market in 1975, and the Alternative Vote system in 2011. In these instances, the 'status quo' option won and the constitutional settlement was largely unaffected. The majority vote to Leave the EU in 2016 was therefore unique in that, for the first time, a referendum provided the mandate for a large-scale policy change rather than a decision made by elected Members of Parliament. Perhaps this experience has changed people's attitudes towards the use of referendums as a way of making decisions (Independent Commission on Referendums, 2018). In particular, we might anticipate that Leave voters may have become keener on them as a way of making decisions, while there has been a commensurate decline in support among Remain supporters.

We can test this proposition by examining how people responded to two questions about the possible use of referendums that appeared on BSA 2020. One asked whether any decision to reintroduce the death penalty should be made via a referendum or by elected MPs, while the other asked who should decide how MPs are elected. These questions read as follows;

The following are some decisions that could be made either by the MPs we elect to Parliament or by everyone having a say in a special vote or referendum.

First, who do you think should make the decision about whether or not Britain should reintroduce the death penalty for some crimes? Should the decision be made…

1 By elected MPs in Parliament

2 By everyone in a referendum

And who do you think should decide the system used to elect MPs to the House of Commons? Should the decision be made…

1 By elected MPs in Parliament

2 By everyone in a referendum

The question on who should decide on the reintroduction of the death penalty has been asked four times since 1996 (see Table 11). Although a majority still believe that the decision on reintroducing the death penalty ought to be decided by referendum rather than MPs, the proportion who back this view has declined over the past 24 years – from over seven in ten (71%) to just over half (54%). In contrast, the proportion who believe MPs should make this decision has increased by eight percentage points from 18% to 26%. However, there is no similar trend across the three occasions in the last ten years that the question on the system used to elect MPs has been asked. Just over two in three (69%) said in 2011 that it should be decided by MPs, and much the same proportion (65%) express that view now.

Table 11 Who should make the decision on the reintroduction of the death penalty, 1996-2020

	1996	2011	2013	2020
Reintroduction of death penalty	%	%	%	%
Elected MPs	18	22	20	26
Referendum	71	61	61	54
System used to elect MPs	%	%	%	%
Elected MPs	n/a	16	16	18
Referendum	n/a	69	66	65
Unweighted base	*989*	*1909*	*904*	*1332*

Source: 2020: BSA online survey

One possibility, of course, is that attitudes towards how a decision about a particular subject should be made simply reflect people's attitude towards that substantive issue at stake. Supporters of the death penalty might anticipate that their view would be more likely to prevail if the decision were to be made via a referendum, while supporters of a change to the electoral system might reckon that MPs will always be reluctant to change a system through which they have secured election. Indeed, in 2011 for example, those who disagreed that 'for some crimes, the death penalty is the most appropriate sentence' were almost equally divided between those (38%) who felt that the decision should be made by MPs, and those (40%) who reckoned it should be made via a referendum. In contrast among those who agreed with the proposition nearly three-quarters (74%) favoured a referendum and only 15% believed the issue should be left to MPs to decide. That picture has not changed. Indeed in 2020, among those who oppose the death penalty slightly more say that the decision should be made by MPs (44%) than indicated that it should be made by a referendum (36%). Supporters of the death penalty, in contrast, again strongly preferred a referendum to a decision made by MPs, this time by 73% to 15%.

Meanwhile, attitudes towards the death penalty have changed substantially during the last quarter of a century (Stone, 2015). In 1996 as many as 65% agreed that sometimes the death penalty is appropriate, but in 2011 this figure had fallen to 56% and in 2013 to 51%, while in our most recent BSA survey it is as low as 41%. This is the principal reason why holding a referendum on the death penalty has become less popular. As we have already seen, among those who do still agree that ' for some crimes, the death penalty is the most appropriate sentence', the proportion who believe any decision on its reintroduction should be made via a referendum is little different now (73%) from what it was in 2011 (74%)[3] – it is just that there are now many fewer people who support the death penalty.

3 Though, at 83%, the figure was somewhat higher in 1996.

Indeed, given that supporters (41%) and opponents of the death penalty (44%) are now more or less evenly balanced, it is no longer clear that a referendum on the issue would result in a majority in favour of its reintroduction.

However, there is not the same clear link between attitudes towards holding a referendum on the electoral system and people's attitudes towards electoral reform. In 2011, for example, even among those who felt that 'we should change the voting system for general elections to the UK House of Commons to allow smaller political parties to get a fairer share of MPs' 77% said that the issue should be decided by a referendum, only nine percentage points above the equivalent figure (68%) among those who said that 'we should keep the voting system for the House of Commons as it is to produce effective government'. Thus, even though support for changing the system was particularly low following the 2011 referendum on the alternative vote (Curtice, 2016),[4] it perhaps is not particularly surprising that support for deciding the issue via a referendum is no higher now than it was then.

But while attitudes towards electoral reform may only be weakly related to people's views about how the issue should be decided, it is still far from clear that people are consistent in their support for referendums. In particular, no less than half (50%) of those who believe that the reintroduction of the death penalty should be settled by MPs say that any decision to change the electoral system should be made via a referendum; only 37% of this group back allowing MPs to settle the question of the electoral system too. It seems that many people evaluate the merits of holding a referendum on any particular issue on a case by case basis rather than because they have a principled attitude towards holding referendums in general. That suggests that the experience of the EU referendum will not necessarily have affected people's views about holding referendums on other subjects.

Indeed, once we have taken people's attitudes towards the subject matter of a referendum into account there is only marginal evidence that their attitude towards the EU makes any difference to how they think any issue other than Brexit should be settled. True, no less than 66% of those who voted Leave are in favour of settling the issue of the death penalty via a referendum, whereas only 43% of Remain voters express this view. In addition, as the first half of Table 12 shows, the difference of outlook on this subject between those whom we can classify as Eurosceptics and those as Europhiles is now somewhat greater than it was in 1996 or 2013. However, much of this difference arises because Remain and Leave voters (and Europhiles and Eurosceptics) have very different views about the death penalty – no less than 62% of Leave voters agree that it is sometimes the most appropriate sentence, compared with just 24% of Remain supporters.

4 In 2011 only 27% said that they wanted to change the system, while 66% backed keeping it as it is. On the most recent occasion that we asked the question, in 2017, 43% were in favour of changing the system while 49% wished to keep it as it is.

Once we take their attitudes towards the death penalty into account, most of the difference between Remain and Leave voters in their support for a referendum on the death penalty disappears. All that can be said is that support for a referendum on the death penalty is a little higher among those Leave voters who disagree that the death penalty is sometimes the most appropriate sentence (41%) than it is among those Remain supporters who are opposed to the death penalty (31%).

Table 12 Support for deciding the death penalty and the electoral system by attitude towards the EU, 1996-2020

	1996	2013	2020
Death penalty should be decided by referendum	%	%	%
Eurosceptics	76	65	61
Europhiles	64	51	41
Difference	**+12**	**+14**	**+20**
Electoral system should be decided by referendum			
Eurosceptics	n/a	71	65
Europhiles	n/a	57	66
Difference		**+14**	**-1**

Source: 2020: BSA online survey

The bases for this table can be found in Table A1 in the appendix to this chapter.

Meanwhile, Remain and Leave voters do not disagree at all in their level of support for holding a referendum on the system for electing MPs. In both cases, just under two-thirds (65%) do so. In contrast, in 2013 Eurosceptics were rather keener than Europhiles on settling this issue via a referendum (see Table 12) – but the fact that Europhiles are now relatively keener on a referendum on the electoral system than they were before the EU referendum is the very opposite of what we would anticipate if the experience of the EU referendum had made these voters less keen on holding referendums in general.

What, however, does seem to be the case is that the link between political trust and support for holding referendums that was detected by Curtice and Seyd (2018) has strengthened in the case of the decision on how to elect MPs. As Table 13 shows, those who 'almost never' trust governments to put the national interest first are now 23 percentage points less likely to prefer a referendum than are those who trust governments at least most of the time.[5] In contrast, back in 2011 there was hardly any difference at all. And as we showed earlier in this chapter, Remain voters are no longer more likely than their Leave counterparts to trust governments. That loss of trust among Remain voters may in part help explain why Europhiles have

5 Similar analyses by trust in MPs to tell the truth and by how well the system of government is thought to be working show a similar pattern.

apparently now become more inclined to prefer any decision about the electoral system to be made by holding a referendum. However, in the case of using a referendum to settle the reintroduction of the death penalty, where attitudes appear primarily to reflect people's views about the death penalty itself, the relationship with political trust appears to be much the same as it was in 2011.

Table 13 Support for deciding the death penalty and the electoral system via a referendum by trust in government, 2011 & 2020

	Death Penalty		Electoral System	
Trust government	**2011**	**2020**	**2011**	**2020**
	%	%	%	%
Just about always/Most of the time	54	54	68	51
Some of the time	62	50	69	68
Almost never	64	62	70	74

Source: 2020: BSA online survey

The bases for this table can be found in Table A2 in the appendix to this chapter.

For the most part, there is little evidence that people's attitudes towards the use of referendums have been affected by the outcome of the EU referendum. Voters' attitudes towards holding a referendum on any subject can simply reflect their views about the substantive issue at stake, and as a result those who support a referendum on one subject may well oppose one on another. Once we take these considerations onto account there is at most only weak evidence that Remain and Leave voters have different attitudes towards referendums. And in so far as the EU referendum may have made a difference to those views, rather than necessarily making Remain voters more wary of referendums the decline in political trust among them may have made them somewhat more inclined to back putting the issue of electoral reform to a referendum ballot.

Devolution

Of course, the constitutional implications of Brexit are not limited to the future use of referendums as a way of making political decisions. Rather, with both Scotland and Northern Ireland voting to Remain whilst England and Wales voted to Leave, the delivery of Brexit has created potential strains on the integrity of the Union. It had been argued that an underlying cause of these strains is a resurgent sense of English identity that was mobilised by the Brexit vote and which is increasingly resentful of the supposedly privileged place the devolved nations hold within the UK (Wyn Jones et al., 2012; Wyn Jones et al., 2013; Jeffery et al., 2014; Kenny, 2014; Henderson et al., 2016; Henderson et al., 2017; Henderson and Wyn Jones, 2021).

There are several ways of assessing this claim. Firstly, it is worth considering whether people in England have become more likely to

say that they are English and less likely to claim to be British, and particularly so in the wake of the 2016 referendum. Table 14 shows the proportion of people living in England who, when presented with a list of all of the national identities associated with the islands of Britain and Ireland, have since 1996 picked out English or British as one of the identities that best describes themselves. It also shows the proportion that selected both identities.

Table 14 Free choice national identity in England, 1996-2020

	1996	**1997**	**1998**	**1999**	**2000**	**2001**	**2002**	**2003**	**2004**
	%	%	%	%	%	%	%	%	%
English	52	50	55	65	59	63	57	59	55
British	71	68	70	71	67	67	73	70	69
Both	29	26	34	44	35	39	37	38	33
Unweighted base	*1019*	*1153*	*2695*	*2718*	*2887*	*2761*	*2897*	*3709*	*2684*
	2005	**2006**	**2007**	**2008**	**2009**	**2010**	**2011**	**2012**	**2013**
	%	%	%	%	%	%	%	%	%
English	60	67	57	60	59	50	61	64	61
British	70	68	68	67	67	69	66	69	70
Both	38	45	34	38	37	29	37	42	41
Unweighted base	*3643*	*3666*	*3517*	*3880*	*2917*	*2795*	*2859*	*2800*	*2799*
	2014	**2015**	**2016**	**2017**	**2018**	**2019**	**2020**		
	%	%	%	%	%	%	%		
English	60	60	59	56	54	51	58		
British	69	69	68	69	69	72	73		
Both	38	39	39	38	36	38	43		
Unweighted base	*2448*	*3773*	*2541*	*3478*	*3356*	*3880*	*2917*		

Base: respondents living in England

Source: 2020: BSA online survey

There is little evidence of a marked increase over time in the proportion saying they are English. Although the creation of the devolved institutions in Scotland and Wales in 1999 was accompanied by a sharp rise in the proportion calling themselves English – from a half (50%) in 1997 to nearly two-thirds (65%) in 1999 – thereafter the figure has only rarely risen above three-fifths (60%). It has now been below that level in every year since and including 2016. Meanwhile, those who say they are British has always been more numerous than those who say they are English and has consistently been at or around 70%. At the same time, around two-fifths say they are both English and British, suggesting that rather than being exclusive identities, for many English and British continue to be largely interchangeable terms (Kumar, 2003).

Table 15 Moreno national identity in England, 1997-2020

	1997	1999	2000	2001	2003	2007	2008	2009	2012
	%	%	%	%	%	%	%	%	%
English not British	7	17	18	17	17	19	16	17	17
More English than British	17	14	14	13	19	14	14	16	12
Equally English and British	45	37	34	42	31	31	41	33	44
More British than English	14	11	14	9	13	14	9	10	8
British not English	9	14	12	11	10	12	9	13	10
Unweighted base	*3150+*	*2718*	*1928*	*2761*	*1917*	*859*	*982*	*1940*	*2717*

	2013	2014	2015	2016	2017	2018	2019	2020
	%	%	%	%	%	%	%	%
English not British	14	16	17	14	13	14	12	11
More English than British	12	12	10	11	10	9	8	11
Equally English and British	42	41	42	42	41	41	43	46
More British than English	8	8	8	8	10	10	11	11
British not English	13	12	13	13	13	15	15	11
Unweighted base	*2799*	*2383*	*3778*	*2525*	*3478*	*3356*	*934*	*3422*

Base: Respondents living in England only; 2012 (N=76) and 2014 (N=65) excludes those born in Scotland or Wales.

Source: 1997: British Election Study; 2020: BSA online survey.

+In 1997 the British Election Study contained an ethnic boost, which was then downweighted

This picture is confirmed if we examine an alternative way of measuring national identity, commonly known as the 'Moreno' question (Moreno, 1989). This invites people to indicate what mixture of being English and British best describes themselves. As Table 15 shows, the response 'equally English and British' has always been the most popular and is no less so now than when the question was first asked on BSA in 1997. Meanwhile, far from suggesting that people have come increasingly to prioritise an English identity over a British one, the responses to this question suggest that, if anything, the opposite is the case. Having increased from 24% in 1997 to 36% in 2003, since then the proportion who say they are either 'English, not British' or 'More English than British' has fallen back down – and, indeed, has been below 24% in each of the last four years. In short, there is no sign in either of our long-running time series of the emergence of a more widespread English identity that might provide the basis for increased resentment at the way in which Britain is governed.[6]

Still, while English identity may be no more common now than it was in the late 1990s, it could still be the case that the identity has

6 Note that on our interpretation the Future of England survey data since 2011 on which Henderson and Wyn Jones (2021) rely are also consistent with this statement. See Curtice (2018) and whatscotllandthinks (nd).

become politically mobilised and now makes a difference to people's views in a way that was not true at the turn of the century. Indeed, this is what has happened in the case of Brexit. According to our 2016 survey, no less than 73% of those who said they were 'English, not British' voted Leave in the EU referendum, whereas only 38% of those who stated they were 'British, not English' did so. And, as Table 16 shows, this vote occurred in the wake of a widening of the gap between the two groups in the proportion who can be classified as 'Eurosceptic'. In 2013, the prevalence of Euroscepticism among those who said they were 'English, not British' was only nine percentage points above that among those who said they were 'British, not English'. However, by the time the EU referendum was over in 2016, the difference had widened to 21 points, and it has remained at or around that figure ever since. In short, there was already some link between feeling exclusively English and antipathy towards Europe well before the EU referendum was held. However, the EU referendum proved to be a catalyst for a strengthening of the pro-Brexit mood among those with a strong sense of English identity.

Table 16 Level of Euroscepticism by Moreno national identity, England, 2013-20

	2013	2014	2015	2016	2017	2018	2019	2020
	%	%	%	%	%	%	%	%
English, not British	76	74	79	88	87	79	85	75
More English than British	78	74	64	79	78	79	78	78
Equally English and British	63	62	64	80	71	69	71	68
More British than English	65	69	72	76	69	72	68	59
British, not English	67	61	69	66	68	58	62	58
Unweighted base	*1854*	*696*	*960*	*1687*	*1752*	*2535*	*934*	*1147*

Base: respondents living in England

Source: 2020: BSA online survey

The fact that English identity has been mobilised by Brexit might well lead one to anticipate that it has been mobilised around other issues too – including not least on devolution. After all, England is now the only member of the Union not to have its own devolved Parliament, and perhaps this has increasingly become a source of resentment among those with a strong English identity. If so, we would anticipate that there is now a stronger link between people's sense of identity and how they think England should be governed.

Ever since the advent of devolution in the rest of the UK in 1999, BSA has repeatedly asked respondents what arrangement they think would be 'best for England':

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

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

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

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

Table 17 shows the distribution of responses to this question among people resident in England between 1999 and 2020. There is little evidence of a long-term trend in favour of either an English Parliament or regional assemblies. The proportion of English residents who say that England should be governed as it is now has nearly always been at or above 50%, and the proportion in the BSA 2020 survey (55%) is roughly the same as it was in 2000 (54%) a year after the introduction of the devolution settlement.

Table 17 Attitudes in England towards how England should be governed, 1999-2020

	1999	**2000**	**2001**	**2002**	**2003**	**2004**	**2005**	**2006**	**2007**
	%	%	%	%	%	%	%	%	%
Governed as it is now	62	54	57	56	50	53	54	54	57
Each region to have its own assembly	15	18	23	20	26	21	20	18	14
England to have its own Parliament	18	19	16	17	18	21	18	21	17
Unweighted base	*2718*	*1928*	*2761*	*2897*	*3709*	*2684*	*1794*	*928*	*859*
	2008	**2009**	**2010**	**2011**	**2012**	**2013**	**2015**	**2018**	**2020**
	%	%	%	%	%	%	%	%	%
Governed as it is now	51	49	53	56	56	56	50	52	55
Each region to have its own assembly	15	15	13	12	15	15	23	18	20
England to have its own Parliament	26	29	23	25	22	19	20	22	22
Unweighted base	*982*	*980*	*913*	*967*	*939*	*925*	*1865*	*2535*	*1164*

Base: respondents living in England

Source: 2020: BSA online survey'

However, it might still be the case that people's responses to this question reflect their sense of identity to a greater extent now than was the case twenty years ago. However, there is little sign that this has happened. As Table 18 shows, those who feel exclusively English have usually been least likely to say that England should continue to be governed as it is now.

Table 18 Attitudes in England towards how England should be run by Moreno national identity, 1999-2020

	English, not British	More English than British	Equally English and British	More British than English	British, not English
2020	%	%	%	%	%
Governed as it is now	47	55	58	59	56
Each region to have its own assembly	15	18	18	21	22
England to have its own Parliament	35	25	21	18	17
Unweighted base	*107*	*118*	*509*	*124*	*147*
2018	%	%	%	%	%
Governed as it is now	51	52	52	52	56
Each region to have its own assembly	15	15	16	23	22
England to have its own Parliament	24	26	26	21	15
Unweighted base	*381*	*241*	*1065*	*242*	*338*
2015	%	%	%	%	%
Governed as it is now	46	49	54	48	50
Each region to have its own assembly	26	20	21	26	23
England to have its own Parliament	24	25	17	20	21
Unweighted base	*329*	*194*	*780*	*154*	*222*
2007	%	%	%	%	%
Governed as it is now	54	52	61	66	64
Each region to have its own assembly	11	17	15	12	19
England to have its own Parliament	28	23	14	20	9
Unweighted base	*165*	*129*	*267*	*116*	*102*
1999	%	%	%	%	%
Governed as it is now	59	63	61	71	65
Each region to have its own assembly	14	16	17	13	14
England to have its own Parliament	23	19	18	11	17
Unweighted base	*491*	*389*	*999*	*298*	*354*

Base: respondents living in England

Source: 2020: BSA online survey

But at nine percentage points in our latest survey, the difference between this group and those with an exclusively British identity in the proportion who think England should be governed as it is now is little different from the six-point gap in 1999 and the four-point one just before the EU referendum in 2015. Meanwhile, although in 2020, 35% of those who identify as 'English, not British' back an English Parliament compared with just 17% of those who identify as 'British not English', a gap of 18 percentage points, this difference is no

bigger than the 19 point gap that was also in evidence in 2007. In short, it is far from clear that the mobilisation of English identity that occurred over Brexit has been replicated on the issue of how England itself should be governed.

Still, perhaps the disquiet that people in England with a strong sense of English identity have about devolution is to be found not in their attitudes towards the governance of their own part of the UK but in their feelings about the devolution that Scotland now enjoys. Perhaps they have become more likely to want to see an end to Scottish devolution – and either now wish to seek a return to the status quo that prevailed before 1999 or perhaps even feel that it would be better if Scotland were no longer part of the UK.

Since 1997 BSA has asked people in England the following question about how Scotland should be governed:

Which of the following statements comes closest to your view?

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

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

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

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

5 Scotland should remain part of the UK without an elected parliament

To simplify matters those who offer either of the first two responses are combined in the table under the heading 'independence', while those who give either the third or the fourth are brought together under the heading 'devolution'.

Table 19 shows that although the level of support for devolution among people in England has varied from year to year, it has always been by far the most popular option, while there is no evidence of a consistent trend over time. The latest reading of 54% is little different from the one of 55% that was obtained when the question was first asked in 1997. Meanwhile, since 1999 support for Scottish independence has consistently hovered around 20%, with the proportion supporting it roughly the same in 2020 (24%) as it was in 2015 (22%), immediately before the EU referendum. Above all, there is no sign of any long-term increase in support for scrapping the Scottish Parliament – just 14% support that proposition in the 2020 survey, the same proportion as did so in 1999. As measured by this question at least, there is little evidence of a 'growing resentment' among English residents towards Scotland's devolution settlement in recent years.

Table 19 Attitudes in England towards how Scotland should be governed, 1997-2020

	1997	1999	2000	2001	2002	2003	2007
	%	%	%	%	%	%	%
Independence	14	21	19	19	19	17	19
Devolution	55	57	52	60	52	58	48
No Parliament	23	14	17	11	15	13	18
Unweighted base	*2536*	*902*	*1928*	*2761*	*1924*	*1917*	*859*

	2011	2012	2013	2015	2017	2020
	%	%	%	%	%	%
Independence	26	25	20	22	22	24
Devolution	44	43	49	50	55	54
No Parliament	19	23	18	19	15	14
Unweighted base	*967*	*939*	*925*	*1865*	*891*	*1164*

Base: Respondents living in England

Source: 2020: BSA online survey

Meanwhile, as Table 20 shows, although those who say they are 'English, not British' have consistently been less likely to support Scottish devolution and more inclined to back Scottish independence, their attitudes have proven remarkably stable over time. Since 2007, support for Scottish independence has consistently lain between 27% and 30%, for devolution at between 40% and 44%, while just 19%-20% have said that there should not be a Scottish Parliament at all. There may well be some resentment about Scotland's position in the UK among those with an English identity, but there is no sign that it has become more widespread.[7]

Claims that English identity have become politically more salient have some truth to them. There is evidence that Brexit has helped to mobilise or politicise English identity – those with a stronger sense of 'Englishness' have become more Eurosceptic during the EU referendum, and that legacy has not dissipated. However, what our evidence does not support is the claim that English identity has become more exclusive or commonplace or that the political mobilisation of that identity, that is evident in the case of Brexit, has also spilled over into increased resentment about the devolution settlement enjoyed by other parts of the UK. Given also the evidence on attitudes towards referendums, it seems that the impact of Brexit on specific aspects of Britain's continuing constitutional debate has been a limited one.

7 Meanwhile, we might also note that in BSA 2020 those who say they are exclusively or mostly English are now especially likely to say that the system of governing Britain is in little or no need of improvement. No less than 41% now express that view, compared with just 25% of those who say they are mostly or wholly British. This, of course, is what we might anticipate given the predominance of Leave voters among those with a strong sense of English identity and the fact that Leave voters in general are now more likely to say that the system of government at most needs only a little improvement.

Table 20 Attitudes in England towards how Scotland should be run by Moreno national identity, 1999-2020

	English, not British	More English than British	Equally English and British	More British than English	British, not English
2020	%	%	%	%	%
Independence	30	35	17	29	18
Devolution	42	48	60	50	60
No Parliament	20	14	16	17	12
Unweighted base	*107*	*118*	*509*	*124*	*147*
2017	%	%	%	%	%
Independence	30	26	19	20	21
Devolution	40	45	58	64	63
No Parliament	19	22	15	11	12
Unweighted base	*134*	*99*	*365*	*84*	*107*
2015	%	%	%	%	%
Independence	29	21	20	16	27
Devolution	44	48	49	65	54
No Parliament	20	23	21	12	15
Unweighted base	*329*	*194*	*780*	*154*	*222*
2007	%	%	%	%	%
Independence	27	27	13	16	12
Devolution	41	41	51	64	52
No Parliament	20	21	19	13	24
Unweighted base	*165*	*129*	*267*	*116*	*102*
1999	%	%	%	%	%
Independence	29	20	19	22	16
Devolution	51	56	58	60	57
No Parliament	12	14	14	12	14
Unweighted base	*491*	*389*	*999*	*298*	*354*

Base: respondents living in England

Source: 2020: BSA online survey

Conclusions

The delivery of Brexit does appear to have had a substantial impact on trust and confidence in how Britain is governed. After reaching a nadir in 2019 in the wake of a parliamentary stalemate on the subject, attitudes towards how well the system of government is working have returned to more or less where they were before the EU referendum. Much the same can be said about levels of trust in government and

politicians. However, this development is not an indication that the division over Brexit has begun to heal. Rather, it is the product of a partisan reaction to the delivery of Brexit on the part of those who voted for it. As a result, whereas Leave voters once tended to be more doubtful than Remain supporters about how they were governed, now the opposite appears to be the case. Moreover, it appears that the delivery of Brexit has had a more substantial influence on levels of political trust and confidence than anything that happened in the first year or so of the pandemic – though its impact on specific debates about constitutional reform, such as the use of referendums and devolution in England, looks as though it may be a limited one.[8]

As we noted at the beginning, it is often argued that democracies can only be effective if people have at least a degree of trust and confidence in how they are governed. To that extent, the reversal of the apparent damage to trust and confidence engendered by the Brexit stalemate of 2019 might be regarded as a development to be welcomed. It might perhaps be thought particularly desirable that it should have arisen above all among a group of voters who hitherto appeared least likely to think well of how they were being governed. However, the fact that the delivery of Brexit has added to the substantial divergence of outlook that already existed between Remain and Leave voters (Curtice and Montagu, 2019) suggests that it has done little to attenuate the division between them. Restoring the trust and confidence of Remain voters looks as though it is still very much a work in progress.

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8 The same of course is not true of the debate about independence in Scotland. See Curtice and Montagu (2020b).

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Appendix

Unweighted bases for Table 12 are shown below.

Table A1 Support for deciding the death penalty and the electoral system by attitude towards the EU, 1996-2020

	1996	2013	2020
Unweighted base	*989*	*904*	*1332*
Unweighted base: Eurosceptics	*589*	*615*	*893*
Unweighted base: Europhiles	*320*	*225*	*402*

Unweighted bases for Table 13 are shown below.

Table A2 Support for deciding the death penalty and the electoral system via a referendum by trust in government: 2011 & 2020

	Death penalty		Electoral system	
Trust government	**2011**	**2020**	**2011**	**2020**
Just about always/most of the time	*383*	*315*	*383*	*315*
Some of the time	*873*	*651*	*873*	*651*
Almost never	*624*	*354*	*624*	*354*

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