

ARTICLE

The Politics of Imperial Nostalgia

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Abstract

In post-imperial European states, debates about imperial legacies – centred on issues such as colonial statues, police treatment of minorities, and school curricula – have intensified in recent years. Yet little systematic research examines public attitudes towards empire or their political impact. We develop a framework linking imperial nostalgia with political preferences and present findings from Britain using a national survey and conjoint experiment. First, we identify a distinct public opinion dimension on empire, ranging from nostalgic to critical. Second, we show that imperial nostalgia strongly predicts party evaluations and vote intentions, with effects comparable to those of immigration attitudes and left–right economic values. Finally, a conjoint experiment reveals that elite positions on empire influence voter preferences, but do so asymmetrically: right-wing opposition to criticism of the imperial past is stronger than left-wing support. These findings underscore the contemporary political relevance of imperial nostalgia in post-imperial Europe.

Keywords: Empires; nostalgia; collective memory; Britain

Introduction

European colonial empires once governed vast territories and populations. Although now largely dissolved, these empires have substantially influenced European societies, cultures and economies, and shaped contemporary political debates around identity, race, and the role of European states in the world (for example, Buettner 2016; Gildea 2019; Gilroy 2004; Sanghera 2021; Veugelers 2019).

Remarkably, however, attitudes towards empire remain almost entirely absent from studies of European public opinion and political behaviour. We know little about how contemporary publics perceive their imperial pasts, let alone whether these perceptions shape political outcomes. Are citizens largely indifferent to these historical legacies and are their views epiphenomenal to political choices? Or do attitudes towards empire represent an under-explored but potent cleavage that influences political preferences?

This paper provides the first systematic exploration of how public opinion about the imperial past connects to political attitudes in the present. We develop and propose a theoretical framework that describes how attitudes towards empire shape contemporary political choices. Specifically, we conceptualise attitudes towards empire as collective memories – shared narratives of national history that frame imperial histories as sources of both pride and trauma (Verovšek 2016; Volkan 2001) – and argue that these narratives link to contemporary politics through collective nostalgia, an emotional longing for a perceived golden age often mobilised by right-wing actors (Elçi 2022; Gest et al. 2018; Goidel et al. 2024; Wildschut et al. 2014).

We empirically assess this theory in two ways. First, we measure imperial nostalgia and examine its correlates with party support and vote intentions. We construct two batteries of survey questions to measure imperial nostalgia – a seven-item attitudinal battery and a ten-item emotional battery – and field these in two rounds of a representative panel survey of the British public. We find that imperial nostalgia constitutes a clear dimension of public opinion ranging from nostalgic to critical, and is distinct from general nostalgia, authoritarianism, national pride, and other similar attitudes. We show that imperial nostalgia also strongly predicts evaluations of major parties and vote intentions, rivalling traditional attitudinal dimensions such as immigration opinion and left–right economic values in explanatory power.

Second, using a conjoint experiment, we find that political candidates' stances on empire significantly influence voter preferences, particularly once we examine the effects within left- and right-leaning respondent groups. However, these effects operate asymmetrically: empire-critical positions are strongly disliked by conservatives whilst receiving little favour from cultural liberals, demonstrating how criticism of imperial violence remains politically taboo despite being widely held in public opinion. This asymmetry reveals the electoral constraints currently facing politicians who might consider mobilising empire-critical sentiment. Yet the political salience of imperial attitudes may increase through generational replacement, as younger Britons hold more critical views of empire, and through the rise of challenger parties like Reform, which our analysis shows attract voters with strong imperial nostalgia and currently lead in some opinion polls.

In addition to providing novel findings regarding the nature and political consequences of imperial nostalgia in Britain, our research also has three further conceptual and theoretical implications. First, we contribute to the burgeoning study of nostalgia in politics (Goidel et al. 2024) by conceptualising imperial nostalgia as a distinct form that requires considering not only pro-empire opinions nostalgic for the glory and power of imperial eras, but also anti-empire opinions ashamed of the violence and exploitation of these periods (Bonnot et al. 2016; Wohl et al. 2006). Second, we demonstrate how ideational and constructivist approaches, which are common in international relations and history, can be fruitfully applied to mass political behaviour using survey and experimental methods. Third, we show how latent belief systems recognised as part of cultural heritage can have significant political effects despite remaining hidden below everyday political discourse (see also de Geus et al. 2022).

The Politics of Imperialism in Britain

While the British Empire shaped the world, it remained surprisingly absent as a major political cleavage within Britain itself. The Conservative Party strongly supported imperialism, declaring as late as 1950 that it was 'the party of Empire' and 'proud of its past', and viewed the empire as 'the surest hope in our day' (cited in Barnes 1994, 337). In contrast, the Labour Party's position was complex and ambivalent. While anti-imperialist sentiment began to emerge in the British left in the 1920s and 1930s, these voices had little influence on the parliamentary Labour Party (Rich 1990). The Labour government that came to power after World War II did accept the independence of Asian colonies such as India and Burma, but this was a pragmatic rather than ideological consideration. Indeed, the African colonies, in particular, were intended to remain under British tutelage (Hyam 2006). Attention also shifted to the Commonwealth, an effort to maintain British influence in former colonies (Patel 2021). In summary, throughout twentieth-century British politics, imperialism consistently enjoyed Conservative support and sympathy, while Labour's position was conflicted, buttressed by anti-imperialist thought and Cold War realism, but also – as critics such as George Orwell argued – the dependence of working-class prosperity in Britain on continued colonial exploitation (Howe 1993).

Although the British Empire remains largely absent in contemporary political discourse and campaigns, its imagery and symbolism is sometimes invoked by politicians, particularly from the right. Boris Johnson often used colonial references, for example, reciting Kipling's colonial paean

‘Mandalay’ whilst in Myanmar. Rory Stewart, a former MP from the left of the Conservative party, developed a persona that Mitchell (2021) describes as mimicking the ‘imperial patrician tradition’ of TE Lawrence (that is, ‘Lawrence of Arabia’). Conservative MP and party leadership candidate Robert Jenrick made a more overt defence of empire in a 2024 op-ed: ‘many of our former colonies – amid the complex realities of Empire – owe us a debt of gratitude for the inheritance we left them’ Jenrick (2024). While imperialism is not a major axis of political contestation in contemporary Britain, symbolic references do surface, indicating that some politicians see value in mobilising imperial themes.

Historical research has identified imperial legacies across multiple policy domains, with particularly extensive work examining international relations and immigration policy. In international relations, Gildea (2019) argues that an imperialist mode of thinking was used to justify interventions in Afghanistan, Iraq, and Syria. Other scholars (Bell 2003, 2020; Kenny and Pearce 2018; Vucetic 2011) have identified an ideational frame, the ‘Anglosphere’, which has circulated since the imperial era and focuses on perceived cultural and racial bonds between Britain and its former settler colonies. This has been used by elites to advance alternative visions of Britain’s global role. Related to this are arguments that Britain’s post-war immigration policy has reflected colonial ideas of racial hierarchy in its preferential treatment for white Commonwealth citizens (Patel 2021).

In contrast, the British Empire’s legacy for democratic mass politics remains less explored. While both Gildea (2019) and Kenny and Pearce (2018) draw links between Brexit and imperial ideas, the focus is on elite discourse rather than the attitudes and behaviours of the public. Indeed, more generally, while the positions of political elites on the British Empire are well-documented, public opinion towards empire remains far less understood. Although some historians have argued that British society was strongly imperialist in sentiment (for example, Hall 2002), and the ‘loss of empire came as a profound psychological shock’ (Rich 1990, 11), others claim widespread public indifference (Porter 2004). Behind these debates lies an unavoidable uncertainty regarding historical public opinion, due both to the limitations of the historical lens and the paucity of survey research on the topic.

Surprisingly, the absence of research on public opinion on empire continues to the present day. Contemporary analyses of imperial nostalgia remain conceptual and impressionistic rather than empirically grounded (for example, Mitchell 2021). Available empirical evidence is limited to sporadic surveys conducted by commercial pollsters. For instance, a 2014 YouGov survey revealed that 59 per cent of Britons viewed the empire favourably, compared to only 19 per cent who felt ashamed (Dahlgreen 2014). A similar question asked in 2019 found lower levels of pride (32 per cent), but the same level of shame (this question also included a ‘neither’ option) (Smith 2020). More recent polling in 2024 suggests continued polarisation, with 33 per cent viewing the empire as something to be proud of and 21 per cent as something to be ashamed of (Smith 2025).

Cross-national data from the same 2019 YouGov poll conducted across several European countries suggests that British opinion is somewhat more positive towards empire compared to other former colonial powers, but not uniquely so: 32 per cent of the British public felt pride in their empire, ranking second only to the Netherlands (50 per cent) among European colonial powers, and well above France (26 per cent), Belgium (23 per cent) and Spain (11 per cent) (Smith 2020). These more positive views found in Britain align with comparative historical research arguing that Britain’s relatively seamless transition from empire enabled more positive imperial narratives to persist in national consciousness (Buettner 2016). What comparative evidence we have thus positions Britain among the more empire-positive former colonial powers, whilst suggesting that imperial nostalgia represents a broader phenomenon across post-imperial societies with varying intensity depending on particular historical experiences of imperial competition and decolonisation.

Despite this comparative context, the true extent and nature of British imperial attitudes remains uncertain, and whether they are politically consequential is entirely unknown. The

objective of this paper is to address these issues. First, we describe how we conceptualise public attitudes towards empire and theorise their connections to political preferences.

Conceptualising Imperial Nostalgia

Understanding public attitudes towards empire requires drawing on three interconnected theoretical traditions. First, we conceptualise imperial attitudes as a form of collective memory, which is a shared narrative about a nation's history. However, the moral complexity of imperial histories – encompassing national greatness on one hand and violence, oppression and expropriation on the other (Gildea 2019) – means that public reactions likely include both positive and negative evaluations. We therefore engage with two additional literatures: research on political nostalgia to understand favourable imperial attitudes and work on memories of historical violence to conceptualise hostile reactions to imperial legacies.

Collective memories are 'memories that are shared by a group and that are of central importance to the group's identity' (Abel et al. 2017, 290). They function more as 'myths' than literal memories, however, as they are reimagined and reinvented across time (Verovšek 2016).¹ Moreover, collective memories tend to be expressed through narratives that tell a story of the nation – who it is, how it came to be, and what it values (Bell 2003). In this way, they can be seen as a form of political culture, in that they are 'concerned with the cultural constitution of political identities and activities' (Olick 1999, 336–7). Imperial eras are particularly likely to feature as collective memories because they embody both national glory, through imperial dominance, and national trauma, through the loss of empire – qualities that Volkan (2001) identifies as central to the construction of group identity.

To link these collective memories of empire to political preferences and behaviour, we turn to the concept of collective (or political) nostalgia. This is the belief that one's group experienced a golden age that has now been lost (Tannock 1995; Wildschut et al. 2014). Nostalgia is an affectively charged orientation, infused with wistfulness, melancholy, and fondness for the past. This affective charge allows nostalgia to transform beliefs about the past into a motivating force that shapes how individuals and groups understand their identities and political priorities. The concept of nostalgia therefore allows us to link evaluations of the past with preferences in the present.

The concept of nostalgia is increasingly used by social scientists to describe and explain various forms of the politics of the past. Most prominently, researchers have used nostalgia to explain electoral choice in Europe and the United States, especially for right-wing populist parties (Gest et al. 2018; Goidel et al. 2024; Lammers and Baldwin 2020; Smeekes et al. 2021; Smeekes and Lubbers 2024; Steenvoorden and Harteveld 2018). This research typically focuses on nostalgia for some halcyon period within living memory, that is, the 'good old days' (Smeekes et al. 2021), and explains its political effects through relative deprivation: negative appraisals of present circumstances compared to a fondly remembered past (Gest et al. 2018; Versteegen 2024).

A complementary literature examines how political actors across the political spectrum deploy nostalgic rhetoric in campaigns (Bonikowski and Stuhler 2022; Elçi 2022; Menke and Wulf 2021). This research demonstrates nostalgia's mobilising power when elites frame political appeals around idealised pasts, suggesting that nostalgic sentiments can be both measured as mass attitudes and activated more implicitly through elite communication – a distinction relevant to understanding how imperial nostalgia might operate both as a latent public opinion and as a mobilisable set of symbols.

Related is work on 'authoritarian nostalgia' in Eastern Europe and East Asia, which highlights how former authoritarian regimes are viewed positively by many citizens shortly after democratic

¹In this way, the study of historical memory is quite distinct from the study of historical legacy: while the former focuses on present imaginings of the past, the latter is concerned with how facts about the past influence present realities (Walton 2021).

transitions (Boyer 2006; Kim-Leffingwell 2024; Neundorf et al. 2020). Nostalgia is generally not directly measured in this literature, but is inferred as a mechanism (cf. Kim-Leffingwell 2024). But relative deprivation appears to be a key factor in these circumstances, with dissatisfaction with present circumstances coupled with relatively positive appraisals of previous regimes.

Imperial nostalgia has received far less attention from researchers who measure public opinion and test its political implications. Elçi (2022) presents Turkish respondents with experimental treatments manipulating nostalgia for either the Ottoman Empire or the secular Kemalist period, finding that Ottoman nostalgia increases populist attitudes while Kemalist nostalgia does not. Bizumic and Duckitt (2018) develop a six-item battery measuring pro-British Empire attitudes, though this was used as a criterion variable for validating their authoritarianism scale rather than a subject of inquiry on its own terms.

Beyond this empirical gap, existing literature also lacks a clear concept of imperial nostalgia as distinct from general political or authoritarian nostalgia. Nostalgia for imperial pasts shares some features with these other forms, but differs in two important ways. First, imperial eras are beyond the personal experience of most, if not all citizens. Relative deprivation between the imperial era and the present is therefore unlikely to be the psychological mechanism at play, as it may be for other forms of nostalgia. Rather, imperial attitudes reflect mythologised national narratives about periods beyond living memory rather than lived comparisons. Second, the moral complexity of imperial histories likely generates far more ambivalence than nostalgia for recent political periods, creating a need to reconceptualise how we measure and understand these attitudes.

This moral complexity stems from the inherently violent and coercive nature of imperial projects. Researchers have examined European public reactions to colonial atrocities (Leach et al. 2013; Licata and Klein 2010), as well public responses to other forms of historical violence perpetrated by the national ingroup, such as antisemitic pogroms (Charnysh 2023) and the subjugation of native peoples in North America and Australia (Gunn and Wilson 2011; Rotella and Richeson 2013; Williams 2000). This body of work demonstrates how people avoid accepting guilt for their forebears' actions (Leach et al. 2013; Wohl et al. 2006) and seek to deny or minimise historical atrocities (Bonnot et al. 2016). Presenting a national history as morally fraught challenges individuals by threatening deeply held national identities (Branscombe and Wann 1994; Leach et al. 2013) and provoking cognitive dissonance (Charnysh 2023). Indeed, while colonial violence is now widely condemned in principle, open acknowledgements of colonial violence or criticisms of a nation's imperialism have provoked vigorous reactions in the past (Buettner 2016).

Given this complexity, we propose that imperial attitudes run from positive views and emotions about empire (nostalgia) to negative views and emotions (aversion), with indifference and ambivalence occupying a midpoint between these poles. The antithesis of nostalgia is therefore not mere indifference, but affectively charged, hostile views of national myths, such as feeling ashamed of the British Empire. This conceptual framework suggests that while some may view the imperial past nostalgically, few would desire empire's actual return, and many others may feel genuine aversion to these same historical periods.²

As we have established, attitudes towards empire are best understood as a form of collective memory: they are narratives or myths that are as much about the nation as they are about the past. The concept of nostalgia provides a way to link these national narratives to contemporary political preferences, building on recent research showing nostalgia's growing influence in electoral choice across Western democracies. Like general nostalgia, there are two sides to imperial nostalgia that can be analysed: the beliefs and attitudes of the mass public, and the rhetoric and language of elite campaigns. However, the moral complexity of imperial histories requires expanding beyond nostalgia alone to encompass the full spectrum from nostalgic to aversive reactions.

²We thank one of the anonymous reviewers for suggesting this point.

Data and Research Design

Our data come from an original panel survey conducted by YouGov with a sample of adult residents of Britain (excluding Northern Ireland).³ We adopt two complementary approaches to understand the nature and consequences of imperial nostalgia among the British public and test the political salience of elite rhetoric on imperial themes.

First, we measure imperial nostalgia using two batteries of survey items to examine whether the British public hold coherent and meaningful attitudes towards the British empire.⁴ We assess the psychometric properties and consistency of our measures, then examine their associations with evaluations of political parties and electoral choice. This observational approach allows us to determine whether imperial attitudes represent a distinct dimension of public opinion and whether these orientations are politically consequential for understanding party support and voting behaviour.

Second, we designed a conjoint experiment to examine the political salience of elite positions on empire by testing how candidates' nostalgic versus critical stances influence respondents' electoral preferences.⁵ This experimental approach allows us to test whether political rhetoric about the imperial past shapes electoral preferences and how the effects of this rhetoric vary depending on respondents' pre-existing attitudes. Together, these approaches provide both measurement validation and causal inference about the political consequences of imperial nostalgia in contemporary British politics.

Patterns of Imperial Nostalgia in the British Public

We measure public views of empire using two batteries of questions. The first asks respondents to evaluate the British Empire using seven questions, drawn in part from the questions fielded by YouGov (Smith 2020) and Bizumic and Duckitt (2018).⁶

Do you agree or disagree with the following statements about the British Empire?

1. The British Empire caused more harm than good to colonised peoples.
2. The British Empire had a great civilising effect on the world.
3. The British Empire advanced the interests of humanity.
4. The British Empire was responsible for many atrocities.
5. I wish Britain still had an empire.
6. The British Empire was a golden age in our nation's history.
7. The British Empire was a shameful period in our nation's history.⁷

The second battery measures respondents' emotional reactions to the British Empire. Respondents are asked 'to what extent' they feel each of ten emotions 'when you think about the British Empire': embarrassment, shame, guilt, anger, pride, nostalgia, sadness, disgust, happiness, and satisfaction.⁸

³See supplementary materials for further information.

⁴These batteries were included in both the second and third waves of the survey, fielded in October to November 2023 ($N = 2460$) and May to June 2024 ($N = 2109$) respectively.

⁵This experiment was included on the final wave of the survey. Being an exploratory study of a novel topic, it was not pre-registered. While this precludes confirmatory hypothesis testing, it provides a foundation for future research by identifying patterns and relationships.

⁶We thank the latter authors for supplying us with their questionnaire.

⁷The response set is (1) Strongly disagree, (2) Somewhat disagree, (3) Neither agree nor disagree, (4) Somewhat agree, and (5) Strongly agree.

⁸The response set is (1) Not at all, (2) To a small extent, (3) To a moderate extent, and (4) To a great extent.

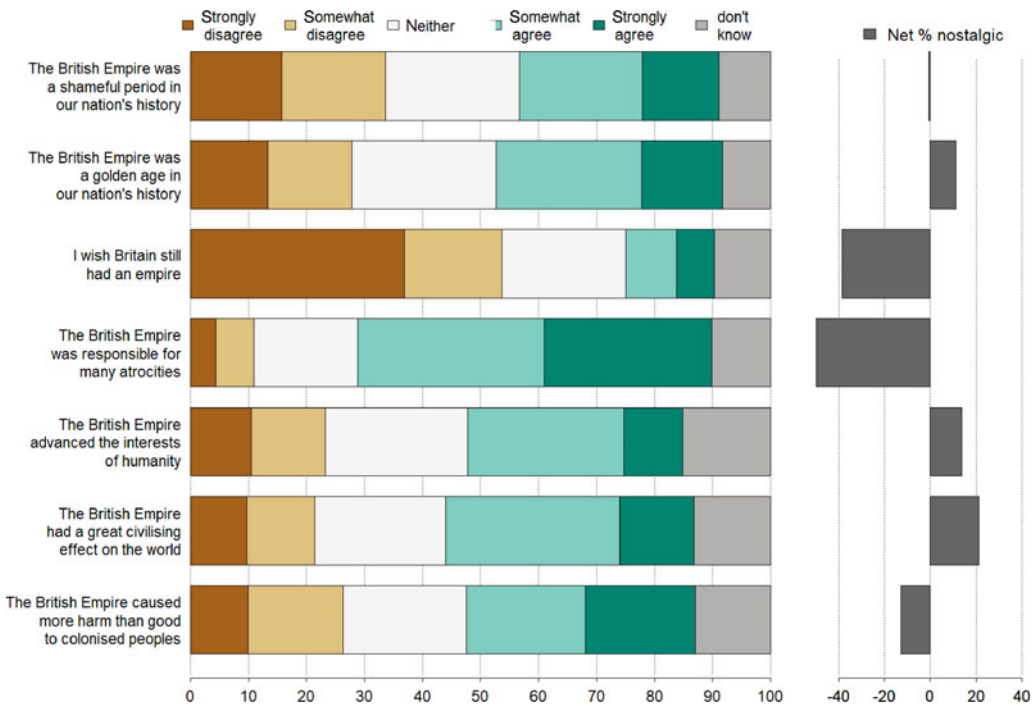


Figure 1. Responses to the imperial attitudes questions.

Note: Each bar shows the weighted distribution of responses for one of the seven questions in the imperial attitudes battery using the second-round survey. The net percentage of the sample offering a nostalgic (anti-imperial) view is shown in the panel on the left. See the supplementary materials for the respective figure using the third-round data.

Our data show that opinions are divided regarding the British Empire. Significant minorities support both pro- and anti-imperial positions on most of the seven items (see Figure 1). On only two questions does opinion clearly fall in one direction, and it is an anti-imperial direction in both cases: majorities agree that the British Empire did commit atrocities and majorities disagree that they wish for Britain to still have an empire.

These findings reveal the ambivalence in attitudes to empire that we theorised earlier, with substantial constituencies holding both positive and negative views of empire depending on which aspects are emphasised. The net percentage of respondents offering a pro-British Empire opinion varies dramatically from –50 per cent when asked about responsibility for ‘atrocities’ to +21 per cent regarding ‘civilising effects’ in the second-round survey (–52 per cent and +28 per cent respectively in the third round). This considerable variation demonstrates that imperial attitudes are strongly shaped by framing – here, question wording.

Consistent with this result, respondents also display a significant level of uncertainty in their opinions regarding empire. Between a quarter and 40 per cent of respondents selected the ‘neither agree nor disagree’ or ‘don’t know’ options. This can be seen more clearly in the second battery, on emotional reactions to the British Empire (see Figure 2), where pluralities select ‘not at all’ in response to the questions.

Figure 3 illustrates the overall direction of attitudes and emotions regarding the British Empire. Across all questions, net opinion is slightly unfavourable towards the empire, with anti-imperial attitudes and emotions outnumbering pro-imperial ones. However, anti-imperial views are never close to a majority position when considered across our seven-item battery. Many respondents hold ambivalent or neutral views, accounting for over 40 per cent on the attitudinal battery and

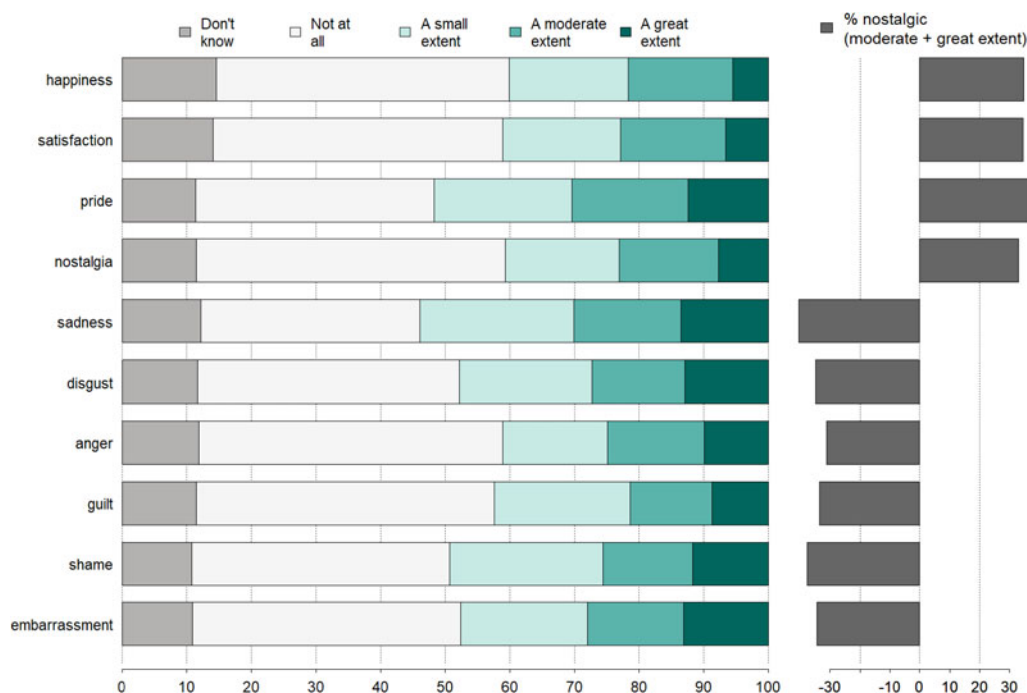


Figure 2. Responses to the imperial emotions questions.

Note: Each bar shows the weighted distribution of responses for one of the ten questions in the imperial emotions battery using the second-round survey. The stem of the question read ‘When you think about the British Empire, to what extent do you feel...?’ The percentage of the sample holding a pro- or anti-imperial emotion – defined as selecting the response options a ‘moderate’ or ‘great’ extent – is shown in the panel on the left. See the supplementary materials for the respective figure using the third-round data.

nearly 30 per cent on the emotional battery.⁹ Despite this, we find that a significant portion of the British public is nostalgic for the British Empire: in the second-round survey, 24 per cent reported net nostalgic attitudes, and 34 per cent expressed net nostalgic emotions. These proportions remained consistent in the third round, at 23 per cent and 34 per cent, respectively.

Finally, in Figure 4, we illustrate how imperial nostalgia, averaged across all seven questions in the attitudinal scale, varies across demographic and geographic groups. We see that imperial nostalgia increases steadily and significantly with age while decreasing markedly with education. Men are more nostalgic than women, and White British respondents are more nostalgic than non-White respondents, though ‘Other White’ respondents are the least nostalgic overall. Geographically, residents of London and Scotland exhibit the lowest levels of imperial nostalgia, with the latter echoing the more critical views of the Belgian empire in Flanders as compared with Wallonia (Buettner 2016). In summary, imperial nostalgia shows demographic patterns consistent with it being a form of cultural conservatism: respondents are more nostalgic of empire to the extent that they are older, male, White British respondents, have lower levels of education, and live outside London and Scotland.¹⁰ In the next section, we examine the convergent and divergent validity of our imperial nostalgia measures by testing whether they represent a distinct political orientation or simply reflect broader patterns of cultural conservatism.

⁹This difference partly reflects the treatment of ‘don’t know’ responses, which were recoded as intermediate values (‘neither agree nor disagree’) for the attitudinal scale but excluded from the emotional scale due to the lack of an equivalent intermediate option.

¹⁰In the supplementary materials we consider how imperial nostalgia varies across all two-way combinations of these variables.

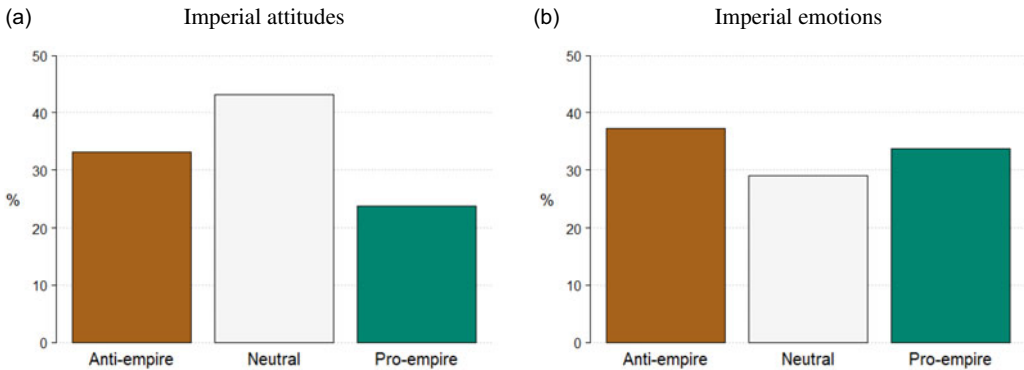


Figure 3. Overall opinion regarding empire.

Note: Each panel shows the average direction of opinion across the items in the attitudes and emotions batteries as measured in the second-round survey. Neutral values are defined as 2.5 to 3.5 on the imperial attitudes scale (range 1–5) and –0.5 to 0.5 on the emotion difference scale (range –3–3). The figure uses composite mean scales for illustration, whereas confirmatory factor analysis (CFA)-derived scales (see supplementary materials) are used elsewhere in the paper.

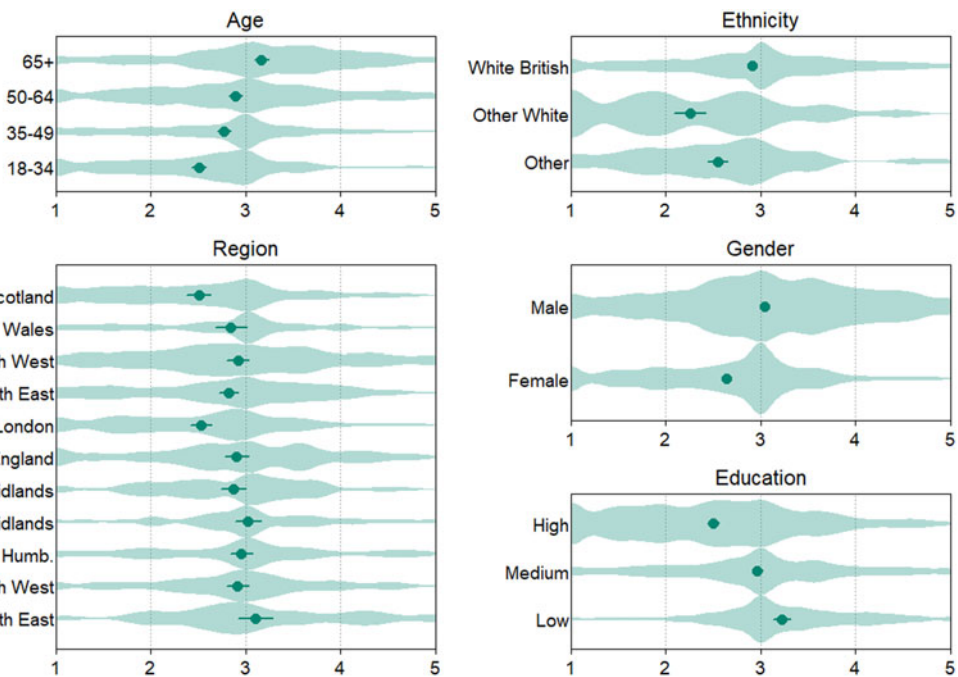


Figure 4. Group differences in overall imperial nostalgia.

Note: The dots show the average level of imperial attitudes within the respective demographic group, pooled across both waves and weighted, and the horizontal bars indicate the 95 per cent confidence intervals. The shaded regions show the weighted distributions of the data within each subgroup. A composite mean scale is used in this figure. See the next section for psychometric details and the CFA-based scale used in subsequent analyses.

The Distinctiveness of Imperial Nostalgia

Having explored the patterns and distributions of our imperial attitude and emotions batteries, we consider now whether and to what extent we can speak of imperial nostalgia as a dimension of British public opinion. Our analysis of the psychometrics of the two scales (see supplementary

materials) suggests that both are reliable and valid, but with the imperial attitudes scale having slightly better measurement properties, we consider it in isolation from this point forward.

To test the convergent and divergent validity of our imperial attitudes battery, we employ exploratory factor analysis (EFA). In addition to our seven items, we include thirty-six other items that measure other political attitudes and values, including left-economic and authoritarian-libertarian values, hostile sexism, immigration opinion, support for liberal democracy, populist attitudes, national pride, and chauvinistic nationalism. The results are reported using a heatmap in Figure 5.

We see that a single dimension of imperial nostalgia emerges clearly and distinctively in the EFA, with minimal overlap with other items measuring cultural conservatism or national pride. At the level of the factors, modest to strong correlations emerge between the imperial nostalgia factor and the national pride/chauvinism ($r = 0.60$), authoritarian values (0.63), hostile sexism (0.51) and left-economic values factors (-0.55). This suggests that while imperial nostalgia is related to other political attitudes – particularly those measuring cultural conservatism – it represents a distinct and coherent construct. Notably, its separation from measures of national pride and chauvinism indicates that nostalgia for empire is not reducible to a broader sense of patriotic attachment but instead taps into a specific ideological perspective.

Nostalgia and Party Choice

We now turn to an examination of the links, if any, between imperial nostalgia and electoral preferences. We begin with a heatmap showing bivariate correlations between respondents' support for each of the major parties and various important political attitudes, including our measures of imperial nostalgia (Figure 6).

Imperial nostalgia has moderate correlations with support for all parties. As one might expect, it is negatively associated with support for parties of the left (Labour, Liberal Democrats and Greens) and positively associated with support for the right (Conservatives and Reform). Perhaps more surprising is the strength of the associations: imperial nostalgia is overall the second strongest correlate among all the covariates we include, after preferences regarding relations with the EU. Imperial nostalgia is more strongly correlated with party evaluations, on average, than such well-established predictors of party preference as left-economic and authoritarian values and immigration opinion. This result is intriguing given the minimal attention the British Empire received in electoral campaigns compared to issues like taxation, spending, and immigration.

We turn to regression models to further examine the relationship between imperial nostalgia and electoral preferences. Table 1 presents seemingly unrelated regression (SUR) models predicting respondents' 11-point ratings of their likelihood to vote for the five most popular British parties. Imperial nostalgia remains a significant predictor of evaluations for three of the five parties we consider. It has a stronger association with support for the Conservatives than support for Labour, which is consistent both with the Conservatives' long-standing pro-empire stance and Labour's more ambivalent position. However, imperial nostalgia is an even stronger predictor of support for challenger parties on both the right (Reform) and the left (Greens), highlighting its potential as a disruptive dimension of political contestation. Since both parties position themselves as alternatives to the political establishment, imperial nostalgia may become an increasingly salient political force if these parties continue to grow in prominence.¹¹

In Table 2 we include a measure of general nostalgia: a question asking 'for people like me, life in our country is better today than it was fifty years ago'.¹² The associations between imperial

¹¹Consistent with this interpretation is the strong (negative) association between imperial nostalgia and support for the Scottish National Party: see supplementary materials for these results.

¹²This was reverse coded such that higher values ('disagree') indicate nostalgia. Note also that this question was asked of only half the first-wave sample.



Figure 5. Heatmap of exploratory factor analysis loadings.

Note: The heatmap shows the loadings from an exploratory factor analysis (EFA) of multiple attitudinal survey items. Eight dimensions are used, as indicated by a parallel analysis. EFA employs minimum residual estimation, promax rotation and pairwise polyserial correlations. Only loadings $\geq |0.30|$ are reported in this figure. Most items are from round two, except national pride and chauvinistic nationalism (round three).

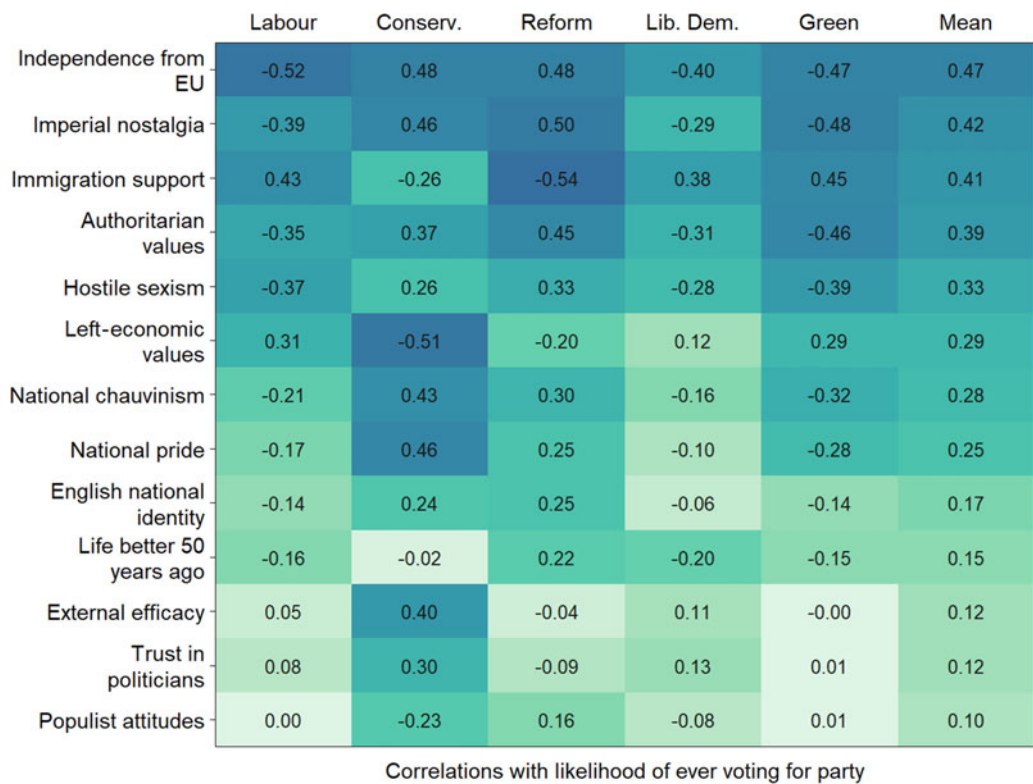


Figure 6. Correlates of party evaluations.
Note: Cells show the bivariate correlation between opinions listed in rows and self-assessed likelihood of ever voting for the party listed in columns. Darker blue cells indicate stronger absolute correlations. The column labelled ‘Mean’ shows the mean absolute correlation across the five party support items.

nostalgia and party evaluations remain similar to those presented in Table 1 when this potential confound is included, although the nostalgia-party evaluation associations are slightly stronger for the Conservative Party and much weaker – effectively zero – for the Labour Party. These findings suggest that, while some overlap exists between general and imperial nostalgia, the latter retains substantial predictive value in understanding party support across Britain’s political landscape.

Table 2 furthermore shows that general nostalgia and imperial nostalgia have different patterns of association with party evaluations. While imperial nostalgia is positively associated with both Conservative and Reform parties, general nostalgia is negatively associated with Conservative approval but positively linked to Reform support. This echoes existing literature demonstrating that general nostalgia is particularly associated with radical right support (Gest et al. 2018; Steenvoorden and Hartevelde 2018). Imperial nostalgia, in contrast, demonstrates broader mainstream appeal spanning both the conventional right (Conservatives) and also the Greens. These divergent patterns underscore that imperial nostalgia operates as a distinct political orientation.

Finally, we analyse respondents’ preferred choice of party (rather than their voting likelihood ratings for all parties, which we used previously). Party choice is measured using two items asking respondents whether they are likely to vote if a general election were to be held tomorrow and, if so, which party they would choose. We combine these data to create a single qualitative variable with eight party choices (including an ‘other’ option) as well as a ninth category indicating if a respondent would not vote.

Table 1. Party support regressions

	Cons.	Labour	Lib. Dem.	Reform	Green
Imperial nostalgia	0.42* (0.11)	-0.22 (0.13)	-0.12 (0.11)	0.50* (0.10)	-0.54* (0.11)
Left-economic values	-1.04* (0.10)	0.97* (0.11)	0.15 (0.11)	0.01 (0.10)	0.39* (0.10)
Authoritarian values	0.85* (0.13)	0.19 (0.14)	0.21 (0.13)	-0.16 (0.12)	-0.29* (0.12)
Immigration support	0.29 (0.22)	0.88* (0.25)	0.99* (0.20)	-1.06* (0.20)	0.50* (0.21)
Hostile sexism	-0.16 (0.10)	-0.50* (0.12)	-0.29* (0.10)	0.17 (0.10)	-0.40* (0.11)
Populist attitudes	-0.66* (0.11)	-0.13 (0.12)	-0.20 (0.11)	0.44* (0.10)	0.04 (0.11)
English identity	0.05 (0.03)	0.04 (0.03)	0.02 (0.03)	0.03 (0.02)	0.00 (0.03)
EU independence	0.26* (0.03)	-0.34* (0.04)	-0.23* (0.03)	0.23* (0.03)	-0.19* (0.03)
R^2	0.47	0.43	0.26	0.34	0.38
N	2,060	2,060	2,060	2,060	2,060

* $p < 0.05$. Seemingly unrelated regression results using wave two data, with weights applied and standard errors in parentheses. Error terms allowed to correlate across models. Missing values are imputed using FIML. Models also include an intercept, political attention, age, ethnicity, gender, education, religion, social grade, home ownership and region.

Table 2. Including general nostalgia

	Cons.	Labour	Lib. Dem.	Reform	Green
Imperial nostalgia	0.55* (0.14)	-0.01 (0.16)	-0.10 (0.13)	0.48* (0.12)	-0.53* (0.14)
Left-economic values	-1.09* (0.14)	1.11* (0.15)	0.02 (0.13)	-0.04 (0.14)	0.29* (0.13)
Authoritarian values	0.84* (0.16)	0.27 (0.18)	0.39* (0.15)	-0.11 (0.15)	-0.14 (0.15)
Immigration support	0.37 (0.33)	1.26* (0.37)	1.16* (0.28)	-0.84* (0.29)	0.88* (0.26)
Hostile sexism	-0.18 (0.13)	-0.48* (0.17)	-0.54* (0.13)	0.02 (0.14)	-0.52* (0.14)
Populist attitudes	-0.59* (0.14)	-0.26 (0.16)	-0.20 (0.15)	0.44* (0.13)	0.25 (0.15)
English identity	0.05 (0.03)	0.05 (0.04)	0.00 (0.03)	0.04 (0.03)	0.00 (0.04)
EU independence	0.22* (0.04)	-0.33* (0.05)	-0.24* (0.04)	0.25* (0.04)	-0.18* (0.04)
Life better 50 years ago	-0.19* (0.08)	0.01 (0.09)	-0.06 (0.08)	0.26* (0.09)	0.02 (0.09)
R^2	0.50	0.44	0.31	0.37	0.40
N	1,059	1,059	1,059	1,059	1,059

* $p < 0.05$. Seemingly unrelated regression results using wave two data, with weights applied and standard errors in parentheses. Error terms allowed to correlate across models. Missing values are imputed using FIML. Models also include the covariates listed in Table 1.

We fit a random forest predictive model to this variable, including as features all our attitudinal covariates, drawn from all three survey waves, as well as the set of demographic variables we have available. Random forests aggregate an ensemble of decision trees that each analyse a random subset of variables. They are particularly well-suited for predicting party choice, as they allow for the modelling of complex, interactive, and non-linear relationships that traditional regression methods may not detect (Montgomery and Olivella 2018). We focus here on the impact of our set of covariates on the overall model's predictive accuracy (that is, as indicated in the variable

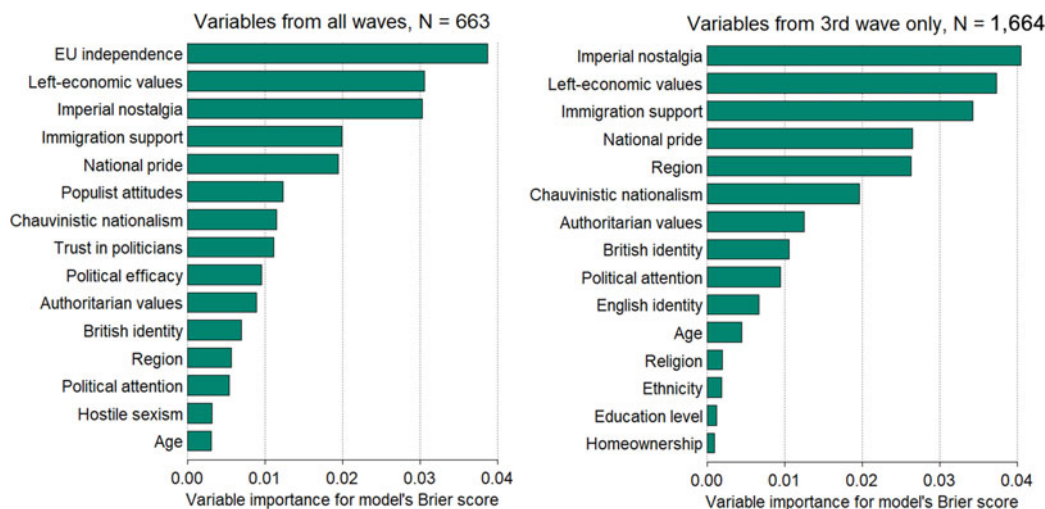


Figure 7. Variable importance for predicting UK voter intentions.

Note: This figure presents the variable importance scores from random forest models predicting respondents' vote intentions, which were measured in the third-round survey. The scores are calculated using the Brier score, which measures the mean squared error between the predicted probabilities and the actual outcomes. Our random forest models achieved a Brier score of 0.47, indicating reasonable predictive accuracy. The variable importance scores show the amount the model's Brier score would be reduced if the values of each variable were randomly shuffled across respondents; higher variable importance scores are better. The top fifteen variables are presented and are ranked in descending order of importance. The left figure includes variables from all three survey rounds ($N = 663$); the right figure includes variables only from the third round ($N = 1,664$).

importance estimates in Figure 7). These show the amount the model's Brier score (predictive accuracy) would be reduced if the values of each variable were randomly shuffled across respondents, with higher variable importance scores signifying stronger predictive power.

As shown in Figure 7, imperial nostalgia emerges as one of the most important predictors of respondents' voting intentions. It has similar predictive power to left–right economic values and stronger predictive power than immigration opinion, authoritarian values, and other known correlates of British vote choice. Only preferences regarding EU relations are a stronger predictor. This finding is consistent with the earlier correlation and regression results in reinforcing the central role that imperial nostalgia appears to play in British political behaviour.

In this section, we have used a variety of models and specifications to show that imperial nostalgia is an important correlate of party support and a powerful predictor of vote intentions. It is of comparable importance to economic values and immigration opinion, being stronger in certain specifications and weaker in others. However, unlike these well-established political issues, imperial nostalgia remains a neglected topic in the analysis of British (and European) politics. Our findings suggest that this neglect is misplaced, with imperial nostalgia potentially an important orientation for structuring citizens' political views.

Yet these results raise a further question: would voters actually respond to political rhetoric about the imperial past? As we have noted, empire is not a major feature of contemporary British campaigns and political discourse. However, just as the study of general nostalgia encompasses both mass opinion (for example, Gest et al. 2018) and campaign effects (for example, Menke and Wulf 2021), a complete account of imperial nostalgia's political consequences requires examining how citizens respond to nostalgic versus critical elite positions on empire. We investigate this question experimentally in the next section, testing whether politicians who take stances on the imperial past – either positively or negatively – face electoral rewards or penalties from voters.

The Consequences of Elite-Level Nostalgia

In this section we analyse a paired conjoint experiment designed to test how hypothetical political candidates' positions on the British Empire causally affect respondents' preferences. In our experiment, the parliamentary candidates are presented as having taken one of three stances regarding the empire: a nostalgic, 'civilising effect' position; a critical, 'atrocities' position; and an intermediate position that endorses both points of view.¹³ Respondents were presented with three pairs of candidates, and were asked to choose between and rank¹⁴ each pair of would-be MPs. Seven other MP attributes (gender, ethnicity, education, age, occupation, political party, and tax-and-spend positions) are also included in the conjoint design. These are chosen primarily because respondents may infer other important characteristics from a candidate's imperial stance; for example, they may infer that a pro-empire candidate is more likely to be a Conservative or to hold conservative economic views. Our inclusion and randomisation of these attributes reduces the likelihood of these unobserved confounding inferences.

Figure 8 presents the marginal means, with results from the forced-choice question displayed on the left and the profile-rating questions on the right.¹⁵ The first result to note is that respondents' preferences are strongly and significantly influenced by elites' positions on the British Empire. The intermediate stance – acknowledging both the atrocities committed by the empire and its so-called civilising effects – is the most favoured position.¹⁶ The 'civilising effect' stance ranks second, drawing less support than the intermediate position but more than the 'atrocities' position,¹⁷ which is the least popular.

These results also reveal a disconnect between public attitudes to empire and the electoral viability of candidate positions on empire. On the critical side, while a majority of the public (63 per cent in the third wave) agreed that the British Empire was responsible for many atrocities, with only a tiny minority (11 per cent) disagreeing, candidates adopting this majority position face an electoral penalty rather than a reward. Similarly, regarding empire's positive aspects, while 47 per cent of respondents agreed that the empire had civilising effects (compared to 19 per cent who disagreed), the corresponding experimental treatment generates neutral rather than positive electoral effects for candidates. This pattern suggests a systematic divergence between mass opinion and electoral traction: whilst both critical and nostalgic views enjoy substantial public support in survey responses, translating these positions into electoral appeals proves problematic for political candidates. The asymmetry is particularly pronounced for empire-critical positions, which face stronger electoral penalties despite representing majority opinion, highlighting how criticism of imperial violence remains politically taboo even when widely held among the public.

These results are drawn from the whole sample, which may obscure important heterogeneity in how ideological and partisan subgroups respond to nostalgic (or critical) views of the British Empire. To examine this potential heterogeneity, we split our sample using three measures of cultural conservatism as well as preference for a party of the left or right and compare results of candidates' imperial positions within and between these subgroups. These results are presented in

¹³These map closely onto questions used in our imperial nostalgia attitudes battery. The civilising effect position: 'the British Empire had a civilising effect on the world'; the 'atrocities' position: 'the British Empire was responsible for many atrocities'; the intermediate position: 'although the British Empire was responsible for some atrocities, it also had a civilising effect on the world'.

¹⁴We asked respondents to rank, on a scale of 0 (not at all) to 10 (very), 'How happy would you be to have MP1 or MP2 as your Member of Parliament?'

¹⁵Marginal means represent the percentage of profiles selected (forced choice) or the average rating (profile rating) for a profile with a given attribute value, averaged across all other attributes. See the supplementary materials for the average marginal component effects (AMCEs).

¹⁶This intermediate stance is somewhat ambiguous: it may reflect a moderate midpoint between the pro- and anti-empire positions, but also it may capture a more consensual, less divisive type of politics. We thank the editor for pointing out this issue.

¹⁷This latter contrast is significantly different in the profile ratings but not in the forced choices.

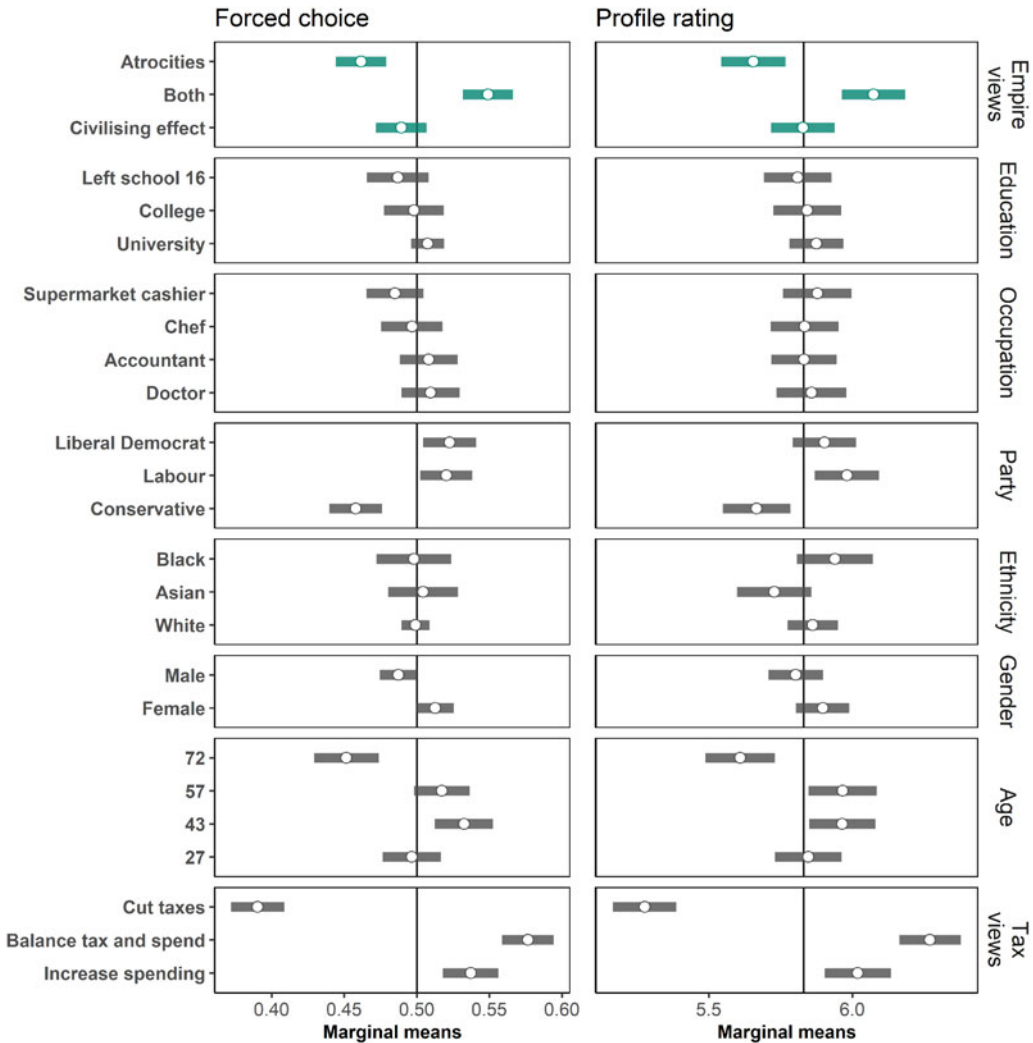


Figure 8. Conjoint experiment results, marginal means.
Note: Marginal means shown, with forced-choice results on the left and profile rankings on the right; the latter includes some ‘don’t know’ responses that have been removed prior to analysis.

Figure 9, where the marginal means for the left- and right-leaning subgroups are shown in the first two columns, with the differences between these groups shown in the third column.¹⁸

As we might expect, the pro- versus anti-empire stances resonate differently with culturally conservative and culturally liberal respondents. We find that right-leaning respondents strongly dislike candidates who take empire-critical positions, but only weakly prefer candidates who take pro-empire positions. And similarly, while left-leaning respondents dislike candidates who defend empire, they only weakly favour candidates who criticise empire.¹⁹ There is therefore an asymmetry in how stances towards imperial history shape voters’ preferences. On the one hand, anti-empire views are more polarising than pro-empire views: the ‘atrocities’ treatment creates

¹⁸Differences in marginal means are differences between two subgroups, which can be interpreted as differences in favourability; for example, a value of 0.05 indicates a five percentage point difference in how favourable the attribute value is in the two subgroups.

¹⁹See supplementary materials for AMCE results by subgroup.

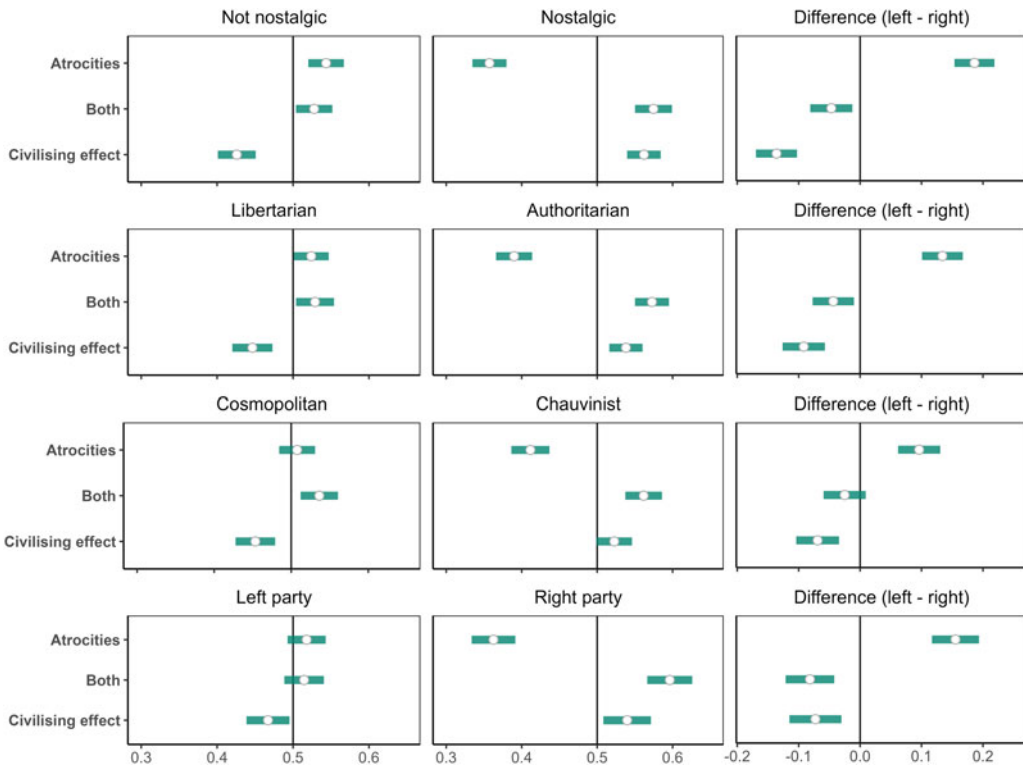


Figure 9. Subgroup analysis, splitting sample by measures of conservatism.

Note: Subgroup marginal means when splitting the sample by the median values of (from top) imperial nostalgia, authoritarianism, and national chauvinism, as well as by respondents' preference for a party of the left (Labour, Liberal Democrat, SNP, Plaid, or Green) or party of the right (Conservative or Reform). Forced-choice results presented.

more of a divide between left- and right-leaning voters than the 'civilising effect' treatment (as can be seen in the differences in the marginal means). On the other hand, conservatives are more exercised by candidates' imperial positions than are cultural liberals: the contrast between the atrocities and civilising effects treatments is larger for conservatives than it is for liberals.

In sum, our experiment reveals two main findings. First, electoral candidates' positions on the British Empire significantly shape voter preferences. This is evident in the whole sample but is particularly clear when we split the sample by measures of conservatism (versus liberalism). Second, the effects are asymmetric, in that anti-empire positions are more polarising than pro-empire positions. This asymmetry is due to cultural conservatives' dislike of critical views of empire more than cultural liberals' dislike of positive views of empire.

These results resonate with our earlier discussion of the politics of imperialism in Britain: the Conservative Party declared itself the 'party of Empire' (and recently took pro-empire positions) whilst the Labour Party has always been more ambivalent in its views on the British Empire. This historical asymmetry in partisan alignment with the issue of the imperial past continues to the present day, with those more on the right reacting more strongly to negativity on the imperial past than left-leaning respondents do.

Conclusion

European colonial empires had outsized roles in European and world history. We might therefore expect that Europeans have strong views of their national pasts – whether nostalgic or critical. Yet we have little understanding of opinion about empire because attitudes to empire have not been

considered in studies of European political behaviour and public opinion. We address this gap for the first time by providing a theoretical framework for understanding how attitudes to empire become politically salient, measuring imperial nostalgia in a British panel survey, examining the links between nostalgia and voting intentions, and testing the effects of MPs' pro- versus anti-empire positions in a conjoint experiment.

Theoretically, we argue that empires play important roles in collective memories in post-imperial metropolises. These collective memories become politically salient through collective nostalgia, which links understandings of the past to contemporary political choices. We then measure imperial nostalgia using two original batteries fielded in a British panel study, finding that attitudes and emotions to empire form clear dimensions of opinion that are distinct from related concepts like general nostalgia, authoritarianism, nationalism, and immigration attitudes.

Turning to its potential consequences, we find that imperial nostalgia has strong associations with party evaluations and vote intentions, rivalling or exceeding the predictive power of established attitudinal dimensions such as immigration opinion, authoritarian values, and left-right ideology. This is particularly striking given that empire is not a prominent theme in contemporary political campaigns.

Our conjoint experiment shows that elite positions on empire significantly affect respondents' voting preferences. However we find that respondents are hesitant in supporting anti-imperial candidates, even among left-wing ideological or partisan subgroups who strongly oppose imperialism when asked for their opinions directly. In contrast, we find strong opposition to anti-imperial views among conservative subgroups. We therefore find an asymmetry in public reactions to candidates' imperial views that may explain why political elites have largely avoided direct engagement with the imperial past. Criticism of empire is not broadly rewarded by voters and risks alienating right-wing audiences. As such, the topic remains taboo even though a majority of the British public agrees with empire-critical views when asked directly.

Yet the future status of this taboo remains uncertain, with several pathways potentially increasing the political salience of imperial attitudes. First, generational change may create new constituencies for empire-critical positions. We have shown that imperial attitudes are more critical the younger the respondent, and YouGov polling shows that younger Britons became substantially more critical about the British Empire between 2019 and 2024 (Smith 2025). Generational replacement may thus create constituencies of support for empire-critical elite rhetoric which, our experiment suggests, might trigger conservative backlash. Second, our regression analyses reveal that imperial nostalgia shows particularly strong associations with support for challenger parties on both the right (Reform) and left (Greens), suggesting its potential as a disruptive dimension of political contestation. With Reform currently leading UK opinion polls and positioning itself as a more radical alternative to mainstream conservatism, imperial nostalgia may become an increasingly important electoral force. Third, as Bonikowski (2017) argues regarding radical right success, contextual change can allow existing positions to 'resonate' more strongly with public beliefs without requiring opinion change or new political parties. Appeals that are nostalgic or critical of the imperial era may similarly come to resonate more strongly with voters' existing beliefs through forces such as partisan realignment or demographic change.

Aside from our empirical contributions, our research also has conceptual and theoretical implications. First, we contribute to the burgeoning study of nostalgia in politics by applying this concept to memories of imperial histories. Unlike other forms of political nostalgia that typically range from positive to indifferent, we argue that imperial attitudes need to take account of the moral complexity of imperial histories, and therefore must be understood along a spectrum from nostalgia to aversion. As such, while some may view their imperial history nostalgically, few people desire the actual return of empire, and many others feel genuine aversion to this historical period. Second, our work creates a methodological bridge between disciplines by demonstrating how concepts from international relations, historical, and sociological work on collective memory

and national narratives can be systematically applied to individual-level political behaviour. We show how survey and experimental methods can operationalise ideational concepts that are typically studied through qualitative, interpretive approaches focused on cultural texts or elite discourse. Third, our study demonstrates that beliefs and orientations widely considered part of the national heritage or political culture can have significant connections to political choice even while remaining hidden below everyday political rhetoric. In this way, imperial nostalgia is similar to sexism, which de Geus et al. (2022) show to powerfully predict British vote choice despite not being salient in political discourse.

Our novel but broadly exploratory study could be extended by examining the conditions under which imperial nostalgia becomes politically salient and its interactions with other individual attributes. Moreover, future longitudinal or experimental studies could test in a more confirmatory vein the important role we have found for imperial nostalgia in political choice. In addition, similar patterns of imperial nostalgia, ambivalence, or aversion likely exist in other post-imperial European societies. Comparative studies could help uncover how these attitudes interact with, or underpin, support for immigration, multiculturalism, and radical-right parties.

Supplementary material. The supplementary material for this article can be found at <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0007123425101130>.

Data availability statement. Replication data for this article can be found in Harvard Dataverse at: <https://doi.org/10.7910/DVN/OXBTRM>.

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