



England's world: UK foreign policy in a multi-nation state

Politics

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journals.sagepub.com/home/pol**John Denham**  and **Conor Gaughan** 

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Abstract

UK foreign policy is the product of the politics of a multi-nation state. Because of its size, politics and position in the constitutional imagination of UK decision makers, England dominates policy-making. Brexit showed how that domination can cause difficulties and tensions within the UK when a foreign policy issue becomes a domestic issue where English opinion is at odds with other parts of the UK. Despite this, analysis of English views and influence over the UK's foreign policy remains under-developed. In this article, we outline the mechanisms by which England dominates UK foreign policy and how foreign policy issues can become domestic electoral issues, as happened with Brexit. We examine polling of the views of voters in England and Scotland to identify potential areas of disagreement. We show that while the English and Scottish do not hold profoundly different world views, there are some foreign policy issues that could be mobilised as domestic electoral issues causing division and tensions for the UK.

Keywords

Brexit, British politics, England, Scotland, UK foreign policy

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Introduction

Brexit was the most consequential UK foreign policy decision in decades driven primarily by how the English voted. Brexit reshaped the UK's economic and political relationships with the European Union (EU) and its member states, affecting the UK's wider international relations (Evans and Menon, 2017; Hill, 2019; Oliver, 2018). As Houde argues elsewhere in this issue, it reinforced perceptions of UK decline. Domestically, Brexit created tensions between the UK government and devolved administrations, especially Scotland and Northern Ireland (Atkins, 2021). It significantly reshaped party politics in each UK nation (Whiteley et al., 2023). It underlined how UK foreign policy arises

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from a multi-nation union, where power is unevenly distributed and dominated by England (McEwen, 2020). As touched on in the articles by Bonotti, Wellings and Zech in their exploration of the monarchy and Englishness, and by Melhuish in their analysis of Englishness and global Britain, while national and international narratives around British foreign policy have been studied, the political and power relationships between the UK's nations, their peoples and UK foreign policy are rarely discussed as a systemic feature of the UK's governance. This matters because foreign policy decisions reflecting mainly English preferences (as with Brexit) risk deepening divisions within the Union. Understanding these differences and their potential to cause tensions is essential for understanding UK politics and foreign policy. This article therefore breaks new ground by examining UK foreign policy as the expression of the politics of a multi-nation state. We explore how far UK foreign policy reflects a dominant English view to the relative exclusion of other parts of the UK. We do this over six sections.

First, we explore the demographic, constitutional and ideological mechanisms through which England dominates UK foreign policy-making. Second, we explain how foreign policy issues become significant factors in domestic electoral politics. Third we show how Brexit became a politically mobilised foreign policy issue, and how England's dominant place in both foreign and domestic policy-making created tensions within the UK. Although not wholly a foreign policy matter, Brexit illustrates how international and domestic matters can entangle. In this article, we define foreign policy as the strategies, plans and decisions the UK state has for managing its relations with the wider world, whether that be European-wide integration or international relations in a globalising world. We focus on how domestic actors amplify certain foreign policy issues for electoral gain, thereby shifting UK foreign policy, illustrating the international-domestic interplay outlined in the work of Putnam (1988) and Milner (1997).

Fourth, we analyse foreign policy attitudes in England and Scotland through two opinion polls. This helps gauge public views of foreign policy ideas, such as the post-Brexit vision of 'Global Britain'. Fifth, through comparing Scottish and English polling we identify limited divergence between popular attitudes in both, and the degree to which voters can be characterised as holding distinct 'world views' on foreign policy issues. However, we identify distinct differences between voters in both nations who voted Leave or Remain in 2016. Finally, we discuss the potential for foreign policy issues to mobilise opinion within or across the two nations.

While our original aim was to identify issues that might generate different political responses in England and Scotland, such as Brexit, we identified a more complex picture. While there is potential for tensions between England and Scotland, there are issues on which electoral opinion might be mobilised against current UK foreign policy in both nations. Limited resources restricted our polling to England and Scotland, but our findings support further studies across all UK nations.

The article adopts a mixed theoretical and methodological approach. It combines qualitative analysis of the UK's constitutional setup with quantitative polling conducted in England and Scotland in 2023 and 2024, subjected to correspondence analysis to identify axes of foreign policy opinion. The article begins by examining England's position within the UK and its role in foreign policy, followed by an exploration of how foreign policy issues, such as immigration, become significant domestic electoral issues. This is illuminated through a discussion of Brexit. The article then analyses polling data comparing English and Scottish views and concludes by discussing the electoral potential of several foreign policy issues.

England's dominant position within UK foreign policy

Academic and political discussion of UK foreign policy usually treats the UK as a unitary state. The UK presents itself as such in international organisations, as a treaty signatory, in diplomacy, and, when it was an EU member. But the UK is also a multi-nation state (Keating, 2021). While the UK parliament is sovereign, significant legislative, fiscal and administrative powers are devolved to parliaments¹ and governments in Wales, Scotland, and Northern Ireland. England is governed by the UK state with no separate institutions (Denham, 2018). England accounts for 84.3% of the UK's population, and 83.5% of MPs represent English constituencies. All modern UK governments have been led by England's largest parliamentary party.

Foreign and defence policy remain reserved matters for UK government, with decisions often taken through the Royal Prerogatives (Strong, 2018). In practice, this gives the England-dominated UK government control over international affairs. While some mechanisms exist for engaging with devolved administrations, such as inclusion of staff in some UK diplomatic posts and, during EU membership, close working relations with the UK Permanent Representation (Minto et al., 2023), Brexit showed there is no constitutional requirement to involve devolved governments in foreign policy decisions (House of Lords, European Union Committee, 2017).

England's dominance is further underpinned by an Anglo-centric view of the UK's constitution (Kenny, 2019) rooted in the 19th-century doctrine of parliamentary sovereignty. Anglo-centric unionism conflates the interests of England and the UK which are assumed to be the same (Wincott et al., 2021). Historically allowances were made for Scotland and Wales in administrative devolution in areas such as education and health overseen by the Scottish Office and Welsh Office, while Northern Ireland's distinct politics was reflected from 1921 to 1972 in the devolved Stormont Parliament.

At the core of this Anglo-centric constitutionalism was the assumption that England required no distinct political or administrative identity nor governing institutions. This conception has continued to dominate the UK state despite the creation in the late 1990s of elected assemblies and governments in Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland. The UK is still assumed to act as a unitary state on non-devolved matters, and that the UK state is the appropriate government for England. This Anglo-centric assumption was evident when Prime Minister Theresa May declared in October 2016, 'We voted in the referendum as one United Kingdom, we will negotiate as one United Kingdom, and we will leave the EU as one United Kingdom', despite Remain majorities in Scotland and Northern Ireland.

The potential for tensions between an Anglo-centric UK government and the devolved nations has increased in the post-war period. In the decades following 1945, it was possible to conceive of a 'British politics' with elections in Great Britain – England, Wales and Scotland – almost entirely contested by the Conservative and Unionist Party and the Labour Party. Nationalist parties emerged in the 1960s, beginning a process where England's weight grew as UK party politics fragmented. After 1979 a UK Conservative Government depended on English MPs while the majority of Welsh and Scottish MPs were Labour. Labour won three elections in all three nations between 1997 and 2005, but from 2010 to 2019 different parties 'won' in England (Conservatives), Wales (Labour) and Scotland (SNP). Labour's 2024 victory owed more to electoral quirks and record-low vote shares than to a revival of two-party politics.

Devolution – a response to rising nationalism in Wales and Scotland and the need for a bespoke solution to Northern Ireland’s internal tensions amplified smaller nations’ voices. The Westminster majoritarian electoral system exaggerated national differences in party representation by overstating Conservative support in England, Labour then SNP in Scotland, and Labour in Wales (Denham, 2022). In Northern Ireland’s distinct political culture, earlier alignments between Ulster Unionism and Conservatism and between the Social Democratic and Labour Party (SDLP) and the Labour Party were weakened by the post-Good Friday Agreement dominance of Sinn Féin and the Democratic Unionist Party (DUP).

The UK constitution, Anglo-centrism, and the divergent politics of the UK’s nations together mean an England-dominated UK government experiences few constraints when acting for the whole UK in foreign affairs. Such governments may decide to respond to or ignore devolved concerns, as seen in the Brexit negotiations and over the Northern Ireland Protocol, but such decisions are driven by an English view of the UK national interest.

Anglo-centric constitutional assumptions are reflected in academic and political discourse, and few studies of UK politics consider England as a distinct national polity. The major study *The British General Election 2019* contained no mentions of England, although it contained chapters on the devolved nations (Ford et al., 2021). English politicians routinely refer to Britain or the UK when discussing policy that applies to England. Coyle and Muhtar (2023) describe the dysfunctionality of the centralised state that governs England (but not the rest of the UK), while Denham and Morphet (2024) link failures to devolve power within England to the hold of Anglo-centric constitutionalism. While internationally England is frequently conflated with the UK, few texts on UK foreign policy consider England explicitly (Clements, 2019; Gaskarth, 2013; Hill, 2019; Sanders and Houghton, 2017). Notable exceptions include Wallace (1991), Hadfield (2010) and Vucetic (2021). However, there has been no comprehensive assessment of England’s governance, identities and relationship with the UK since the British Academy’s *Governing England* (Kenny et al., 2018), which largely excluded foreign policy except Brexit.

By contrast, Scotland has received more academic attention, particularly since the 2014 independence referendum. Studies have examined Scottish approaches to Europe and international relations (Dorman, 2014; Gethins, 2021; Happold, 2000; Hepburn et al., 2021; Sloat, 2000). Northern Ireland’s complex position regarding the UK, Ireland, and the EU has been central to Brexit debates (Connolly and Doyle, 2019; Phinnemore, 2020). While less studied, Wales has also attracted more attention since Brexit (Hunt and Minto, 2017; Minto and Morgan, 2019).

The one area where there is emerging literature on England is in studies of English nationalism and identity. Henderson and Wyn Jones (2021) identified an English world view they characterise as Euro-sceptic and ‘devo-anxious’ (believing that England loses out). While Henderson and Wyn Jones talk simply of Englishness, Wellings (2019) identifies an English nationalism. Vucetic (2021) showed how ideas of Britain’s global role are embedded in English identity. Denham and McKay (2023) describe ‘political Englishness’ as aspects of identity emphasising sovereignty and immigration. Denham (2024) notes that those who strongly identify as English are also usually strongly British and suggests England’s identities range from ‘Englishness with Britishness’ to ‘Britishness without Englishness’. However, this literature on England’s identities, politics, and Anglo-centric constitutionalism rarely addresses foreign policy beyond Brexit.

How foreign policy becomes domestic politics

Foreign policy rarely plays a decisive role in electoral politics. Even the Iraq War, which prompted widespread protests, did not determine the subsequent general election (Butler and Kavanagh, 2005). Instead, a complex interplay of factors determines the outcome with foreign policy an influential but not a dominant issue. Iraq, for example, added to questions of trust in Tony Blair on both domestic and international matters. Sometimes a foreign policy issue does directly mobilise specific groups of voters, such as support for independent pro-Palestinian candidates among Muslim voters in 2024 (Mohyuddin et al., 2024). It is unsurprising then that polling reveals voter indifference to foreign policy. To understand how foreign policy issues can nonetheless affect electoral politics, we need to understand how international issues shift to domestic politics. Five conditions make this shift more likely.

First, the foreign policy issue must be seen by voters to clearly affect domestic life. While domestic issues dominate the ballot box, foreign policy positions are not irrelevant (Aldrich et al., 1989; Stevens, 2015). Sometimes an issue in one democracy (such as a referendum on an EU Treaty) may spill over into the political discourse of neighbouring countries (Malet, 2022). A government's response to international events such as banking crises, wars, pandemics, or US tariff policy is often judged more by domestic than foreign policy responses (Putnam, 1988).

Second, foreign policy must resonate with contested ideas of identity and national role. When Tony Blair derided critics of globalisation, he was speaking to those who saw themselves as beneficiaries but offered little to those who associated globalisation with economic and social loss (Kriesi et al., 2008). Within the UK, perceptions of the national interest can differ across nations (Jennings and Stoker, 2016), especially in Scotland (Gethins, 2021).

Third, the foreign policy choice must divide the electorate. Elections depend on political differentiation. The EU became such an issue by building upon deep social and economic divisions (Hobolt, 2016). This led the Conservatives to campaign on the EU in 2015, 2017, and 2019. Traditionally, bipartisanship limited foreign policy's electoral impact. However, as seen in the USA, deep polarisation can eventually encompass foreign policy (Friedrichs and Tama, 2022).

Fourth, governments shape political perceptions through public policy. Competent governance, especially in managing the domestic fallout of foreign affairs, can lessen public concern. David Cameron's failure to fulfil his promise to lower immigration below 100,000 a year helped boost the UK Independence Party (UKIP) (Somerville, 2015). A contrast here is the Danish Social Democrats' firm stance on immigration, which has been credited with helping them avoid the electoral losses faced by other centre-left parties (Nedergaard, 2022).

Fifth, there must be a political force capable of framing and mobilising voters around the foreign policy issue. Populist movements have successfully brought international affairs into the domestic sphere (Cadier, 2024; Destradi et al., 2022). Whether populist or not, domestic political actors are essential in framing international developments as domestic concerns (Chong and Druckman, 2007; Haas, 1980; Soroka, 2003). Theories of 'securitisation' in particular highlight how elites can recast foreign issues as domestic challenges (Wæver, 2011). Recent calls for the UK to withdraw from the European Convention on Human Rights are framed by security concerns about borders, terrorism, and crime.

Foreign policy, domestic politics, and Brexit

Brexit illustrates how ideas of the nation, domestic politics, and foreign policy can interact to change UK policy. In 2016, the UK voted 52%–48% to Leave the EU with clear UK-wide differences. England and Wales voted Leave (by 53.4% and 52.5%, respectively); Scotland and Northern Ireland voted Remain (by 62% and 55.8%, respectively). England's 15,188,406 Leave votes were 87% of the total Leave vote (Electoral Commission, 2016). This marked a reversal of the 1975 referendum endorsing membership of the European Economic Community. Then voters in England (68.7%) and Wales (64.8%) were more supportive than Scotland (58%) and Northern Ireland (52.2%) (Butler and Kitzing, 1976).

English Euroscepticism grew from the late 1980s, seen in Conservative divisions and Labour's cautious approach between 1997 and 2010 (Bale, 2017; Dorey, 2017). The Future of England survey (Wyn Jones, 2013) revealed strong Euroscepticism among those identifying strongly as English, alongside high concern about EU influence on government policy. Nonetheless, the major parties supported EU membership, and few voters prioritised it. UKIP made little progress until the 2004 accession to the EU of eight Central and Eastern European states, which led to a sharp rise in immigration.

This immigration brought together all the conditions likely to increase the salience of foreign policy in domestic politics. The UK government's decision not to introduce transitional controls, unlike other EU countries, exacerbated the effect (Somerville, 2007). The UK had backed EU enlargement, seeing it as a way of widening rather than deepening integration and of advancing post-Cold War European unification through an enlarged EU and an enlarged North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO). However, the sudden arrival of large numbers of migrants had a marked economic and social impact, particularly in areas with little prior immigration. The government was slow to admit concern (Ford and Goodwin, 2014). In 2010, Prime Minister Gordon Brown's description of a voter concerned about immigration as 'a bigot' reflected this disconnect. Some voters were further angered by knowing the UK could not limit EU immigration.

The combination of a domestic issue – the effects of immigration – with foreign policy – of EU membership – boosted support for UKIP (Ford and Goodwin, 2014). While only ever winning a by-election in 2014, UKIP gained ground in European and local elections. It won 16.5% of the vote (13 MEPs) in the 2009 European Parliament elections and 27.5% (24 Members of the European Parliament) in 2014 (House of Commons Library, 2009, 2014). This growing minority influenced the UK's traditional parties, despite polls showing that EU membership was unimportant to most voters (Evans and Menon, 2017). The Liberal Democrats committed to an in-out referendum in the event of a new EU treaty during the 2010 general election, and Labour adopted a similar position in 2015. In 2013, David Cameron committed the Conservatives to renegotiating the UK's EU membership and holding an in-out referendum largely in response to UKIP's growing appeal.

By the 2016 referendum, immigration was the most salient political issue, peaking at 58% in September 2015 and remaining the top concern for 48% of voters by the time of the referendum (Richards et al., 2025). Vote Leave's slogan of 'take back control' resonated not only with voters who opposed free movement but also with those hostile to the pooling of sovereignty (Hobolt, 2016). These concerns were particularly strong among voters who emphasised their English identity (Denham and McKay, 2023). In England, therefore, the EU referendum gave many voters a vote on two issues they cared about: immigration and sovereignty.

The decision to leave the EU shows all the elements needed for foreign policy to shape domestic politics: a substantive issue which concerns many voters, doubts about government policy, a divided electorate, an effective political force, and a foreign policy choice that appealed to some voters' ideas of the nation and national interest. However, Brexit was not inevitable. It required decisions (especially around immigration), the rise of UKIP, the willingness of other parties to endorse the principle of a referendum, and political misjudgements (to call an in/out referendum).

Brexit had important domestic political consequences which reinforced England's dominance within UK government. Conservative divisions ultimately destroyed Theresa May's premiership. The Brexit Party (now re-branded as Reform), succeeded UKIP and continued to pressure the Conservatives and Labour. Johnson's acceptance of a customs border in the Irish Sea, and the indifference of many Conservative members to the union's future, showed a party focused on English priorities (Bush, 2019). Johnson's 2019 election victory was overwhelmingly English; his UK majority of 80 resting on an England majority of 156.

In upending UK-EU relations, Brexit transformed UK foreign policy. In its place, the post-Brexit Conservative governments spoke of 'global Britain', an idea advanced by Leave campaigners of an independent, deregulated, sovereign, trading nation. However, research soon questioned whether Leave voters supported this vision (Bevington, 2018). The idea was more an attempt to unify a party divided over globalisation, immigration, and Brexit (Melhuish, 2024; Wraight and Green, 2024). Some have linked it, and the Leave vote to imperial nostalgia, although that confuses narrative with intent. Saunders (2020) argues that imperial references were used instrumentally rather than as expressions of widespread nostalgia.

Brexit continues to change the UK, England, and their electoral politics. The Conservatives and Reform compete for the political Right – and for Leave voters – in England and Wales. Labour remains cautious on EU relations, despite polling showing a majority support re-joining. Although the SNP has faced challenges, support for independence remains around 50%, buoyed by Remain voters growing sympathy for independence. The Internal Market Bill, which used Brexit to centralise control, strained relations with devolved governments. Liz Truss's failed in her attempt to use Brexit to remake the UK's political economy as a 'Singapore on Thames'. Proposals to remove EU laws and regulations from the statute books were dropped when business and regulators warned of legal and trading disruption. By 2024, most Britons believed Brexit was a mistake (The Economist, 2024), and in May 2023, even Nigel Farage admitted, 'Brexit has failed' (McDonald, 2023).

Foreign policy views in England and Scotland

Brexit showed how a major change in UK foreign policy could occur when foreign affairs connected strongly with domestic concerns in England. It also revealed how a foreign policy issue can affect the UK's internal politics. To explore the potential for other foreign policy issues to shape UK domestic politics, two polls were conducted in England and Scotland in June 2023 and April 2024.²

The first poll sought views on the UK's international relationships, trade, defence, and security while the second asked about economics, cultural and political relationships with the USA and EU, action on climate change, humanitarian aid, relations with China, the Ukraine conflict, NATO, nuclear weapons, and trade.³ Both polls probed underlying

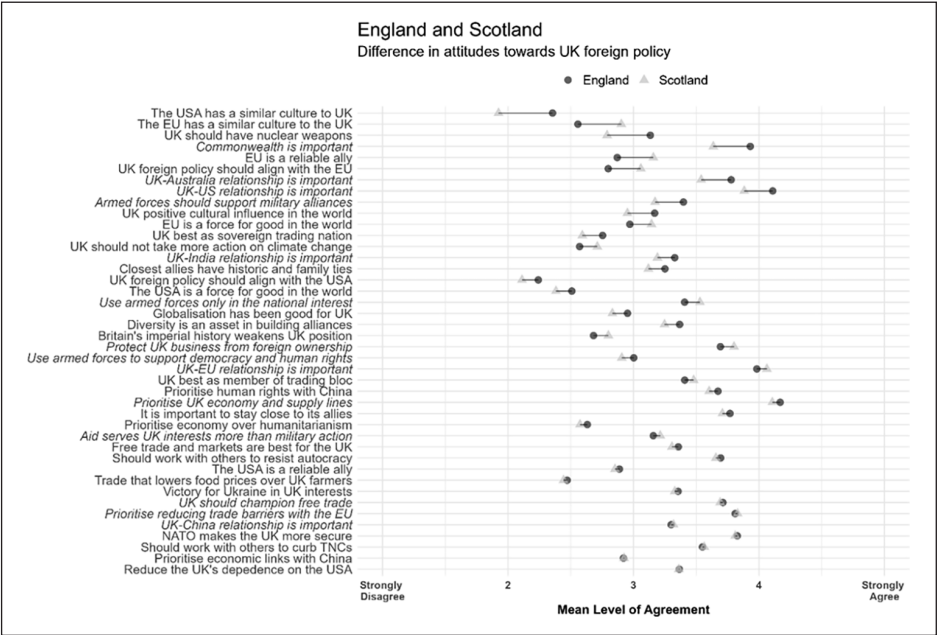


Figure 1. Mean response scores for each foreign policy statement. Mean scores are weighted using survey weights. Italics statements are survey responses from a separate smaller poll.

foreign policy values and attitudes rather than specific policy questions. Such underlying values are less likely to change quickly or be contingent on specific events.

The polling data was analysed in five ways. First, the mean foreign policy views in each nation were identified in order to highlight issues which were most polarising and had the greatest potential for divisive political mobilisation. Second, the extent of correlation between voters' views, such as whether views on trade with China align with views on nuclear weapons, was determined. Third, whether foreign policy views could be segmented into distinct world views or whether other patterns of views appear was identified. Fourth, the data sets for England and Scotland were compared to identify similarities and differences which might cause polarisation between the politics of the two in future. Finally, the extent to which historic positions on Brexit (how a respondent voted in the 2016 referendum) might be reflected in current policy views and how these historic views might be related to our wider analysis of the data were determined.

For ease of presentation, we first set out the data and analysis for England. We then present a similar analysis for Scotland. Finally, we compare the data from the two nations and highlight similarities, divergences, and persistent Leave/Remain differences.

Figure 1 shows the headline mean responses from England and Scotland.

England's world view

The mean responses for England suggest a nation supportive of a progressive, collaborative foreign policy. Respondents support upholding a global rules-based order. They support NATO, nuclear weapons, and see Ukraine's victory as in the UK's interest. They favour international collaboration to resist autocracy. They want the UK to remain close

to its allies. While backing free trade they believe the UK is better in a trading block and prioritise economic resilience and protecting British business from foreign ownership. They want international collaboration to curb the power of transnational companies and believe the UK should prioritise human rights over economic interests with China. They are, however, ambivalent about UK leadership on climate change.

However, most want to reduce the UK's security dependence on the USA. Cultural affinity with both the EU and USA is ambiguous. Voters are more likely to see the EU as a force for good than the USA and, to a limited extent, favour alignment of UK foreign policy with the EU. Neither the USA nor the EU are identified clearly as reliable or unreliable. England's voters believe diversity is an asset in building alliances and believe the UK has a positive cultural influence. They tend not to think Britain's imperial history affects its global role but believe that the UK's strongest allies are those with whom it has familial ties.

At this aggregate level, English respondents do not strongly align with the 'Global Britain' narrative of an independent global free-trading nation allied to the Anglosphere. Membership of a trading block is prized over national economic independence, and while relationships with countries with familial ties are seen as the UK's best allies, the EU is also seen as a positive force. Despite the centrality of immigration in the Brexit campaign and recent UK politics, diversity is seen as an asset in building alliances.

England's most polarising issues

Average responses may mask significant divergence from the rest of the UK. To examine how polarising these issues are among the English and Scottish populations, we apply Van der Eijk's (2001) measure of agreement. This uses an algorithm that disaggregates frequency distributions into component parts called layers. At the level of these layers, agreement can be determined, and the measure of agreement provides a weighted average (Ruedin, 2023; p.3). The polarisation function from the agrmt package (Ruedin, 2023) in R is then used to derive polarisation scores for each question in each nation, which rescales agreement scores onto a standardised scale of 0–1, where 0 indicates no polarisation (complete consensus), and 1 indicates total polarisation (half in one category, half in another).

Figure 2 ranks questions by degree of polarisation, shaded by the mean direction of (dis)-agreement. The most polarising issues are the possession of nuclear weapons, how much action the UK should take on climate change, whether the UK should align its foreign policy with the EU, whether the UK can best succeed as a sovereign trading nation, and whether the EU is a reliable ally.

Correlation among English foreign policy views

Figure 3 illustrates a Spearman's correlation matrix between the 28 survey statements for English respondents conducted in 2023. It shows the extent to which foreign policy views are correlated with one another.

Weak to moderate positive and negative correlations exist between a number of foreign policy statements. For example, support for the UK's nuclear weapons correlates weakly with the view that the UK should not lead on climate change. Seeing the USA as a global force for good is positively associated with seeing the UK as a positive cultural influence.

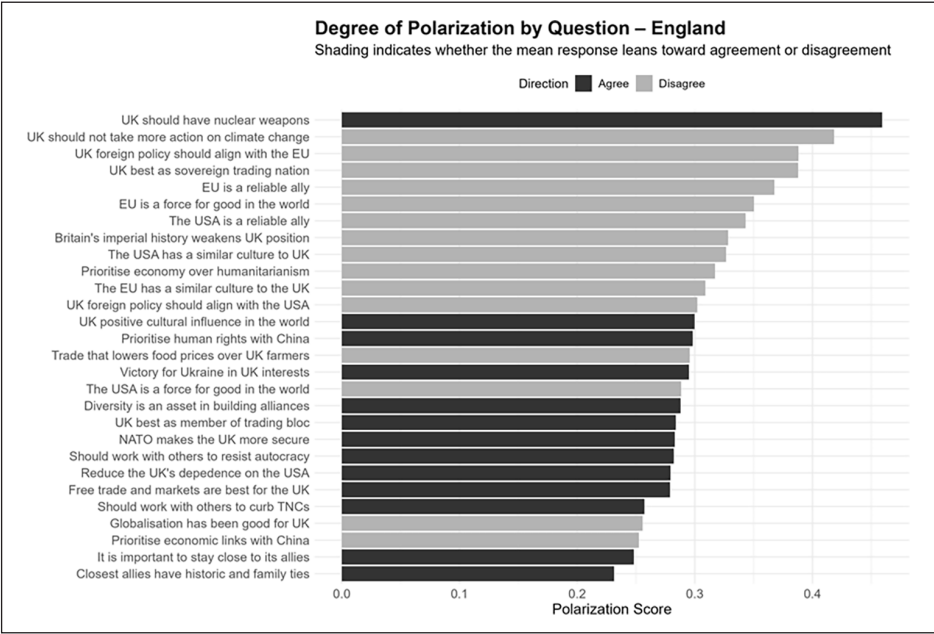


Figure 2. Polarisation scores for each foreign policy statement. Bars are shaded by mean agreement where issues with a mean score of less than 3 are shaded light (disagree), and issues with a mean score of above 3 are shaded dark (agree). English respondents only.

By applying a correspondence analysis to capture the underlying relationships between these policy issues (Greenacre, 2002), we see that 43% of the variance across the 28 statements can be understood through three primary underlying axes. We have called these ‘Sovereignty’, ‘Atlanticism’, and ‘UK in the World’. Figure 4 illustrates the top 10 contributing statements to the formation of these axes.

A small number of policy positions wield significant influence in each axis. Figure 5 demonstrates how these axes correlate with different foreign policy statements. Certain statements contribute significantly more influence to each axis. For instance, an English respondent’s position on UK action on climate change has the largest impact on their placement along the Sovereignty axis but has substantially less impact on their position along the Atlanticism axis.

Positions on the Sovereignty axis explain 24.6% of the variance in English foreign policy views. The Sovereignty axis comprises issues related to the desirability of the UK acting independently from other nations and alliances, including how much the UK should lead on climate change, whether the UK best succeeds as a sovereign trading nation, the UK’s relationship with the EU, whether the UK should prioritise its economic interests over humanitarian concerns, and whether the UK should have nuclear weapons. We can use the term Sovereigntist to identify those voters who consistently favour UK independent or unilateral policy-making. Such Sovereigntist voters are unlikely to regard the EU as an ally, a force for good in the world, as culturally similar, or believe the UK should align with its foreign policy. Sovereigntist voters are more likely to believe the UK should have nuclear weapons, should not lead on climate change, and should prioritise economic interests over humanitarian concerns. They believe the UK best succeeds as a sovereign trading nation. They are less likely to believe the UK’s imperial history weakens its role or that diversity is an asset.

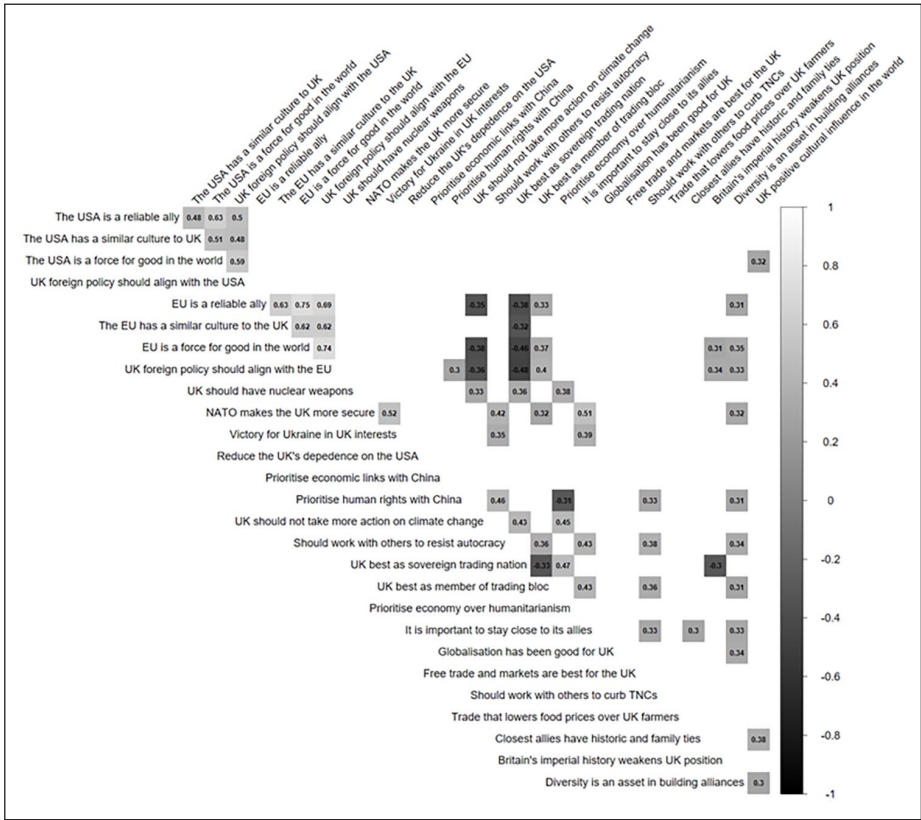


Figure 3. Spearman's correlation matrix illustrating the relationship between each of the 28 statements in the April 2024 survey data for England. Questions with a correlation coefficient of less than +0.3 or -0.3 are left blank.

The Atlanticist axis explains 10.9% of the observed variance. It includes attitudes towards the USA as an ally, as a global force for good, similarity between the UK and USA, how closely the UK should align its foreign policy with the USA, and whether the UK should reduce its security dependency on the USA. We can describe voters who are most likely to have positive opinions towards the USA and do not want the UK to reduce its defence dependency on the USA as ‘Atlanticist’. They give lower priority to human rights when negotiating trade deals with China or to working with other countries to curb the power of transnational corporations.

A third axis, which we have called ‘UK in the World’, explains 7.3% of the observed variance and links issues that more broadly define the UK’s relationships with the wider world. It is influenced heavily by attitudes towards free trade and free market economics, cultural relations with the EU, membership of NATO, the importance of military victory for Ukraine, resisting authoritarian regimes, and how the UK’s imperial history affects its position globally. This axis might be interpreted as a loose representation of non-interventionism or isolationism: voters aligned with this axis being less likely to believe NATO membership strengthens the UK, that victory for Ukraine is vital to UK interests, that it should work with other democracies to resist authoritarian regimes, that the UK must stay close to its allies, that its closest allies are those with familial ties, or that the UK should

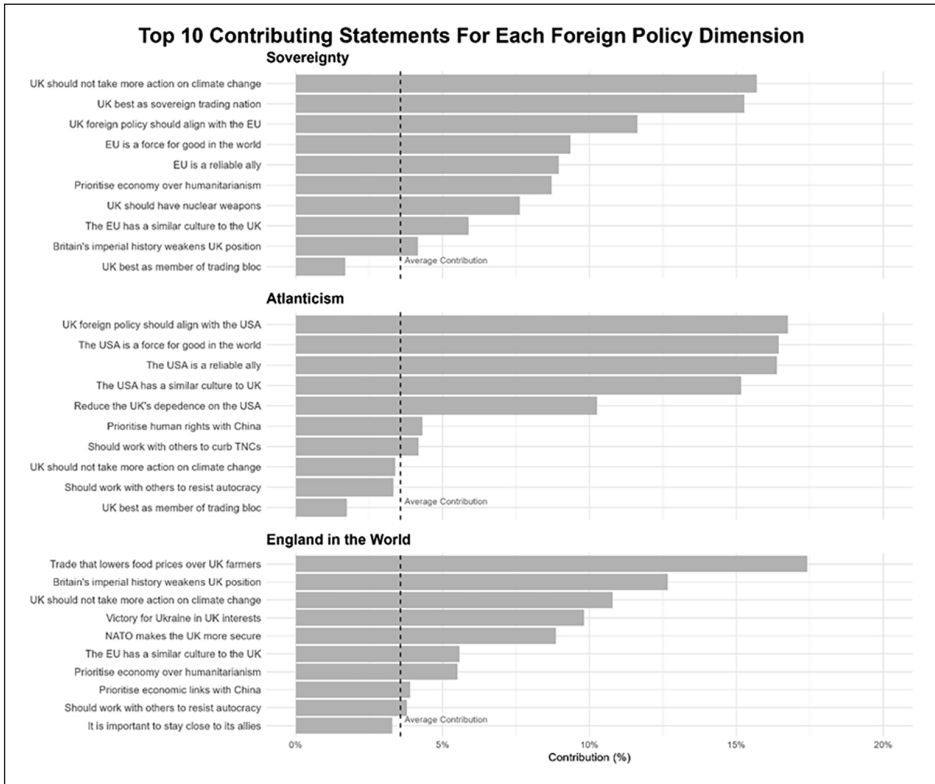


Figure 4. Contribution plot showing the top 10 contributing foreign policy statements towards the formation of the three main foreign policy axes. The dashed black line marks the average contribution of all 28 statements together (3.57%).

have nuclear weapons. It is the only axis that displays more negative attitudes towards the USA and the belief that the UK is seen globally as a positive cultural influence. It is the only axis that views the UK's imperial history as weakening its position globally.

There is little overlap between the foreign policy propositions that are most influential in each axis. Only opposition to leading on climate change is an important issue on two axes, being the top issue on the Sovereigntist axis and the third most important on the UK in the World axis. Seeing membership of a trading block as in the best interests of the UK correlates negatively with the Sovereigntist and Atlanticist axes.

Together the three axes only shed light on 43% of the variance of foreign policy views. Further segmentation analysis failed to yield distinct groups or segments expressing clearly distinguishable world views. Many respondents expressed no strong or consistent views. This is in line with studies that suggest large portions of the electorate do not hold coherent sets of opinions on most policy areas (Converse, 1964; Zaller, 1992).

The persistence of the Leave-Remain divide

Further insight into foreign policy views is gained by comparing the polling with the historic positions taken by respondents in the 2016 EU referendum. This data was obtained from the historic data on members of the polling panel and does not reflect

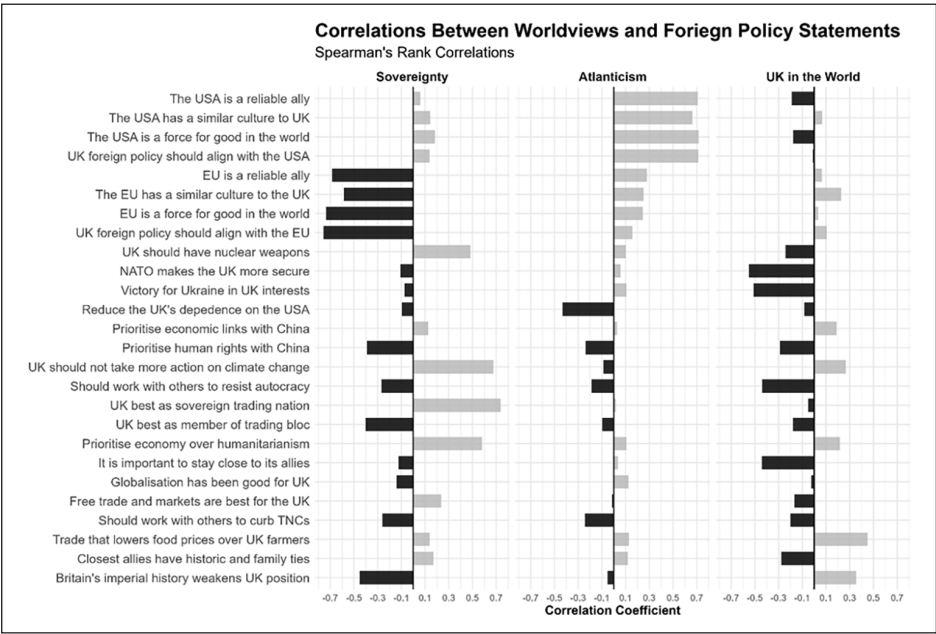


Figure 5. Spearman’s rank correlations between each foreign policy axis and 28 different foreign policy statements.

current views, nor whether they continued to identify as ‘Leavers’ or ‘Remainers’ (Hobolt et al., 2021). Other polling suggests large numbers of voters have changed their minds since 2016 (Curtice, 2023). Our polling did not ask about membership in order to avoid prompting other related answers.

Figure 6 shows how someone voted in 2016 remained a strong predictor of foreign policy positions in our 2023 and 2024 surveys. These not only include views of UK-EU relations and whether the UK would best succeed as a sovereign trading nation but also whether the UK should lead on tackling climate change, the value of foreign aid, promoting economic over humanitarian interests, and support for the UK’s nuclear weapons.

The persistence of Leave-Remain reflects the dominance of issues on the Sovereigntist axis for these voters and the extent to which these issues polarise voters. Ten of the top 13 Leave-Remain divides are on the Sovereignty axis, and England’s five most polarised issues are also on the Sovereignty axis.

Figure 7 shows that English Leave voters have generally higher levels of Sovereigntist alignment than Remainers. There is no statistically significant difference between the two groups on the Atlanticist or UK in the World axes, suggesting these axes had little influence when it came to English views on Brexit.

Comparison of Scottish and English world views

On average, Scottish respondents are more positive about the EU as an ally, its culture, and alignment of UK with EU foreign policy. They are less positive about the USA. A majority favour the UK’s nuclear weapons, but support is notably lower than in England. On most other issues, differences are small. Views on China, NATO, and curbing the power of transnational companies are almost identical.

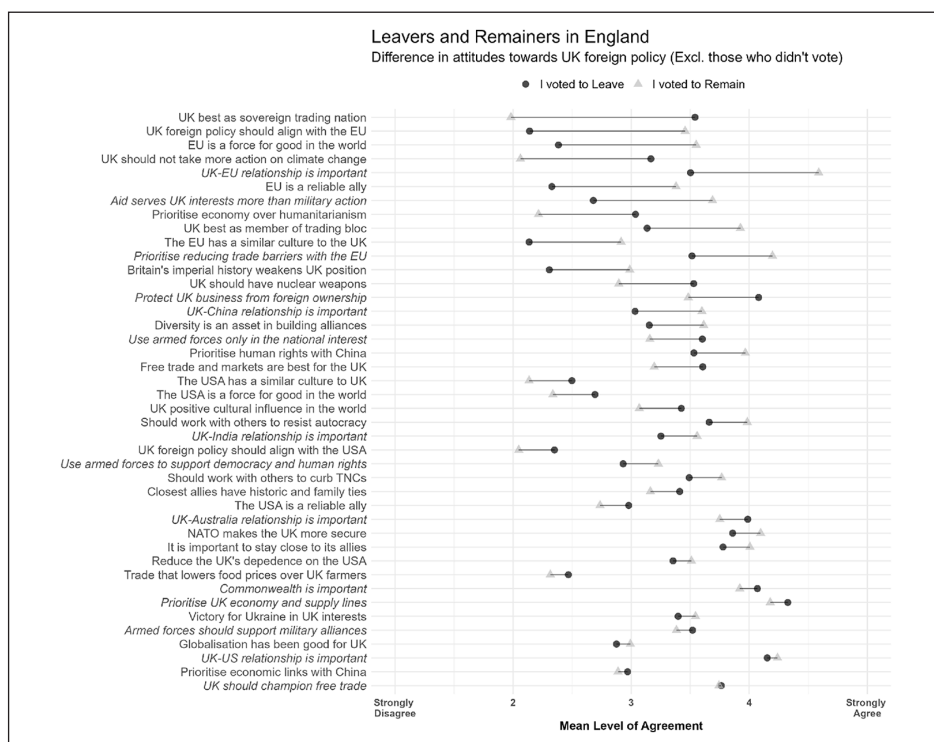


Figure 6. Mean response scores for each foreign policy statement split by Leave voters and Remainers. This figure includes several additional statements from the survey data that were not used in the previous analysis, plus additional statements from the 2022 survey data which are in italics.

The most polarising issues

Scotland's two most polarising issues match England's: nuclear weapons and climate change (See Figure 8). However, unlike action on climate change where both nations generally reject taking more action than others, the UK's nuclear weapons polarise in two different directions. Where the English are in mean agreement that the UK should have nuclear weapons, the Scottish are in mean disagreement. Similarly, questions relating to the EU also polarise Scots, but in the opposite direction to the English (except for the EU sharing a similar culture to the UK where both nations generally disagree). The Scottish are also relatively polarised on the issue of Britain's imperial history and whether the UK succeeds best as a sovereign trading nation.

Correlation of Scottish foreign policy views

Analysis of the Scottish data identified the same three foreign policy dimensions: Sovereignists, Atlanticist, and UK in the World. Each carries almost the same influence as in England (see Figure 9).

A significant difference lies in a few issues. Possession of nuclear weapons is the most influential issue on the Sovereignist axis in Scotland while climate change action is the most influential issue on the same axis in England. Climate change plays an important

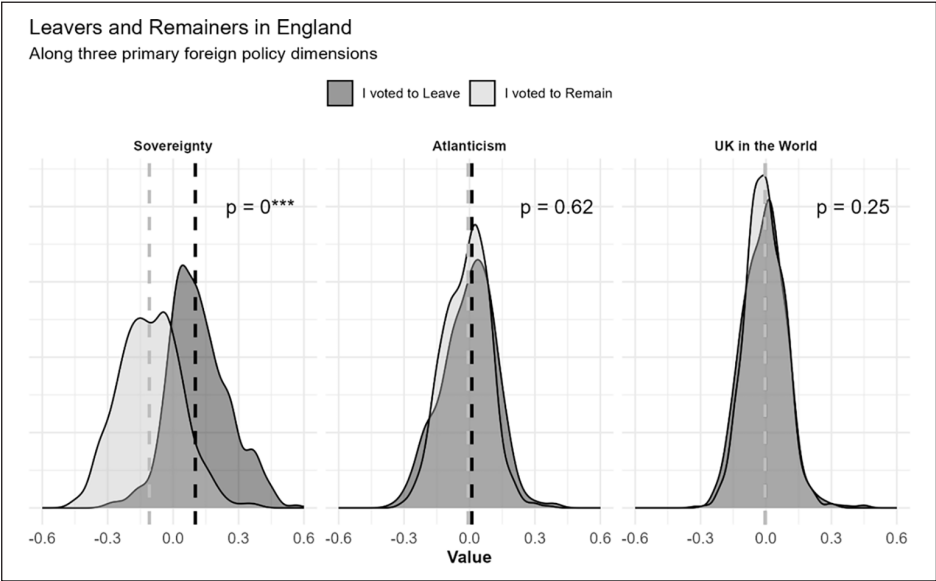


Figure 7. Distribution of those who voted leave in the 2016 European Referendum compared to those who voted leave. Includes English respondents only and excludes anyone who did not specify their vote Dashed lines indicate the median value for each group and p-values represent the statistical significance of differences between the two groups based on student's t-tests.
* $p < 0.05$, ** $p < 0.01$, *** $p < 0.001$.

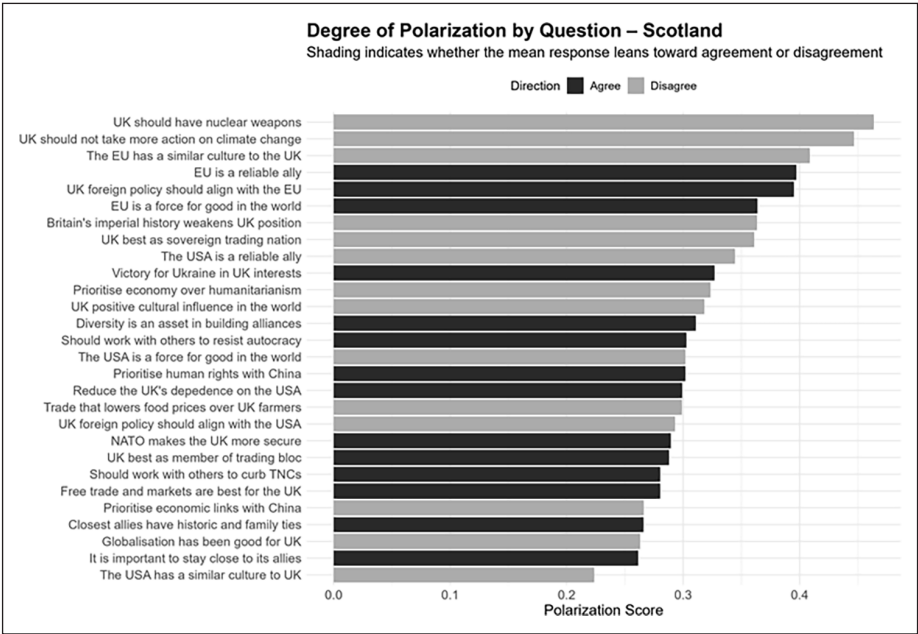


Figure 8. Polarisation scores for each foreign policy statement. Bars are shaded by mean agreement where issues with a mean score of less than 3 are shaded light (disagree), and issues with a mean score of above 3 are shaded dark (agree). Scottish respondents only.

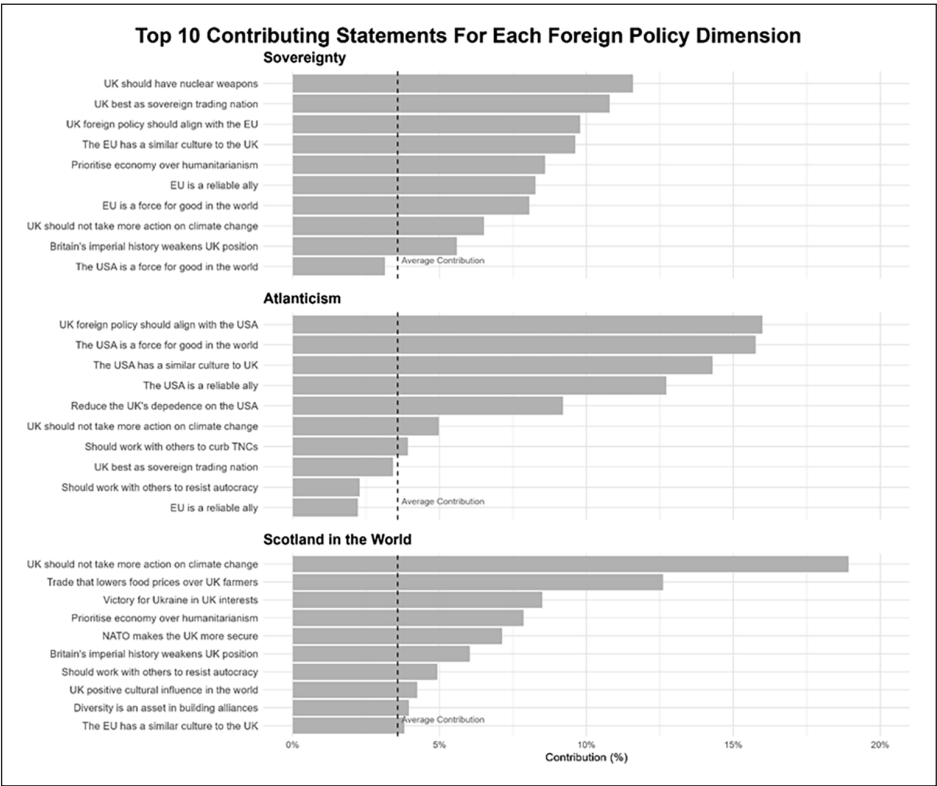


Figure 9. Contribution plot showing the top 10 contributing foreign policy statements towards the formation of the three main foreign policy axes in Scotland. The dashed black line marks the average contribution of all 28 statements together (3.57%).

role in the Atlanticist and UK in the World axis in Scotland but not in England where relationships with China are more prominent.

Scaling both results, it is possible to compare the three axes in the two nations, as shown in Figure 10.

Scotland and England differ in modestly but statistically significant ways along all three axes. Along the dominant foreign policy axis, English respondents on average display moderately higher levels of Sovereignty sentiment than Scottish respondents. The English also demonstrate slightly higher Atlanticist sentiment than the Scottish. The Scottish rank slightly higher along the UK in the World dimension, suggesting Scots see the UK’s global role slightly less positively.

Analysis of historic Scottish Leave and Remain voters across the three foreign policy axes shows similar results to those in England, as shown in Figure 11. Sovereignty is significantly higher among former Leave Voters. In contrast to England, however, Scottish Leavers demonstrated a modest but significantly lower degree of Atlanticism.

The electoral potential of foreign policy issues

Our polling provides new insights into foreign policy views in England and Scotland. However, conclusions about political significance must remain tentative. Our polling

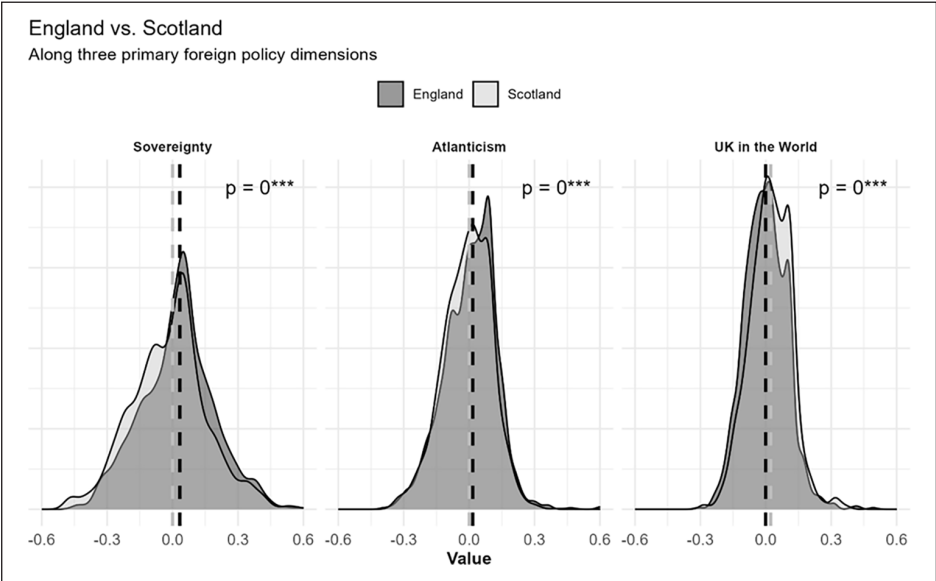


Figure 10. Distribution of English respondents compared to Scottish dashed lines indicate the median value for each nation, and p-values represent the statistical significance of differences between the two nations based on student's t-tests.
* $p < 0.05$, ** $p < 0.01$, *** $p < 0.001$.

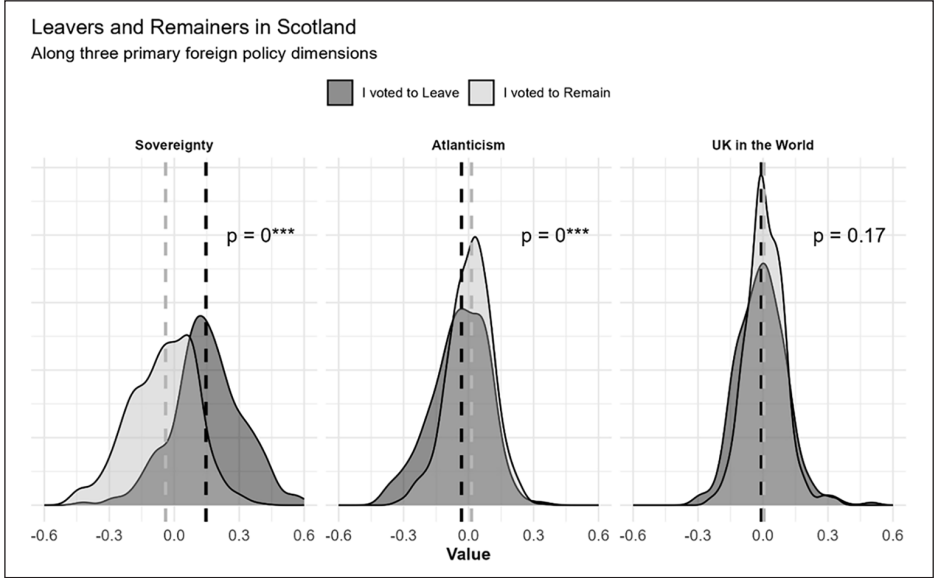


Figure 11. Distribution of those who voted leave in the 2016 European Referendum compared to those who voted remain. Includes Scottish respondents only and excludes anyone who did not specify their vote. Dashed lines indicate the median value for each group and p-values represent the statistical significance of differences between the two groups based on student's t-tests.
* $p < 0.05$, ** $p < 0.01$, *** $p < 0.001$.

cannot show how voters make connections between foreign policy, domestic politics and government responses to consequential issues such as inflation, energy prices, migration, or defence spending. Foreign policy rarely offers clear choices around which government or voters may congregate. Foreign policy issues may also interact with different understandings of national sovereignty in different nations of the UK. Finally, without a political force capable of framing and mobilising foreign policy concerns, connections to domestic politics may remain dormant. Nonetheless, several conclusions can be drawn about attitudes in England and Scotland that could influence future foreign policy. These are strong enough to justify further research across more issues and all UK nations.

Our polling shows limited support for the concept of 'Global Britain' promoted by the Conservative Government after 2016. Voters tend to prioritise national economic resilience and protection of UK ownership of goods and services over open markets and deregulation. There is minimal enthusiasm for deeper relations with the Anglosphere, and attitudes towards the USA have little influence on views of Brexit. Even Leave voters balance support for free markets with a preference for a trading block and national economic resilience. This suggests elite advocates of 'Global Britain' mobilised Leave voters around narrower issues of national sovereignty and immigration. It would be a mistake to overstate popular support for 'Global Britain' among English or Scottish voters.

On Europe, our study explored views of the EU as an ally, as a force for good, for potential alignment on foreign policy, and cultural similarities rather than questions about the UK re-joining. Attitudes towards the EU remain the most polarising, with Scots far more positive. The issue remains the one with the greatest capacity to polarise voters. If it re-emerges as a defining issue, English and Scottish opinions would likely diverge. Given how English views can dominate UK government, tensions between the UK government and Scotland, as happened over Brexit, could be repeated.

We found a range of differences in a number of areas. The UK's nuclear weapons are the second issue on which opinion is polarised in both nations, albeit in opposite directions. The issue currently divides the plurality of public opinion in the two nations and could create conflict between the UK government and Scotland. While our polling was conducted during the Biden administration, even then views of the USA as a reliable ally were polarising in both nations. In both nations, a plurality did not regard the USA positively as an ally. We also noted significant minorities in both nations oppose taking more action on climate change than others. Voters in both nations polarise similarly, albeit the Scottish are slightly less supportive of UK climate leadership. Finally, views on international aid versus military action are not markedly different between England and Scotland. However, Remain voters are much more likely than Leave voters to believe aid serves UK interests more than military action. This shows a strong divide based on Brexit choices rather than between English and Scottish views.

The three axes of Sovereignty, Atlanticism, and UK in the World make connections, albeit sometimes weakly, between unrelated questions. The same axes exist in England and Scotland with minor differences over the relative importance of action on climate change and the UK's nuclear weapons. The three axes embrace less than half of respondents and only Sovereignty is reflected in over 20% of respondents views. Nonetheless, issues on the Sovereignty axis represent the most polarising political positions in Scotland and England and are reflected in the world views of historic Leave and Remain voters. The political significance of these axes is that an issue which polarises a group of voters on one element of the axis is likely to see the same group polarise, in the same direction, on other elements of the same axis. This may create a voting block of political significance beyond the weight attached to the single issue.

Much of the polling and differences between the two nations is primarily issue-specific and influenced by voters who do not align strongly with any of the axes and who may previously have held no strong views on the issue. The three foreign policy axes may only be influential on issues where there is also a wider polarisation or consensus among voters. That said, three of the contested foreign policy areas identified – the EU, climate change, and nuclear weapons – are linked by their role on the Sovereignty axis. Climate change is also an important dimension of the UK in the World axis. Mobilisation around these issues may unite voters with aligned foreign policy concerns.

The polling therefore provides data to interpret some of the current Labour government's choices. While the average English and Scottish responses reflect centrist views on foreign policy, we identify four polarising issues: the EU, USA, nuclear weapons, and climate change. These issues are linked by one or more of the foreign policy axes underlying some voters' views and are reflected in the historic Leave-Remain divide. On two issues – the EU and nuclear weapons – English and Scottish views differ significantly.

The Labour government has cautiously sought to reset relations with the EU but appears wary of alienating those English voters who continue to have a negative assessment of the EU. This reflects a fear of re-opening a divisive political contest. As such, the UK government is giving more weight to English than Scottish opinion. The potential for a political mobilisation that challenges current UK policy might appear to come from those who want to re-join the EU or the customs union or single market. However, pro-EU voices struggle to find a defining link between the economic benefits of closer relations with the everyday issues of employment and living costs.

The second Trump administration created new challenges for the UK government. In line with our English and Scottish data, the UK has remained committed to supporting Ukraine despite the USA's antipathy but still wishes to remain close to the USA. The UK has led efforts to create a non-EU European 'coalition of the willing' to help Ukraine. By seeking to balance UK-US and UK-EU relationships the government risks running counter to public opinion which, even under the Biden administration, tended to regard the USA as an unreliable ally. Any domestic UK political impact from actions by the Trump administration, including the imposition of new tariffs, pressure on UK-EU relations, or any NHS and agricultural content in any US-UK trade agreement, may be influenced by the polarised and sceptical public views of relations with the USA.

The UK's commitment to a leading global role on climate change appears to have the greatest potential to create political divide with an electoral effect. Government strategy aims to increase energy security and lower energy prices by reducing dependence on fossil fuels and increasing renewables. However, the UK's internationally high energy prices could be pushed higher by a global energy crisis caused by geopolitical instability, which in turn could see campaigns against climate change leadership mobilise voters on other issues on the Sovereigntist axis including voters with a negative assessment of the EU. While a majority in both nations favour climate change leadership, Brexit showed how insurgent campaigns can force changes to government policy. The conditions for a disruptive challenge to current policy would emerge if a political connection were made between the net zero targets and the UK's high energy prices. Scottish voters are less likely than English voters to want the UK to take more action on climate change, perhaps reflecting the importance in Scottish politics of North Sea oil and gas. This suggests that any political mobilisation in England around the costs of climate change policies could gain support in Scotland, aligning the nations.

Finally, our polling shows three foreign policy issues where differences between Scotland and England could see problems for Scotland's relations with the rest of the UK.

Scottish voters are less likely to be satisfied with the pace of resetting UK-EU relations or close UK-US relations. The UK's nuclear weapons are less popular in Scotland than in England, although majorities in both support their retention. Opposition to the UK's nuclear weapons has long been a policy of both the SNP and Scottish Greens. The use of a proportional electoral system enables a range of views to be represented in the Scottish Parliament, creating potential for nuclear weapons, US relations, and EU relations to grow as Scottish electoral issues. In turn, these may create differences and tensions within the UK and challenges to parties seeking support in both nations.

Conclusion

This article offers a rare insight into England's role in UK foreign policy. While UK foreign policy is centralised and conducted for the whole UK, it is substantively shaped by England's size, and constitutional, electoral, and ideological mechanisms. Our polling did not show distinctly different world views in English and Scottish public opinion. However, issues like nuclear weapons and attitudes to the EU show electorally significant divergences. This was shown most clearly with Brexit. The article shows therefore that UK foreign policy is not simply the product of a unitary state but emerges from a union of nations with distinct identities, electoral preferences, and policy priorities. This also shows how some foreign policy topics can, by being linked to sovereignty or identity, become important issues in the UK's internal politics, which can affect the UK's cohesion and governance.

The article points to the three foreign policy axes of sovereignty, Atlanticism, and the UK in the world as a framework for understanding attitudes of voters in England and Scotland. They explain how what at first appear to be unrelated views can cluster to influence political mobilisation and party alignment. We note the persistence of Leave-Remain identities in the Sovereignty axis, which point to long-term legacies from the EU referendum although these opinions pre-date the vote. These views continue to shape foreign policy preferences in England and Scotland, creating potential tensions over UK foreign policy. Our polling also points to the UK's leading role on climate change as one area where there is the potential for political mobilisation and division.

There are clear limits to our analysis. Notably, our polling excludes Wales and Northern Ireland. Furthermore, our polling cannot fully capture how attitudes gain political salience. We have not explored how UK, Scottish, or English elites can frame international events to shape opinion. Further research is therefore needed to compare views across all of the UK to better understand how foreign policy connects with national identity, party politics, constitutional arrangements, and electoral politics. This would also help address the lack of long-term attitudinal data in each UK nation.

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Notes

1. Parliament/Senedd/Assembly.
2. The June 2023 poll surveyed 1716 respondents in England (18+) and 1100 in Scotland (16+). The April 2024 poll surveyed 1455 in England (18+) and 1116 in Scotland (16+). Funding precluded polling Wales and Northern Ireland. The questions and data for both YouGov polls are archived in the Loughborough University Research Repository. They can be found as Oliver (2024a, 2024b). Opinion polling in England and Scotland on international relations. Loughborough University. Online resource. <https://doi.org/10.17028/rd.lboro.27324714> and Oliver, Tim (2024a). Polling of views in Scotland on international matters. Loughborough University. Online resource. <https://doi.org/10.17028/rd.lboro.27344091>
3. To note, as these two surveys involved different sets of respondents, only headline results can be combined together and compared for analysis, which is illustrated in Figure 5. The foreign policy axes generated using correspondence analysis are only scaled using the second survey containing 28 questions.

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