

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 toward 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

Words: 8,105

Introduction

European colonial empires once governed vast territories and populations. Although now largely dissolved, these empires have substantially influenced European societies and economies, and shaped contemporary political debates around identity, race, and the role of European states in the world (e.g., Gildea 2019; Gilroy 2004; Oostindie 2011; Sanghera 2021; Veugelers 2019).

Remarkably, however, attitudes toward 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 toward 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 toward empire shape contemporary political choices. Specifically, we conceptualize attitudes toward 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; Wildschut et al. 2014; Smeekes, Wildschut, and Sedikides 2021).

To empirically assess these concepts, we develop two batteries of survey questions to measure imperial nostalgia – a 7-item attitudinal battery and a 10-item emotional battery – and field these in two rounds of a representative panel survey of the British public. We find, using both batteries, that imperial nostalgia constitutes a clear dimension of public opinion that ranges from nostalgic to critical, and is distinct from general nostalgia, authoritarianism, national pride, and other similar attitudes.

We then provide two tests of the importance of imperial nostalgia in British politics. First,

we show that an imperial nostalgia scale strongly predicts party evaluations and vote intentions, rivalling traditional attitudinal dimensions such as immigration opinion and left-right economic values. Second, using a conjoint experiment,¹ we observe that experimentally manipulated elite positions on empire significantly influence voter preferences. However, the affects are asymmetrical: whilst a majority of the public are either critical or ambivalent about empire, empire-critical elite positions impart an electoral penalty, whilst empire-positive positions are received indifferently.

Our study shows that imperial nostalgia is a politically important dimension of public opinion in Britain despite not being a prominent feature of electoral rhetoric. Yet, as our experimental findings suggest, the political mobilization of the imperial past has been limited because of the asymmetrical nature of imperial nostalgia, whereby criticism of empire is penalised by right-wing voters and fails to gain substantial support from the left. Yet if public views of the past liberalize through, e.g., generational replacement, the imperial past could become a more prominent political divide in Britain – and across Europe – as left-wing candidates and parties find new opportunities to challenge imperial legacies while conservatives respond with defensive reactions.²

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,” “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).

¹The conjoint experiment was not pre-registered. We view these results as exploratory analyses of a novel topic in public opinion and political behaviour.

²For a recent example of the latter, see Jenrick (2024).

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 20th-century British politics, imperialism consistently enjoyed Conservative support and sympathy, while Labour's position was conflicted, buttressed by anti-imperialist thought, 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 has long faded from *direct* political relevance, its imagery and symbolism is frequently invoked by contemporary 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 (i.e., "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 has never been a central political divide Britain, its legacy clearly remains a collective touchstone in contemporary politics.

While the positions of parties and political elites on the British Empire are well-documented, public opinion toward empire remains far less understood. Although some historians have argued that British society was strongly imperialist in sentiment (e.g., Hall 2002), others claim widespread public indifference (Porter 2004). Rich (1990, 11) suggests that the "loss of empire came as a profound psychological shock" to the British, suggesting a deep attachment. Behind these debates lies an unavoidable uncertainty regarding historical public opinion, due both to the limitations of the historical lens as well as 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 (e.g., Mitchell 2021). Available empirical evidence is limited to sporadic surveys conducted by commercial pollsters. For instance, a 2014 Yougov survey revealed that 59% of Britons viewed the empire favourably, compared to only 19% who felt ashamed (Dahlgreen 2014). A similar question asked in 2019 found lower levels of pride (32%), but the same level of shame (this question also included a “neither” option). This survey also showed that only the Dutch are more proud of their empire than the British (Smith 2020).

What limited evidence we have available therefore suggests that British views of empire are relatively positive, perhaps fuelled both by the Conservative Party’s historical celebration of empire and Labour’s historical ambivalence. The true extent and nature of these opinions is uncertain however, and whether they are politically consequential is entirely unknown. The objective of this paper is to address these issues. First, we describe how we conceptualize public attitudes toward empire and theorize their connections to political preferences.

Conceptualising imperial nostalgia

The concept of “collective memory” allows us to understand imperial attitudes as shared narratives about the nation, and the concept of “nostalgia” aids us in exploring how these narratives shape contemporary political preferences and behaviour. Together, these concepts offer a framework for understanding how perceptions of the (imperial) past affect the politics of the present.

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 re-imagined and reinvented across time (Verovšek 2016).³ Moreover, collective memories tend to be expressed through narratives that tell a story of the na-

³In 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).

tion – 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 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.

A growing body of research has demonstrated that nostalgia – though not imperial nostalgia – has important political implications, with a notable relationship with support for populist and conservative parties. Of particular relevance to this paper is Elçi (2022), who demonstrates that Turkish nostalgia for the Ottoman Empire, but not for the secular Kemalist period, is positively associated with populist attitudes. Gest, Reny, and Mayer (2018) introduce the concept of “nostalgic deprivation,” defined as “the discrepancy between individuals’ understandings of their current status and their perceptions about their past” (p. 1695), which they find to be linked to support for right-wing parties in Britain and the United States. Smeekes, Wildschut, and Sedikides (2021, 90) argue that “national nostalgia reflects grievances over perceived loss of the ethnically and culturally homogeneous moral community” – grievances that radical right actors actively mobilize. Building on this, Smeekes and Lubbers (2024) show that national nostalgia is associated with support for populist radical right parties in the Netherlands.

While researchers have begun examining political nostalgia, they have not considered what its antithesis or opposing pole might constitute. On the one hand, the absence of nostalgia may sim-

ply be indifference, i.e., the absence of any emotional attachment to myths about the past. Indeed, existing polling data on British attitudes to empire suggest that indifference is fairly widespread. However, it might be more fruitful to conceive of the antithesis of nostalgia as an aversion to the past, i.e., affectively-charged, hostile views of national myths, such as respondents who feel ashamed of the British empire. We therefore propose that imperial nostalgia is an orientation that runs from positive views and emotions about empire to negative views and emotions, with indifference and ambivalence occupying a midpoint between these poles.

Broadening the scope to encompass both nostalgia and aversion toward imperial eras brings additional research into focus, particularly regarding negative emotional responses to colonial atrocities in European contexts (e.g., Leach, Branscombe, and Wohl 2013; Licata and Klein 2010). This literature examines how emotions such as shame, guilt, and anger produce complex reactions to the colonial past. Shame and guilt may produce defense reactions, including denial or minimization of atrocities (Bonnot et al. 2016). Recognition of the morally fraught nature of many national histories remains challenging for many individuals, as confronting it threatens deeply held national identities and individual self-concepts (Leach, Branscombe, and Wohl 2013). Even today, while colonial aggression and violence would be widely condemned in principle, openly criticising one's nation for such past actions can remain contentious.

We have argued that attitudes toward empire are best understood as a form of collective memory, framing them as narratives or myths that are as much about the nation as they are about the past, and as much imagined as historical. Additionally, we have proposed that the concept of nostalgia provides a way to link these national narratives to contemporary political preferences, building on recent research showing the growing influence of nostalgia in electoral choice across Western democracies. Together, these perspectives suggest that imperial nostalgia possibly plays an important, but underappreciated role, in British politics. We explore this possibility in the paper, describing our methods and measures in the next section.

Data and research design

This paper addresses the novel topic of public opinion regarding the British Empire, and the political implications thereof, using new measures and an experimental design. The novelty of our topic means that our analyses are exploratory in nature. As such, our measures and experimental designs were not pre-registered. While this lack of pre-registration precludes confirmatory hypothesis testing, the study provides a foundation for future research by identifying patterns and relationships that can guide subsequent studies.

Our data come from a three-round panel survey conducted by YouGov with a sample of adult residents of Britain (excluding Northern Ireland). The first round, fielded from October 3 to 19, 2022, included 4,069 respondents. The second round, conducted from October 13 to November 11, 2023, retained 2,522 participants from the first wave, and the third round, fielded from May 21 to June 10, 2024, included 2,169 of the original respondents, with 1,876 participating in all three waves. The first wave featured an oversample of rural residents, and weights were constructed for each survey wave using raking to align results with national population marginals.

To improve response quality, respondents who completed a survey wave in less than one-third of the median completion time were excluded: 117 respondents were excluded in wave 1 (median 24.7 minutes) and 12 in wave 2 (median 19.1 minutes), with none excluded in wave 3. Additionally, 36 respondents who were missing demographic data and six who had left the UK during the panel period were dropped. The final sample sizes for analysis were 3,884 for wave 1, 2,451 for wave 2, and 2,109 for wave 3.

We fielded two batteries designed to measure imperial nostalgia in the second and third waves of the survey. The first asked respondents to evaluate the British Empire using seven questions, drawn in part from the questions fielded by Smith (2020) and Bizumic and Duckitt (2018).⁴

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

⁴We thank the latter authors for supplying us with their questionnaire.

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.⁵

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.⁶

Our analysis of imperial nostalgia proceeds in four main steps. First, we describe the data from our batteries; second we evaluate the psychometric properties of the scales; third, we analyze the associations between nostalgia and evaluations of political parties, and gauge its predictive power for voting intentions; and finally, we assess the impact of political candidates' pro- versus anti-imperial positions on respondents' voting preferences through a conjoint experiment, which was fielded in the third round of the survey.

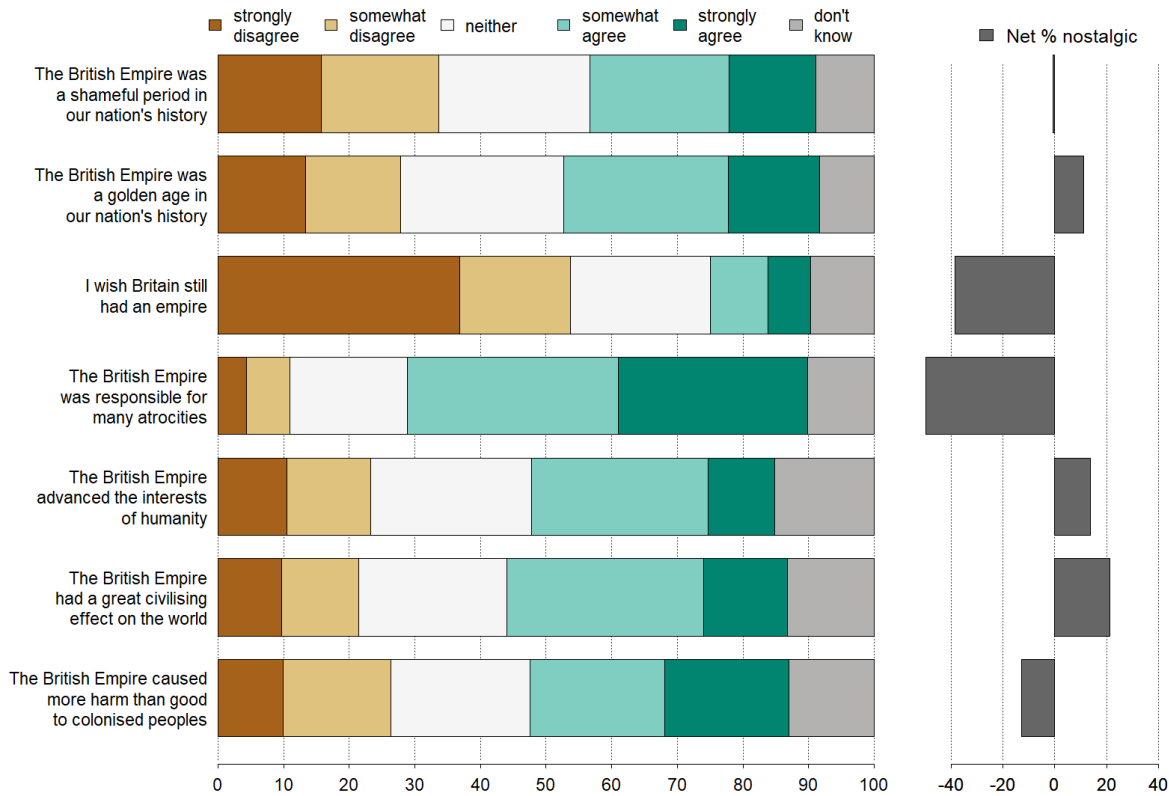
Patterns of imperial nostalgia in the British public

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

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

⁶The 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



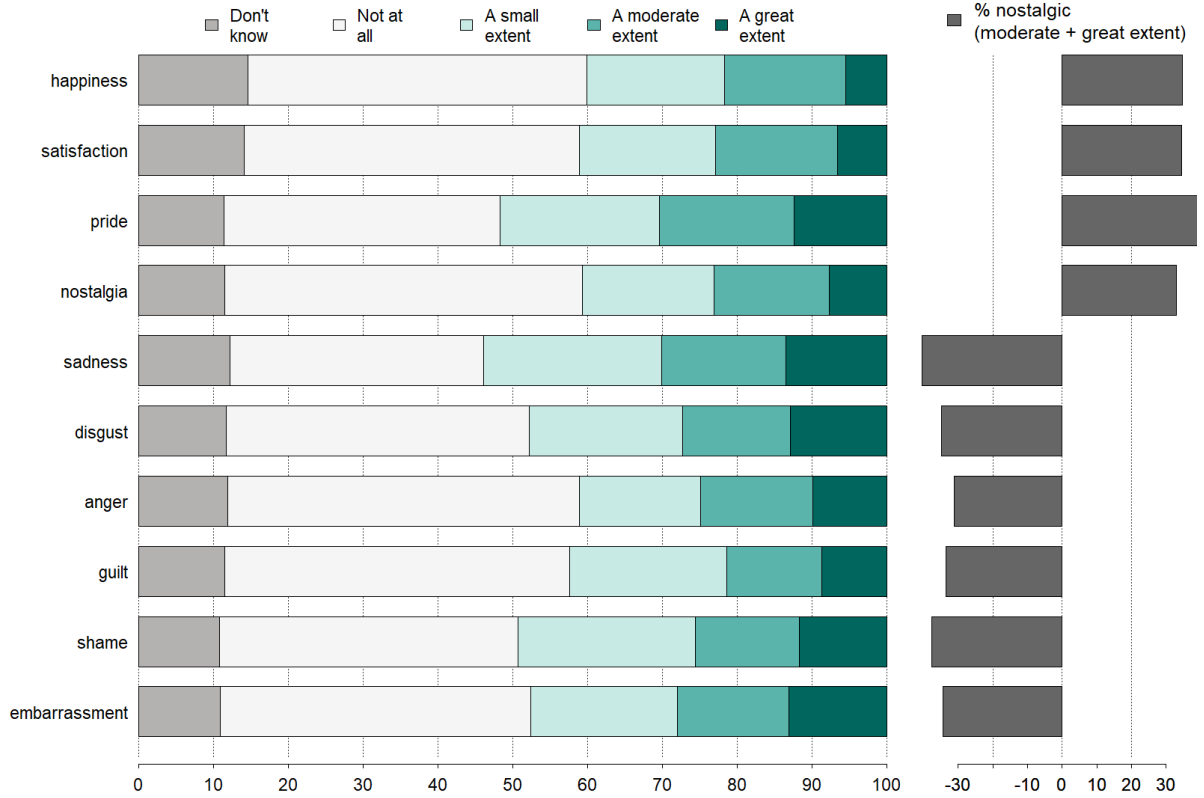
Notes: Each bar shows the weighted distribution of responses for one of the seven questions in the imperial attitudes battery using the second round survey. The net percentage of the sample offering a nostalgic (anti-imperial) view is shown in the panel on the left. See the supplementary materials for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

cases: majorities agree that the British empire did commit atrocities and majorities disagree that they wish for Britain to still have an empire.

It is also evident that question framing matters considerably. The net percent of respondents offering a pro-British empire opinion varies from -50% in the responsible for “atrocities” question to $+21\%$ for the “civilising effect” question in the second round survey (-52% and $+28\%$ in the respective questions in the third round survey). This suggests a fair degree of ambivalence in these opinions: while majorities agree that the British empire caused harms, majorities also believe the empire had beneficial effects.

Consistent with this result, respondents also display a significant level of uncertainty in their opinions regarding empire. Between a quarter and 40% of respondents selected the “neither

Figure 2. Responses to the imperial emotions questions

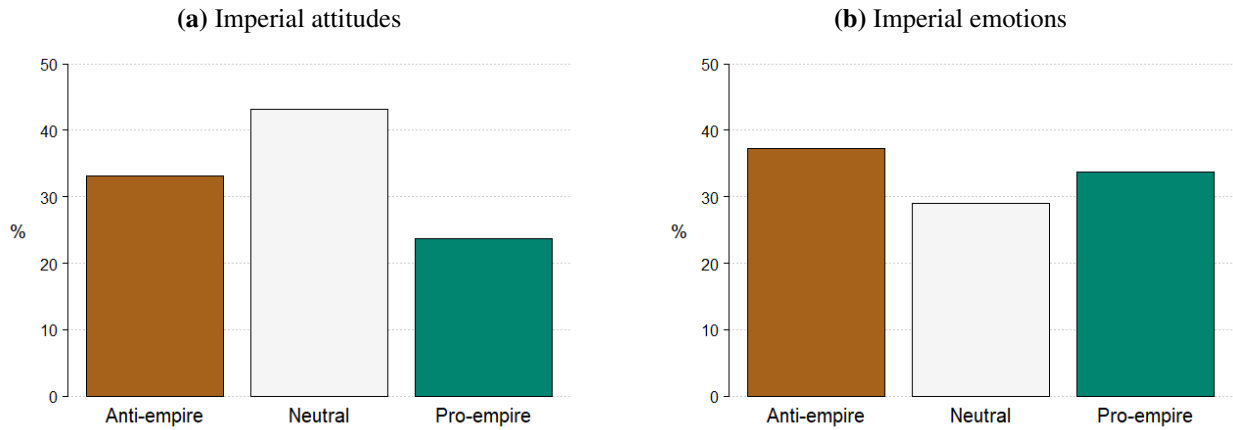


Notes: Each bar shows the weighted distribution of responses for one of the ten questions in the imperial emotions battery using the third round survey. The stem of the question read “When you think about the British Empire, to what extent do you feel...”. The percentage of the sample holding a pro- 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 second round data.

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% on the attitudinal battery and

Figure 3. Overall opinion regarding empire



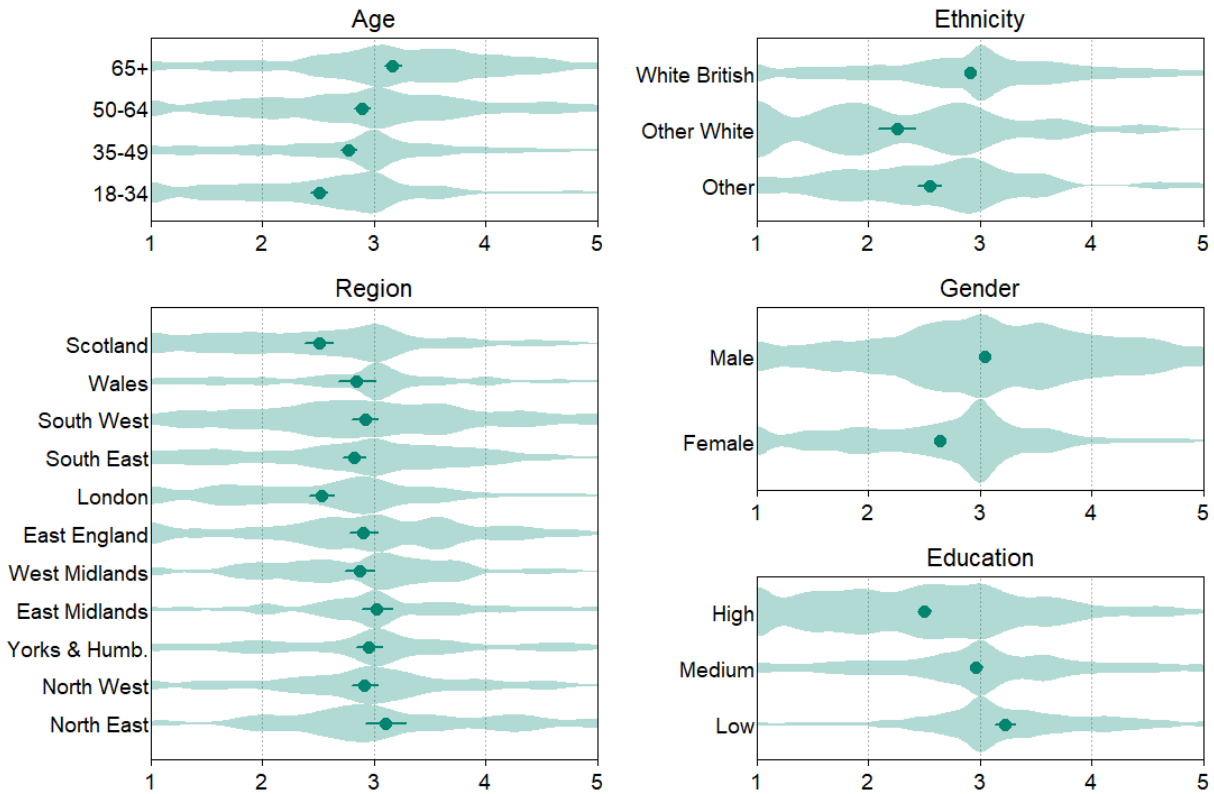
Notes: Each panel shows the average direction of opinion across the items in the attitudes and emotions batteries as measured in the second round survey. Neutral values are defined as 2.5 to 3.5 on the imperial attitudes scale (range 1–5) and -0.5 to 0.5 on the emotion difference scale (range -3–3).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

nearly 30% on the emotional battery.⁷ Despite this, we find that a significant portion of the British public is nostalgic for the British Empire: in the second-round survey, 24% reported net nostalgic attitudes, and 34% expressed net nostalgic emotions. These proportions remained consistent in the third round, at 23% and 34%, 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 Scotland and London exhibit the lowest levels of imperial nostalgia. In summary, imperial nostalgia shows demographic patterns consistent with it being a form of cul-

⁷This 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.

Figure 4. Group differences in overall imperial nostalgia



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% 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.

tural 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.⁸

The measurement properties 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. That is, we consider the psychometrics of the two batteries.

⁸In the supplementary materials we consider how imperial nostalgia varies across all two-way combinations of these variables.

Attitudes to empire

The imperial attitudes battery appears to measure a single coherent and reliable dimension of opinion. The scree plots from both survey rounds reveal a strong first eigenvalue, a second eigenvalue below one, and a pronounced “elbow” at the second eigenvalue, all of which support a unidimensional interpretation (see the supplementary materials for the tables and figures supporting this section). A one-dimensional confirmatory factor analysis fits reasonably well, with the CFI and SRMR metric better than the conventional metrics, but the RMSEA metric falling short (round 2: CFI = .996, RMSEA = .105, SRMR = .043; round 3: CFI = .997, RMSEA = .106, SRMR = .040). In addition, all items have strong positive standardised loadings in the .74-.89 range. The battery is internally consistent across both rounds ($\alpha = .91$ and $.92$), showing inter-item reliability. The repeated measurements allow us to assess the test-retest reliability, which is also strong ($r = .87$).

Emotions to empire

The imperial emotions battery displays a more complex structure than imperial attitudes, with evidence for distinct positive and negative dimensions. Such a finding is consistent with classic research on the latent structure of emotional response (Watson and Tellegen 1985). Specifically, scree plots reveal that the first two eigenvalues are elevated (both greater than 2), with a distinct “elbow” at the third. Exploratory factor analyses reveal a clear separation, with the items tapping negative and positive emotions loading on separate factors. Confirmatory factor analyses show that the two-dimensional, negative vs. positive imperial emotion model fits well (CFI = .999, RMSEA = .053, SRMR = .0388; r3: CFI = .999, RMSEA = .054, SRMR = .039) while a one-dimensional model does not (r2: CFI = .972, RMSEA = .296, SRMR = .240; r3: CFI = .980, RMSEA = .261, SRMR = .202). The two dimensions exhibit a moderate negative correlation ($r = -.51$ & $-.60$).

While these results support the use of separate negative and positive emotions to empire scales, creating a single differenced measure (i.e., positive emotions scale – negative emotions scale) produces a scale with greater test-retest reliability ($r = .86$ vs. $.81$) and a stronger correlation with imperial attitudes ($r = .87$ -.88 vs. $.74$ -.78). Given the strong correlation that imperial attitudes

exhibits with the net imperial emotions scale, as well as the stronger correlation it shows with other measures of cultural conservatism (compared with net imperial emotions; results in online supplementary materials), we use the imperial attitudes scale as our measure of imperial nostalgia in the remainder of the paper.

Convergent and divergent validity

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 36 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.

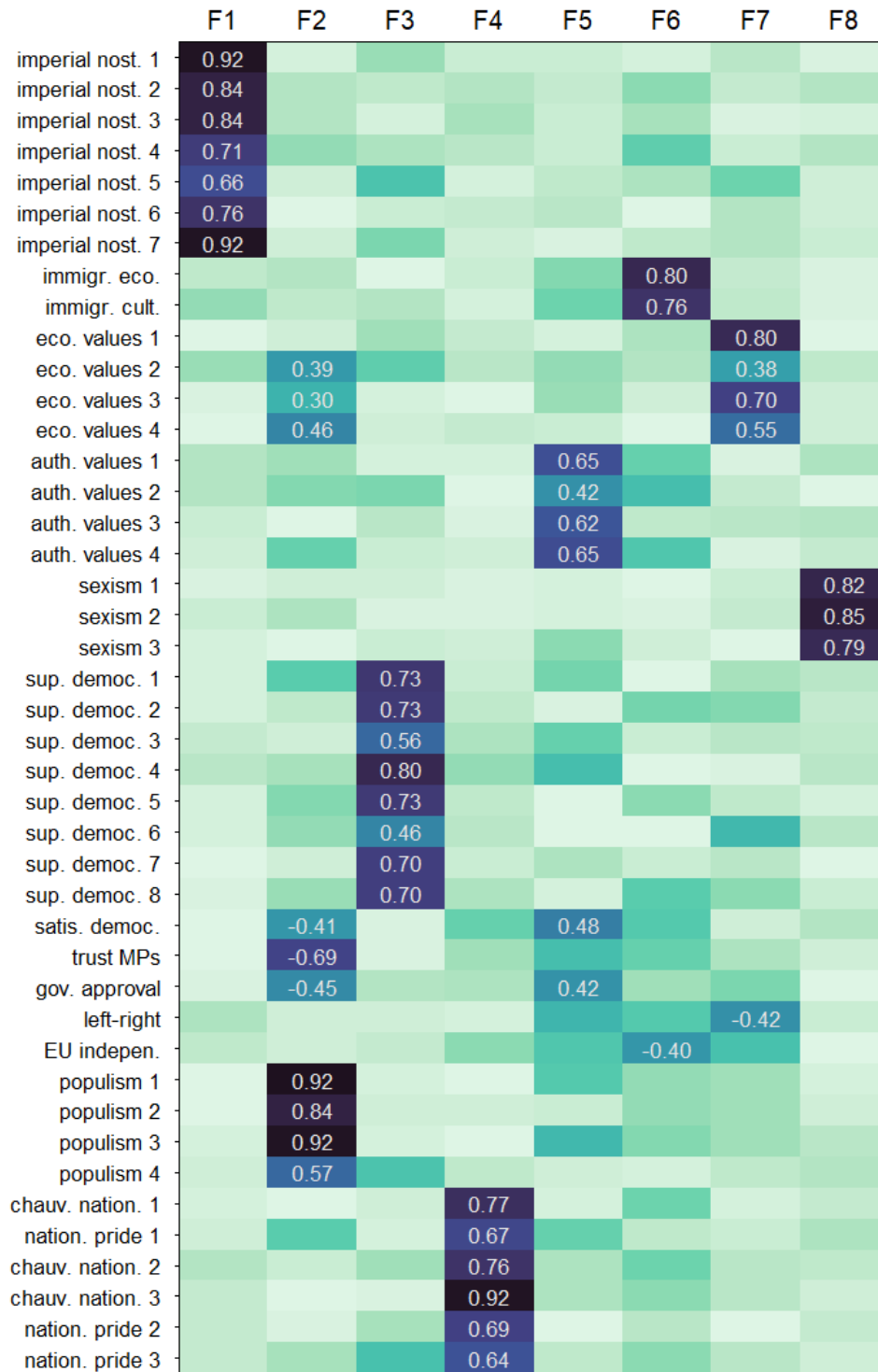
We see that a single dimension of imperial nostalgia emerges clearly and distinctively in the EFA, with minimal overlap with other items measuring cultural conservatism or national pride. At the level of the factors, modest to strong correlations emerge between the imperial nostalgia factor and the national pride/chauvinism ($r = .60$), authoritarian values (.63), hostile sexism (.55), and left-economic values factors ($-.55$). 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 would

Figure 5. Heatmap of exploratory factor analysis loadings



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 $\geq |0.30|$ reported in this figure. Most items are from round 2, except national pride and chauvinistic nationalism (round 3).

Figure 6. Correlates of party evaluations

	Labour	Conserv.	Reform	Lib. Dem.	Green	Mean
Independence from EU	-0.52	0.48	0.48	-0.40	-0.47	0.47
Imperial nostalgia	-0.39	0.46	0.50	-0.29	-0.48	0.42
Immigration support	0.43	-0.26	-0.54	0.38	0.45	0.41
Authoritarian values	-0.35	0.37	0.45	-0.31	-0.46	0.39
Hostile sexism	-0.37	0.26	0.33	-0.28	-0.39	0.33
Left economic values	0.31	-0.51	-0.20	0.12	0.29	0.29
National chauvinism	-0.21	0.43	0.30	-0.16	-0.32	0.28
National pride	-0.17	0.46	0.25	-0.10	-0.28	0.25
English national identity	-0.14	0.24	0.25	-0.06	-0.14	0.17
Life better 50 years ago	-0.16	-0.02	0.22	-0.20	-0.15	0.15
External efficacy	0.05	0.40	-0.04	0.11	-0.00	0.12
Trust in politicians	0.08	0.30	-0.09	0.13	0.01	0.12
Populist attitudes	0.00	-0.23	0.16	-0.08	0.01	0.10

Correlations with likelihood of ever voting for party

Notes: 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.

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 linear 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 four of the five parties we consider. As expected, given the Conservatives' long-standing support for empire and Labour's more ambivalent stance, we find a stronger association between imperial nostalgia and support for the Conservatives than for Labour. 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 – Reform by advocating a more radical break from mainstream conservatism and the Greens by questioning Britain's historical narratives and institutions – imperial nostalgia may become an increasingly salient political force if these parties continue to grow in prominence.

Table 1. Party support regressions models

	Cons.	Labour	Lib.Dem.	Reform	Green
Imperial nostalgia	.42*** (.09)	-.22* (.09)	-.12 (.09)	.49*** (.08)	-.54*** (.09)
Left-economic values	-1.04*** (.09)	.97*** (.10)	.15 (.09)	.01 (.08)	.39*** (.09)
Authoritarian values	.85*** (.10)	.19 (.11)	.22* (.10)	-.16 (.10)	-.29** (.10)
Immigration support	.29 (.16)	.87*** (.18)	.97*** (.16)	-1.05*** (.16)	.49** (.16)
Hostile sexism	-.16 (.08)	-.50*** (.09)	-.30*** (.09)	.17* (.08)	-.40*** (.08)
Populist attitudes	-.66*** (.09)	-.13 (.09)	-.20* (.09)	.44*** (.08)	.03 (.09)
English identity	.05* (.02)	.04 (.02)	.02 (.02)	.03 (.02)	.00 (.02)
EU independence	.26*** (.02)	-.34*** (.02)	-.23*** (.02)	.23*** (.02)	-.19*** (.02)
Intercept	.59 (.54)	6.79*** (.59)	2.96*** (.55)	-.55 (.54)	3.42*** (.53)
<i>N</i>	2029	2028	2011	1897	2011

* $p < 0.05$. Linear regressions using wave 2 data, with weights applied and standard errors in parentheses. Models also include political attention, age, ethnicity, gender, education, religion, social grade, home ownership, and region.

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 50 years ago”.⁹ The associations between imperial nostalgia and party evaluations remain similar to those presented in Table 1 for evaluations of the Reform, Liberal Democrat, and Green parties and stronger for evaluations of the Conservative party. In contrast, the role of imperial nostalgia for Labour party evaluations is much reduced when general nostalgia is included: it is effectively zero. This suggests that the association between Labour Party support and imperial nostalgia reflects a more generalised nostalgia for the past rather than specific imperial sentiment. Nevertheless, imperial nostalgia remains distinct in its associations with evaluations of three of the four other major parties. These findings underscore 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.

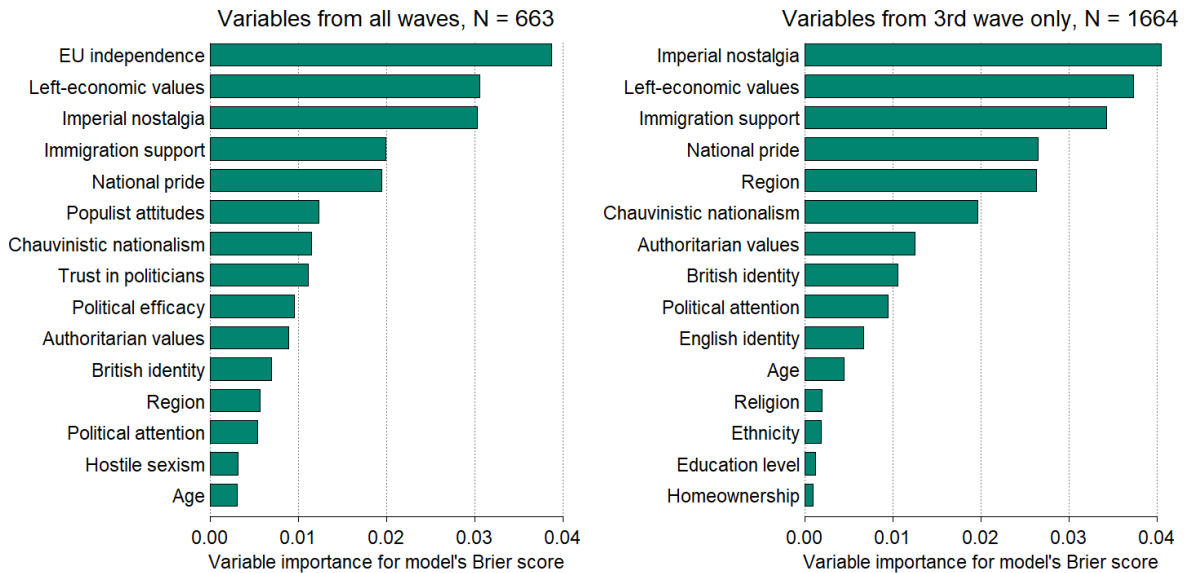
Table 2. Including general nostalgia

	Cons.	Labour	Lib.Dem.	Reform	Green
Imperial nostalgia	.55*** (.12)	-.01 (.13)	-.10 (.11)	.46*** (.12)	-.54*** (.12)
Left-economic values	-1.09*** (.12)	1.11*** (.14)	.03 (.12)	-.04 (.12)	.30* (.12)
Authoritarian values	.84*** (.14)	.27 (.15)	.40** (.13)	-.10 (.14)	-.13 (.14)
Immigration support	.36 (.23)	1.25*** (.26)	1.13*** (.23)	-.83*** (.23)	.89*** (.24)
Hostile sexism	-.18 (.12)	-.48*** (.13)	-.55*** (.11)	.03 (.11)	-.51*** (.12)
Populist attitudes	-.59*** (.12)	-.27 (.14)	-.21 (.12)	.44*** (.12)	.24* (.12)
English identity	.05 (.03)	.05 (.04)	.00 (.03)	.03 (.03)	.00 (.03)
EU independence	.22*** (.03)	-.34*** (.04)	-.24*** (.03)	.26*** (.03)	-.18*** (.03)
Life better 50 years ago	-.19** (.07)	.01 (.08)	-.07 (.07)	.23*** (.07)	.02 (.07)
Intercept	1.81* (.77)	6.58*** (.87)	4.12*** (.75)	-.15 (.77)	3.75*** (.77)
<i>N</i>	1041	1043	1034	965	1036

* $p < 0.05$. Linear regressions using second round data, with weights applied and standard errors in parentheses. Models also include the covariates listed in Table 1.

⁹This 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 7. Variable importance for predicting UK voter intentions



Notes: These figure present the variable importance scores from random forest model predicting respondents' vote intentions, which were measured in the 3rd 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 RF 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 VIP scores are better. The top 15 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 = 1664).

Finally, we analyse the factors influencing respondents' stated party choice (rather than their voting likelihood ratings for all parties, which we used previously). Party choice is measured using two items asking respondents whether they were likely to vote if a general election 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.

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 re-

gression methods may not detect (Montgomery and Olivella 2018; Muchlinski et al. 2016). We focus here on the impact of our set of covariates on the overall model’s predictive accuracy (i.e., as indicated in the variable 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 predictors of British vote choice. Only preferences regarding EU relations are stronger predictors. 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.

Nostalgia and Parliamentary candidate choice

The findings of the previous section are ultimately correlational, with omitted variables and reverse effects of partisan identities potentially confounding our conclusions. As such, we turn in this section to a paired conjoint experiment to test the causal effect of a (hypothetical) political candidate’s position on the British empire on 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, an aversive, “atrocities” position; and an intermediate position that en-

dorses both points of view.¹⁰ We then asked respondents to choose between and rank¹¹ 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 the ‘Empire’ treatment; 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 randomization of these attributes reduces the likelihood of these unobserved confounding inferences.

Figure 8 presents the marginal means from this experiment, with results from the forced-choice question displayed on the left and the profile-rating questions on the right.¹² 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. The “civilising effect” stance ranks second, drawing significantly less support than the intermediate position but significantly more than the “atrocities” position,¹³ which is the least popular.

These results are something of a departure from the direct attitudinal results that we discussed earlier. We found that a majority of the public (63%) agreed that the British Empire was

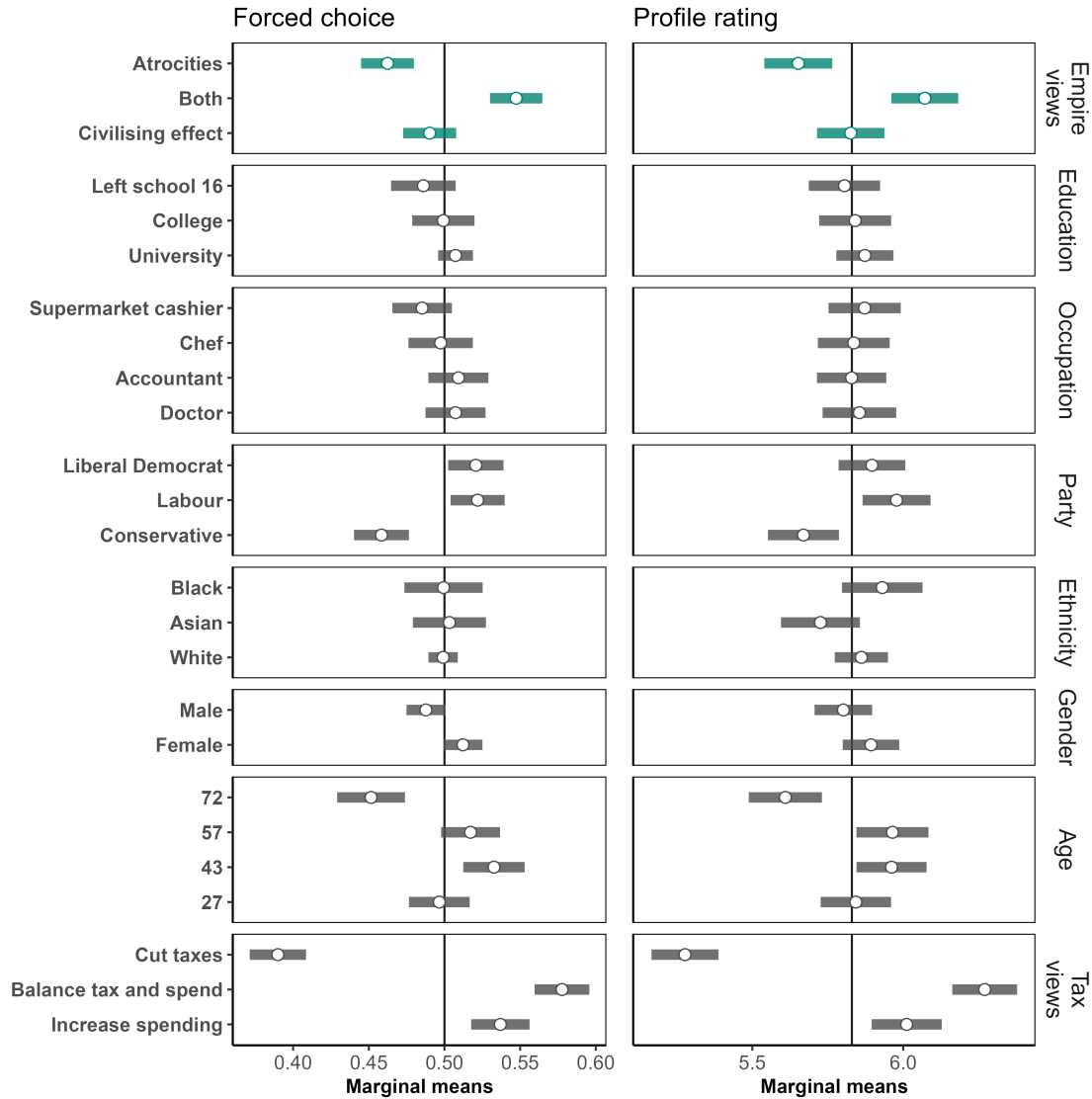
¹⁰These map closely onto questions used in our imperial nostalgia attitudes battery. The civilising effect position: “the British Empire had a civilising effect on the world”; the “atrocities” position: “the British Empire was responsible for many atrocities;” the intermediate position: “although the British Empire was responsible for some atrocities, it also had a civilising effect on the world.”

¹¹We 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?”

¹²Marginal 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.

¹³Only the profile rating difference is significant, not the forced choice.

Figure 8. Conjoint experiment results, marginal means

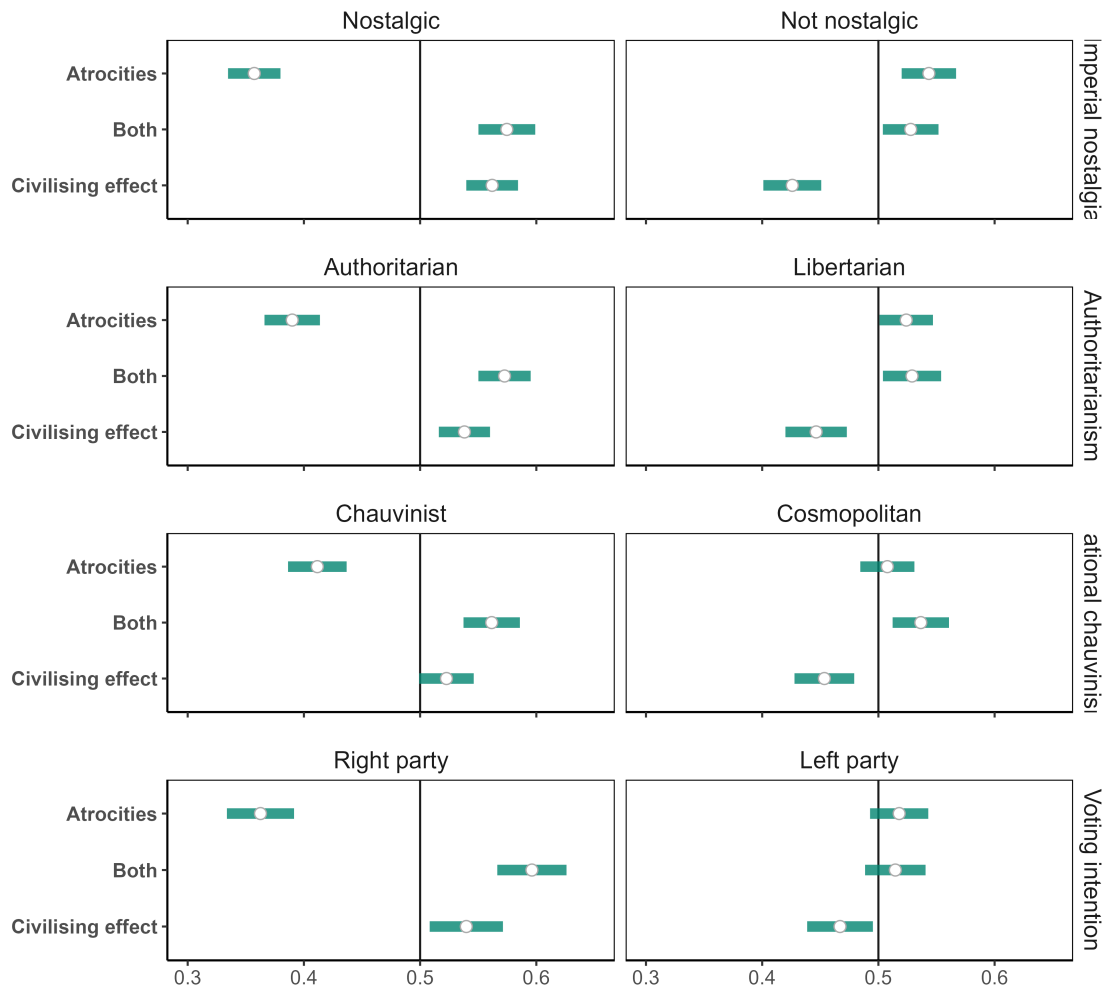


Marginal means shown, with forced choice results on the left and profile rankings on the right; the latter includes some “don’t know” responses that have been removed prior to analysis.

responsible for many atrocities, with only a tiny minority (11%) disagreeing.¹⁴ Yet the same views appear less attractive when they are proposed by politicians. While most respondents are somewhat critical of the British Empire when asked directly, they are opposed, on average, to political

¹⁴These are results from the 3rd wave of the panel survey, which is also when the experiment was fielded.

Figure 9. Marginal means, splitting sample by measures of conservatism



Results of conjoint experiment when splitting the sample by the median values of (from top) imperial nostalgia, authoritarianism and national chauvinism, as well as preference for a party of the left or right party, as revealed in the voting intentions questions. Forced choice results presented.

candidates who express these same criticisms. The “civilising effect” survey question is also more popular than the equivalent conjoint treatment: while 47% of respondents agreed with this proposition and 19% disagreed, the corresponding experimental treatment does not influence respondents’ preferences one way or the other.

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 analyse the experimental results within var-

ious subgroups. In Figure 9, we show the forced choice results where the sample is split at the median of three measures of cultural conservatism as well as preference for a party of the left or right.

There is a significant and substantial difference between the sub-groups in how the anti-imperial “atrocities” and pro-imperial “civilising effect” treatments are perceived. Respondents with higher levels of imperial nostalgia, authoritarian values, national chauvinism, and those with a preference for a party of the right (i.e., Conservative or Reform) dislike parliamentary candidates who take anti-imperial positions. Such conservative respondents are 15-20 percentage points less likely to support a candidate expressing an anti-imperial position than a candidate who takes a pro-imperial or an intermediate stance. This result is not surprising, nor is the finding that left-leaning respondents prefer candidates who do not take the civilising effect position. However, what is unexpected is that the effect is weaker among left-leaning respondents than it is among respondents who lean right. The issue of the imperial past appears to asymmetrically affect political preferences: critiques of national imperial histories repel conservatives more than they attract cultural liberals.

Moreover, a second form of asymmetry is visible across the imperial issue domain itself, specifically, across the levels of the empire view attribute: while there is a substantial gap in support between right-leaning and left-leaning respondents on the anti-imperial atrocities treatment (left 10-19 percentage points more supportive than right), there is a less-pronounced gap on the pro-imperial, civilising effect treatment (right 7-14 pp more supportive).¹⁵ Compared to liberals, conservatives dislike criticism of the British empire more than they like praise of its “civilising effect.”

Our conjoint experiments reveal two main results. While positions on Empire do influence choices (and rankings) of MPs, the effect is asymmetrical in that taking an anti-Empire position is negatively received in the population in general and also has a larger differential effect on attitudinal subgroups. This is driven more by negative reactions to the “atrocities” stance among those who

¹⁵See the supplementary materials for these differences in marginal means.

are conservative than it is a positive reaction among those who are liberal (and the same is true, to a lesser extent, for the “civilising effect” level).

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 have always been more conflicted in their views on the British Empire. This historical asymmetry in partisan alignment with the issue of Empire continues to the present day, with those more on the right (and more nostalgic) reacting more strongly to negativity on the imperial past than left-leaning (and non-nostalgic) respondents do.

Conclusion

European colonial empires had outsize 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- vs 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 right-wing subgroups. We therefore find an asymmetry in public endorsement of MPs' 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 “frozen” in symbolic politics, indirectly referenced through cultural markers rather than explicitly debated. At the same time, our findings suggest that imperial nostalgia and aversion constitute a potentially politically salient axis of opinion, one that could be mobilised under the right circumstances or by certain political entrepreneurs, particularly on the right.

Given the fluidity of the current political landscape, both in terms of shifting public attitudes toward the past and the dynamics of the party system, nostalgia (or criticism) of the imperial era may yet emerge as a more prominent force in British politics. Indeed, we find stronger correlations between imperial attitudes and evaluations of challenger parties from the left (Greens) and right (Reform) than evaluations of mainstream parties. Moreover, attitudes towards empire appear to have become more critical over the years when comparing Yougov polls from 2014 and 2019 (Dahlgreen 2014; Smith 2020). Criticism of the imperial past may become yet more acceptable in future, which may offer opportunities to political candidates on the left. This would galvanize conservative defences of national histories, which already appear to be on a trigger finger.

Our novel but broadly exploratory study could be extended in future 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.

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