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Representing Scotland: Conservative narratives of nation, union, and Scottish independence

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The United Kingdom's vote to exit the European Union reignited the debate about Scottish independence, requiring statewide political parties to rearticulate the case for the Union. The UK Conservative Party, as the party of government and one with a tumultuous history vis-à-vis Scotland and devolution, was at the fore in making this case. This article explores representations of Scotland, its position within the United Kingdom, and Scottish nationalism as a political force by the Conservative Party at a prolonged moment of significant political and constitutional tension. We focus, therefore, on 2019 to 2024, a parliamentary term and political period defined by protracted debates on Scotland's place within the Union, playing out against the backdrop of the Brexit negotiations, the Covid-19 pandemic, and a worsening cost-of-living crisis. To this end, we draw upon parliamentary debates, two daily English newspapers (*The Daily Telegraph* and *the Sun*) and two online right-leaning news sites (*ConservativeHome* and *The Spectator* online). Our analysis identifies three distinct but interrelated strands in Conservative representations of Scotland, each of which is centred on a contrast. First, a distinction between an inclusive unionism versus a narrow nationalism; second, a largely economic narrative, contrasting a prosperous union with the economic risks of independence; and finally, a contrast between governmental competence at Westminster and the SNP-led Scottish Government failing Scotland. These contrasting narratives elucidate the ways in which Conservatives construct representations of Scotland, particularly at moments of constitutional contestation.

KEYWORDS

Conservative Party, unionism, state nationalism, Scottish independence, Scottish nationalism

1 Introduction

2024 marks two significant constitutional anniversaries for the Scottish political establishment: the twenty-fifth anniversary of the first Scottish Parliament elections and ten years since the 2014 independence referendum. On 18 September 2014, a majority of the Scottish electorate (55%) rejected ending the political union between Scotland and the rest of the United Kingdom (UK). The 2014 vote, however, did not settle the matter and 'the Scottish Question' has been at the centre of political debate for the last ten years, particularly from 2016 onward, when compounded with the affirmative result in the vote on the UK's continued membership of the European Union (EU) (Douglas Scott, 2017). The territorial incongruity of the result (whereby a majority in Scotland and Northern Ireland voted to remain while England and Wales voted to leave) reignited the debate on Scottish independence as well as

serious discussion on the constitutional futures of Northern Ireland and Wales. A decade on from the (first) referendum on Scottish independence, the future of the UK as a plurinational union remains a live debate (Keating, 2021; Kenny, 2024).

The Conservative and Unionist Party, in government at the UK level since 2010, has been forced to repeatedly address the issue of the future of the Union and Scotland's place within it. In reaction to the increasingly persistent centrifugal forces present within the UK, the Conservatives, as well as their Labour counterpart, have had to grapple with competing nationalist claims, and in doing so, articulate a particular form of state nationalism in the shape of unionism (Cetrà and Brown Swan, 2020). In the aftermath of the 2014 and 2016 referendums, state nationalism in the UK has undergone a transmutation from a plurinational, accommodative tendency to an Anglo-centric, unitarist unionism (Anderson, 2024). It has also been influenced by the growth of majority nationalism, that is English nationalism, characterised by 'concern about England's place within the United Kingdom' and 'negative attitudes towards European integration' (Henderson and Wyn Jones, 2020: 4; 81).[1] Indeed, evidence from the Future of England Survey has repeatedly shown a significant link between English identity and euroscepticism (Jeffery et al., 2016; Henderson et al., 2017), to the extent that the Leave campaign's principal slogan of "'Take Back Control" was a wolf-whistle for English nationalism' (McCrone, 2023: 611). The Brexit debate, leading up to and after the referendum witnessed the unleashing and heightening of state, majority, and minority nationalisms across the UK.

The objective of this article is to critically examine representations of Scotland and its position within the UK espoused by Conservative political elites and conservative-leaning media. We focus on 2019 to 2024, a parliamentary term and political period defined by protracted debates on Scotland's place within the Union, playing out against the backdrop of the Brexit negotiations, the Covid-19 pandemic, and a worsening cost-of-living crisis. To this end, we draw upon parliamentary debates, two daily English newspapers (*The Daily Telegraph* and *the Sun*) and two online right-leaning news sites (*ConservativeHome* and *The Spectator* online). Our analysis identifies three distinct but interrelated strands in Conservative representations of Scotland, each of which is centred on a contrast. First, a distinction between an inclusive unionism versus a narrow nationalism; second, a largely economic narrative which contrasts a prosperous union with the economic risks of independence; and finally, a contrast between governmental competence at Westminster and the SNP-led Scottish Government failing Scotland. These contrasts elucidate the ways in which Conservatives construct representations of Scotland, particularly in the context of significant political and constitutional tension.

The contribution of this paper is twofold. First, we build on recent work (Rocher and Carpentier, 2022) which examines discursive representations of subnational entities by majority groups within plurinational states. This, as this special issue attests, is an important yet underdeveloped area of study within territorial politics. Specific to the UK case, we examine how state nationalist political elites conceive of Scotland as a political entity within the Union, vis-à-vis England as the majority nation. Second, we expand on our previous empirical research (Brown Swan and Cetrà, 2020; Cetrà and Brown Swan, 2022; Anderson et al., 2023) on state nationalism by focusing on the rhetorical narratives used by Conservatives in the UK to make the case for the Union and against independence. As other scholars have highlighted, research on majority/state nationalism is crucial 'to provide much-anticipated clarification on the relationship between majority and minority nations by fundamentally exploring the means by which the core nation operates' (Lecours and Nootens, 2011: 15). Our focus in this paper on state nationalist narratives adds further empirical insights into the often banal and invisible phenomena of state/majority nationalism as well as speaking to the growing literature on nationalism in the twenty-first century.

This article proceeds as follows. In the next section we contextualise our research within the wider study of Union and unionism in the UK. We then set out our research design, focused on methods of data collection and content analysis of parliamentary speeches and media articles. In the penultimate section we discuss and analyse our empirical research findings centred on the three strands identified above. In the conclusion, we highlight the significance of our findings for the UK case, particularly in the context of the next general election, and for wider scholarship on state/majority nationalism.

2 The evolving union and unionism

The United Kingdom is variably viewed, *inter alia,* as a unitary state, a union state, and in the wake of devolution in the late 1990s, a quasi-federal state. The lack of precision in defining what sort of state the UK is lies in a pluralist understanding of the state across its four constituent territories (England, Northern Ireland, Scotland and Wales) and the fact that Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland, as a result of differential processes, have a distinct relationship with the dominant English centre (Keating, 2021). Capturing these various relationships, as well as the distinct conceptions of identity, and institutional and legal variations across the UK, Mitchell (2010) astutely attests that the UK is best defined as a 'state of unions'.

While Wales and Ireland were subject to military conquests in the pursuit of Union, this was not the case for the Anglo-Scottish Union in 1707. Widely viewed as an incorporating rather than assimilating union, political partnership did not entail the abolition of autarchic institutions in Scotland, nor a statewide nation-building project as found in other European states. Instead, separate educational, legal, and religious traditions were maintained in Scotland, allowing for Scottish distinctiveness within the Union (Mitchell, 2014). Further, recognition of Scottish nationhood formed a central tenet of the newly forged unionist ideology 'which fully recognises national pluralism and the distinct traditions of the four nations' (Keating, 2015: 178). As McEwen and Lecours (2008: 221) note, 'the traditional means of accommodating Scotland prioritised the politics of recognition; Scotland's status as a distinctive nation within the UK has never been seriously questioned'. In short, the price of unity was not uniformity.

Yet, while for many Scots the preservation of pre-existing institutions and a sense of Scottish identity represented continuity rather than change, there were differences in how the English and Scottish populations viewed the political partnership. For the latter, Union was largely framed as 'a partnership of equals', but this

1 In the UK, state nationalism refers to British nationalism, while majority nationalism relates to English nationalism.

sentiment not necessarily shared by political elites in the much larger and economically stronger English nation (Brodie, 2009: 279). The Union was (and remains) undergirded by 'English constitutional assumptions' evidenced in the distinct and at times competing conceptions of sovereignty across both nations (Keating, 2021: 197). Within England, sovereignty is predominantly understood as 'sovereignty of Parliament', oft-represented as a unitary state, while in Scotland, notably among Scottish nationalists, it is understood as 'sovereignty of the Scottish people'. That people understand the Union in different ways, is, as Keating (2009: 174) notes, 'the genius of British unionism'.

While there are various strands of unionism as a state nationalism that cut across the traditional left–right ideological cleavage (Convery, 2020: 242), a shared characteristic is a commitment to the unity of the UK (Kidd, 2008). As such, unionism, while comfortable with recognition of national diversity, was traditionally opposed to notions of self-governance and independence. This was most clear during the premiership of Margaret Thatcher in the 1980s in which a less accommodating strategy of unionism and a 'hyper-unionist verging on unitarist' conception of the Union took root (Kidd and Petrie, 2016: 39). Important to note, however, is that while Thatcher, and her successor John Major, opposed self-government within the UK, they did not deny the right of Scotland to secede from the Union. Thatcher (1993: 624) declared in her memoirs 'as a nation, they [the Scots] have an undoubted right to national self-determination', while Major noted in a foreword to a Government White Paper on Scotland that 'no nation could be held irrevocably in a Union against its will' (Scottish Office, 1993: 5).

In the aftermath of devolution in the late 1990s, unionism had to evolve, moving from a doctrine opposed to self-governance to one that accepted the existence of autonomous institutions in the devolved nations. This also required the Conservative Party itself as well as its unionist thinking to evolve too (Convery, 2016). For Keating (2021: 131), the rationale for unionists accepting devolution lay in the fact that 'the new settlement is bolted onto the old constitution, rather than changings its fundamentals.' In this vein, devolution overhauled governance structures in Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland but led to little change at the centre in Westminster and Whitehall (Anderson and Brown Swan, 2024).

Devolution has nonetheless had significant implications for the Union. While it was framed by some as an opportunity 'to kill nationalism stone dead', these substate structures have instead provided a legitimate platform for nationalists in Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland to promote their territorial ambitions. This has been most profound in the case of Scotland, and more recently, in Northern Ireland, where Sinn Fein took the post of First Minister in the Northern Ireland Assembly following a protracted period of inactivity. The Scottish National Party (SNP) has been in power since 2007, winning a majority in the 2011 Scottish Parliament election and securing the necessary legal permissions from the UK Parliament to organise an independence referendum in 2014. While the Unionist side won the referendum, the question of Scottish independence remained a live one. The independence referendum and near-death experience of the Union was a boon for Conservative elites who were galvanised to defend the Anglo-Scottish political partnership, and in the 2016 election, the Conservatives overtook Labour as the second-largest party within the Scottish Parliament (Anderson, 2016). As has been noted elsewhere, however, despite victory for the unionists, the referendum campaign spotlighted that pro-Union parties, largely a result of the 'taken-for-granted character of dominant state nationalisms … find it difficult to articulate a well-developed case for state integrity' (Brown Swan and Cetrà, 2020: 61).

In the aftermath of the 2014 vote, UK Prime Minister David Cameron, under pressure from the Conservative parliamentary party (Hayton, 2015) sought to refocus the debate, proclaiming 'We have heard the voice of Scotland – and now the millions of voices if England must also be heard' (Cameron, 2018). In the subsequent general election in 2015, 'the Scottish Question' was a central plank of the campaign, most notably the Conservative Party's strategy to whip up English nationalism and demonise the SNP in an attempt (that proved successful) to defeat Labour. This, however, left the Conservatives open to charges of becoming an English rather than unionist party (Jeffery et al., 2016). The mobilisation of English nationalism became further pronounced during the 2016 referendum on the UK's membership of the EU, resulting in a narrow majority in favour of leave in England and Wales. Scholars have shown a direct link between English national identity and negative attitudes towards the EU, with those identifying as English much more likely to vote/have voted leave (Henderson et al., 2017; Henderson and Wyn Jones, 2020). This is in contrast with Scotland, where Scottish identifiers tend to be more pro-EU, hence the overwhelming vote to remain in the 2016 referendum (Henderson and Wyn Jones, 2020: 147).

That 'Brexit was made in England' is a notable but unsurprising thesis for scholars of UK territorial politics (Henderson et al., 2017). The result of the vote, however, proved to be a disrupting force for UK politics, reigniting the debate on Scottish independence and precipitating serious discussion on Irish unification and even the prospects of Welsh independence (McEwen and Murphy, 2022; Rawlings, 2022). In the aftermath, Conservative elites made reassurances that the UK government would pursue a four-nation approach to EU withdrawal, notwithstanding the territorial incongruity of the result. Prime Minister Theresa May underlined the importance of protecting 'our precious union' in her first speech as Prime Minister in 2016 while May's successor, Boris Johnson, declared the UK to be the 'awesome foursome' after becoming Prime Minister in 2019. That said, despite the rhetoric of the Prime Ministers, the actions of their governments vis-à-vis Brexit and the devolved governments betrayed a largely 'English understanding' of the Union and unionism (Hayton, 2021).

This is perhaps unsurprising given the emergence of what Gamble (2016) termed 'a new English Toryism' within the Conservative party, less attached to the idea of Union. As Gamble (2016: 364) accords, 'English Tories have always considered the Union to be desirable, but it comes second in their thinking to the need to protect the sovereignty of the British state, the core of which is England and its traditional institutions.' Polling conducted following the vote to leave the EU lends credence to Gamble's thesis. In a 2019 survey of Conservative Party membership, 63% (still) favoured leaving the EU, even if that meant Scotland seceding from the UK Union (Smith, 2019). Since 2016, the dominance of a more Anglo-centric view of the Union, and thus a less accommodative state nationalism, has been evidenced in the 'muscular unionism' approach of Conservative governments which have become more assertive in championing the benefits of political partnership and challenging the devolved governments in devolved competences (Kenny and Sheldon, 2021; Sandford, 2023; Anderson and Brown Swan, 2024). In contrast with the

plurinational-sensitive unionism described at the beginning of this section, muscular unionism embodies a more assertive, Anglo-centric strategy to manage the devolved governments. For muscular unionists:

> Britain is a single nation and a unitary state. The sub-British national identities within the Union should amount to no more than mere cultural pageantry. They are certainly not a basis for challenging Westminster's unfettered authority. The devolved institutions are to be tolerated because of the present political climate, but their powers are to be checked and contested, and, should the opportunity arise, clipped. (Martin, 2021: 37)

In political practice, muscular unionism involves increasing the visibility of the UK Government in the devolved territories, including spending money in areas of devolved competence without engagement with the devolved governments and 'on the basis of the political priorities of the UK Government' (Andrews, 2021: 515). For Henderson and Wyn Jones (2023: 51), the muscular unionist approach 'appears to be premised on the view that reforms to the territorial constitution of the state have gone too far already'. Arguably, the power-hoarding approach the UK Government pursued in relation to Brexit and the repatriation of competences from Brussels, and the passing of the Internal Market Act 2020 illustrate this point. Indeed, during his tenure as Prime Minister, Boris Johnson described Scottish devolution as 'a disaster' (BBC News, 2020). The debate on Brexit saw a reassertion of a less accommodating state nationalism by the UK Government and became a vehicle for the reinvention of the UK in the image predominantly endorsed by the English majority: a sovereign, unitary state (Keating, 2022).

The reassertion of a unionism predicated on a centralising, unitary nation-state by Conservative elites in recent years represents a significant break from the party's traditional enthusiasm for the recognition of the UK as a plurinational union state (Gamble, 2016). Changes in perception within the English branch of the party have been a key driving force in this transmutation, compounded by negative views towards devolution and the EU. Across the main political parties in the UK, the Conservatives remain the most staunchly pro-Union party, but its unionism is no longer an all-encompassing nationalism willing to accommodate/promote national diversity and territorial distinctiveness. Putting the devolved governments in their place is an evident election strategy to appease those in England anxious about devolution (and of course, win their votes), but at the same time, serves to further alienate voters in the devolved territories. Accordingly, unitary unionism poses as great a threat to the continuation of the UK state as nationalist movements in the devolved nations (Anderson, 2024).

3 Research design

To explore and examine the predominant narratives of Scotland and its position within the UK espoused by Conservative parliamentarians and commentators, we created a database of parliamentary speeches and media publications. We gathered contributions which were made between 2019 and 2024, a period of heightened constitutional tension, precipitated by the endogenous and exogenous shocks of Brexit and the Covid-19 pandemic. We begin our analysis with the election of Boris Johnson as Prime Minister in July 2019. This is a key point of departure as compared with his predecessor (Theresa May), Johnson endorsed a more combative approach towards the devolved governments, whom he believed were undemocratically thwarting the UK's exit from the EU (Hayton, 2021). Indeed, as Torrance (2020: 24) explains 'unusually, the Union – or rather the prospect of a second independence referendum – featured in the leadership campaign, with every candidate required to state their opposition to varying degrees'.

Parliamentary speeches were collated using Hansard, a publicly accessible database of all parliamentary debates in the Houses of Commons and Lords. Transcriptions were found using various keyword searches within the database including the terms 'Scotland', 'Scottish Government', 'Scottish nationalism' and 'Union', which identify both 'debate titles' and references to the keywords in different contributions. Each of these searches yielded thousands of results, which were further refined to capture relevant actors and contributions. In our media analysis, we identified conservative-leaning publications aimed at an English audience (*Daily Telegraph* and the UK edition of *the Sun*) as well as news sites particularly aimed at a Conservative audience (*ConservativeHome* and the online version of *The Spectator*) and followed a similar keyword search to parliamentary debates to identify editorials. Relevant transcriptions and articles were compiled in a database, which numbered *circa* 140 outputs, and were manually coded.

We conducted a content analysis of the parliamentary debates and news articles. As Slapin and Proksch (2014: 127) note, with specific reference to analysis of parliamentary debates, 'the goal of content analysis is to extract meaningful content from an entire corpus of text in a systematic way', facilitating the identification of key strands to be interpreted and analysed in a systematic manner. By using both parliamentary contributions made by politicians and media editorials, we sought to understand the ways in which Conservative political elites and commentators portrayed Scotland and its relationship with England as the majority nation within the plurinational union. The inclusion of conservative-facing publications aimed at an English-audience in our analysis allowed us to interrogate the ways in which Scotland was portrayed to a majority nation audience, teasing out the differences between Conservative politicians, who spoke to audiences throughout the UK, and were likely more cautious in their framing of Scotland, and those speaking to a predominately English audience. This mirrored methods used in other recent studies examining the representation of minority nations by the majority group (see, Rocher and Carpentier, 2022).

4 Representing Scotland: Conservative political discourse

In the period 2019–2024, significant attention was paid to the preservation and strengthening of the Union and a dominant Unionist narrative emerges within Conservative political elites and the conservative-leaning media. Our analysis identifies three strands to state nationalist narratives. Each strand identified centres on a contrast: firstly, between an inclusive unionism versus a narrow and divisive nationalism; secondly, a largely economic strand, contrasting a prosperous union with the economic perils of independence; and finally, a contrast between competence at Westminster and the SNP's failures of Scotland. These contrasting strands elucidate the ways in

which Unionism was constructed at a time of significant political tension.

4.1 'Unlike the divisive nationalists…': contrasting unionism and nationalism

Since the electoral rise of the SNP from 2007 onward, Scottish politics, and debate in Westminster about Scotland, has been dominated by the unionism-nationalism dichotomy. In the aftermath of the SNP's formation of a majority government in 2011 and the campaign for independence leading up to the 2014 referendum, unionists have been in a near permanent state of campaign for the Union. As noted earlier, unionism is no longer a banal state nationalism, but is instead a more active and vigorous defence of the Union, largely evidenced in 'instrumentalist defences of union rooted in economics and welfare' (Cetrà and Brown Swan, 2022). In this section, we focus on the representations of unionism and nationalism by Conservative parliamentarians and commentators and highlight the contrast drawn between the two – that of an *inclusive unionism* versus *narrow nationalism*.

Much like the defence of the Union during the 2014 independence referendum, analysis of parliamentary speeches from 2019 illuminates a common strand among Conservative MPs in promoting unionism, with emphasis on references to a shared history, a common cause, and legacies which bound the UK. Unionism is portrayed as open, patriotic and 'joined together by blood and family tradition and history' (Johnson, 2021). Often, the inclusive portrayal of unionism is placed in contrast with Scottish (and Welsh) nationalism, which is dismissed as anti-British, divisive, and rooted in grievance. In the words of Lamont (2023), 'unlike the divisive nationalists, we Unionists on the Government Benches are about bringing people together'. Tellingly, in our analysis of parliamentary debates we identify a rhetorical distinction drawn between Scottish nationalism, characterised as a divisive force, and Scotland and Scottish identity, which are to be embraced and nested within an all-encompassing British identity and plurinational union. The latter resonates with the traditional plurinational unionism discussed earlier in this paper, in which unionism recognised and accommodated different identities within the UK.

Despite the validity in viewing unionism as a state nationalism, this is not a description acknowledged by Conservatives parliamentarians who tend to explicitly eschew the nationalist label. Indeed, as has been pointed out elsewhere, nationalism that seeks to reinforce the integrity of the state tends not to be seen by its proponents as nationalism (Lecours and Nootens, 2011: 4). For the Conservatives, nationalism, particularly minority nationalism, is often negatively framed, dismissed as a 'regressive political force' (Graham, 2019a). In a debate on Scottish independence, Nick Fletcher MP (22 March 2021) characterised nationalism as having 'an unhealthy obsession with stoking division rather than celebrating centuries of shared history, culture and values of all nations have with one another' while another MP dismissed Scottish nationalism as a 'self-important, peevish nationalism' oriented towards 'creating an inward looking, less tolerant country' (Clarkson, 2021). Newspaper editorials presented a similar picture, describing Scottish nationalism as 'dangerous, intolerant, tribalist' (Telegraph, 2022b). Writing in *Conservative Home,* David Green described the need to defend the Union against the 'small-minded grievance mongering of the sectarian SNP' (Green, 2021). Nationalism, Douglas Murray argued in *The Sun* risked undermining the legacy of the United Kingdom, setting 'Brit against Brit, neighbour against neighbour and families against each other' (Murray, 2021).

The proclivity of Conservative MPs and commentators to denigrate nationalism is consistent with the experience of state and majority nationalists in other states. Gagnon (2020: 90) notes that 'often, state nationalists make the argument that while they disapprove of nationalist sentiments they proudly rally behind "constitutional" patriotism'. This conflation of patriotism and state nationalism is evident in our analysis in which Scottish (and indeed Welsh) nationalism, framed as a threat to the Union, is repeatedly dismissed as 'narrow', 'selfish' and 'divisive' (Gove, 2020; Fletcher, 2021), while unionism is lauded as a patriotic political project. As Dieckhoff (2000: 54, as quoted in Gagnon et al., 2011: 7) attests 'strengthening the allegiance to the state is seen as the expression of a legitimate national feeling, namely patriotism, while, conversely, contesting the state is invariable dismissed as the manifestation of a reactionary trend, namely nationalism'. Costa (2019) drew an explicit contrast between nationalism and patriotism in a contribution to a debate on Brexit saying 'I am not a nationalist; I am a British patriot. There is a difference between the narrow-mindedness of nationalism and being a good patriot'.

In the context of Brexit and thus increased attention on the prospect of a second independence referendum, a familiar trope within Conservative discourse was to paint Scottish nationalism as 'undemocratic' (Stafford, 2020). After the 2016 vote, Scottish nationalists were accused of opportunistically calling for a second independence referendum, a move lambasted by Conservative MPs as disrespecting the vote against independence in 2014 (Jack, 2022). Calls for a second independence referendum were dubbed by Conservatives as a 'neverendum', a constant campaign—predicated on grievance—to destroy the Union (Clarkson, 2020; Jack, 2022; Stewart, 2022).

In both parliamentary debate and newspaper editorials, the more Europhile Scottish nationalism was portrayed as a threat to the pursuit of Brexit. While the SNP joined with Liberal Democrat and Labour parliamentarians and members of the House of Lords in the hope of keeping the UK in the EU, commentators attributed different motivations to the nationalists, arguing that Brexit was merely a pretext for reigniting the independence debate. While this was particularly pronounced under May's leadership, defined as it was by a series of contentious votes on the withdrawal agreement, and ultimately culminating in the Prime Minister's resignation, it continued throughout the period of study, with SNP representatives critiqued for their opposition to Brexit. MP Trott (2023) described the SNP as 'Brexit zombies' failing to recognise the potential of the British economy outside of the EU, while Mordaunt (2023c) described the SNP as part of a band of 'fanatical rejoiners'. In addition, SNP representatives were portrayed as hypocritical in their desire to secure independence for Scotland, and in doing so, hand power back to Brussels (Hunt, 2023b).

In this context we identify a more assertive and at times combative rhetoric in line with the muscular unionism approach that characterises Conservative territorial strategy after the 2016 referendum, particularly during the premiership of Boris Johnson (2019–2022) (Kenny and Sheldon, 2021). A minor yet telling strand

in the Johnson government's muscular unionism was the Prime Minister's repeated references to the 'Scottish nationalist party' rather than the party's correct name, the Scottish National Party, a trait Johnson continued in parliamentary debate, notwithstanding regular rebukes by parliamentary officials. A search of Hansard for 'Scottish nationalist party' reveals use of the misnomer by a swathe of Conservative politicians, including Prime Minister Rishi Sunak, Scottish Secretary Alistair Jack, Minister for Intergovernmental Relations Michael Gove and Deputy Prime Minister Oliver Dowden, but Boris Johnson's use was consistent, with 40 instances recorded in Hansard during his premiership. This more confrontational approach was designed to irritate SNP representatives, but also, in line with the preceding discussion, paint nationalism in a negative light.

In contrast with the predominant interpretation in Scotland of the Union as a 'union of equals', from 2019 on, but arguably before, we find increasing confidence among Conservative MPs to challenge this assertion. One Conservative MP accused Scottish nationalists of intentionally 'misinterpreting' the relationship as 'contractual' to champion grievance and make the case for independence (Millar, 2022). This was a staple of the Brexit debate, in which the UK was repeatedly conceived in unitary terms (Anderson, 2024: 96) and evidenced further in the UK Government's White Paper on the UK Internal Market published in July 2020 in which the UK was described as 'a unitary state' (Department of Business, Energy & Industrial Strategy, 2020: 12). More recently, the unitary state narrative gathered further steam as Conservative MPs sought to justify the UK Government's blocking of the Scottish Government's Gender Recognition Reform (Scotland) Bill on the grounds that the UK was a 'unitary state' necessitating 'equality across all four nations' (Fox, 2023). We see a more confrontational approach in which the supremacy of the UK Parliament is asserted over the devolved governments, a message which is consistent with Martin's (2021) conception of muscular unionism outlined earlier in this article.

In this section we have analysed representations of unionism and nationalism by Conservative parliamentarians and commentators. These actors seek to draw a direct distinction between British unionism as a tolerant and accommodative ideology versus Scottish nationalism which it dismisses as undemocratic and divisive. However, as Keating (2021: 123) point out 'the ironical outcome is that in doing so it [unionism] has not only made itself into a form of nationalism but has claimed the same normative foundations as its 'nationalist' opponents'.

4.2 'The union dividend': the case against independence

In addition to the rhetorical battle between unionism and nationalism, the framing of the UK Union and Scottish independence in economic terms is a hallmark of parliamentary and editorial discourse in the period under study. Economic arguments have been central to constitutional debates in Scotland since the early days of the home rule movement, defined by competing claims about the benefits membership in the Union for Scotland's economic development, and the economic prospects of independence (Henderson et al., 2023). In 2014, the case for the Union made in Scotland focused on the benefits of political partnership, contrasted with the economic risks and uncertainty of independence. The campaign focused on financial benefits, including a higher level of public spending per head compared to the rest of the UK (UK Government, 2014). This 'Union dividend' was repeatedly extolled by pro-Union supporters as the principal benefit of Union. However, while focus on the Union dividend has evident mileage among voters in Scotland vis-à-vis the constitutional debate, it has coincided with a rise of grievance among the English population that Scotland, at the expense of England, gets 'more than its fair share' of public spending (Henderson and Wyn Jones, 2020: 63–4). In the 2016 Future of England survey, for instance, 38% of English respondents believed Scotland got more than its fair share of public spending, while 29% believed England got less than its fair share (*ibid*). In line with these findings, our qualitative analysis shows increasing criticism of perceived imbalances of spending between Scotland and England. While not absent from parliamentary debate, media commentators were much more vociferous in their criticism of perceived fiscal inequalities, and Scotland's economic dependence became a key narrative.

Throughout the period under study, the union dividend is largely framed in positive terms by Conservative parliamentarians, particularly in the context of discussion on Scotland's membership of the UK and independence. Described by Gove (2022) as a sum that 'the Treasury pays to the people of Scotland', the dividend illustrates the economic instrumentalisation that has come to dominate the case for the Union made by Conservatives (Cetrà and Brown Swan, 2022). Parliamentarians repeatedly referred to the dividend as amounting to around £2000 per person in Scotland and a clear benefit of the Union for Scots (Lamont, 2022a; Mordaunt, 2023d). The emphasis on the economic benefits of the Union was particularly prominent from 2020 on, reflecting both the Covid-19 pandemic and cost-of-living crisis, with Conservatives extolling the virtues of the 'broad shoulders' of the UK which supported Scottish businesses and households through the economic dislocation of lockdown, as well as provided financial support to counter rising energy prices (Hands, 2022). Emphasising the dividend and the privileged position of Scotland vis-à-vis the other nations, the Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Scotland stressed in a debate on the cost-of-living in Scotland that 'the Scottish Government receive about 25% more per person than equivalent UK Government spending in other parts of the United Kingdom and that translates into about £8.5 billion more per year on average' (Lamont, 2024a). The positive framing of the Union dividend, nonetheless, is arguably oriented towards a Scottish audience; as noted above, in recent years a sense of fiscal grievance has mobilised English nationalism and increased resentment and anxiety towards devolution.

In our media analysis, we identify persistent murmurs of discontent that the UK Government spends quite a lot in Scotland, but rarely sees the political/electoral benefit of that expenditure. Writing in *The Spectator,* columnist Stephen Daisley outlined the spending approach of the SNP and the political risks to Westminster: 'It [the Scottish Government] can live beyond its means thanks to the Union it wishes to dismantle, and when the money runs out, blame that same Union for robbing Scots of their shiny new services and programmes. Not everyone who pays the piper gets to call the tune' (Daisley, 2021). *The Telegraph's* Ross Clark critiqued the SNP's universalistic public policies as an act of bribery, one which Westminster funded but does not get credit for: 'But is not the truth that the real bribery towards Scottish voters is coming from Westminster, through the Barnett formula? It is just that Sturgeon is allowed to take the credit'. Instead, Clark argued, that the UK Government should 'get out there and boast

of boosterism for the glens', concluding that '[t]o cough up all this extra cash on the quiet – and then allow the SNP to claim the electoral dividend – is ridiculous' (Clark, 2021). This perceived lack of credit, at least in part, explains the rationale for the more muscular unionist strategy pursued by the UK Government in spending funds in devolved territories under the auspices of levelling-up and shared prosperity funding (UKSPF) (Andrews, 2021). Akin to media commentators, Conservative politicians spoke in positive terms of the UKSPF in highlighting the benefits of 'stronger together' and in consonance with the 'flag-waving' strand of muscular unionism called for Union flag branding on UKSPF funded projects (Graham, 2019b).

As well as critique regarding perceptions of unfairness, we also find a narrative which argues that 'better' public services in Scotland (e.g., free university education) are delivered at the expense of English taxpayers. This is more notable in media analysis, though Conservative parliamentarians do advance an implicit narrative that England subsidises Scotland. One columnist in *The Sun* described Scotland as a 'privileged partner' of the Union, which benefited more than England, noting, 'the Scottish government is only able to afford policies like free university for Scottish students because they are paid for by taxpayers in England' (Murray, 2022). Politicians are more muted in this line of argumentation, but some do seek to make political capital by emphasising the reliance of the Scottish Government on UK taxpayers and criticising the SNP explicitly. Rees-Mogg (2022), then a government minister, for instance repeatedly referenced 'UK taxpayers' as the main source of funding for the Scottish Government, arguing in one debate in 2022 that 'without Westminster … [Scotland] would be bankrupt'. Indeed, in a previous debate the minister argued that during the Covid pandemic Scotland benefited by 'many billions of pounds … thanks to the United Kingdom taxpayer', continuing 'it seems to me sometimes that the Scottish nationalists want devolution when it suits them, but that when there are bills to be paid, they want somebody else to pick up the bill' (Rees-Mogg, 2020). This statement is polemical, reflecting Rees-Mogg's particular presentational style, and was not always echoed or endorsed by more moderate Conservative voices.

Beyond this, there is a more detailed and regular narrative on the economic debate between Union and independence. While during the 2014 campaign Unionists focused on the economic risks of independence rather than the idea that Scotland was not economically viable, recent years have seen more critical accounting of Scotland's economic prospects both within the Union and with independence. In this sense, rather than the Union undermining Scotland's economic prospects, it was the uncertainty inherent in the SNP's demands for another referendum, as well as the SNP's mismanagement of the Scottish budget (see next section) that posed the most risk. In a debate on Scottish independence and the Scottish economy, Scottish Secretary, Alistair Jack (2 November 2022) described the Scottish Government's support for independence as a 'millstone around the neck of the Scottish economy', discouraging investment. In a separate debate, the Chancellor of the Exchequer argued along similar lines 'They have been in power in Edinburgh for longer than the Conservatives have been in power in Westminster, but Scottish GDP is still lower, Scottish employment is still lower and Scottish inactivity is still higher. The reason for that is very simply. They focus on separation, while we focus on growth' (Hunt, 2023a). Financial Secretary to the Treasury, Huddleston (2024), presented a similar case to the Chancellor in February 2024 arguing, 'the thing that would most impoverish the people of Scotland is separation from the UK. After 16 years of SNP rule—longer than the Conservatives' in England—GDP per head in Scotland is lower, productivity is falling, employment is lower and inactivity is higher. That is not exactly a proud record.' Accordingly, the prospect of a Scottish independence is dismissed as 'fantasy'. In one parliamentary debate on addressing rising energy prices, Rees-Mogg (2022) described SNP visions of an independent Scotland as living 'in a fantasy land' and dismissing the prospect of an economically competent Scottish government: 'just think how much worse off businesses would be if they were to depend on an entirely Scottish Administration with no money'.

In line with other empirical research (see, Cetrà and Brown Swan, 2022; Anderson et al., 2023), our analysis highlights the centrality of the economy in Conservative narratives regarding Scotland and its constitutional future. We discern two distinct approaches that appear aimed at different audiences. The first, addressing a Scottish audience, is the positive framing of the Union dividend and the economic benefits of Union for Scotland. This is much more prominent in parliamentary debate than in media discourse, a caution we can read as an electoral strategy North of the border. In contrast, the media narrative, speaking more directly to an English audience is much more critical, viewing funding arrangements for Scotland as over-generous and often framed as funded by English taxpayers. This speaks to an evolving understanding of the Union, from a redistributive Union, underpinned by the principle of solidarity, to one in which individual units are derided for their inability to pay their share.

A common thread in both narratives is critique of the Scottish Government's (and SNP in general) economic competence. This represents an instrumentalization of the economic case of the Union. This builds on the success of Unionist arguments about the economy made in 2014, as well as a greater effort to articulate a positive case for the Union. However, we identify a distinction in the *tone* if not the content of the Unionist narratives found within this strand. While media commentators, and more polemical figures within the Conservative Party are more explicitly critical of Scotland's economic prospects, more mainstream actors are careful to differentiate between Scotland as a political entity and the Scottish Government and SNP as political actors, and are reluctant to make sweeping statements that might be clipped and exploited by the SNP and friendly media. As Mordaunt (2023b) explained in one debate 'I am not talking Scotland down but about the SNP running Scotland down'. Critiques of both Scotland's economic prospects, as well as the SNP's management of the economy, are often hand in hand with a critique of governance generally, focusing on two principal critiques/accusations: the Scottish Government's disrespect for devolution and its poor performance in government.

4.3 "Stick to the day job": critiquing governance in Scotland

The SNP entered government, first as a minority government (2007–2011), later a majority (2011–2016), and later still as a minority government (2016–2021 and from 2021–2024 in cooperation with the Scottish Greens). In its early years, the party focused on 'performance politics' (Johns et al., 2013) in which it sought to demonstrate competence in government as a way of building support, and implicitly, making the case for independence. It was only following the

party's success in the 2011 Scottish election that independence was foregrounded, and it was the pursuit of independence which would define the SNP government from 2014 onward. Independence was articulated by the party as a way of pursuing self-determination, but more centrally, pursuing a range of economic and social policy goals, not possible within the constraints of the Union (Mooney and Scott, 2015; Béland and Lecours, 2016). Particularly during the acute phase of the Covid-19 pandemic which coincided with our period of analysis, then First Minister Nicola Sturgeon benefitted from perceptions of greater competence, despite outcomes in Scotland and the rest of the United Kingdom being broadly similar (Anderson et al., 2023). In the summer of 2020, support for independence increased, enhancing the salience of the independence question, and triggering more vociferous attacks on the part of Unionist political actors. The subsequent period saw a range of high-profile confrontations between the UK and Scottish governments, which were ostensibly conflicts about the exercise of devolved powers, but also centred on the question of Scotland's position and future within the Union.

Accompanying and often underpinning claims and critiques around nationalism and independence, found in both parliamentary debates and media commentary, is a third salient strand: Scottish Government bashing. This narrative relates to negative messaging about the performance, motives and credentials of the SNP-led government at Holyrood, often undergirded by ideological point-scoring. This messaging is intentional—rarely do politicians and political commentators speak about Scotland *tout court*, but instead, they portray a Scottish populace held politically captive by the SNP, with calamitous consequences. Two narratives come to the fore: firstly, a Scottish government that disrespects and seeks to destroy devolution and secondly, an overriding obsession with independence which prevents action on meaningful policy areas.

The first narrative we identify—that of the Scottish government disrespecting the devolution settlement—is a regular feature of parliamentary debate to criticise the Scottish Government's pursuit of independence as well as its policy choices. Critiques by SNP MPs in Parliament about the UK Government's interactions with the Scottish Government, notably in the context of Brexit and the subsequent more muscular unionism strategy, are often dismissed as a 'usual SNP agenda of provoking grievance' (Lamont, 2022b). Conservative parliamentarians regularly accused SNP politicians, and by extension the Scottish Government, of being 'able to manufacture a grievance out of nothing' (Bowie, 2021) and of pursuing a strategy of 'grievance politics' merely to oppose—for the sake of opposing—the UK Government (Moore, 2023). Commentary in the media echoes the language of politicians, with a motif of SNP grievance.

While Johnson's (2020) characterisation of devolution as a 'disaster' was quickly disavowed by the politicians, we note the media was more able to engage with this characterisation. Devolution was increasingly portrayed as a system easily exploited by the SNP in their pursuit of independence, undermining the British state and pandering to separatist instincts. Writing in the *Telegraph*, Harris (2020) characterised the SNP as 'a party committed to abolishing it [devolution] altogether' and noting 'in no version of the nationalists' vision for Scotland does devolution figure at all'. Hill (2020), editor of *ConservativeHome* was critical of devolution as having, in Scotland, Wales, and Northern Ireland, 'managed to deliver the same toxic combination of bad governance and diminished Britishness'. Hill continued: 'every subsequent one-more-heave concession of powers has sapped the credibility of devolutionary unionism as the separatists have got stronger and stronger' (*ibid*). In the *Spectator,* Stephen Daisley described devolution as having 'built the separatists their own command centre at the foot of the Royal Mile' from which they pursue independence 'not only as a ballot box event but as the day-to-day organising principle of a government machine' (Daisley, 2020). While political commentators are trenchant about devolution, they do not suggest rolling it back entirely, but instead argue for a more present and assertive form of unionism as a counter to the SNP.

Complementing this is a more recent narrative accusing the Scottish Government of undermining devolution by straying beyond the constitutional limits of the devolved settlement. This was the case in January 2023 when the UK Government blocked the passing of the Gender Recognition Reform (Scotland) Bill from proceeding to Royal Assent on the grounds it affected 'reserved matters', those areas specifically within the remit of the UK Government. While there was acknowledgement by Conservative MPs that this was a decision not taken lightly, it was understood as a necessary step, because the legislation 'could undermine the settlement in the Union of the United Kingdom' (Cairns, 2023). On other issues, Conservative parliamentarians regularly chastise the Scottish Government for having 'consistently strayed outside the limits of the devolution settlements' (Hart, 2023). Responding in one debate on the topic of the Scottish Government's interaction with foreign officials, the Scottish Secretary avowed to 'get a grip on the Scottish Government travelling overseas, meeting ministers, discussing reserved areas such as constitutional affairs and foreign affairs, and straying away from the portfolio of matters that are devolved to them' (Jack, 2023).

For Conservatives, governance by grievance and testing the limits of devolution is a tactic employed by the Scottish Government to make political capital and advance its pursuit of independence. Consequently, there is consensus among parliamentarians and media commentators that the SNP-led Scottish Government's 'sole political purpose …[is]… to destroy devolution' (Lamont, 2022b) and by inference destroy the Union.

A second narrative within this strand relates to portrayals of the SNP by statewide politicians and political commentators that the party's obsessive pursuit of independence has led to a neglect of significant policy issues. The SNP's performance in government is subject to competing knowledge claims across a range of policy areas, and policy outcomes are instrumentalised by both sides of the constitutional divide to make the case for their preferred constitutional outcome. The Conservative mantra of *focus on the day job* was employed throughout the period of examination as justification to block an independence vote, arguing that the SNP, in its single-minded pursuit of independence, was failing to fulfil the core functions of government. It exists, Conservatives argue, to campaign for independence rather than govern competently, and all policy failures will be used to foment grievance of the government at Westminster.

Conservative politicians and commentators note declining results in education, and the failure of the SNP government to narrow the attainment gap, long wait times in the NHS, economic underperformance and drugs deaths which remain the highest in Western Europe as evidence of both the SNP's failure to come to grips with thorny domestic policy issues as well their inability to govern should independence be achieved (Johnson, 2022; Sunak, 2023b; Mordaunt, 2023e). Policy failures are attributed to the 'self-obsessed, self-pitying and self-delusional' pursuit of independence (Mordaunt,

2023e). Critique of the Scottish Government is often targeted at former First Minister Nicola Sturgeon, whose policy priorities 'play second fiddle to the First Minister's hopes of self-aggrandisement through winning independence' (Telegraph, 2022a). Indeed, Sturgeon was repeatedly accused of turning Scotland into a 'banana republic' (Telegraph, 2021), under what Henry Hill (2022) of *ConservativeHome* described as the 'hegemonic grip' of the SNP. In the words of another commentator, under the SNP Scotland was a 'a failed one-party state, a tinpot dictatorship, a fruit-free banana republic where democracy is quietly expiring' (Parsons, 2021).

Calls for a second independence referendum were viewed as a distraction from the SNP's poor track record in office. A search of Hansard reveals that this *day job* narrative has since become akin to a mantra for Conservative MPs. Then Prime Minister Boris Johnson (11 March 2020) noted declining support for independence, attributing it to the SNP's poor performance in government:

> Maybe that is because they have a Scottish nationalist party in charge that has the highest taxes anywhere in the United Kingdom, is failing Scottish children in their schools and is not running the Scottish health service in the way it should. Maybe the hon. Member's bluff and bluster is covering up for the abject failures of the Scottish nationalist Government. Maybe the Scottish nationalists should stick to the day job.

The then Prime Minister's reference to higher rates of tax in Scotland is a regular criticism levelled at the Scottish Government by Conservative parliamentarians. In the aftermath of the Scottish budget in December 2023 in which the Scottish Government introduced a new higher rate of tax for higher earners, Prime Minister Sunak (2024) made repeated references to Scotland as 'the highest taxed part of the United Kingdom', continuing in one debate 'where the average – not the wealthiest, but the average – worker in Scotland is now paying more tax than they do in England'. For some Conservative MPs, the introduction of a new tax rate provided an opportunity to contrast the priorities of the Scottish and UK Governments and spotlight differences between Scotland and England. In response to a question by Conservative MP Foster (2024) who claimed, 'the SNP is hitting it [Scotland] with higher taxes and is not supporting vital sectors such as hospitality in the way that is happening in England', the Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Scotland agreed, noting:

> the SNP's sole focus seems to be on independence referendums and making Scotland the part of the United Kingdom with the highest tax. I see that every day of the week in my constituency, as people find it increasingly difficult to justify remaining in Scotland when they are paying so much more tax compared to the rest of the UK while getting less good public services. (Lamont, 2024b)

What we identify here is critique not based on constitutional grounds but the distinct (and competing) ideological positions of the SNP and Conservatives. Commentators juxtaposed high rates of tax, or Scotland's 'high tax nightmare' (Harris, 2023), with the lack of progress on education, health, and productivity. The SNP's 'poor' record in government was used to undercut its demands for independence—if, senior Conservatives and commentators argued, the party could not manage the devolved powers, how could it possibly be ready for independence? In a 2021 debate, Conservatives argued that independence would compound existing policy failures and undercut recovery from the Covid-19 pandemic, citing 'the SNP's abysmal track record in Government …[as]… only a taste of what would happen if the SNP were left completely in charge of Scotland' (Khan, 2021). In the aftermath of Nicola Sturgeon's resignation as First Minister, the rhetoric on the Scottish Government's incompetence intensified, particularly in the context of internal power struggles within the SNP. Conservatives sought to capitalise on this internal turmoil to further highlight poor governance: 'We now know that because of the SNP, the trains do not run on time, the police are at breaking point and the NHS in Scotland has experienced its longest ever waiting lists. That is not even my assessment—it is what we learned in the SNP's leadership debate' (Sunak, 2023a). This critique intensified as allegations were made about the financial mismanagement of the SNP as an organisation.

Mordaunt (2023a), heralded in the Conservative-leaning media for her attacks on the SNP was trenchant in her rebuke of the party, describing the 'appalling legacy' of the SNP and its failure to educate and protect Scotland's children:

> a wrecked education system, a widening attainment gap, fewer teachers, maths scores declining in every PISA survey, science at a record low and plummeting literacy rates. But they will, of course, have somewhere safe and warm in which to take heroin. I am not going to take any lectures from the hon. Lady about values, responsibility or performance in office. This is why I will get up every week and stand up and fight against the slopey-shouldered separatism evidenced by the SNP.

In sum, we identify an anti-SNP and 'Scottish Government bashing' narrative, though this is often used in combination with the previous strands to dismiss Scottish nationalism and the potential appeal of independence as a constitutional future. In this instance, we see the articulation of a more muscular understanding of the Union, with a greater willingness to challenge the devolved governments, including interventions to limit the exercise of devolved powers. Critiques levelled against the SNP were rebuffed by the party as attempts to undercut Scotland, and any policy failings attributed to the funding and constraints imposed by the UK Government, ensuring that this argument served the interest of both parties. Yet, while Conservative elites and commentators were highly critical of the SNP's leadership and left-leaning policies, they were careful to centre their critiques on the SNP and Scottish Government rather than Scotland as a whole. This argument was premised on the idea that Scotland was being failed by the SNP and 'deserves better than socialist separatist parties' (Mordaunt, 2023b).

5 Conclusion

Recent years have seen an increasingly assertive unionism, in response to sustained questions about the constitutional future of the United Kingdom, and a more sustained articulation of an English national identity. As demonstrated in this article, during the parliamentary period of 2019 to 2024, the Conservative Party, under a succession of leaders, and with the support of the conservative-leaning media, have adopted a more confrontational approach towards Scotland. This period was one of significant tumult, both within the

Conservative Party (Bale, 2023) and within the country as a whole. This period was punctuated by requests for a second referendum on Scottish independence, each rebuffed by a succession of prime ministers.

By analysing the narratives adopted and employed by both politicians and political commentators, we triangulated the Conservatives representations of Scotland, the Scottish Government/SNP, and the Union, and identified unique manifestations of state/majority nationalism. In doing so, we found three distinct but interrelated strands. The first centres on the distinction drawn between unionism, characterised as an inclusive, open form of British patriotism, and nationalism, which by contrast was portrayed as narrow, insular, and regressive. This is consistent with state and majority nationalism expressed by other UK parties, and by state/majority nationalists outside the UK (Brown Swan and Cetrà, 2020). The second strand is rooted in a well-trodden narrative which speaks to the practical considerations surrounding Scottish independence, namely, that Scotland benefits from its incorporation into the Union, and would struggle economically should independence be achieved. To a Scottish audience, and as articulated by Conservative politicians, the emphasis is on the 'Union dividend', the financial benefit of Scotland's membership in the UK. Within this strand, we see the sharpest difference between politicians and the commentariat, with conservative-leaning media with an English audience portraying Scotland, and its generous social services as unfairly subsidised by the English taxpayer, while Conservative politicians are more circumspect. The final strand speaks directly to the SNP, and particularly its management of Scotland's public services. Commentators and politicians argue that the SNP's obsession with independence has come at the expense of Scotland's governance, leading to more than a decade of policy failures.

These narratives are not unique to the 2019 to 2024 period but have become more explicitly articulated during this era of political tumult. It can be read as a response to the perceived weakness of the SNP, which seems damaged by contentious debates over the route to independence and gender-recognition reform, and a divisive leadership contest following Nicola Sturgeon's surprise resignation. It can also be read as symptomatic of tendencies and factions within the Conservative Party, which sought simultaneously to appeal to an increasingly politically mobilised English electorate and to articulate a case for the Union. In this sense, it is a manifestation of both a state nationalism, situated around the preservation of the Union, and a majority English nationalism.

While a more muscular unionism was a defining characteristic of this period in both parliament and the press, it was more direct in the Conservative-leading media with a predominately English audience, the writers for which would not face electoral consequences for positions viewed as anti-Scottish or doing Scotland down. In contrast, politicians were careful to focus their public critiques on the SNP and its leadership, rather than contrasting England and Scotland.

At the time of writing, the United Kingdom is in the run-up to the next UK General Election, with parties positioning themselves ahead of this contest on ideological as well as constitutional grounds. The Conservative Party is particularly conscious of its precarious position in Scotland, which has seen gains at Holyrood and Westminster, albeit from a very low base. Polling at the time of writing suggests the political landscape UK-wide and in Scotland will shift dramatically with the next election and a new strategy may be required as the Conservatives face growing pressures to shift further to the right, with potential impact on their Unionist positioning.

Our findings speak to an emergent literature on state/majority nationalism and suggest that at moments of political peril and constitutional contestation, once understated nationalist narratives become more explicit. This analysis raises several avenues for future research on the nature of state nationalism vis-à-vis the sub-state nation, its institutions, and the parties which mobilise on behalf of each. The first, a recurring strand in many plurinational states, is an examination of the distinction made by politicians between state nationalism, viewed as an inaccurate descriptor, and patriotism, a legitimate manifestation of state pride. The second is to analyse discursive representations across right- and left-wing discourse to explore whether these transcend ideology. Following the framework in this paper, and building on recent research in the case of the UK (Brown Swan, 2023), an examination of how the Labour Party represents Scotland within its discourse would shed further light on the topic. Finally, there is merit in a more systematic comparison of discursive representations as relates to all four constituent territories in the UK, exploring whether similar strands emerge when Conservatives represent the minority nations of Wales and Northern Ireland, and how England as a majority nation is represented. In an era of nationalist revival, and as manifestations of state and/or majority nationalism become more prominent, there is plenty of scope for further research.

Data availability statement

The original contributions presented in the study are included in the article/supplementary material, further inquiries can be directed to the corresponding author.

Author contributions

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