


Brexit and Territorial Preferences: Evidence from Scotland and Northern Ireland

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Has the UK referendum to leave the EU (Brexit) affected territorial preferences within the UK? We draw on comparative theories of such preferences to address this question, as Brexit can be seen as a shock to a political unit. We test hypotheses in two key regions, Scotland and Northern Ireland, with original surveys fielded at a unique time (September 2019). We randomize making salient different Brexit scenarios and measure support for Scottish independence and unification with Ireland within each region. We find in Scotland the prospect of leaving the EU increases support for independence. This effect is pronounced among those who support the UK remaining in the EU. In Northern Ireland, religious background correlates highly with territorial views, and we find little evidence of Brexit or border-scenario effects. Our results contribute to the literature on decentralization processes and the EU, and provide evidence of when negative shocks affect such preferences.

The 2016 referendum in which United Kingdom (UK) voters opted to leave the European Union, known as Brexit, has undoubtedly changed politics in the UK. But its political consequences are still being understood. Political scientists have quickly accumulated much knowledge about the causes of individual support for Brexit, its electoral consequences, and implications for various domestic policies. However, the impact on territorial preferences has been less explored. As Brexit can be considered a major external shock to an existing political unit, especially to key regions within the UK, it provides an important case to test theories of when territorial preferences can change. One oft-quoted claim is that Brexit threatens the UK's territorial integrity. However, there has been little theorizing and specific evidence regarding whether Brexit scenarios affect relevant preferences in the regions where such issues have been a political cleavage. Through a survey experiment fielded within two UK regions, we make the different possible outcomes salient and test whether a change in EU membership affects preferences for territorial arrangements. Our original individual-level data were gathered

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simultaneously during a key time period (September 2019) when the final Brexit outcome was unclear. In the two regions of Scotland and Northern Ireland, territorial preferences are prominent issues, and we measure preferences regarding support for independence in Scotland and unification with Ireland in Northern Ireland.

Our findings show that Brexit scenarios affect territorial preferences in Scotland, where the prospect of leaving the EU increases support for Scottish independence. We also find that these results are driven by those who most strongly oppose the shock, i.e., those who support the UK remaining in the EU. In Northern Ireland, we find that religious background correlates highly with territorial views, but posing Brexit or border-change scenarios does not clearly affect support for unification with Ireland.

Although the results are from events in the UK and Brexit might be viewed as a specific example of an external shock affecting regions, the findings contribute to the larger literature on the relationship between territorial cleavages within states and the EU, and provide unique evidence about the role of the external shocks, the EU, and regional territorial views. There has been little research on the role of membership of higher-level bodies on territorial preferences or, conversely, on the politicization of territorial issues if membership of higher-level bodies is put in doubt. If EU discontent and threats to leave occur in the future, territorial issues could be further politicized if there are regions within such countries that support EU membership. More broadly, political forces that drive EU skepticism might overlap with existing identity cleavages, allowing mobilization along both issues. The results contribute to understanding of how external shocks can raise the salience of territorial issues and affect regional preferences, as there has been an absence of designs that consider the specific role of external shocks on territorial preferences. This is one of the few studies that uses this type of design to isolate the salience of an external shock to a union, for this issue during a key time period.

The first section of the article presents a summary of relevant background literature to motivate the study and hypotheses. The section after presents the design. The third section presents the results for Scotland, and the fourth section for Northern Ireland. The article then concludes and offers avenues for further research.

Motivation, Background, Hypotheses

Theoretical Framework and Motivation

Why would a country's exit from the EU matter for domestic territorial preferences? We conceptualize the possibility of EU exit as a specific, albeit very

real-world and important country shock that raises the salience of territorial issues and reduces economic benefits from being part of a state; this combination affects preferences to change a region's territorial status. We draw on the broader comparative literature on support for territorial change within democracies (that mostly examines determinants of secessionism). Two particularly relevant approaches within this literature are the studies on cultural (or identity-based) explanations of individual territorial preferences, and the agenda on how territorial preferences can be derived from political-economy models that theorize the net economic benefits from remaining within a country. For conceptual clarity, we separate these factors regarding territorial preferences, although of course both would matter.

Exit from the EU, as an example of a potential negative shock, can increase the salience of territorial issues; most empirical evidence indicates that the appeal of independence or territorial changes is possible because of some baseline cultural cleavage. A strand in comparative federalism or separatism focuses on cultural or linguistic differences between a region and the rest of the polity, and theorizes territorial preferences as a function of such differences being politicized, such that beliefs that the rest of the territorial unit (or center) constitutes an "out-group" (see [Sorens \(2012\)](#) for one discussion of these claims). Many studies correspondingly examine the individual-level correlates of territorial preferences within regions where regional autonomy (or its legal status) is a salient political issue, and a key predicting variable is the degree of sub-state versus national identity (e.g. [Guibernau 2006](#); [Hagendoorn, Poppe, and Minescu 2008](#); [Serrano 2013](#); [Burg 2015](#); [Sarigil and Karakoc 2016](#)). Scholars often find an intuitive robust correlation between an individual's sense of such identity (or related nationality or ethnicity) and support for such movements ([Bond and Rosie 2010](#); [Burg 2015](#); [Sarigil and Karakoc 2016](#); [Serrano 2013](#)), although in practice establishing a causal role of identity on territorial preferences is difficult.

Sub-state identity has been shown to be sometimes correlated with pan-European identity; this European identification might include a broad support for being European which may encompass cultural benefits, beliefs in the norms promoted by the EU, or sense of belonging to or affinity with the EU. Identities can thus be aligned with multiple territorial references ([Kohli 2000](#)). Exiting the EU may mean for these individuals a greater loss in benefits of being EU members. There is baseline evidence to indicate that in select regions, individuals both support the EU and feel a strong European as well as sub-state identity, with corresponding weaker national identities ([Bourne 2014](#); [Jolly 2014](#)). [Jolly \(2014\)](#) specifically notes a correlation between sub-state identity and EU support; [Bourne \(2014\)](#) presents evidence that individuals who have stronger sub-state identities in Scotland and Catalonia, for example, are more likely also to have strong European identities (again, at the expense of national identities). Thus, the threat of exiting

the EU can increase the salience of the cultural cleavage within the country and intensify the importance of sub-state identity.

The identity-based argument for why an EU-based territorial change can affect regional territorial preferences can happen through multiple sequences, and it is unclear which sequence of identity activation would dominate. One plausible sequencing is that if regional political elites prefer one territorial outcome, they can use the territorial shock to activate the sub-state identity. In both Scotland and Northern Ireland, regional political parties have made identity within a region a political issue. Or, the territorial shock in this case, because of pre-existing European identity strength, activates sub-state identity, and corresponding regional territorial preferences could be due to a desire to affirm European identity by re-joining the EU. In either instance, the regional or European identity could be instrumental for this ultimate goal (see discussion of this by [Kalin and Sambanis \(2018\)](#)). A final possibility is that the initial territorial shock (EU exit) increases the salience of *both* sub-state and European identities, and because of the pre-existing link between these identities, the strength of both simultaneously increases.

Besides solely identity-based arguments, EU exit can also reduce the economic benefits from being part of a state. A set of influential models theorize conditions under which regional independence or other territorial preferences are a function of net economic benefits of remaining in or seceding from an existing sovereign unit or fiscal union ([Alesina, Perotti, and Spolaore 1995](#); [Bolton and Roland 1997](#)). Brexit can be thought of as a specific case of these models where an anticipated or realized economic shock to a polity causes support for territorial changes, due to beliefs that the region would be economically better off by seceding or joining another country. Different types of economic shocks, broadly conceived, can affect support for territorial changes. These models generally imply that if the perceived net benefits from regional integration or membership in a country decline, support for territorial changes increase; many empirical studies support this framework of when regional autonomy movements become politically salient ([Alesina, Perotti, and Spolaore 1995](#); [Bolton and Roland 1997](#); [Fidrmuc 2015](#); [Sorens 2004](#)).

Regarding the role of the economic benefits of secession, in the European context, a handful of studies have established how EU membership has increased support for regionalist movements, due to the economic benefits that regions believe they could attain as independent country-members.¹ An overarching and influential argument by [Jolly \(2015\)](#), as a specific substantive application of the aforementioned models, is that regional parties or movements seeking secession are more incentivized to do so because of the belief that they can join the EU as new states upon successful secession. As this work shows, EU membership provides a host of economic benefits and political belonging that are perceived to be a substitute for (or superior to) status-quo territoriality within a state. Specifically, Jolly finds that the EU's large economic market has increased the appeal of

separatist regional political parties, and that European integration has decreased the perceived relative benefit of being part of a large state. In terms of the relevance of international recognition and support for secession, [Muro, Vidal, and Vlaskamp \(2020\)](#) find that in Catalonia and Scotland, positive framings of an independence scenario increased individual-level support for independence. Thus, following from this evidence, Brexit as an economic shock increases the net benefits for regions to pursue different territorial preferences, if they perceive that the region staying within the country makes the region worse off.

For conceptual clarity we have separated the analysis of these factors of more identity-based versus economic approaches to territorial preferences. Even though the empirical testing of theories of such preferences often pits identity-based approaches “against” economic ones, in practice, these arguments are difficult to distinguish, and regional politicians certainly use both. Many studies indicate that beliefs in the economic benefits of the EU can be correlated with sub-state identity ([Jolly 2014](#); [Mols, Jetten, and Haslam 2009](#)). Our hypotheses about the role of Brexit as an economic shock that also increases identity-based desires to change territory draw on both these strands of literature. Building on the work of [Jolly \(2014, 2015\)](#), we argue that regional populations that believe that EU membership affords economic and cultural benefits should on average favor territorial preferences that can maintain or not reduce such benefits. Our empirical method tests whether increasing the salience of different scenarios of EU exit provokes a change in territorial preferences. We emphasize that identity and economic-based arguments are not mutually exclusive, and that of course, increasing sub-state identity is not necessarily sufficient for changes in territorial preferences—but economic consequences might either amplify such identity or territorial preferences, and heightened sub-state identity may affect beliefs about economic consequences as implied in the studies above.

Case Context

The literature discussed provides the theoretical and empirical bases upon which to test the impact of Brexit on territorial views. Recent events in Scotland and Northern Ireland indicate the applicability of these broad approaches regarding how external shocks can affect territorial views, and the specific role of the EU in influencing relevant identities. We choose these two cases as the regions of the UK where a possible change of borders has been most salient; in both the Scottish and Northern Ireland cases, such changes have been legally possible. In Scotland, there was a failed 2014 independence referendum, and in the Northern Ireland, the 1998 Good Friday (Belfast) Agreement permits a unification referendum if a majority in the region clearly supports it. We provide some brief background discussion of

both regions to indicate the relevance of Brexit for territorial views within these regions and to further motivate our research design.

The success of the Brexit Leave campaign in June 2016 and the subsequent exit process culminating in the EU-UK trade deal, negotiated at the end of 2020, has further heightened the debate in both Scotland and Northern Ireland about their citizens' preferred territorial status. As of this writing, the EU-UK Trade and Cooperation Agreement has not prevented business disruption between Northern Ireland and the rest of the UK nor between the UK and EU. Considering first the Scottish case, there has been much political discussion about whether Brexit justifies Scotland pursuing another independence bid, and the current governing Scottish National Party (SNP) supports a second independence referendum after the failed 2014 effort. After the SNP's success in the December 2019 general election, its leader Nicola Sturgeon claimed that the electoral success indicated that the party had a "... renewed, refreshed and strengthened mandate" to pursue a second referendum (Carrell 2019), as the SNP claims that many Scots prefer being in the EU to being in the UK outside of the EU. To date, conservative governments under both Theresa May and Boris Johnson have denied the possibility of a second Scottish independence referendum.

Most evidence on the evolution of the Scottish independence movement, prior to and just after the failed 2014 referendum, shows that both Scottish identity and beliefs about economic prospects of an independent Scotland are correlated with support for independence (e.g. Keating 1996, 2008, 2014, 2017; Curtice 2011, 2016, 2018). Johns and Mitchell (2016) discuss the increasing salience of independence as an issue promoted by the SNP and how independence became a key political cleavage in the last 10–15 years, and Fieldhouse and Prosser (2018) show that the 2014 independence referendum itself accelerated this re-alignment where support for the SNP became increasingly due to pro-independence views. Support for independence appears to have increased since the failed 2014 referendum (Curtice 2016, 2019), but there are few studies exploring the role that Brexit plays in such preferences.

On the particular connection between the Scottish independence and Brexit, the debate prior to the failed referendum of 2014 and since has been premised partially on the assumption that a Scottish exit would allow it to re-enter EU. There is suggestive but not recent evidence that Scottish independence support is conditioned by expectations of international recognition. Muro, Vidal, and Vlaskamp (2020) find using 2014 survey experimental evidence that the prospect of international recognition increases support for independence; Muro and Vlaskamp (2016) find weaker evidence that the prospect of EU recognition increases independence support on average, but that key sub-groups of Scots are more responsive to the possibility of such recognition. As with the above evidence on the role of economic expectations in the wake of possible independence, though, the causal role of expectations of EU recognition remains unclear (as such beliefs may

not be separate from territorial preferences). Related, some have argued that a subset of SNP voters supported Leave strategically in order to produce the conditions for a second independence referendum (Greene, Spoon, and Williams 2018). This latter evidence however finds it difficult to disentangle the relationship between current territorial preferences and SNP support, and finds that a very large majority of independence supporters from 2014 also supported Remain; further, prior to Brexit, SNP leadership had strongly supported Remain. This set of findings provides suggestive support of the basic logic of territorial preferences being affected by negative shocks to the existing “union,” but these previous data either come from prior to the Scottish referendum and Brexit (and the corresponding political fallout), or do not focus on Brexit scenarios. We draw on this evidence to argue that the role of Brexit scenarios should affect territorial views in Scotland.

More recent polling about Scottish support for independence helps motivate the expectation that much of the region views Brexit as a negative economic shock, and that the national government is imposing a policy that the region opposes. Scottish parties have emphasized Brexit would mean a poorer Scotland and UK, and polls show support for independence and particularly among those who support the EU (roughly 62 percent) (Curtice 2019; Curtice and Montagu 2020). EU supporters are also more likely to think that independence will be good for Scotland’s economy, have more pride in their country, and think that Scotland will have a stronger voice in the world (Curtice and Montagu 2020). Thus, the Scottish case is a straightforward application of the above logic, where a negative economic shock increases the incentive for territorial independence; such a shock is also facilitated in the Brexit case with a growing sense of Scottish identity.

In Northern Ireland, there are concerns that Brexit has overall increased support for unification with Ireland, a referendum permitted by international treaty in the Good Friday Agreement. During the Brexit negotiation process, this issue was complicated by the uncertainty about whether a UK exit from the EU single market and customs union would leave Northern Ireland separated from the rest of the UK by a de-facto trade border in the Irish Sea or separated by a “hard border” from trade with the rest of Ireland. The EU-UK agreement creates new divisions between Northern Ireland and the rest of the UK that have already generated economic friction.

The territorial status of Northern Ireland prior to the Good Friday Agreement had long been a source of contention, and much scholarship has documented the enduring religious cleavage regarding support for Northern Ireland’s devolved status (see O’Leary 2019a,b for detailed analysis). In Northern Ireland, individuals with “Unionist” preferences support Northern Ireland’s membership of the United Kingdom, while “Nationalists” generally prefer Northern Ireland to leave the United Kingdom and unite with the Republic of Ireland. Given the entrenchment

of these positions, there is a view that there is little room for movement on political status and that this cleavage presents effectively a demographic cap on support for a change in status. While a referendum for unification with Ireland could occur, the prospect of such a referendum had remained very limited in political discussion until Brexit. The political and economic arrangements in the Good Friday Agreement were predicated on both the UK and Ireland being members of the EU (O'Leary 2018). The Brexit referendum altered these delicate balances. During negotiations for May's withdrawal agreement, most Unionist voters preferred a "hard Brexit" (though only slightly ahead of "soft Brexit") and ranked the option of Northern Ireland having a special status within the EU as a distant third choice. Nationalist voters strongly supported a special status and were very opposed to hard Brexit (White 2017: 12). With respect to contemporary Northern Irish territorial positions, polls prior to the date of our survey showed that support for united Ireland did not have a majority opinion (32 percent), with many individuals undecided (23 percent), most likely due to the belief that such an event would be unlikely (Leahy 2019). However, since the negotiation of the trade agreement, more recent polls show a rise in support for a united Ireland to 42 percent (Shipman and Allardy 2021).

At the same time, however, there has been concern about the consequences of a change in borders. Garry, McNicholl, O'Leary, and Pow (2018) for example have compiled much evidence from detailed focus-group studies indicating that the Northern Ireland residents of both Unionist and Nationalist persuasions strongly opposed both North-South and East-West borders. Most of the subjects in their groups were opposed to any referendum on a united Ireland in the short term, but felt that Brexit had changed the terms of the arrangements. Among the reasons, some highlight the advantages of membership of the EU. For example, one respondent stated, "I was kind of unsure ... then when Brexit happened I definitely wanted a united Ireland again because it would mean being part of the EU as well" (Garry et al. 2018: 11). Another aspect highlighted in these groups is much apprehension about the possibility of violence if a hard border returned between Northern Ireland and Ireland. Garry, O'Leary, McNicholl, and Pow (Garry et al. 2020) show that the minority group of "conditional Catholic nationalists" are amenable to supporting a united Ireland in the context of a hard Brexit.

In terms of the relevance to the comparative literature on territorial preferences, drawing on the net benefits of regional membership in the EU, there are clear potential economic costs to Brexit for Northern Ireland. Thus, territorial preferences might change due to the economic costs from the change of borders. The final arrangement of an East-West trade border between Northern Ireland and the rest of the UK has generated increased economic friction between these two areas, via costs of entry and reduced trade. A hard border between Northern Ireland and the rest of Ireland would have likewise reduced trade with the EU, as

well as bringing the possibility of violence. Thus, the change in borders or friction between areas might make a united Ireland arrangement *on average* appealing, following the aforementioned basic economic theory of unions.

Summarizing Expectations

From this discussion we posit some simple expectations about the effect of different Brexit scenarios on territorial preferences. The popular debate has assumed that Brexit should increase the appeal of changing territorial preferences because regional borders were assumed to be based on continued UK membership in the EU (in the Scottish case) and maintenance of existing porous borders (in the Northern Irish case). However, this expectation has not been empirically tested, and we have grounded this expectation in the comparative secession literature and EU-specific findings as noted above. Our research design functions by increasing the salience of different possible outcomes to the Brexit process to isolate the impact on territorial preferences. We distinguish between the two main different scenarios of Brexit (a no deal Brexit and a withdrawal agreement similar to that agreed by the May government) as well as the less likely possibility that it could be reversed (remain) to test the effects of the different options and assess if Brexit itself affects territorial preferences.

Our core hypothesis is that, on average, scenarios that make Brexit salient should increase support for territorial change (independence in the case of Scotland and united Ireland in the case of Northern Ireland). In Northern Ireland, we also expect that the different border outcomes from Brexit will affect preferences, with Brexit outcomes that create borders that either divide Northern Ireland from the rest of the UK, or borders that divide Northern Ireland from the rest of Ireland, increasing the desire to change the territorial arrangements.

To further test expectations, we hypothesize that those who feel most strongly about avoiding the regional economic shock should be most sensitive to treatments making Brexit salient. For both Scotland and Northern Ireland, this means that individuals who support remaining in the EU should be more sensitive to the treatments, and thus more likely to support territorial change when Brexit is made salient. While there are many determinants of being for remain, such as opposition to a negative economic shock, we also follow recent literature that shows that the Brexit policy position has also become a relevant identity grouping. In light of the acrimonious debate over Brexit and its significant economic and political consequences, individuals in the UK increasingly view “Remain” and “Leave” as social identities, self-categorize as such, and form judgments or have political affect consistent with other powerful social identities (Curtice 2018; Hobolt, Leeper, and Tilley 2020). Brexit scenarios should make Remainers predisposed to supporting a change in the territorial status, on average, as opposed to those who support leave.

From Hypotheses to Design Objectives

It is difficult in one design to test all the possible reasons why EU exit would affect territorial preferences. Measurements of expectations of what would happen either after an EU exit or territorial change are potentially endogenous to such preferences (or subject to rationalization). Our goal is not to arbitrate between “economistic” versus “identity” reasons for territorial preferences, but to assess whether shocks (our focus being Brexit) do change territorial preferences in a causal manner. Our goal is to assess the effect of making scenarios of territorial shocks—EU exit—salient, and thus how the salience of different scenarios of Brexit affect territorial preferences. The proposed design is the most straightforward way of testing whether exogenously making salient variations in the condition for the EU exit matter for territorial views.

Design

Design Overview and Context

To test these hypotheses, we embed an experiment where randomly assigned groups are presented with a different Brexit scenario, and then we embed in that scenario a question of how individuals would vote for independence in Scotland and unification in Northern Ireland. This approach allows for assessment of how Brexit affects territorial preferences, while minimizing the differences across different scenarios. We randomize the framings of each Brexit scenario that were prominent at the time of the survey, prior to the 2019 general election. From a design perspective, using an embedded survey experiment is the most effective way to isolate the impact of different Brexit scenarios. Since respondents are randomly assigned into groups, the groups are equivalent in expectation except for the different Brexit scenario they receive (the treatment). Thus, differences in the outcome can be attributed to the treatment, i.e., the increased salience of such a Brexit scenario. Our design also allows us to substantially mitigate respondent fatigue, reduce the acquiescence bias issue (so that respondents would be less likely to answer all questions in a manner to satisfy researcher expectations), and to mask the intent of the survey.

For both regions, we randomize assignment to a wording of the territorial-preference assessment as follows: (i) a control condition where Brexit is not mentioned, (ii) a reversal of Brexit and remain in the EU, (iii) a condition where we raise Brexit via the withdrawal agreement that had been negotiated by May’s government, and (iv) a condition where we raise the prospect of a no deal outcome. The design allows for clean and simple comparison across the treatment groups to see whether different Brexit scenarios affect support for territorial status. In addition to this Brexit scenario experiment, we asked Northern Ireland

respondents an additional variation on the referendum question with a different set of plausible border conditions to make the scenarios less abstract, as this was an important source of discussion and concern. We randomly present different border scenarios of (i) status quo borders, (ii) a “hard” border within the island of Ireland, and (iii) a border between Northern Ireland and the rest of the UK. In a third relevant innovation, we also ask about support for a referendum, though due to space constraints, the results are reported in Part D of the Appendix.

Our survey was fielded in September 2019 in both regions. At the time of the survey, Conservative party leader and general election candidate Johnson had not yet negotiated a new withdrawal agreement. The only defined withdrawal agreement that was in the public discussion (although it had been voted down by the UK Parliament) was May’s deal. This timing meant that all our treatment options were salient and plausible outcomes in the minds of our respondents. In the conclusion, we return to how one could interpret our results given this context.

Design Specifics, Question Wordings, Measurement

Our surveys in Scotland and Northern Ireland were fielded online by Respondi, a respected web survey firm that has a large and balanced panel.² The sample fulfilled quotas on age and gender, and sizes were 1,650 in Scotland and 796 in Northern Ireland.³ We assessed territorial preferences with the following set of questions, with the “/” indicating random assignment of equal probability (0.25) to one of four groups assigned a different version of the question (here based on the question for Scotland): “Would you support another independence referendum for Scotland? [no other text]/if the United Kingdom somehow reverses its decision and stays in the EU?/if the United Kingdom exits the EU under the conditions similar to the current withdrawal agreement negotiated between the British government and the EU?/if the United Kingdom leaves the EU without an agreement (no deal)?”⁴ The response options were “yes,” “no,” and “don’t know.” Those who responded “don’t know” were asked a follow-up question of which option (yes or no) was closer to their view. Respondents in Scotland were then asked if they would participate in a referendum with a yes or no option. Those who answered yes were then asked, “How would you vote in such a referendum?” The response options were “In favour of an independent Scotland,” “Against an independent Scotland,” and “don’t know.”

Respondents in Northern Ireland answered a similarly worded question, again with equiprobable assignment to one of four treatment conditions except the question text read, “Would you support a referendum for unification with Ireland?” for the control group, with the same wordings of the treatment text regarding Brexit scenarios (reversion to remain, withdrawal agreement, and no deal). The response options were the same as those of Scotland. All Northern

Ireland respondents also had the same follow up question of how they would vote in a unification referendum with the same response options.

In addition to this Brexit scenario experiment, we asked Northern Ireland respondents an additional variation on the referendum question with a different set of plausible border conditions to make the scenarios less abstract, but assuming Brexit occurs in some fashion. Respondents were again randomly assigned with equiprobability to one of three border conditions. The wording of this question was, “And would you support a referendum for unification with Ireland if the United Kingdom exits from the EU [and this results in a hard border with checks at the border between Northern Ireland and the rest of Ireland?/and this results in border checks between Northern Ireland and the rest of the United Kingdom/but the current border arrangements are maintained]?” The response options and follow-up options of choice in such a referendum are the same as in the previous Brexit question. This test allows for more precise consideration of whether differential explicit border conditions affect territorial preferences, and focuses on preferences that assume Brexit, but assessing the role of different border scenarios, which were an important source of concern.

Demographic Controls

We also measured standard demographic characteristics. We measure female gender (coded as 1 for female, 0 otherwise), age (recoded into the categories of 18–34, 35–54, 55 and up), education (lower secondary or less, higher secondary, vocational, some or completed university), household income (four quartiles), and employment situation of the respondent (1 for unemployed). For those in Scotland, as a proxy for Scottish heritage, we measure family background based on categories of the following: whether the respondent’s parents and respondent are all born in Scotland, whether one parent and respondent are, and whether only the respondent is born in Scotland. In Northern Ireland, we proxy identity with religious category. While religion can be a choice, we use religion in Northern Ireland as the simplest and more accurate way to capture the community background of the respondent and the key demographic cleavage, consistent with previous studies (Mitchell 2013; O’Malley and Walsh 2013); not including religious background would undoubtedly result in omitted variable bias. We code respondents in three categories as Catholic, Protestant, and other/no religion. While most of the population has traditionally defined itself as either Protestant or Catholic, the minority that either chooses no or another religion has recently increased (Doherty and Poole 2002). We also measure the respondent’s view on Brexit with the question “What is your preferred outcome regarding the UK’s relationship with the EU?” The response options were “Leave with a deal,” “Leave without a deal,” or “Remain.” Unless otherwise noted, all variables are either

entered in a regression as categorical dummy variables or are scaled 0–1 to ease interpretation of coefficients. The data are weighted for the analysis in Scotland by age and gender and in Northern Ireland by age, gender and religion.⁵

For robustness, as shown in various Tables in the [Online Appendix](#), we show the results do not change when we estimate logistic regression models (Tables A13 and A14), with “don’t know” answers either (i) dropped or (ii) recoded (Tables A15, A16 and A17), and with HC3 errors (Tables A21 and A22).

Results for Scotland

We first provide some basic descriptive statistics on the control group for each regional sample (see the full [Table A1](#) in the [Online Appendix](#)). We interpret the control group as measurement of territorial preferences in the absence of any salience of Brexit scenarios. We describe some subtleties of independence support because the descriptive results show in the control group how close either position is to attaining majority support. These results also benchmark the experimental results.

When asked in the control group ($n = 353$) if they would support independence in Scotland, 52 percent were for independence while 44 percent were against (5 percent reported “don’t know” or declined to answer). We note that support for independence is high, but we caution this could be because we asked the independence preferences of those who indicated they would participate in a referendum. Such respondents might be more inclined to support independence, or respondents might interpret such a referendum as an “authorized” one and may internalize that such a referendum would have fewer negative consequences (for example, if they infer that the central government agreed with the Scottish government to have one). This already is an indication that support for independence is potentially conditional on a variety of circumstances (including Brexit).⁶

Brexit Scenarios and Territorial Preferences in Scotland

We turn to the main experimental results in Scotland by comparing support for independence by Brexit condition. Recall our four scenarios embedded in the territorial-assessment question were (i) a control group without reference to Brexit, (ii) a reversal and remain scenario, (iii) a withdrawal agreement (akin to May’s deal) scenario, and (iv) a no deal scenario. [Figure 1](#) first presents the simple plots of support by condition, and it is clear that for the two Brexit scenarios (no deal and withdrawal agreement) support for independence is higher relative to the control group by around 10 percentage points. Independence support in the remain treatment condition is the same relative to the control group. This is evidence confirming the basic hypothesis in Scotland, and some simple evidence

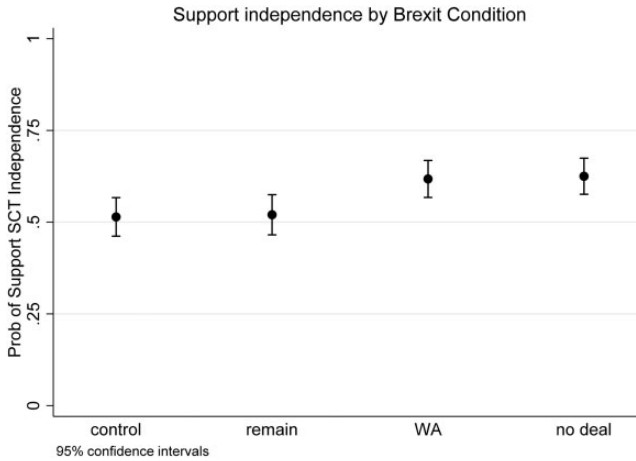


Figure 1 Brexit scenarios and support for Scottish independence.

that making Brexit scenarios salient does affect independence support; within both the Brexit scenarios, support for independence is above a majority (whereas it is just above a majority in the control group).

We next test if the core treatment effects are robust to the inclusion of controls. We present the results of simple linear probability models where the dependent variable is independence support, and the variables of interest are binary variables indicating treatment assignment (Gomila 2020). Our core specification codes “don’t knows” as no, as we view initial unreserved support for independence as the most useful assessment of territorial preferences. We exclude other variables that measure attitudes, such as Scottish identity, political ideology, and recent party vote choice, as such attitudes could either be endogenous to territorial preferences, an omitted or included demographic variable might explain both, or, both attitudes could proxy for some other variable. The only other political preference variable that we consider is the position on Brexit, i.e. Remainer, coded as discussed. The above caveats and concerns about inclusion of political attitudes could apply to the inclusion of this variable (in fact, Greene, Spoon and Williams (2018) discuss how Brexit voting might be strategic due to one’s independence positions). One argument for its inclusion is that views on Brexit could be related to territorial preferences; however, from a design perspective, this is the question the article is trying to resolve by isolating the independent impact of Brexit scenarios. Another argument is the aforementioned “social-identity” perspective on Brexit, that this policy position has become a relevant, less malleable identity attachment similar to other demographic groups. Results do not change when we drop this variable (see Tables A11 and A12 in the Online Appendix).

Table 1 shows the results. Column 1 considers just treatment assignment; Column 2 controls for treatment assignment as well for a parsimonious set of core demographic variables. Table 1 overall shows that the magnitudes of the two Brexit treatments—no deal and withdrawal agreement—do not substantively change once we introduce controls. Both treatments have magnitudes of around 10 percentage points. This is a substantive impact, equivalent to the range of moving one full household income quartile. Figure 2 displays the plotted marginal effects of the treatments and control variables. The effect on independence preferences is notable as we are realistically conditioning on those individuals who state an interest in participating in such a referendum, and thus we are observing the Brexit scenario effects for those who already profess some political stake in the issue. We note that the remain scenario has no effect on the territorial view relative to the control group. This is potential evidence that there is an asymmetric effect regarding the negative shock, and that even the possibility of a “positive” shock (in the form of remaining in the EU) cannot reduce support for independence. Across all specifications, as in the control group, being a Remainer is strongly correlated with support for independence. Overall, the results indicate that Scottish territorial preferences are affected by Brexit.

Remainers versus Leavers in Scotland

We now assess if the specific impact of Brexit treatments differs based on the prior orientation towards Brexit, i.e., Remainer. Our expectation is that those who oppose EU exit have a higher motivation to change their territorial preferences. In other words, if individuals oppose Brexit, that could condition the treatment effects. Recall that this is because we hypothesize that Remainer status indicates support of the “status quo” arrangement of the region and opposition to the economic shock caused by Brexit. We test this by estimating the same model as shown in Table 1 but including an interaction term of treatment assignment with Remainer, reported in Table A18 of the Online Appendix. Figure 3 plots the results from this linear probability model, showing the different predicted probabilities to support independence by treatment condition, for both Remainers and Leavers. We note that across all conditions, Remainers are more supportive of independence than Leavers. The figure also indicates much higher support for independence among Remainers in the two Brexit conditions; the difference in support for Scottish independence between Remainers and Leavers is largest in the two Brexit options, reaching a little over 30 percentage points in the withdrawal agreement condition, compared to around 14 percentage points in the control group. We note as well a smaller but precisely estimated difference for the no deal condition as well. There is not a significant difference in the treatment effect for the remain condition for Remainers versus Leavers compared to their differences in the control group.

Table 1 Brexit scenarios and support for Scottish independence

	(1) support ind	(2) support ind
Remain cond	0.0077 (0.043)	0.0059 (0.040)
WA cond	0.099** (0.043)	0.088** (0.038)
No deal cond	0.11*** (0.042)	0.10*** (0.040)
Female		-0.066** (0.027)
Age 35–54		-0.11*** (0.033)
Age 55 and up		-0.28*** (0.034)
High sec edu		-0.030 (0.043)
Voc edu		-0.0081 (0.045)
Univ deg		-0.040 (0.040)
HH inc Q2		-0.12*** (0.042)
HH inc Q3		-0.10** (0.042)
HH inc Q4		-0.14*** (0.042)
Unemployed		0.062 (0.054)
Mixed scot		0.098** (0.049)
Born scot		0.15*** (0.031)
Remainer		0.20*** (0.028)
Constant	0.49*** (0.031)	0.57*** (0.063)
<i>N</i>	1399	1399
<i>R</i> ²	0.011	0.147

Standard errors in parentheses.

* $p < 0.05$.

** $p < 0.01$.

*** $p < 0.001$.

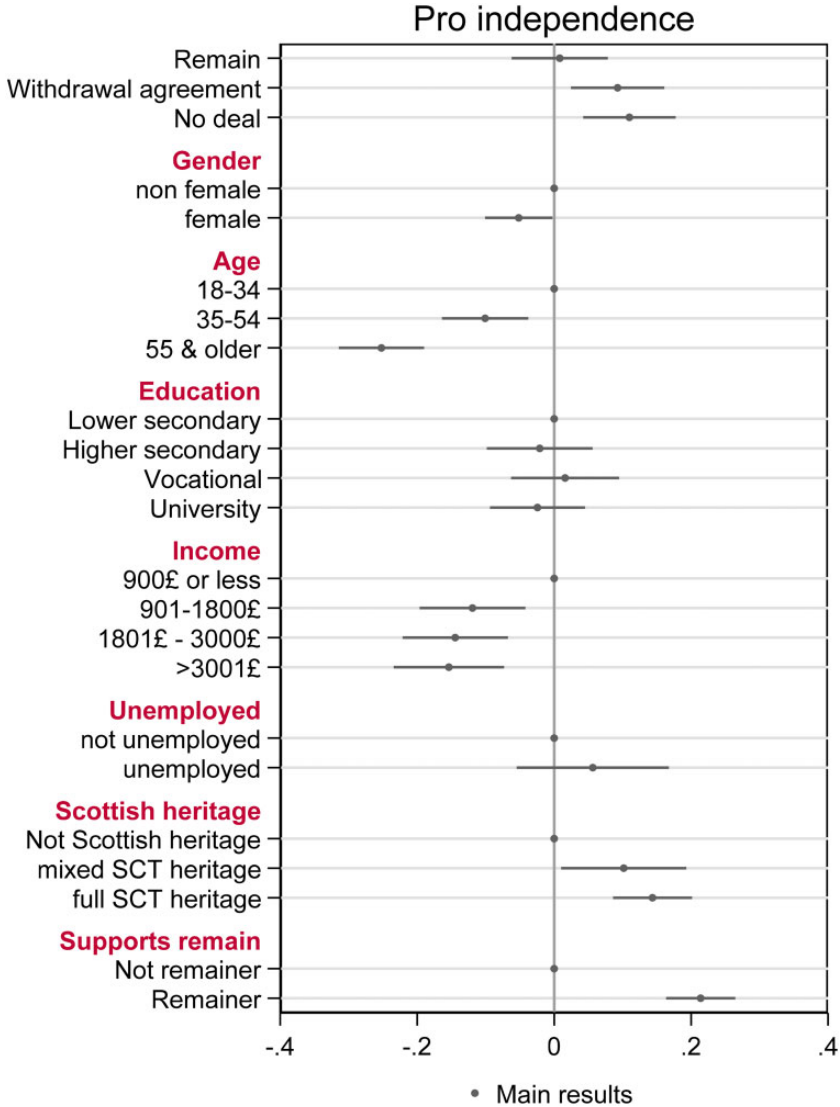


Figure 2 Support for Scottish independence.

Thus, as expected, making Brexit scenarios salient does affect independence preferences, and these are more pronounced among Remainers. This is suggestive evidence that individuals who least prefer the economic shock (those who opposed Brexit) are more likely to support territorial change when the prospect of that shock is made salient. We caution of course that a host of other demographic

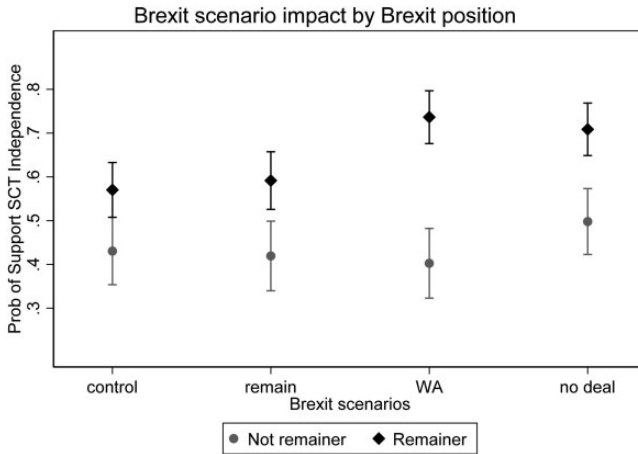


Figure 3 Brexit scenarios and support for Scottish independence, by Remainer versus Leavers.

variables may jointly explain both one's independence and Brexit position, but given that the treatment is explicitly about Brexit scenarios—capturing the uncertainty and possible scenarios raised in September 2019—it is sensible to focus on Brexit position as a moderator.

Results from Northern Ireland

As in the Scottish results, we first provide some basic descriptive statistics on preferences from the control group in Northern Ireland ($n = 200$) in order to establish baseline preferences (see also [Table A2](#) in the [Online Appendix](#)). Regarding support for a united Ireland, 32 percent responded yes, while 53.5 percent were against (14.5 percent reported “don't know” or declined to answer). Replacing the “don't know” responses with the view that was closest to their opinion, support for unification reaches 36.5 percent. This result is in line with contemporaneous surveys ([Leahy 2019](#)), and is not surprising as this historically has been viewed as an extreme option, only increasing in salience due to Brexit. These results are of course strongly conditioned by community background and the corresponding religious cleavage, as 67 percent of Catholics would support a united Ireland and 90 percent of Protestants would not.⁷

Brexit Scenarios and Territorial Preferences in Northern Ireland

We now turn to the experimental results for Northern Ireland, which compare support for unification with Ireland by Brexit condition. Recall that in the Brexit experiment the scenarios were the same as in the Scottish experiment and we estimate the same models, with the same demographic controls (except for

religious background, as discussed above) and conduct the same robustness checks as in the Scottish design. In Northern Ireland, we also posed a separate question about territorial preferences given specific border consequences of Brexit: a hard border within Northern Ireland or a border between NI and the rest of the UK. Overall, we find little to no differences in comparing average preferences across the treatment groups in both experiments. Table 2 presents models for support for unification for the Brexit and border experiments, with and without demographic controls. The table indicates that Catholic religion is by far the most important characteristic in explaining support for unification; being a Remainder is also positively correlated with support for such policies. The table shows the same pattern for the borders experiment; no border condition affects unification preferences when demographic controls are included. As column 4 shows, again, Catholic religion and being a Remainder are positively correlated with preferences for unification. It is noticeable that across both experiments the “other religion/no religion” category is also positively correlated with such support, relative to Protestant respondents. Although this group is a minority in Northern Ireland, these initial results indicate that it could be persuaded to support different territorial preferences in the future. As in Scotland, we also tested the impact of the Brexit and border treatments dependent on the prior orientation towards Brexit, though we caution that the size of the sample requires circumspect inferences. We do not find any strong conditional effect based on Remainder status.

Overall, these results challenge our expectations of finding that Brexit scenarios would increase average support for unification; we had hypothesized Brexit treatment effects on territorial views across both regions. The absence of an average treatment effect (and any effect among Remainders) in Northern Ireland could be for a number of reasons. First, the territorial policy option could still be perceived to be an extreme or politically unrealistic option, and individuals may be averse to supporting a political option that is unlikely. Only Sinn Féin has consistently supported a referendum on united Ireland, but has not made this goal its most salient policy proposal. Second, it is possible that even though various Brexit scenarios would pose an economic shock, individuals in Northern Ireland have had various expectations of Brexit scenarios internalized in their territorial preferences, and thus making a particular Brexit or borders scenario salient does not affect such preferences. Put another way, individuals in the two Brexit treatment groups or border-change scenarios had previously internalized some type of “negative outcome” when formulating territorial preferences. Third, other cleavages—in particular religious background (or Unionist-Nationalist division)—may currently be so determinative of territorial preferences that the salience of economic or cultural shocks such as Brexit cannot affect them. Such a cleavage may also correlate with beliefs about the whether the negative economic shock of Brexit is worse than economic consequences of alternative territorial changes. Nationalists

Table 2 Brexit and border scenarios and support for united Ireland

	(1) Brexit experiment	(2) Brexit experiment	(3) Border experiment	(4) Border experiment
Remain condition	-0.050 (0.05)	-0.057 (0.04)		
WA condition	0.079 (0.05)	0.020 (0.04)		
No deal condition	-0.033 (0.05)	-0.050 (0.04)		
Hard border			0.066 (0.05)	-0.014 (0.04)
NI-UK border			0.076 (0.05)	0.020 (0.04)
Female		-0.033 (0.03)		-0.033 (0.03)
Age 35 – 54		-0.061 (0.04)		-0.063 (0.04)
Age 55 and up		-0.080 (0.04)		-0.015 (0.04)
High sec edu		0.071 (0.04)		0.047 (0.05)
Voc edu		0.043 (0.05)		0.048 (0.05)
Univ deg		0.008 (0.04)		0.12** (0.04)
HH inc Q2		0.046 (0.04)		0.021 (0.05)
HH inc Q3		-0.019 (0.05)		-0.043 (0.05)
HH inc Q4		0.004 (0.05)		-0.003 (0.05)
Unemployed		-0.053 (0.06)		-0.105 (0.06)
Other/no religion		0.16*** (0.03)		0.20*** (0.04)
Catholic		0.54*** (0.04)		0.53*** (0.04)
Remainer		0.15*** (0.03)		0.226*** (0.03)
Constant	0.37*** (0.04)	0.099 (0.06)	0.37*** (0.03)	0.039 (0.06)
<i>N</i>	796	796	795	795
<i>R</i> ²	0.010	0.364	0.005	0.388

Standard errors in parentheses.

* $p < 0.05$. ** $p < 0.01$. *** $p < 0.001$.

may be sufficiently predisposed to unification, and Unionists may always be opposed to it regardless of the Brexit scenario posed. We caution that we only can most confidently detect an average effect, and it is possible that a test with a larger sample might be able to detect Brexit effects among individuals who do not feel strongly on other side of this longstanding cleavage.

Conclusion

In this study, we examine whether Brexit scenarios affect support for alternative territorial arrangements. Brexit poses a useful test of the broad frameworks regarding the causes of territorial preferences that posit that identity bonds and economic costs of an existing union can change such preferences. We use embedded experiments in surveys as a simple, clear way to identify the impact of different Brexit options.

We note that while the design is very similar in both regions, the dependent variable is distinct across the two regions (in Scotland it is support for independence; in Northern Ireland it is support for Irish unification). Further, respondents in Scotland are familiar with the experience of the failed 2014 referendum, but in Northern Ireland respondents do not have prior experience of a referendum. In Northern Ireland, unification with Ireland is considered a more extreme and less immediately viable option. We find that in the regions in the UK where Brexit has raised the salience of territorial issues, Brexit scenarios seem to affect support for independence in Scotland. We are unable to confirm any effect on support for unification in Northern Ireland arising from the manipulation of the Brexit scenarios. In Scotland, the two Brexit scenarios—no deal and withdrawal agreement—increase support for independence by around 10 percentage points relative to the control group. The fact that the “remain” scenario does not reduce support for independence (relative to the control group) may indicate that there is now a baseline degree of support such that limited “positive” scenarios will not dampen it, and that the Brexit process itself has increased the appeal of independence. Across both regions, we find a consistent correlation between those who most oppose the shock, i.e. being a Remainer, and these territorial preferences. This could be because Remainers are most likely to oppose the economic shock to their region, but is also consistent with previous findings that “Remainer” is becoming a social identity that has coherent and stable preferences, similar to other social identities. In Scotland, the results are more driven by those who support the UK remaining in the EU. In Northern Ireland, the religious cleavage matters most, and this basic demographic characteristic is more important than any Brexit scenario in terms of support for a unification referendum. This leaves little room for a shift in support, though we note that those who identify as “other or no religion” may be the most open to movement. These results would

suggest future surveys could fruitfully focus on respondents who are more indeterminate on the main cleavage.

Our results come from a specific point in time, before the calling of the UK general election in December 2019 and approval of the new withdrawal agreement negotiated by the Johnson government. But our results are also pertinent to future discussion, since preferences could further change or intensify given current economic frictions and the difficulties of implementing the trade deal, and if economic conditions following Brexit worsen.

Our results in Scotland indicate that preferences about independence can be affected by the projected relationship with the EU. However, our study does not test which aspect of remaining in the EU drives these territorial preferences (for example, whether this is driven by the increased identity with the EU or by economic prospects). Future research could delve into the mechanisms driving these preferences. Further, we caution from the results in Northern Ireland showing that religious background is the most powerful predictor, that the territorial preferences can be subsumed by powerful cleavages. Additional studies might consider more fully how other cleavages overlay or cross-cut strong preferences for the EU; related, if negative economic consequences accumulate then it is possible that those on neither side of the traditional cleavage within Northern Ireland will increasingly support a unification referendum. More broadly, these results show that the impact of negative shocks on the relationship of the national unit within international organizations, which may be moderated by identity- or economic-based factors, can affect domestic territorial preferences.

Supplementary Data

Supplementary data are available at *Publius: The Journal of Federalism* online.

Notes

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1. Other long-term factors explaining the rise in European regionalism are the decline in existing cleavages (such as left-right), and the mimicking of secessionist movements in developing countries.

2. Respondi recruits respondents to be part of an ongoing panel, maintaining balance within the panel and quality of responses. See [Bansak, Hainmueller, and Hangartner \(2016\)](#) for more details.
3. Our sample sizes exceeded those required based on a comparison of proportions using expected proportions from previous surveys, setting the alpha to 0.05 and requiring a minimum power of 0.8.
4. Part B of the [Online Appendix](#) shows successful randomization into each of these treatments for both regions.
5. The demographic information for Scotland is taken from the National Records for Scotland (<https://www.nrscotland.gov.uk/statistics-and-data/statistics/stats-at-a-glance/registrar-generals-annual-review/2018>) and for Northern Ireland from the 2011 census.
6. Out of space constraints, we report within-control group estimation results in Table A5 of the [Online Appendix](#). The table shows that “Scottish heritage,” coarsely measured, is positively correlated with support for independence. Being a Remainer is significantly correlated with pro referendum and independence views; it has a larger substantive effect than the other demographic traits.
7. We refer readers to discussion of the estimation results within the control group to Table A7 in the [Online Appendix](#). The results show that, unsurprisingly, Catholic religion is positively correlated with support for unification. The weighted marginal effect of being Catholic relative to Protestant is large, increasing referendum support by 50 percentage points. Those with other or no religion are also more supportive of unification (relative to Protestants). Being a Remainer is correlated in the same positive direction. Strikingly, no other demographic characteristic is consistently correlated with support for unification. This provides reassuring confirmation of the general observation that religiosity is the main cleavage of relevance, but the results suggest that Remainer status is also a factor.

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