



From Bush to Biden: British public opinion and the image of America

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Accepted: 26 June 2023
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Abstract

The scholarly literature on US–UK relations has been marked by recurrent debate over the health and utility of the special relationship, recently enlivened by the policy tensions and political turbulence of the Trump presidency. The literature has also seen a social and cultural ‘turn’, with a growing focus on the broader linkages between the two countries’ societies and cultures. However, there has been limited analysis of public opinion in Britain in recent scholarly research. This article examines the ‘image of America’ in British public opinion in the twenty-first century, across recent Republican and Democratic presidencies. It uses data from the annual Pew Global Attitudes survey series and Transatlantic Trends survey series to undertake systematic analysis of these quantitative data sources. It examines the following areas: the performance and policies of presidents from Bush to Biden, the US and its people, the state of bilateral relations, and NATO. It examines aggregate-level opinion and also pays close attention to views across different societal groups, based on demographic characteristics, party support and left–right ideology. The paper makes a significant and distinctive contribution to scholarly research into US–UK relations.

Keywords America · Public opinion · Britain · US presidents · Foreign policy

Introduction

What is the British public’s ‘image of America’, and in what ways has it changed or remained stable over recent decades, under Republican and Democratic presidents? Smith and Wertman observe that:

The American image is composed of many different levels and types of opinions; individuals can have some positive attitudes about the USA mixed

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together with some negative ones. However, it is only the most fundamental attitudes relating to overall opinion of the United States and its society, institutions, values, and culture which speak directly to the question of anti-Americanism. Nevertheless, opinions of US foreign policy, specific US actions, or individual US leaders are part of the American image and will be examined here with more underlying attitudes towards the United States.¹

It is this second aspect of ‘the American image’ which is the focus of this article, examining the attitudes of the British public in the period covered by the presidencies of George W. Bush through to Joe Biden. Specifically, the article assesses the public’s views of core elements of US–UK relations and the wider transatlantic partnership: the performance of recent presidents, the US as a country, the American people, the extent of consideration afforded to Britain in the bilateral links? The analysis also includes popular attitudes towards British membership in, and the role of, the North Atlantic Treaty Organisation (NATO). NATO is the key organisational manifestation of the wider transatlantic relationship and a core underpinning of post-war British foreign policy, an institutional arena in which US–UK relations have historically been a critical driving force, but also an organisation whose member countries have been criticised by recent US presidents regarding issues of ‘burden-sharing’ relating to defence capabilities and expenditure. The principal research questions are: how did the public opinion respond to the political controversies and policy disagreements of Trump’s one-term presidency, and to the previous incumbents of the White House? Has public opinion shown a tendency to favour Democratic over Republican presidents, a feature noted in earlier research?² Has there been notable variation in the ‘image of America’ across different societal groups in Britain, defined socio-demographically or in terms of core political attitudes?

Such an analysis is lacking in the rich and ever-expanding scholarly literature on the US–UK ‘special relationship’, and there are several reasons why one is warranted. Firstly, paying close attention to public opinion contributes to a fuller recognition of the multi-layered structure (the ‘layer cake’) of US–UK relations.³ There is a clear need to provide in-depth analysis of all levels of this relationship: moving from the political elites and governments through the intermediate bureaucratic and sectoral level, down to the bottom, societal layer, of respective national publics. As Xu and Rees observe: ‘Common sentiments refer to mutual affection and favourable feelings between the US and the UK *at both the leadership level and the public level*’ (emphasis added).⁴ Secondly, this focus aligns with the recent social and cultural ‘turn’ in the scholarly literature⁵: exploring the interconnections between

¹ Steven K. Smith and Douglas A. Wertman, *US-West European Relations During the Reagan Years*. (Palgrave Macmillan, 1992), 93.

² Smith and Wertman, ‘US-West European Relations’, 126.

³ John Dumbrell, ‘Personal Diplomacy: Relations between Prime Ministers and Presidents’, in *Anglo-American Relations: Contemporary Perspectives*, ed. Steve Marsh and Alan P. Dobson. (London: Routledge, 2013), 82.

⁴ Ruike Xu and Wyn Rees, ‘America and the special relationship: the impact of the Trump administration on relations with the UK’, *British Politics* 17, no. 1 (2022), 65.

⁵ Robert M. Hendershot, ‘Reflecting on the “Cultural Turn”’: New Directions in the Study of Anglo-American Relations and the Special Relationship’, *Journal of Transatlantic Studies* 18, no. 4 (2020).



the two countries' societies and cultures, the subject of a recent special issue in this journal.⁶ As recent research has noted: 'Scholarship on popular attitudes during the post-war period is, by contrast, surprisingly thin'.⁷ Third, and more specifically, public opinion comprises a worthy area of analysis in the scholarly literature's aim to identify and explain the effects of the Trump presidency on the health and utility of US–UK relations⁸ and wider transatlantic linkages,⁹ and whether policy and politics has returned to—or is returning to—'business as usual' under the Biden administration. Fourth, the strategic flux and political contestation over Britain's international role and relationships in the context of leaving the EU—including emphasis of the importance of the Anglosphere and the advocacy of efforts to strike a trade deal with the US—make it instructive to identify and account for recent shifts in public opinion on foreign policy and defence issues.

Undertaking systematic analysis of quantitative data using two survey series, the aims of this article are twofold. Firstly, to analyse aggregate-level opinion in Britain towards different aspects of the 'image of America', over recent decades. Secondly, to examine the views of different groups within British society, defined demographically and by core attitudes in domestic politics (left–right ideology and party support). By doing this and relating the findings to insights from existing research, the article builds on and extends earlier scholarship into attitudes in Britain.¹⁰ This detailed, country-specific study also contributes to the broader, cross-national or comparative, literature looking at the causes and consequences of public opinion towards the US in other countries and regions of the world.¹¹

⁶ Clive Webb and Robert Cook, 'British attitudes towards the United States since 1941', *Journal of Transatlantic Studies* 18 (2020), no. 3.

⁷ Webb and Cook, 'British attitudes', 279.

⁸ Xu and Rees, 'America and the special relationship', p. 65.

⁹ Gorm Rye Olsen, 'America is Back' or 'America First' and the Transatlantic Relationship'. *Politics and Governance* 10, no. 2 (2022), 154–64.

¹⁰ Ivor Crewe, 'Britain: Two and a half cheers for the Atlantic Alliance', in *The Public and Atlantic Defense*, ed. Gregory Flynn and Hans Rattinger. (Totowa, NJ: Rowman & Littlefield, 1985); Paul Whiteley, 'Attitudes to defence and international affairs', in *British Social Attitudes: The 1985 Report*, ed. Roger Jowell and Sharon Witherspoon (Aldershot: Gower, 1985); Dean Godson, 'British Attitudes Toward the United States', in *British Security Policy and the Atlantic Alliance: Prospects for the 1990s*, ed. Martin Holmes. (Pergamon-Brassey's International Defense Publishers, 1987); Jorgen Rasmussen and James M. McCormick, 'British Mass Perceptions of the Anglo-American Special Relationship', *Political Science Quarterly* 108, no. 3 (1993); Caroline Page, *U.S. Official Propaganda During the Vietnam War, 1965–1973: The Limits of Persuasion*. (London: Bloomsbury Academic, 1996), 191–225; Ben Clements, *British Public Opinion towards Foreign and Defence Policy: 1945–2017*. (London: Routledge, 2018); Ben Clements, 'British Public Opinion Towards the Vietnam War and UK-US Relations During the 1964–70 Labour Governments', *International History Review* 43, no. 4 (2021).

¹¹ Richard L. Merritt and Donald J. Puchala eds, *Western European Perspectives on International Affairs: Public Opinion Studies and Evaluations*. (New York: Frederick A Praeger, 1968); Gregory Flynn and Hans Rattinger eds, *The Public and Atlantic Defense*. (Totowa, NJ: Rowman & Littlefield, 1985); Richard C. Eichenberg, *Public Opinion and National Security in Western Europe*. (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1989); Smith and Wertman, 'US-West European Relations'; Sergio Fabbrini, 'The Domestic Sources of European Anti-Americanism', *Government and Opposition* 37, no. 1 (2002); Peter J. Katzenstein and Robert O. Keohane, *Anti-Americanisms in world politics* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2007); Ole R. Holsti, *To See Ourselves as Others See Us: How Publics Abroad View*



The article proceeds as follows. First, it discusses the methodological approach and the data sources used, highlighting the key features and strengths of the latter, and sets out the two principal areas of analysis. Second, it provides a detailed analysis of aggregate public opinion in Britain towards US–UK relations over the last two decades, identifying key patterns, shifts in attitudes, and areas of continuity across recent Democratic and Republican presidents. Third, it then provides an in-depth analysis of the opinions of groups within British society, on the basis of socio-demographic, political, and ideological characteristics. The final section concludes the main findings from the analyses and identifies areas for further research.

Methodology and data sources

This paper assesses public opinion towards US–UK relations through systematic analysis of quantitative data. The research uses two cross-national survey series: the Pew Research Center’s Global Attitudes Project (GAP) surveys (running annually from 2000 onwards) and the Transatlantic Trends (TT) surveys (which ran from 2002 to 14). Each survey in these series sampled public opinion amongst adults living in Britain or the UK. For consistency, in those surveys where the sample was drawn from the UK, the very small number of cases of respondents living in Northern Ireland were omitted, so the analysis focused on those respondents living in Britain (England, Wales, and Scotland). Appendix 1 provides a profile of the two survey series. The survey datasets—around 35 in total—and their accompanying user documentation were all downloaded online. The bibliographic citations for the TT survey datasets are provided at the end of the article, but the Pew GAP surveys cannot be cited in this way as they do not have digital object identifiers. All of the analyses were undertaken by the author, using the software package SPSS v26. In terms of presentation, in all figures and tables data have been rounded to the nearest per cent.

Both survey series provide thematic continuity in terms of gauging opinion towards different aspects of the image of America (presidents, the US as a country, American people, bilateral relations), as well as coverage of NATO, featuring identical questions over time. The Pew GAP series is the primary resource for the

Footnote 11 (continued)

the United States after 9/11 (Michigan: University of Michigan Press, 2008); Giacomo Chiozza, *Anti-Americanism and the American world order* (Baltimore, Md: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2009); Monti Naraya Datta, *Anti-Americanism and the rise of world opinion: consequences for the US national interest* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2014); Colin W. Lawson and John Hudson, ‘Who Is Anti-American in the European Union?’, *SAGE Open* 5, no. 2 (2015); Philip Everts, and Pierangelo Isernia, *Public Opinion, Transatlantic Relations and the Use of Force*. (Cham: Palgrave Macmillan, 2015); Alexander Agadjanian and Yusaku Horiuchi, ‘Has Trump Damaged the U.S. Image Abroad? Decomposing the Effects of Policy Messages on Foreign Public Opinion’, *Political Behavior*, 42, no. 2 (2020); Michael Haman and Milan Školník, ‘Trump and the Image of the United States in Latin America’, *Central European Journal of International and Security Studies*, 15, no. 2 (2021); Songying Fang, Xiaojun Li, and Adam Y. Liu ‘Chinese Public Opinion about US–China Relations from Trump to Biden’, *The Chinese Journal of International Politics*, 15, no. 1 (2022); Stephen Azzi and Norman Hillmer, ‘The Presidents and the Polls, 1963–2021: An Inquiry into Canadian Anti-Americanism’, *American Review of Canadian Studies*, 52, no. 4 (2022).



analysis, given its wider thematic coverage of this topic (both regular questions and some supplementary questions), and its longer duration, the most recently-released dataset covering the 2021 survey. The TT surveys function as a secondary resource, given their more limited duration and because they did not feature such an extensive set of questions on the topic. Using two survey series provides a more robust analysis, in terms of corroborating recurrent patterns or shifts in opinion in Britain. Appendix 2 displays the topics and question wordings from each survey series.

The availability, extent, and consistent content of the data in these two series serve to highlight that, to borrow a term used by Dobson, public opinion data as a form of evidence is eminently ‘examinable’ for Britain.¹² Moreover, in depth analysis of the survey series addresses another issue:

Yet there is much more we need to learn. Since opinion poll data seldom provides a demographic profile of respondents, it affords little perspective on differences in opinion shaped by age, gender, class, race and ethnicity. Providing a more nuanced portrait of British public opinion will allow us to move beyond broad generalisations.¹³

Secondary analysis of both survey series enables an assessment of overall public opinion in Britain, as well as a systematic comparison of specific socio-demographic, political and ideological groups within the general population. Doing this enables the article to make an important contribution, extending the scope of recent analyses which have been focused on British public opinion as a whole and which have not used the potential of survey datasets for secondary analysis.¹⁴

Aggregate-level analysis

To enable a comparison of the direction and magnitude of shifts in attitudes over time, Figs. 1, 2 provide a visual summary for key indicators using the Pew GAP surveys. Figure 1 shows the proportions of the British public with a positive opinion for the two questions asked most often: views of the US as a country (the percentage with a somewhat or very favourable opinion) and views of the president’s handling of world affairs (the percentage expressing some or a lot of confidence). Figure 2 shows the proportions with positive views for three indicators (either asked less frequently or introduced later on in the series): views of the American people (the percentage with a somewhat or very favourable opinion); whether the US takes into account British interests when making international policy decisions (the percentage

¹² Alan P. Dobson, ‘The evolving study of Anglo-American relations: The Last 50 Years’, *Journal of Transatlantic Studies* 18, no. 4 (2020), 421.

¹³ Webb and Cook, ‘British attitudes’, 3.

¹⁴ Robert M. Hendershot, ‘“Affection is the cement that binds us”: Understanding the cultural sinews of the Anglo-American special relationship’, in *Anglo-American Relations: Contemporary Perspectives*, ed. Steve Marsh and Alan P. Dobson (London: Routledge, 2013); Sylvia Ellis, ‘British public opinion and the Vietnam war’, *Journal of Transatlantic Studies* 18, no. 3 (2020).



saying a great deal or somewhat); and views of NATO (the percentage with a very or somewhat favourable opinion).

Figure 1 shows evidence of changing attitudes over time. The most notable changes are evident from the public's assessment of how well US presidents were performing on the international stage, with a stark distinction made between Democratic and Republican presidents in the public's mind. Put simply, the British public were much more likely to view Obama and Biden positively, with negative opinion much more prevalent during the Bush and Trump presidencies. Bush's rating's fell away after 2003 (when it was 51%) and never recovered, getting lower during his second term of office. The 2003 rating represented an improvement on 2001, though, when only 30% said that they had some level of confidence in Bush and foreign affairs, while 64% had no much or none at. Confidence in Trump started off very low, increased somewhat, and then regressed at the end of his time in office. There were several pronounced year-on-year shifts in the proportions with positive assessments, as seen in the transitions from Bush to Obama (2008–09) and from Trump to Biden (2020–21). Dumbrell's observation regarding the shift from Bush to Obama—'The turnaround in opinion appeared to be based on a generally positive perception of the new US president and on relief at the imminent departure of his predecessor'¹⁵—also applies well to Biden replacing Trump. Datta interprets this dramatic shift in from Bush to Obama opinion as a 'multilateralism effect' rather than an "Obama effect" per se',¹⁶ and the same could be said to characterise—to some extent—the dramatic shift in support attending the change from Trump to Biden. The former had a declared aversion to multilateralism as part of the 'American First' agenda in foreign policy from 2017–21¹⁷; while the latter declared their intention to return the US to its rightful place in the international stage, engaging in much closer cooperation with other states and international institutions.¹⁸ Furthermore, Datta's observation concerning popular views towards Obama—that 'The world was hungry for not just a change in American leadership, but for a return to a less unilateral United States'¹⁹—also applies equally well to Biden. In contrast to these shifts, there was a drastic movement—in the opposite direction—in the proportion of the public with a positive appraisal when Trump replaced Obama in the White House (2016–17). Overall, the range for this data series stretched from as low as 19% (Trump, in 2020, his final rating) to as high as 86% (for Obama, in 2009, his first rating).

Additional evidence shows the widely diverging views of Obama and Trump. In 2017, 91% of the British public adjudged Obama to *have been* a very or somewhat

¹⁵ John Dumbrell, 'Hating Bush, Supporting Washington: George W. Bush, Anti-Americanism and the US–UK Special Relationship', in *America's 'Special Relationships': Foreign and Domestic Aspects of the Politics of Alliance*, ed. John Dumbrell and Axel Schäfer. (London: Routledge, 2009), 57.

¹⁶ Datta, 'Anti-Americanism', 149.

¹⁷ Jon Herbert, Trevor McCrisken and Andrew Wroe, *The Ordinary Presidency of Donald J. Trump*. (Cham: Palgrave Macmillan, 2019), 187.

¹⁸ Dina Smeltz, 'Are we drowning at the water's edge? Foreign policy polarization among the US Public', *International Politics*, 59, no. 5 (2022), 22.

¹⁹ Datta, 'Anti-Americanism', 150.



good president (just 8% took the opposite view). When asked to assess Trump, recently-elected, 67% said that he *would be* a somewhat or very bad president, with 28% offering a positive assessment. Distinctions in public evaluations of Republican and Democratic politicians are also apparent in responses to questions which asked about the parties' respective presidential candidates, focusing again on confidence in their ability to manage international affairs. In 2008, 62% expressed some level of confidence for Obama and 50% for Hilary Clinton, both well ahead of John McCain (the Republican candidate, at 37%). In 2016, Clinton was well in advance of her Democratic contender, Bernie Sanders (68% versus 35%), and even farther ahead of the two Republican contenders (25% for Ted Cruz and just 12% for Trump). The 2012 survey did not ask about the presidential candidates for both parties, but did probe views of Obama being re-elected: a very large majority of the British public (73%) wanted this outcome, with just 11% backing the opposite result and 16% unsure.

Responses to the question gauging views of the US as a country show that the proportion of the public with a favourable assessment does vary over time, but that the variation is more constrained compared to the dramatic swings seen in the appraisals of presidents. But this indicator also shows that, under unpopular Republican presidents, positive views of the US tend to recede as well. The country was viewed more favourably under Obama and Biden than under Bush and Trump. The evidence for British public opinion in recent decades does seem to indicate, then, that views of the USA as a country can be influenced by opinions towards the current president. This is a feature that has been found in recent studies of attitudes in other countries, both leading allies of the USA and amongst its major competitors.²⁰ What was most recently a 'Trump effect'—his widespread unpopularity lowering the positive share of views of the US—was also to some extent a 'Bush effect'. When Obama replaced Bush in 2009, the proportion in Britain with a positive view of the USA increased from 54% in 2008 to 70%. When Trump in turn succeeded Obama, favourable views of the USA declined from 62% in 2016 to 50% in 2017. Finally, when Biden replaced Trump, positive views of the country rose from 41% in 2020 to 65% in 2021. Statistically, there is also a strong correlation between the two data series shown in Fig. 1 (coefficient: 0.81), which indicates a high level of co-variation between them.

More direct evidence bearing on this issue—of presidential assessments acting to as a lens through which some individuals' view the country—comes from a question asked in the 2005, 2009 and 2013 surveys, after the election or re-election, respectively, of Bush and Obama. In terms of whether they thought that the election outcome would lead to them having a more or less favourable view of the US (or would have no effect), the differences are stark. In 2005, 63% took the view that it would have an adverse effect on their view of the US, just 18% said it would be more favourable and 15% declared there would be no change. In 2009 and 2013, in contrast, clear majorities said that Obama's election and re-election would improve

²⁰ Agadjanian and Horiuchi, 'Has Trump Damaged'; Haman and Školník, 'Trump and the Image'; Fang, Li, and Liu, 'Chinese Public Opinion'; Azzi and Hillmer, 'The Presidents and the Polls'.



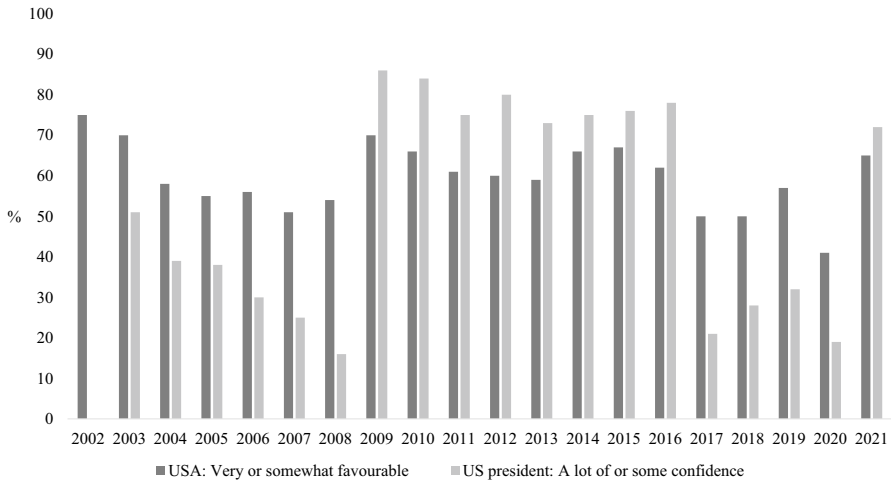


Fig. 1 Public opinion towards the USA and US presidents' handling of international affairs, 2002–21. Source: Author's analysis of Pew Global Attitudes survey datasets. Note: British samples only; weighted data.

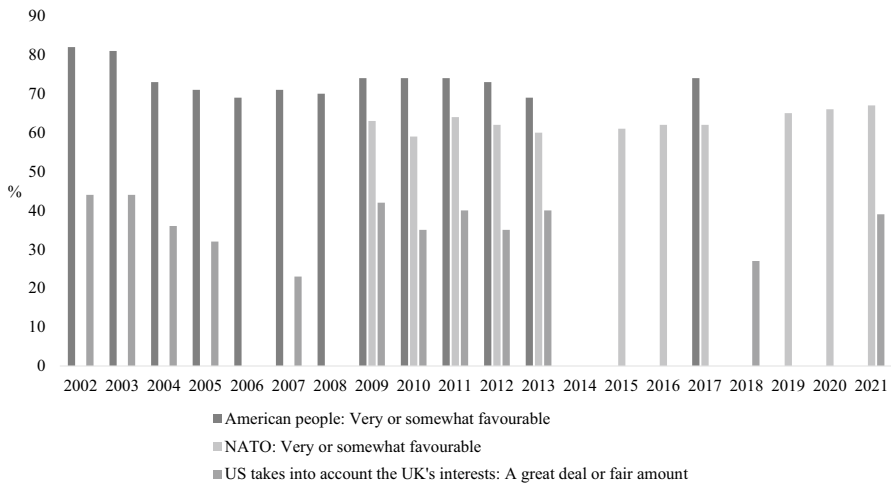


Fig. 2 Public opinion towards the American people, US consideration of UK interests, and NATO, 2002–21. Source: Author's analysis of Pew Global Attitudes survey datasets. Note: British samples only; weighted data. None of these questions was asked in the 2014 survey

their view of the US: respectively, 78% (compared to 6% unfavourable and 14% no change) and 65% (10% unfavourable and 19% no change).

Figure 2 charts the public's consistently favourable views of the American people (asked between 2003 and 2013 and repeated in 2017). This has been in the range of 69–74%, with the exception of 2003 during the Bush presidency when it was higher, at 83%, with feeling perhaps bolstered by support for the US after the 9–11 attacks



and the coalition intervention launched against Afghanistan. What is the British public's assessment of how the US treats its longstanding ally? A recent YouGov poll conducted in Britain and the US found that public opinion in the latter was much more likely to think that the two countries had a shared bond and a special relationship, an inversion of the situation that has often thought to prevail at the level of the political and diplomatic elites. The British public was more likely to adjudge that the two countries were close allies but did not have a special relationship and had other close bilateral links, or to say that the US and UK were not now particularly close allies.²¹ When asked, in the Pew GAP surveys, if the US takes Britain into account when making decisions regarding international policy, public opinion has clearly shifted in response to the incumbent in the White House and their foreign policies and approach to bilateral relations. During the Bush presidency, as shown in Fig. 2, the proportion saying a great deal or a fair amount decreased (from 44% in 2002 to 24% in 2008), but this trend halted when Obama came into office, ranging between 35 and 42% during his presidency (asked between 2009 and 2013). Asked only once, part-way, through Trump's presidency, the proportion fell again to 27%, but then rose when asked again in the first year of Biden's presidency (to 39%). Even taking these fluctuations into account, the proportion taking a more sceptical view of the consideration given to UK interests has always exceeded the share thinking that Britain's national interests are considered a great deal or a fair amount. But more generous views of the extent of US consideration have been higher during periods of Democratic occupancy of the White House. This prevailing scepticism about the representation of interests in bilateral relations with the US seems to be a longer-term feature of public opinion, given earlier research found that, during the 1980s, 'Western European nation also think the USA is not sensitive to their country's interests or views'.²²

Finally, Fig. 2 shows that public opinion in Britain towards NATO (asked from 2009 onwards) has generally been stable, showing a consistent majority with favourable views of the organisation (ranging between 59 and 67%). This includes the Trump presidency (where it stood at between 62 and 66%), a period marked initially by strong criticisms from the president of the organisation's supposed obsolescence and its role regarding fighting terrorism, the longstanding issue of burden-sharing and the contribution of European member states to collective defence, and how the latter linked to the US's willingness to uphold the Article 5 treaty commitment.²³ This recent pattern of aggregate stability in attitudes aligns with the high levels of support for NATO shown in many West European countries, including Britain, in the Cold War period.²⁴

²¹ Camilla Walden, 'Americans are twice as likely as Britons to believe the US and UK share a "Special Relationship"', YouGov, June 11th 2021. Available at: <https://yougov.co.uk/topics/politics/articles-reports/2021/06/11/americans-are-twice-likely-britons-believe-us-and->.

²² Smith and Wertman, 'US-West European Relations', 114.

²³ Stanley R. Sloan, 'Donald Trump and NATO: Historic Alliance Meets A-historic President', *Chaos in the Liberal Order: The Trump Presidency and International Politics in the Twenty-First Century*, ed. Robert Jervis, Francis J. Gavin, Joshua Rovner and Diane N. Labrosse (New York: Columbia University Press, 2018), 223–6.

²⁴ Smith and Wertman, 'US-West European Relations', 20.



Figures 3, 4 show aggregate-level opinion in Britain using the TT surveys, for the period 2002–2014. Figure 3 shows the following indicators: the percentage approving of the president's handling of international policies; the percentage that desired a strong leadership role for the US in world affairs; and the percentage saying that NATO is still essential for Britain's security. Figure 4 features two indicators about the US: the percentage with a somewhat or very favourable opinion of the US (asked between 2002 and 09); and the average score based on a 'thermometer' rating of feelings towards the US (asked from 2009 to 14). For the latter indicator, which ranged from 0 to 100, zero represented a very cold (unfavourable) feeling, 50 denoted not particularly warm or cold, and 100 represented a very warm (favourable) feeling.

The evidence shown in Figs. 3 and 4 exhibits some similarities to the data from the Pew GAP surveys. Again, there is a consistent majority supportive of NATO's role in providing for Britain's national security, ranging from 60 to 76%. In response to an equivalent question, for the period 1967–91, consistent majorities of the British public took the view that NATO was essential for Britain's security.²⁵ This staunch backing for NATO on the part of the British public may reflect the enduring role that it has played in national security and defence policy since the outset of the post-war period, and the longstanding bipartisan underpinnings of Britain's involvement in NATO as expressed in the positions of the two major parties, Labour and Conservative.

Evaluations of US presidents also showed the marked variation seen earlier on. Positive appraisals of Bush were low or very low between 2002 and 08, with his ratings somewhat worse between 2006 and 08 (ranging between 17 and 20%) compared to 2003–05 (26–35%). The change in White House incumbency saw a similar dramatic year-on-year increase in public opinion, from 18 to 82%. In every year, there was majority approval of Obama's handling of international policies (61–82%). Interestingly, the 2013 survey also featured an equivalent question asking about the US government's management of international policies, which elicited a much lower level of approval, at 44%. Assessments of the role that the USA should play on the international stage were initially very high under Bush (72% in 2002) and then fell away, ranging between 54 and 58% in 2003–05 and then 47–50% from 2006 to 08. When Obama arrived in the White House, public opinion became more favourable, rising to 64% in 2009 and higher still to 72% in 2010. It then settled at 57–72% between 2011 and 2014. This provides some evidence perhaps of attitudes towards presidents—here, involving a generally unpopular incumbent being replaced by a very popular successor—influencing wider evaluations of the US.

Feelings towards the US (Fig. 4) also tended to be positive across the presidencies of Bush and Obama, for both indicators. The mean score based on the feeling thermometer ranged between 55 and 68, while a majority maintained a favourable view (between 65 and 77%).

To provide a more effective comparison of public opinion during the periods of recent Republican and Democratic presidents, the data shown in Figs. 1, 2, 3, 4 were averaged across all available survey years per presidency (for Biden, this

²⁵ Clements, 'British Public Opinion', 76.



was only based on the 2021 survey). This summary picture of the data is reported in Table 1. In recent decades, based on the Pew GAP surveys (shown in the upper part of Table 1), British public opinion has been somewhat more favourable towards Democratic than Republican presidents. In other words, there is evidence of a ‘pro-Democratic’ tendency, but only for some of the questions. This is evident for the question asking directly about presidential performance on world affairs, with the average proportions expressing confidence in Bush and Trump during their respective periods in office much lower than that seen for Obama and Biden. Also, overall, favourable views of the US as a country were somewhat lower under Trump, but not Bush’s time in office. Likewise, the generally sceptical assessments of whether the US takes British interests into account when making foreign policy decisions were more pronounced under Trump (27% choosing a great deal or a fair amount) compared to the three predecessors (36–39%). British public opinion was quite negative towards Bush during his time in office, in some respects, but was even more so during Trump’s tenure. In contrast, though, views of the American people were highly favourable under Bush, Obama, and Trump (this question not asked in the 2021 survey). Similarly, support for NATO was high and stable across presidents, Democratic and Republican (the NATO question did not feature in the Pew GAP surveys during the Bush presidency).

Based on the TT survey data (shown in the lower part of Table 1), covering most of the Bush (2002–08) and Obama presidencies (2009–14), there are similarly positive views of NATO under both White House incumbents. For views of whether the US should play a leadership role in world affairs, desirability for this was higher under Obama than Bush, but was a majority view nonetheless in each case. The data also replicate the considerable variation in evaluations of these presidents’ handling of the international situation. This patterning corresponds with findings from earlier search, which found there was a pro-Democratic patterning to public opinion in the 1970s and 1980s, with evaluations of Jimmy Carter (1977–81) being more favourable than those of Ronald Reagan (1981–89).²⁶

Does this pro-Democratic tendency show up in the responses to other questions asked in the Pew GAP surveys? Another question gauging approval or disapproval of presidential performance on international affairs—asked infrequently—enables comparison of recent Republican and Democratic presidents. As shown in Fig. 5, there is a clear contrast in the British public’s assessments of Obama and Bush, with the former receiving much higher approval ratings. This also extends to the comparison of Bush and his Democratic predecessor, Bill Clinton. For Bush’s ratings, we can see a clear decline from 2002 to 2003, as opinion moves from being broadly split to being much more skewed in a negative direction, given the heated debates—domestically and internationally—in the run-up to and then after the invasion of Iraq in March 2003.

As well as asking about presidential performance, the Pew GAP surveys have gauged approval or disapproval towards the foreign policy agendas of recent presidents. The actual number of policies asked about for each president has varied (between 4–8 items), so the data here show the level of approval for each policy

²⁶ Smith and Wertman, ‘US-West European Relations’, 126.



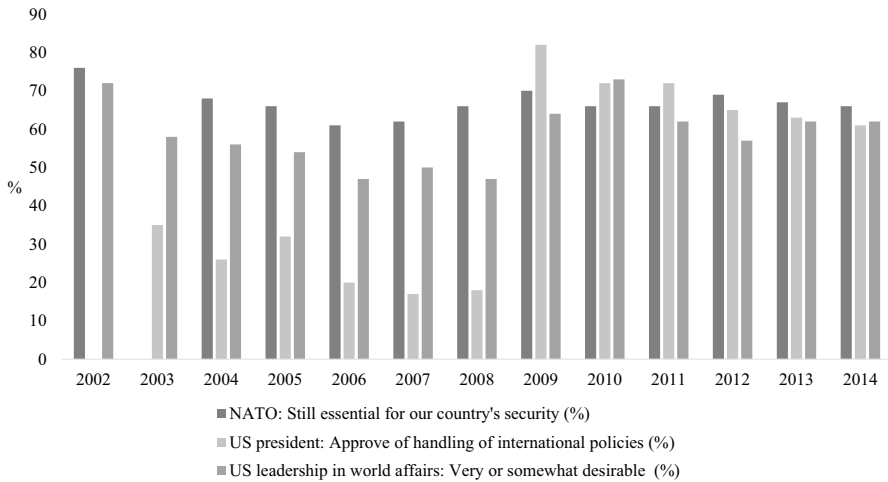


Fig. 3 Public opinion towards NATO, US role in world affairs, and US presidents' handling of international policies, 2002–14. *Source:* Author's analysis of TT survey datasets. *Note:* British samples only; weighted data

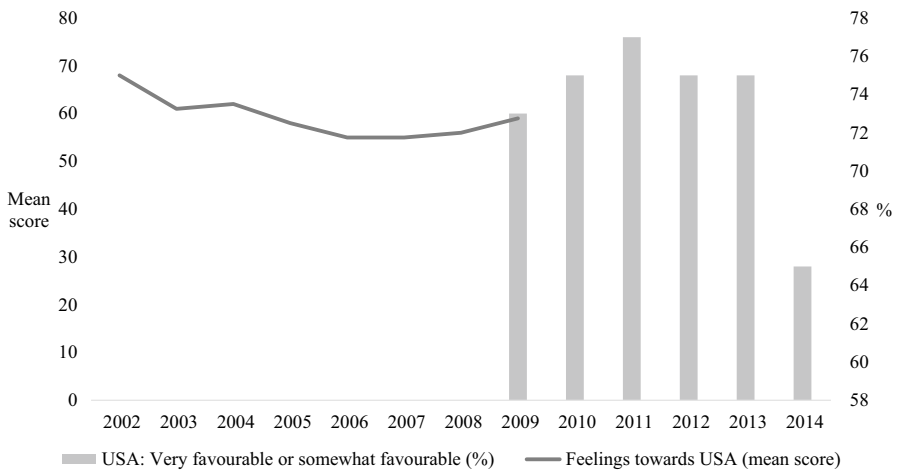


Fig. 4 Public opinion towards the USA, 2002–14. *Source:* Author's analysis of TT survey datasets. *Note:* British samples only; weighted data

and the average approval rate (across the set of policies) per president. Policy approval was gauged on two occasions for Bush (2001 and 2002) and Trump (2017 and 2019), and once for Obama (2009) and (so far) Biden (in 2021). The results are shown in Table 2 (for Bush and Obama) and Table 3 (for Trump and Biden). The full question wordings in the original surveys have been paraphrased and abbreviated for ease of presentation. Comparing Tables 2 and 3, average policy approval, amongst the British public, was much higher for Obama (68%)



Table 1 Summary of public opinion during each presidency

Question	Bush	Obama	Trump	Biden
<i>Pew GAP</i>				
Percent with some confidence or a lot of confidence in the US president to do the right thing in world affairs	33	78	25	72
Percent with a very favourable or somewhat favourable view of Americans	74	73	74	–
Percent with a somewhat favourable or very favourable view of the USA	60	64	50	65
Percent saying the US takes the interests of the UK into account a great deal or a fair amount when taking international policy decisions	36	39	27	39
Percentage with a somewhat favourable or very favourable view of NATO	–	61	64	67
<i>Transatlantic Trends</i>				
Percent approving very much or somewhat of how the US president is handling international policies	25	69	–	–
Percent saying that it is very or somewhat desirable that the US exerts strong leadership in world affairs	55	63	–	–
Feelings towards the USA (mean score)	59	59	–	–
Percent with a very favourable or somewhat favourable view of Americans	–	73	–	–
Percent saying NATO is still essential	66	67	–	–

Source: Author's analysis of Pew Global Attitudes survey datasets

Note: British samples only; weighted data



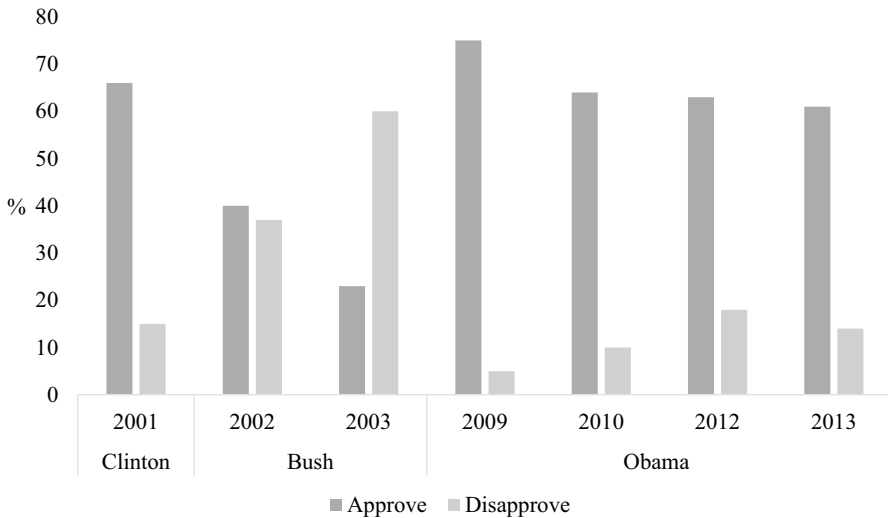


Fig. 5 Public opinion towards the international policies of US presidents. *Source:* Author's analysis of Pew Global Attitudes survey datasets. *Note:* British samples only; weighted data

and Biden (82%) than for their Republican counterparts. Agreement with Bush's policies—averaged at 41% and 53%, respectively—was considerably higher than that expressed for Trump (just 21% in 2017 and 32% two years later). The clear differentiation in British public opinion in levels of support for Democratic and Republican presidents encompasses specific foreign policies, as well as their general performance in managing international affairs.

Moving beyond performance assessments and policy appraisals, further questions asked by the Pew GAP surveys gauged the British public's views of Trump and Biden's leadership attributes or personality characteristics. These took the form of respondents being asked to say whether each president possessed each of several positive or negative attributes. This comparison is shown in Table 4. Trump was assessed on seven attributes (in 2017) and Biden on four of these (in 2021). In terms of positive characteristics as a leader, the public rated Biden much more highly in terms of being a strong leader (61% to 39%) and being well-qualified to lead the US (76% compared to just 16%). Very small proportions rated Biden as dangerous (17%) or as arrogant (13%), whereas very large majorities said the same about Trump (69% and 89%, respectively), as well as being intolerant (77%; this was not asked of Biden). For two other attributes not asked of Biden, only 27% affirmed that Trump cared about ordinary people, while 39% thought that he was charismatic. Albeit based on a limited comparison of the two most recent presidents, the pro-Democratic tendency is again apparent in public opinion.



Table 2 Public opinion towards the foreign policies of Bush and Obama

Policy	Bush (2002)		Obama (2009)	
	Approve (%)	Policy	Approve (%)	Policy
US should not support the Kyoto Protocol	10	US-led military campaign against in Afghanistan	73	Closing the US military prison in Guantanamo Bay
US should develop a missile defense system even if it means withdrawing from ABM treaty	20	Calling Iraq, Iran and North Korea an Axis of Evil	32	Withdrawing US combat forces from Iraq by December 2011
Support for the death penalty	46	Putting tariffs on steel imports to the US	18	Sending additional troops to Afghanistan
Keep US troops in Bosnia and Kosovo	65	Trying Al Qaeda prisoners before military tribunals rather than in civilian courts	49	Stimulating the US economy through government spending
Support for free trade policies	66	Increasing US foreign aid to poor countries	90	
		Efforts to bring about Middle East peace	75	
		US policies in the Middle East	36	
Average approval	41		53	68

Source: Author's analysis of Pew Global Attitudes survey datasets

Note: British samples only; weighted data



Table 3 Public opinion towards the foreign policies of Trump and Biden

Policy	Trump (2017)		Trump (2019)		Biden (2021)	
	Approve (%)	Policy	Approve (%)	Policy	Approve (%)	Policy
Withdraw US support for international climate change agreements	14	US negotiations with the North Korean leader about the country's nuclear weapons program	66	US rejoining the Paris climate agreement	82	
Build a wall on the border between US and Mexico	13	US withdrawal from the Iran nuclear weapons agreement	25	US rejoining the World Health Organization	87	
Withdraw US support from the Iran nuclear weapons agreement	25	US increasing tariffs or fees on imported goods from other countries	29	US hosting a summit of democratic nations	84	
Withdraw US support for major trade agreements	17	US withdrawal from international climate change agreements	13	US allowing more refugees into the country	76	
Introduce tighter restrictions on those entering the US from some majority-Muslim countries	35	Building a wall on the border between US and Mexico	22			
Average approval	21	Allowing fewer immigrants into the US	37			
			32			82

Source: Author's analysis of Pew Global Attitudes survey datasets

Note: British samples only; weighted data



Table 4 Public opinion towards the leadership attributes of Trump and Biden

Attribute	Trump: 2017) (%) yes)	Biden: 2021 (%) yes)
Well-qualified to be president	16	76
A strong leader	39	61
Caring about ordinary people	27	-
Charismatic	39	-
Intolerant	77	-
Dangerous	69	17
Arrogant	89	13

Source: Author's analysis of Pew Global Attitudes survey datasets

Note: British samples only; weighted data

Group-level analysis

In aggregate, the British public has been broadly positive in its views of the US as a country and its people, and staunchly supportive of NATO. But its views of recent US presidents—their international role, foreign policy, and leadership traits—have varied markedly. This feature of public opinion in recent decades therefore underscores earlier research, with Crewe finding that ‘general attitudes of liking and trust are positive’, but which became ‘lukewarm when directed to the performance and judgement of the United States government and of particular presidents’.²⁷

This raises questions addressed in this second part of the analysis, as the focus moves from the aggregate level to the micro-level. Which groups in British society have been more (or less) supportive of recent US presidents (Democratic and Republican), and which have been more positive (or negative) in their views of the US, its people, and US–UK bilateral relations? Furthermore, has there been any notable variation in groups’ views of NATO? The analysis of group attitudes encompasses both socio-demographic variables and core political attitudes, using the Pew GAP and TT surveys.

Socio-demographic groups

A core set of socio-demographic variables were used to facilitate the analysis over time for the Pew GAP surveys. These are gender (men and women), age group (divided into four categories: 18–29, 30–44, 45–64, 65 and older), and educational attainment (using a binary categorisation of university level and below university level). The presentation of the results follows the same approach used in Table 1. For each question, the data have been averaged across all (available) years for each president (with the caveat that the data for Biden are from the 2021 survey only). This enables a clear comparison of attitudes across Democratic and Republican

²⁷ Crewe, ‘Britain’, 40.



presidents. The exception to be noted here are the data pertaining to views of the American people. Given that public opinion is consistently high and generally stable over time and show little variation, these data are not presented or discussed in depth in the tables that follow, but—for purposes of comparison—the percentages for core demographic groups and political attitudes are reported in Appendix 3 (for the Bush, Obama, and Trump presidencies; the question was not asked in 2021).

Within the overall pattern of strongly divergent assessments for the recent Democratic and Republican presidents seen earlier, Table 5 shows that men and women evaluated Bush and Obama at similar levels (the former low and the latter high), but women's evaluations of Trump were lower than those given by men (respectively, 19% and 32%). Across the age groups, assessments of Bush were broadly similar, as were the very positive evaluations of Obama. Positive appraisals of Trump, which were very low across-the-board, reached a nadir amongst those aged 18–29 years old (at just 18%). Based on level of education, those without some form of university level education were slightly more favourable in their assessments of Bush and Trump. Both groups registered positive ratings of the Democratic president's handling of international politics. In the 2021 survey, Biden received favourable assessments across all socio-demographic groups, broadly similar to the average levels seen for Obama, with some difference based on level of education (78% of those with university level experience, compared to 68% for those without).

What about attitudes towards the US as a country? The views of men and women towards the US were similar during the Bush and Obama presidencies, but men had slightly more favourable attitudes during Trump's time in office (58% compared to 52%), in the context of overall favourability being lower during his presidency. The levels of positive sentiment towards the US did not really vary across the different age groups, whether under a Republic or a Democratic incumbent. Moreover, the level of education did not differentiate views of the US during the Obama and Trump presidencies, although those with some form of university level education were somewhat more favourable during Biden's first year in the White House (68% compared to 58% for those without some form of university level education), and also slightly more so during Bush's presidency.

In terms of group attitudes towards NATO, there is evidence than men have been somewhat more favourable than women over recent years (data are not available for the Bush presidency), but in the context of consistent majority support being offered amongst both groups. There were not marked, or consistent, differences based on age, with majority support registered across all groups. Those educated to university level were particularly likely to be more supportive of NATO during Trump's presidency (75% compared to 59% of those educated to a lower level), a period in which the organisation's role and the member countries' contributions were politicised by the president's various statements on the issue. Previous research has shown that education 'makes citizens more inclined to support international cooperation',²⁸ and so the vociferous criticisms made by a more unilaterally-inclined President

²⁸ Harold Schoen, 'Personality Traits and Foreign Policy Attitudes in German Public Opinion', *Journal of Conflict Resolution*, 51 no. 3 (2007).



Table 5 Public opinion: Socio-demographic group

Socio-demographic group	Percent with some confidence or a lot of confidence in the US president to do the right thing in world affairs				Percent with a somewhat favourable or very favourable view of the USA				Percent saying that the US takes Britain's interests into account a great deal or a fair amount				Percentage with a somewhat favourable or very favourable view of NATO			
	Bush	Obama	Trump	Biden	Bush	Obama	Trump	Biden	Bush	Obama	Trump	Biden	Obama	Trump	Biden	
Women	33	81	19	75	62	66	44	61	38	40	26	41	55	61	61	
Men	34	76	32	68	58	62	55	68	34	38	29	35	67	68	72	
18–29 years	31	80	18	77	59	66	52	64	39	48	42	50	54	59	61	
30–44 years	35	79	24	71	61	62	49	64	34	35	22	43	62	63	63	
45–64 years	32	79	29	67	59	63	49	66	33	34	22	33	67	68	74	
65 and over	35	76	27	76	62	65	50	63	41	43	28	38	60	67	66	
University level education	36	76	29	68	62	64	51	68	27	32	31	35	67	76	69	
Below university level education	27	83	17	78	55	65	47	58	39	43	18	41	59	59	65	

Source: Author's analysis of Pew Global Attitudes survey datasets

Note: British samples only; weighted data



Trump—advancing his ‘America First’ agenda—may have heightened support for one of the principal multilateral security institutions for British foreign and defence policy.

Based on the more limited time period, the TT surveys enable analysis of views of recent presidents and towards the US based on the same set of socio-demographic groups used for the Pew GAP surveys (for gender and age; and using a broadly similar binary classification of education, with the exception of the 2003 survey, when a different measure was used and which is therefore excluded from the analysis). The data are shown in Table 6. The consistent differences in evaluations of Bush and Obama, across all groups, are immediately apparent. Across the board, ratings for Obama were generally very high and, for Bush, usually very low. There was a general consistency in the groups’ views of the US’s world role, in that—for both Bush and Obama—there was always majority support for the country playing a leading part in international affairs, although this support tended to be higher under the Democratic president.

Moving to the two indicators of feelings towards the US, a similar pattern is evident: that is, there is little variation in opinion across gender, age group and education, in the context of generally high levels of affinity for the US, whether measured by the ‘thermometer scale’ (for Bush and Obama, the latter only in 2009) or general (un)favourability (Obama only). Finally, across the groups there are generally high levels of support for the view that NATO is essential for security. Even so, the magnitude of support is greater amongst the older age groups (45–64 and 64 and older) compared to those aged 18–29. The level of support shows little variation based on gender or level of education. This pattern of broad-based support for NATO’s relevance for national security is similar to that seen for the Pew GAP surveys concerning NATO’s favourability, at least prior to the political tensions over NATO which were arose under the Trump presidency.

Party-political and ideological groups

There are two important reasons why the political and ideological underpinnings of public views on US–UK relations are worth examining in detail. Firstly, the scholarly literature on public opinion and foreign policy highlights that, for citizens, partisanship and ideology can represent ‘relatively stable and enduring political beliefs and attitudes,²⁹ and these political predispositions can therefore act as accessible ‘cues’ or ‘proxies’ for structuring views on foreign policy issues.³⁰ This may be particularly the case for foreign policy issues, which are, relative to domestic policy concerns, generally less salient for the British public.³¹ Party affiliations are relevant

²⁹ Benjamin I. Page and Marshall Bouton, *The Foreign Policy Disconnect: What Americans Want from Our Leaders but Don’t Get*. (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 2006), 239.

³⁰ Adam J. Berinsky, *In Time of War: Understanding American Public Opinion from World War II to Iraq*. (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 2009); Ole R. Holsti, *Public Opinion and American Foreign Policy*. Revised edition. (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2004); Clements (2018).

³¹ Clements, ‘British Public Opinion’, 46.



Table 6 Public opinion: Socio-demographic group

Socio-demographic group	Percentage approving very much or somewhat of the president's handling of international policies		Percent saying that it is very or somewhat desirable that the US exerts strong leadership in world affairs		Feelings towards the USA (mean score)		Percent very favourable or somewhat favourable towards the USA		Percentage saying NATO is still essential	
	Bush	Obama	Bush	Obama	Bush	Obama	Bush	Obama	Bush	Obama
Men	28	71	59	66	61	59	74	69	69	69
Women	22	68	51	62	57	58	70	65	65	67
18–29 years	26	71	51	61	57	56	76	56	56	58
30–44 years	25	68	54	61	58	59	70	64	64	63
45–64 years	26	68	57	64	60	60	72	72	72	72
65 and over	23	72	56	67	62	59	73	72	72	73
Lower level education (primary, secondary, other qualification)	25	68	55	61	60	59	72	68	68	68
Third level education (college, university)	19	70	52	66	56	58	73	64	64	67

Source: Author's analysis of TT survey datasets

Note: British samples only; weighted data



given that, ‘political parties and their leaders often serve as key cue-givers, and citizens are prone to rely on them when asked to consider topics remote from their daily experiences.’³² Moreover, ideological orientations are also important here, given the left–right ideological axis which has traditionally underpinned party and electoral contestation in Britain.³³

Second, previous research has offered up findings on the associations between party affiliations and public opinion towards the US or wider transatlantic relations. Cross-national research has produced important insights for the Cold War decades. One study found that, regarding west European public opinion, ‘Consistently, those on the political Right are more “Atlanticist” than are those on the Left.’³⁴ While another study broadly concurred, noting that supporters of larger left-wing parties were more likely than those backing large centrist or centre-right parties to see themselves as anti-American.³⁵ However, for Britain specifically, Crewe cautioned that there has not been ‘a period in which attitudes to the United States were the touchstone of partisan allegiance’, which was the case in some West European countries.³⁶

Thirdly, an Atlanticist orientation has been a principal component of the bipartisan consensus over post-war British foreign policy.³⁷ However, historically, there was a strand of ‘latent anti-Americanism’ within the left-wing of the Labour Party, with the right of the party generally more pro-Atlanticist on foreign and defence policy.³⁸ For these reasons, therefore, it is instructive to examine how contemporary views on US–UK relations relate to the British public’s party allegiances and ideological leanings. Is there evidence of partisan consensus or dissensus? Did the views of political or ideological groups change in response to a Republican or Democratic president?

Based on the Pew GAP surveys, Table 7 shows data for left–right ideology and party support (the latter was only available from 2009 onwards).³⁹ Classified on the basis of ideology, we can see that those on the left were generally less supportive of Republican presidents, manifested in their ability to manage international affairs. Just 12% of those who were left-wing offered a positive assessment of Trump, which was similar to that expressed for Bush (10%). Those in the centre or on the

³² Jason Reifler, Harold D. Clarke, Thomas J. Scotto, David Sanders, Marianne C. Stewart and Paul Whiteley, ‘Prudence, Principle and Minimal Heuristics: British Public Opinion toward the Use of Military Force in Afghanistan and Libya’, *British Journal of Politics and International Relations*, 16, no. 1 (2014), 28–55.

³³ Geoffrey Evans, Anthony Heath and Mansur Lalljee, ‘Measuring Left–Right and Libertarian-Authoritarian Values in the British Electorate’, *The British Journal of Sociology*, 47, no. 1 (1996), 93–112.

³⁴ Eichenberg, ‘Public Opinion’, 146.

³⁵ Smith and Wertman, ‘US–West European Relations’, 95.

³⁶ Crewe, ‘Britain’, 39.

³⁷ Dennis Kavanagh and Peter Morris, *Consensus Politics from Attlee to Major*. 2nd edition. (Oxford: Blackwell, 1994).

³⁸ Kavanagh and Morris, 99.

³⁹ Left–right ideology in the Pew GAP surveys is based on respondents’ self-placement on a scale, ranging from most left-wing to most right-wing. The scale values were collapsed into three broader categories of left-wing, centre, and right-wing. Supporting a political party was operationalised either from a question on vote intention or party feel closest to and recoded in a consistent way into the following categories: Labour; Conservative; other party (including the Liberal Democrats and minor parties); did not support a party or was unsure.



Table 7 Public opinion: Party support and left–right ideology

Political attitude	Percent with some confidence or a lot of confidence in the US president to do the right thing in world affairs			Percent with a somewhat favourable or very favourable view of the USA			Percent saying that the US takes Britain’s interests into account a great deal or a fair amount			Percent with a somewhat favourable or very favourable view of NATO					
	Bush	Obama	Trump	Biden	Bush	Obama	Trump	Biden	Bush	Obama	Trump	Biden			
Ideology: Left	12	80	10	78	43	54	37	54	21	35	21	33	62	65	66
Ideology: Centre	20	79	26	79	54	65	50	71	30	39	28	38	64	66	72
Ideology: Right	28	77	34	63	58	68	60	65	39	38	29	44	69	69	67
Party: Conservative	–	82	33	71	–	71	63	74	–	41	31	42	72	72	70
Party: Labour	–	85	20	80	–	66	41	58	–	44	28	38	63	65	70
Party: Other	–	73	22	74	–	58	45	63	–	34	25	35	60	68	73
None/don’t know	–	72	25	60	–	62	51	62	–	39	24	39	50	52	53

Source: Author’s analysis of Pew Global Attitudes survey datasets

Note: British samples only; weighted data



ideological right rated both Bush and Trump somewhat more highly, but still at low levels. There were similar views of Obama across the ideological spectrum, who was rated very highly in this regard (77–80%), in stark contrast to his Republican predecessor and successor. Based on the 2021 survey, those on the right were less supportive of Biden's conduct of international affairs (63%) as a Democratic president, but there was still majority support in all groups, and at a very similar level for those on the left (78%) and in the centre (79%).

Looking at views of the US as a country, those on the left have held less favourable views, compared to those on the right and in the centre, under every president. Under Obama, 54% of those on the left held a favourable view of the US, which rose to 65% of those in the centre and 68% of those on the right. A similar pattern was evident under Trump: 37% of those on the left, increasing to 50% of those in the centre and 60% of those on the right. More generally, across ideological groups, views of the USA were more positive under Democratic than under Republican presidents.

Based on political party preference, we can see that Conservative Party supporters were somewhat more supportive of Trump's handling of international affairs (33%), but in the context of much lower support across-the-board (the other groups ranged between 20 and 25%). Conservative (82%) and Labour (85%) supporters were both highly positive towards Obama's performance in this area, while Labour supporters were somewhat more favourable than Conservative backers towards Biden in 2021, at 80% versus 71%; but he received high ratings across the board. Conservative voters were most likely to hold favourable views of the US during the Trump presidency (63%), while Labour supporters were least favourable (41%). Positive views of the US were much higher for all groups during Obama's tenure in the White House compared to Trump's. Conservative supporters (71%) were the most favourable group in their appraisals of the US during the Obama presidency, followed by Labour voters (66%). For Biden's first year in office, a majority (58%) of Labour supporters held a positive view of the US, which was lower than the 74% of Conservative supporters.

Did assessments of NATO differ on the basis of core political attitudes? This is a particularly interesting area for investigation given the controversial pronouncements—noted earlier—about the organisation made by President Trump on the campaign trail and after taking office in January 2017. Moreover, research into views of NATO amongst Democratic and Republican supporters in the US found that opinion underwent polarisation after 2016, with the latter become more sceptical of—and the former more favourable towards—their country's involvement in NATO, a process driven by Trump's candidacy for and election as president.⁴⁰ In Britain, Jeremy Corbyn's leadership of the Labour Party, from 2015 to 20, gave rise to considerable scrutiny of his views on foreign and defence policy given his left-wing credentials, with his seeming refusal to endorse the collective defence of NATO marking him

⁴⁰ Kyung Suk Lee and Kirby Goidel, 'U.S. Public Support for the U.S.-NATO Alliance', *International Journal of Public Opinion Research*, 34, no. 2 (2022), 1.



out from his recent predecessors.⁴¹ Set against this, however, during Corbyn's leadership the Labour Party reiterated its longstanding commitment to Britain's role in NATO in the 2017 and 2019 general election manifestos.⁴²

Generally, variation based on left–right ideology was little in evidence in relation to NATO, with clear majorities of each ideological grouping holding favourable views under each president. There was no differentiation under Trump's presidency, when NATO became something of a political football: whether on the left, centre or right, the levels of support clustered close together, between 65 and 69%. Similarly, majorities of supporters of all parties held positive views of NATO under each president, and there was no evidence for greater variation during Trump's presidency, which coincided with Corbyn's leadership: 65% of Labour supporters backed NATO compared to 72% of Conservative supporters. Amongst those with no party preference, support for NATO was visibly lower due to the greater proportions who were unsure on the issue (Table 8).

Overall, we can see that there was some variation in attitudes towards US presidents based on core political attitudes, but these patterns were not consistent across Democratic and Republican presidents. Trump in particular, rather befitting his governing style, seems to have divided the British public to some degree based on left–right ideology and—to a lesser extent—party affiliation. Was attitudinal variation evident for the assessment of Trump's and (his predecessors') foreign policies, and for the leadership qualities of Trump and Biden? Table 8 reports the average approval—for each ideological and party group—for the set of foreign policies discussed already (with the exception of Bush due to lack of data on party support), as well as the proportion attributing negative and positive attributes to Trump and Biden (those asked in common in 2017 and 2019).

All ideological groups exhibit very high levels of average approval of Obama's and Biden's foreign policies. There is more variation evident in the approval of Trump's foreign policies, in 2017 and 2019, with support lowest amongst those on the left, but in the context of all groups showing much lower levels of endorsement for Trump's 'America First' agenda. For the evaluations of leadership qualities, those on the ideological left were least likely to think that Trump possessed positive characteristics (well-qualified to be president or a strong leader). Large majorities thought that Biden possessed these positive qualities, but even so support was rather lower amongst those on the right. All party-political groups strongly supported Obama's foreign policies, as well as those of Biden. Compared to Labour supporters, Conservative backers were more likely to approve of Trump's foreign policies, but this was still a minority view (as it was for all groups) in 2017 and 2019. Across

⁴¹ James Strong, 'Jeremy Corbyn's views on British defence policy lie far outside the mainstream', LSE British Politics and Policy Blog, 24 September, 2015, <http://blogs.lse.ac.uk/politicsandpolicy/jeremy-corbyns-views-on-british-defence-policy-lie-far-outside-the-mainstream/>; Bridget Kendall, 'The impact of Jeremy Corbyn's foreign policy', BBC News, 13 October, 2015, <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-politics-34465737>.

⁴² The Labour Party, *For the Many. Not The Few. The Labour Party Manifesto 2017*. Available at: <https://labour.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2017/10/labour-manifesto-2017.pdf>, 120. The Labour Party, *It's Time For Real Change. The Labour Party Manifesto 2019*. Available at: <https://labour.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2019/11/Real-Change-Labour-Manifesto-2019.pdf>, 101.



Table 8 Public opinion towards presidents' foreign policies and leadership attributes, by ideology and party support

	Ideology				Party support			
	Left (%)	Centre (%)	Right (%)	Conservative (%)	Labour (%)	Other party (%)	None/don't know (%)	
Average approval of Obama's foreign policies (2009)	67	72	66	71	75	71	64	
Average approval of Trump's foreign policies (2017)	9	21	28	25	16	20	22	
Average approval of Trump's foreign policies (2019)	21	31	42	41	24	35	29	
Average approval of Biden's foreign policies (2021)	88	84	81	81	87	91	74	
<i>Trump (2017)</i>								
Well-qualified to be president	4	13	24	23	11	17	13	
A strong leader	28	35	51	47	28	45	33	
Dangerous	84	75	63	66	76	74	64	
Arrogant	97	92	86	89	91	91	85	
<i>Biden (2021)</i>								
Well-qualified to be president	87	78	68	71	83	85	71	
A strong leader	70	61	55	54	71	69	49	
Dangerous	12	13	22	17	12	17	20	
Arrogant	12	12	16	13	16	9	13	

Source: Author's analysis of Pew Global Attitudes survey datasets

Note: British samples only; weighted data



Table 9 Public opinion: Party support and left–right ideology

Political attitude	Percentage approving very much or somewhat of president's handling of international policies		Percent saying that it is very or somewhat desirable that the US exerts strong leadership in world affairs		Feelings towards the USA (mean score)		Percent very favourable or somewhat favourable towards the USA		Percentage saying NATO is still essential	
	Bush	Obama	Bush	Obama	Bush	Obama	Obama	Bush	Obama	Bush
Ideology: Left	20	73	48	66	53	60	70	62	66	
Ideology: Centre	24	69	56	62	61	57	75	72	70	
Ideology: Right	31	70	60	68	63	55	74	68	69	
Party: Conservative	32	76	65	74	64	60	80	75	73	
Party: Labour	29	76	59	67	61	62	74	68	69	
Party: Other party	16	71	48	64	55	55	70	64	64	
Would not vote/ don't know/other response	24	65	48	57	57	57	70	61	69	

Source: Author's analysis of TT survey datasets

Note: British samples only; weighted data



party groups, large majorities and small minorities, respectively, thought that Trump and Biden possessed the negative qualities asked about in both surveys. For the positive qualities, Labour supporters were less likely to rate Trump as a strong leader compared to Conservative and other party supporters, while in nearly every case a majority attributed a positive characteristic to Biden. There is some further evidence of variation in evaluations of Trump, in particular, by ideological location and party support, but this occurs in the context of the groups often having similar majority standpoints when evaluating recent Democratic and Republican presidents.

The TT surveys also enable an analysis of views based on left–right ideology and party support.⁴³ The results are shown in Table 9. In terms of the evaluations of presidential handling of international affairs, there were similar—and generally very high—ratings of Obama across the three ideological groups. Those on the left were less likely to approval of Bush’s performance compared to those on the right (respectively, 20% and 31%), with those in the centre at 24%. Comparing Labour and Conservative supporters, large majorities endorsed Obama’s performance on the international stage, while similar—but this time much smaller proportions—provided a favourable assessment of Bush. Those supporting minor parties were least favourable in their views of Bush’s management of international affairs (just 16%). Views of whether it was desirable for the US to play a leading role internationally were higher under Obama than Bush, irrespective of ideological orientation or party-political affiliation. Those on the left were more reluctant for the US to play this role under Bush (48% compared to 60% of those on the right), whereas under Obama the ideological groups were closer together in their views. Those supporting a minor party or not expressing a preference for a party were least likely to endorse the US playing a leading role, under both presidents.

Affinity towards the US as measured by the ‘thermometer scale’ was consistently warm under Bush and Obama, across both ideological and party groups. Favourability ratings towards the US were high across-the-board during Obama’s presidency, with little variation based on ideological location and similar levels amongst supporters of the two main parties. Those on the ideological left were less warm—on average—towards the US during Bush’s presidency, but the mean values for Labour and Conservative supporters were similar.

Finally, in relation to NATO, there was no difference in the (majority) support expressed within ideological groups during Obama’s time in office, while under Bush’s presidency, all groups were strongly supportive, but those on the left somewhat less so than those in the ideological centre (62% percent versus 72%). Across party-political groups, support for NATO was very high under both presidents, with

⁴³ Each TT survey asked a question about voting behaviour. From 2002 to 13, the same question gauged how a respondent would vote at a (hypothetical) national election taking place tomorrow; in 2014, the question asked whether, and how, the respondent had voted at the 2014 European Parliament election. From the responses to these questions, four party support categories were constructed: Conservative; Labour; other party; none / would not vote / unsure. For ideology, the TT survey used a self-placement scale, using the same question in each survey: ‘In politics people sometimes talk of left and right. Where would you place yourself on a scale from 1 to 7, where 1 means the extreme left and 7 means the extreme right?’). These values were combined into the three categories of left-wing (values of 1–2), centre (values of 3–5), and right-wing (values of 6–7).



no marked differences between Conservative and Labour supporters. Research into opinion towards NATO in the 1980s similarly found that both groups generally offered majority support for membership, at a time of greater party-political divergence in foreign and defence policy, with Conservative voters tending to be relatively more favourable.⁴⁴ Overall, then, NATO's role in British defence and security is underpinned by broad-based support, across ideological and partisan categories, in both the Pew GAP and TT survey data.

The Labour Party, left-wing ideology, and attitudes towards the US

The wider political context of the Trump presidency might be seen to have offered conditions which could have promoted the (re)emergence of left-wing opposition—party-based or ideologically-based—to aspects of US–UK relations, given the right-wing incumbent in the White House with an the ‘America First’ agenda, and the Labour Party having been led by its most left-wing leader since the early 1980s. A leader who had made strong criticisms of the foreign policies of the Trump administration⁴⁵ and stated that the US was not the most important bilateral relationship for Britain.⁴⁶ In general, Corbyn ‘rejected the UK’s Atlanticism and liberal internationalism’.⁴⁷ Therefore, to probe some aspects of the data at a more granular level, Table 10 examines the association between party support, ideological position, and views towards the image of America, excluding the Bush presidency due to the lack of data for party support. Specifically, it compares the attitudes of those on the left versus those on the centre and right, amongst supporters of the Labour Party; and the attitudes of those on the right versus those on the left and centre, amongst those backing the Conservative Party.

Under the Democratic presidents, left-wing Labour supporters registered very high levels of support (85% in each instance), as was generally the case for the other party-ideological groups, albeit it was rather lower amongst those on the Conservative right in relation to Biden’s handling of international affairs. Labour supporters on the left were least likely to express confidence in Trump’s handling of international affairs (just 8% did so), showing lower levels than those on the ideological centre and right (but also very low, at 19%). In turn—Labour supporters—irrespective of their ideological position—exhibited less confidence than Conservative supporters (39% amongst those on the right and 38% for those on the left and in the centre).

⁴⁴ Clements, ‘British Public Opinion’, 80.

⁴⁵ Jeremy Corbyn, speech at Chatham House, May 12, 2017, <https://www.chathamhouse.org/sites/default/files/images/events/2017-05-12-Corbyn.pdf>.

⁴⁶ Lizzy Buchan, ‘Jeremy Corbyn says US is not Britain’s most important relationship as he hits out at “offensive” Donald Trump’, *The Independent*, January 14, 2018, <https://www.independent.co.uk/news/uk/politics/donald-trump-jeremy-corbyn-offensive-us-embassy-labour-special-relationship-a8158356.html>.

⁴⁷ Angelos Chrysosgelos, *Is there a populist foreign policy?* Research Paper. Europe Programme. (London: Chatham House, 2021), https://www.chathamhouse.org/sites/default/files/2021-03/2021-03-26-populist-foreign-policy-chrysosgelos_0.pdf, 8.



Table 10 Public opinion: Left–right ideology amongst Labour and Conservative supporters

	Percent with some confidence or a lot of confidence in the US president to do the right thing in world affairs		Percent with a somewhat favourable or very favourable view of the USA		Percent saying that the US takes Britain's interests into account a great deal or a fair amount		Percent with a somewhat favourable or very favourable view of NATO		
	Obama	Trump	Obama	Trump	Obama	Trump	Obama	Trump	
Labour: Left-wing	85	8	85	32	50	18	24	66	73
Labour: Centre or right-wing	84	19	80	43	63	33	49	67	69
Conservative: Right-wing	76	39	67	64	73	30	38	76	76
Conservative: Centre or left-wing	84	38	77	64	76	46	45	72	66

Source: Author's analysis of Pew Global Attitudes survey datasets

Note: British samples only; weighted data



When it comes to affinity towards the US, left-wing Labour supporters have had distinctive stance during recent presidencies, being consistently less likely to offer positive assessments of the country. This is the case both in relation to their co-supporters on the centre and right and—with larger differentials—both groups of Conservative backers. Under Trump, just 32% of left-wing Labour supporters held positive views of the US, compared to 54% and 50% under, respectively, Obama and Biden. For NATO, however, left-wing Labour supporters do not occupy a distinctive position, either from Labour backers on the ideological centre and right or from Conservative supporters (whatever their ideological location). From Obama onwards, 66–73% of left-wing Labour supporters have held favourable views of NATO. There is certainly no recent evidence, then, that left-wing Labour supporters have been markedly less positive in their stance towards NATO, which would have been in keeping with the more critical views of the organisation's role and utility held by their leader, Jeremy Corbyn. Across recent presidents, Labour supporters on the left were also least likely to think that the US took Britain's interests into account when making policy decisions (lowest at 18% during Trump's tenure).

When party supporters are divided into ideological groups, it is clear that left-wing Labour backers were highly critical of Trump's performance internationally, somewhat less enamoured with the US as a country, and more sceptical about whether Britain's interests were accounted for in bilateral relations. However, left-wing Labour supporters also proved to be strong backers of NATO and of Democratic presidents on the world stage.

Table 11 presents the results from replicating the analysis of ideological positioning within the two groups party supporters, using the TT surveys. The data availability here allows us to look at the combinations of party and ideological position under Bush. We can see a stark contrast in all groups' evaluations of Bush and Obama's conduct of international politics: the former ranked very low, and the latter scored very highly, irrespective of party and ideological combination. Across the groups, there was also greater enthusiasm for the US playing a leading role internationally under Obama's presidency compared to that of Bush. The barometer scale of feelings towards the US shows broadly similar levels of affinity under Bush and Obama. While, under Obama, all groups exhibit very high levels of approval of the US as a country. Stability characterises attitudes towards NATO, with all groups registering large majorities—across the presidencies of Bush and Obama—seeing NATO as essential for national security. There is again no evidence that Labour's left-wing supporters held distinctive—that is, less supportive—views on NATO (Table 11).

Conclusion

This article has provided an in-depth analysis of the 'image of America' in British public opinion over recent decades, encompassing Republican and Democratic presidents. In so doing, it responded to a clear gap in the scholarly literature regarding understanding of popular views of US–UK relations, while also engaging with—and



Table 11 Public opinion: Left–right ideology amongst Labour and Conservative supporters

	Percentage approving very much or somewhat of president's handling of international policies		Percent saying that it is very or somewhat desirable that the US exerts strong leadership in world affairs		Feelings towards the USA (mean score)		Percent very favourable or somewhat favourable towards the USA		Percentage saying NATO is still essential
	Bush	Obama	Bush	Obama	Bush	Obama	Obama	Bush	
Labour: Left-wing	27	79	57	69	57	62	73	66	68
Labour: Centre or right-wing	29	74	62	68	64	62	76	69	68
Conservative: Right-wing	35	75	68	77	66	60	81	74	76
Conservative: Centre or left-wing	28	75	61	72	62	62	79	74	73

Source: Author's analysis of TT survey datasets

Note: British samples only; weighted data



providing new insights alongside—other recent research in this area.⁴⁸ These insights concern both the dynamics of public opinion at the aggregate level and at the group level. The analysis of aggregate-level opinion has shown that there has been something of a pro-Democratic tendency amongst the British public as a whole. In some respects, the image of the US is generally more positive when Democratic presidents are governing the US. This was evident in terms of evaluations of presidents—their performance in international affairs and foreign policy offerings—and affinity for the US, but not for NATO, where the public's views are stable (and generally very positive) over time. Such a pattern reinforces what was seen in earlier decades, with public opinion being more favourable towards Carter in the 1970s compared to Reagan in the 1980s.⁴⁹ Moreover, the evidence also tends to suggest that—for the British public, as with attitudes in other countries—the US can sometimes be viewed through the lens of the incumbent in the White House and their degree of (un)popularity.

The findings from the aggregate level also tend to underline an earlier—and wider—conclusion that:

Attitudes wax and wane with the course of events. When the United States does things that Britons like, they applaud; when it does things to which they object, they boo.⁵⁰

Under Bush and to even a greater extent Trump, the British were public generally booing loudly and consistently, given there was a lot—both presidential performance and policy—to which they were objected. Under Obama, and in the early stages of Biden's tenure, the British were and are much more likely to be applauding, given there is considerably more that they seem to like and support. At the heart of this seems to be a strong public impulse to welcome and approve of presidents that are returning the US to the path of international cooperation, rejoining or reengaging with multilateral institutions and agreements.⁵¹

As the British public as a whole has shifted its views with the replacement of a Republican president by a Democratic successor, so have most or all societal groups that comprise it. There was more divergence in public opinion under Trump—up to a point—based on political attitudes, rooted in ideology and party preferences. In some respects, those on the left-wing and within the Labour Party tended to manifest more oppositional views, particularly under Trump. But, on the whole, a broad consensus—rather than dissensus—has tended to characterise attitudes amongst political and ideological groups.

Building on the insights generated by this in-depth study of public opinion in Britain, future research would do well to track how attitudes in Britain change or remain stable over the duration of Biden's first presidency and, looking forward, to whether recurrent features of public opinion reassert themselves if Trump or a Trumpian candidate takes the White House for the Republican Party at the 2024 presidential election. Moreover, while this article has focused on the

⁴⁸ Webb and Cook, 'British attitudes'; Ellis, 'British public opinion'; Webb, 'Observing America'.

⁴⁹ Smith and Wertman, 'US-West European Relations', 126.

⁵⁰ Rasmussen and McCormick, 'British Mass Perceptions', 534–5.

⁵¹ Datta, 'Anti-Americanism', 149.



external-facing aspects of the ‘image of America’—its role in the world, its bilateral links, and its wider embedding within the transatlantic alliance—there is also a need to examine contemporary British public opinion towards the internal-facing aspects of this image—the values, practices and institutions of US society, culture, and its political system.

Appendix 1

Information on the survey series.

Pew Global Attitudes surveys	Transatlantic Trends surveys
Annual cross-national surveys	Annual cross-national surveys
Time period: 2001 onwards	Time period: 2002–2014
Adults in GB/UK, aged 18 and older	Adults in GB/UK, aged 18 and older
Mode: Telephone interviews	Mode: Telephone interviews
Source: https://www.pewresearch.org/global/datasets/	Source: (https://www.icpsr.umich.edu/web/ICPSR/series/235)
Topline and group data (demographic and political)	Topline and group data (demographic and political)
Topics	Topics
US presidents: performance, policy, leadership attributes	US presidents: performance
USA: country, people	USA: country
US–UK relations: bilateral context	–
NATO	NATO

Appendix 2

The image of America: Topics and core question wordings.

Survey series	Topic	Core questions	Question coverage
Pew Global Attitudes Project	<i>USA: Country and people</i>	‘Please tell me if you have a very favorable, somewhat favorable, somewhat unfavorable, or very unfavorable opinion of the USA.’ ‘Please tell me if you have a very favorable, somewhat favorable, somewhat unfavorable or very unfavorable opinion of Americans?’	2002–21 2002–03, 2005–09, 2010–13, 2017



Survey series	Topic	Core questions	Question coverage
	<i>US presidents: Performance and policy</i>	'Now I'm going to read a list of political leaders. For each, tell me how much confidence you have in each leader to do the right thing regarding world affairs—a lot of confidence, some confidence, not too much confidence, or no confidence at all. The U.S. President.'	2001, 2003–21
	<i>US–UK relations (bilateral context)</i>	'In making international policy decisions, to what extent do you think the United States takes into account the interests of countries like Britain—a great deal, a fair amount, not too much, or not at all?'	2002–05, 2007, 2009–13, 2018, 2021
	<i>NATO</i>	'Please tell me if you have a very favorable, somewhat favorable, somewhat unfavorable or very unfavorable opinion of NATO, that is, North Atlantic Treaty Organization?'	2009–13, 2015–17, 2019–21
Transatlantic Trends	<i>USA: Country and people</i>	'Next I'd like you to rate your feelings toward some countries, institutions and people, with one hundred meaning a very warm, favorable feeling, zero meaning a very cold, unfavorable feeling, and fifty meaning not particularly warm or cold. You can use any number from zero to one hundred. If you have no opinion or have never heard of that country or institution, please say so. USA.'	2002–09



Survey series	Topic	Core questions	Question coverage
		'Please tell me if you have a very favorable, somewhat favorable, somewhat unfavorable or very unfavorable opinion of...? The United States'	2009–14
		'How desirable is it that the US exert strong leadership in world affairs?'	2002–14
	<i>US presidents: Performance and policy</i>	'Do you approve or disapprove of the way the president of the United States George Bush/Obama is handling international policies?'	2003–14
	<i>NATO</i>	'Some people say that NATO is still essential to our country's security. Others say it is no longer essential. Which of these views is closer to your own?'	2002, 2004–14

Appendix 3

Public opinion towards Americans, by socio-demographic group, party support and left–right ideology.

	% Percent with a very favourable or somewhat favourable view of Americans		
	Bush	Obama	Trump
<i>Socio-demographic group</i>			
Women	73	69	74
Men	75	76	74
18–29 years	71	72	70
30–44 years	75	73	73
45–64 years	74	73	77
65 and over	75	72	75
University level	74	75	73
Below university level	74	71	74



	% Percent with a very favourable or somewhat favourable view of Americans		
	Bush	Obama	Trump
<i>Political attitude</i>			
Left	71	70	68
Centre	73	76	77
Right	75	73	80
Conservative	–	77	80
Labour	–	75	73
Other party	–	70	77
None/don't know	–	68	69

Source: Author's analysis of Pew Global Attitudes survey datasets.

Note: British samples only; weighted data.

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