

Social inequality

Is Scotland more Nordic than liberal?

In this chapter we compare attitudes towards social inequality in Scotland with those in England, Denmark, Finland and Norway. If Scotland is more Nordic than liberal, then we would expect to see a divergence in social attitudes between Scotland and England, and a similarity between Scotland and the Nordic countries.

People in Scotland are most likely to think the income distribution is unfair

- 73% of people in Scotland say the distribution of incomes in Britain is unfair, compared with 65% in England.
- In the Nordic countries, where income inequality is much lower, only 38% of people in Denmark and 52% of people in Norway claim the income differences between high and low earners is unfair. In Finland, where income inequality has increased substantially, 63% claim the income distribution is unfair.

Scotland lies between England and the Nordic countries in its attitude towards buying better education and healthcare

- 46% of people in Scotland say that it is wrong for people to buy better education, while 42% say the same of buying better healthcare.
- In England the equivalent figures are 34% and 32% respectively.
- In Norway 70% feel it is wrong to buy better education, while 65% feel that way about buying better healthcare. The figures in both Finland (62% and 51%) and Denmark (60% and 50%) are also higher than in Scotland.

People in Scotland are most likely to say they live in an unequal society

- Only 11% of people living in Scotland claim British society is broadly equal with most people in the middle, compared with 17% of people living in England.
 - People in the Nordic countries are much more likely to feel their society is broadly equal – 53% in Norway, 51% in Denmark and 39% in Finland.
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People in Scotland are most likely to believe government has been unsuccessful in reducing income differences

- 37% of people in Scotland say that government in Britain has been ‘very unsuccessful’ at reducing the differences between those on high incomes and those on low incomes – compared with 29% in England.
 - The equivalent figure is much lower in the three more equal Nordic countries – 21% in Norway, 18% in Finland and just 11% in Denmark.
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Introduction

The Nordic countries (Denmark, Finland, Norway, Sweden and Iceland) are well known for their commitment to equality and social justice, for being able both to raise living standards and curb inequalities. In these countries the welfare state has attempted to provide universal protection and access to high-quality services, while government is actively involved in redistributing income from the rich to the poor in order to reduce the level of poverty and inequality generated by free-market capitalism (Christiansen et al, 2006).

In the Nordic tradition, there is also a strong commitment to ‘social investment’ that involves the state taking an active role in the economy. Labour market policies based on investment in education and training look to increase skills and participation in the workforce, while investment in family policies, by which we mean early childhood education and childcare services, helps working parents to manage their work-life balance. High levels of employment for women and men is the goal – for paid work and a high amount of tax revenue is crucial for the sustainability of the Nordic welfare model, which is more costly than a liberal approach.

Indeed, many Nordic governments impose a higher tax burden on their citizens (see Table 1). In 2020, the top income tax rate in Denmark was 55.9%, while in Finland it was 51.2% – this compares with 46.0% in Scotland and 45.0% in the rest of the UK. In Norway, however, the rate of tax has declined steadily over the past two decades, from 47.5% in 2000 to 38.2% in 2020, putting it below the top rate in the UK.

Table 1 Top statutory personal income tax rates

	2000	2005	2010	2015	2020
	%	%	%	%	%
Denmark	59.0	59.0	55.4	55.8	55.9
Finland	55.2	51.8	49.0	51.6	51.2
Norway	47.5	43.5	40.0	39.0	38.2
United Kingdom+	40.0	40.0	50.0	45.0	45.0

+ Following the devolution of income tax in Scotland, the top rate of income tax there was increased to 46% in 2017.

Source: OECD (2021a)

The liberal market model has tended to emphasise freedom and liberty. The rule of law and the free market provides a framework for the pursuit of private ends – individuals should be left to pursue their own goals and purposes (Deeming, 2020). Limited government and low tax rates are thought to encourage private enterprise and wealth creation, and the role of the (welfare) state is limited to providing a

residual or targeted safety net function that only offers assistance to the poorest sections of society.

In a liberal society, there is no desired end state beyond the rule of law and the market. Social democracy, in contrast, seeks to reduce inequality. The Nordic model has often been seen as the best exemplar of the social democratic approach while the Anglophone countries – the USA, Canada, Australia, New Zealand, along with the UK (England, Scotland, Wales, and Northern Ireland) and Ireland – have traditionally been closer to the ‘liberal’ model (Deeming, 2020).

Devolution has given Scotland some ability to depart from the liberal model – the Scottish Parliament provides ‘Scottish Answers to Scottish Questions’ (Bromley et al, 2003). In the discourse of Scottish National Party (SNP) politicians Scotland has increasingly come to be represented as a social democratic nation that would prefer a Nordic-style welfare state. Since it first entered government in 2007, the SNP has strengthened its commitment to social democracy, drawing lessons and learning from what it regards as the successful, small independent economies of Northern Europe – that is, the Nordic countries which are similar to Scotland in scale and geographically are very close (Scottish Government, 2007, 2008, 2013, Sustainable Growth Commission, 2018).¹

This outlook is reflected in a more ‘universalist’ approach to public policy in Scotland, that is, access to social protection and services are regarded as a social right and therefore made available to all, rather than only to those deemed to be in most need (Deeming, 2019). As a result the country has increasingly diverged from England in its social and fiscal policy. While university students in Scotland enjoy ‘free’ tuition (Graduate Endowment Abolition (Scotland) Act 2008), in the rest of the UK they have to pay tuition fees. Personal care is provided for ‘free’ to older people in Scotland who need it, whereas access to free care is means tested in the rest of the UK. The internal market in healthcare was dismantled in Scotland in 2004 (with the abolition of NHS Trusts), ‘free’ NHS eye and dental checks were introduced in 2006, while prescription charges were abolished in 2011, with none of these steps having been taken in England. Meanwhile a new Scottish welfare system of social security benefits and employability services is required to prioritise the human rights of those who use their services (Social Security (Scotland) Act 2018).

Scotland has also adopted some of the hallmarks of the social investment state. There has been an expansion of funded childcare for early years children and an increased emphasis on training that enables potentially marginalised groups to secure employment. Three particular examples where a policy initiative has been borrowed from Finland are a Baby Box scheme for newborn babies, a Housing First

¹ The SNP is a Scottish nationalist centre left social democratic political party in Scotland that has been in power since 2007. It has sought to make Scotland an independent social democratic state within the European Union (EU).

policy that priorities finding accommodation for those experiencing homelessness, and a Youth Guarantee.²

As noted earlier, the Nordic model is costly and requires a growing workforce and/or higher tax contributions to finance it. The Scottish Parliament acquired new income tax raising powers in 2017 – these give it the power to set all tax rates and most tax bands on earned income – and these have been used to increase the taxes of those on middle and higher incomes. The higher rate was set at 41% compared with 40% in the rest of the UK, while the top rate was increased from 45% to 46%. At the same time, the level of income at which people start to pay a higher rate of tax was lowered.

Public policy in Scotland has then come to have more of a social democratic character than is to be found elsewhere in the UK. But does this mean that attitudes in Scotland towards social inequality are now more Nordic than liberal? In order to address this question, this chapter compares attitudes in Scotland with, on the one hand, those in the Nordic countries of Denmark, Finland and Norway, and, on the other, the views expressed by people in England. If the creation of a more Nordic-style welfare system in Scotland reflects public attitudes, we would expect to see a divergence between social attitudes in England and those in Scotland, but a degree of convergence between social attitudes in Scotland and those of the Nordic countries such as Denmark, Finland and Norway.

This exercise has been made possible by the inclusion of Scotland for the first time in the data collection undertaken as part of the International Social Survey Programme (ISSP). Under this programme, member countries administer each year the same module of questions and in 2019 the module focused on attitudes towards social inequality. The data for Scotland were collected as part of the 2019 Scottish Social Attitudes (SSA) survey, while the data for England come from respondents to the 2019 British Social Attitudes (BSA) survey who were living in England (NatCen Social Research, 2021). The data for Denmark and Finland are taken from the first collective release of data from the ISSP 2019 Social Inequality module (ISSP Research Group, 2021), while the data for Norway come from the Norwegian 2019 Social Inequality survey (Norwegian Centre for Research Data, 2021). However, it should be noted that the five national surveys apply different age criteria to determine eligibility to be interviewed, and to ensure the results of the five surveys are strictly comparable, the analysis in this chapter is restricted to those aged 18-74.³

2 Under the Scottish Baby Box initiative launched in 2017, the government made a pledge that every baby born in Scotland will be given their own Baby Box of essential items needed to help new parents. Finland introduced baby boxes in 1938. Housing First Scotland, launched in 2018, aims to provide people experiencing homelessness and complex needs access to a permanent home. The Housing First approach was introduced in Finland in 2007. The Youth Guarantee, announced in 2020, aims to ensure everyone aged between 16 and 24 has the opportunity of work, education or training. A similar guarantee was first introduced in Finland in 2005.

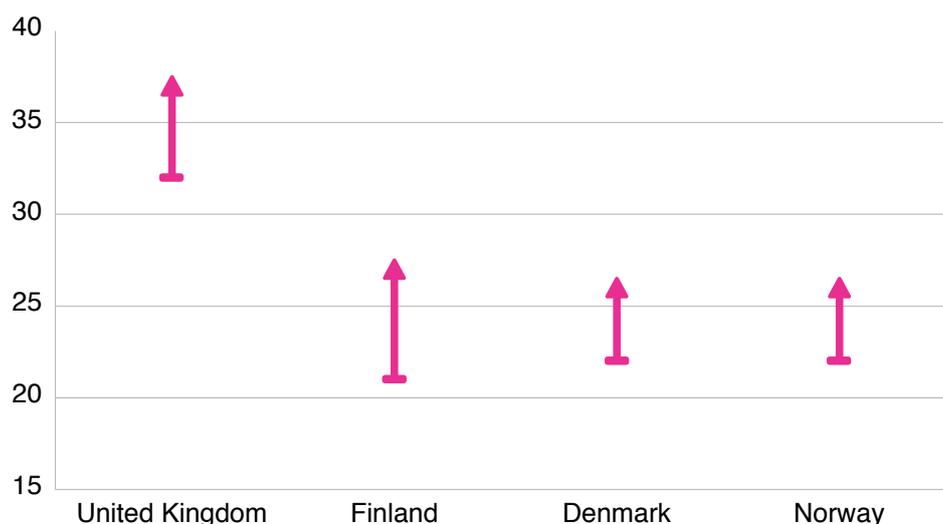
3 In Denmark and Norway people aged 18-79 are surveyed, in Finland it is people aged 15-74. The BSA surveys people aged 18-97+ (respondents aged 97+ are coded '97' in the datasets), and the SSA surveys people aged 16-97+ (respondents aged 97+ are coded '97' in the datasets).

The first section of the chapter examines comparative attitudes towards social inequality. It then considers public attitudes towards social justice or social fairness. We then examine the type of society that people feel they actually live in, and the sort of society they would ideally like to live in. The final section analyses comparative attitudes towards the role of government in addressing social inequality.

Attitudes towards social inequality

Historically, the Nordic countries have made some of the greatest efforts to curb the growth of inequality but income inequality has been increasing in the Nordics that reflects a more general international trend towards increased income inequality (Kvist et al, 2012, Aaberge et al, 2018). Figure 1 shows that in 2019 the Gini coefficient (shown as the point of the arrow), which measures income inequality on a scale from 0 (zero inequality) to 100 (total inequality), was 26 in both Denmark and Norway, and 27 in Finland. In contrast, the figure across the UK as a whole was, at 37, as much as 10 percentage points higher (OECD, 2021b). Although this still means that income inequality is higher in Denmark, Finland and Norway now than it was in the mid-1980s (see the line at Figure 1), the same is also true of the UK. Since the mid-1980s Finland has seen a substantial rise in income inequality. Meanwhile, within the UK itself, the Scottish Government has calculated that between 2016 and 2019 the Gini coefficient for Scotland alone was 32, compared with a higher rate of 35 for England (Scottish Government, 2020).

Figure 1 Gini coefficients of income inequality, mid-1980s and late-2010s



Source: OECD (2011: Figure 1, p. 24, updated with the latest available country data (OECD, 2021b)).

Respondents to each of our five surveys were asked to evaluate the distribution of income in their country by answering the following question.

How fair or unfair do you think the income distribution is in [COUNTRY]?

As Table 2 shows, they could answer by giving one of four answers ranging from ‘very fair’ to ‘very unfair’. Note that the surveys in both Scotland and England referred to Britain as a whole. Consequently, if Scotland is more social democratic in outlook than England we would expect respondents to the Scottish survey to have been more likely than those in England to say that the income distribution was unfair (even though the Gini coefficient is somewhat lower in Scotland), while we would certainly expect them to be more likely than those living in any of the Nordic countries to say that it was unfair.

Both expectations are fulfilled. Nearly three-quarters (73%) of people in Scotland say that the distribution of income in Britain is unfair. In contrast only two-thirds (65%) say the same in England. Meanwhile, only 38% of people in Denmark and only just over half (52%) in Norway and 63% in Finland believe that the income distribution in their country is unfair.

This difference between Finland on the one hand and both Denmark and Norway on the other is, given that the actual level of inequality in all three is much the same, rather intriguing – but may be explained by the growth in inequality since the mid-1980s which has been greatest of all in Finland (see Figure 1).

Table 2 Perceived fairness of income distribution, 2019

	England+	Scotland+	Denmark	Finland	Norway
Fairness of income distribution	%	%	%	%	%
Very fair	2	1	5	1	1
Fair	21	16	43	25	37
Unfair	52	53	33	54	46
Very unfair	13	21	6	9	6
Can't choose	10	8	14	9	10
<i>Unweighted base</i>	1302	674	965	938	1247

Base for England: BSA respondents living in England aged 18-74

Base for Scotland: SSA respondents living in Scotland aged 18-74

Base for Denmark, Finland and Norway: ISSP respondents living in each country aged 18-74

+ In Scotland and England the survey question asked about fairness in Britain.

Attitudes towards social justice

The social democratic ideal of universal access to public services is the hallmark of the Nordic model and so we would expect to find that people in those countries are more likely than people in England to feel it is unjust or wrong for wealthier people to purchase better public services. Meanwhile, if public opinion in Scotland is more social democratic than liberal in its outlook, attitudes there on buying better public services should be closer to the pattern in the Nordic countries than to opinion in England.

The ISSP module asked whether it is just – or right – for people with higher incomes to purchase better healthcare or better education as follows:

**Is it right or wrong that people with higher incomes can...
... buy better healthcare than people with lower incomes?**

They were also asked whether it was right or wrong for people with higher incomes to:

... buy better education for their children than people with lower incomes?

In both cases the possible answers were:

Very just, definitely right

Somewhat just, right

Neither right nor wrong, mixed feelings

Somewhat unjust, wrong

Very unjust, definitely wrong

Table 3 reveals that in each of the egalitarian countries of Denmark (60%), Finland (62%) and Norway (70%) a clear majority say that it is either 'definitely' or 'somewhat' wrong for people with higher incomes to be able to buy better education. In England only just over a third (34%) say that it is wrong or unjust. At 46%, the figure for Scotland is markedly higher than it is in England – but still well below that in any of the three Nordic countries.

Table 3 Attitudes towards people with higher incomes being able to buy better education, 2019

	England	Scotland	Denmark	Finland	Norway
Better education	%	%	%	%	%
Very just, definitely right	18	14	4	4	3
Somewhat just, right	21	18	14	11	10
Neither right nor wrong, mixed feelings	23	19	19	19	15
Somewhat unjust, wrong	16	17	22	27	35
Very unjust, definitely wrong	18	28	38	35	35
<i>Unweighted base</i>	1302	674	965	938	1247

Base for England: BSA respondents living in England aged 18-74

Base for Scotland: SSA respondents living in Scotland aged 18-74

Base for Denmark, Finland and Norway: ISSP respondents living in each country aged 18-74

There is less of a difference between countries in attitudes towards the buying of better healthcare – but the pattern is similar (Table 4). Although in Norway as many as 65% say it is either ‘definitely’ or ‘somewhat’ wrong, the figure in both Denmark (50%) and Finland (51%) is only around a half. In England, however, only a third (32%) believe that it is wrong. At 42%, the figure in Scotland is again higher than that in England, but is still well short of that in the three Nordic countries.

Table 4 Attitudes towards people with higher incomes being able to buy better healthcare, 2019

	England	Scotland	Denmark	Finland	Norway
Better healthcare	%	%	%	%	%
Very just, definitely right	17	12	6	8	4
Somewhat just, right	21	17	18	19	12
Neither right nor wrong, mixed feelings	26	26	22	19	17
Somewhat unjust, wrong	16	18	21	24	35
Very unjust, definitely wrong	16	25	29	27	30
<i>Unweighted base</i>	1302	674	965	938	1247

Base for England: BSA respondents living in England aged 18-74

Base for Scotland: SSA respondents living in Scotland aged 18-74

Base for Denmark, Finland and Norway: ISSP respondents living in each country aged 18-74

Overall then we find that attitudes towards this issue are more egalitarian or social democratic in Scotland than in England. However, Scottish social attitudes do not resemble those of the Nordic countries, where we observe a stronger sense of social justice and support for equality.

Under the Nordic model of welfare, citizens have social rights, not just democratic ones, and this is reflected in wide-ranging public policies that protect individuals against the risks they may face in their lives. This outlook is reflected in the fact that most people in the Nordic countries believe it is the government's responsibility to provide healthcare in the case of serious illness, and that it is the government's responsibility to provide a decent standard of living for those in old-age (Deeming, 2018). Consequently a question about the social rights of unemployed people that was included on the ISSP module should be a reliable indicator of how attitudes towards social citizenship rights differ between our five countries. Respondents were asked whether they agreed or disagreed that:

The government should provide a decent standard of living for the unemployed?

They could give one of five answers, ranging from 'strongly agree' to 'strongly disagree' (see Table 5).

In England, more than half (60%) either 'agree' or 'strongly agree' with the proposition. In Norway, in contrast, over three-quarters (78%) do so, while the equivalent proportions in Denmark (76%) and Finland (71%) are almost as high. Here, at 65%, the figure in Scotland is closer to those in the three Nordic countries than that in England. Indeed, nearly a quarter (24%) of people in Scotland 'strongly agree', a figure that more than matches that in Norway (22%).

Table 5 The government should provide a decent standard of living for the unemployed, 2019

	England	Scotland	Denmark	Finland	Norway
	%	%	%	%	%
Strongly agree	17	24	29	29	22
Agree	43	41	47	42	56
Neither agree nor disagree	21	22	15	18	14
Disagree	13	7	5	7	5
Strongly disagree	3	2	2	2	1
<i>Unweighted base</i>	1302	674	965	938	1247

Base for England: BSA respondents living in England aged 18-74

Base for Scotland: SSA respondents living in Scotland aged 18-74

Base for Denmark, Finland and Norway: ISSP respondents living in each country aged 18-74

Images of society

So far our analysis suggests that there is stronger support for a more just and more equal society in Scotland than in England, but that Scottish attitudes are not as supportive of social justice as those in

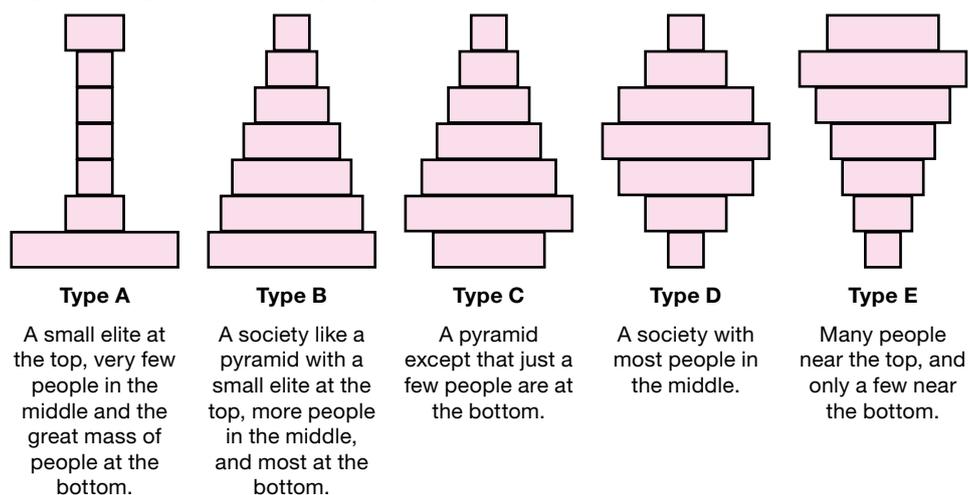
our three Nordic countries. However, we can also use the ISSP module to look more directly at the kind of society people in our surveys say that they would like, and compare their answers with their perception of the kind of society in which they are currently living. The questions which asked about these issues read as follows:

... First, what type of society is [COUNTRY] today – which diagram comes closest?

... What do you think [COUNTRY] ought to be like – which would you prefer?

Respondents were referred to five images (see Figure 2) that show a range of differently structured social distributions that vary in the degree of inequality that they portray. Of the five Type D is the most equal with most people in the middle, though Type E, in which most people are towards the top, might also be regarded as relatively equal.

Figure 2 Images of social inequality



If Scotland's view of society is indeed distinctly social democratic then we would expect a high level of support for a Type D society and that this preference is shared with the Nordic countries but not with England. We would also expect (given the current level of inequality – see Figure 1 above) that the gap between Scots' ideal society and their image of the (British) society in which they are living is greater than that for any other country.

In practice, the differences between the countries in respect of people's ideal type of society are, perhaps, rather less than we might have anticipated (see Table 6). The majority in each country said they prefer the Type D society, where most people are in the middle. This preference is only slightly more common in Finland (61%) than in Norway (57%) and Scotland (53%), while both Denmark (52%) and England (52%) are not far behind. To that extent all of our countries are similar in their level of support for living in a relatively equal society.

However, what is also true is that the level of support in the Nordic countries for the relatively egalitarian Type E society, is consistently higher, ranging between 23% and 29%, than it is in Scotland (25%) and especially England (19%). Indeed, whereas, 86% of people in Norway prefer either Type D or Type E, as do 84% in Finland and 80% in Denmark, in Scotland the equivalent proportion is 78% and in England only 71%. On this analysis Scotland appears once again to lie between the Nordic countries and England in its level of support for equality.

Table 6 Preferred type of society, 2019

Society in [COUNTRY] ought to be		Type A	Type B	Type C	Type D	Type E	Can't choose	Unweighted base
England+	%	1	7	14	52	19	6	1302
Scotland+	%	1	3	10	53	25	6	674
Denmark	%	1	3	12	52	27	5	965
Finland	%	*	2	9	61	23	4	938
Norway	%	*	2	9	57	29	2	1247

Base for England: BSA respondents living in England aged 18-74

Base for Scotland: SSA respondents living in Scotland aged 18-74

Base for Denmark, Finland and Norway: ISSP respondents living in each country aged 18-74

+ In Scotland and England the survey asked about British society.

Meanwhile, as Table 7 shows, more people in Scotland (25%) than in England (17%) feel they live in a highly unequal society, with an elite at the top and most people at the bottom (Type A), while similar proportions (37% in Scotland and 38% in England) see society as a 'pyramid' (Type B). In Denmark and Norway hardly anyone thinks that they live in a highly unequal society (Type A) while over half think they live in a relatively equal Type D society. In Finland, where the preference for a Type D society is strongest, rather fewer (39%) think they are living in such a society, while we saw earlier (Table 2) that people in Finland were most likely to think that the distribution of income in their country is unfair (a likely reflection of the substantial increase in inequality since the 1980s, see Figure 1).

Table 7 The type of society today, 2019

Society in [COUNTRY] today is		Type A	Type B	Type C	Type D	Type E	Can't choose	Unweighted base
England+	%	17	38	20	17	2	5	1302
Scotland+	%	25	37	16	11	3	5	674
Denmark	%	2	12	25	51	5	4	965
Finland	%	6	17	32	39	2	3	938
Norway	%	3	9	24	53	9	2	1247

Base for England: BSA respondents living in England aged 18-74

Base for Scotland: SSA respondents living in Scotland aged 18-74

Base for Denmark, Finland and Norway: ISSP respondents living in each country aged 18-74

+ In Scotland and England the survey asked about British society.

In any event, as we anticipated, the greatest disparity between people's views on how society is structured and how society ought to be structured is to be found in Scotland. A slight majority of people in Scotland (53%) say society ought to be like a Type D society with most people in the middle, yet only one in ten (11%) believe British society actually is a Type D society. The resulting gap of 42 percentage points is not only much larger than that in any of the Nordic countries, but is also bigger than the equivalent gap of 35 points in England.

The role of government in addressing social inequality

Given this disparity we might anticipate that people in Scotland want the government to take the initiative in tackling inequality, and that this is an outlook that they share with those living in the Nordic countries. However, trade union density is much higher in these countries (OECD, 2021c),⁴ which have a long history of collective bargaining and tripartite employment relations (that is collaboration between government, businesses and employees) (Christiansen et al, 2006). Consequently, respondents to our three Nordic surveys might be more likely than those in either Scotland or England to say that trade unions have a role to play.

This issue was addressed in the ISSP module by asking:

Who has greatest responsibility for reducing differences in income between people with high and low incomes?

Private companies

⁴ In 2019, trade union density in Denmark was 67.0% and 58.8% in Finland, compared to just 23.5% in the UK. Trade union density is defined as the number of net union members (i.e., excluding those who are not in the labour force, unemployed and self-employed) as a proportion of the number of employees.

Government**Trade unions****High-income individuals themselves****Low-income individuals themselves**

As Table 8 shows, the most popular answer in every country was the government. The majority in both Scotland (55%) and England (56%) gave that answer, as they did in Norway (59%) and Finland (50%), while a plurality did so in Denmark (43%). On this issue at least, it seems as though people in Britain and the Nordic countries are largely at one – both look to the state to tackle income inequality.

However, there are some differences of note. First, as we anticipated, compared with both Scotland (3%) and England (2%), people in Denmark (18%), Finland (12%) and Norway (11%) are more likely to look to trade unions to reduce income inequality. The relative weakness of trade unions in Britain appears to affect people's expectations of what they can be expected to achieve. Conversely, people in Scotland (17%) and England (14%) are somewhat more likely than those in Denmark (12%), Finland (12%) and Norway (10%) to name private companies. Much emphasis has been placed by recent UK governments on minimum wage legislation that sets a floor to the hourly rate that private companies (and others) can pay, while since 2015 the Scottish Government has been implementing a new flagship 'fair work' policy initiative that encourages employers to sign up to fair work practices, such as paying the Living Wage (which is higher than the minimum wage), reducing the gender wage gap, and avoiding the use of zero hours contracts.

Second, those living in the more egalitarian Nordic countries were more likely to respond by questioning whether there is a need for anyone to be reducing differences in income. As many as 13% gave this response in Denmark as did 7% in Norway and 6% in Finland. In contrast, only 4% said this in England and just 2% in Scotland. This, of course, has the effect of reducing somewhat the proportion of people in the Nordic countries who named any of the institutions, including government.

Table 8 Responsibility for reducing differences between people on high and low incomes, 2019

	England	Scotland	Denmark	Finland	Norway
Greatest responsibility is for...	%	%	%	%	%
Private companies	14	17	12	12	10
Government	56	55	43	50	59
Trade unions	2	3	18	12	11
High-income individuals themselves	1	2	2	4	3
Low-income individuals themselves+	3	3	2	5	n/a
Income differences do not need to be reduced	4	2	13	6	7
Can't choose	13	15	10	9	7
<i>Unweighted base</i>	<i>1302</i>	<i>674</i>	<i>965</i>	<i>938</i>	<i>1247</i>

Base for England: BSA respondents living in England aged 18-74

Base for Scotland: SSA respondents living in Scotland aged 18-74

Base for Denmark, Finland and Norway: ISSP respondents living in each country aged 18-74

+ 'Low-income individuals themselves' was not included as an answer option in the Norwegian survey.

But if government is widely thought to be responsible for reducing income differences, how successful are they thought to have been? This would seem a particularly pertinent question in Scotland where we have seen the gap between the kind of society that people would like and the one they believe they currently have is biggest, and where people are most likely to regard the current distribution of incomes as unfair. It would seem probable that people in Scotland are also most likely to believe that the government has been unsuccessful in reducing the income gap.

To ascertain whether this is the case we can examine the responses people gave when they were asked as part of the ISSP module:

How successful do you think the government in [COUNTRY] is nowadays in reducing the differences in income between people with high incomes and people with low incomes?

Respondents could give one of five answers ranging from 'very successful' to 'very unsuccessful' (see Table 9).

The results are striking. Very few people in each country claim the government has been successful in tackling income inequality. In all but Denmark over half think the government has been either 'quite unsuccessful' or 'very unsuccessful', while even in Denmark 43% hold that view. However, respondents in Scotland are the most critical. Here 37% of respondents say the government has been 'very unsuccessful', even higher than the 29% figure in England. In contrast, only 11% of people living in Denmark, 18% of those in Finland and 21% of those living in Norway claim the government has

been 'very unsuccessful' in reducing income inequalities.

In summary, most people are critical of their government's efforts to address income inequality, even those living in the more equal Nordic countries. However, people in Scotland are the most dissatisfied with their government's progress on this issue.

Table 9 Perceptions of government record in reducing the income differences between people on high and low incomes, 2019

	England	Scotland	Denmark	Finland	Norway
Government success	%	%	%	%	%
Very successful	1	1	*	1	1
Quite successful	5	3	5	7	9
Neither successful nor unsuccessful	27	26	32	22	26
Quite unsuccessful	32	27	32	34	35
Very unsuccessful	29	37	11	18	21
Can't choose	4	6	19	17	7
<i>Unweighted base</i>	1302	674	965	938	1247

Base for England: BSA respondents living in England aged 18-74

Base for Scotland: SSA respondents living in Scotland aged 18-74

Base for Denmark, Finland and Norway: ISSP respondents living in each country aged 18-74

+ In Scotland and England the survey question asked about the success of the government in Britain.

One of the key ways in which governments can reduce income inequality is through taxation, and in particular through imposing high taxes on high incomes. In Scotland, there has been a political appetite for higher levels of taxation to create a more equal society – as we noted at the beginning of this chapter the devolved government has introduced an income tax regime that is more progressive than that in the rest of the UK. The SNP claims that this approach is laying the foundations for a fairer Scotland and a new Nordic-style social investment welfare state.

Attitudes towards taxing high earners were addressed on the ISSP module by asking the following question:

Generally, how would you describe taxes in [COUNTRY] today for those with high incomes? Taxes are...

... much too high

... too high

... about right

... too low

... much too low

As in the case of other questions that asked respondents to evaluate the current position, respondents in England and Scotland were both asked about Britain as a whole. Thus, despite the fact that income tax for high earners is somewhat higher in Scotland, we would still anticipate, given the results we have observed so far, that people in Scotland are more likely than those in England to say that taxes for those on high incomes are too low. In contrast, given that the tax rate on high incomes is higher in Denmark and Finland than in Britain (see Table 1), we might well find that fewer people there think that taxes on those on high incomes are too low – but that the same would not necessarily be true in Norway where the top rate of income tax is now lower than that in Britain.

As Table 10 shows, people in Scotland are inclined to the view that taxes in Britain on high incomes are either ‘too low’ or ‘much too low’ – as many as 44% express that view, rather more than the 36% who do so in England. In Denmark and Finland where the top rates of income tax are highest we find that 30% of people in Denmark and 40% of people in Finland claim taxes for those on high incomes are too low. In Norway, where the top rate of income tax is lower than Britain, just under half (48%) feel that the taxation of those on high incomes is too low.

Table 10 Attitudes towards current tax levels for people with high incomes, 2019

	England+	Scotland+	Denmark	Finland	Norway
Tax levels for high earners	%	%	%	%	%
Much too high	7	4	7	4	2
Too high	19	15	18	14	11
About right	32	29	38	31	33
Too low	30	34	27	30	39
Much too low	6	11	3	10	9
Can't choose	6	7	7	10	6
<i>Unweighted base</i>	1302	674	965	938	1247

Base for England: BSA respondents living in England aged 18-74

Base for Scotland: SSA respondents living in Scotland aged 18-74

Base for Denmark, Finland and Norway: ISSP respondents living in each country aged 18-74

+ In Scotland and England the survey question asked about taxes for those on high incomes in Britain.

Conclusions

In this chapter we have compared attitudes towards inequality in Scotland with those in England, Denmark, Finland and Norway – benefiting from the inclusion of the ISSP ‘Social Inequality V’ module on SSA 2019.⁵

Overall we find that there is a greater concern about social justice in Scotland than in England. People in Scotland are more likely to say that Britain is an unequal society, and the desire to live in a more equal country is more widespread.

While attitudes towards social inequality and social justice are different in Scotland from those in England, they are perhaps differences of degree rather than of kind, as indeed previous research has suggested (Curtice and Ormston, 2012; Yarde and Wishart, 2020). Certainly, attitudes towards inequality in Scotland do not match the profile of Nordic social attitudes, at least at present. In the Nordic countries – where society is perceived to be more equal – we observe a much stronger sense of social justice and support for equality.

Even in the Nordic countries, though, most people are critical about their government’s efforts to address income inequality. However, we find that people in Scotland are the most dissatisfied with the government’s progress in tackling inequality. On the one hand, this concern may be thought to provide the Scottish Government with a strong and credible mandate for the steps it has taken to try to reduce inequality in Scotland. On the other hand, despite the efforts that the SNP have made so far, most people doubt that government has enjoyed much success in reducing differences of income – though whether they blame the Scottish or the UK government for that situation is not something we can address with the ISSP data.

If, as some people have suggested, Scotland is now a ‘social democratic’ country in its social attitudes we might perhaps have expected to see a greater divergence than we have observed between social attitudes in Scotland and those in England, and more evidence of convergence between Scotland and the Nordic countries. However, creating a welfare regime is a complex task, and change only happens slowly, incrementally over long periods of time. Past public policy constrains what a new policy can achieve, a new policy takes a while to make any difference to outcomes, while public attitudes may lag even further behind the ambitions of reforming politicians and policymakers.

If the Scottish Government continues to pursue a more ‘social democratic’ path, and *if* policy eventually influences public opinion, Scottish social attitudes might resemble Nordic social attitudes more closely in the future (assuming too that attitudes in the Nordic

⁵ Until now, the unit of analysis in comparative research using the ISSP was largely limited to Britain as a whole (see Taylor-Gooby, 1998; Deeming, 2018). While BSA does interview people in Scotland, there are usually too few in any one year to permit separate analysis of public opinion in Scotland (Scottish Government, 2018).

countries themselves do not change) (Deeming, 2018). But only time – and further research – will tell.⁶

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⁶ The ISSP Social Inequality module has previously been conducted in 1987, 1992, 1999, 2009 – but these modules were not administered in Scotland. Thus at present we do not have any evidence on whether attitudes in Scotland are closer to those in the Nordic countries than they were.

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