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THE BRITISH MONARCHY AND NATIONAL IDENTITY: PUBLIC PERCEPTIONS AND ATTITUDES IN CONTEMPORARY BRITAIN, 2001–2022

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ABSTRACT

This article examines the relationship between the British monarchy and national identity between 2001 and 2022, a period in which the institution remained constitutionally stable while the society around it changed in significant political, social, cultural, and generational ways. It argues that public attitudes during this period are best understood not as a single measure of popularity but as a decoupling of two things usually assumed to move together: symbolic attachment to the monarchy and active support for it as an institution. Drawing on an original questionnaire of 141 respondents, the study finds that symbolic recognition of the monarchy remained high while institutional commitment was markedly weaker. A large majority of respondents, 77.3 percent, saw the monarchy as a representation of British national identity, and 70.2 percent believed royal traditions strengthened national unity. Yet only 48.2 percent supported the institution's continuation, and only 24.8 percent expressed high trust in it. This gap of roughly twenty-nine points between symbolic representation and active support is the central finding of the study. It was widest among younger respondents, 42.6 percent of whom regarded the monarchy as less relevant to their generation. The article situates this pattern against the historical literature and the accession of King Charles III in 2022, and concludes that the monarchy's future position depends less on whether it is recognised as a national symbol, which it still is, than on whether that symbolic attachment can be converted into institutional support, which the generational evidence suggests is weakening. The study's sample is a self-selected convenience sample and its findings are therefore indicative rather than representative; its value lies in identifying a structure of attitudes that larger representative studies can test.

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Introduction

The British monarchy entered the twenty-first century as a constitutionally limited but symbolically central institution, and it remained so throughout the period from 2001 to 2022. Its formal powers were settled; its place in public life was not. During these two decades British society became more diverse, more critical of inherited institutions, and more attentive to questions of equality, accountability, and public cost. The growth of digital and social media changed how the Royal Family was seen and discussed, a series of family controversies drew sustained critical attention, and the long reign of Queen Elizabeth II ended in 2022 with the accession of King Charles III. Across these changes the monarchy continued to be described, by supporters and critics alike, as a symbol of national identity and historical continuity. What is less clear, and what this article sets out to examine, is what that symbolic status actually meant for public support of the institution.

Most discussion of the monarchy's standing treats attitudes toward it as a single dimension, measured by whether people are broadly for or against it. This article argues that this framing obscures the most important feature of contemporary opinion. The evidence presented here suggests that symbolic attachment to the monarchy and active support for it as an institution had become partly separated: people could recognise the Crown as a representation of national identity while withholding commitment to its continuation and withholding trust in it as an institution. The central claim of this study is therefore that public opinion in this period is best understood as a decoupling of symbolic recognition from institutional support, rather than as a simple balance of supporters against opponents.

This claim is grounded in original questionnaire evidence from 141 respondents. The data show that a large majority recognised the monarchy as a national symbol, while a much smaller proportion actively supported its continuation or trusted it as an institution. The same data show that this gap was most pronounced among younger respondents. The argument developed here is that the symbolic importance of the monarchy, which earlier scholarship has emphasised, can no longer be read as evidence of institutional security, because the two had begun to move apart. The accession of Charles III in 2022 brought this question into focus: a new monarch inherited an institution that was still widely recognised as a symbol but was increasingly judged on contemporary expectations of relevance, transparency, and accountability.

The article proceeds in six further sections. The first sets out the historical relationship between the monarchy and British national identity across the period and establishes the distinction between symbolic authority and institutional support on which the argument depends. The second describes the questionnaire and its method. The third states the study's limitations and the scope of the claims its data can support. The fourth presents the findings, organised around the gap between symbolic attachment and institutional commitment. The fifth discusses what this pattern means in relation to the qualitative responses and the historical literature. The conclusion returns to the central argument and its implications for the monarchy's position under Charles III.

The Monarchy and British National Identity, 2001–2022

The British monarchy entered the twenty-first century as an old constitutional institution operating within a very different social and political environment from that in which the modern constitutional monarchy had developed. By 2001 the Crown no longer exercised the direct political authority associated with earlier periods. Its principal importance rested on constitutional continuity, ceremonial representation, historical tradition, and its capacity to provide a visible symbol of the British state. Vernon Bogdanor explains that the British monarchy has survived partly because it adapted to the development of parliamentary government and democratic politics rather than attempting to preserve the political powers of earlier monarchs.[1] Rodney Brazier similarly notes that during the twentieth century the constitutional powers of the sovereign were increasingly transformed into constitutional influence, while the institution itself had to adapt to changes in British society.[2]

This distinction between political power and symbolic authority is central to understanding the monarchy's relationship with national identity after 2001. The Crown could remain politically limited while continuing to carry cultural and symbolic importance. The monarch represented the state at ceremonial occasions, opened Parliament, received foreign leaders, undertook state visits, and participated in national commemorations. These functions gave the monarchy a continuing public presence even though elected governments and Parliament exercised political authority. The distinction between political power and symbolic authority therefore became central to the modern position of the Crown.[3] It is precisely this distinction that the present study develops: if the monarchy's standing rested on symbolic rather than political grounds, then the strength of that standing cannot be assumed from its symbolic visibility alone, but must be examined in terms of whether symbolic recognition translated into institutional support.

The monarchy's connection with British identity was also shaped by the historical development of the idea of Britain itself. British identity has never been based on one single political, religious, or cultural characteristic. It developed through the interaction of constitutional traditions, monarchy, Parliament, empire, religion, military history, popular culture, and shared public institutions. Linda Colley has shown how British identity historically developed through a combination of political and cultural experiences rather than through a single institution.[4] The monarchy consequently became one of several important symbols through which Britishness could be represented, rather than its sole or defining source. This is significant for the interpretation offered here, because it means that a weakening of attachment to the monarchy need not indicate a weakening of British identity itself; identity could be reallocated toward other institutions, a possibility that the study's respondents raise directly.

The importance of tradition should not be understood simply as the preservation of an unchanged past. Traditions can be adapted, reinterpreted, and presented to new generations. Eric Hobsbawm and Terence Ranger's work on the invention and use of tradition demonstrated how public rituals can establish connections between past and present and can serve social and political purposes.[5] David Cannadine's discussion of ritual similarly emphasises the importance of ceremonial performance in

giving political institutions a visible and emotional form.[6] In the British case, royal ceremonies, jubilees, weddings, coronations, funerals, and national commemorations have provided occasions through which historical continuity could be publicly expressed. This symbolic dimension became particularly visible during the reign of Queen Elizabeth II. Her long period on the throne allowed her personal identity to become closely associated with continuity, duty, service, and stability. Ben Pimlott's study of Elizabeth II shows how the Queen's public role developed through the changing political and social conditions of the second half of the twentieth century.[7] Her position after 2001 was consequently not simply that of a constitutional office-holder. For many people she represented a connection with an earlier generation and with a longer historical memory of Britain. As the findings below show, this personal association was unusually strong and, importantly, was not transferred automatically to the institution she headed.

At the same time, the symbolic importance of the monarchy did not make it immune from criticism. The beginning of the twenty-first century brought stronger expectations concerning equality, accountability, transparency, and individual rights. The monarchy was therefore increasingly judged not only according to its historical importance but also according to contemporary democratic values. Robert Hazell and Bob Morris argue that modern monarchies operate successfully only when they remain compatible with democratic constitutional principles and maintain public acceptance.[8] The question was consequently not simply whether Britain should retain a monarchy, but whether the institution could continue to justify its position within a changing democratic society. The constitutional character of the monarchy remained an important protection against some forms of political criticism. Because the monarch normally acts on ministerial advice and does not participate directly in party politics, the Crown can occupy a position above everyday political competition. This helped Queen Elizabeth II maintain an image of neutrality and continuity. However, constitutional neutrality did not remove the monarchy from public debate. The behaviour of individual members of the Royal Family, the cost of the institution, its relationship with the media, and its relevance to younger generations could all influence perceptions of the institution as a whole.[9]

The changing media environment was particularly important. The relationship between monarchy and mass communication has a long history, but the twenty-first century introduced a much faster and more interactive media environment. Edward Owens' historical study of the Windsor monarchy demonstrates that media presentation has long been central to the public image of the Crown. The royal household learned to present the monarchy through family life, emotion, duty, and public ceremony in order to maintain a relationship with the wider population.[10] This historical pattern remained relevant in the twenty-first century, although the communication environment became much more complex. By the period 2001–2022, newspapers, television, twenty-four-hour news, websites, online publications, social media, and video platforms all contributed to the construction of royal images. Royal institutions could communicate directly with audiences through official channels, while critics could also publish their views without depending on established media organisations. The result was greater visibility but also greater vulnerability.[11] Roger Mortimore's study of public opinion on the monarchy demonstrates that opinion polling has increasingly focused

not only on the institution but also on the performance and popularity of individual members of the Royal Family. The growth of polling therefore contributed to a closer relationship between royal behaviour, media coverage, and public judgement.[12] Mortimore's distinction between attitudes toward the monarchy as an institution and attitudes toward individual members is directly relevant to this study, which finds a parallel and arguably deeper separation between symbolic attachment and institutional support.

This separation became particularly visible when royal controversies involved questions of personal conduct. Media coverage in 2019 placed renewed attention on Prince Andrew's relationship with Jeffrey Epstein and on the question of whether his continued public role was compatible with the reputation of the institution.[13] The significance of the episode was not limited to the individual involved. It raised questions about judgement, accountability, privilege, and the ability of the monarchy to respond to public criticism. The decision of the Duke and Duchess of Sussex to step back from senior royal duties in 2020 created a different but equally important debate, bringing questions of family unity, race, media pressure, generational expectations, and institutional culture into public discussion. The episode also showed how the monarchy had become part of an international digital media environment in which royal disputes could reach audiences far beyond Britain. Public visibility could strengthen popularity when royal events generated positive emotional responses, but the same visibility could expose the institution to criticism.

Financial accountability became another important issue. The financing of the monarchy had long been debated, but the Sovereign Grant Act 2011 provided a new statutory framework. The Act established a Sovereign Grant paid by the Treasury to support the official duties of the monarch and required accounting arrangements for the Royal Household, coming into force on 1 April 2012.[14] The legislation brought the financial support of the monarchy within a clearer statutory and accounting framework, but it did not remove the political debate about royal expenditure. Supporters could argue that royal spending was connected with constitutional duties and national representation, while critics could argue that a hereditary institution should be subject to particularly strong financial scrutiny because its members are not elected.[15] The financial issue was especially sensitive during periods of economic pressure, when public discussion of royal expenditure could become connected with wider concerns about inequality and the cost of living.

The monarchy also faced an ideological challenge from republicanism. Republican arguments questioned the principle of hereditary headship and proposed an elected head of state. Republican criticism became more visible when questions concerning royal privilege, public expenditure, family controversies, and constitutional accountability received media attention.[16] Yet the existence of republican debate did not mean that the monarchy had lost its popular or cultural significance. It meant, rather, that the constitutional position of the Crown increasingly existed within a competitive debate about the meaning of democratic representation. The relationship between monarchy and national unity was similarly complex. Royal ceremonies could provide occasions for shared participation across social and political divisions, particularly during major jubilees and national commemorations. The monarchy could therefore act as a symbolic focus for collective identity

without being the only source of national unity. Parliament, democratic citizenship, shared institutions, regional identities, and cultural diversity were also important components of British identity.[17] This point is reinforced by the United Kingdom's internal diversity. Scotland, Wales, Northern Ireland, and England possess different historical experiences and forms of political identity, and debates surrounding Scottish nationalism and the 2014 independence referendum demonstrated that British identity could not simply be equated with loyalty to the Crown.[18]

At the same time, the monarchy remained connected with the wider Commonwealth and with Britain's international identity. The sovereign's role as Head of the Commonwealth gave the institution an international dimension that went beyond the domestic constitutional system, and Elizabeth II's long association with Commonwealth countries contributed to perceptions of the monarchy as an institution linking different historical experiences.[19] Changing debates about empire, colonialism, race, and Britain's historical responsibilities increasingly influenced the way this role was understood, which was particularly relevant to the question of multiculturalism. Britain in the twenty-first century was a more ethnically and culturally diverse society than earlier generations, and the monarchy therefore faced the challenge of representing a population whose identities could not be understood solely through older ideas of Britishness. Tariq Modood's work on British multiculturalism emphasises the importance of understanding British identity within a diverse civic society.[20] The monarchy's continuing relevance consequently depended partly on its ability to represent a broader conception of British society.

The generational question brought these pressures together. Younger people were generally less likely than older people to regard the monarchy as highly important. The National Centre for Social Research found that in 2021, 31 percent of respondents considered it very important for Britain to continue to have a monarchy and 24 percent considered it quite important, while among people under thirty-five only 14 percent considered the monarchy very important, compared with 44 percent among those aged fifty-five and above.[21] These figures do not necessarily demonstrate a simple movement from monarchism to republicanism. They may instead indicate a weakening of automatic attachment. Younger people have grown up in a society shaped by digital communication, multiculturalism, greater awareness of equality, and more direct participation in political and social debate. They may therefore judge the monarchy according to whether it appears relevant to contemporary life rather than simply accepting it as an inherited institution. This interpretation is consistent with the central argument of the present study: if attachment to the monarchy is increasingly conditional on perceived relevance rather than inherited as a matter of course, then symbolic recognition and institutional support are likely to diverge, and to diverge most sharply among the young.

The accession of Charles III in 2022 brought this question into sharper focus. Elizabeth II's death on 8 September 2022 ended a reign of more than seventy years, but the Crown passed immediately to Charles. The House of Commons Library notes that the new monarch succeeded immediately upon the death of his predecessor and that the accession process involved the Privy Council, Parliament, government, and established constitutional and ceremonial practices.[22] The absence of a

constitutional gap demonstrated the strength of institutional continuity. The emotional response to Elizabeth II's death, the public mourning, the lying-in-state, the funeral, and the extensive media coverage, also demonstrated that the monarchy remained capable of generating collective feeling. These events showed that the monarchy continued to operate not only through constitutional rules but also through emotion, memory, ritual, and public participation.[23] The transition nevertheless represented more than a simple change of monarch. Charles III inherited an institution that faced questions about its future that were more visible than during the earlier decades of Elizabeth II's reign. Charles had already developed a public identity through his environmental interests, charitable work, architecture, and community activities before becoming King, but as monarch he had to operate within the constitutional expectation of political neutrality. His reign therefore created a new balance between personal interests and institutional responsibilities, in a media environment very different from that of 1952.[24]

The period 2001–2022 can consequently be understood as one in which the British monarchy remained constitutionally stable while becoming increasingly contested in social and cultural terms. Its historical importance remained considerable, but its legitimacy could no longer depend only on tradition. The historical evidence suggests that the monarchy's relationship with British national identity was neither fixed nor disappearing, but being renegotiated. The Crown continued to provide a visible symbol of continuity and tradition, while British identity itself was becoming more diverse and more closely connected with democratic citizenship, multiculturalism, regional identities, and changing social values. The remainder of this article examines, through original questionnaire evidence, how that renegotiation registered in public attitudes, and argues that its defining feature was the growing distance between what the monarchy symbolised and what the public was prepared to commit to it.

Methodology

To examine public perceptions of the monarchy's role in British national identity between 2001 and 2022, a structured questionnaire was designed and administered. The instrument was developed to capture attitudes across several dimensions: the perceived importance of the monarchy, support for its continuation, trust in it as an institution, its role in representing national identity, the contribution of royal traditions to national unity, perceptions of Queen Elizabeth II's leadership, the monarchy's adaptation to modern society, and its relevance to younger generations. A final open-ended question invited respondents to reflect on whether Britain would lose part of its identity without the monarchy and to give reasons for their view, in order to capture qualitative insight alongside the closed responses.[25]

The questionnaire began with a short introduction explaining the purpose of the research and securing informed consent. It was then divided into two main parts. The first collected demographic information on age and gender, used to examine whether attitudes varied across social and generational groups. The second addressed the thematic areas described above through a mix of closed-response items, using ordinal scales such as "very important" to "not important at all" and "very high" to "very low," and one open-ended item. Responses were recorded and analysed using

both quantitative and qualitative methods: closed items were tabulated as counts and percentages, and open-ended responses were grouped into themes by recurring content.[26]

A total of 141 respondents completed the questionnaire. The demographic composition of the sample is reported in the findings below. The analysis that follows reports the distribution of responses for each item, including the proportion of responses left blank or unclear, which is retained in the tables rather than excluded so that the basis of each percentage is transparent. Percentages are calculated on the full sample of 141 unless otherwise stated. Because several items offered grouped response categories, the findings report the categories as they were recorded; where a summary table in the original instrument combined moderate categories differently from the detailed item, this is noted so that the figures can be read consistently.

Limitations and Scope of the Study

The claims this study can support are shaped by the nature of its sample, and these limits should be stated plainly before the findings are presented. The questionnaire was completed by a self-selected convenience sample of 141 respondents. It was not drawn from a random or stratified sampling frame, and it is therefore not a representative sample of the British public. Two features of the sample make this especially important. First, the sample is skewed toward younger respondents: 71.6 percent were under the age of forty-five, and only 4.3 percent were aged sixty or above, whereas the older age groups that national studies consistently find most supportive of the monarchy are substantially under-represented here. Second, the sample is skewed toward female respondents, who made up 55.3 percent of the total. A sample weighted toward the young and composed disproportionately of women cannot be taken to reflect the distribution of opinion in the population as a whole, and in particular is likely to understate overall levels of support for the monarchy relative to a representative sample.

Three further limitations follow. The study reports descriptive statistics only. It does not apply inferential tests, and it does not report formal cross-tabulations of attitudes by demographic group, because the summary data available do not permit the calculation of statistical significance. Where the article discusses generational differences, it draws on the study's own relevance item and on published representative data from the National Centre for Social Research, rather than on significance-tested relationships within the present sample; these generational observations should therefore be read as consistent with, but not independently demonstrated by, inferential analysis of this dataset. In addition, the proportion of blank or unclear responses is substantial on some items, reaching 20.6 percent on the question of political disintegration, which reduces the confidence that can be placed in those particular distributions. Finally, the open-ended responses were grouped thematically by the researcher, an interpretive process that, while systematic, is not free from judgement.

These limitations do not render the study without value, but they do determine the kind of value it has. The purpose of the analysis is not to estimate the true level of support for the monarchy in the British population, which would require a representative sample. Its purpose is to identify the

structure of attitudes, the way different attitudes toward the monarchy relate to one another within the same respondents. The central finding of this study, the gap between symbolic recognition and institutional support, is a relationship between variables rather than a population estimate, and such internal relationships are more robust to sampling bias than absolute levels are. A convenience sample cannot tell us what proportion of Britons support the monarchy. It can, however, show that the same people who affirm the monarchy as a symbol may decline to support it as an institution, and it can indicate where that gap is widest. The findings below should be read in that spirit: as an indicative mapping of how public attitudes toward the monarchy were organised in this period, offered as a basis for the hypotheses that larger representative studies are equipped to test.

Findings

Demographic Composition of the Sample

The sample of 141 respondents was concentrated among younger and middle-aged adults. The largest age group was 30–44, with 57 respondents (40.4 percent), followed by 18–29, with 44 respondents (31.2 percent). Respondents aged 45–59 numbered 28 (19.9 percent), while only 6 respondents (4.3 percent) were aged 60 and above, and a further 6 (4.3 percent) did not give a clear age. By gender, 78 respondents (55.3 percent) were female and 57 (40.4 percent) were male, with 6 (4.3 percent) unclear. As set out in the previous section, this composition, weighted toward the young and toward women, is the principal reason the findings are treated as indicative rather than representative. It is reported here in full so that every subsequent percentage can be read against the sample that produced it.

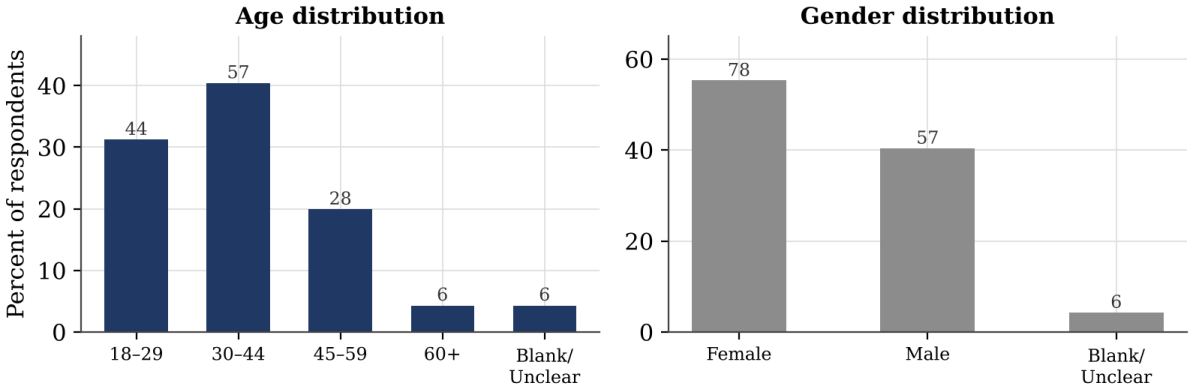
Table 1. Age distribution of respondents (N = 141)

Age group	Count	Percentage
18–29	44	31.2%
30–44	57	40.4%
45–59	28	19.9%
60+	6	4.3%
Blank/Unclear	6	4.3%

Table 2. Gender distribution of respondents (N = 141)

Gender	Count	Percentage
Female	78	55.3%
Male	57	40.4%
Blank/Unclear	6	4.3%

Figure 1. Demographic composition of the sample (N = 141)



Symbolic Attachment: The Monarchy as a National Symbol

On the measures of symbolic attachment, the monarchy's standing was strong. Asked whether the monarchy represents British national identity, 109 respondents (77.3 percent) said it strongly or somewhat represents it, while only 8 (5.7 percent) said it weakly represents it or does not represent it at all, with 17 (12.1 percent) neutral and 7 (5.0 percent) unclear. Asked whether royal traditions strengthen national unity, 99 respondents (70.2 percent) strongly agreed or agreed, against 13 (9.2 percent) who disagreed, with 20 (14.2 percent) neutral and 9 (6.4 percent) unclear. On the question of whether the monarchy was important to Britain today, 94 respondents (66.7 percent) regarded it as very important or important, 25 (17.7 percent) as not very important or not important at all, 15 (10.6 percent) as neutral, and 7 (5.0 percent) unclear.

These three measures establish that, among this sample, the monarchy retained a strong claim on national symbolism. A clear majority continued to associate the Crown with British identity, with national traditions, and with a general sense of importance. On the symbolic dimension, in other words, the monarchy remained securely established.

Table 3. The monarchy and national identity and unity (N = 141)

Question / Response	Count	Percentage
Does the monarchy represent British national identity?		
Strongly / Somewhat represents	109	77.3%
Neutral	17	12.1%
Weakly / Does not represent at all	8	5.7%
Blank/Unclear	7	5.0%
Do royal traditions strengthen national unity?		
Strongly agree / Agree	99	70.2%
Neutral	20	14.2%

Strongly disagree / Disagree	13	9.2%
Blank/Unclear	9	6.4%

Institutional Support: Continuation and Trust

The picture changes sharply when attention turns from what the monarchy represents to whether respondents were prepared to support it as an institution. Asked whether the monarchy should continue to exist in the United Kingdom, only 68 respondents (48.2 percent) said yes. A substantial 44 (31.2 percent) said no, 22 (15.6 percent) were unsure, and 7 (5.0 percent) were unclear. Support for continuation therefore fell short of a majority, and the combined proportion who opposed continuation or were unsure (46.8 percent) was almost equal to the proportion in favour.

Trust in the monarchy as an institution was weaker still. Only 35 respondents (24.8 percent) reported very high or high trust. The largest single group, 48 respondents (34.0 percent), reported only moderate trust, while 44 (31.2 percent) reported low or very low trust and 14 (9.9 percent) gave no clear answer. On this measure, those expressing low trust outnumbered those expressing high trust, and fewer than one in four respondents placed strong trust in the institution.

Table 4. Core attitudes: importance, continuation, and trust (N = 141)

Question / Response	Count	Percentage
How important is the monarchy to Britain today?		
Very important / Important	94	66.7%
Neutral	15	10.6%
Not very important / Not important at all	25	17.7%
Blank/Unclear	7	5.0%
Should the monarchy continue to exist in the UK?		
Yes	68	48.2%
No	44	31.2%
Unsure	22	15.6%
Blank/Unclear	7	5.0%
How much trust in the monarchy as an institution?		
Very high / High	35	24.8%
Moderate	48	34.0%
Low / Very low	44	31.2%
Blank/Unclear	14	9.9%

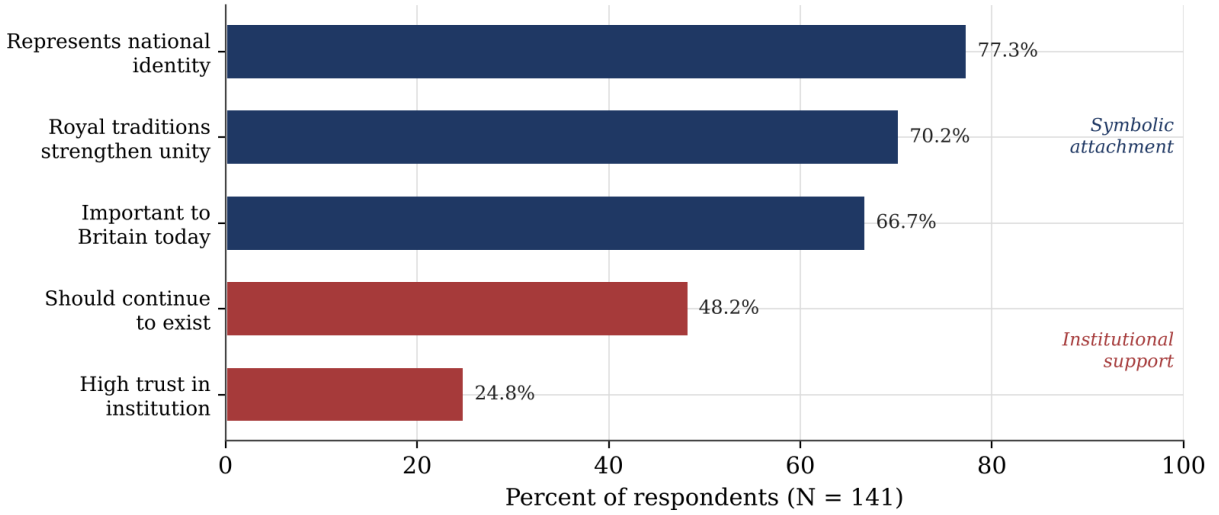
The Central Finding: A Gap Between Symbol and Institution

Placing these two sets of results side by side reveals the study's central finding. On symbolic measures the monarchy commanded the assent of roughly three-quarters of respondents: 77.3 percent saw it as representing national identity and 70.2 percent credited royal traditions with strengthening

unity. On institutional measures it commanded the active support of fewer than half: 48.2 percent supported its continuation and 24.8 percent expressed high trust. The distance between symbolic recognition (77.3 percent) and support for continuation (48.2 percent) is 29.1 percentage points; the distance between symbolic recognition and high trust (24.8 percent) is 52.5 points.

This gap is the phenomenon the article set out to identify. It indicates that symbolic attachment and institutional support were not the same attitude and did not move together. A respondent could affirm that the monarchy represented Britain and still decline to support its continuation or to trust it. The monarchy, on this evidence, was widely recognised as a national symbol but much less widely endorsed as an institution deserving of continuation and confidence. This is a different and more precise claim than the familiar observation that the monarchy is "popular but questioned." It specifies where the questioning occurs: not at the level of what the monarchy means, where attachment remained strong, but at the level of institutional commitment, where it had substantially eroded.

Figure 2. The gap between symbolic recognition and institutional support



Queen Elizabeth II and the Personal Dimension

The personal standing of Queen Elizabeth II stood apart from attitudes toward the institution, and reinforces the argument. Asked whether Queen Elizabeth II helped maintain stability, 107 respondents (75.9 percent) agreed or strongly agreed, while only 9 (6.4 percent) disagreed, with 13 (9.2 percent) neutral and 12 (8.5 percent) unclear. This level of agreement is close to the symbolic measures and far above the institutional ones. The Queen as an individual was credited with stability by three-quarters of respondents, even as trust in the institution she headed stood at under a quarter.

This confirms, within a single dataset, a pattern that Mortimore identified in the polling literature: attitudes toward individual royals and attitudes toward the institution are distinct.[21] It also sharpens

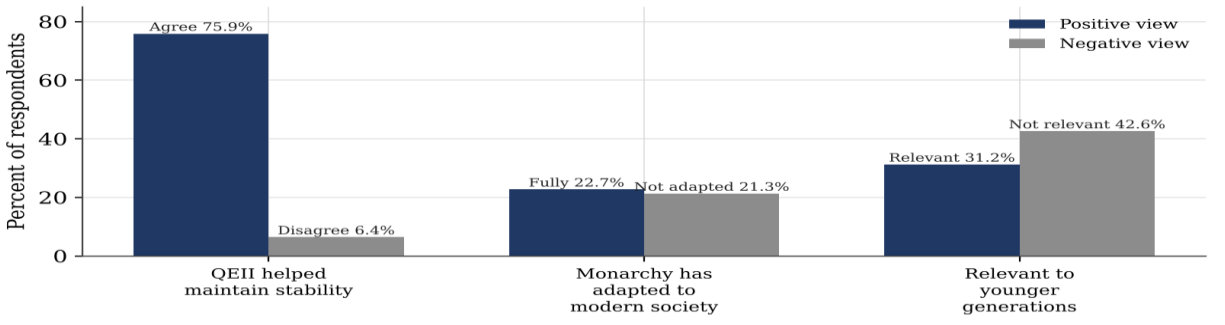
the study's central argument. If the monarchy's symbolic strength rested substantially on the personal association of Elizabeth II with continuity and service, then the transition to Charles III removed precisely the element that had been most strongly supported, leaving the institution to rely on a symbolic attachment that was already decoupled from institutional trust.

Adaptation and Generational Relevance

Respondents were markedly less convinced that the monarchy had adapted to modern society. Only 32 respondents (22.7 percent) believed it had successfully adapted, while 48 (34.0 percent) believed it had partially adapted, 30 (21.3 percent) believed it had not, and 17 (12.1 percent) were unsure. A majority, in other words, regarded the monarchy's adaptation as at best partial. The relevance of the monarchy to younger generations produced the most critical distribution of any item in the study. Only 44 respondents (31.2 percent) regarded the monarchy as relevant to younger generations, while 60 (42.6 percent) regarded it as not relevant and 26 (18.4 percent) were neutral, with 11 (7.8 percent) unclear.

This item is where the gap between symbol and institution connects to the generational question. The study's sample is itself young, and it returns the lowest relevance scores of any measure. This is consistent with the representative finding of the National Centre for Social Research that only 14 percent of those under thirty-five considered the monarchy very important, against 44 percent of those aged fifty-five and above.[22] Read alongside the study's own data, the implication is that the decoupling of symbol from institution is generationally structured: younger respondents were the readiest to recognise the monarchy as a symbol while regarding it as institutionally irrelevant to their own lives. Because the older, more supportive groups are under-represented in this sample, the absolute relevance figures should be read with the caution set out in the limitations section; the direction of the pattern, however, matches the representative evidence.

Figure 3. Personal esteem versus institutional adaptation and relevance



Identity Without the Institution

The final pair of items addressed what would follow from the monarchy's absence, and distinguished between symbolic and structural consequences. Asked whether Britain would lose part of its identity without the monarchy, 73 respondents (51.8 percent) answered yes explicitly or implicitly, while 43

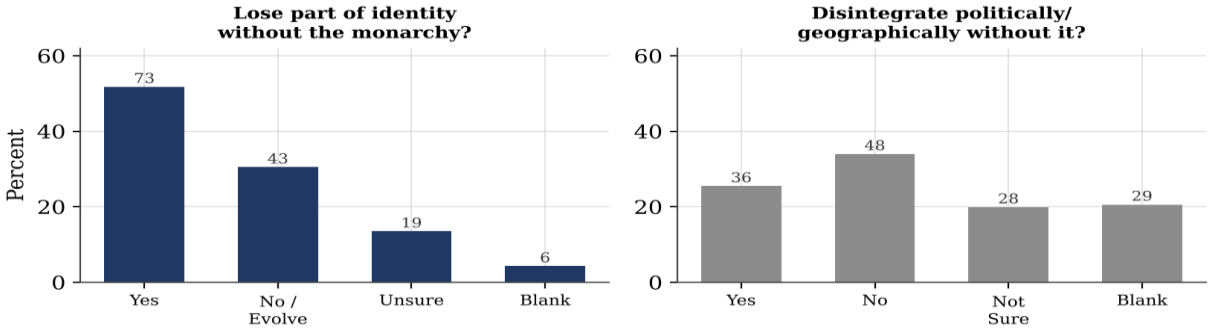
(30.5 percent) believed Britain's identity would not be lost but would evolve, 19 (13.5 percent) were unsure or regarded the question as complex, and 6 (4.3 percent) were unclear. A slight majority therefore attached a symbolic cost to the monarchy's absence. Asked whether Britain would disintegrate politically or geographically without the monarchy, however, respondents were much more sceptical. Only 36 (25.5 percent) said yes, while 48 (34.0 percent) said no, 28 (19.9 percent) were not sure, and 29 (20.6 percent) were unclear.

The contrast between these two items is itself evidence for the article's argument. Respondents were willing to grant that the monarchy carried symbolic weight whose loss would be felt, while largely rejecting the idea that it was structurally necessary to the survival of the state. The high proportion of blank or unclear answers on the disintegration item (20.6 percent) warrants caution, but the direction is clear: the monarchy was valued as a symbol more than it was regarded as a load-bearing part of the constitutional order. This is the same decoupling seen on the attitudinal items, expressed now as a distinction between symbolic and structural importance.

Table 5. Symbolic cost versus structural necessity (N = 141)

Question / Response	Count	Percentage
Would Britain lose part of its identity without the monarchy?		
Yes (explicit or implied)	73	51.8%
No / Would evolve	43	30.5%
Unsure / Maybe / Complex	19	13.5%
Blank/Unclear	6	4.3%
Would Britain disintegrate politically/geographically without it?		
Yes	36	25.5%
No	48	34.0%
Not Sure	28	19.9%
Blank/Unclear	29	20.6%

Figure 4. Symbolic cost versus structural necessity of the monarchy (N = 141)



Qualitative Themes

The open-ended responses give texture to this structure of attitudes and were grouped into six recurring themes. The first, expressed by respondents who felt Britain would lose part of its identity without the monarchy, presented the Crown as an indispensable symbol of identity and continuity, a "living link" to over a thousand years of history and a distinctive cultural and global symbol. The second, from those who felt identity would evolve rather than be lost, emphasised the strength of democratic institutions and argued that British identity rests on Parliament, the rule of law, and a multicultural society as much as on the Crown; several in this group regarded the monarchy as an expensive or outdated institution whose cultural residue, the palaces and ceremonies, would survive as heritage even if the institution did not. The third theme, on national unity, was genuinely mixed, with some respondents describing the monarchy as a unifying figurehead above the political fray and others describing it as a divisive symbol of an elitist and colonial past. The fourth theme, the personal legacy of Queen Elizabeth II, was overwhelmingly positive even among respondents sceptical of the monarchy's future, confirming the personal–institutional distinction found in the closed items. The fifth theme, the generational divide, was expressed more bluntly in the open responses than in the figures, with younger respondents describing the institution as disconnected from the concerns of their generation. The sixth theme, political and geographical disintegration, was largely rejected, with respondents pointing to Parliament and the democratic system as the real sources of national cohesion.

Taken together, the qualitative themes articulate in respondents' own words the separation that the quantitative data measure: a strong symbolic and emotional attachment, particularly to the person of the late Queen, coexisting with doubt about the institution's contemporary relevance and its structural necessity.

Table 6. Comprehensive summary of attitudes toward the British monarchy (N = 141)

Question	Positive (Yes/High/Agree)	Middle (Neutral/Partial)	Negative (No/Low/Disagree)	Blank/ Unclear
Importance of monarchy today	94 (66.7%)	15 (10.6%)	25 (17.7%)	7 (5.0%)
Should monarchy continue?	68 (48.2%)	22 (15.6%)	44 (31.2%)	7 (5.0%)
Trust in monarchy as institution	35 (24.8%)	48 (34.0%)	44 (31.2%)	14 (9.9%)
Represents national identity	109 (77.3%)	17 (12.1%)	8 (5.7%)	7 (5.0%)
Traditions strengthen unity	99 (70.2%)	20 (14.2%)	13 (9.2%)	9 (6.4%)
QEII maintained stability	107 (75.9%)	13 (9.2%)	9 (6.4%)	12 (8.5%)
Adapted to modern society	32 (22.7%)	65 (46.1%)	30 (21.3%)	14 (9.9%)

Relevant to younger generations	44 (31.2%)	26 (18.4%)	60 (42.6%)	11 (7.8%)
Britain loses identity without monarchy	73 (51.8%)	19 (13.5%)	43 (30.5%)	6 (4.3%)
Britain disintegrates without monarchy	36 (25.5%)	28 (19.9%)	48 (34.0%)	29 (20.6%)

Note: For "Adapted to modern society," the middle column combines the "partially adapted" (48) and "unsure" (17) responses reported separately in the text, consistent with the summary categorisation in the original instrument.

Discussion

The findings presented above support a single interpretive claim: that public attitudes toward the British monarchy in this period are best understood as a decoupling of symbolic recognition from institutional support. The evidence for this claim is the consistent gap, across multiple items, between the strong majorities who affirmed the monarchy's symbolic and cultural standing and the much smaller groups who supported its continuation, trusted it as an institution, believed it had adapted to modern society, or regarded it as relevant to younger generations. The gap is not an artefact of one question. It recurs between representation of identity (77.3 percent) and continuation (48.2 percent), between representation and trust (24.8 percent), between the personal standing of Elizabeth II (75.9 percent) and the adaptation of the institution (22.7 percent), and between the symbolic cost of the monarchy's absence (51.8 percent) and its structural necessity (25.5 percent). The repetition of the pattern across independent items is what gives the interpretation its force.

This reading revise, rather than contradicts, the historical scholarship discussed earlier. Bogdanor's account of a monarchy that survived by transforming political power into constitutional influence describes the condition that makes the decoupling possible: an institution whose authority is symbolic can retain its symbolism while losing its hold on active support, because the two were never the same thing.[27] The symbolic strength that Hobsbawm, Cannadine, and Owens attribute to royal ritual and media presentation is confirmed by the study's symbolic measures, but the study shows that this strength does not underwrite institutional commitment. Mortimore's distinction between the institution and its individual members anticipates the specific case of Elizabeth II found here, where personal esteem ran far ahead of institutional trust.[28] The contribution of the present study is to locate the fault line not between the institution and particular royals, but between the monarchy's symbolic meaning and its institutional standing in general, and to show that this fault line is widest among the young.

The qualitative themes clarify why the decoupling occurs. Respondents who affirmed the monarchy as a symbol frequently did so on historical and emotional grounds, describing it as a connection to the past and to a distinctive national character. Respondents who withheld institutional support frequently did so on contemporary grounds, citing cost, relevance, democratic principle, and the sufficiency of Parliament and other institutions as sources of unity. These are not competing answers to the same question; they are answers to different questions. The monarchy can score highly when respondents are asked what it means and lower when they are asked what it deserves, because meaning is anchored in the past and commitment is assessed against the present. The accession of Charles III makes this tension consequential. The element of the monarchy that attracted the strongest support, the personal standing of Elizabeth II, was precisely the element that could not be inherited. Charles III therefore began his reign in possession of the monarchy's symbolic recognition but without the personal association that had done the most to sustain public confidence, and facing a younger population among whom the decoupling was already most advanced.

This interpretation must be held within the limits set out earlier. The absolute figures reported here come from a sample that over-represents the young and women and under-represents the older groups most likely to support the monarchy; the true level of support in the population is almost certainly higher than this sample's 48.2 percent. But the argument does not depend on the absolute level. It depends on the relationship between symbolic and institutional attitudes within respondents, and that relationship, a strong symbol commanding weak commitment, is if anything likely to be understated in a representative sample rather than overstated, because the groups missing from this sample are those for whom symbol and support most nearly coincide. The decoupling identified here is therefore best understood as a hypothesis with a clear direction, generated from indicative data and ready to be tested on a representative sample.

Conclusion

The British monarchy remained an important part of British national identity between 2001 and 2022, but the nature of that importance changed. This article has argued that the defining feature of public attitudes in this period was not a simple balance of support and opposition but a decoupling of symbolic recognition from institutional support. The questionnaire evidence shows that large majorities continued to recognise the monarchy as a representation of national identity and as a source of national tradition, while much smaller groups actively supported its continuation, trusted it as an institution, believed it had adapted to modern society, or regarded it as relevant to younger generations. The gap between these two sets of attitudes, some twenty-nine points between symbolic representation and support for continuation, is the study's central finding, and it recurred consistently across independent measures and was reflected in the open-ended responses.

Three implications follow. First, the symbolic strength of the monarchy can no longer be read as evidence of its institutional security, because the two had come apart. Measures of what the monarchy means overstate the public's commitment to its continuation. Second, the personal standing of Queen Elizabeth II, which stood far above attitudes toward the institution, had been doing substantial work in sustaining public confidence, and that element passed out of the institution

with her death; the accession of Charles III consequently exposed the monarchy more directly to a public attachment that was already conditional. Third, the decoupling was generationally structured: younger respondents, while still often recognising the monarchy as a symbol, were the most likely to regard it as institutionally irrelevant, a pattern consistent with representative national data and one that points to further erosion of institutional support as these cohorts age.

The monarchy's future position in British national identity therefore depends less on whether it continues to be recognised as a national symbol, which on this evidence it still is, than on whether that symbolic recognition can be converted into institutional support. The historical record suggests the monarchy has adapted before, transforming political power into constitutional influence and learning to present itself to successive generations through new media. The question raised by this study is whether it can perform a comparable adaptation now: closing the distance between the symbol the public still affirms and the institution the public has grown more reluctant to endorse. These conclusions are offered on the basis of an indicative sample and are framed as hypotheses for representative testing. They nonetheless identify a structure of attitudes, a strong symbol commanding weakening commitment, that is likely to define the context within which the monarchy under Charles III must make its case.

Notes

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15. Robert Blackburn, "The Financing of the Monarchy: The Sovereign Grant Act 2011," Public Law 1 (2012): 1–15.
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24. Robert Hazell and Bob Morris, The Role of Monarchy in Modern Democracy, 190–205.
25. Iqra Ashraf, "Questionnaire on the Status and Role of the Monarchy in British Identity (2001–2022)," unpublished survey instrument, 2024.
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27. Andrzej Olechnowicz, The Monarchy and the British Nation, 1780 to the Present (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007), 1–12; see also Bogdanor, The Monarchy and the Constitution, 1–41.
28. Mortimore, "Measuring British Public Opinion on the Monarchy and Royal Family," 135–56.