

The Politics of England: National Identities and Political Englishness

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Abstract

Over two decades, voters who emphasised their English identity played an influential role in the rise of UKIP and the Brexit Party, the Brexit referendum and the election of Conservative governments—a trend overlooked in most electoral analyses. Using twenty years of data from the British Election Study and British Social Attitudes Survey, as well as recent original surveys, the article explores the evolving political behaviour of national identity groups. It finds that ‘more English’ and ‘more British’ identifiers increasingly voted for different parties. The analysis also identifies growing differences in the demographics, social values and immigration attitudes of these groups, which descriptive and regression analysis suggests may underpin these divergent political behaviours. However, a fuller understanding of electoral behaviour must take account of ideas of national democracy and sovereignty. The electoral impact of both the characteristics of English identifying voters and ideas associated with English identity constitute ‘political Englishness’.

Keywords: Englishness, national identity, realignment, sovereignty, values, voting behaviour

Introduction

The 2019 general election saw the culmination of an extended process of realignment in English politics. The Conservatives won their largest majority since 1987, building support among working class voters, while Labour has established a lead amongst the university educated. The EU referendum created new Leave and Remain political identities. This realignment has seen ‘substantial shifts in the social and geographical basis of support’, as well as changes in the terrain on which British politics is contested (with a greater prominence for issues such as immigration and multiculturalism that connect to social more than economic values).¹

The possible influence of national identities in this realignment is often neglected. Although high-quality bespoke studies of English identity exist, their relative recency means that we cannot track the relationship between identity, voter attitudes and voter

behaviour over time. Using data from long-running social surveys of England featuring the Linz-Moreno scale of national identities, as well as our own recent survey data, we conduct three pieces of analysis. We simplify this scale from five to three categories. ‘More English than British’ and ‘English not British’ become ‘more English’; ‘more British than English’ and ‘British not English’ become ‘more British’; while ‘equally English and British’ represents the final group.

In the first section, we use British Election Study (BES) data to show how different national identity groups voted in general and EU elections between 2001 and 2019, and in the 2016 EU referendum. We then set out two theoretical mechanisms which may have led voters to align with different parties. In the second section, we explore the evolving relationship of national identity groups with the demographics and values that are commonly used in the literature to explain voting patterns. Next, we apply multivariate regression to identify statistically the impact of identities on voter behaviour and to test how these may be best explained. Fourth, we explore polling evidence that English identity carries

¹E. Fieldhouse, J. Green, G. Evans, J. Mellon, C. Prosser, H. Schmitt and C. Van der Eijk, *Electoral Shocks: The Volatile Voter in a Turbulent World*, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2021.

particular understandings of nation, national democracy and sovereignty. Finally, we combine this data to provide a plausible narrative explanation of why political events have resulted in the mobilisation of English-identifying voters behind different parties at different times and we consider the possible role of national identity on future politics in England. We argue that the increasing tendency of English identifiers to vote in a particular way results from both Englishness as a reflection of voters with particular demographics and values, and aspects of English national identity that relate to ideas of national sovereignty and democracy. We describe the cumulative impact of both processes as ‘political Englishness’.

Partisan realignment by national identity

Empirical evidence of partisan realignment

To understand the voting behaviour of identity groups, we turn to the BES face-to-face post-election (BES F2F) surveys. Widely considered the ‘gold standard’, these surveys minimise false recall and reach low political interest groups, offering an accurate picture of voters in England. Our subsamples (no smaller than 350 for any groups and year) yield margins of sampling error of up to ± 5 per cent. That is, if 50 per cent of the ‘more English’ said they voted Conservative, we would be 95 per cent confident that the true proportion would be between 45–55 per cent. (Small gaps or group movements should thus be interpreted with caution.)

In the general election of 2001, Labour won the largest share of votes amongst all three Moreno groups, although the ‘more English’ leaned more towards the Conservatives than the other groups. (Labour polled 5 per cent less and the Conservative Party polled 12 per cent better amongst the ‘more English’ than the other two groups.) By the general election of 2019, the rightward leaning of English identifiers had become much more pronounced and 68 per cent of the ‘more English’ voted Conservative (up from 40 per cent in 2001), while Conservative support amongst the ‘equally English and British’ reached 52 per cent (up from 28 per cent in 2001). By contrast,

the Conservative Party made no significant gains amongst the ‘more British’ over this period and, while Labour support amongst the ‘more British’ fell (from 48 per cent in 2001 to 40 per cent in 2019), the party still outpolled the Conservatives amongst this group. In 2001, the Liberal Democrats polled most strongly amongst the ‘more English’. Their recovery from a poor result in 2015 was largely achieved amongst the ‘more British’.

Other important changes in electoral behaviour took place outside general elections. English identifying voters were key to the rise and political impact of the UK Independence Party (UKIP) and, more recently, the Brexit Party. In the 2009 EU election UKIP polled 16 per cent, taking 24 per cent of the ‘more English’ vote and only 9 per cent of the ‘more British’. In the 2014 EU election, UKIP polled 27 per cent, taking 41 per cent of the ‘more English’—outpolling the combined Conservative and Labour support—and 18 per cent of the ‘more British’.² UKIP’s gathering momentum led the Conservatives to promise an EU referendum in their manifesto for the 2015 general election. The Conservative election campaign also targeted English voters’ concerns about potential Scottish National Party (SNP) influence on a Labour minority government and may have contributed to the surprise Tory victory.³ The Conservatives defeated Labour among the ‘more English’, but UKIP also secured 20 per cent of those voters.

The ‘more English’ were decisive in the 2016 EU referendum, voting Leave by 70–30 per cent. The ‘more British’ voted Remain by 67–33 per cent and the ‘equally English and British’ split 50:50. Those narrow margins, combined with the slightly greater numbers of ‘more English’ than ‘more British’ voters, help explain why a majority in England (and hence the UK) voted to take Britain out of the EU. All parties promised to respect the referendum outcome in the 2017 election and Brexit played a limited explicit role in the campaign. UKIP support collapsed and an unexpected Labour

²UKIP also made significant gains in local council elections but, in the absence of identity data, the importance of English identifying voters may only be imputed.

³P. Cowley and D. Kavanagh, *The British General Election of 2015*, London, Palgrave Macmillan, 2016.

Vote share by identity group (UK general elections)

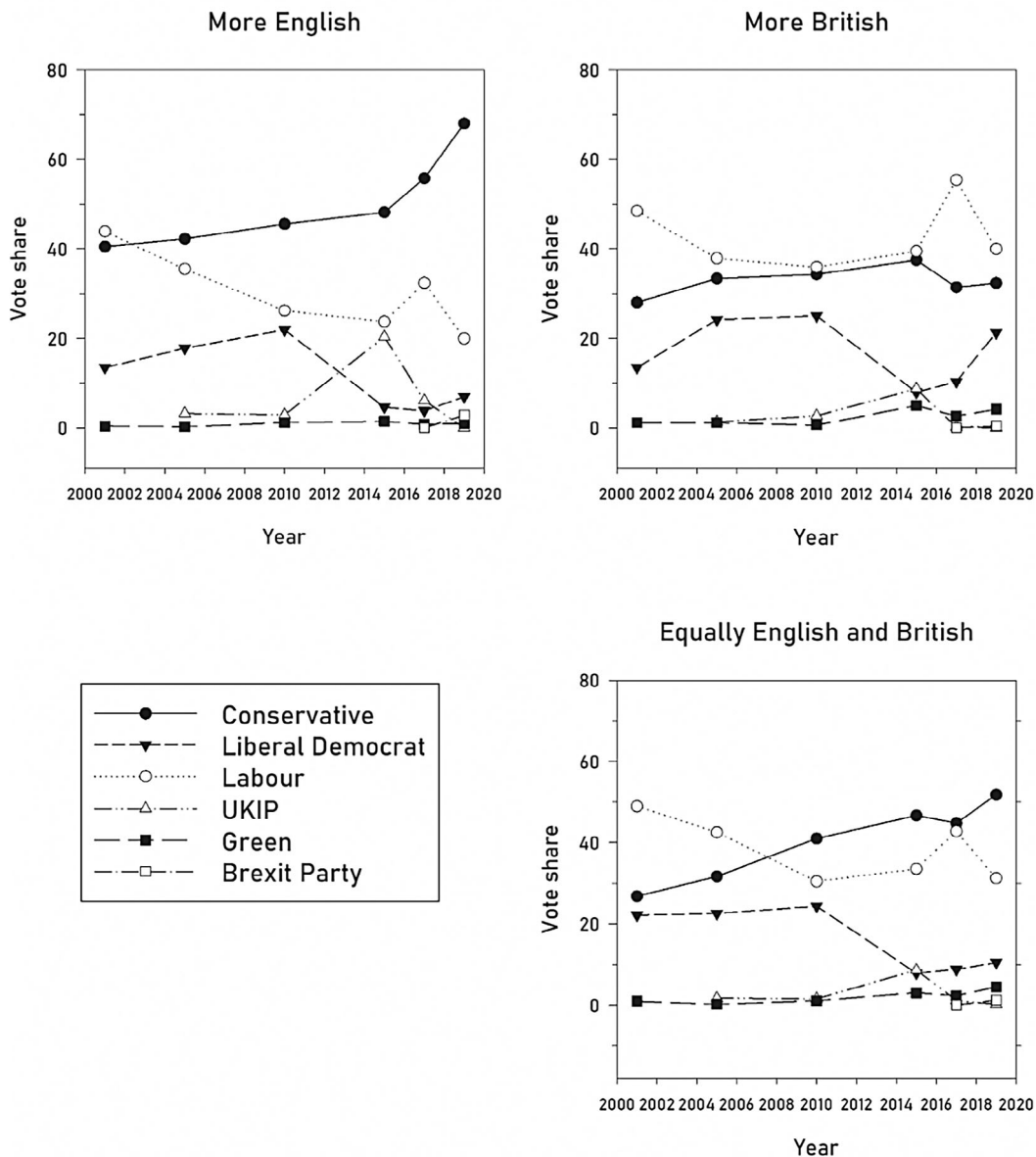


Figure 1: Recalled vote choice at general elections, BES face-to-face post-election surveys, 2001–2019.

surge limited the Conservatives to minority government. Nonetheless, the underlying polarisation by national identity continued. The Conservative vote increased slightly more than Labour amongst the ‘more English’, while Labour’s support from the ‘more British’ increased from 39 per cent to 59 per cent.

Stalemate on the EU Withdrawal Bill dominated Parliament for the next two years and the newly formed Brexit Party took 33 per cent of the vote to become the largest party in the 2019 EU elections. The Brexit Party won 53 per cent of the ‘more English’, 39 per cent of the ‘equally English and British’ and

22 per cent of the ‘more British’ vote. Following Theresa May’s resignation as Prime Minister, Boris Johnson’s Conservatives triumphed amongst English identifying voters in the subsequent general election on the promise to ‘Get Brexit Done’. This was an English Conservative victory rather than a UK-wide success: the Conservatives’ UK majority of eighty rested on an English majority of 156.

These changing mobilisations of English identifying voters may be conceived as ‘political Englishness’. Between 2001 and 2019 the Conservatives were able to build a dominant position amongst the ‘more English’ and establish a clear lead amongst the ‘equally English and British’. However, the long-term alignment of English identifying voters behind the Conservative Party was not the only significant trend in electoral behaviour. Over the same period the impact of political Englishness also came from its support for UKIP and the Brexit Party, in local, EU and general elections, as well as in the EU referendum, with consequential impacts on the decision to hold an EU referendum and the changing politics of the Conservative Party. These changes in the behaviour of English identifying voters reduced Labour from broad support across national identity groups towards a heavy reliance on support from the ‘more British’. Any analysis needs to embrace both the growing long-term alignment of voting behaviour with national identity and volatility in voting behaviour (particularly that of more English identifiers) between national, local and European elections.

Mechanisms of partisan realignment

Most of the literature on England’s electoral realignments does not engage with England or England’s national identities. The major study, *The British General Election of 2019*, does not mention either (although it does discuss the devolved nations).⁴ Some studies emphasise the role of social class and the decline of class-based identities; others emphasise demographic factors, including age and education.⁵

⁴R. Ford, T. Bale, W. Jennings and P. Surridge, *The British General Election of 2019*, London, Palgrave Macmillan, 2021.

⁵G. Evans and J. Tilley, *The New Politics of Class: The Political Exclusion of the British Working Class*, Oxford,

Other work deals with the spatial patterns of economic growth and decline, while a further strand highlights the changing influence of social and economic values.⁶ A further body of work has highlighted the impact and salience of immigration.⁷ Henderson and Wyn Jones, and their collaborators in the Future of England survey, who argue that ‘Englishness has transform(ed) British politics’, remain outliers in their studies of the nature and importance of national identity in England.⁸

The widespread assumption that neither the English context nor England’s identities play any role in electoral behaviour is curious given academic acceptance of the importance of national identity in the very different electoral experiences of the other British nations. There has been no equivalent of the Conservatives’ English advance in Scotland, where it was the SNP that largely displaced Labour. Welsh Labour remained the largest party in Wales, even though Wales, like England, voted Leave. The literature on Scotland and Wales strongly suggests that in both nations, political parties appeal to (contested) ideas of the nation. In 2014, 60 per cent of the ‘Scottish not British’ supported Scottish independence, as opposed to 18 per cent of the ‘British not Scottish’.⁹ In Wales, Plaid Cymru is recognised to be

Oxford University Press, 2017; P. Sturgis and W. Jennings, ‘Was there a “youthquake” in the 2017 general election?’, *Electoral Studies*, vol. 64, 2020; D. Cutts, M. Goodwin, O. Heath and P. Surridge, ‘Brexit, the 2019 general election and the realignment of British politics’, *The Political Quarterly*, vol. 91, no. 1, 2021, pp. 7–23.

⁶W. Jennings and G. Stoker, ‘Tilting towards the cosmopolitan axis? Political change in England and the 2017 general election’, *The Political Quarterly*, vol. 88, no. 3, 2017, pp. 359–369; P. Surridge, ‘Post-Brexit British politics: a reunited kingdom’, *Political Insight*, vol. 12, no. 1, 2021, pp. 8–11.

⁷G. Evans and J. Mellon, ‘Immigration, Euroscepticism, and the rise and fall of UKIP’, *Party Politics*, vol. 25, no. 1, 2019, pp. 76–87.

⁸A. Henderson and R. Wyn Jones, *Englishness: The Political Force Transforming Britain*, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2021.

⁹D. McCrone, ‘Nationality and national identity’, in M. Keating, ed., *Oxford Handbook of Scottish Politics*, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2020, pp. 23–41.

strongest amongst the ‘Welsh only’.¹⁰ A full account of England’s politics should likewise assess the role of national identity.¹¹

There are two ways in which national identity might be linked to political behaviour. Firstly, it may form a link between the social structure of a nation and views of desirable change, and this may also be mobilised as the link between those views and political action to bring about change.¹² National identities can reflect the life experiences of diverse groups, such as their parental upbringing, socialisation in schools, workplaces and social spaces like pubs. National identities are thus aligned with demographic groups and with other values (social values, such as tolerance, and economic values, such as hard work) that might be instilled in those environments. The existence of national identity as an additional ‘layer’ of identity may solidify the sense that one’s characteristics amount to a recognisable ‘mega-identity’ that needs political expression.¹³ Research from states with multiple national identities supports the idea that divides over identity and values are mutually reinforcing, and that national identity helps link values of voter groups with social and political mobilisation.¹⁴ As such, it is important to analyse the evolving demographics, values and attitudes of identity groups, and assess how consistent these are with political (re)alignment.

Secondly, national identities carry understandings of the nation beyond, or additional

to, shared values and demography that may be mobilised under certain circumstances. For example, Mader, et al. show how right-wing parties and actors emphasise the ‘continuing importance of national attachments in a time of weakening national borders’ (something expressed in the UK case by campaigns to ‘Take Back Control’ and ‘Get Brexit Done’).¹⁵ In multinational states, ideas of the nation are particularly likely to be influenced by different national identities: as Henderson and Wyn Jones argue, English identity coincides with ‘devo-anxiety’ and a desire for English self-government.¹⁶ We are interested in identifying components to political Englishness which may have been (and may in future be) mobilised by political parties. For these reasons, our study explores both the relationship between demography, values and national identity, as well as the ideas of nation, democracy and sovereignty associated with England’s national identities. We describe the electoral behaviour resulting from these factors as ‘political Englishness’.

Social and attitudinal realignment by national identity

Along with the British Election Study (BES) 2001–2019 data, British Social Attitudes Surveys (BSAS) 2018 allow us to explore how the relationship between national identity, demography, values and attitudes toward immigration evolved. In the BES, we analyse the demographic composition of ‘more English’, ‘more British’ and ‘equally English’ voters, with age, ethnicity and education being our main foci. The BES also provides data on the perceived economic impact of immigration as well as its salience to voters, via the ‘most important issue’ question.¹⁷ The BSAS data was used to construct scales of left-right economic and liberal-authoritarian social values and their relationship with national identity over the period 2000–2018.

¹⁰R. Scully and R. Wyn Jones, ‘Still three Wales? Social location and electoral behaviour in contemporary Wales’, *Electoral Studies*, vol. 31, no. 4, 2012, pp. 656–667.

¹¹L. McAllister and R. Awan-Scully, ‘For Wales, do not see England? An analysis of the 2017 general election’, *Parliamentary Affairs*, vol. 74, no. 1, 2021, pp. 138–157.

¹²D. McCrone and F. Bechhofer, *Understanding National Identity*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2015.

¹³L. Mason, *Uncivil Agreement: How Politics Became our Identity*, Chicago, University of Chicago Press, 2018.

¹⁴A. Henderson and N. McEwen, ‘Do shared values underpin national identity? Examining the role of values in national identity in Canada and the United Kingdom’, *National Identities*, vol. 7, no. 2, 2005, pp. 173–191; McCrone, ‘Nationality and national identity’.

¹⁵M. Mader, T. Scotto, J. Reifler, P. H. Gries, P. Isernia and H. Schoen, ‘How political are national identities? A comparison of the United States, the United Kingdom, and Germany in the 2010s’, *Research & Politics*, vol. 5, no. 3, 2018, pp. 1–9.

¹⁶Henderson and Wyn Jones, *Englishness*.

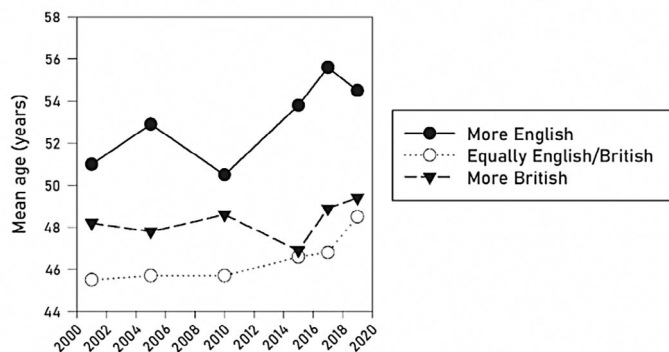
¹⁷Measures of perceived cultural impact of immigration were not included in sufficient BES surveys over this period to determine a long-term trend.

Figures 2, 3 and 4 show the results of this analysis. They reveal both consistent *differences* between the demographics, values and immigration attitudes of the national identity groups and significant *divergences* between them.

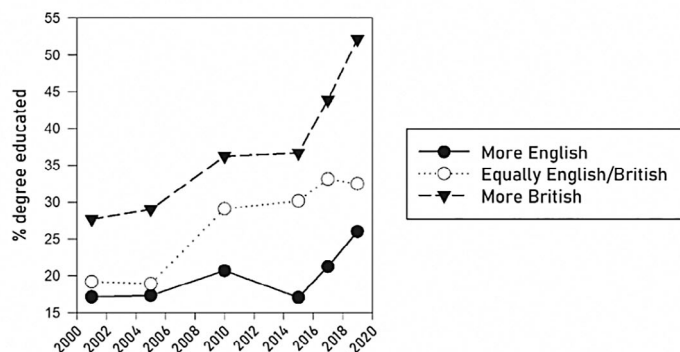
Throughout the period, the ‘more English’ have been more socially conservative and

more concerned about immigration than the ‘more British’. However, all the identity groups have broadly become more liberal on social values and attitudes towards economic immigration and are more likely to have been educated to degree level. But, throughout the period, the ‘more English’ have also been

Average (mean) age of identity groups



Percentage of identity group with degree-level qualifications



Whites as a percentage of national identity groups

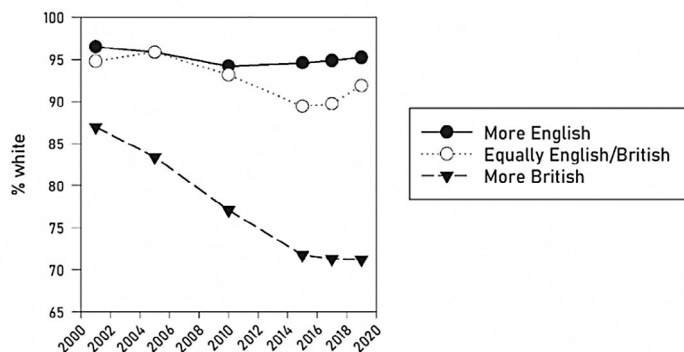


Figure 2: Demographics of identity groups. BES post-election face-to-face (BES F2F) data.

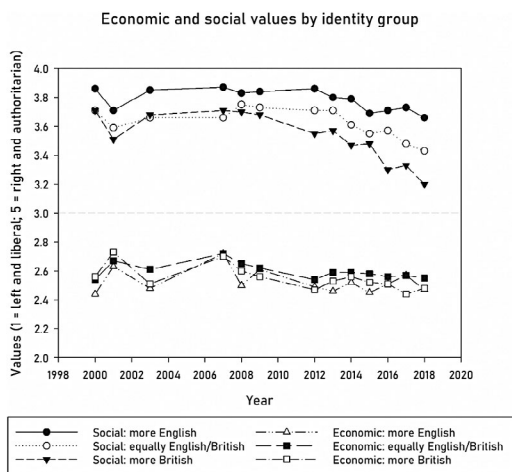


Figure 3: Economic and social attitudes: mean values by national identity group. BSAS face-to-face survey data, 2000–2018.

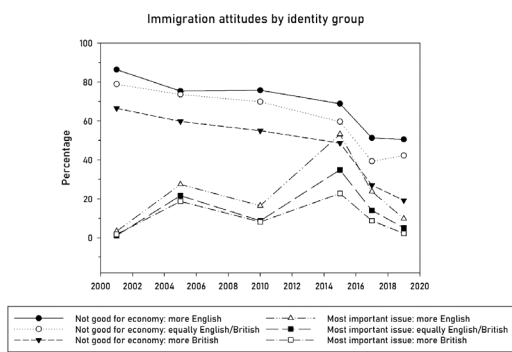


Figure 4: Immigration attitudes by national identity group. BES face-to-face post-election surveys, 2001–2019.

older and educated to a lower level than the ‘more British’ and have been less diverse than the ‘more British’. There is little difference between the identity groups on economic values which, for all, skew somewhat to the left of centre on this battery.

Equally significant are the divergences in values and attitudes that developed between identity groups. These are most marked in the extent to which the gaps between the ‘more British’ and the ‘more English’ widened after 2015. The ‘more British’ became sharply more liberal, faster than the population-wide trend. The higher education gap with the ‘more English’

widened. The diversity of the ‘more British’ increased dramatically.

The ‘equally English and British’ are placed between the other groups in all our data, but it should be noted that after 2015 the ‘equally English’ were much closer to the ‘more English’ on age and higher education. By 2018, the gap between the ‘more British’ and the ‘equally English’ on social values was the widest it had been in our period of study, and the ‘equally English’ were significantly closer to the ‘more English’ on attitudes towards economic migration.

There was a sharp increase in the salience of immigration as a political issue around 2015. This was most marked amongst the ‘more English’. By 2019 the salience of immigration had fallen sharply, including amongst the ‘more English’, but a majority of the ‘more English’ still regarded immigration as economically damaging.

Explaining partisan realignment: multivariate regression analysis

As an attempt to disentangle these factors, we run separate multivariate multinomial regressions for each election, with the outcome being whether the respondent voted for Conservatives, Labour, Liberal Democrats, UKIP/Brexit Party, or the Green Party at a given general election. We control for age, gender, ethnicity (white British/ethnic minority) and education (degree/non-degree). We add scales of economic and social values, immigration attitudes and immigration salience (as per the above).

Figure 5 first displays the results of bivariate (uncontrolled) regressions before introducing the controls to assess how far they collectively explain the effect of national identity on voting. The bars represent the effect of identifying as ‘more British’ vs ‘equally English/British’, and ‘more English’ vs ‘equally English/British’ on predicted vote share for each party. Error bars represent 95 per cent confidence intervals; bars that cross the black (zero) line indicate null effects for English identity.

According to the uncontrolled analysis, in 2001, one type of identity (more English) played a role in voting for two parties (predicting more Conservative and less Liberal Democrat voting). In 2005–10, ‘more English’ identity became a driver of UKIP votes, but

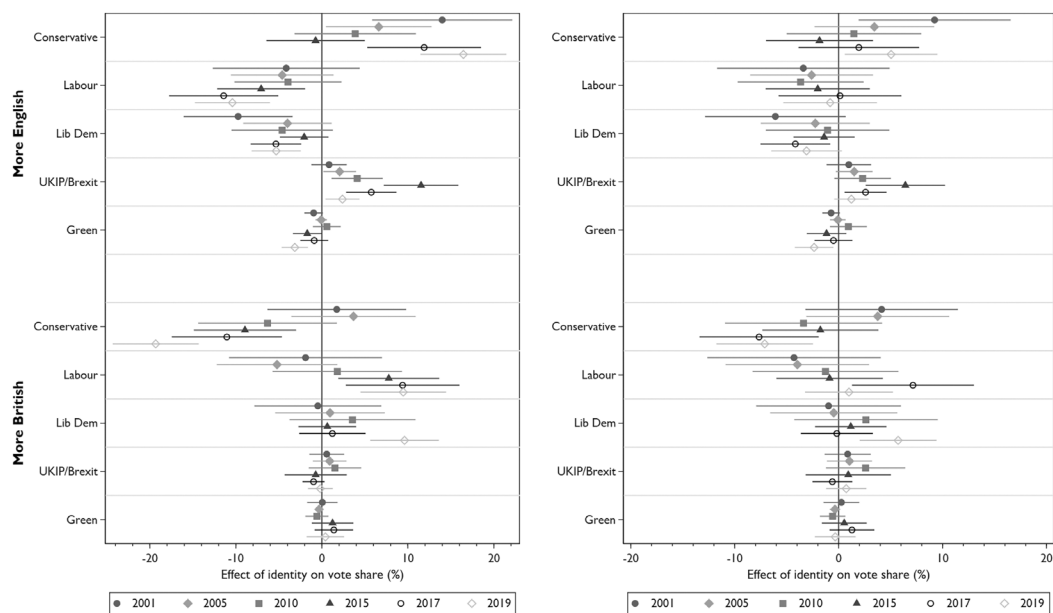


Figure 5: Multivariate regression analysis, estimated effect of identity *vs* ‘equally English/British’ identity on vote share by party, before and after controls.

no major parties; by 2015, some divides are opening up. ‘More English’ identity predicts lower Labour and more UKIP voting, while ‘more British’ predicts more Labour and less Conservative voting. By 2017, these trends are accelerating—particularly in that ‘more English’ starts predicting more Conservative voting as well as ‘more British’ predicting less. Finally, by 2019, these differences look particularly large and significant for several parties. ‘More English’ identity was associated with higher Conservative and UKIP/Brexit shares, but lower shares for Labour, Lib Dems and Greens. ‘More British’ identities were linked to higher Labour/Lib Dem shares and a much lower likelihood of voting Conservative, with a predicted vote share 20 per cent lower than among the ‘equally English’.

By introducing controls, we also find that the voting behaviour of national identity groups is not fully explained by other demographic and political variables which correlate with Englishness, apart from voting for Labour (for whom almost all identity effects now overlap zero). This is especially true for 2019, as shown in the right-hand panel of Figure 5: ‘more English’ voters remain more likely to back the Conservatives and reject the

Liberal Democrats than their demographics and values would predict, while ‘more British’ voters are less Conservative and more Liberal Democrat than expected from these characteristics.

As noted earlier, the growing alignment of national identity groups behind different political parties in general elections is not the only feature of this period. In particular, ‘more English’ identifiers, a group which showed a long-term trend towards the Conservatives, often instead put their support behind UKIP and then the Brexit Party, especially in European elections. The changes in demographics and values do not provide a simple explanation of this volatility. We therefore still require a fuller explanation of political behaviour among identity groups.

National identity, national interests, sovereignty, and national democracy

We used survey data from BBC/YouGov and CEIP/YouGov polls, as well as BES data, to explore five issues on which national identity groups might hold different views of

Table 1: Details of surveys used in the analysis

No.	Year	Month	Survey source	Pollster	Mode	Survey N*
1	2015	May	British Election Study (panel)	YouGov	Online	30073
2	2018	March	BBC	YouGov	Online	20081
3	2019	June	Centre for English Identity and Politics (CEIP)	YouGov	Online	1462
4	2019	December	Centre for English Identity and Politics (CEIP)	YouGov	Online	1472

*Number of respondents on specific questions is often smaller owing to survey routing and item non-response.

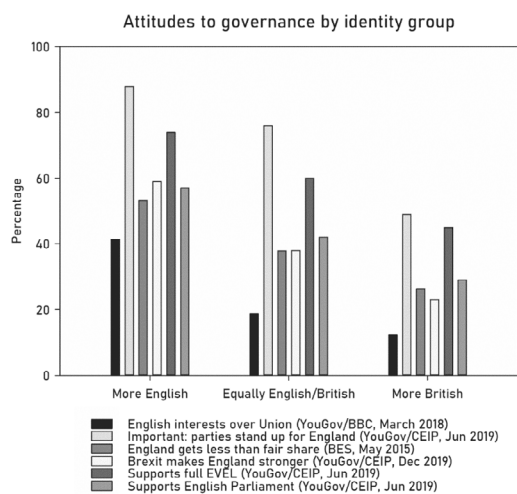


Figure 6: Attitudes to governance by identity group.

England's interest: English attitudes towards the UK and its position within the Union; England, the UK and the Brexit process; the national governance of England; and the local governance of England. Table 1 describes the details of surveys used in the analysis; Figure 6 shows that across a range of issues the national identity groups take significantly different positions.

English interests and the Union

An overwhelming majority of the 'more English' believe that 'it is important for political parties to stand up for England's interests', but only half of the 'more British' do so, according to the CEIP/YouGov 1462 survey. Asked whether the Union should be given 'priority over English interests' or whether English interests should be prioritised 'even if

it put the Union at risk', a plurality (41 per cent) of the 'more English' prioritised English interests, while 58 per cent of the 'more British' favoured the Union, according to the 2018 BBC/YouGov survey. A majority of the 'more English' believe England gets less than its fair share of resources within the Union, a view held by only a quarter of the 'more British', according to the 2015 BES/YouGov survey.

England, the UK and the Brexit process

Polling during the 'Get Brexit Done' election of 2019 showed that 59 per cent of 'more English' voters thought that leaving the EU as planned would make England stronger, compared with 24 per cent of the 'more British' according to the 2019 CEIP/YouGov 1472 survey. 'More English' voters prioritised completing Brexit over both the Northern Ireland peace process or keeping Scotland in the Union, in line with findings from the Future of England Survey.¹⁸ However, only 12 per cent of the 'more English' believed that Brexit would actually weaken the Union, suggesting that English identifiers equated British interests with those of England.

The national governance of England

Our polling tested support and opposition to possible 'changes to the way England is governed': an English parliament, 'full' English votes for English laws (EVEL), independence, and devolution of 'decisions on policies and resources that are currently made in Westminster' to regional assemblies or combined

¹⁸D. Wincott. 'Brexit and English identity', UK in a Changing Europe, 13 March 2018; <https://ukandeu.ac.uk/brexit-and-english-identity/>

authorities as per the 2019 CEIP/YouGov 1462 survey. The 2019 CEIP/YouGov 1472 survey finds that the ‘more English’ give greatest support to EVEL (74 per cent, against 61 per cent across all groups) and an English parliament (57 per cent, against 43 per cent nationally) and see them as the most effective ways of improving England’s government. By contrast, only a plurality (45 per cent) of the more British support EVEL, and only 28 per cent support an English parliament according to the 2019 CEIP/YouGov 1462 survey.

The local governance of England

Support for devolution options within England was not polarised by national identity. Devolution to local authorities or regional assemblies were seen as unlikely to improve governance by a majority of all groups, but the 2019 CEIP/YouGov 1462 survey finds the ‘more English’ and the ‘equally English’ saw these changes as less effective than did the ‘more British’. This may reflect their preference for changes to England’s governance at national rather than regional level (in line with Henderson and Wyn Jones’s findings).

We suggest that ideas of national interest, national democracy, England’s position within the Union and sovereignty form a distinct aspect of English identity—political Englishness—that has the potential to be mobilised politically under certain circumstances, and to further reinforce the relationship between political parties and identity groups.

Conclusion

Political Englishness and electoral behaviour, 2001–2019

The voting patterns of the three national identity groups polarised significantly between 2001 and 2019. Our analysis suggests both that the three national identity groups in England differed and diverged in their demographic composition and their social values, and that they carried different views of England within the UK Union, the EU, the Brexit process and the governance of England itself.

The realignment of voting patterns by national identity reflects the underlying demographics and values of different identity

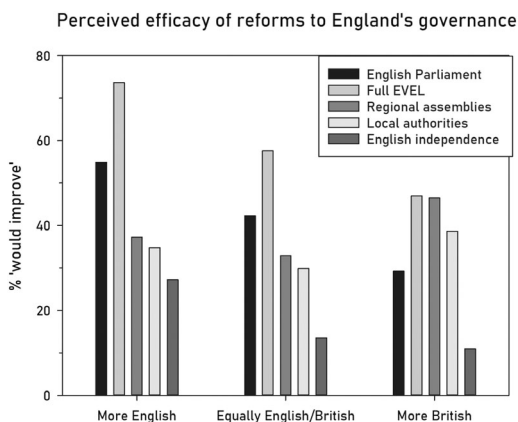


Figure 7: Perceived efficacy of reforms to England’s governance by identity group. Source: CEIP/YouGov, June 2019.

groups, but both the extent of the realignment and switching between parties also reflects an understanding of English national identity itself. The electoral impact of political Englishness was evident when political choices created links between both the demographics, socially conservative values and immigration concerns of English voters and their ideas of the nation, sovereignty, democracy and EU membership.

At general elections, being ‘more English’ increasingly became a predictor of general election support, first for UKIP and then for the Conservatives, while the ‘more British’ became more likely to vote Labour or Liberal Democrat. Looking at general and EU elections, some ‘more English’ voters may have switched between the Conservatives, UKIP and the Brexit Party depending on which seemed the clearest advocate of national sovereignty outside the EU and curbs on immigration. Although we do not have identity data for local elections, it seems reasonable to assume that the same drivers created spikes in support for UKIP. By 2019, these differences look particularly large and significant. ‘More English’ identity was associated with higher Conservative and UKIP/Brexit shares and ‘more British’ were linked to higher Labour/Lib Dem shares and a much lower likelihood of voting Conservative (with a predicted vote share 20 per cent lower than among the ‘equally English’). The ‘equally English and British’ sit between the ‘more English’

and the 'more British' on these issues, and between them in their electoral behaviour, suggesting that political Englishness is an important, though less marked, feature of the 'equally English'.

EU membership brought together national sovereignty with electoral concern about immigration, and was a common feature in the support offered by 'more English' voters in the rise of UKIP, the EU referendum, Brexit Party success in the 2019 EU election, and the Conservatives' 2019 general election victory. UKIP appealed explicitly to ideas of a sovereign nation outside the EU (and English identifying voters associated Brexit with a strengthening of England). When Leave voters were asked *in their own terms* to explain their decision, 'immigration' was the reason most given, while other words featuring prominently concerned issues surrounding 'sovereignty', 'control' and 'laws'.¹⁹ Different interpretations of sovereignty were also prominent in the public campaigning that took place for and against a second referendum in 2018 and 2019.²⁰ The 2019 general election was explicitly framed as an issue of sovereignty in the Conservative 'Get Brexit Done' campaign.

At other times the Conservative Party made explicit appeals to ideas of the English nation and democracy. Following the Scottish independence referendum, David Cameron pledged to introduce EVEL: 'we've heard the voice of Scotland—and now the millions of voices of England must also be heard'; and in 2015 the party targeted voters concerned about SNP influence on a minority Labour government.

The ability of political parties to mobilise political Englishness rested on underlying attitudes held by English identifying voters: on their disposition to be Eurosceptic and be

concerned about the impact of UK devolution on England. The promise of EVEL was in step with the entrenched support for EVEL amongst English identifying voters. The successful mobilisation of political Englishness by Leave forces in the EU referendum then required the previously pro-EU Conservative Party to reinvent itself as today's Eurosceptic party.

Recognising the role of political Englishness provides a plausible narrative of the shifting voting patterns over the past twenty years. Our data cannot test precise mechanisms connecting identity and voting (which would require panel data and experimental studies). Although it is clear that ideas of nation, sovereignty and democracy have featured consistently in the politics of the past two decades, we do not present new evidence on exactly how political Englishness was mobilised by elites, such as the use of shared symbols, narratives and histories of Englishness and Britishness. However, we expect the associations we find to be robust and believe that exploring their roots with more sophisticated methods will be an important next step for researchers in this area.

The future influence of political Englishness

The Conservative Party has been the primary beneficiary of political Englishness. By 2019 Labour was weaker than ever among the 'more English' and the 'equally English' who once formed an important part of their base. It was competing with smaller parties of the centre and left for support among the 'more British'. Political Englishness had its greatest influence when national sovereignty was linked to policy issues that energise social conservatives and both are high on the political agenda. The future role of political Englishness will primarily depend on the extent to which these remain central electoral issues and, to a lesser extent, on the polarisation of party affiliation reflecting the demographics and values of different identity groups.

The Conservatives have sought new issues that combine ideas of sovereignty with socially conservative values. There is significant concern about small boat crossings, which some ministers link to the 'foreign' European

¹⁹C. Prosser, J. Mellon and J. Green, 'What mattered most to you when deciding how to vote in the EU referendum?', BES, 11 July 2016; <https://www.britishelectionstudy.com/bes-findings/what-mattered-most-to-you-when-deciding-how-to-vote-in-the-eu-referendum/#.ZGIv1OrMKNd>

²⁰C. Bickerton and N. Brack, 'Implementing the will of the people: sovereignty and policy conflicts in the aftermath of the UK's referendum on EU membership', *Comparative European Politics*, vol. 20, no. 3, 2022, pp. 295–313.

Convention on Human Rights. Labour is attempting to defuse sovereignty issues by ruling out re-joining the EU and refusing to collaborate in any way with the SNP, though the resignation of SNP leader Nicola Sturgeon may make SNP influence a less pressing threat in the eyes of English voters. The Conservatives' direct appeal to England *qua* England will be blunted by the abolition of even the limited form of EVEL, while Labour has itself eschewed any pitch to English voters beyond aspirations for devolution, which are of least interest to English identifiers.

Later in 2022 and in early 2023, Labour established a commanding lead of up to 20 per cent against a background of a cost of living crisis and political turmoil that produced three Conservative prime ministers and an economic crisis triggered by a Conservative budget. The combination of Brexit implementation, the aftermath of the pandemic and the invasion of Ukraine, as well as the deep crisis of many public services, has raised the salience of economic issues on which national identity groups differ far less and are broadly left of centre. Labour certainly enjoyed significant swings in Brexit voting areas in the May 2023 local elections, but the extent to which the party has redressed its skewed support is not clear. Polarisation of voters by national identity has persisted past the period studied, as surveys from CEIP/YouGov in June 2023 show. Compared with 2019 election voting, Labour had gained across all national identity groups, but its support was almost as heavily skewed towards the 'more British' as it had been in 2019, with

36 per cent of Labour identifiers thinking of themselves as 'more British' against 20 per cent seeing themselves as 'more English'. (Among Labour 2019 voters, the figures were 40 per cent and 19 per cent).

The divergence between the 'more British' and the English identifying groups on demography, values and ideas of the nation poses larger problems for Labour, which needs to span a more diverse electoral base than do the Conservatives. Any lingering political Englishness may not prevent Labour becoming the largest party at the next election, but may well limit the extent of its lead and, crucially, the number of seats in England it is able to win. English identity is more evenly spread geographically and strongest amongst older voters, who have a greater propensity to vote.

As the population becomes more diverse, participation in higher education expands, and if the spread of more socially liberal values continues, political Englishness may also lose its potential influence. However, the balance between identities may only change slowly and reshaping the electoral map may take longer. Political Englishness has the capacity to influence more than one future election.

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