

**BEING BRITISH****David McCrone**

Significant proportions of people in England (82%) and Scotland (51%) declare themselves to be 'strongly British'. This might come as a surprise, given the rising salience of 'national' identities, being 'Scottish' and being 'English', but it is a reminder that national identities in these islands are quite complex and nuanced.

This raises the question: is there a common and coherent sense of being British among these 'strong Brits' in the two countries? Who are these people, and to what extent do they have shared conceptions of being British? If there is, then the Union of England and Scotland would seem reasonably secure. If, on the other hand, different people in Scotland and England interpret being British differently, then the Union is more problematic.

To measure the strength or weakness of being British, respondents were asked, on 7-point scales: 'To what extent do you think of yourself as British?', where 1=not at all British, through to 7=very strongly British. For purposes of analysis, these were collapsed to 'weak British' (1-4) and 'strong British' (5-7). We can summarise how respondents' social characteristics and political preferences are associated with being strongly British as follows (table 1).

**Table 1: % 'strongly British'**

*\*significant in binary regression model*

	SCOTLAND		ENGLAND		Sc-Eng
SEX	% Br	N	% Br	N	
male	45	586	72	460	-27
female	50	638	77*	424	-27
<i>ppd</i>	+5		+5		
AGE					
18-24	36	121	61	104	-25
25-34	32	196	65	149	-33
35-44	41	181	71	132	-30
45-54	48	220	78	174	-30
55-64	51	191	78	120	-27
65+	69*	272	86*	205	-17

<i>ppd</i>	+33		+25		
<b>SOCIAL CLASS</b>					
Employers etc	52	412	75	352	-23
intermediate	55	123	72	96	-17
Own account	45	105	75	105	-30
Lower supy	40	117	70	82	-30
routine	44	326	76	211	-32
<i>ppd</i>	-8		+1		
<b>EDUCATION</b>					
Degree/HE	48	496	72	359	-24
Highers/As	48	248	75	169	-27
Standard/O/CSE	51	288	78	203	-27
none	42	186	78	138	-36
<i>ppd</i>	-6		+6		
<b>INCOME</b>					
Bottom quartile	45	218	78	116	-33
2 <sup>nd</sup>	43	225	74	165	-31
3 <sup>rd</sup>	46	257	70	164	-24
Top quartile	51	279	73	228	-22
<i>ppd</i>	+6		-5		
<b>PARTY</b>					
Cons	80*	185	82	267	-2
Lab	50	301	71	377	-21
LibDem	78	54	80	59	-2
SNP	32	416	N/A	N/A	
<i>ppd (Cons-Lab)</i>	+30		+11		
<b>VALUES</b>					
libertarian	39	174	63	86	-24
Neither	42	469	76	280	-34
authoritarian	56*	536	76	323	-30
<i>ppd</i>	+17		+13		
Left	43	753	71	351	-28
Neither	54	352	77	264	-23
Right	71*	73	80*	74	-9
<i>ppd</i>	+28		+9		
<b>CONST PREF</b>					
SP all decns	32	565	N/A		
Devo-max	57	392	N/A		
Status quo	72*	177	N/A		
UK rule	67	48	N/A		
<i>ppd</i>	+35				
<b>EU IDENTN</b>					
Weak European	46	659	79	444	-33
Strong Europn	50*	551	70	437	-20
<i>ppd</i>	+4		-9		
<b>INTEREST IN POLITICS</b>					

Great deal	49	505	78	407	-29
Some	52	346	72	257	-30
Little or none	42	372	71	221	-29
<i>ppd</i>	-7		-7		

The first, and most obvious, conclusion to draw is that people in Scotland are systematically far *less* likely to say they are strongly British than their counterparts in England. Only among Tory and LibDem supporters is there anything approaching parity. It is possible, of course, that the same set of influences on being strongly British operate in the two countries, albeit at a different level of ‘strength’ in Scotland. Modelling the factors which make for being ‘strongly British’ in Scotland and England suggest that this is not so. Being older has a major effect in the two countries, but in Scotland, being strongly British is significantly more ‘political’ (tables 2 and 3).

**Table 2: Binary regression models for Scotland**

	<i>Model 1</i>	<i>Model 2</i>	<i>Model 3</i>	<b><i>Strong Brits are</i></b>
	Wald (significance)	Wald (significance)	Wald (significance)	
Sex	0.741 (.389)	-	-	
Age	15.699 (.000**)	21.370 (.000**)	21.043 (.000**)	older
Social class	1.203 (.273)	-	-	
Education	1.959 (.162)	1.405 (.236)	-	
Income	0.105 (.746)	-	-	
Party support	33.461 (.000**)	33.712 (.000**)	33.063 (.000**)	Tories
Lib-authn	3.744 (.053*)	6.142 (.013*)	5.143 (.023*)	‘authoritarians’
Left-right	5.306 (.021*)	5.566 (.018*)	7.041 (.008**)	on the Right
Const preference+	16.303 (.000**)	21.013 (.000**)	21.859 (.000**)	not pro-indep.
EU identification	12.799 (.000**)	14.501 (.000**)	16.875 (.000**)	‘European’
Interest in politics	0.024 (.877)	-	-	

+Constitutional preference is only modelled in Scotland

**Table 3: Binary regression models for England**

	<i>Model 1</i>	<i>Model 2</i>	<i>Model 3</i>	<b><i>Strong Brits are</i></b>
	Wald (significance)	Wald (significance)	Wald (significance)	
Sex	3.637 (.057*)	5.006 (.025*)	4.328 (.037*)	female
Age	16.533 (.000**)	20.388 (.000**)	24.371 (.000**)	older
Social class	1.425 (.233)	-	-	
Education	0.002 (.967)	-	-	
Income	0.019 (.890)	-	-	
Party support	0.022 (.882)	-	-	
Lib-authoritarian	0.460 (.498)	-	-	

Left-right	5.158 (.023*)	5.081 (.024*)	5.310 (.021*)	on the Right
EU identification	.000 (.982)	-	-	
Interest in politics	5.668 (.017*)	2.184 (.139)	1.531 (.216)	

So why these national differences? First of all, being British in relation to what? The most obvious answer is ‘national’ identity, being Scottish and English respectively. There are two older measures of national identity, a simpler one asking whether people consider themselves Scottish/English/British, and which – Scottish/English as opposed to British – best describes them. This question (known as ‘bestnat’) has been in use from the 1980s. Since the early 1990s, there is the so-called Moreno question (properly, the Linz question) which takes the form of a 5-point Likert scale ranging from national not British/more national than British/equally national and British/ more British than national/British not national.

Taking each of these scales in turn, we find important differences north and south of the border with regard to measures of association.

### 1. ‘BestNat’

There is no obvious direction in which to percentage these data given that one is not ‘causing’ the other, but let us do so in terms of ‘bestnat’, being the older, and simpler, measure.

**Table 4: Bestnat by strength of being British: Scotland**

% by row		Weak British	Strong British	N
bestnat	‘British’	16%	<b>84</b>	246
	‘Scottish’	<b>59%</b>	41	834

**Table 5: Bestnat by strength of being British: England**

% by row		Weak British	Strong British	N
bestnat	‘British’	12%	<b>88</b>	413
	‘English’	26%	<b>74</b>	313

The most obvious point is that ‘bestnat’ discriminates in Scotland, but not in England to any significant extent. Most Scots who give their ‘bestnat’ as ‘Scottish’ are weakly British (59%),

while, unsurprisingly, the ‘bestnat’ British are strongly British (84%). In England, on the other hand, both ‘bestnat’ English and British are ‘strongly British’, and the differences are of degree rather than of kind.

However, percentaging the table in the other direction, among the English, being weakly or strongly British does produce different ‘bestnat’ results of identical symmetry: the ‘English’ are weakly British, and the ‘British’ are strongly British to the same degree (table 6).

**Table 6: Strength of being British by bestnat: England**

<i>% by column</i>		Weak Br	Strong Br
bestnat	‘British’	39%	<b>61%</b>
	‘English’	<b>61</b>	39
<i>N</i>		131	597

In Scotland, on the other hand, ‘bestnat’ is given as ‘Scottish’ for both weak and strong Brits (table 7). Being Scottish trumps both.

**Table 7: Strength of being British by bestnat: Scotland**

<i>% by column</i>		Weak Br	Strong Br
bestnat	‘British’	7%	38%
	‘Scottish’	<b>93</b>	<b>62</b>
<i>N</i>		534	546

## 2. ‘Moreno’ scales of national identity

We get similar patterns if we use the Moreno scales<sup>1</sup> (tables 8 & 9).

**Table 8: National Identity (Moreno) by strength of being British: Scotland**

<i>% by row</i>	Weak British	Strong British	N
Mainly Scottish	<b>69%</b>	31	664
Scottish = British	23%	<b>77</b>	341
Mainly British	9%	<b>91</b>	107

**Table 9: National Identity (Moreno) by strength of being British: England**

<i>% by row</i>	Weak British	Strong British	N
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<sup>1</sup> We have reduced the 5 Moreno categories to 3 because the numbers saying they are British in Scotland are small.

Mainly English	29%	<b>71</b>	215
English = British	17%	<b>83</b>	358
Mainly British	13%	<b>87</b>	203

These results are broadly comparable to those using the ‘bestnat’ scales, with the added refinement that there is an ‘equally national and British’ category. In Scotland, being ‘mainly Scottish’ implies being ‘weakly British’, while in England, the ‘mainly English’ are ‘strongly British’. In that respect, in Scotland there is a greater sense of people choosing to be either Scottish *or* British, while in England, it is a matter of being both English *and* British.

To complete the picture, we find that in Scotland the ‘weak British’ are mainly Scottish, while the ‘strong British’ are equally or mainly Scottish. In England, on the other hand, there is a looser association such that the ‘weak British’ are less strongly English, split evenly between mainly and equally English. The ‘strong British’ in England, like their counterparts in Scotland, put their ‘national’ identity on a par with being British, and the distributions are not dissimilar.

**Table 10: Strength of being British by national identity (Moreno): Scotland**

<i>% by column</i>	Weak British	Strong British
Mainly Scottish	<b>84%</b>	36%
Scottish = British	14	<b>46</b>
Mainly British	2	17
<i>N</i>	<i>547</i>	<i>565</i>

**Table 11: Strength of being British by national identity (Moreno): England**

<i>% by column</i>	Weak British	Strong British
Mainly English	41%	24%
English = British	41	<b>47</b>
Mainly British	18	28
<i>N</i>	<i>150</i>	<i>626</i>

## Discussion

1. Age is important: this is likely to be a cohort effect whereby the over 65+ generation is more strongly British than younger people. It is not so much growing old which

brings this about, but being born and brought up in the mid-20<sup>th</sup> century.

Nevertheless, the age gradient in Scotland is much steeper, with only 36% of 18-24 year olds, compared with 61% of that age group in England saying they are strongly British.

2. There is a stronger 'political' import in Scotland in saying that you are strongly British. Tory supporters in both Scotland and England are strongly British (around 80%), but among Labour supporters, there is a significant differential: only 50% in Scotland, but 71% in England. Around one-third of SNP supporters say they are strong Brits, which, while predictably low, might be thought of as unusually high for a nationalist party, reflecting perhaps the party's appeal to 'unionists' as a party of 'good government'. The overall effect is to make party support significant in the regression model in Scotland, but not in England.
3. On the other hand, having 'right-wing' values as measured by the Left-Right scale operates in favour of being strongly British in both countries, while being on the Left has a much lower level of association in Scotland with being strongly British (only 43%) than being on the Left in England (71%). Likewise, being a 'unionist' in Scotland, preferring the status quo or rule from Westminster, is strongly associated with being British.
4. Thinking of oneself as 'European' in Scotland and England has an interesting, and inverse, effect. Whereas in Scotland being strongly European and strongly British are positively associated, and indeed, it figures significantly in the model, it is reversed south of the border. In England, being strongly British has more of an inverse relationship with being strongly European, and does not figure significantly in the regression model. This suggests that for English Brits, 'Europe' is a defining Other, while in Scotland being European is seen as a complement to being British as well as being Scottish, and not its antithesis.
5. Finally, while having 'authoritarian' values is associated with being strongly British in both Scotland and England, only north of the border does it have a significant effect, arguably because the difference as regards being strongly British between 'libertarians' and 'authoritarians' in Scotland is much steeper (39% and 56%), while in England, the gradient is only 63% to 76%.

The overall impression, then, is that while there are some predictable similarities – older people are more strongly British in both countries – issues of politics and constitution figure far more significant in Scotland than in England. It is the absence of similar effects in England which stands out; being British is more ‘secular’ and less ‘political’. Furthermore, neither in Scotland nor in England do socio-economic factors have an effect on being strongly British: social class, education, and income do not figure, while sex has only a modest statistical effect in England, women in both countries being marginally more likely than men to say they are strongly British.

If being British was ubiquitous, then we would see little variation in terms of people’s social and political characteristics, across ages, sexes, social classes, educational levels, their political proclivities, and so on. There is, seemingly, more of that operating in England, where significant variations only occur with regard to age, sex and having right-wing values. In other words, the distributional patterns are smoother, and tend to be statistically insignificant. In Scotland, on the other hand, there is greater variation; the ‘slopes’ from low- to high-strength Britishness are steeper, especially with regard to ‘political’ variables, and higher levels of statistical significance. In other words, being British in Scotland is not only weaker than in England – but even so, around half say they are strongly British – but it is more suffused with ‘politics’.

We can draw these conclusions in large part because we have used more sophisticated measures of territorial identity than hitherto, in particular using 7-point scales ranging from low to high strength, of being Scottish, British and even European<sup>2</sup>. Such scales are direct measures of importance in a way in which older measures are not. For example, the oldest, ‘bestnat’ scale simply derives from asking respondents which identities they have (English/Scottish, British, European), and then asking which is the most important (or ‘bestnat’). We have little way of knowing whether or not these matter to people, except in terms of their relativities. The ‘improved’ Moreno question relates ‘state’ and ‘national’

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<sup>2</sup> Unfortunately, we have no such scale for ‘being English’, something of a missed opportunity. The British Social Attitudes survey 2017, which is the source of data on England, did not include a 7-point scale for Englishness, but does as regards being British, and being European.

identities<sup>3</sup>, and to what extent. If someone says they are ‘more Scottish/English than British’, for example, we cannot tell whether either or both national and state identities matter very much and how ‘strong’ such identities are.

These issues do matter, however, because not measuring strength directly has led to unwarranted assumptions in substantive terms, assuming, for example, that because people in Scotland put being Scottish far ahead of being British or European, the latter two are unimportant. Similarly, knowing that people in England rate being English and being British more or less equally has led to the assumption that they cannot tell the difference between them. Both Scottish and English conclusions of this sort are unwarranted, and driven, in essence, by the measures we choose to use. As we commented in our book *Understanding National Identity* “‘Forced choice’ may have the merit of clarity but reveals none of the complexity which attaches to national identity’ (2015: 166).

To a large extent, it is ‘politics’ which has given credence to debates about national identity. It is plausible to argue that changing ‘politics’ (and constitutional arrangements) are driving shifts in national identities, as well as vice versa. To take an example: it is often asserted that more people in England are opting to say they are English even though survey data suggests it has not changed much above 25% over two decades. Being English has become more ‘political’, notably vis-à-vis Brexit where it was a significant factor in accounting for vote (McCrone, 2017). Among such people there was growing support for an ‘English’ parliament rather than a pan-British one. Recall that morning after the Scottish Independence Referendum in 2014 when the-then Prime Minister David Cameron announced that now was the time to consider EVEL: English votes for English laws. Politics and identity were intertwined. Curiously, but significantly, we have heard little about EVEL since then, as the political maelstrom of Brexit has mobilised England in particular. This time, it is ‘Europe’ and not ‘the Scots’ which has become the significant Other against which being ‘English’ is measured.

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<sup>3</sup> The terms ‘state’ (British) and ‘national’ (English, Scottish etc) are used here as a shorthand, and do not disallow respondents being able to consider ‘British’, for example as ‘national’.

## Conclusion

'Politics', nevertheless, is often a poor guide to shifts in territorial identities. People in Scotland and in England *are* British, but not in identical ways or strengths. Thus, in Scotland saying you are strongly British, and as many as 50% do, there is a greater connection to political-constitutional matters than in England, where the sense of being British is higher, yet more diffuse. Previous survey research in 2006 showed that the Scots and the English had similar views on what constituted 'British symbols': British democracy, British fair play, and the British monarchy. They were not making personal judgements about whether or not they approved of these symbols; simply that these were what 'being British' was about. Furthermore, all shades of national identity opinion, north and south of the border, agreed on what the key symbols were. We concluded in that research that

"Britain" remains a salient and meaningful frame of reference, even though more and more people in England and Scotland do not define their own identity as British. If, then, they choose not to define themselves as British, this is a positive decision, not because they think Britishness is a concept devoid of meaning. (McCrone and Bechhofer, 2017: 178).

Ten years on, we can see the force of that statement, and it helps us to understand much better that being British is a matter of feeling as well as of speaking. We also understand much better to whom being British matters, and hence, what futures it might have in post-Brexit Britain.

## References:

- McCrone, D. (2017) 'Explaining Brexit North and South of the Border', in *Scottish Affairs*, 26(4), 391-410.
- McCrone, D. and F. Bechhofer (2015) *Understanding National Identity*, Cambridge University Press.