

Devolution and Britishness

Devolution Briefings

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Key Points

- The introduction of devolution prompted debate about whether common attachments to an overarching British identity would be eroded among the UK's nations.
- Devolution appears to be more a response to a decline in Britishness apparent in Scotland and Wales well before devolution, than a cause of that decline; but it has not reversed that decline.
- In Northern Ireland national identities are polarized between British-identifying Protestants and Irish-identifying Catholics. Again devolution has changed little.
- Only in England is there a notable post-devolution fall in 'British' identity, and a growth in English identity.
- But most people in England, Scotland and Wales claim dual identities, combining English/Scottish/Welshness and Britishness.
- A strengthening of 'local' identities in the UK's nations does not, in any case, pose a threat to the future of the UK. Those who now see themselves as more English than British are not especially likely to favour Scottish independence. And only a minority who see themselves as Scottish/Welsh rather than British favour independence for their nation.
- Only in Northern Ireland does the 'local' identity of Irishness indicate a desire to become independent, but this group has not grown in size in recent years.

National identity is often regarded as an emotional 'glue' that not only means that people feel a sense of belonging to a 'nation' but also a degree of obligation to it. Their identity helps ensure they feel positively attached to those institutions that symbolise or organise 'their' nation. So where the territorial boundaries of those who feel they belong to the same 'nation' coincide with those of the 'state' in whose jurisdiction they live, the state can be expected to be the object of such attachment. In consequence, the state is regarded as legitimate by its citizens, who accept its right to make decisions even when they disagree with them.

Britain is not, however, a 'nation-state'. Apart from England it includes the historic nations of Scotland and Wales together with part of Ireland. Nevertheless, it may be felt that the United Kingdom has developed a common state-wide national identity, 'British', that binds the peoples of the four parts of the UK together into a shared

sense of nationhood and thus ensures that the governmental institutions of the UK are regarded as legitimate.

For its critics, however, the advent of devolution in Scotland and Wales in 1999 posed a threat to that common bond. By creating distinctive institutions that symbolised and to some degree organised the separate nations of Scotland and Wales, they feared that devolution would boost the degree to which people in those two parts of the UK felt 'Scottish' or 'Welsh' rather than 'British'. Meanwhile devolution would also make people in England more aware of the distinction between 'England' and 'Britain', thereby perhaps ensuring they feel more 'English'. Meanwhile in Northern Ireland the implementation of the Belfast Agreement of 1998, which not only restored devolution to the province but also gave the Irish State some role in Northern Ireland's affairs, would undermine the degree to which people in the province felt part of the same British nation as those living on the other side of the Irish Sea.

This briefing examines whether those fears have been realised. It examines some of the key trends in the incidence and pattern of national identity in the four parts of the UK following the introduction of Scottish and Welsh devolution and in the wake of the (much interrupted) implementation of the Belfast Agreement. It does so by reporting the results of four surveys, one in each part of the UK, that have been collaboratively measuring and charting national identity in recent years, and comparing them with the results of earlier surveys that measured national identity prior to the constitutional innovations of recent years.

Table 1 shows the proportion in England, Scotland and Wales that, when presented with a list of some dozen or so identities, selected British as the one that best described themselves. In addition it shows for each of these three parts of the UK the proportion that opted instead for their 'local' national identity, that is English in England, Scottish in Scotland, and Welsh in Wales. (Only small minorities chose any other option.)

Table 1. Trends in Forced Choice National Identity, Great Britain 1974-2004

	1974	1979	1992	1997	1999	2000	2001	2002	2003	2004
England	%	%	%	%	%	%	%	%	%	%
English	na	na	31	34	44	41	43	37	38	38
British	na	na	63	59	44	47	44	51	48	51
Scotland										
Scottish	65	56	72	72	77	80	77	75	72	75
British	31	38	25	20	17	13	16	18	20	19
Wales										
Welsh	na	59	na	63	57	na	57	na	60	na
British	na	34	na	26	31	na	31	na	27	na

na: not asked

1997 readings are for the general election of that year except in Wales where it is for the devolution referendum.

Source: Scottish Election Studies 1974-1997; British Election Studies 1992-1997; Scottish Social Attitudes Surveys 1999-2004; British Social Attitudes Surveys 1999-2004; Welsh Election Study 1979; Welsh Referendum Study 1997; Welsh Assembly Election Study 1999; Wales Life and Times Surveys 2001, 2003.

Those living in the two parts of Great Britain where devolution has been introduced are far less likely to say they are British than are those living in England. In both cases far more – comprising in Scotland around three-quarters, and in Wales about three-fifths - describe themselves as ‘Scottish/Welsh’ than say they are ‘British’. In contrast in England British is selected more often than is English. However, the apparent lack of ‘Britishness’ outside of England cannot be regarded as a consequence of the introduction of devolution. These patterns existed before devolution was introduced. In Scotland the proportion saying they were British was almost the same in 2004, five years after the creation of the Scottish Parliament, as it had been in 1997, two years beforehand. Similarly in Wales the proportion saying in 2003 that they were British was little different from what it had been in 1997.

However, the proportion of people in Scotland and Wales who say they feel British has been lower in recent years than it was in the 1970s, and especially so in Scotland. The introduction of devolution – and the willingness of people to back that introduction in the 1997 referendums – occurred after a decline in Britishness rather than preceded it. Devolution is more accurately portrayed as a response to a decline in Britishness rather than a cause of its decline. But at the same time in neither Scotland nor Wales does it appear to have been a response that has helped to reverse the long-term decline in British identity they have experienced.

Indeed, not only is a sense of British identity far less common in both Scotland and Wales than it is in England, but it is also less common than in Northern Ireland. As table 2 shows, a little under half of those in the province say they are British, quite

similar to the proportion in England. But as in Scotland and Wales there is little evidence that the (attempted) constitutional innovations of recent years have had much impact on the incidence of Britishness. The proportion laying claim to that identity has been little different in recent years from the 44% who did so at the end of the 1980s, well before the ‘peace process’ that resulted in the Belfast Agreement ever began.

But adherence to Britishness is very much the exclusive preserve of one of the two religious communities in the province. Around three-quarters of Protestants say they are British, but only around one in ten Catholics. Amongst the latter around three-fifths say they are ‘Irish’, an identity that would seem to induce loyalty to the Republic of Ireland rather than the UK. But, again, this is not new. In 1989 too just 10% of Catholics said they were British while 60% said they were Irish. The Belfast Agreement has not promoted any long-term increase in the sense of ‘Irishness’ amongst Catholics. Equally, despite their widespread doubts about the agreement, neither does it appear to have undermined the protestant community’s sense of ‘Britishness’. Indeed, if anything the opposite is the case, as prior to 1998 the proportion of protestants saying they were British never exceeded 70%.

Table 2 Trends in National Identity in Northern Ireland, 1989-2004

	1989	1996	1998	1999	2000	2001	2002	2003	2004
British	44	39	41	45	49	42	45	41	47
Irish	25	28	27	29	22	27	28	27	27
N Irish	20	25	23	19	20	23	19	24	21

Source: Northern Ireland Social Attitudes Survey, 1989, 1996; Northern Ireland Life and Times Survey, 1998-2004.

There is, however, one part of the UK where there has been a notable change - England. Prior to the 1999 reading reported in table 1 around three-fifths of people in England said that they were British while only around one-third said they were English. (This is confirmed by a reading taken in England in 1996 that is not shown in the table. In that year 34% said they were English while 58% said they were British.) But then in 1999, just after the first Scottish and Welsh elections were held, as many people said they were English as said they were British. While thereafter the proportion of people who said they were British increased again, at around a half it has not returned to the level it was before 1999. It therefore appears possible that the advent of devolution in Scotland and Wales has helped to make people in England more aware of the distinction between ‘British’ and ‘English’ and that this has resulted in a reduction in the level of manifest identification with Britishness.

However, the data in table 1 are based on an important but problematic assumption. This is that national identities are exclusive, that those who say they are English, Scottish or Welsh reject any sense of Britishness. But perhaps people feel both. If feeling, say, Scottish, is not necessarily regarded as incompatible with feeling British,

then the high incidence of feeling Scottish in Scotland cannot be assumed to be indicative of emotional hostility to the UK.

In fact behind the data presented in table 1 is a fuller set of data. Respondents were not immediately asked to state just one national identity but rather to indicate all those national identities that they thought applied to themselves. Only thereafter were they required to choose just one. In practice plenty of people in all three parts of Great Britain say that they are both British and either English, Scottish or Welsh. In 2003, for example, this was true of 34% of people in Wales, 38% in England and no less than 47% in Scotland. Moreover, in England and Scotland at least this proportion has if anything increased in recent years.

The same though cannot be said of Northern Ireland. In the 2003 survey there, just 3% laid claim to being both Irish and British. Equally only 4% said they were both Irish and Northern Irish, the one identity accepted by significant proportions on both sides of the religious divide (albeit more readily by Catholics), while only a few more, 13% said they were British and Northern Irish. Evidently most of the quarter or so in Northern Ireland who say they are Irish do reject any adherence to Britishness.

The possibility that people in Great Britain at least may have dual identities, albeit perhaps with one more important to them than the other, is specifically acknowledged in another question put to respondents in our surveys. This invited people to place themselves on a five point scale that at one end was (in, for example, England) labelled 'English, not British', and at the other end, 'British, not English'. In between these two exclusive responses, however, are other answers that indicate some form of dual identity; respondents can indicate that they feel equally British and English or that while they feel both, they feel one more strongly than the other.

Table 3 Trends in Moreno National Identity, Great Britain 1992-2003

	1992	1997	1999	2000	2001	2003
England	%	%	%	%	%	%
English not British	na	7	17	19	17	17
More English than British	na	17	15	14	13	19
Equally English and British	na	45	37	34	42	31
More British than English	na	14	11	14	9	13
British not English	na	9	14	12	11	10
Scotland						
Scottish not British	19	23	32	37	36	31

More Scottish than British	40	38	35	31	30	34
Equally Scottish and British	33	27	22	21	24	22
More British than Scottish	3	4	3	3	3	4
British not Scottish	3	4	4	4	3	4
Wales						
Welsh, not British	na	17	17	na	24	21
More Welsh than British	na	26	19	na	23	27
Equally Welsh and British	na	34	37	na	28	29
More British than Welsh	na	10	8	na	11	8
British, not Welsh	na	12	14	na	11	9

na: not asked

1997 readings are for the general election of that year except in Wales where it is for the devolution referendum.

Source: Scottish Election Study 1992; British and Scottish Election Studies 1997; British and Scottish Social Attitudes Surveys. Welsh Referendum Study 1997; Welsh Assembly Election Study 1999; Wales Life and Times Surveys 2001, 2003.

The answers that this question has elicited over the last decade, shown in table 3, confirm that a sense of dual identity is common. In Scotland and Wales in 2003 at least three in five said they regarded themselves as some mixture of British and Scottish/Welsh. In England the equivalent figure was nearly three-quarters. At the same time, however, these data confirm the post-devolution increase in adherence to feeling English that we discerned from table 1. In 1997, only 7% of people in England said they were English, not British, but since 1999 that proportion has not fallen below 17%. However, this increase seems to have come mainly at the expense of a decline in the proportion thinking they are equally British and English rather than in those who said they were primarily British.

But table 3 also suggests that adherence to Britishness may also have been weaker since 1999 in both Scotland and Wales too. Before 1999 only around one in five people in Scotland explicitly rejected being British at all; since 1999 that proportion has been more typically of the order of one in three. In Wales the trend may be less marked but appears to be similar in direction. In both cases the increase in those who feel exclusively Scottish/Welsh seems again not to have come at the expense of the minority who primarily felt British, but rather those whose sense of Britishness existed alongside an at least equally strong sense of feeling Scottish or Welsh. This may help explain why an equivalent decline in Britishness is not discernible from the

forced choice responses shown in table 1. Any post-devolution decline in feeling British in Scotland and Wales appears to have occurred amongst those whose sense of Britishness was already relatively weak, and who thus, in answering the forced choice question posed at table 1, even said before 1999 that they were ‘Scottish’ or ‘Welsh’ rather than ‘British’.

It appears then that the immediate post-devolution period has been marked across Great Britain at least by some decline in the level of adherence to Britishness. The evidence is clearest in England whose population seems to have become more aware of the distinction between English and British in the immediate wake of the creation of the new devolved institutions. In Scotland and Wales, in contrast, any decline seems to have been confined to those whose sense of feeling British was already relatively weak. But if the advent of devolution has helped undermine adherence to Britishness, it appears to have been a once and for all step change that occurred in and around 1999 rather than a secular decline that might be expected to continue further in future.

Table 4 Constitutional Preferences by National Identity, 2003

	British	English/Scottish/ Welsh/Irish
Attitudes in England	%	%
Scotland should ...		
be independent, separate from UK and EU or separate from UK but part of EU	15	20
remain part of UK with its own elected Parliament, either with or without tax powers	62	56
remain part of the UK without an elected parliament	13	14
Attitudes in Scotland		
Scotland should ...		
be independent, separate from UK and EU or separate from UK but part of EU	6	31
remain part of UK with its own elected Parliament, either with or without tax powers	64	54
remain part of the UK without an elected parliament	39	15
Attitudes in Wales		
Wales should...		

be independent, separate from UK and EU or separate from UK but part of EU	6	17
remain part of UK with its own elected Parliament or Assembly	63	62
remain part of the UK without an elected assembly	28	17
Attitudes in Northern Ireland		
Northern Ireland should...		
unify with the Republic of Ireland	2	50
be independent, separate from UK and EU or separate from UK but part of EU	5	10
remain part of the UK with its own elected Parliament or Assembly	69	20
remain part of UK without an elected assembly	17	6

Sources: British Social Attitudes Surveys, 2003; Scottish Social Attitudes Surveys, 2003; Wales Life and Time Survey 2003; Northern Ireland Life and Times Survey 2003.

In any event, some caution should be exercised before presuming that such weakening of Britishness as may have occurred portends serious consequences for the future of the UK. Arguably these only arise if, for example, those who feel English would wish to end the link with England's neighbours. But, as can be seen from table 4, there is little evidence of this. In 2003 those who said they were English in response to our forced choice question were only a little more likely to indicate they would like Scotland to become independent than were those who said they were British. For the most part whether someone feels British or English appears to make little difference to their views about the constitutional structure of the United Kingdom. It is therefore difficult to argue that the decline of Britishness in England represents a serious challenge the future legitimacy of the United Kingdom.

However, in Scotland and Wales someone's national identity does make some difference to how they would prefer to be governed. Those who say they are Scottish or Welsh are more likely to want to leave the United Kingdom and live in an independent Scotland or Wales than are those who say they are British. Even so, only a minority of this group support independence, especially so in Wales. So any decline in Britishness that has occurred in these two parts of the UK does not necessarily translate into a wish to leave the UK. It is only in Northern Ireland, where half of those who say they are Irish would like the province to unify with the Irish Republic and another 10% say they would like Northern Ireland to become independent, that a majority of those who opt for one of the non-British identities favour leaving the UK. But this is one group whose size has not grown in recent years. Meanwhile we should note too that less than a quarter of those who say they are Northern Irish back unification or independence.

The fears of devolution's critics about the possible impact of recent constitutional reforms on the incidence of 'Britishness' may have had some foundation. We have uncovered some evidence in England, Scotland and Wales that a decline in adherence to 'Britishness' may have occurred in the immediate wake of the introduction of devolution. However, feeling 'English', 'Scottish' or 'Welsh' is not necessarily something that people feel to the exclusion of feeling 'British'. Nor does it necessarily signify hostility to the maintenance of the UK. Only in Northern Ireland is there a national identity, Irish, whose adherents both clearly reject any sense of 'Britishness' and would like to leave the UK, but the size of this group has not increased in the wake of recent constitutional developments.

The challenge facing those who wish to use national identity to foster loyalty to the UK remains much the same now as it was a decade ago. The UK is not only a multi-national state but a state with multiple national identities. Its future appears to rest not simply on its ability to promote a uniform sense of 'Britishness' but rather on its ability to maintain and secure the loyalty of those with a wide variety of other national identities too.

This Devolution Briefing was written by Professor John Curtice of the Department of Government, University of Strathclyde. Professor Curtice has acted as coordinator of four survey projects in the ESRC Devolution Programme, each focused on one of the UK's nations: on England, led by Professor Anthony Heath, University of Oxford; on Scotland, led by Dr Alison Park, National Centre for Social Research; on Wales, led by Dr Richard Wyn Jones, University of Wales, Aberystwyth; and on Northern Ireland, led by Dr Roger Mac Ginty, University of York. The work presented here draws on all these surveys, including time series data funded by other sources, to which we are grateful.