

Nationalism, racism, and identity: what connects Englishness to a preference for hard Brexit?



*Support for Brexit was higher among those who identify as English rather than British, even after accounting for relevant economic factors. But what is it that connects English identity to a preference for Brexit? **Anthony Heath** and **Lindsay Richards** outline some key characteristics that go some way in explaining the association.*

'[Identity politics](#)' is a phrase that can be heard a lot these days, although it has been around for a while. It's a phrase that captures the idea that people are forming political preferences on the basis of who they are (or who they feel they are) and the groups they belong to. This is in contrast to the 'classic' treatments of British politics which tended to focus on divisions between social classes, their economic interests, and the left-right ideological dimension which pitted free market policies (of the sort particularly associated with Margaret Thatcher) against the kind of socialist policies followed by the Atlee government. In this [classic divide](#), political choices follow one's own economic position, with the well-off voting for lower taxes and lower redistribution (the Conservatives) and trade unionists and the worse-off voting for the opposite (Labour). But, while economics has been highly relevant to the debates over Brexit, issues over identity, particularly national and European identities, are also an important part of the mix.

"When you strip away the rhetoric", [wrote Fintan O'Toole](#) in the Guardian in June 2016, "Brexit is an English Nationalist movement". Englishness has also been called "[the invisible driver](#)" behind Brexit. These assertions have been borne out by a number of post-referendum studies that have demonstrated higher support for Brexit among those identifying as English rather than British (see [here](#) for example). Importantly, in light of the 'classic' political divides, these findings about Englishness hold true after accounting for relevant economic factors; that is, identity matters over and above any economic concerns the individual might hold.

And it is an English phenomenon: the distinction doesn't hold in Scotland or Northern Ireland or Wales. But just what is it about Englishness that connects one's feeling of belonging to the nation to preferences for Brexit? Do the English identifiers place greater emphasis on nationalism, on protecting national boundaries? And is Englishness an 'ethnic' identity where Britishness is more 'civic'?

National identity represents a social identity. According to [social identity theory](#) a social identity represents a self-concept based on perceived membership of a social group and is associated with in-group favouritism and discrimination against members of outgroups. Conceptually similar is the idea that national identity/membership of a nation represents membership of an [imagined community](#) – imagined as both inherently limited and sovereign. A nation always implies a *boundary* between those who are conceived to belong to it and those who are excluded from membership. Key ideas in both set of theories are that boundaries between members and non-members exist, and that feelings differ towards those on different sides of the boundary.

We can think of these [symbolic boundaries](#) as being more, or less, "bright" or "blurred". In effect the brightness of the boundary tells one how easy it is to cross the boundary and for newcomers to be accepted as a member of the specific national community. A further set of distinctions include the criteria for crossing the boundary and being accepted as a member of the national community in question.

To explore these ideas – of nationalism, of symbolic boundaries, and of nativism – we investigated how Englishness and other identities are linked to Brexit preferences. In our [on-going Brexit survey](#), we asked respondents about various aspects of the Brexit negotiations: what would be their 'red lines' and where would they be willing to negotiate? (Read more about these attitudes [here](#).)

Table 1: National identities and red lines (percentages, weighted, N = 3027, data collected online April-May 2018)

	No EU role in UK lawmaking	Irish Border must remain 'soft'	Free movement must be stopped	UK Citizens in EU must have same rights	UK must have full access to EU markets	Scientific collaboration must continue	No future budget contributions	UK must be freed to make trade deals
British only	46	34	27	43	31	35	44	49
English only	60	32	39	46	32	32	58	63
Scottish only	51	33	23	47	32	49	28	43
Welsh only	64	38	28	55	30	33	46	49
Irish only	42	66	19	37	36	32	39	50
European only	22	28	22	43	19	30	24	21
Other only	25	30	28	43	27	34	35	31
British preferred	45	28	25	46	30	31	38	35
English preferred	45	25	33	45	33	30	41	48
Other preferred	28	31	24	44	35	39	30	36
All	48	32	29	44	31	34	43	47

Our results (table 1) show that exclusive English identities are associated with a hard Brexit, with strong emphases on the red lines of regaining sovereignty, ending free movement, ending budget contributions, and restoring the freedom to make independent trade deals. European (and other) identities are associated with significantly weaker emphases on these red lines, with British identities falling somewhere in between. Irish identities are distinctive in their emphasis on maintaining a soft border in the island of Ireland.

We also collected measures of people's symbolic boundaries by asking how important various factors are for being English/ Scottish/ Welsh/ British etc. The questions included the importance of ancestry, speaking the language, respect for laws, and being born here. We also asked a set of questions intended to garner beliefs in biological racism. We asked, for example: "Do you agree that some races or ethnic groups are born less intelligent than others? Do you agree that some races or ethnic groups are born harder working than others?" From these we derived a measure of 'blatant racism' for those who agree with these questions (in contrast to those who disagree but may hold more 'subtle' forms of racist views).

Table 2: National identities: distribution, strength, ethnic, brightness (percentages, weighted, N = 3027, data collected online April-May 2018). B = British, E = English, S = Scottish, W = Welsh, NI = Northern Irish

	Strength of identity	Ancestry important to be B/E/S/W/NI	Bright boundaries	Blatant racist
British only	8.2	59	30	21
English only	8.6	76	44	28
Scottish only	8.6	66	27	17
Welsh only	9.3	65	19	16
Irish only	8.6	83	0	14
European only	8.7	-	2	13
Other only	8.4	-	15	23
British preferred	8.0	56	25	19
English preferred	8.7	70	29	22
Other preferred	8.7	-	13	18
All/ Total	8.4	64	28	21

In table 2 we can see that an exclusive English identity does seem to have a distinctive, rather 'nativist' or 'ethnocentric', character with bright boundaries against outsiders and an emphasis on ancestry as a criterion for national belonging. People who subscribe to an exclusive English identity are also more willing to express racist views, while those with European identities tend to be the opposite.

Our research shows that these characteristics go some way towards explaining the association between an English identity, a preference for a hard Brexit, and the red lines of restoring British sovereignty and the ability to make independent trade deals and ending free movement and budget contributions to the EU. This is not to deny that there may simultaneously be affinities between these Brexit red lines and Margaret Thatcher's free market vision with its emphasis on deregulation, a small state, and consumer choice. Identity politics is not necessarily antithetical to economic ideology. Perhaps the power of the Leave movement was its ability to harness these two sorts of politics together.

This article gives the views of the author(s), and not the position of LSE Brexit, nor of the London School of Economics and Political Science. It first appeared on [LSE British Politics and Policy](#). Featured image credit: [Pixabay](#) (Public Domain).

Anthony Heath, CBE, FBA is the Director of the [Centre for Social Investigation](#) at Nuffield College, Oxford. He is Emeritus Professor of Sociology at the University of Oxford and Professor of Sociology at Manchester University.

Lindsay Richards is a Postdoctoral Research Fellow at the [Centre for Social Investigation](#) at Nuffield College, Oxford.