

Scottish nationalism stands apart from other secessionist movements for being civic in origin, rather than ethnic

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The contrast between the SNP and other nationalist movements and parties is striking, argues [Elliott Green](#). The SNP explicitly promotes civic nationalism, claiming that membership in the Scottish nation is to be defined not by blood but by voluntary attachment to Scotland and participation in its civic life. This has paid off, with high support from ethnic minorities for independence.



Normally we think of nationalism as a right-wing ideology, where members of the nation are considered superior to non-members, and the latter are excluded from becoming citizens or full members of the nation. This ideology becomes especially pernicious when membership of the nation is defined along ethnic lines, such that foreign immigrants are permanently excluded from becoming part of the nation, no matter how much they might want to assimilate.

This type of nationalism, commonly known as ethnic nationalism, is usually contrasted with civic nationalism, whereby the latter allows anyone to identify with the nation and its civic values regardless of their ethnicity. Historically the ethnic/civic divide was mapped geographically along a western/eastern divide within Europe by scholars of nationalism like [Hans Kohn](#), who identified civic nationalism as typical of the nations of western Europe (France, the UK, Switzerland and the Netherlands, as well as Scandinavia) and ethnic nationalism as exemplified by Germany, the nations of eastern Europe and the peripheral nations of western Europe like Ireland.

This dichotomy, while simple and useful, papered over the strong ethnic divisions in western Europe that have more recently come to the fore since Kohn first wrote about this topic in 1944. The Vlaams Blok in the Netherlands, the British National Party (BNP) in the UK, the Front National in France and the Danish People's Party in Denmark have all explicitly rejected civic nationalism in favour of some form of ethnic nationalism. The success of these parties has varied, but the fact that many of their anti-immigration policies have been taken up by mainstream parties suggests how strong ethnic nationalism remains in much of western Europe.

The current debates on Scottish independence are a fascinating contrast to this narrative. The Scottish National Party (SNP) is explicitly nationalist, not only in its name but also in its goal to create a Scottish nation-state. However, it also explicitly promotes civic nationalism, such that it has claimed that membership in the Scottish nation is to be defined not by blood but by voluntary attachment to Scotland and participation in its civic life. The SNP has been rewarded with support from ethnic minorities, such that Scots of Asian descent actually [support](#) independence at a higher rate than the rest of the population. The fact that such groups as [Africans for an Independent Scotland](#), [English Scots for Yes](#) and [Scots Asians for Yes](#) even exist is clear evidence of how the Yes campaign is able to draw upon non-ethnically Scottish residents of Scotland who support independence.

Indeed, the contrast between the SNP and other nationalist movements and parties is striking. In the run-up to the recent European elections in May 2014 I received a flyer from the BNP, which attempted to explain to the ignorant masses how the SNP wasn't a "real" nationalist party since true nationalism meant cutting immigration and protecting the rights of indigenous Britons. Scottish nationalism is also different in this sense from other secessionist movements. Jacques Parizeau, the Premier of Quebec who led the secessionist campaign in Quebec's 1995 referendum on independence, famously blamed the failure of the campaign on "[money and ethnic votes](#)," since around 90 per cent of immigrants voted against independence. Catalan nationalism also has a quiet undercurrent of ethnic nationalism, with one former President of the Catalan Parliament [complaining](#) that "Catalonia will disappear if current migration flows continue."

In contrast, the SNP has praised high levels of immigration into Scotland, and it was an SNP representative, Bashir Ahmad, who became the first non-white and first Muslim Member of Scottish Parliament (MSP) in 2007, followed by the election of a second Muslim SNP MSP, Humza Yousaf, in 2011. Moreover, while non-white residents of Scotland have the right to vote in the referendum on independence, those Scots who live outside Scotland but within the UK are not allowed to cast a vote. Thus those who are ethnically Scottish wholly or in part – including UK Prime Minister David Cameron, whose father was born in Scotland, and former Prime Minister Tony Blair, who was born in Edinburgh to a Scottish father – do not have the right to vote, in contrast to non-Scots resident in Scotland (including those from Commonwealth and European countries who are not UK citizens). This decision to exclude non-resident Scots from the vote only emphasizes the civic nature of Scottish nationalism, such that ethnic descent and birthplace is less important than one's commitment to residence in Scotland.

Regardless of the outcome of Thursday's vote, mainstream Scottish nationalism will most likely continue to be conceived as civic in origin, rather than ethnic. The question remains as to whether other secessionist movements in Spain, Canada and elsewhere will learn from the Scottish experience and pursue more a more civic conceptualization of the nation than they have in the past.

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