

October 2020
Britain's Choice:
Common Ground and
Division in 2020s Britain

Chapter 7

Shared Identity



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Shared Identity

59 per cent say they are proud of being British

42 per cent of Scots feel proud of their British identity, but 79 per cent feel proud of their Scottish identity

22 per cent of Progressive Activists feel proud of their British identity

62 per cent of Britons say their national identity is important to them (being English/ Scottish Welsh)

The **#1** source of shared pride in Britain is for the National Health Service

79 per cent say that they are proud of the advancements we have made in equality between men and women

Interviewer

What about your national identity? Do you see yourself as British or English?

Louise

'Oh. Well, I'm technically both.'

Interviewer

Which one's first? Which one has precedence?

Louise

'Well I'd probably say I'm British first and then I narrow it down to I'm English, because it's what I am.'

Interviewer

Do you have more of an emotional attachment to one of them, for example?

Louise

'Well I think saying that you're British, you're part of something bigger. You're part of four countries joining together really. And then to say you're English it's more dividing yourself even further down. Which, yes, I am English. I'm also British.'

Interviewer

Anything else then, in terms of your identity and background that you would bring up if you were down the pub, meeting people for the first time?

Louise

'Well I'm Northern [laughs]. Everyone brings that up. I'm a northerner.'

Introduction

Among the more profound changes western democracies are experiencing in the 21st century is the shifting of their dividing lines to become more shaped by identity than by ideology. Identity conflict between groups, or what Francis Fukuyama has described as the 'struggle for recognition',¹ plays out in many ways. Through the rise of populist nationalism, it has subverted the established order of many democracies, shifting the focus away from older left/right policy debates towards issues that divide societies into in-groups and out-groups. It is seen in the tribalism of social media, where complex issues quickly degenerate into tests of loyalty and of where someone stands in a binary 'us-versus-them' world. It is also reflected in debates on cultural values around free speech and 'cancel culture'.

Social psychology teaches us how strongly we as humans are group oriented. We hunger for the sense of belonging, identity, and recognition that comes from being part of a group. In times when we feel insecure or threatened, and when

other forms of community and belonging have weakened, this need for a group can become more important, because it provides us with a greater sense of security. The social psychology that drives these dynamics is summarised in a paper published by More in Common in 2018.²

These group identities can become a source of division when an in-group is defined by an out-group, such as an established population versus immigrants, nationalists versus internationalists, or the Leavers versus Remainers division of recent years. Polarisation occurs when group identities are defined in opposition to an 'other', and where people's sense of belonging is built around the exclusion of that 'other'.

This chapter provides insights into the different in-group and out-group identities that matter most to people in Britain. These insights help us to better understand where there are differences and divisions between the group identities that are meaningful to us, but also where there is common ground that is often neglected or unseen. In a time of increasing social fragmentation, one of the most powerful forces to strengthen cohesion within societies is a shared sense of identity – one which transcends differences and divisions. This chapter also looks at the sources of shared pride and identity in Britain that are common ground across society.

Questions of national identity and loyalties have played a major role in some of Britain's most divisive debates in recent years, including Brexit, Scottish independence, and immigration. The goal of this chapter is not to address these specific issues in detail, but to provide useful insights into the importance of different forms of identity for people in Britain, with a view to understanding which elements tend to divide the different segments of the population and which elements tend to unite them. Finally, although this chapter presents findings related to Scottish and British identity, it does not seek to address in detail the relationship between those identities. The dynamics of Scottish identity and the aspiration for independence felt by many people requires a more focused and detailed examination.

7.1 Layered identity

One of Britain's unique strengths is that most people's sense of identity has several layers that might include both British and dimensions of English, Welsh, Scottish, or Irish identity, sometimes layered also with strong local identities such as Geordie, Glaswegian, Londoner, Cornish, Mancunian, or Scouser. Many people also have a migrant background that gives them another layer of identity. These layers reflect the unusual structure of the United Kingdom, composed of four nations with distinctive national identities that have persisted through centuries and grown more important in recent years, especially with the rise of Scottish nationalism. Among the many reasons for the persistence of these identities, one is that several international sporting contests – including football, rugby, and cricket – are contested by national teams rather than UK teams, a significant factor given the enormous popularity of the FIFA World Cup in particular.

In understanding the layered identities of people in Britain, another important factor is the dominant role of England within the United Kingdom. England constitutes close to 85 per cent of both the economy and population of the UK. This has historically led to an entanglement between English and British identities, weakening Englishness as a distinctive identity separate from Britishness. Our conversations with people in England often found that many people do not have a clear sense of what distinguishes their British and English

identities. England's historic dominance of British institutions has in more recent decades energised independence movements to assert a more visible Scottish and Welsh identity, leading to devolution and the creation of the Scottish Parliament and the Senedd alongside the re-establishment of political institutions in Northern Ireland with the creation of the Northern Ireland Assembly following the Good Friday.

The constitutional structure of the United Kingdom has contributed to this layered sense of identity as well as the character of the people in those four nations. As a result, across society British identity does not sit above all other identities and group attachments. Instead, British identity is just one layer of identity – thicker for some, thinner for others. For some, there is more density in a different layer of national identity such as Scottish, Welsh, English, or Irish.

For many, the most important layers of their identity come from other places that feel closer to their daily lives such as attachments to family and friends; their home city, town, or county; cultural background; support for a football team or other sports club; worshipping in a particular church, mosque, temple, or other religious building; activism and beliefs; education; trade or profession; and leisure pursuits. British identity can therefore sometimes appear as a muddle – reflecting the diverse ways in which people across the country think about the different layers of their identity.ⁱⁱⁱ The focus group conversations conducted for this study found that most English people do not have clear-cut or fixed ideas of what English and British identities are and what they attribute to each of them, sometimes mixing the connotations for each interchangeably. While in public discourse certain characteristics may be associated with British and English identities, awareness of those distinctions among the English population is low.

A final aspect of the British layering of identity that emerged from focus group conversations is that many people think of national identity in practical ways. For example, national identity can become more important to people when they are travelling overseas, because they need to navigate their interactions with people as a British citizen. Participants often referenced their British identity in connection with travel or the nationality listed on their passport. Similarly, people become more aware of the national and regional layers of their identity when travelling to another part of Britain, where they might be conscious of different accents, or when they have seen reports of the different impacts of the Covid-19 pandemic on other parts of the country.

7.2 Measures of importance and pride

To understand people's sense of British and national identity, we asked about its importance and to what extent it gives them pride. Participants answered questions covering both British and specifically, English, Scottish, and Welsh identity (the exclusion of data for Northern Ireland is explained in the Methodology chapter).^{iv} In order to compare the importance of national identity against other forms of group-based identity, people were also asked about the importance of their gender, class, ethnicity, political party, and Leaver/Remainer identity.

ⁱⁱⁱ For clarity, this chapter generally refers to 'British identity' to refer to people's attachment to the idea of being a citizen of the United Kingdom, and when referring to a specific 'national identity' it refers to their attachment to one of the four constituent nations which make up the UK.

^{iv} While data quality issues required us to exclude findings from Northern Ireland from this report, it is important to recognise the unique context of Northern Ireland, which has suffered violence and sectarian divisions over the past century. Identity debates on the British mainland play out in very distinctive ways around the fault lines of sectarian divisions in Northern Ireland. An expert interviewee in Northern Ireland noted that the Brexit debates had forced people to revisit identity politics, which many hoped to put behind them. While it is uncommon to identify as both British and Irish in Northern Ireland, a growing proportion (21 per cent in the 2011 census) identify as Northern Irish as a standalone identity.

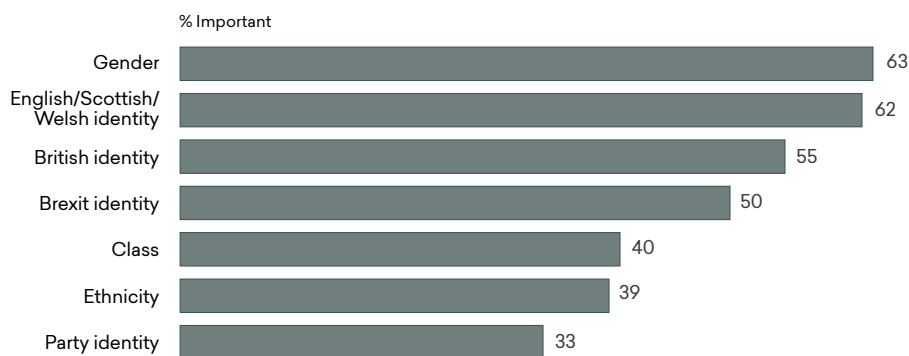
Across a range of questions, between three and four out of five people describe their national identity or their British identity as important or as a source of pride. It is more important to people's sense of identity than all other sources of group identity except gender. Another key finding is that national identity (English, Scottish, or Welsh) is more important than British identity to people in Scotland and Wales, but of similar importance to people in England.

- Around 60 per cent of people in England say that both British identity and English identity is important to them.
- In contrast, national identity resonates with twice as many Scots as does British identity (75 per cent for Scottish identity versus 39 per cent for British identity).
- The difference between the importance of national identity and British identity is not as great in Wales – the gap is around half the size of the gap in Scotland (70 per cent for Welsh identity versus 54 per cent for British identity).
- Scottish and Welsh participants are comparable to Americans, among whom 77 per cent in More in Common's research say that their national identity is important to their identity³. In other words, people in England consider national identity to be important to who they are, but less so than people in most other nations do.

Figure 7.1. Important aspects of identity

Gender and national identity are considered to be the most important aspects of their identity for many Britons

The importance of different aspects of identity



Qu. How important to you are each of the following parts of your identity? February 2020. Source: More in Common 2020.

Another lens through which to understand the layers of British and national identity is to ask about the association of positive emotions with group identity. These findings on pride in identity.

- In England, 64 per cent are proud of their English identity, compared to 61 per cent for their British identity.
- In Scotland, 79 per cent are proud of their Scottish identity, while only 42 per cent are proud of their British identity.

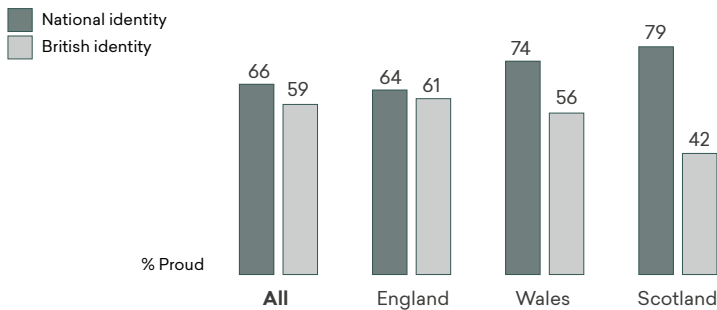
- In Wales the gap is 74 per cent to 56 per cent.
- This compares with 78 per cent of Americans feeling proud of their American identity.
- The difference between Americans and English people mentioned above is shown in the data More in Common has gathered. 56 per cent of Americans rank their level of pride in their national identity at the highest possible level, while in England just 35 per cent do (and in Britain overall, just 27 per cent do).

Figure 7.2.

Pride in national and British identity

National identity has more resonance than British identity, especially for Scottish and Welsh people

Pride in national versus British identity



Qu. How proud are you to be... February 2020.
Source: More in Common 2020.

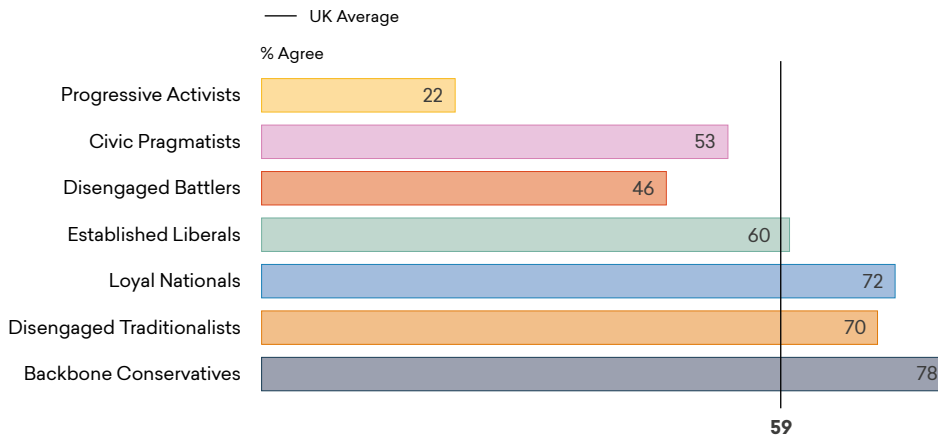
The psychological underpinnings of national identity are reflected in an analysis of these findings through the lens of people's core beliefs and the mapping of the social psychology of Britain's seven segments. The two core beliefs most strongly associated with a higher degree of pride in British identity are the moral foundations of loyalty and authority. The three groups that score highest on commitment to loyalty and authority (Disengaged Traditionalists, Loyal Nationals, and Backbone Conservatives) are also the same three segments with the highest levels of pride in British identity. The gap between Backbone Conservatives and the group with the least national pride, Progressive Activists, is almost 60 percentage points.

Figure 7.3.

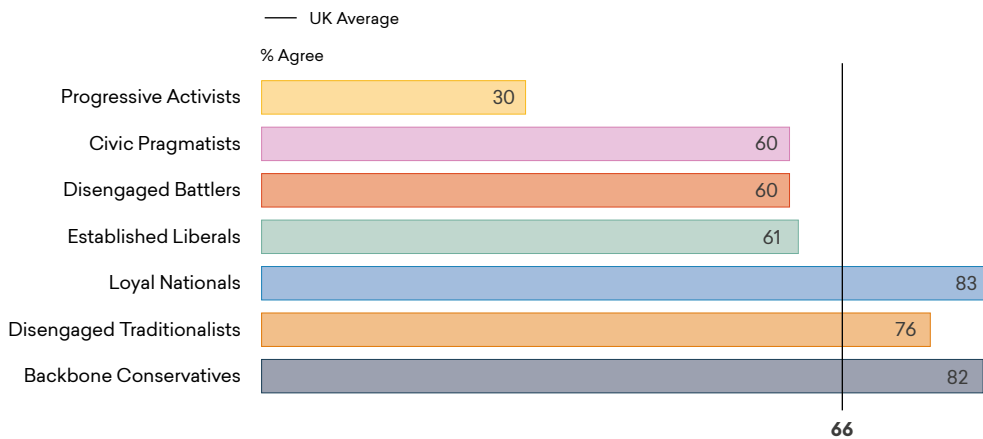
National pride

Progressive Activists stand out as having the least pride in their national identity

Pride in national versus British identity



Pride in being English/ Welsh/ Scottish



Qu. How proud are you to be... February 2020.
Source: More in Common 2020.

Figure 7.3 highlights the extent to which Progressive Activists stand out on both the importance they give their national identity and their sense of pride in it.

- Only one in five Progressive Activists feel proud of their British identity – compared to three times as many in the general population and four times as many Backbone Conservatives.
- On measures of intensity this difference is even more pronounced. Just 5 per cent of Progressive Activists say that British identity is a ‘very important’ aspect of their identity, compared to 23 per cent of the overall population (and among Backbone Conservatives and Loyal Nationals, 35 and 37 per cent respectively).
- Looked at from the opposite end of the spectrum in which people say that they are *not* proud to be British (rather than just being apathetic or having moderate feelings of pride), on average 23 per cent of people say that they are not proud to be British. This view is held by 59 per cent of Progressive Activists.

The differences identified among the population segments are significantly larger than for demographic factors such as race, age, or where someone lives:

- There is a slightly higher level of pride in British identity among non-white than white British people, although this difference is within the margin of error (on the measure of feeling very proud, a difference of 28 to 27 per cent). Likewise, fewer non-white British people say that they are not proud of their British identity (18 per cent compared to 23 per cent for white British).
- Younger people are not as proud of their British identity, but the differences are modest – for example, 19 per cent of Gen Z 18-24 year-olds say that they feel very proud of being British, compared to the national average of 27 per cent.
- The Centre for Towns’ mapping of different types of towns across the country shows that there are larger variations between differences types of towns than between regions of the UK. While 27 per cent of people overall say they are very proud of being British, the number is lower in commuter belt and university towns (20 and 22 per cent respectively) and highest in coastal and post-industrial ones (33 and 34 per cent respectively).⁴ The variation is not as well captured at a regional level, where differences range only from 26 per cent in London to 30 per cent in the North West.

More significant differences exist between how Progressive Activists in England feel about their national identity compared to members of the same segment in Scotland and Wales

- Scottish and Welsh identities resonate with the progressive values and psychology of Progressive Activists in ways that English identity does not.
- Compared to an average of 64 per cent for all of England, just 21 per cent of Progressive Activists are proud of their English identity (while 24 per cent are proud of their British identity).
- In contrast, 81 per cent of Progressive Activists in Scotland are proud of their Scottish identity (while just 12 per cent are proud of their British identity).
- Pride in Scottish and Welsh national identity is relatively even across the seven segments.
- The differences in the strength of pride in English versus British identity among the segments is relatively small. Among the three segments with the strongest sense of pride in being British, around 10-15 per cent expressed stronger pride in English rather than British identity.

Analysis by partisan identity also finds that:

- With the unsurprising exception of the SNP, the large majority of supporters of the major parties express pride in British identity – although its expression among Conservatives is especially strong (with 41 per cent describing themselves as ‘very proud’).
- Some 49 per cent of Labour supporters and 48 per cent of Liberal Democrats rate their pride in British identity between 3 and 5 out of 7 (moderate scores compared to strong pro- or anti-identities).
- Among Labour supporters, just 12 per cent say that they are not at all proud and 20 per cent say that they are very proud of their British identity. Among Liberal Democrats, the numbers are 12 and 17 per cent respectively.

Another measure of emotional connection to British identity is how people feel when they see the Union Jack flying. Figure 7.3 shows that three in four people in all segments except Progressive Activists say that the flag makes them feel either very good or somewhat good. Backbone Conservatives are the most

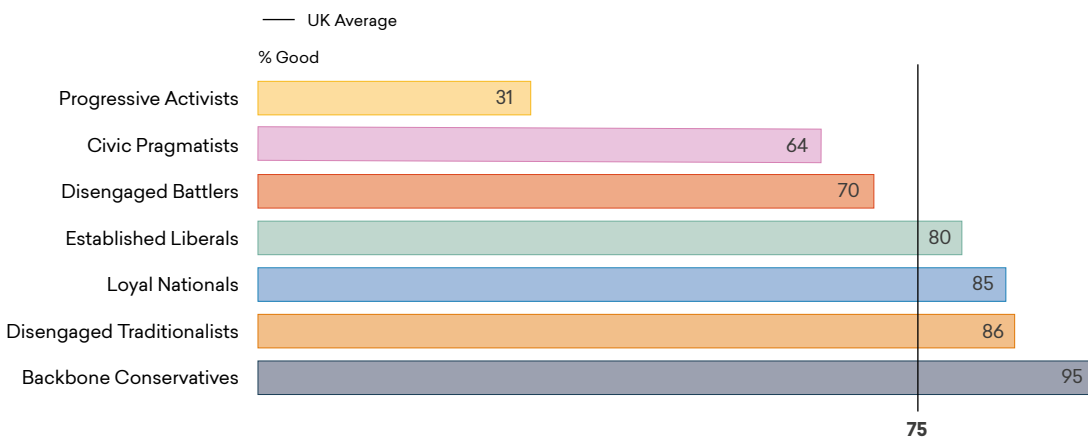
emphatic (95 per cent) in feeling good, and Progressive Activists feel least so (30 per cent), with less than half as many feeling proud as any other group. Likewise, three times as many Leavers and Remainders say that they feel ‘very good’ when they see the flag flying (48 versus 14 per cent).

Figure 7.4.

Feelings towards the Union Jack

Britons generally feel more positive than negative towards the flag – although more progressive segments report feeling more negative towards it.

When you see the British flag flying, how does it make you feel?



Qu. When you see the British flag flying, how does it make you feel? June 2020.
Source: More in Common 2020.

7.3

Do British and English identities feel inclusive or exclusive in England?

In diverse modern societies, national identity can be a force for inclusion or exclusion. An inclusive national identity provides a way of understanding the story of a country or people that gives everyone in it a sense of belonging and equal citizenship, regardless of their ethnic or cultural background. However, national identity is often defined in narrow ways that exclude people without a particular ancestry, skin colour, religion, or belief, or create a hierarchy of citizenship or privilege. Exclusion can divide communities into an ‘us’ against ‘them’ and can be played out in destructive ways through efforts to draw lines in the sand between the in-group and the out-group.

To the extent that they distinguish British and English identity, people are more likely to see British identity as more inclusive than English because it is not connected to a single ethnic group. British identity is also connected to the history of the British Empire, and post-war immigration was directly connected to British citizens from parts of the former empire coming to settle in Britain. Some view English identity negatively, thinking of racist white nationalist groups such as the English Defence League, football hooligans behaving violently in other countries, and flying the St George’s Flag.

To understand these perceptions in more detail, we asked English survey participants about different dimensions of English identity. British Future's research has shown that English identity has become increasingly inclusive over time, but this is a generational shift in understanding, which remains a work in progress (across both majority and minority groups). Our responses are consistent with those findings:

- Overall, 29 per cent agree with the proposition that 'English pride represents racist beliefs', with 8 per cent believing this strongly.
- These views are held strongly by Progressive Activists, with 71 per cent in agreement including 28 per cent who strongly agree.
- Other segments do not have the same concerns as Progressive Activists. Even among Civic Pragmatists, whose views are most often closest to those of Progressive Activists, 69 per cent feel that 'English pride is unfairly characterised as racist', reflecting a view that overall is held by 71 per cent of the population.
- Most people do not associate English identity with exclusionary notions. For example, on whether being white is important to being English, only 24 per cent of people overall agreed, including 37 per cent of Loyal Nationals and Disengaged Traditionalists and 33 per cent of Backbone Conservatives.
- The one exception is being born in England, which 51 per cent of people regard as being important to being English.
- When the importance of ancestry is tested further, we find that only 29 per cent of the population believes that having two parents born in England is important to being English, and in no segment does a majority hold this view.

There is a difference in the perspectives of white and non-white English people. English people from non-white backgrounds are more conscious of the way that English identity can be associated with racism, with almost half associating English pride with racism (49 per cent compared to 28 per cent for white English). In focus group conversations, black and ethnic minority participants are more likely to distinguish between English and British identity, seeing the latter as more inclusive of people from diverse backgrounds, and feeling reluctant to describe themselves as English. Several felt that no matter what they said, they would not be seen as English in the eyes of others.

Conversations with people from ethnic minority backgrounds often brought up stronger expressions of pride, belonging, and attachment to Britain than among the white population. Most described being British as part of their identity. While only limited research was conducted specifically with younger people from ethnic minority backgrounds, this feeling seemed weaker for them, with many speaking of feeling a sense of 'otherness' in the country where they are growing up. However, this is not unique to British people from minority backgrounds – a weaker sense of attachment to national identity is found among younger people more generally (for example, 50 per cent of Gen Z and Millennials are proud of their British identity, versus 67 per cent of Boomers and 79 per cent of those in the Silent Generation).

Participants were also asked about positive associations between English identity and democracy. While this is an area where More in Common hopes to do more work in the future, one early finding is that a shared belief in democracy seems to resonate with people as being foundational to English identity. Some 78 per cent feel that believing in democracy is important for being English and 46 per cent of the population rate it as very important, while just 8 per cent believe it is not at all important. The only group where there is any significant level of disagreement with this is among Disengaged Battlers, for whom 25 per cent say it is not important, reflecting the fact that they value living in a democracy less than any other segment.



In their own words: Black and ethnic minority views on British and national identity



'I've never actually considered myself to be English. I think I always felt that was a bit distinct. Being English has never to me felt very inclusive. It always looked like to me, white people essentially, I've never seen it anything other than that.'

Omar, Progressive Activist, 35, London



'I think ["British"] tends to hold a slightly higher value than just saying English... British does have that greater sense of empowerment if you like.'

Kia, Civic Pragmatist, 37, London



'I think with English, to call yourself English, there's a level of almost, I guess, imposter syndrome in using that word... I think what became kind of ingrained into me [growing up] was, English is something to do with race. And if I'm not white, then I'm not English. And I seem to still have that kind of feeling today. Which is I would not call myself English, but I would definitely call myself British.'

Anwar, Established Liberal, 29, South East



'I just don't see myself as being English. Maybe it's the whole United Kingdom. We're meant to be united even though I know we're different, but I just see myself as being British. And that's what it says on my passport.'

Viola, Loyal National, 41, East of England



'To me, when everybody asks me that question, I'm always confused, because I've never grown up with the same values as somebody else. If a person sat next to me at the dinner table, when I'm at school, for their Sunday dinner, they might have a Sunday roast, but for my Sunday dinner, it'll probably be rice and peas and chicken, or something like that. It's always different, so I've never really thought what it means to be British, because I'm mixed. I have mixed things inside of me. There's not one.'

Renee, Disengaged Battler, 18, Yorkshire and the Humber



‘The words I use to describe myself are black, female, Muslim. I don't know why, but I just feel like I've never actually been like, "Yes, I'm British". I've never actually worn that on my chest. And I think it's just this mentality that we've grown up with. That was just kind of like, I just feel like the government has never really worked for us. And I think, not to say that everything is all doom and gloom, it's not, but I just feel like I've never actually felt a close attachment to the UK. And I don't know whether that's always feeling like the other, or always feeling like outside of the whole, kind of inner circle of people that live in this country: people that are white.’

Iman, Established Liberal, 21, London

7.4 Foundations for a shared sense of identity

Another way of understanding the extent of shared identity among people in Britain is to look at the shared achievements, values, institutions, and symbols that unite people. While some of these dimensions of identity are valued more narrowly within specific regions or groups, there are several sources of shared identity that transcend the dividing lines of nation, region, political values, and other fault lines in our society.

Figure 7.5.

19 in 20 Britons agree Covid-19 has taught us the importance of the NHS



Qu. To what extent do you agree or disagree with the following statement? Covid-19 has highlighted the importance of the NHS and public services. June 2020.
Source: More in Common 2020.

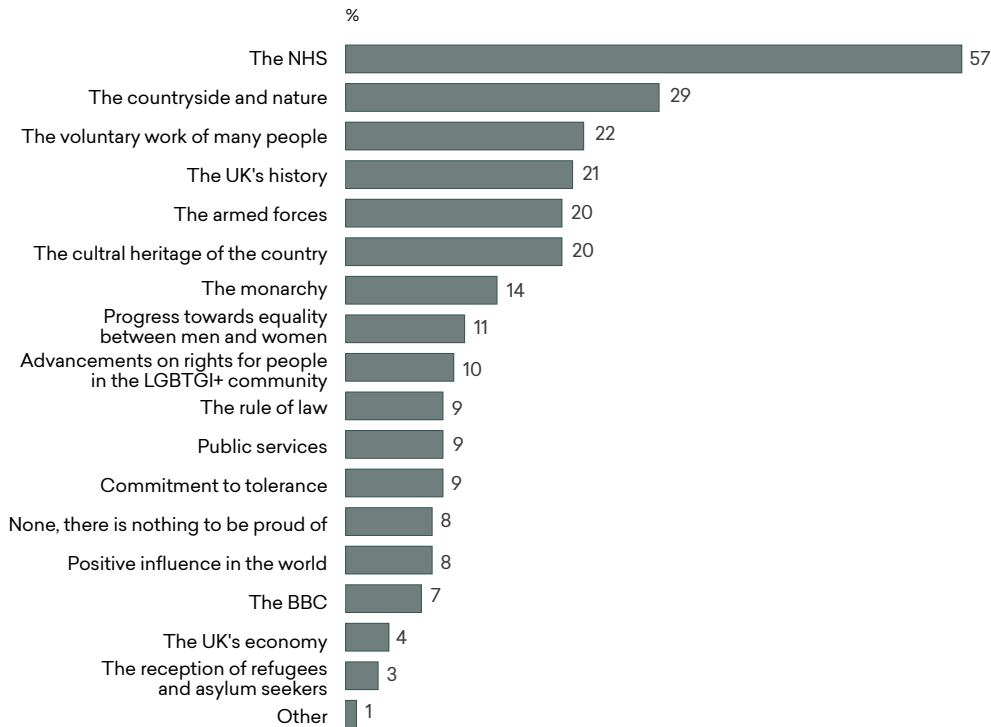
By far the strongest source of shared pride in Britain is the National Health Service. Asked to identify three things of which they are most proud in the UK today, a majority of people mentioned the NHS. The health service's iconic status long pre-dates the Covid-19 pandemic (as the Opening Ceremony for the London 2012 Olympics showed) but the pandemic has further reinforced its importance. The NHS is also a unifying national institution – More than half the population mentioned it as one the things of which they are most proud, and it came first for every single segment. These findings confirm other research on the significance of the NHS, such as a 2018 finding that 87 per cent of Britons feel proud of it.⁵

Figure 7.6.

Pride in the UK

Britons share a strong sense of pride in the NHS, along with the countryside and the tradition of voluntary work in the country

What are you most proud of in the UK today?



Qu. What are you proud of in the UK today? Select up to 3. February 2020.
Source: More in Common 2020.

The next most cited sources of pride are the countryside and nature and the large amount of voluntary work undertaken across the country. There is agreement across the sectors on these sources of pride, showing that they can act as unifying themes of a shared identity and future.

Several other aspects of what makes people proud of the UK resonate more with some segments of the population but not others. While 20 per cent are proud of the British Army, and the same proportion are proud of the UK's history, the support for both is weighted towards Backbone Conservatives (at 28 and 32 per cent respectively) and away from Progressive Activists, who see British history in much more negative terms (just 2 per cent mention the army and 3 per cent UK history as sources of pride). Conversely, other sources of pride – such as advances in LGBT+ rights and commitment to tolerance – are heavily weighted towards Progressive Activists and away from Backbone Conservatives.

'I'd like to say that I'm proud of our history or something like that because all history is cool [laughs], but then I think our history is also full of colonialism, war, death and oppression as well. So it's hard to be attached to anything without saying 'yeah

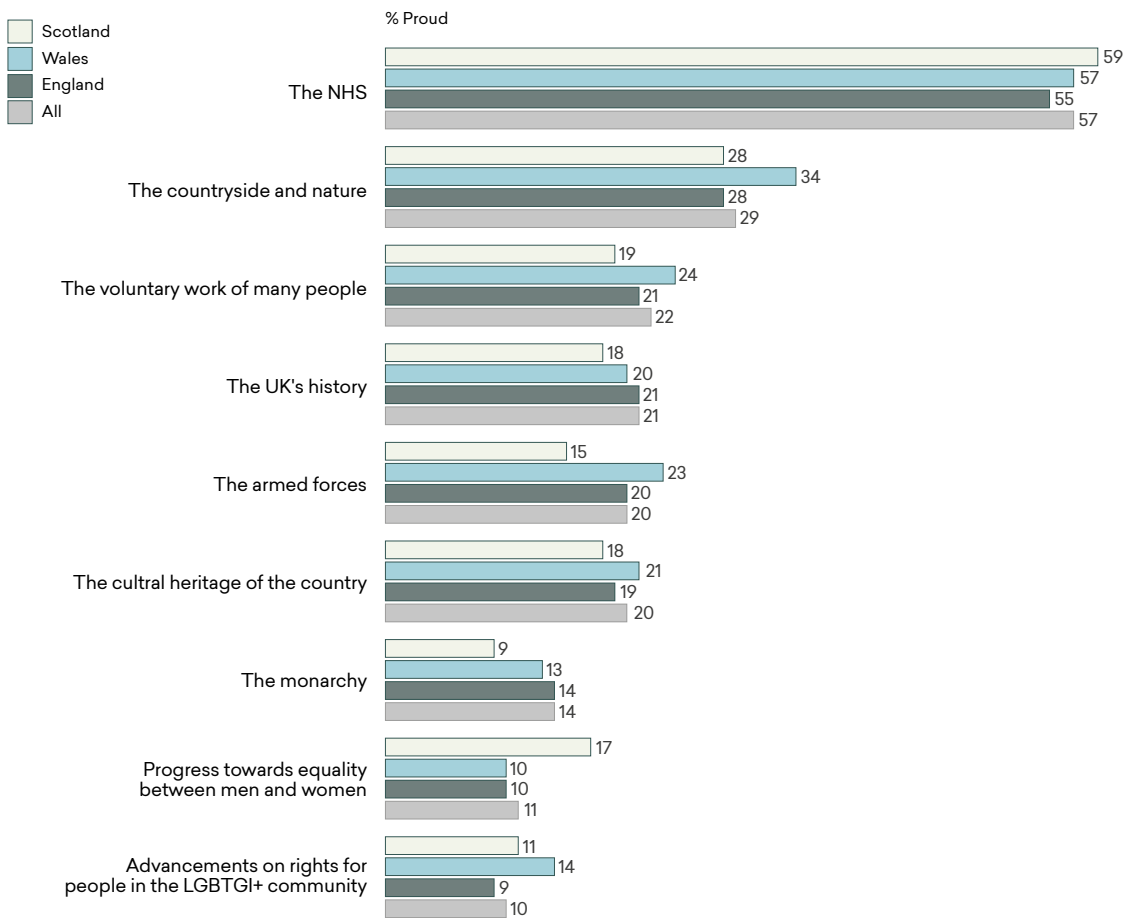
but’, and I think it’s that ‘yeah but’ that holds me back from feeling British, feeling English and identifying with that in a positive way.’

Nick, Progressive Activist, 34, London

Figure 7.7.

Pride in the UK by Nation

People in all three nations are united in their shared sense of pride in the NHS



Qu. What are you most proud of in the UK today? Select up to 3. February 2020.
Source: More in Common 2020.

One of the more striking findings relating to our sources of pride is how much common ground exists between people from England, Scotland, and Wales. The NHS is valued similarly across all three nations. Similar numbers of people across the three nations share common ground in valuing the countryside and nature and voluntary work. There is also a shared sense of pride in many of the cultural dimensions of the United Kingdom, although with slightly lower levels of pride in UK history, the armed forces, and the monarchy among people in Scotland.

Another source of pride that is widely shared is a sense of social progress in becoming a more modern and diverse nation. While these achievements are not as prominent as the more conspicuous symbols of shared pride, they rank within the top ten sources of pride across all three nations. Further, when asked specifically about whether people feel proud of these achievements, an overwhelming majority says yes:

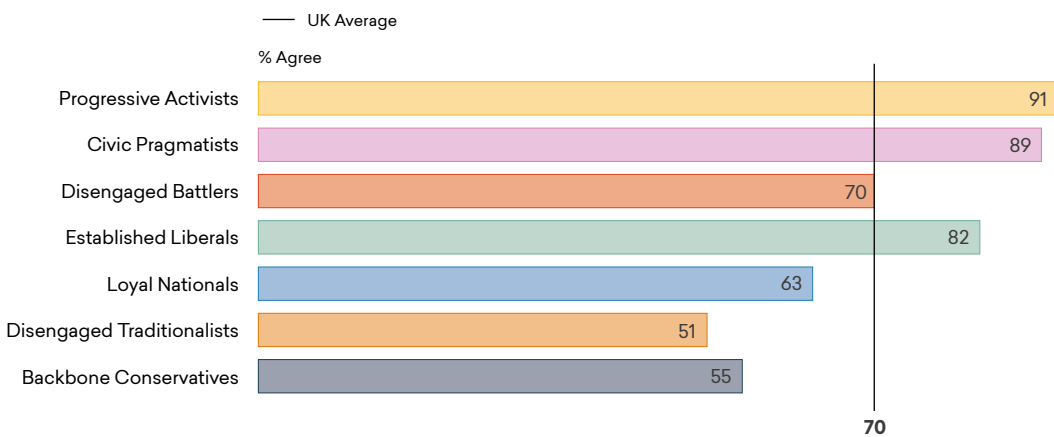
79% say that they are proud of the advancements we have made in equality between men and women, with majority agreement in all segments (though it is lower among the two Disengaged groups and the Backbone Conservatives)

- 70 per cent feel proud of progress in embracing ethnic, religious, and sexual diversity, ranging from 51 per cent among Disengaged Traditionalists to 91 per cent of Progressive Activists.

Figure 7.8.

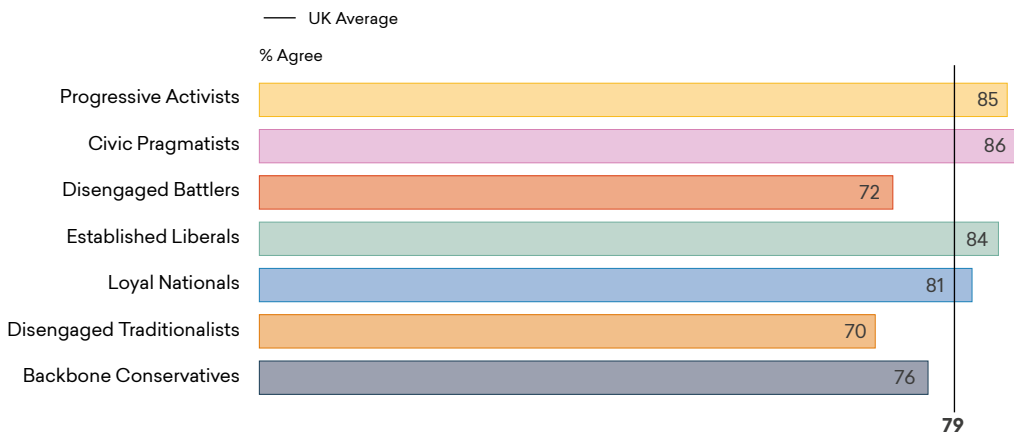
Pride in diversity

I am proud that we are more embracing of people of diverse religions, races, and sexual orientations than before



Qu. To what extent do you agree or disagree with the following: I am proud that we are more embracing of people of diverse religions, races, and sexual orientations than before. February 2020.
Source: More in Common 2020.

I am proud of the advancements we have made in equality between men and women.



Qu. To what extent do you agree or disagree with the following: I am proud of the advancements we have made in equality between men and women. February 2020.

Source: More in Common 2020.

Other aspects of life in Britain that people cite as making them feel proud include:

- Aspects of our democracy, such as freedom of speech and the active participation of citizens in achieving change
- Education, with some of the world's leading universities
- The arts
- The British sense of humour
- Premiership football
- Communities that work together and resolve injustices in British society
- The UK's international impact, such as aid given to poorer countries
- British scientific prowess and technology
- The Northern Irish peace process

Attachment to local and regional identity

In their own words

A striking aspect of conversations about people's sense of their own identities for this study is how often people refer to their sense of regional or local identity, even while they might struggle to piece together the significance of British or national identity. More in Common is working in other countries on the unifying power of local identities and we hope to build up this work in the UK in the future.

'So, my response was going to be that I've always considered myself first and foremost to be a Londoner. And then if I was pressed and been asked, so what are you? If I was abroad and people said, where are you from? So Britain, like British, I'm British, I'm happy to sort of describe myself as British.'

Omar, Progressive Activist, 35, London

'There's something about claiming you're English, it's all St George's flag and topless to the waist, drinking lager somewhere, that there's negative connotations to it and so British is something else. I mean, I feel a bit more European, than anything else to be honest. My Yorkshire identity is quite strong and I just don't think I would describe myself as "I'm an Englishman", because it's a bit, an Englishman's home is his castle, St George's flag... and maybe narrow-mindedness of being English and "English is best" and that kind of thing.'

Sam, Civic Pragmatist, 48, Yorkshire and the Humber

Moderator

What parts of identity are most important for you?

Megan

'Where I'm from.'

Moderator

Why is that?

Megan

'I think it's because of how we were just brought up. Like I said, we were all united. I can go back to my old area and still know everybody and everybody would stop and chat in the street.'

Megan, Loyal National, 56, South West

‘I’m always very proud if I travel abroad on holidays. I’m very proud of my roots. I’m very proud of being from the North West and always have been.’

Kate, Disengaged Traditionalist, 49, North West

7.5 Key takeaways

National identity is important to many people in Britain, as the Brexit years demonstrated. But it resonates in ways that are different to countries that have a more unitary sense of national identity, such as the United States and France. Identity has more layers in the British context, with different segments of the population and regions of the country valuing those layers in different ways. This layered sense of identity reflects the United Kingdom’s unique mix of cultural, historical, and constitutional factors. British identity often layers upon other forms of identity – English, Scottish, Welsh, and Irish, but also upon other dimensions of people’s backgrounds more connected to family, community, and relationships. In deeply divided societies, people are often faced with an ‘either/or’ choice in their identity. People in Britain, on the other hand, mostly have a broader set of ‘both/and’ choices available to them as they define themselves in relation to society.

The layering of identity among British people is a strength, so long as those identity layers do not become binary choices with an ‘us’ that is hostile towards ‘them’. The layering of identities in Britain can and does make the national tapestry stronger and more resilient to the stresses that tear at the social fabric. It is more difficult to see another person as part of a ‘them’ in an ‘us-versus-them’ division when you share an identity or allegiance that feels important to both of you. For that reason, there is value in strengthening those identities that connect people across the lines of division in Britain. The support for the universal health service as a totem of the post-war welfare state is one such example where policies could build upon this shared sense of pride. Likewise, appreciation of our natural environment and desire to protect it for the future could also unify Britons.

Britons of ethnic minority background often perceive Britishness as more open to them than English identity, with several participants describing Englishness as a race rather than an identity. Given that English identity is important to millions of people who do not intend to exclude those with more recent migration histories, these findings highlight the need to strengthen the inclusive dimensions of English identity. English national identity is too important and powerful as a source of belonging and attachment to be abandoned to the proponents of a narrow and divisive ‘us-versus-them’ version of identity that excludes rather than includes. Allowing this to happen could risk these identities being polarised between ‘globalist’ Britishness and ‘nativist’ Englishness, undermining the potential for these identities to bring people together. The success of Scottish and Welsh people in finding ways to build a collective identity that connects all segments of society in those nations together, including the most progressive groups, shows that it is possible for English identity also to be developed in this more inclusive way.

The research for this study has only touched lightly on the complex interactions of these and other layers of identity and perhaps raises as many questions as it answers. But it cautions against the false binaries of many identity debates and it shows that across Britain, people value different dimensions of their shared

identity. Strengthening the layers of identity in British society that connect people across the lines of division can help avoid the trap of people being seen only through a narrow polarised identity (such a Leaver or Remainer). Societies become more resilient to division when more people engage across the lines of division and value more those things that they have in common – shared history, values, interests, activities, aspirations, as well as commitments to our local communities and sources of pride. Finding this common ground and strengthening the different layers of our identities that connect us to each other can help build a more cohesive Britain.

Endnotes

- 1 Francis Fukuyama, *Identity: Contemporary Identity Politics and the Struggle for Recognition: The Demand for Dignity and the Politics of Resentment* by Francis Fukuyama | 4 Oct 2018 (London, UK: Profile Books, 2018).
- 2 Daniel Yudkin (2018), *The Psychology of Authoritarian Populism: A Bird's Eye View*, https://www.moreincommon.com/media/5mcjfn4t/yudkin-daniel-2018-the-psychology-of-authoritarian-populism-a-bird-s-eye-view_june2018.pdf
- 3 Stephen Hawkins and others, *Hidden Tribes: A Study of America's Polarized Landscape* (More in Common, 2018).
- 4 Use of Centre for Towns' typology by courtesy of the Centre for Towns and YouGov. The Centre for Towns' typology includes core cities, towns of various sizes, and villages. The data can also be broken down by type of area, including coastal, post-industrial areas, commuter belt, post-war new towns, university towns, and market towns.
- 5 Matthew Smith, 'The NHS Is the British Institution That Brits Are Second-Most Proud of – after the Fire Brigade | YouGov' <<https://yougov.co.uk/topics/politics/articles-reports/2018/07/04/nhs-british-institution-brits-aresecond-most-prou>>.

