



## What do we know about national and local belonging and civic participation and what are the key emerging issues?

Issues of identity and belonging have been repeatedly highlighted by policy makers and politicians across the political spectrum as being fundamental to a cohesive society. Adherence to a common set of values represented by forms of identification with and participation in the nation are expected to contribute to both individual well-being and social solidarity.

This briefing summarises evidence relating to patterns of national identity, belonging and political participation among minority ethnic groups and highlights the risks associated with their absence. The focus is on studies which have explored how patterns vary across generations.

### Current context

Across many European countries including the UK, there have been claims that the multicultural project fosters separation and dislocation, particularly among second generation minorities, instead of bringing all ethnic groups together in a common project underpinned by a set of core values. In the UK, this perspective has built on long-standing attempts to reassert an inclusive British national story.

Academic researchers have consistently argued that a sense of national identity is at the heart of a cohesive society and its ability to incorporate immigrants and minorities. They have also stressed the importance of national and/or ethnic identity formation for individuals' social and psychological adaptation and well-being.

The primary focus of research has been on minorities' sense of belonging, identity and participation; but it is important to see this against the background of majority practices and allegiances. Moreover, most studies of minority identity have focused more on the 'older' minority groups and their long-term relationship to the nation. But the changing demographic profile of the non-UK born following EU expansion in 2004, offers an additional layer of complexity to thinking about belonging. These new migrants share a supranational identity with the majority UK population (EU) but are often seen as representing a 'cultural' challenge to British ways of life.

### Identity and belonging

A number of studies consistently show the high levels of national (British) identity and belonging demonstrated by ethnic minorities. While there is some variation across ethnic groups and national origins, identity with and belonging to Britain and Britishness increase with length of stay in the UK and rise across generations.

Muslim groups have particularly high rates of belonging and identification, which tend to accompany rather than contrast with commitment to ethnic and religious identity. Rates of both minority and national identity are somewhat lower among Black Caribbeans.

Generational increases in identity and belonging occur despite the fact that feelings of grievance and injustice, potentially influenced by greater exposure as well as greater expectations of equal treatment, also increase over generations.

In general, the evidence suggests that minority ethnic and British identity are not opposed to each other, though across generations the former tends to decline as the latter increases. Indicative research on new migrant flows from Eastern Europe suggests that they may be less committed to either origin or destination society identities than older migrants. This may stem from their greater mobility, ease of entry and lower salience of specific identities. However, it is too early to say how that might develop over generations.

Among the white majority in the UK there has been a strengthening of identity associated with the countries of the UK at the expense of adherence to British identities. These dynamics have been highlighted in the recent Scottish referendum. However, while research suggests that Scottish identity has managed to move from a more 'ethnic' to a more 'civic' – and therefore more inclusive – identity, English identity continues to be felt as 'ethnic' and hence more exclusive. Reconceiving English identities as having the qualities and values currently endorsed as 'British' may be a necessary step to enhance the connections between majority and minorities.

### Participation and trust

“Participation” can involve a number of activities, ranging from volunteering to voting. The evidence on political participation among longstanding minority groups has shown that there is convergence across generations, with patterns of political party commitment and voter turnout among second generation minorities comparable to those among the majority. Voter registration is lower among the first generation; but it is among this migrant generation that attitudes to British democracy and trust in British institutions are particularly strong. These positive attitudes and orientations do decline over generations – converging to white majority levels. An exception is trust in the police, which is substantially lower among minorities.

Convergence with majority participation and attitudes suggests lack of particularity about minority groups, though overall levels may nevertheless be of concern for political legitimacy.

There is also, as with identity and belonging, some variation across minority groups. And, as with identity and belonging, part of the differences between individuals and groups can be accounted for by the extent to which they have a sense of injustice and feel poorly represented. But even taking account of this, Black Caribbeans have lower levels of trust than other ethnic groups, though they have similar levels of political registration and turnout.

### Risks and costs

The risks identified with lack of national identification and belonging occur at both individual and community levels. A lack of common majority and minority identification could lead to fragmented interests. If this is exacerbated by perceptions of unfairness, then alienation could increase despite the currently positive scenario.

The move by the white majority away from an overarching British identity towards more ethnic bases of national solidarity in the form of English or other country identities may inhibit possibilities for establishing common purpose.

Political participation is important for the credibility and representativeness of politics. Frustration with lack of representation or inequalities in society, if not addressed may result in grievances festering and alienating those most sensitive to them from engagement and participation, and encourage them to seek expression outside the political process.

### Conclusions

Overall the evidence suggests that the attachment of minority ethnic groups to the national project is substantial and anxieties are overstated. However, there are caveats to this story. First, national surveys may effectively capture the general picture of national belonging, but are likely to miss out on the minority of those who are highly disaffected or antagonistic. These may be the very people who are seen as most threatening to the national and civic project, even if their numbers are small.

Second, debates on belonging and identity take place in the context of greater fragmentation of national identities. If 'Britishness' increasingly speaks more to those of minority origins than the white majority, then the challenge is not so much as to reassert the common values underpinning British identity and participation but to develop these country identities as inclusive and as the basis of interethnic national solidarity.

### Key texts

Platt, Lucinda (2013). *How might we expect minorities' feelings of ethnic, religious and British identity to change, especially among the second and third generation?* Driver Review 15 of Government Office of Science Foresight project on The Future of Identity in the UK. Government Office of Science.

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