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EVIDENCE ON...
National identity in England

Exploring transitions to Britishness between 2011 and 2021 using the ONS Longitudinal Study

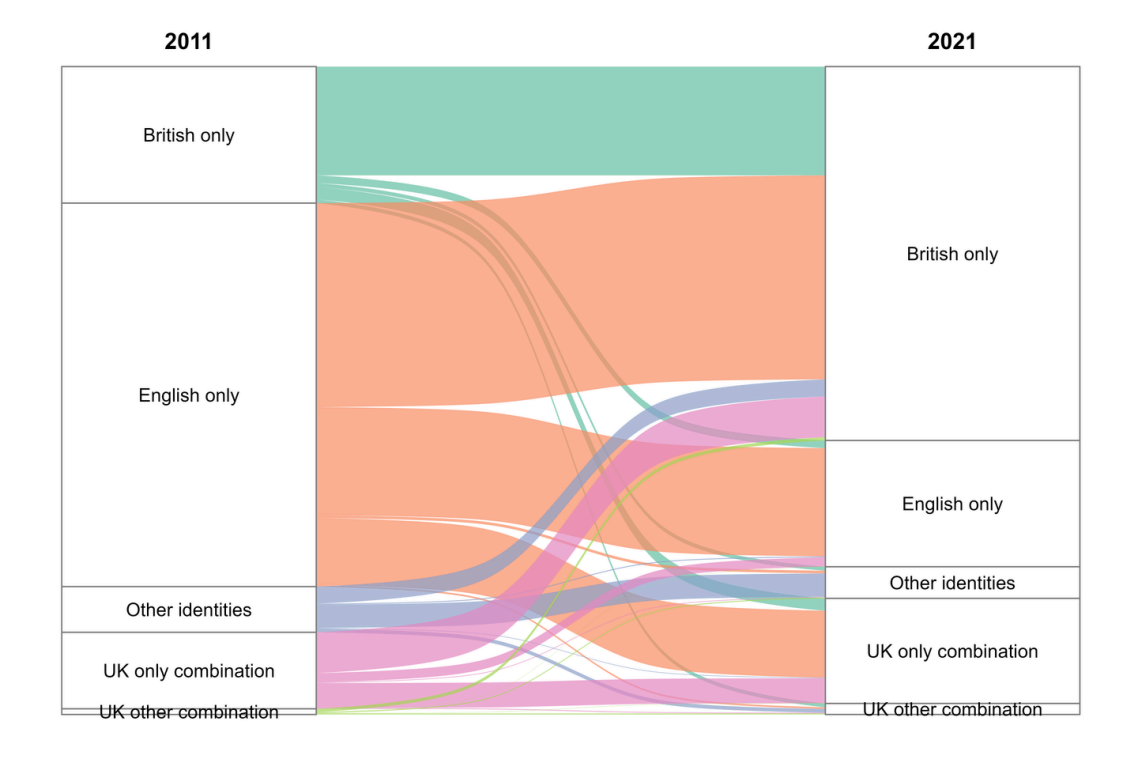

Figure 1 National identity transition flows of LS members from 2011 to 2021

Note: Sample contains respondents present in both the 2011 and 2021 LS who are 18+ and reside in England (N=336,666). Source: 2011 and 2021 ONS-LS. Authors' calculations.

Summary

This work used data from the Office for National Statistics Longitudinal Study to examine who identified with a British national identity in England in 2021, and who transitioned from no British identity to any British identity between 2011 and 2021. Our finding suggested a rise in British-only identity may have been prompted by a change in census response-option order than by social change. Almost all ethnic groups had more than a 90% probability of reporting any British identity in 2021, with the highest among Bangladeshi and Pakistani groups and lowest among White Irish and Other White groups. The same groups were also most and least likely, respectively, to transition to a British identity between 2011 and 2021. Longer UK residency, English language proficiency, higher occupational class and religious affiliation – particularly Muslim and Jewish – were associated with higher odds of British identification.

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Key Findings

1. The apparent rise in British-only identity is most likely explained by the response order change between the two censuses: English-only was listed first in 2011, British-only first in 2021.
2. Minority ethnic groups almost universally identified with a British identity in 2021, with Bangladeshi and Pakistani groups showing the highest probabilities of reporting and transitioning to one.
3. Longer UK residency, English language proficiency, higher occupational class and religion – particularly Muslim and Jewish – were associated with higher odds of reporting and transitioning to a British identity.

Policy Implications

National identity has featured prominently in recent UK policy discussions around social cohesion and inclusion. The government's Protecting What Matters action plan, published in March 2026, for instance, addressed shared identity, integration and belonging as central policy concerns – providing a timely backdrop for our findings.

The association between longer UK residency, English language proficiency and Britishness in our findings highlighted the importance of policies that support long-term integration. Recent arrivals to the UK were the least likely to identify with a British identity, suggesting early investment in English language provision and settlement support could play an important role in developing a sense of belonging over time.

Our findings challenge assumptions that minority ethnic and religious groups have fixed national identities and are resistant to adopting a British national identity, suggesting instead a malleability shaped by individual characteristics, life pathways and meanings people attach to Britishness. The instability in national identity between 2011 and 2021, which we attribute to the changing order of options, raises questions about how well the current census question captures this complex and personal concept. ONS could consider alternative ways of framing the national identity question and ensure that the same instruction is given to respondents on the electronic and paper questionnaire.

The evidence

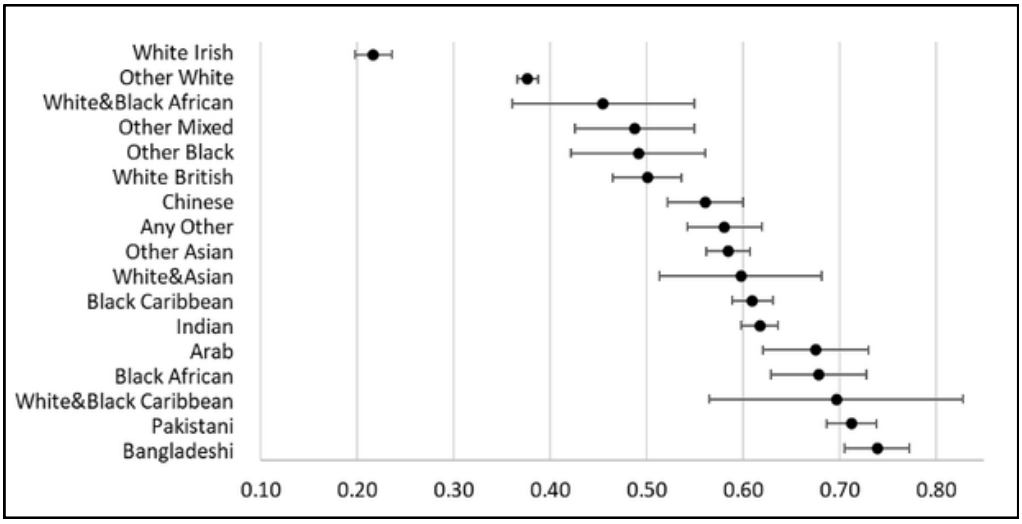
Background

National identity refers to one's sense of belonging to a nation, shaped by ideas about who belongs and what it means to be part of that community. The 2011 Census in England and Wales introduced the question: "How would you describe your national identity?" Respondents chose from six options, in the following order: English, Welsh, Scottish, Northern Irish, British, and Other, prompting a write-in option. The 2021 Census in England asked the same question but with British listed first. Using linked census records from the Office for National Statistics Longitudinal Study (ONS-LS), we examined individual-level change in national identity. Here, 'a British identity', 'any British identity' or 'Britishness' means identifying as English and/or British, whether alone or in combination with other identities.

Increase in British-only identity: artefact or true societal change?

In our analysis of the ONS-LS, 58% of respondents identified as British-only in 2021, compared to 21% in 2011, while English-only identification fell from 59% to 19%. Figure 1 shows 53% of individuals who identified as English-only in 2011 reported a British-only identity in 2021. Such a large shift is more likely to reflect the change in response-option order between censuses than real societal change. This instability may also stem from confusion about the question or its categories, or from national identity meaning different things to different people.

Figure 1 also shows national identity



Note: Sample contains respondents present in both the 2011 and 2021 LS who are 18+, reside in England, identified as having no British identity in 2011 and do not have any missing observations for any of the variables of interest in logistic regression analysis (N=23,734). Source: 2011 and 2021 ONS-LS. Authors' calculations.

Figure 2. Probability of reporting any British identity in 2021 given not reporting one in 2011, by ethnic group

transitions among those who reported no British identity in 2011. 37% of this group identified as exclusively British by 2021, and nearly half identified with any British identity. Given that the response-option order for a non-British identity was unchanged between censuses, this transition may reflect genuine integration and assimilation into British society.

National identity in 2021

In 2021, most ethnic groups had at least a 90% probability of identifying with any British identity: highest among White British (99%), Pakistani, Bangladeshi and White and Black Caribbean groups (all 98%); lowest among Other White and White Irish respondents (75% and 61%, respectively).

Length of UK residency, English language proficiency and religious affiliation were strong predictors of British identification, consistent with previous work (Bond, 2025; Jivraj & Byrne, 2015; Manning & Roy, 2010). Those not born in the UK showed higher odds of identifying with any British identity after more than ten years of residency, with the highest likelihood among those resident for more than 40 years. Greater English language proficiency was also associated with higher odds of identifying with Britishness, as was religious affiliation, with Muslim and Jewish respondents showing the highest odds. Those in professional and managerial occupations were most likely of all occupational groups to identify with any British identity, while university graduates were less likely to do so than those without a degree. This suggests educational attainment and occupational class may relate to British identification differently. Residents of more deprived neighbourhoods showed lower odds of identifying as British. The same was true for those in the South West, South East and East of England, compared to London.

National identity in transition, 2011-2021

Figure 2 presents the probabilities of transitioning to any British identity in 2011-2021, by ethnic group. White and Black Caribbean, Pakistani and Bangladeshi groups showed higher probabilities (70%, 71% and 74%, respectively), while White minority groups, particularly White Irish, showed the lowest (22%). Muslim respondents showed the highest odds of transitioning to any British identity, at twice the rate of those with no religion. Jewish respondents also showed relatively high odds. Professional and managerial workers were the most likely to transition and those in routine occupations were the least likely. Area-level characteristics played a comparatively modest role, though living in the South West, South East, East of England and Midlands, compared to London, was associated with a lower likelihood of transitioning.

The research

Authors: Momoko Nishikido (pictured), Stephen Jivraj and Gemma Catney

Title of paper: National Identity in Transition: A Longitudinal Study of National Identity by Ethnic Group in England

Date of publication: Working paper available from authors

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Evidence on is a briefing series exhibiting research using the ONS Longitudinal Study, a dataset including records from more than one million people over 50 years of social change in England and Wales.

If you have any questions about this research or using the data please contact us:

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