

The 'Politicisation' of Englishness: Towards a Framework for Political Analysis

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Abstract

The constitutional position of England has become the subject of intense focus following the decision by the Conservative Party to table the question of English devolution in the immediate aftermath of the Scottish Referendum. Various pundits have argued that English nationalism has become a major factor in British politics and a source of deepening territorial tension. Academic commentators have been slower to interrogate the nature and implications of these assertions and, despite the ubiquity of references to English interests and anxieties in political discourse, there is a much less extensive analytical literature on the make-up and political dimensions of the national identity of the largest people of the United Kingdom. How, then, should the political status and character of the English identity be understood and studied? Notions of a politicised Englishness reflect various, often contentious, judgements of both interpretive and empirical kinds. This article highlights the different ways in which 'politicisation' in this context has been characterised, and shows that each of these established perspectives yields a different sort of political response and policy approach. I finish with some observations about how politicisation might be conceptualised, and identify the elements of a more comprehensive and fluid understanding of this phenomenon.

Keywords

Englishness, English nationalism, devolution, union, national identity

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The constitutional position of England has become the subject of intense focus following the decision by the Conservative Party to table the question of English devolution in the immediate aftermath of the Scottish Referendum, in September 2014. The debates that broke out about whether this implied reforms to the legislative process – either in the

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form of some version of 'English Votes for English Laws' (EVEL), or more radical solutions, such as an English Parliament – or should be advanced through administrative decentralisation within England by passing powers to major cities and city regions, spilled into the general election campaign of 2015. Arguments about governance and constitution were then subsumed beneath the decision of the Conservatives to highlight the prospect of a Labour-led administration, which might involve some sort of arrangement with an ascendant Scottish National Party. The concerted attempt to scare English voters about this prospect provided a new prism for discourse on the English Question and may have played a role in determining the intentions of some voters.¹ More generally, as a result of these twin developments, numerous pundits have argued that English nationalism has become a major factor in British politics and a source of deepening territorial tension (White, 2015).

Academic commentators have been slower to interrogate the nature and implications of these assertions and, despite the ubiquity of references to English interests and anxieties in public discourse, there is a much less extensive analytical literature on the make-up and political dimensions of the national identity of the largest people of the United Kingdom (approximately 84% of its total population) compared to the considerable body of work devoted to its various national counterparts. Indeed, the very idea of holding up England or Englishness as objects for intellectual interrogation still remains a rather alien enterprise in the study of British politics (Kenny, 2014b). This Symposium Issue, which I have compiled with Andrew Mycock and Ben Wellings, represents an attempt to address this critical deficit, and includes papers which raise interpretive, historical and empirical questions about the emergence of 'political Englishness'.

How, then, should the political status and character of the English identity be understood and studied? Projections of a political, or politicised, Englishness, I will argue, typically rest on a number of foundational and often contentious judgements of both interpretive and empirical kinds. This article highlights the different ways in which 'politicisation' in this context has been characterised, and shows that each of these established perspectives points towards a very different sort of political response and policy approach. I finish with some observations about how politicisation might be better conceptualised, and identify the elements of a more comprehensive and fluid understanding of this phenomenon.

Political Englishness – A Typology

There are four main characterisations of political Englishness circulating in contemporary debate. And while these are certainly not mutually exclusive and are often combined in particular arguments, each represents a distinct way of understanding Englishness and the nature of its entry into the domain of politics.

Political Allegiance

It is often suggested that a propensity to identify with an English nationality either reflects an established ideological predisposition or encourages certain kinds of political allegiance among citizens. This notion reflects the widely held view that Englishness represents a national consciousness that is fundamentally regressive, nostalgic and anti-modern in its character, the antithesis of those forms of modern nationalism that have cohered around the values of popular sovereignty and equality. According to Labour politician Jack Straw,

English nationalism represented the dark side of the national character, with its ‘propensity to violence’ and ‘history of subjugating other peoples’. The expression of an English identity is, accordingly, often held to be a natural expression of, or route to, a conservative political temperament – or, latterly, closely associated with the populist nationalism associated with the UK Independence Party (UKIP) (Seth Smith, 2013).

This longstanding claim can be traced to various intellectual and political sources and reflects, in particular, the liberal embrace of a post-imperial civic Britishness during the latter years of the twentieth century and a rejection of the post-imperial connotations of ‘little Englandism’. A key influence upon this characterisation was the work of New Left, and latterly nationalist, theoretician Tom Nairn (1977). He depicted English nationalism as the symptom of a stalled consciousness exhibited by people bewitched by the aura of the ancient British state and its ‘enchanted’ institutions (Nairn, 2011). When the English did express their national identity in political terms, Nairn contended, they did so in regressive, nostalgic fashion, lacking an underpinning notion of popular sovereignty. During the New Labour years, he argued that a new spasm of English nationalism was inevitable and was likely to find expression in populist and xenophobic terms (Nairn, 2000).

Many on the left disagreed with Nairn over the viability and importance of Britishness – which was loudly promoted by New Labour figures in the late 1990s and 2000s – but most tended to recycle his aversion to an English nationality. Gordon Brown’s progressive British patriotism was in part premised upon the assumption that this was a viable container for the atavism and conservatism that subsisted within English culture. More generally, English nationalism was routinely referenced as a source of conservative sentiments that might well endanger the multicultural union or divert attention from the underlying material inequalities which Labours ought to be addressing (Brown, 2014; Jones, 2012).

Yet there are, in both empirical and interpretive terms, good reasons to doubt the adequacy of these perspectives upon English national identity and the intellectual foundations upon which they rest. Nairn’s arguments have long been challenged for the reified and essentialist account of the English tradition which he and other left intellectuals advanced in the post-war decades. Historical critics like EP Thompson (1965) pointed to the variety of forms of collective action and political endeavour that were formed from the materials that Nairn and other critics dismissed as irredeemably regressive (Kenny, 2014a). They observed the enduring power of the idea of the ‘freeborn Englishman’, the potent idea of an unfolding tradition of English liberty and the continuing presence of radical claims upon an English political heritage. The neo-Marxist insensitivity to the multiple political articulations of an English identity reflects an ingrained tendency – still apparent in much commentary – to conceive of English nationhood in an essentialist, rather than contested, fashion.

These interpretive objections are supported by empirical evidence which undermines standard assumptions about the relationship between political allegiance and English identification. Looking across the body of polling conducted since devolution was introduced, there is surprisingly little evidence to support firm judgements about the politically Conservative or populist implications of English allegiance. It is only in the very recent past that any kind of significant correlation is apparent at the level of individual attitudes (see Wyn Jones et al., 2012, 2013). But, rather than reflecting a deep-rooted relationship, these findings may well relate to contingent factors such as the rise of UKIP, the advent of the Scottish Referendum in 2014 or growing resentment at the economic position of London and the South East region. These surveys also report that supporters of all the main parties are – with the exception of the Liberal Democrats – inclined to see

themselves as English and British if given the choice, although the rising number who do identify as solely or predominantly English is notable. Survey evidence tends to suggest that geography matters more than ideology in relation to English allegiance, with those living outside London similarly inclined to identify with Englishness and London being a notable outlier, with higher levels of attachment to Britishness still prevailing.

While the rise of UKIP and the territorial character of its appeal may provide some support for this residual perception of Englishness, the contention that this is an inherently conservative form of nationalism is much harder to sustain in empirical terms than is widely assumed.

A Political Question?

A second distinct way of understanding political Englishness emanates from those who perceive the English Question as a constitutional, rather than popular, issue. Within this interpretation, questions about the national sentiments and constitutional rights of the people remain secondary to the decisions taken by political parties and individuals about whether to bring it onto the main political stage.

For many critics, David Cameron's response to the announcement of the Scottish Referendum result on 19 September 2014 was an attempt to secure party advantage on an issue where the Conservatives perceived their main opponents at Westminster as uncertain and defensive, and which offered the prospect of shoring up the party's support in the face of the UKIP threat. And yet, to define the politics of Englishness solely, or primarily, as a newly politicised issue area has considerable limitations. First, it underplays the extent to which the English Question has long served as an important auxiliary to debates about devolution that have unfolded since Labour introduced it in the late 1990s, having become a regular fixture in constitutional discussions from the 1970s onwards. The asymmetry of the Union, the absence of any kind of devolution for England and the potential imbalances which Labour's settlement introduced all featured prominently in the arguments of the late 1990s and were a key backdrop to the justification of Labour's regional government agenda (and the opposition to it) thereafter. Ideas and arguments about the English Question were an inseparable part of debates about constitution and governance in the United Kingdom. The notion that David Cameron single-handedly and illegitimately injected this issue into British politics, therefore, defies historical credibility.

And it is belied too by the upsurge of interest in questions of nationhood and territory which have been apparent for some while in British politics. During the second Blair administration, the West Lothian Question became a source of considerable focus within public discourse, as several controversial pieces of Labour's legislative programme were passed against the wishes of most English Members of Parliament, notably legislation involving university tuition fees and Foundation Hospitals. Indeed, a number of different scholars have identified the mid 2000s as the point when a significant shift towards a more resentful and anxious national mood may have gained a foothold.

The notion that the Conservatives stoked English nationalism for political gain affords a degree of agency to a political party which is unlikely and rests on normative assumptions about the illegitimacy of political engagements with national sentiment, which merit critical examination. In fact, an appreciation of the hinterland of debates associated with devolution suggests instead that, for the most part, the UK party system responded slowly and reluctantly to an issue that was of growing concern to many English voters.

Englishness – From Cultural to Political Nationalism?

This observation also hints at a different way of understanding the emergence of a politicised Englishness. This perspective draws attention to a potentially fundamental shift within the character of English national consciousness and depicts politicisation in terms of the purported advent of a mass English nationalism. This, it is suggested, has grown out of what was once a stable, primarily cultural, vein of patriotism. Some researchers indeed suggest that the English are beginning to envisage their own national-political community as disaffection grows with the terms of the Union (Wyn Jones et al., 2012).

One further implication of this position is that ‘politicisation’ arises from the emergence of a sense of shared interest and common concern among the English people, and a concomitant desire to see this commonality accorded some degree of representation and recognition within the political and institutional structures of the state. Such a characterisation weighs against familiar arguments in favour of a system of regional government as the most appropriate equivalent of the devolution of powers to non-English territories, and highlights the national character of demands for devolution which are unlikely to be satiated by the establishment of more powerful cities and city-regions (Tombs, 2015).

This way of understanding the politicisation of an English national identity has been widely echoed in media and academic commentary. It figured in the final report of the McKay Commission (2013) which reported in March 2013 on the implications of devolution for legislation in the Lower House that affected England only, and in David Cameron’s response to the Scottish Referendum result, where he spoke of a growing English demand for ‘voice’ and promised to find an answer to the West Lothian Question. But it also needs more careful evaluation and rests upon assumptions that are by no means unproblematic. The notion of a substantive shift in English consciousness, from a cultural to a political modality, implies that national consciousness in the preceding period was not significantly political. Yet, as Arthur Aughey and Andrew Gamble show, in their different contributions to this special issue, ‘England’ carried a distinctive set of constitutional and political connotations until the early decades of the twentieth century, being closely associated with the ideas of parliamentary government and the pursuit of liberty. Notions of the ‘character’ of these people were, as historian Peter Mandler (2007) has demonstrated, typically understood in civilisational terms, rather than those of ethnicity or culture.

In his major recent study of the history of the national self-image of the English, Robert Tombs (2014) explores the array of unions and alliances into which the English people have been inserted by their rulers, experiences that have bequeathed a dispensation to distance from nationalist forms of expression and a self-image as mixed people who have mostly been accepting of the compromises required to keep these unions operative, but have also been wary of arrangements that jeopardise their own interests. From this perspective, recent signs of irritation and territorial grievance might be read not as a burgeoning nationalist desire to overthrow the unions through which England is governed, but as a reflection of the established intuition that the English are reluctant to consent to constitutional arrangements which appear to compromise the basic principle of fair treatment for nations within a union.

The notion of the sudden onset of political nationalism among the English people is reliant upon a weak sense of historical memory and typically understates the intertwining of cultural *and* political purposes and resonances that lie at the heart of different notions of Englishness, and indeed of nationalism generally. There is, moreover, considerable evidence to suggest that there is far more continuity within the English mind-set, on

issues relating to sovereignty and constitution, than much current commentary allows. For instance, the most rigorous polling repeatedly shows that a majority of people retain a residual attachment to the United Kingdom, and indeed continue to identify as British, as well as feeling an affinity for a newly emerging English community (Ormston, 2012). This represents a considerable challenge to the proposition that political nationalism among the English signals the rejection of the ethos and values of liberal Britain.

The habit of seeing Britishness on the one hand, and sub-state forms of national and regional consciousness on the other, as irreconcilable alternatives has long been questioned. As some of the shrewdest observers of nation and constitution – for instance, Bernard Crick (1993) – have long observed, one of the defining features of Britishness is its capacity to overarch, and leave room for, a range of different cultural and national identities and traditions. It may well be that what is happening in popular terms involves the re-formation of British identity, in an era of heightened national and territorial consciousness, rather than its linear decline.

After Empire?

There is a fourth distinct understanding of politicisation which also deserves more careful consideration. It stems from critical arguments that are less familiar to political science (for an exception, see Gifford, 2014) but are highly influential in other social scientific fields and are reflected in left-wing political circles. On this view, it is the trauma associated with the abandonment of Empire and the inability of the United Kingdom's elites to deal with the external challenges associated with post-imperial decline that have played a key role, freezing the national consciousness of the English into a kind of cultural melancholia and an endless lament for a global status and social order that no longer prevail (Gilroy, 2004). This backward-looking, parochial nationalism is encapsulated in the cultural obsession with the Second World War.

On this view, political Englishness signals a deepening desire – triggered by the conditions of uncertainty and decline associated with relative economic decline, European integration and, latterly, devolution – to retreat to a cultural formation that offers an imaginative solace from the anxieties generated by these powerful dynamics (Schofield, 2013). Various commentators, in the wake of Nairn, have long anticipated the likely emergence of populist, resentment-driven nationalism as a vehicle for the self-assertion of working-class voters who have become decreasingly loyal to mainstream political parties.

Many advocates of the post-imperial thesis also adhere to the notion that, by dint of the unique historical circumstances in which it emanated, Englishness cannot be seen as the stable emanation from a rich and rooted tradition. It is instead a kind of void, an empty vessel filled with regressive, pastoral fantasies. English nationalism was infected by the universalising mentality of the British Empire and was also, according to historical sociologist Krishan Kumar (1999), significantly restrained and depleted by the imperative to establish an overarching British national identity for the people of the United Kingdom.

What distinguishes the post-imperial decline thesis is the conviction that the English will only come to terms with their own history as a former *imperium* when they embrace the kind of civic, post-national patriotism which progressive thinkers advocated in the final years of the twentieth century. But the notion that a politicised Englishness represents a stew of reactionary and xenophobic fantasies is challenged, for instance, by qualitative research that points to the multiple kinds of belonging and different forms of imagined community that a sense of English belonging conveys (Skey, 2011). It is also, importantly, confounded

by evidence of shifts in the ways in which a growing number of citizens from minority backgrounds relate to an English, as well as British, identity (Kenny, 2014b: 100–105). Throughout the last two decades, most polls have consistently shown that, at an aggregate level, most members of minority communities choose to identify as British and are wary of Englishness. Yet, in recent years, various studies have shown that in its everyday contexts, this form of sentiment is much more ethnically and culturally porous than is typically imagined (Skey, 2011) – although most research agrees that Muslims typically remain excluded from its terms of belonging (Mann, 2011).

But perhaps the most important reason for doubting the post-imperial decline thesis is its foundational assumption that, in giving up its empire and losing its dominant power status, the United Kingdom has experienced the same degree and kind of psychic trauma and cultural fall-out that have beset other states that were once imperial hegemony. In fact, as the passage of time permits us to take an ever longer view of this process, there are good reasons to query whether this axiom is well founded. There is, for instance, a growing debate among historians about the adequacy of this reading of post-war Britain (Howe, 2013). Equally, the contention of some political economists (Gamble, 1994) that the United Kingdom's relatively open economy ensured a smoother transition from empire than that experienced by other states is also pertinent here, suggesting one important reason why a strong sense of continuity with the past has been a hallmark of English nationhood.

Indeed, while the question of geo-political role has posed a major dilemma for the United Kingdom's elites, which have disagreed about where to position this state in relation to Europe and the United States (Gamble, 2003), in other respects the United Kingdom appears to have made the adjustment to a post-imperial status in a more stable and successful way than some of its comparators. There is relatively little evidence to suggest that the post-imperial syndrome has been the only dynamic shaping the trajectory of identity politics within England and the approach that the United Kingdom has taken to issues of cultural diversity and integration.

This is not to suggest the downplaying of empire and the multiple effects its passing has had in high politics and popular consciousness. But it is to commend that we seek a proportionate, non-deterministic, understanding of their causal role at the level of national identity and appreciate the degree to which the refashioning of different territorial identities in different parts of the United Kingdom is a response to other pressing developments and pressures.

Implications for Policy

This typology incorporates the main rival ways of understanding and accounting for the politicisation of Englishness. Some of these perspectives undoubtedly overlap, even though each rests upon a quite distinct form of historical understanding and definition of what politicisation actually entails. The main analytical value of identifying their assumptions and implication is to enable a more reflective and critical debate about the normative and empirical assumptions informing discourse on contemporary Englishness. But there is another reason for elucidating the distinctive character of these perspectives. Each carries important consequences for policy and politics. And, as the potential for conflict over the English Question grows in British politics, the dilemmas associated with them will become increasingly important.

If, first, the political character of Englishness lies in relation to the attitudes and allegiances this form of nationhood promotes or reveals, political actors will, very likely, be inclined to respond in primarily, or solely, partisan terms. Specifically, if non-Conservative politicians believe – as many do – that those who identify strongly with Englishness

are by definition unlikely to be their supporters, this increases the likelihood that they will continue to ignore or play down the English Question. Taking this view may also lead parties, for instance, the Liberal Democrats and Labour since the late 1990s, to promote the merits of decentralisation to tiers of governance which reflect attachments – to locality, city or region – that they view more positively. This is undoubtedly one reason why the dream of a regional tier of government remains alive in high political circles despite its palpable lack of popularity among the populace at large.

If, however, politicisation is taken to signal the sudden emergence into the political spotlight of an issue area that has long remained in the shadows of British politics – as the second perspective considered here suggests, then a very different kind of political response may well become apposite. In strategic terms, the parties will calculate whether this is an issue that it is in their interest to keep at the heart of political debate, and will accordingly make decisions about whether to depoliticise, dilute or maintain its prominence. Responses formed in this way are unlikely to leave space for consideration of the deeper-lying, and longer-term, shifts in national identification and sentiment that are associated with this issue, and may well leave the parties open to the accusation that they are prioritising their own partisan interests over the good of the wider community. The government's attempt to promote a particular answer to the West Lothian Question as a sufficient answer to the English Question may well fit this bill, and so too, perhaps, calls for a constitutional convention offered by Labour and the Liberal Democrats since September 2014.

But if – as the third perspective considered above stipulates – Englishness has altered its internal character from being a predominantly cultural form of nationhood to becoming a species of mass nationalism, very different kinds of policy response would seem to be required. This kind of analysis gives succour to those who argue for a substantive form of EVEL in order to give the English a voice and to head off a growing sense of grievance. As has been widely noted, however, such a reform is extremely difficult to introduce into the UK Parliament and may well introduce new territorial tensions into the Union.

But there is another important implication of this kind of interpretation. The notion that political nationalism has grown from what was once a 'merely cultural' nationhood implies that cultural questions have been surpassed by the emergence of political and institutional demands and claims. In fact, as a good deal of research on the question of the imaginative appeal and meanings of Englishness attests, questions of recognition, as well as representation and governance, are at the heart of the resurgence of this form of identity. Indeed, the impulse to express, celebrate and evoke a national tradition and sense of cultural identity has been a preamble and accompaniment to the growing political focus upon English identity (Kenny, 2014b: 131–170). A policy agenda responding to these trends might, therefore, involve various kinds of cultural provision, changes to the ways in which the nationhood of the English is depicted in terms of flags and symbols, and a different response to the growing demand for historical narratives and public representations of nationhood which pick out English, as well as British, lineages.

The fourth, and final, characterisation offered here also carries implications for politics and policy. Framing Englishness as a pathological product of the United Kingdom's decline inclines politicians and citizens alike to perceive it as a regressive and insular form of identity – a retreat from the dilemmas and challenges of the modern world and the wider entanglements and alliances to which England has belonged. Such a form of understanding suggests that this species of 'narrow nationalism' needs to be contained and its potential impact upon the working classes, in particular, negated through the cultivation of alternative ideas about universal rights and liberal values. Little space is left in such an understanding

for the possibility that the emphasis upon English *demos* might engender or sustain democratic demands of various kinds. Viewing Englishness as an alienated and chauvinistic form of self-assertion inevitably inhibits the prospects of positive and democratic engagement with its sentiments and manifestations, and has had the consequence of leaving it to the political right to appropriate and control the narratives and cultural resources associated with what was once widely assumed to be a deeply liberal model of nationality.

Conclusion

In this article, I have argued the case for identifying several distinct modes of understanding 'political Englishness' and pointed to some of the actual and potential policy directions which are likely to flow from each of these. I lack the space here to offer a fully fledged alternative framework that encompasses their strengths and removes their weaknesses. But it is possible to identify some of the different elements that would provide the basis for a more comprehensive and balanced framework for understanding the issues at stake here. And these can be adduced through reference to the inadequacies and limitations of each of the perspectives considered above.

Against the tendency to read Englishness as inherently conservative, there is a good case for regarding this form of identity as more polysemic in terms of the variety of different political narratives and ideas that can be promoted through its articulation. Second, rather than positing this as an issue area that has been created and controlled by actors in the party system, there is a good case for political science to engage much more deeply, using different research methodologies and kinds of data, with the complexities of shifting forms of territorial identification among the English.

Third, there is a strong argument that the cultural dimension and dynamics through which an English identity has been expressed, explored and normalised have been unduly neglected by political scientists. And this has left commentators insensitive to the cultural dimensions of an emergent English nationalism, and to the nature and strength of the demands for recognition, as well as representation, in the political and governing systems associated with it. And, fourth, there are good reasons to suggest that the post-imperial dilemma has been misconceived, and the possibility that different kinds of English identity might enable the strikingly diverse English populace to navigate towards a new form of imagined community, accordingly overlooked. A framework forged around these blended elements is much more likely, I would contend, to help us capture the ideological contestability, cultural resonances and political implications of Englishness, and to comprehend its increasingly salient role in public discourse and political life.

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Note

- 1 Some psephologists (for instance Green, 2015) argue against the idea that this factor was important in the election outcome, although many political commentators and practitioners disagree (see Cowley and Kavanagh, 2015).

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