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The UK Independence Party and the Politics of Englishness

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Abstract

The rise of the UK Independence Party has been one of the most dramatic and widely discussed features of British politics in recent years. This article argues that one vital but largely overlooked facet of this phenomenon has been the politics of national identity. It argues that despite the UK Independence Party's ostensibly unionist stance, Englishness is an important pivot around which key elements of the party's appeal revolve, notably in terms of its Euroscepticism, its opposition to immigration and its anti-establishment narrative. It argues that the Anglo-Britishness promulgated by the UK Independence Party allows space for the celebration of English identity rather more easily than of other sub-state national identities, as it does not challenge the legitimacy of the UK state, which is itself seen as the expression of Anglo-British identity and sovereignty. Scottish nationalism, on the other hand, is seen as a threat to the union and therefore anti-English.

Introduction

As its very name suggests, the UK Independence Party (UKIP) has always had the politics of national identity at its core. The party was not founded to represent a particular class or sectional interest, but to pursue one key aim – to bring about British withdrawal from the European Union (EU). Even as UKIP has sought to broaden its appeal and range of policies beyond that of a single-issue party this has remained its overriding objective, and the lens through which most of its other policy positions are framed and understood. The commitment to withdrawal from the EU is the first principle enshrined in the party's constitution. Following this, in the same opening paragraph, the constitutional document goes on to state: 'The Party further believes that the integrity of the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland (hereinafter "The United Kingdom") should be maintained' (UKIP, 2012).

Ostensibly at least UKIP is therefore a unionist party, making it a somewhat surprising channel for a political Englishness – a puzzle this article explores. UKIP's unionism reflects the party's ideological heritage as essentially a splinter on the Conservative right that emerged at the height of tensions within Conservative ranks over the issue of European integration in the early-1990s. The party was formed out of the Anti-Federalist League established by the academic Dr Alan Sked, who hoped it 'would convert the Tory Party to Euroscepticism and to British Independence' (quoted in Ford and Goodwin, 2014, 21). Sked had also been involved in the Bruges Group, which similarly wanted to move the Conservative Party in the direction outlined by Margaret Thatcher in her 1988 Bruges speech. This anti-federalism is important for understanding UKIP's unionism as it encapsulates the party's narrow conceptualisation of national sovereignty, which reflects the Thatcherite view of the state that came to dominate Conservative thinking in the 1980s (Hayton, 2012, p. 62).

UKIP's unionism is also illustrated by the fact that it competes electorally across all four nations of the UK, and the party held manifesto launches in each at the 2015 general election. UKIP's manifesto for Northern Ireland included a clear declaration of the party's unionism, stating that:

> UKIP will work to return to the Northern Ireland Office representation in the form of a Secretary of State and Ministers who are reliable Unionists. UKIP will demand that the N.I.O. act and perform its duties in a manner which defends and upholds Northern Ireland's status within the UK. UKIP will influence a N.I.O. presence, 'supportive' not neutral negative on Northern Ireland's constitutional position. (UKIP, 2015c, p. 11).

This article argues that UKIP's unionism should be understood as an expression of Anglo-Britishness. In Christopher Bryant's terms, 'Anglo-British England is the England that was at the heart of the making of Great Britain and the Empire, the one in which the differences between England and Britain disappear or are marginalised' (Bryant, 2008, p. 678). Consequently a politicised Englishness can find expression through the defence of UK sovereignty (Wellings, 2011). So while reluctant to end its commitment to the unitary British state, UKIP has appeared increasingly keen to tap into and articulate a sense of English grievance. It is, as John Harris (2014) has observed: 'the conduit for a specifically English political revolt, and full of people who highlight the notion of England as an angry, introverted place'. Concerns over immigration and multiculturalism are central to this, and the significant rise of the former, particularly since the expansion of the European Union in 2004, has enabled UKIP to link these concerns with their central policy of withdrawal from the EU.

Public disquiet about the issue led David Cameron to pledge during the 2010 election campaign that if elected he would reduce annual net migration to under 100,000. The Coalition government failed to meet this target quite spectacularly, with net migration in 2014 calculated at 318,000, marginally below the all-time record set in 2005 (ONS, 2015). While UKIP supporters are typically concerned about immigration and want to see it significantly cut, research by Lord Ashcroft suggested that 'in the mix of things that attract voters to UKIP, policies are secondary'. He found that while 'those who are attracted to UKIP are more preoccupied than most with immigration' this concern was emblematic of a deeper 'dissatisfaction with the way they see things going in Britain' particularly in cultural terms (Ashcroft, 2012, p. 5). In one widely reported intervention for example, Nigel Farage complained that catching the train out of London to his home in Kent, it was not until it reached the outer suburbs that 'I could hear English being audibly spoken in the carriage'. In the same speech he claimed that 'in scores of our cities and market towns, this country in a short space of time has frankly become unrecognisable… Whether it is the impact on local schools and hospitals, whether it is the fact in many parts of England you don't hear English spoken any more'. Immigration, he said, was leading to whole areas being 'taken over' with 'ordinary folk' paying the social and financial price (quoted in Hope, 2014). As such UKIP can be seen to be successfully tapping into a vein of nostalgic cultural nationalism which is then refracted through issues such as immigration and European integration. In this sense, the party's anti-immigration and Eurosceptic positioning and its Englishness can be understood as two sides of the same populist radical right appeal (Mudde, 2007). UKIP can and should be understood as falling within the European populist radical right (Bale, 2012) but as discussed here the unionist framework of the UK shapes how this appeal manifests itself in a distinctive way.

This article seeks to explore how UKIP has attempted to balance its central objective of withdrawal from the European Union, and its commitment to the union, with the emergence of a more Anglo-centric sense of identity in England and its growing intrusion into British politics. It does this firstly by considering the party's response to the changing constitutional context since the advent of devolution under New Labour. Secondly, it considers the extent to which UKIP has become a vehicle for the mobilisation of a populist form of English national identity in terms of support for the party and the attitudes of its membership. It argues that UKIP has spoken directly to English grievances around the devolution settlement, particularly the Barnett formula and English votes for English laws (EvfEl), but largely through the language of Anglo-Britishness.

Constitutional questions

The sense that the UK is stronger together, and therefore better placed to thrive as an 'island nation' outside the EU has remained a persistent feature of UKIP's thinking even as the nature of the British constitutional settlement has been significantly altered by devolution. Indeed, while the Conservative Party moved relatively quickly to accept devolution to Scotland and Wales after fighting against it during the 1997 election and subsequent referendums, UKIP struggled to accept this new state of affairs. In a policy statement entitled *Restoring Britishness* published in 2010, the party painted a picture of a nation and an identity under threat:

> Britain and Britishness are in trouble. They are being attacked and undermined, both externally and internally. They are threatened by the European Union (EU) and corporatist Americanised pressures from without, and betrayed by misguided politically correct ideology, extremist Islam and errant nationalism from within (UKIP, 2010a, p. 3).

Sub-state nationalisms were also explicitly linked by UKIP to the EU:

> In addition, Britain faces a serious existential crisis, with Scottish, Welsh and Irish nationalisms on the rise. These nationalisms have been enchanted by Brussels that they will have more independence as a province of Europe than as a major constituent part of the United Kingdom. But this is bogus independence (UKIP, 2010a, p. 3).

In policy terms, the document indicated that the executive powers would remain devolved to Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland, and that an English executive 'would be created from British departments that are de facto only engaged in English affairs, headed by an English First Minister' (UKIP, 2010a, 6). Curiously however, the paper pledged to 'replace members of the Scottish, Welsh and Northern Ireland Assemblies with national Westminster MPs' (2010a, p. 6) who would meet in their respective nations monthly (with the English MPs having equivalent gatherings at Westminster) - a seemingly totally impractical form of devolved governance, given that these MPs, in addition to their duties as legislators in two assemblies, would also need to form the executives. As Alan Trench identified in a blog at the time, the publication of this policy document betrayed a 'deeply Anglo-centric view of Britishness' in UKIP's thinking. As he noted: 'This is an archetypal form of primordial unionism, explicitly "unicultural" and based on the English language, accompanied by celebrations of the Commonwealth, British achievements in science, culture or engineering' (Trench, 2010). These policies did nonetheless form part of the 2010 UKIP manifesto, with the accompanying full policy statement on constitutional issues declaring that this approach would create an English Parliament 'but with no extra buildings or politicians' (UKIP, 2010b, p. 9). Furthermore, this body 'would restore England to its rightful recognition alongside the United Kingdom's other constituent nations, and help remove resentment of unfair treatment' (2010b, p. 9). In addition to this, the Barnett formula would be scrapped, all regional governance abolished, and counties restored as the 'prime unit of local governance' (2010b, p. 15).

UKIP's thoughts on devolution and the English Question were fleshed out further in another policy proposal put forward the following year by the party's deputy leader, Paul Nuttall. Developed in conjunction with the Campaign for an English Parliament, this document, *A Union for the Future*, accepted the continuation of the existing devolved bodies in Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland, but backed the creation of an English Parliament, as with the previous proposal, sitting in the House of Commons at Westminster. The House of Lords would also be reformed into an elected upper chamber 'for the whole Union', in which the Prime Minister and UK Cabinet would sit. This plan, the paper argued, would 'end the friction engendered by the current devolutionary settlement' and

thereby save the Union. A further benefit would be 'Preventing the EU dismembering of England into nine euro-regions whilst ensuring the future existence of England as a country within the United Kingdom' (Nuttall, 2011, p. 3).

The 2015 manifesto was rather less detailed on the issue of constitutional reform. However, the theme of addressing English grievances remained, with the party promising to abolish the Barnett formula and introduce English votes for English laws (UKIP, 2015). In early-2015 the party accused the Conservatives of a climb-down over the latter issue, suggesting that the plans advanced by William Hague to give English MPs a veto over English-only matters were insufficient and unclear, and would fail to genuinely deliver English votes for English laws (UKIP, 2015b). The 2015 manifesto also pledged to celebrate Britishness, 'take pride in our country again' and 'promote a unifying British culture' (2015b, p. 61). The party pledged to promote the English language by ending 'the use of multi-lingual formatting on official documents'; make St George's Day and St David's Day bank holidays in England and Wales respectively; and supported a 'chronological understanding of British history and achievements in the National Curriculum, which should place due emphasis on the unique influence Britain has had in shaping the modern world' (2015b, p. 61).

UKIP's response to the constitutional reform agenda, particularly in relation to devolution, has been to reassert a form of Anglo-Britishness, whilst also seeking to capitalise on resentment in England and supporting the celebration of English national identity, for example through the St George's Day bank holiday policy (Mycock and Hayton, 2014). This Anglo-Britishness can accommodate recognition of English national identity rather more easily than that of the other nations of the UK. Following a bad-tempered protest he encountered in Edinburgh in May 2013, the UKIP leader, Nigel Farage suggested that elements of Scottish nationalism were 'akin to fascism' and 'deeply racist, with a total hatred of the English' (BBC News, 2013). During the 2014 Scottish independence referendum campaign he used similar language in an article in the *Daily Telegraph*, asserting that 'the SNP is the voice of anti-Englishness'. For Farage, the referendum was not about independence (as an independent Scotland would be subjugated to Brussels in any case) but was 'about secession from England' while 'Mr Cameron epitomises all that the Scottish people viscerally loathe about England' (Farage, 2014). So although UKIP remained in favour of the union, its attitude towards Scottish nationalism was uncompromising, leaving little room for any political expression of Scottish identity within its vision of the UK. Secessionist Scottish nationalism, in defining itself against the United Kingdom and Britishness, is, for UKIP, also defined against English national identity.

The English Party?

As discussed above, while UKIP has remained a unionist party, there is also evidence that the party has sought to exploit the politics of English resentment in relation to constitutional questions. This has linked to UKIP's populist positioning against the Westminster political establishment, as well as to its Euroscepticism. This section therefore considers the extent to which UKIP has become the vehicle for, and representative of, English nationalism – thereby inverting Arthur Aughey's characterisation of Englishness, as a movement rather than just a mood (Aughey, 2010).

Ben Wellings (2011) has previously argued that Euroscepticism has been a key source of English nationalism, and data presented by Wyn Jones *et al*. (2013, p. 22) indicates that 'Euroscepticism is concentrated most heavily among those with a more English sense of national identity'. Their data showed that amongst those (in England) who identify on the Moreno scale as exclusively English, not British, almost two-thirds (64 per cent) regarded the UK's membership of the EU as a bad thing. This compared to 43 per cent amongst the population as a whole, and just 28 per cent of those who identified as 'British not English'. Conversely among this latter group, 45 per cent regarded EU membership as a good thing for Britain, compared to just 14 per cent of those who identified as

'English not British' (Wyn Jones *et al*., 2013, p. 19). Attitudes towards the EU were also mapped on to views about how England should be governed. Respondents who regarded UK membership of the EU as a good thing were by far the most likely to be happy with the status quo, with 40 per cent of them favouring this, with a further 29 per cent favouring EvfEl. Amongst those seeing EU membership as a bad thing however, just 14 per cent wanted to see current arrangements for English law-making continued, with 38 per cent favouring EvfEl, 22 per cent backing the creation of an English Parliament, and 20 per cent favouring English independence (Wyn Jones *et al*., 2013, p. 21).

Table 1: Preferences for governance of England by party support, England, 2012 (%)

	All	UKIP	Con	Lab
Status quo	21	14	19	27
EvfEL	36	42	46	28
English Parliament	20	32	21	18
Regional assemblies	8	6	5	10
Don't know	16	6	10	16
N	*1,774*	*146*	*456*	*597*

Source: Adapted from Table 4.5 in Wyn-Jones *et al*., 2013, p. 35.

Table 2: Good or Bad for England if Scotland becomes independent, attitude of UKIP supporters

	N	*%*
Very Bad	351	9.6
Bad	921	25.1
Neither Good nor Bad	1194	32.6
Good	447	12.2
Very Good	382	10.4
Don't Know	369	10.1
Total	3664	100

Source: BES Panel Data (second wave).

The same report also found that 'Ukip supporters are by far the most English in terms of national identity and are by far the most strongly discontented with both of England's unions, favouring major constitutional change both domestically and in the UK's relationship with the EU' (2013, p. 32). More than half of UKIP supporters identified as either exclusively English (27 per cent) or more English than British (28 per cent), a larger proportion than amongst supporters of any other party (the next largest being Conservative supporters who registered 17 per cent and 26 per cent in the two categories respectively). A clear majority of UKIP supporters (59 per cent) expressed a preference for English rather than British being stated as the nationality on their passport, although 82 per cent felt proud of the Union Jack (Wyn Jones *et al*., 2013, p. 33). In terms of the governance of England, UKIP supporters were more likely than those of other parties to be unhappy with the status quo, and more likely to support the creation of an English Parliament, although this was a far from universal opinion. Combining the levels of support for EvfEl and an English Parliament reveals that around three in four UKIP supporters want to see the West Lothian Question answered, even if they are unable to agree on how this should be done (Table 1).

Data from the British Election Study reveals that the party's supporters are far from overwhelmingly unionist. Asked whether it would be good or bad for England if Scotland were to become

independent, 35 per cent thought that such an outcome would be detrimental to England. However, 22 per cent thought it would be good for England if Scotland left the Union, with a further 33 per cent seeing it as neither good nor bad (Table 2).

Seen in this context, attempts by UKIP to articulate and mobilise English nationalist sentiment seem unsurprising. In November 2014 for example, Nigel Farage seized upon the outcry over a tweet by Shadow Attorney General Emily Thornberry to declare that 'the Labour Party hate the concept of Englishness… and can't even stand the concept of patriotism' (quoted in BBC News, 2014). Thornberry was rapidly forced to resign following the controversy, which had a particular potency as the photograph she tweeted (of the St George's flag draped from a house with a white van parked on the driveway, and simply labelled 'Image from #Rochester') was taken while she was out canvassing in the Rochester and Strood by-election, which UKIP went on to win. Tournier-Sol (2015, p. 140) has argued that UKIP has developed a 'distinctive narrative' but that this draws upon three interrelated traditions: the British Eurosceptic tradition, the Conservative tradition, and the populist tradition. The populist tradition is an important element in UKIP's Englishness, based as the party is on an outsider and anti-political establishment status. Characterising the mainstream parties as anti-English and part of a Westminster bubble cut off from reality is a persistent feature of UKIP's rhetoric. For example in labelling his party 'the People's Army', Nigel Farage was self-consciously urging voters to 'help us bring down the political establishment' (Farage, 2015, p. 14).

Table 3: Strength of national identity feeling amongst UKIP voters in different nations of the UK

Strength of feeling British/English/ Scottish/Welsh	UKIP voters in England		UKIP voters in Scotland		UKIP voters in Wales	
	English	British	Scottish	British	Welsh	British
Not at all	2.1	3.4	13.1	6.0	14.7	2.7
2	0.6	1.7	3.8	2.2	5.8	0.9
3	1.7	2.6	4.2	4.9	6.1	1.7
4	4.3	8.4	8.1	8.8	14.3	9.6
5	6.2	11.3	7.7	13.3	8.2	11.0
6	12.7	15.7	11.4	16.3	10.9	13.9
Very strong	72.4	57.0	51.7	48.5	40.0	60.2

Source: BES Panel Data (second wave).

For Emma Vines (2016) UKIP's championing of English grievances with the constitutional settlement left by New Labour is linked to its anti-establishment discourse, and the sense that the English working-class has been neglected by mainstream political parties. Ford and Goodwin have similarly argued that white, blue-collar, less-educated male voters form the core of UKIP's support base, who they have characterised as the 'left behind' (2014, p. 177). They suggest that 'these working-class voters have begun to turn to a radical right party who reject the established political class and provide them with someone to blame for their problems' (2014, p. 176). The extent to which the social basis of support for UKIP is also linked to English national identity might, however, be questioned. At the 2015 general election, although UKIP attracted just 1.6 per cent of the vote in Scotland and 2.6 per cent in Northern Ireland, it was almost as popular in Wales (13.6 per cent) as it was in England, where it won 14.1 per cent (BBC News, 2015). However, BES data does reveal some difference in terms of strength of national identity feeling between UKIP voters in Wales and England. On an ordinal scale where respondents were asked to place themselves in terms of strength of national identity, 72.4 per cent of UKIP voters in England said they felt very strongly English (a larger proportion than for any other party, the next being BNP voters, at 66.8 per cent, then Conservative voters at 56.2 per cent). This was also a larger proportion than who described themselves as very strongly British (57 per cent). In Wales, by contrast, just 40 per cent of UKIP voters said they felt very strongly Welsh, behind both supporters of the nationalist party Plaid Cymru

(71.5 per cent of their supporters declared that they were very strong Welsh), and Labour voters (49 per cent). A much larger proportion of UKIP supporters in Wales, 60.2 per cent, said they were very strongly British.

This indicates that to the extent that there is a political space for a nationalist party in England it is occupied by UKIP, even though it does not primarily define itself in terms of sub-state national identity in the way that Plaid Cymru and the SNP do (83.3 per cent of the latter's supporters declared that they felt very strongly Scottish). In Scotland and Wales a notable proportion of UKIP supporters reject Scottish and Welsh identity, whereas very few in England reject Englishness as part of their identity. This reinforces the idea discussed above that UKIP promulgates an Anglo-Britishness which can be allied with Englishness relatively easily, but that struggles to accommodate the more overtly politicised Scottish or Welsh nationalisms. The geography of UKIP support in Wales, which is low in Welsh-speaking areas where Plaid Cymru is strong and higher in English speaking areas in the valleys and the north, indicates the resonance of UKIP's articulation of Anglo-British nationalism amongst some voters in Wales. This pattern of support was seen at the 2015 general election, and also in the 2014 European Parliament elections when UKIP won one of the four Welsh seats. Although in decline, Anglo-British unionism (linked to Ulster) is also still strongly felt by some voters in Scotland and in securing a Scottish seat in the European Parliament in 2014 UKIP may have tapped into this.

Conclusion: narrating and politicising Englishness?

Although the extent to which UKIP represents more of an electoral threat to the Conservatives or Labour is disputed (Evans and Mellon, 2015), as noted above its ideology is certainly on the right of the political spectrum and draws heavily from the Conservative tradition (Tournier-Sol, 2015). Wellings has previously argued that 'England's political nationalism expressed itself as a defence of Britishness' and that this 'merging of England and Britain was particularly evident in conservative thinking, given the conservative adherence to the concept of Crown-in-Parliament sovereignty' (2007, p. 395). Although Wellings was writing with reference to the Conservative Party, given the shared intellectual heritage the analysis is valid for the development of UKIP's nationalism also. Kenny (2015, p. 35) has argued that the rise in support for UKIP is symptomatic of a nostalgic conservative Englishness characterised by 'restorationist and Anglo-British forms of patriotic discourse'. According to Kenny, 'Increasingly, the English and their heritage were framed as an endangered and embattled grouping, derided by a political establishment that was ideologically inclined to use the state on behalf of other ethnic and national minorities, rather than the indigenous English' (2015, p. 43). This narrative has consequently meshed well with UKIP's populist positioning, and its attempts to capitalise on the growing disenchantment with the mainstream political parties (Vines, 2016). Research in 2013 found that UKIP were regarded as the party 'which best stands up for the interests of England' (Wyn-Jones *et al.*, 2013, p. 36), and with the growing strength of the SNP as a force in British, not just Scottish politics, UKIP has sought to present itself as a defender of English interests. On BBC Question Time in January 2015 for example, Deputy Leader Paul Nuttall declared that he was 'absolutely sick to death of Salmond, Sturgeon, and the SNP'. He went on:

> [W]ith them it is take, take, take, take, take, take, take. And we never get anything back. And what are they taking? They are taking your tax. People in Scotland get an extra £1,600 more than people in England… Nothing is ever enough for them is it? Because you've got Sturgeon now saying that Scottish MPs are going to vote on issues that only affect England. It is absolutely appalling. They have got devo-max now, and they have only got devo-max because of rogue poll in August which spooked the three Amigos – Cameron, Clegg and Miliband – who then scuttled up to Edinburgh and basically gave them everything they

wanted in a bribe not to go independent. The fact is that in Parliament English MPs should vote on English-only issues, and that should be the first step in effect to moving towards a fully-fledged English Parliament. (Nuttall, 2015).

The scorn Nuttall directed towards the leaders of the main Westminster party leaders is typical of UKIP's strategy of claiming they fail to stand up in the interests of 'ordinary folk' (Farage, quoted in Hope, 2014). In recent years the party has achieved the greatest traction deploying this message in relation to immigration, but this has also been expressed in relation to the English question. While British politics has certainly witnessed the growth of Englishness in the past couple of decades – an 'English cultural sensibility' as one analyst put it – that has not amounted to a full-blooded, politicised English nationalism (English, 2011). Nonetheless, as English national identity has strengthened, it has become an increasingly important dynamic in British politics. On the right in particular it has become the site of often fractious debate and a lens through which grievances over issues such as immigration and devolution are viewed and discussed. UKIP's Anglo-centric Britishness has both enabled and constrained the party's ability to exploit the politics of resentment in England. On the one hand, it has facilitated the channelling of English nationalist sentiment into the defence of UK sovereignty against the EU, and against secessionist nationalism (particularly the Scottish variant) which threatens the integrity of the UK. EvfEl and reform of the Barnett formula can also be easily accommodated within the Anglo-British view of England (Bryant, 2008, p. 678). However, although an explicitly politicised Englishness sometimes breaks through into UKIP's rhetoric, the Anglo-British view precludes the wholehearted embrace of the more radical positions favour by some English nationalists such as English independence. Tensions over this remain within UKIP, illustrated by the fact that the party backed away from the English parliament proposal contained in the *A Union for the Future* policy document (which was ultimately withdrawn). As such UKIP today is a predominately English party articulating a language of Britishness, but in a narrowly Anglo-centric way.

Acknowledgements

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