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# A note on ethnicity and identity among the UK born population in *Understanding Society*



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# **A note on ethnicity and identity among the UK born population in *Understanding Society***

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## **Abstract**

In this note we take a first look at how the UK born identify across different dimensions (ethnicity, religion, political beliefs and region), to what extent the strength of attachment across these prescribed and elective identities strengthen or substitute each other and how these associations vary by ethnic and ethno-religious groups. For this analysis we make use of the new identity measures in the second wave of the UK longitudinal household survey, *Understanding Society*. We find that ethnic minorities report stronger religious and ethnic identities than the majority, political beliefs are stronger for those with stronger ethnic identity and both these are correlated with regional identities.

**Key words:** identity, ethnicity, religion, political beliefs, regional identity

**JEL classification:** J15; Z12; Z13;

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## **A note on ethnicity and identity among the UK born population in *Understanding Society***

There is widespread interest in how identities are changing, both over time and across generations. The recent report on *Future Identities* by the Foresight programme (Foresight Future Identities 2013), the future scanning unit of the Government Office of Science, discussed how identities can be expected to change over time and are becoming more fluid and contingent. People's identities are linked both to psychological wellbeing, to behaviour and to social cohesion and shared community. They are thus important for individuals and for the societies of which those individuals form a part.

The driver review covering ethnic minorities for the Foresight programme showed that there were trends towards more overarching British identities in the second and subsequent generations, but that there was variation across ethnic groups and that identities were sensitive to context and treatment (Platt 2013). It also demonstrated that, in line with the overall report's general findings, minority group members could hold and manage multiple identities. These findings were reinforced by recent analysis of Wave 1 of *Understanding Society* (Nandi and Platt 2013).

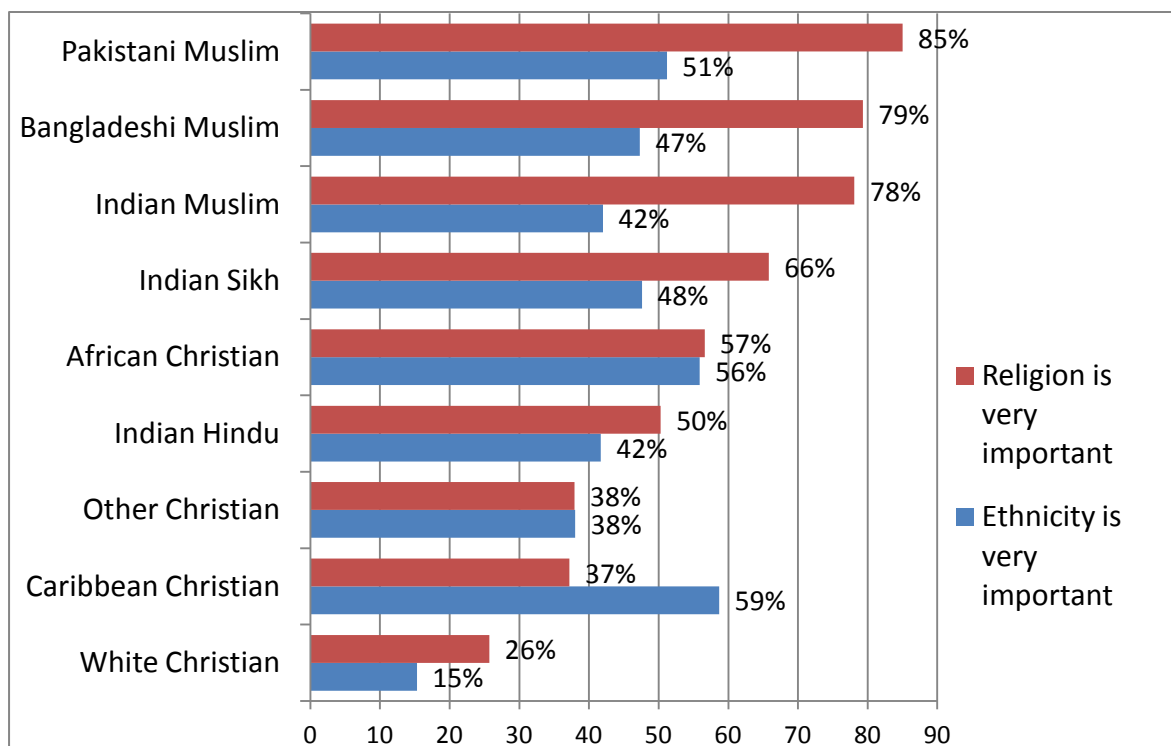
In this paper, we build on these broader insights and findings by exploring unique new survey evidence on the identity of the British population and how it varies among the UK-born by ethnic group. We are able to examine the strength of attachment to various aspects of "identity", and how these do or do not vary with each other. That is, we ask whether different identities are substitutes for each other or whether they reinforce each other. Importantly we consider not only ethnic identity, but also elective identities such as political and religious identity. We show that identities are shared, not separate.

We focus on British born minority and majority populations of the UK. Given that British born minorities have a younger demographic profile than the majority, we focus only on those aged 60 or under. We utilise a selection of the innovative suite of ethnic identity questions included in Wave 2 of *Understanding Society* and asked only of a sub-sample, the extra five minute sample. We also draw on general identity questions, including political and occupational identity, asked of the whole *Understanding Society* sample in the self-completion section of the interview. For further discussion of the *Understanding Society*

identity questions, see Nandi and Platt (2011). Percentages are weighted to represent their distribution in the overall UK population.

First we look at the strength of religious and ethnic identity with the UK born population. The UK has shown clear trends towards secularisation. However, levels of religious commitment are declining from very different starting points, depending on the religion. Moreover, religion offers a transnational identity that has been argued to be a potential substitute for ethnic identity in the second generation. It is therefore pertinent to examine whether the strength of religious identities, for those who have a religious affiliation or were brought up with a religious affiliation, is greater than the ethnic identity of the British population and whether ethnic identity is relatively weak, where religious identity is relatively strong. We can see from Figure 1 that religious identity, expressed in terms of it being very important to one's sense of self, is very important for most minority ethno-religious groups. It is also markedly stronger than ethnic identity for these same groups. The exception is Caribbean Christians. Not only is religion rated as very important for only a minority of this group (though still for a much higher proportion than for White Christians), this is the only UK born group where a higher proportion rate their ethnic identity as very important. Nearly 60 per cent of British Caribbeans regard their ethnic identity as very important to their sense of self.

**Figure 1: Strength of religious and ethnic identity by selected ethno-religious groups**



On the other hand, there is little evidence that overall religious and ethnic identities are substitutes for each other, as high levels of religious identity do not translate into low levels of ethnic identity.

It has been argued that in the first generation, religion can be a resource for immigrants, while in the second and subsequent generations, strong religious or ethnic identity is more likely to represent a form of “reactive ethnicity” in the face of discrimination or disadvantage. So are strong ethnic or religious identities linked to politicisation or political identity among British-born minorities? For the most part, people do not attach as much importance to their political beliefs as to other aspects of identity. Overall, only 28 per cent of respondents say their political beliefs are either very or fairly important to their sense of self. Yet British born minority group members are significantly more likely than their White British counterparts to consider their political beliefs as central to their identity. Figure 1 illustrates how this breaks down across selected ethnic group. The pattern is the same if it were to concentrate on the seven percent who consider their political beliefs as *very* important.

**Figure2: Percent stating political beliefs are very or fairly important to identity, by ethnic group**

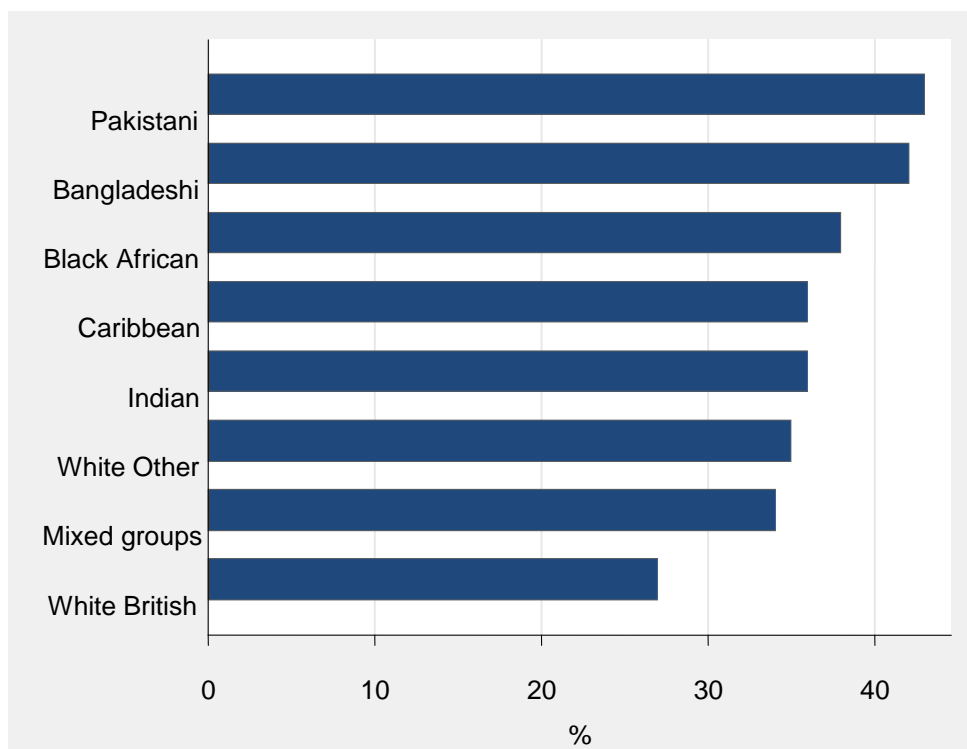


Table 1 investigates whether there is a relationship between ethnic identity and political identity. It combines the findings for both majority and minority groups since the pattern is

the same. It shows that among those with a stronger ethnic group identity, whether majority or minority, there is greater sense of the importance of political beliefs to personal identity. Political beliefs are more than twice as likely to be important to those with a stronger rather than a weaker ethnic identity. Moreover among those with a very strong ethnic identity nearly a quarter have a very strong political identity, compared to only three per cent among those whose ethnic identity is less strong. We see a similar relationship between religious identity and political identity, though it is not quite so pronounced.

**Table 1: Strength of political identity by strength of ethnic identity**

Importance of political beliefs to self	Importance of ethnic identity to self			Total %
	Very/Fairly %	Not very/ Not at all %	Don't know/ not applicable %	
Very/fairly	45	17	14	28
Not very/at all	49	77	27	60
Don't know/not applicable	6	6	59	12
Number of observations	11,058	13,791	3,468	28,317

People's identity is often strongly located in a sense of place – that is why we consider national identities to be important. However, it is also well-recognised that locality or region can be even more meaningful to individuals' sense of who they are. If local identities reinforce people's clarity of identity in other domains, then this may help us to understand the differential patterns of identification that emerge among the British-born population. Table 2 shows the strength of local identity shown by the region in which the respondent was born. It shows that local identities, are, as we might expect strongest for those born in Scotland, or Wales, followed by those from Yorkshire, the West Midlands, London or the South West.

**Table 2: Strength of identity with locality brought up in by region of birth**

Region	% for whom very or fairly important (compared to not very or not at all)	Sample size (unweighted)
North East	68	53
North West	55	206
Yorkshire	76	126
East Midlands	67	126
West Midlands	75	252
Eastern	62	130
London	72	534
South East	67	278
South West	70	53
Wales	78	52
Scotland	80	64
<b>All regions</b>	<b>69</b>	<b>1878</b>

There is some variation – as well as some commonality – in which regions the localities fall that minorities and majority feel most strongly about – for example minorities are particularly strongly attached to London. A more pertinent issue, however, is whether regional identity appears to substitute for or reinforce other forms of identity. We find that those who have a stronger regional identity, whether majority or minority, also tend to have a stronger ethnic identity. In addition, those among the majority population who have a stronger regional identity also have a stronger political identity. Thus, local identities do not substitute for more overarching identities, and particular contexts would appear to foster one's sense of self.

Overall, the findings indicate that different forms of identity tend to be reinforcing rather than separate choices. By and large this is true for the whole of the British born population, whether minority or majority. However, the processes by which identities form and strengthen each other remains to be investigated. For example, these findings do not tell us whether one identity is prior to another.

Much of the interest concerning minority group identities has been on their ethnic and religious attachments. However, individuals have multiple sources of identity and these may be mutually reinforcing as well as independent of each other. Understanding the configuration of identities in the British born population requires us to acknowledge that no single identity may be defining. We have shown that the identities of those who have been born and brought up in the UK do appear to vary along ethnic group lines, when we explore aspects such as religious and political identity. At the same time, across the British born population, strong identities in one domain tend to be associated with strong identities in another. Thus, the benefits of solidarity are not a zero sum game and different forms of identity that arise in a context of different allegiances, national, regional, political and ethnic, may stimulate each other toward greater overall belonging.

### **Key findings**

- The importance of identity to wellbeing and to belonging is widely acknowledged. But rather than single identities, the British born population maintain multiple identities with varying strength.
- Religious and ethnic identities are more important to British born minorities than to the majority. But there is substantial variation across ethnic groups.
- Political beliefs are more than twice as likely to be important to those with a stronger ethnic identity.



- Locality based or regional identities are linked to stronger political and ethnic identities, demonstrating the importance of context in shaping belonging.

*This short note forms a part of a larger project on ethnic identity that is being pursued by the authors.*

### **Further Reading**

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