



## *The Dilemma of British National Identity in Scotland*

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### *Abstract ;*

*This paper explores the complex dilemma of British national identity in Scotland, focusing on historical and political dimensions that shape perceptions of identity in Scotland. As Scotland grapples with its dual identity as both a constituent part of the United Kingdom and a distinct nation with its own cultural heritage, this tension has significant implications for national cohesion and political stability. Through analyzing the historical context, modern political discourse, and recent public attitudes, the study examines how the rise of nationalism in Scotland has challenged Britishness, particularly in light of ongoing debates surrounding devolution. By considering the interplay of identity, governance, and calls for independence, this research aims to contribute to a deeper understanding of the increasingly-changing landscape of national identity in Britain.*

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## 1. Introduction

Historically, Scotland has maintained a strong sense of national identity, influenced by its distinct legal systems, educational frameworks, and cultural traditions. The Act of Union (1707), which allowed for the constitutional unification of Scotland and England under the Westminster Parliament, has created a complex relationship between Scottish identity and British identity. The rise of nationalist sentiment, especially evident during the Scottish Independence Referendum of 2014, has intensified discussions around the meaning of “Britishness” and socio-cultural motives behind calls for independence in Scotland. This study examines the crisis of British national identity in Scotland and its possible considerable role in shaping attitudes towards the UK government and intensifying calls for devolution, through scrutinizing Scottish public opinion. The paper starts first by discussing briefly how national identities are constructed and their significance, as emphasized by several social and psychological studies. Then, it examines the historical making of the Scottish National Identity, in the light of some socio-psychological theories. At the end, the paper analyzes corresponding surveys to investigate Scottish public opinion and compare identities in Scotland and England, in addition to the possible impact on Scots’ perception of the UK government. The paper makes use of recent surveys (2023), conducted by the British Social Attitudes Survey and the Scottish Social Attitudes, which are statistical surveys organized annually by the National

Center for Social Research in Great Britain that are highly used by scholars and academics as an official authentic source of data.

### 1 The Construction of Nationalism and Identity

National Identity is a contested field of study which has been tackled by many scholars. Anderson Benedict’s *Imagined Communities* (2006) is probably among the most significant writings in the study of nationalism. Benedict suggests through his book that nations are imagined communities which give their members a sense of belonging and identity. He suggests that nationalism is not simply being aware about the existing nation, but it is rather about inventing one by sharing the sameness among its citizens. Benedict also emphasizes the role of mass media in forging national identities, especially in the age of globalization where geographical boundaries are eliminated and the possibility of sharing the same idea and experiences increase; thus, facilitating the process of forming “imagined communities”. This proposes that a particular imagined community is defined by what distinguish it from other communities. A similar point is concluded by Guibernau who suggests that the differences which are shared and felt by the members of the same community create psychological bonds which connect them with each other within the same community and link them to their political system, hence creating a collective sense of belonging to a particular nation-state based on shared features and values (Kelman 2010). As national identities are shaped, they serve in legitimizing the activities of

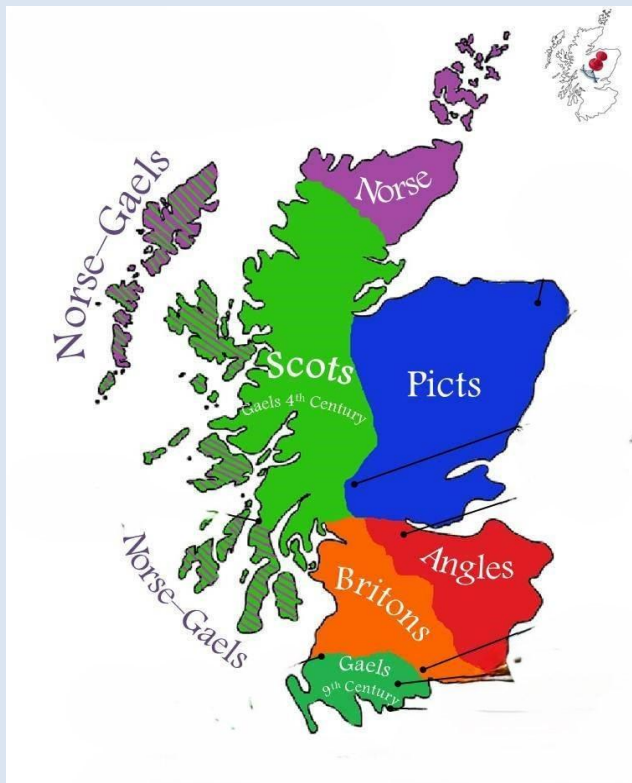
national elites and enable them to mobilize support and commitment<sup>1</sup>.

## 2. The Making of Scottish Identity: Historical and Cultural Origins and their Political Legacy

### 2.1 Historical and Cultural Roots

During the early Middle Ages, four prominent ethnic groups established kingdoms in modern Scotland: the Picts who lived mainly in the east of Scotland; the Gaelic—also called the Scots—who inhabited the west; in the south-west, there were the Brythonic--or British; and in the south-east, the Angles established their kingdom. Figure 1 illustrates these distinct ethnic groups.

**Figure 1:** Ethnic groups in medieval Scotland.



**Source:** (*A Medieval Ethnicity Map of Scotland | Scottish Origenes: Scottish Ancestry, Scottish Genealogy, Scottish Clan Map*, n.d.).

The Picts are descendents of some pre-Celtic aborigines who spoke a Celtic language and embraced Christianity by the 7<sup>th</sup> century. The Gaels came mainly from the northern island of Ireland, whereas the Angles were a Germanic people who invaded the island of Britain during the 5<sup>th</sup> century with Jutes and Saxons. By the late 8<sup>th</sup> century, their kingdoms were under fierce attacks by the Norsemen, North Germanic groups from Norway who occupied mainly the north of Britain; and Danes, Germanic tribe from south Scandinavia who invaded east Britain. The constant threats of Danes and Norsemen led to the birth of the *Alba Kingdom* in 843, as a result of the gradual unification of the Gaelic and Pictish kingdoms, with a noticeable domination of Gaelic culture and a sudden mysterious evaporation of the Picts and their native language. During the high Middle Ages, the kingdom grew to be a predominant Gaelic society, embracing Irish cultural practices, with few Pictish borrowings. In the 10<sup>th</sup> century, *Alba* was a Gaelic term at that time used to refer to Britain (Broun 2007).

The “Scot” was used by foreigners to describe the inhabitants in Scotland who called themselves “Gaidel” or “Albanach”, but by the end of the century, the term was generally employed to refer simply to any

<sup>1</sup> This idea is further explained in “*Political culture and political development*” (2015) by Pye & Verba who studies the

link between political culture and the subsequent political development in ten different countries.

person belonging to the Scottish kingdom—which could unite people of different Germanic ethnicities, despite clear cultural divisions between the Highlanders and the Lowlanders. Several attempts were made by the English to annex their lands. These attacks considerably intensified Scottish nationalism and identity, as the Scots mobilized against one common enemy.

From the perspective of the Social Identity Theory suggested by Tajfel and Turner (2004), the Scots identified themselves as a distinct unified community in comparison with another social group “out-group”—the English in this context. The Declaration of Arbroath, in April 1320, is probably an excellent example in which the Scots asserted their distinctiveness, solidarity, freedom, and sovereignty against the aggressive English attacks. As a legal and humanist document, it reflects the development of democratic intellect, public sovereignty, and the egalitarian society in Scotland, especially during the age of Robert the Bruce and William Wallace (Ichijo 2004) whose myths, bravery and heroic adventures were an integral part of vernacular Scottish literature and epic poetic history.

By the end of Early Modern Age, the Scottish national identity had already been clearly forged, with St Andrew Cross recognized as the Scottish national flag. Protestantism was adopted by the Scottish parliament, establishing the *Kirk* (1560) as the Church of Scotland, after a long religious transformation led by John Knox to break from Catholicism and establish the Presbyterian system (rule by elders instead of bishops) during the Reformation Era. In 1603, James VI of Scotland became James

I of England, thus uniting the two kingdoms. Nevertheless, it was a dynastic union only, with two separate crowns and legislative bodies—despite King James I's efforts to merge the two kingdoms.

It was possible to merge Scotland and England as a politically united kingdom only in 1707 under the Acts of Union. This political union asserted the Hanoverian dynasty and established the Westminster Parliament as a national parliament, while still maintaining the Scottish church-- Kirk, courts, laws, and schooling system. The political union allowed for considerable economic transformations in Scotland as currency and laws regulating taxation and trade were united and new markets were created (Macinnes 2007). Scotland could rapidly undergo the industrialization process, especially in textile, coal mining, and shipbuilding during the Industrial Revolution. Nonetheless, many nationalist movements opposed what they called the Anglicanization of Scotland's unique systems.

## ***2.2 Scottish Nationalism and Modern Political Discourse***

Although since the Acts of Unions, Scotland had increasingly adopted English cultural practices and language, notably in the Lowlands, the Scottish nationalism continued to arise. Revival of Scottish literature and culture during the 19<sup>th</sup> century led to the formation of nationalist organizations calling for self-governance in response to the centralized power of the British Parliament (Jackson 2020). For instance, the efforts of the Home Rule Movement, which was influenced by broader nationalist movements in Europe in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, were culminated

in attempts to pass the Home Rule Bills in 1913 and 1938. A Scottish Parliament was established in 1999 with limited powers after a referendum held in 1997 in favor of devolution (78%)—which culminated the efforts of the Scottish National Party (SNP) and the Labour Party. The Scottish Parliament was granted powers over limited areas including education, health, and transportation, but its powers were further extended by the Scotland Acts of 2012. Unsatisfied with their degree of autonomy, many Scots began to question the possibility of full independence. In 2014, another referendum was held to decide whether Scotland should remain a part of the union. The result was 55.3% voting against independence and 44.7% in favor, but the issue still remains a contentious topic in Scottish politics, particularly in light of changing political dynamics, with calls from the SNP for a renewed vote in the wake of significant political and social changes, including Brexit and an ever-increasing sense of Scottishness.

#### **4. Scottish Public Opinions and Attitudes towards the UK Government**

In an attempt to: (1) explore identities in Scotland, (2) to see to what extent British National Identity might be undermined by the rise of local Scottish nationalism, and (3) to which degree this nationalism is connected to political attitudes towards the UK government in Scotland, the study analyses the results of

the British Social Attitudes (BSA) survey. The survey was held online in 2023 to ask a random sample about a number of social and political issues related to the UK, mainly in two countries: Scotland and England.

#### **Technical Details: Sample Design, Description of the Sample, and Data Limitation**

The British Social Attitudes (BSA) survey is a British annual statistical survey conducted by National Centre for Social Research, established in 1983. It is funded by governmental departments, quasi governmental bodies, and the Gatsby Charitable Foundations. It is a reliable source of authentic data which is widely used by scholars and academics. It uses random probability sampling in its surveys. This paper uses the latest survey findings of the BSA which have been conducted online between September 12th and October 31st 2023 in England, Wales and Scotland, using a mixed-mode-push-to-web design<sup>2</sup>, in which letters were sent to a random sample inviting each person aged 18 or over, at least, per private household in Britain to take the survey (with three reminder letters and £10 shopping voucher as an incentive to encourage the completion of the survey). The Postcode Address File (PAF)<sup>3</sup> is used as a sampling frame. A random sample of 30, 436 respondents was drawn from the PAF.

The sample is divided into subgroups according to factors related to the

<sup>2</sup> According to IPSOS, a push-to-web design “leverages a sequential Mixed Mode approach whereby an offline data collection mode is used to encourage participants to complete an online survey.”

After one or two reminders, this may be followed with an offer to complete a paper questionnaire”.

<sup>3</sup> It is the UK’s definitive address database.

geographical region, age, sex, education, tenure, ethnicity, and economic activity. Table 1 details the description of the sample according to these factors.

**Table 1:** The 2023 BSA Survey Sample: A Detailed Description

| Region                        | Sex            | Age and Education                  | Tenure                   | Ethnicity                   | Economic Activity                                        |
|-------------------------------|----------------|------------------------------------|--------------------------|-----------------------------|----------------------------------------------------------|
| - Northeast (4.1%)            | Male (48.4%)   | -18-34 Degree (12.5%)              | - Owned outright (34.3%) | -White (86%)<br>-Bame (14%) | -Employed (61%)<br>- Unemployed (2.5%)<br>-Other (35.7%) |
| - Northwest (11.4%)           | Female (51.8%) | -18-34 Other qualification (13.7%) | - Mortgage owned (33.9%) |                             |                                                          |
| - Yorkshire and Humber (8.4%) |                | -35-54 Degree (17.3%)              | -Rent or other (31.8%)   |                             |                                                          |
| -East Midlands (7.5%)         |                | -35-54 Other qualification (13.6%) |                          |                             |                                                          |
| -West Midlands (9%)           |                | -55-69 degree (8.5%)               |                          |                             |                                                          |
| -East of England (9.7%)       |                | -55-69 other qualification (11.6%) |                          |                             |                                                          |
| -London (13.4%)               |                | -70+ (17.4%)                       |                          |                             |                                                          |
| -South East (14.2%)           |                | -No qualification (5.4%)           |                          |                             |                                                          |
| -South West (8.9%)            |                |                                    |                          |                             |                                                          |
| -Wales (4.8%)                 |                |                                    |                          |                             |                                                          |
| - Scotland (8.5%)             |                |                                    |                          |                             |                                                          |

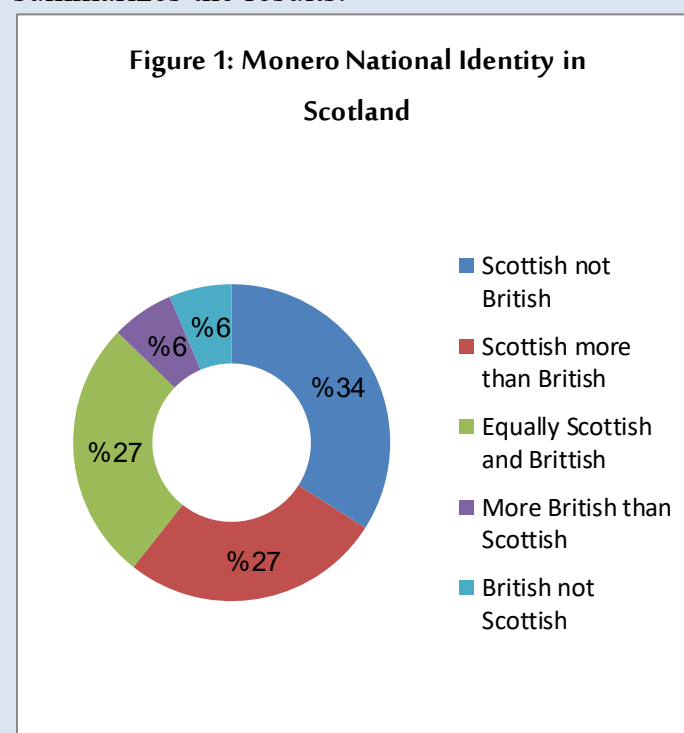
**Source:** British Social Attitudes 41, Technical Details , 2024, p. 19-20.

It is undeniable that managing the survey accurately is difficult in an online

<sup>4</sup> In Scotland, respondents were asked the following question: “Which, if any, of the following best describes how you see yourself? (1) Scottish not British, (2) More Scottish than

setting where it is not possible to verify who is taking part in the survey. To eliminate possible errors, two adults, instead of one, aged 18 or over in each household are invited to take part in the survey to compare their answers, in addition to using some weighting techniques to address possible discrepancy.

The BSA conducted first the so-called Monero question<sup>4</sup> to compare national and local identities in Scotland. Figure 1 summarizes the results.

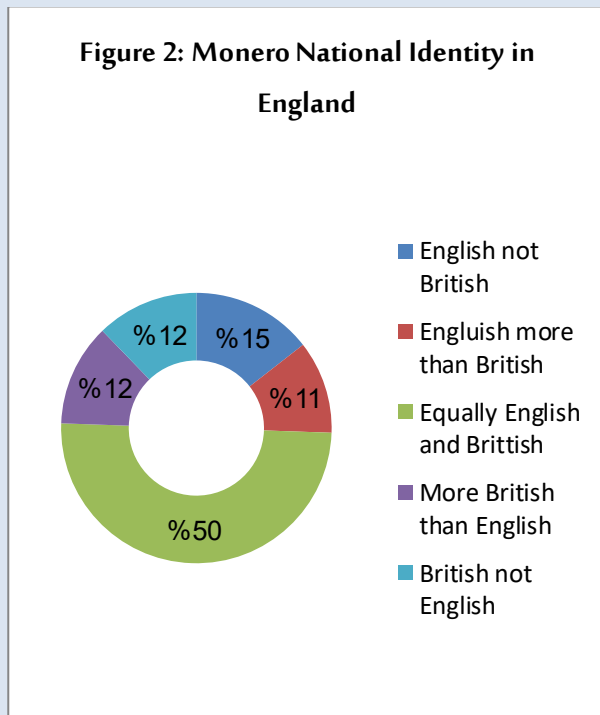


**Source:** British Social Attitudes 41 , 2024, p. 27.

The chart reveals that more than half of the sample (57%) identify themselves either as “Scottish not British” or “More Scottish than British”, and only 12% have more loyalty to the British National identity. If we compare these results with the survey conducted in England to ask the

British, (3) Equally Scottish and British, (4) More British than Scottish, or (5) British, not Scottish”.

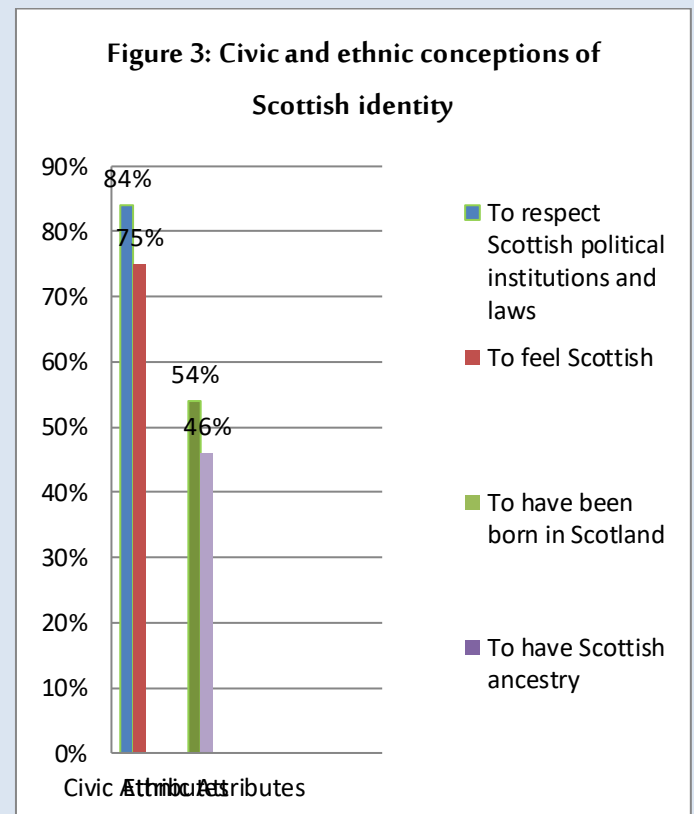
same Monero national identity question (Figure 2), almost half of the English sample (45%) identify themselves as both English and British. Loyalty to local identity rather than the national identity does not exceed 23% in England. This suggests that while the English tend to have a dual identity, the Scots are more inclined to see themselves as Scottish not British.



**Source:** British Social Attitudes 41, 2024, p. 27.

In order to better understand the Scots' conception of Scottish Identity, the survey asked participants to choose corresponding statements associated with being Scottish. The survey distinguished between two main features of identity as suggested by many studies: civic attributes and ethnic attributes. Civic identity focus on acquired characteristics like speaking national language, having a national citizenship, and respecting political institutions; whereas Ethnic attributes refer to cultural conceptions which focus on roots and ancestry and other characteristics which are fixed at birth. **Figure 3** summarizes the

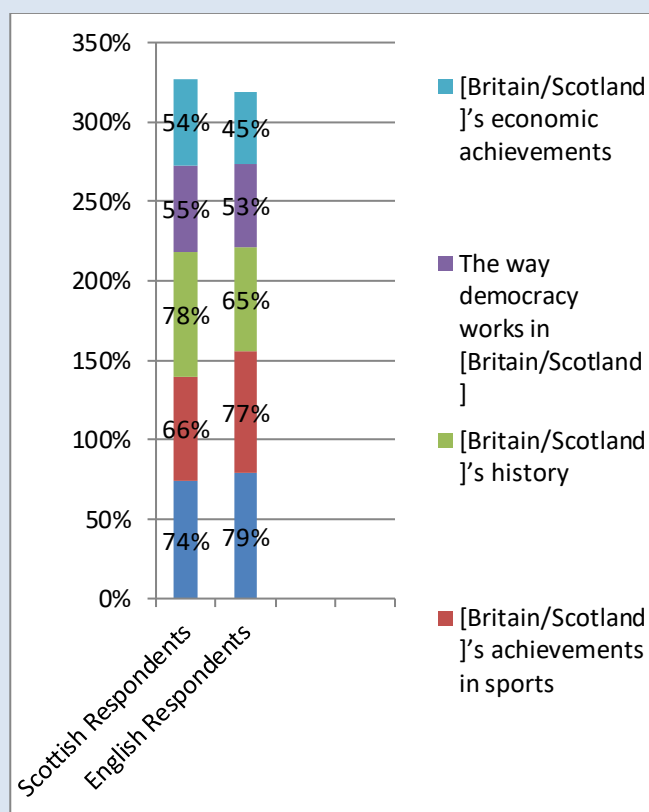
survey's findings.



**Source:** British Social Attitudes 41, 2024, p. 30.

The survey reveals that Scots have a civic conception of identity, as 84% and 75% of the sample see that it is necessary to respect Scottish institutions and feel being Scottish to possess a Scottish identity. Less than half of the participants consider ethnic attributes as being important to be truly Scottish. To further explore the Scots sense of national pride, the respondents were asked to select corresponding answers to a question about the source of their national pride. The findings are compared with their English counterparts in Figure 4 below.

**Figure 4:** Sources of National Pride: Comparison between in Scotland and England



**Source:** British Social Attitudes 41, 2024, p. 32.

The chart reflects how the Scots take pride in their history and consider it as an important component of their identity. Achievements in Scottish art and literature are also a source of national pride for the Scots; this confirms the role of the revival of Scottish literature in intensifying the sense of nationalism in Scotland during the 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> centuries. The findings correspond with Figure 3 as well which suggests that feeling Scottish is an important civic attribute of the Scottish Identity. The English seem to have less national pride in comparison with the Scots.

This strong sense of Scottish identity suggests theoretically a tendency towards devolution and possible internal conflicts within the kingdom, as emphasized by many scholars<sup>5</sup>. To compare Scots’ trust in their local government and the UK government, the respondents were asked to choose one of the suggested statements which best describes how, according to them, the local and the national governments work to promote Scotland’s interests<sup>6</sup>. Figure 5 details the answers.

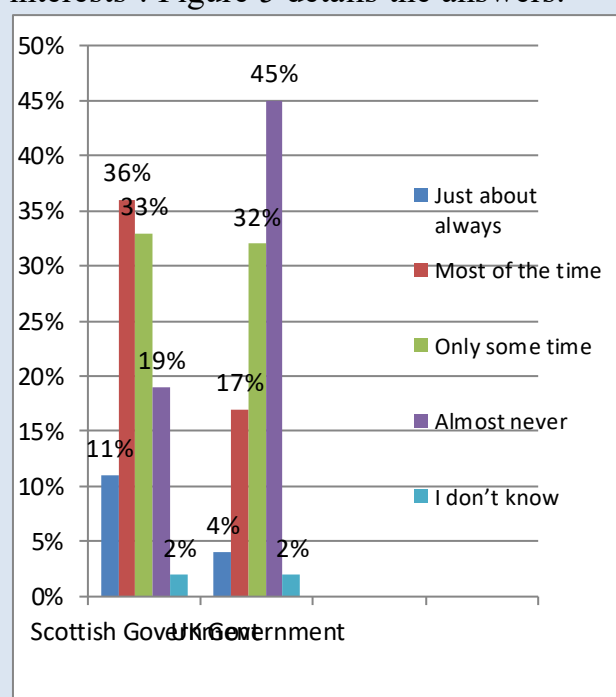


**Figure 5:** Scots’ trust in government.

**Source:** Scottish Social Attitudes 41, 2024. P.4.

As expected, the survey confirms Scots mistrust of the UK’s government. Seventy-seven percent (77%) of the respondents see that the national government either never cares about promoting Scotland’s interests

<sup>5</sup> See for instance the significant works of John Curtice.

<sup>6</sup> The survey raised the following answer: “How much do you trust the Scottish Government to work in Scotland’s best interests/ the UK Government to work in

Scotland’s best long-term interest?”. The participants could choose the following: “just about always”, “most of the time”, “only some of the time”, “almost never”, or “I don’t know”.

or only occupied itself with sometimes. The survey suggests also the Scots tend to have more trust in their local government (47%). This suggests a deep schism in the kingdom and possibly continued debates of devolution and independence in the future.

To conclude, the analysis of the British Social Attitudes Survey highlights a robust and distinctive Scottish identity, shaped by both civic values and cultural pride. Scots are more likely to prioritize their Scottish identity over a British one, focusing on their connection to Scottish institutions and a sense of belonging to the nation. This strong sense of national identity is further reinforced by a deep appreciation for Scotland's history, art, and culture. Survey results suggest that this identity is coupled with a notable mistrust of the UK government, alongside greater confidence in the Scottish government. These findings suggest that debates over Scotland's political future will probably remain central to the UK's discourse, reflecting a broader trend towards divergence in national identities and political aspirations within the union.

## Conclusion

The formation of Scottish identity evolved in the early Middle ages with the emergence of the *Alba* kingdom and the gradual domination of Gaelic culture. Scottish identity further solidified through resistance to English invasions, notably with the Declaration of Arbroath, asserting Scotland's sovereignty and distinctiveness. By the Early Modern period, Scotland had a clearly defined national identity and despite political union with England in 1707, Scottish identity remained strong, fueled by a revival of culture and

nationalism in the 19th century, culminating in the establishment of the Scottish Parliament in 1999, and a referendum in 2014 to question full independence from the kingdom.

The analysis of recent public opinion, as evidenced by the British Social Attitudes Survey, reveals a distinct Scottish identity. The study compared the national identities of Scots and the English, revealing that Scots are more likely to identify strongly as Scottish rather than British, while the English often embrace a dual identity. The research also distinguishes between civic and ethnic aspects of Scottish identity, finding that Scots are more focused on civic traits like respect for Scottish institutions and a sense of belonging to Scotland, rather than ethnic characteristics tied to ancestry. Additionally, Scots take pride in their country's history, art, and culture, which strengthens their national identity.

Politically, the study found that Scots tend to distrust the UK government, feeling that it does not adequately address Scotland's interests, while they have more confidence in their local government. This reflects a growing divide within the UK, suggesting that debates around devolution and independence are likely to continue in the future.

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