

The Perspective of British Politicians on English Identity: Qualitative Study of Parliamentary Debates, Blogs, and Interviews

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Abstract : The question of England's role in Britain is increasingly relevant due to the ongoing rise in citizens identifying as English. Furthermore, the Brexit Referendum was predominantly supported by constituents identifying as English. Few politicians appear to comprehend how Englishness is politically manifested. Politics and the media have depicted English identity as a negative and extremist problem - an inaccurate representation that ignores the breadth of English identifying citizens. This environment prompts the question, 'How are British Politicians Addressing the Modern English Identity Question?' Parliamentary debates, political blogs, and interviews are synthesized to establish a more coherent understanding of the current political attitudes towards English identity, the perceived nature of English identity, and the political manifestation of English representation and governance. Analyzed parliamentary debates addressed the democratic structure of English governance through topics such as English votes for English laws, devolution, and the union. The blogs examined include party-based, multi-author style blogs, and independently authored blogs by politicians, which provide a dynamic and up-to-date representation of party and politician viewpoints. Lastly, fourteen semi-structured interviews of British politicians provide a nuanced perspective on how politicians conceptualize Englishness. Interviewee selection was based on three criteria: (i) Members of Parliament (MP) known for discussing English identity politics, (ii) MPs of strongly English identifying constituencies, (iii) MPs with minimal English identity affiliation. Analysis of parliamentary debates reveals the discussion of English representation has gained little momentum. Many politicians fail to comprehend who the English are, why they desire greater representation and believe that increased recognition of the English would disrupt the unity of the UK. These debates highlight the disconnect of parliament from the disenfranchised English towns. A failure to recognize the legitimacy of English identity politics generates an inability for solution-focused debates to occur. Political blogs demonstrate cross-party recognition of growing English disenfranchisement. The dissatisfaction with British politics derives from multiple factors, including economic decline, shifting community structures, and the delay of Brexit. The left-behind communities have seen little response from Westminster, which is often contrasted to the devolved and louder voices of the other UK nations. Many blogs recognize the need for a political response to the English and lament the lack of party-level initiatives. In comparison, interviews depict an array of local-level initiatives reconnecting MPs to community members. Local efforts include town trips to Westminster, multi-cultural cooking classes, and English language courses. These efforts begin to rebuild positive, local narratives, promote engagement across community sectors, and acknowledge the English voices. These interviewees called for large-scale, political action. Meanwhile, several interviewees denied the saliency of English identity. For them, the term held only extremist narratives. The multi-level analysis reveals continued uncertainty on Englishness within British politics, contrasted with increased recognition of its saliency by politicians. It is paramount that politicians increase discussions on English identity politics to avoid increased alienation of English citizens and to rebuild trust in the abilities of Westminster.

Keywords : British politics, contemporary identity politics and its impacts, English identity, English nationalism, identity politics

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