

Britain's mixed-race population blurs the lines of identity politics

It's not black and white

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[...]

5 The number of Britons who say they have a mixed-ethnic background almost doubled between the census of 2001 and 2011, to about 1.2m, or slightly more than 2% of the overall population. That figure is probably an undercount, since not all children of mixed marriages will have ticked one of the mixed categories, and the number is likely to have grown since the census. An analysis by Alita Nandi of Essex University and Lucinda Platt of the London School of Economics suggests that the true figure could be three times as high. If that is right, mixed-race people constitute a larger proportion of the population than any minority ethnic group.

10 And that share is still growing. Fewer than 1% of Britons aged 50 or over in 2011 had a mixed-ethnic background, according to an analysis of official statistics by Rob Ford of Manchester University. Among the youngest cohort—under fives—6% had one. The proportion of cohabiting couples that are interracial shot up from 2.6% in 2001 to 4.5% by 2011. Both patterns suggest that the next census, due next year, is almost certain to report an even larger number of mixed-race Britons.

15 This demographic shift coincides with the resurgence of race as a central political theme. In Britain, as in America and continental Europe, this year will be remembered not only for covid-19 but also for a reassessment of the state of race relations. As statues were felled and historic anthems reappraised, the idea of “white privilege” leapt from the campus to the streets. Yet much of the focus on symbolic and systemic racism overlooks the growing significance of mixed-race Britons, who often defy labels. The attitudes of this group will be crucial in determining the future direction of identity politics.

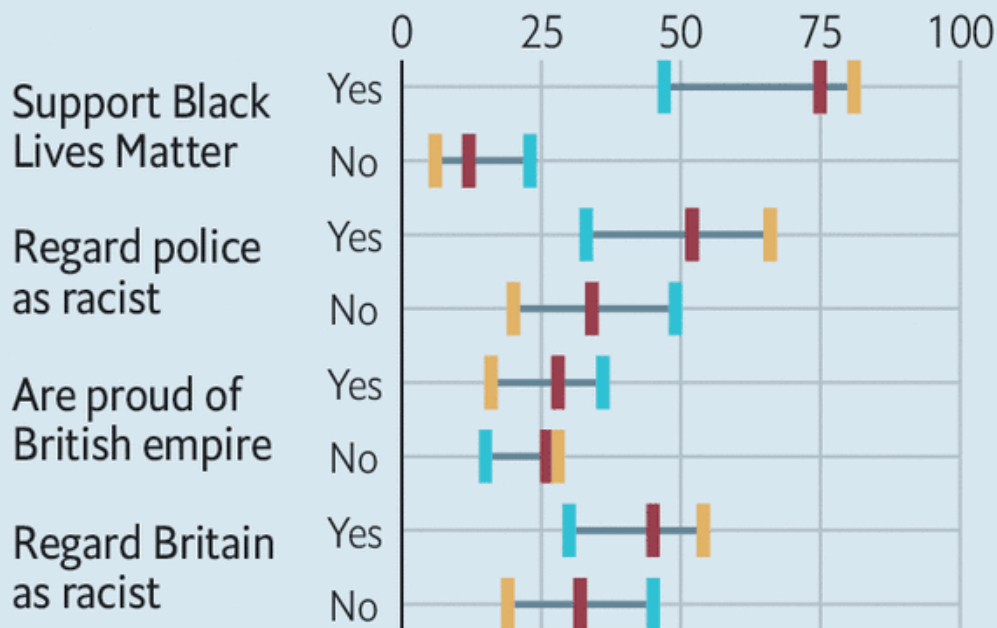
20 This is truer of Britain than of other rich countries. [...] Most Americans of mixed parentage settle down with a partner from a minority group, but 50% of Britons with black African and white parents - and 75% whose parents were white and black Caribbean - marry a white partner.

25 A poll for *The Economist* by Ipsos MORI suggests that mixed-race Britons are, in general, less wary of Britain's institutions and history than black Britons (see chart). They are marginally less likely to support Black Lives Matter (BLM), less likely to agree with the proposition that “Britain is a racist country” and much less likely to think most British cops are intentionally racist. [...]

The middle way

Britain, public opinion on selected issues, %
August 2020

■ White ■ Mixed-race ■ Black



Source: Ipsos MORI

The Economist

30 Consider Marvin Rees, the mixed-race mayor of Bristol. He is proud of his Jamaican ancestry and, growing up in the 1980s, he often faced racial abuse. Yet he would return home each evening to his white mother, who left school at 14 to work as a hairdresser. “There is such a thing as white privilege, but my white family did not grow up with privilege,” he says. He remembers a school friend asking him during one of the city’s race riots, when they were both about 13, “‘in a war between black and white whose side are you going to be on?’...The idea of going to war with
35 white people didn’t sit well with me. At the same time, I recognised the physical threat to my safety was coming from white people.”

Mr Rees, whose wife is white, credits his background for his nuanced approach to racial issues. His city made headlines around the world in June when protesters toppled a statue of a city father who was a notorious slave trader. But Mr Rees was wary of such direct action, arguing that
40 symbols were far less important than measures to tackle entrenched inequality. “I will talk about race and racism in all its fullness,” he says. “But I’m not going to go home and give mum a hard time for being white or ask her to feel guilty.” [...]

It is not inevitable that, as ethnicities mix, identities get watered down. Mr Rees points out that, as people feel their connection to a particular identity weakening, they may well seek to reassert it.
45 “People crave simplicity and certainty.” If that were to happen, the growth in intermarriage could eventually make racial politics more, not less, divided.

But our polling suggests the opposite is happening. Trevor Phillips, a former chairman of the Equality and Human Rights Commission, argues that rather than being forced to choose one ethnic identity or another Britain’s mixed-race citizens are increasingly claiming “both sides of their
50 heritage”. His children have Indian, French and Caribbean ancestry, with cousins from each branch of the family. “Wherever they are at Christmas,” he says, “they know what to do.” And, as Mr Katwala has written, “that is only a threat to those whose views of race depend on telling everybody else how to think about who they are.”