



8 June 2012

Strathclyde University Mood of the Nation Quiz – A Survey with a Twist

The research team: Professor Laura Cram, Dr Stratos Patrikios, Professor James Mitchell

School of Government and Public Policy, University of Strathclyde.

Contact: laura.cram@strath.ac.uk

Research Duration: 23 April 2012- 26 May 2012

No of respondents: 10405

What we did:

We asked viewers to participate in our mood of the nation quiz and told them that this was not a typical attitudes survey. In fact, unknown to participants, the quiz was part of a survey experiment to test whether being implicitly exposed to a flag image (either the Saltire or the Union Jack in Scotland, or the St George's Cross or the Union Jack in England) would affect the respondents' answers to our quiz. We compared their responses to a benchmark, similar group that just saw a control (non descript/generic) flag.

Why we did it:

1. We wanted to give viewers some insights into how this type of research is conducted and to make them think about how the environment they are in when they complete a standard survey might affect their responses.
2. We wanted to reach a much wider audience than is typical for this type of experimental research which is more commonly conducted in laboratories with small student samples and sophisticated technical equipment.
3. We are carrying out research on the impact of national flags and symbols and we genuinely wanted to find out how the various flags in the UK might affect public attitudes. The UK with its multiple flags is a perfect laboratory for this type of research. The idea is that national flags may trigger unconscious 'gut responses' which bypass cognitive processes – so people might not always give the answers that they themselves consciously think that they might.

The place of useful learning

The University of Strathclyde is a charitable body, registered in Scotland, number SC015263



How we did it:

When participants clicked on the online map they were allocated to a nationality group: Scottish, Welsh, English etc. Within each nationality group, each respondent was allocated randomly to one of three groups – the control group (which saw a neutral flag), the national flag group (eg. the St George's cross or Saltire) or the Union Jack group. So - unknown to them - different participants within each of the national groups saw different background flags – or what we call implicit triggers. The control flag acts as our baseline – the responses that this group gives (on average) are what we would expect to have collected if we had not intervened with the flags. We measure the difference in average opinion between eg. those shown the St George's Cross and those shown the control flag and then test these to make sure that we are confident that the effects that we observe are not just random – ie. that they are statistically significant.

The advantages and disadvantages of our online popular approach:

1. We got much bigger numbers than is usual for this type of research and reached people that might not usually participate.
2. This means that we can be fairly confident that the groups that we analyse will be more diverse than the small student sample usually used for this type of research.
3. We can't control who responds – this is a self-selecting group which may not be typical of the population – interested in politics, watching politics programmes, visiting BBC news site, snowballing from there.
4. We also can't control what is happening in the background at home when they are completing the survey – are they watching the television – are two people at the computer – did they complete the quiz more than once.
5. We didn't get as many respondents from Northern Ireland and Wales as we would have liked – so the experiment only uses English and Scottish samples.
6. Of course – as some of the respondents noticed - not all of those who live in England are English etc. – so for the experiment we only analyse, Scots who live in Scotland, were born in Scotland and identify themselves as Scottish – and the same for England.
7. It is always important to emphasise that online experimental research of this open nature is not representative – we can tell you that this group of respondents was affected in these ways but others might respond differently.

What we were looking for:

1. whether and how the flags (national identity triggers) affect people's sense of material self/interest – economic cost/benefit attitudes - and whether these effects were the same for both Scottish and English samples;

The place of useful learning

The University of Strathclyde is a charitable body, registered in Scotland, number SC015263

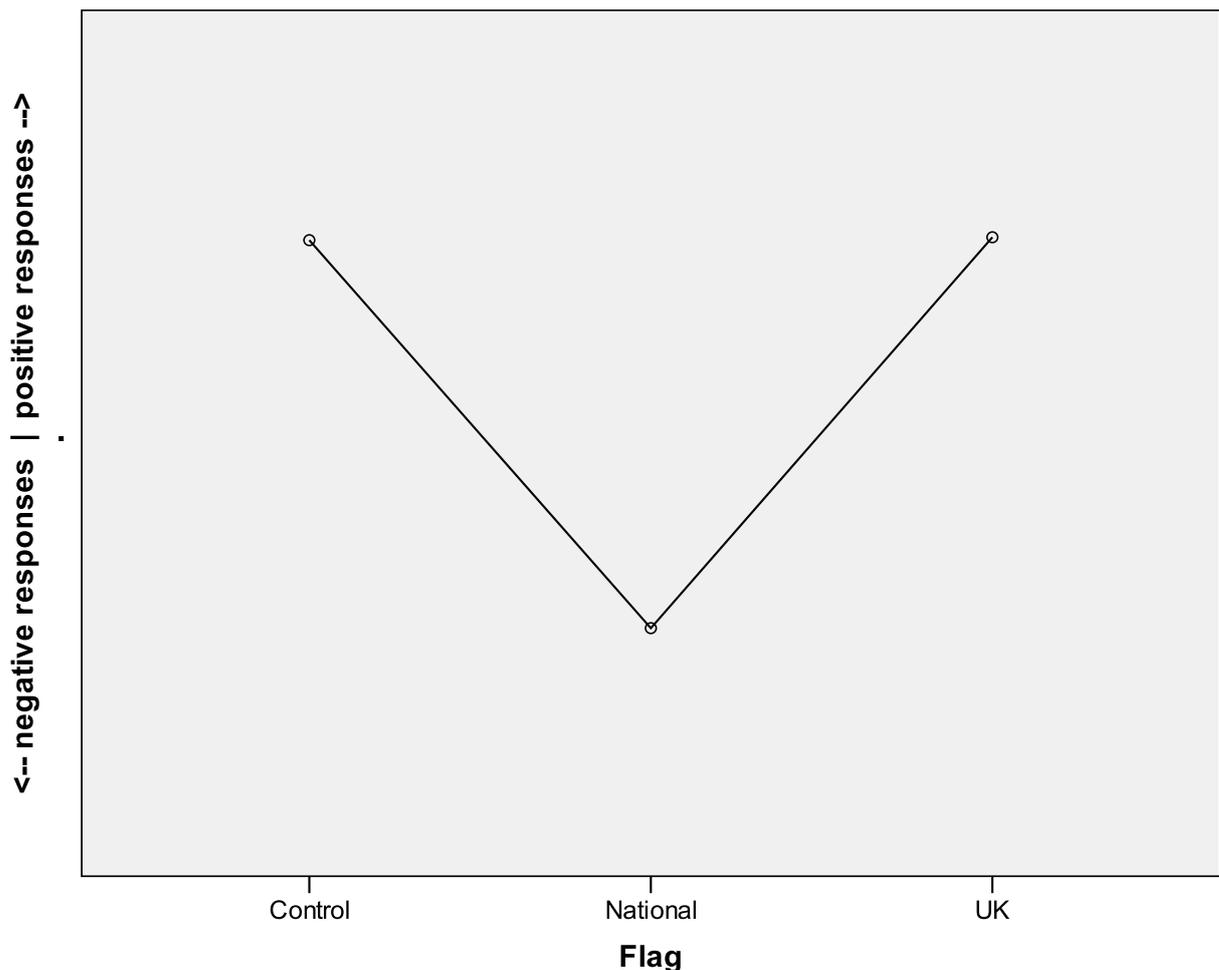


2. whether and how the flags affect more emotional attitudes – like national pride - and whether these effects were the same for both Scottish and English samples;
3. whether different groups of people within the Scottish and English samples were affected in the same way .

What we found (summary – see Appendix below for detail on graph interpretation):

1. *Economic Confidence:* Flag exposure affects how the respondent feels about the current state of the economy in England/Scotland. Exposure to the national flag – the St George's cross or Saltire - makes those who responded more anxious about the current state of the economy. This effect is evident for both the English and Scottish respondents but is more pronounced in Scotland – ie. the Saltire has a stronger negative effect on feelings about the current economic situation in Scotland.

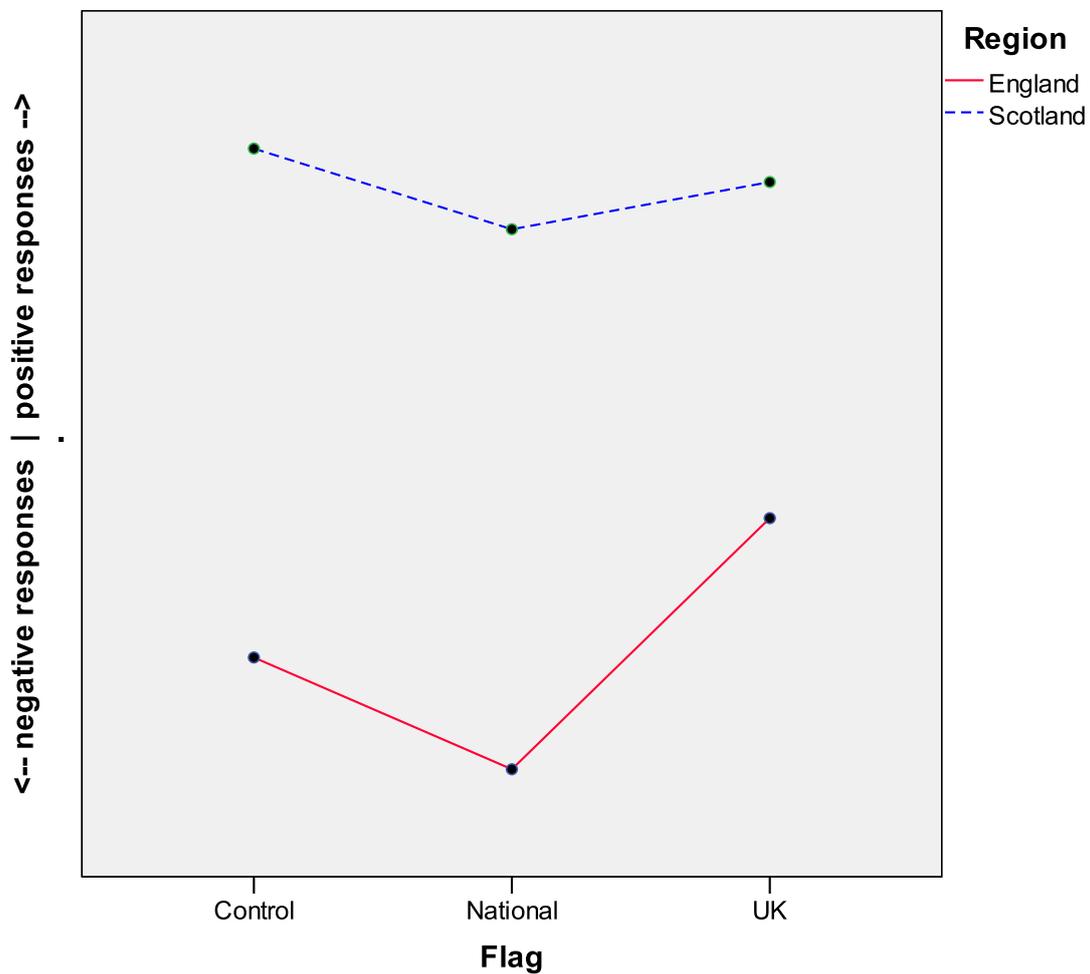
Graph 1: Feelings about [country's: England's or Scotland's depending on map choice] current economic situation





2. *National pride*: Exposure to the Union Jack increases a sense of pride in being English (rather than British) amongst the respondents who were English identifiers. This was not the case for the St George's Cross. Neither the Saltire nor the Union Jack had a significant effect on Scottish national pride for these respondents.

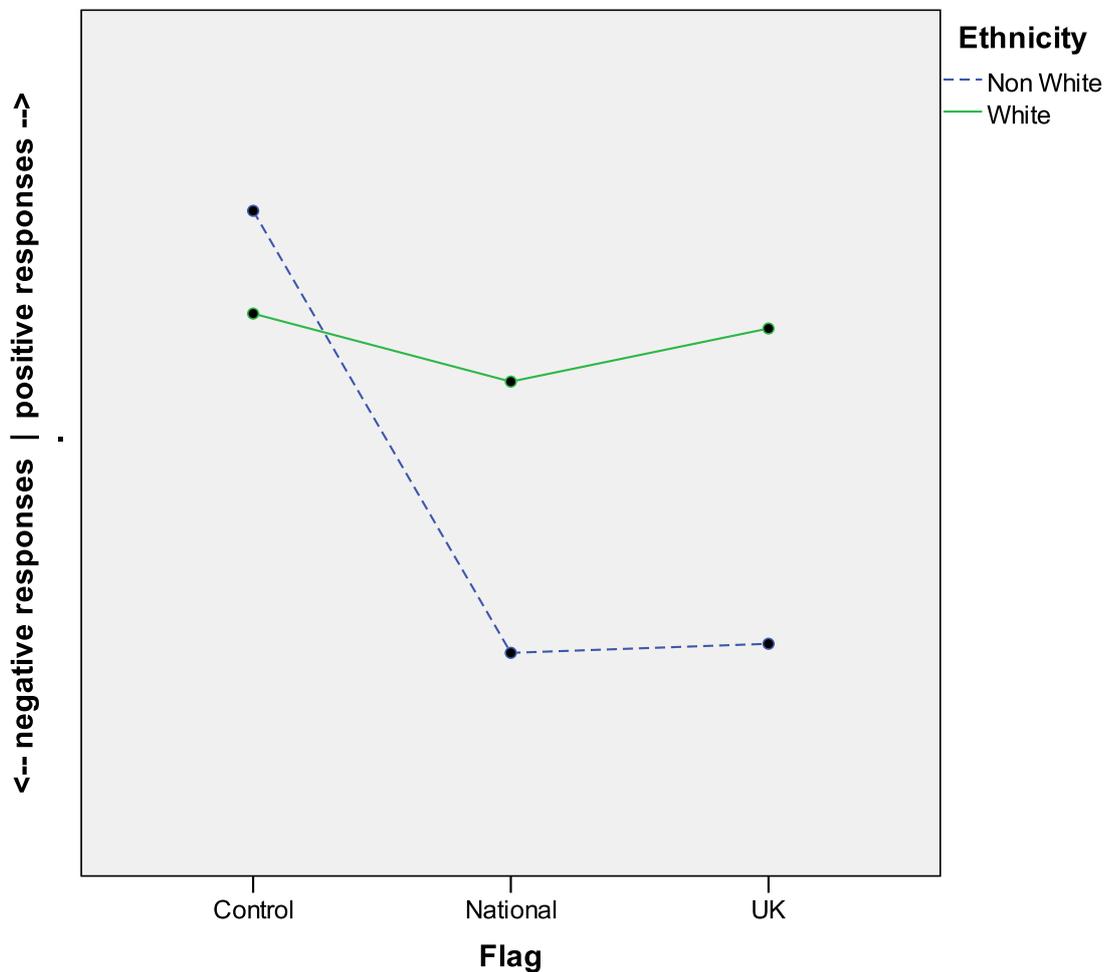
Graph 2: Proud to be [national: English or Scottish, depending on map choice]





3. *Group differences:* Exposure to both the national flags (St George's Cross and Saltire) and the Union Jack made non-white respondents to the quiz less likely to express pride in being English or Scottish. We also found that the flags had a stronger effect on those with a lower educational background, especially for the national pride questions.

Graph 3. Proud to be [national: English or Scottish, depending on map choice]





What it means:

There is no straightforward answer. We can observe these effects but this dataset doesn't allow us to confidently interpret why these results emerge - remember the samples we use are not representative and different groups may be affected in different ways:

1. *Economic Confidence*: It could be that reminding people of being English or Scottish, rather than British, makes them feel less in control of their economies within the UK, or more hard done by as a group, thus more anxious? Perhaps given the salience of this debate in Scotland, this would explain the increased effect of the Saltire in Scotland? On the other hand, it could be an unconscious fear in Scotland of 'going it alone' in the economy as the forthcoming referendum on independence approaches?
2. *National Pride*: The Union Jack, but not the St George's Cross, makes the English identifiers more proud to be English. This might tell us something about the intermingling of English and British identities, the sense that, for many, these are synonymous, or that the Union Jack is in fact the national symbol for those that identify themselves as English.
3. *Group Differences*: The non-white group constituted only a very small percentage of respondents (2%). Nevertheless this is an interesting result, indicating that neither the national flags nor the UK flag invoke a sense of belonging or pride in these groups, indeed quite the opposite, provoking a decreased sense of pride. The findings on educational background are consistent with the notion that implicit triggers are expected to trigger unconscious 'gut' reactions bypassing cognitive processing.

Why it matters:

1. The results challenge the simplistic dichotomy that is often made between on the one hand, 'identity' driven attitudes (often presented as emotional/sentimental) and utilitarian/cost/benefit driven attitudes (often presented as rational). What we demonstrate is that, when we trigger national identity associations in our respondents (by implicitly exposing them to the flags) – their responses on both economic and on national pride questions are affected.
2. We have shown that the UK is a perfect laboratory for this type of research and that there are many questions to be asked about how the various different identities that UK citizens hold are triggered and what effects these might have on public attitudes and even political behaviour.
3. We have brought a wider variety of people into the research process and given them pause for thought about what affects their responses to public opinion surveys.