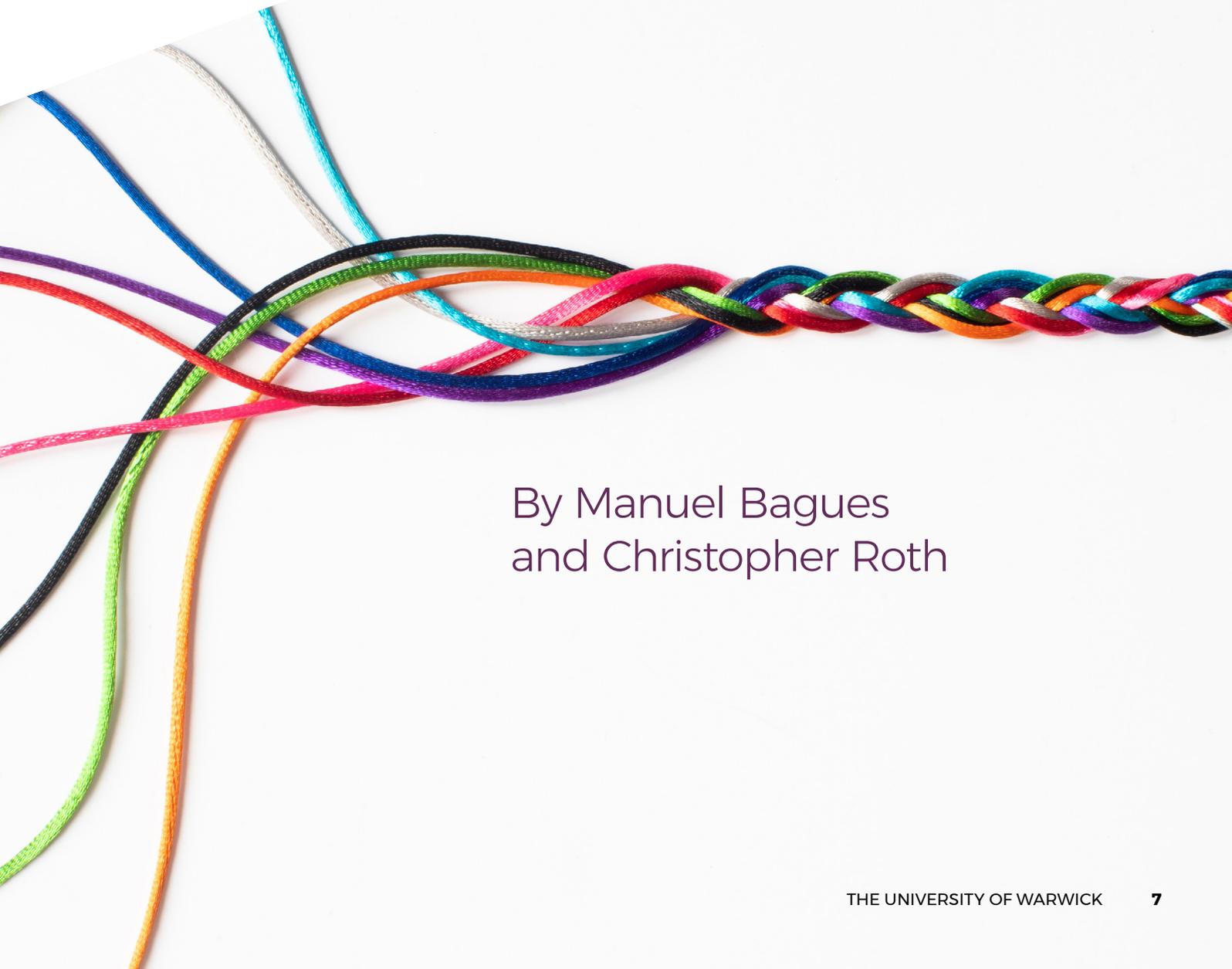


# The ties that bind: how contact with other regions can strengthen feelings of national identity



By Manuel Bagues  
and Christopher Roth

In January, *polls revealed* that 49% of people in Scotland and 47% of people in Northern Ireland supported independence from the UK. A majority of voters from both countries would welcome a referendum on independence. *The Times* called it a *constitutional crisis*, while former Prime Minister Gordon Brown warned that *'dissatisfaction is so deep it threatens the end of the United Kingdom'*. How can the government strengthen social cohesion and encourage a sense of shared national identity in the UK? New research shows that increased interregional contact could make a difference.

Countries across Europe face pressure from citizens who place more trust in local political movements than they do in national government. Spain, France, Belgium and Italy, in addition to the UK, have all faced secessionist movements in the last few decades. The challenge for governments – and particularly for the UK at the moment – is how to encourage citizens to look beyond

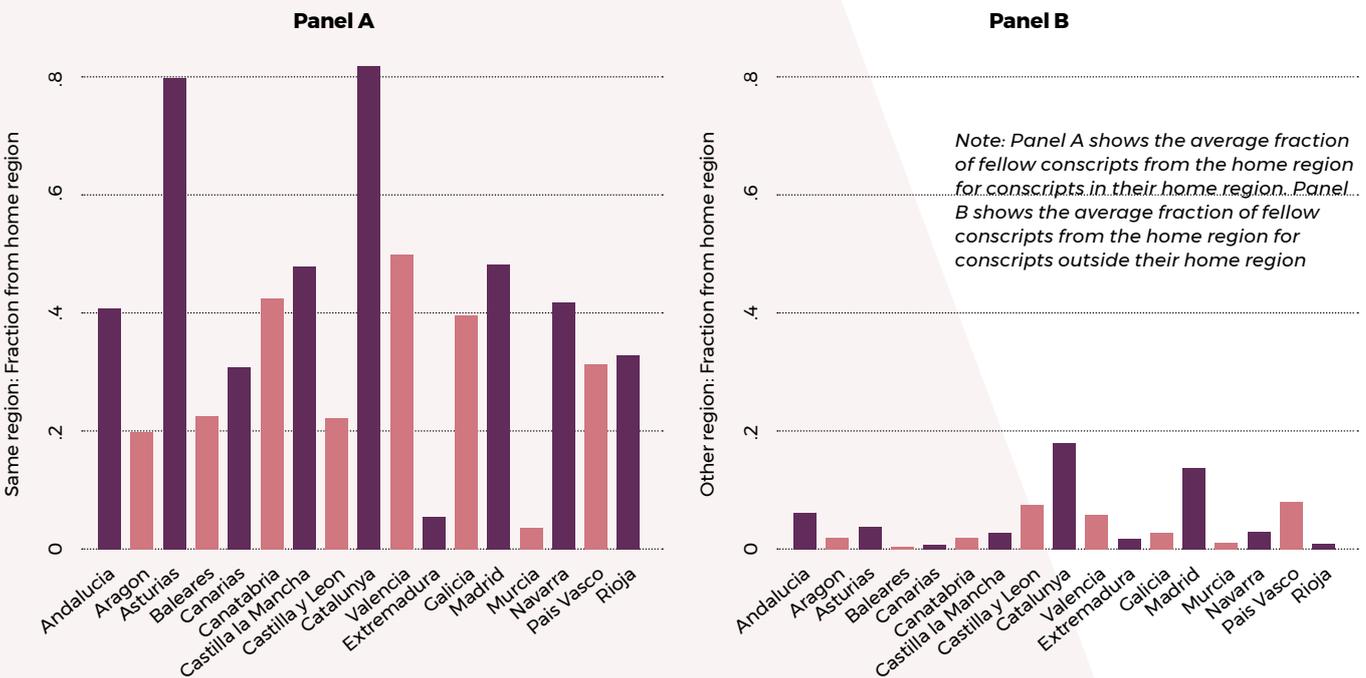
regional matters and support measures for the benefit of the nation. A strong sense of national identity can be critical to encourage social cohesion; our research shows that this can be achieved through increased exposure to people from other regions. We find that interregional contact can increase a sense of national identity and grow feelings of sympathy and trust for people in other regions.

**The case of the Spanish military service lottery**

Historically, governments have tried to strengthen national identity through education, propaganda and resettlement schemes. Another method is conscription, in which conscripts are purposefully mixed with individuals from other regions. The hypothesis is that this mixing can strengthen interregional relationships and identification with the nation state. But contact between individuals of very different backgrounds could also exaggerate feelings of difference. To understand the effects of interregional mixing, we exploit a natural experiment: the random assignment of conscripts to national military service in Spain.

Between 1940 and 2001 young men in Spain were required to take part in military service in the year they turned 20. Until 1992 the location of service was randomly assigned through a lottery. Around one third of conscripts were assigned to serve in their own region, while the rest were allocated to other regions around the country. 97% of young men complied with the lottery outcome. Those serving outside

Figure 1: Fraction of fellow conscripts from the home region



their own region were more exposed to individuals from other regions through interactions with other conscripts, as Figure 1 shows.

### Examining the effects of interregional contact

We wanted to find out the extent to which conscripts were affected by the location of their military service. In particular, we wanted to know if being stationed outside their home region during early adulthood increased a sense of national identity and sympathy for other regions in later life. Spain has a number of regions with their own strong regional identities, many of which have expressed desire for independence (Catalonia, Basque Country, Galicia, Navarra and the Balearic Islands). What would be the effect of serving in another region for conscripts originating from these areas?

To find out how conscripts were affected by the location of their military service, we conducted a survey of 3231 former conscripts. We collected rich background data on each conscript including details of their birth, education, income and province of residence. We then asked them qualitative questions to determine their sympathies for Spain and its different regions. First, we asked our respondents hypothetical questions to determine respondents' sympathies towards, and trust for, people from other regions. Next, we asked i) whether they identify with Spain or their local region, ii) whether they are proud to be Spanish and iii) how they feel when they see the Spanish Flag.

### Interregional contact can build trust

For conscripts who served outside their home region, we found increases in perceived honesty and sympathy towards people from the region of service, several decades after completion of service. This effect was stronger in conscripts from regions with strong regional identities.

**Figure 2: Effect of serving outside the home region on a conscript's identification with Spain**



Note: This figure displays average treatment effects separately for respondents originating from a region with peripheral nationalism and for respondents from other regions. The figure also includes one standard error bars.

### Interregional contact can increase feelings of national identity

We found that conscripts who served outside their home region had a stronger sense of national identity and love for Spain. However, this was only statistically significant for those conscripts originating from areas with a strong sense of regional identity (fig.2). For these conscripts, the effects of being stationed outside their home region was three times larger than for other groups. The specific region they served in, and the cultural difference between the region served and the home region did not alter the effect.

### Implications

Our results suggest that experiences during early adulthood can have long-lasting and persistent effects on people's formation of a shared national identity. Governments aiming to foster interregional cohesion and policies should consider facilitating interactions between individuals from different regions. This could be by encouraging young adults to gain

exposure to different areas of the country through education and apprenticeship schemes. With young voters in Scotland expected to be *more likely to vote for independence*, these findings could be particularly pertinent for the UK. ◀

### About the authors

**Manuel Bagues** is Professor of Economics at the University of Warwick and a CAGE Associate.

**Christopher Roth** is Assistant Professor of Economics at the University of Warwick and a CAGE Deputy Theme Leader.

### Publication details

This article is based on the paper Bagues, M. and Roth, C. (2020). *Interregional Contact and National Identity*. CAGE working papers (no. 526).