



# CSI 31: Is Britain more or less socially cohesive than other countries?

## Summary

- We compare social cohesion in the UK to five other countries (the USA, Sweden, France, Germany, and Japan) and find that it is often ‘middle of the pack’ and most often similar to Germany.
- On several aspects of social cohesion, particularly voter turnout, trust and immigration, we find that the UK is divided between the liberal elites (highly educated) and the traditional non-elites (low educated).
- There are similar social divides on our measures of cohesion across the peer countries. Sweden generally looks more cohesive but it is divided on the issue of income redistribution.
- The UK is weak on voter turnout which is both low and socially divided. Sweden does by far the best on this indicator, and the USA the worst.
- The percentage feeling close to one’s country in the UK is also low, but it is not socially divided.
- As we would expect in light of the Brexit vote, attitudes to immigration in the UK are strongly divided. The size of the social divide on this issue, however, is greatest in Germany.

Declining social cohesion is sometimes seen as an inevitable and lamentable side effect of modernization. Modern societies are more geographically mobile than in the past perhaps bringing about changes in the way people within neighbourhoods relate to each other. Growing economic inequality is thought to have brought about greater ‘social distance’ between groups. A separate but related issue is the perception that after the Brexit referendum British society is divided into two halves that have incompatible visions for the future of the country and little sympathy for each other. These two halves are sometimes characterised in economic terms (the ‘haves’ and ‘have nots’) and sometimes in terms of culture and values (e.g. ‘liberal elites’ versus those with more ‘local-traditional’ values<sup>1</sup>). The Brexit issue may well suggest that such divides are a particularly British phenomenon, though this is one of the assumptions we want to challenge in this briefing note. We aim to show how Britain is faring compared to its ‘peer’ countries, which are those which we consider to be similar based on their level of wealth and size: France, Germany, Japan, the USA and Sweden. To be sure, the USA is much larger than the UK, and Sweden is smaller, but these make important points of comparison, being countries that are held up as ideals of a well-run society (Sweden) or one with deep cracks and inequalities (the USA).

Social cohesion is a rather complex idea, and to explore how cohesive British society is, we will explore a range of indicators. We will think of social cohesion in three ways: first, in terms of the cohesive forces that bind us together, namely shared values, norms and identities. Second, we will consider divisive forces, such as public opinion on divisive issues such as immigration. Third, we explore the idea that British people simply opt-out of political and community life and live atomised lives with little recourse to other members of society. Throughout this note we will explore differences between people with low educational attainment and those with high. This is a central dimension of inequality with both economic and cultural implications, and one thought to be central on issues such as Brexit and attitudes to immigration.

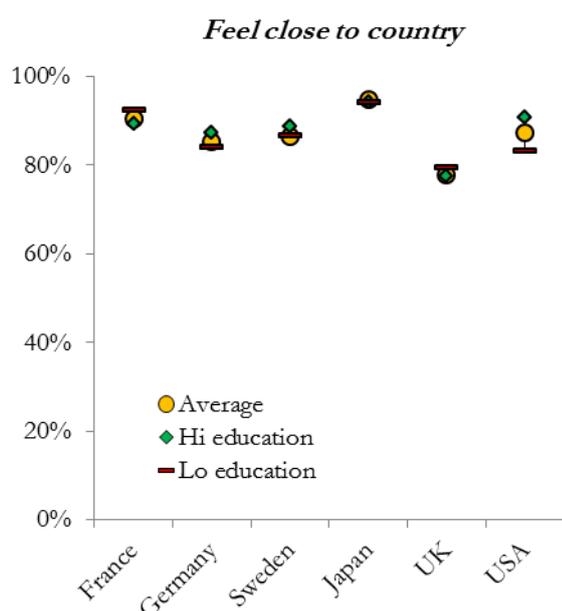
## Defining Social Cohesion

Metaphorically, people often write of a cohesive society as one where there is a ‘social glue’ or set of bonds which hold people together – and this conception is quite closely in line with the etymology of the word cohesion. Cohesion, according to the Oxford English Dictionary, derives from the word ‘cohere’ which in its basic sense mean to stick together, to unite or remain united in action (from the Latin *cohaerere* – to stick together). The heart of the concept of social cohesion is the idea that the members of the society feel that they belong to a common national community, feel morally obliged to follow the norms of the community, and feel some responsibility for the welfare of its other members.

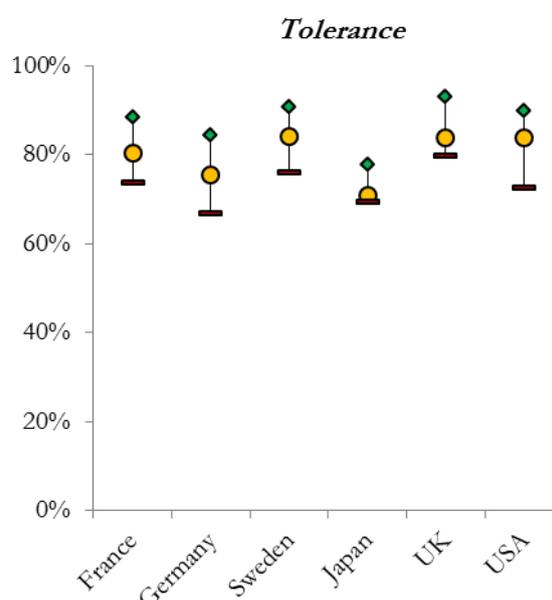
## Unifying forces

A shared sense of national identity, and a sense of belonging and attachment to that identity, can potentially be a unifying force, uniting people in a sense of being part of a single community. Nationalism can be a source of insider/outsider distinctions, too. However, our inclusion of this indicator of cohesion rests on the assumption that a shared national identity may promote attachment to civic norms and a sense of responsibility to one's fellow-citizens<sup>2</sup>. By this measure, the UK has rather lower levels of cohesion than in its peer countries, with 78% feeling close to Britain. British society, however, does not appear to be divided along educational lines by this measure: those with low qualifications are equally likely to feel close to Britain as those with high qualifications.

**Figure 1: Fewer people in the UK feel close to their country than elsewhere, but it is not divided**



**Figure 2: The UK has a rather average level of 'tolerance' and is similar to other countries in the extent of the division**



Tolerance is a value that is thought to be a unifying force in society (see e.g. the Casey Report<sup>3</sup>). Societies in which levels of tolerance are high are likely to be more cohesive places to live, and perhaps make for happier societies particularly for marginalised groups in society<sup>4</sup>. To measure tolerance we use a measure of whether people think it is important to understand the reasoning of others in order to be a good citizen. In the UK, 84% think this is important, a level very similar to France, the USA, and Sweden, and higher than Japan and Germany. By this measure, however, social divides are more evident than in the case of national belonging. A gap of 14 percentage points exists between the high and low educated in Britain. This is similar to the extent of division present in Sweden and France, and a little lower than Germany or the USA.

## Divisive forces

The Brexit vote showed that opinion was more or less evenly split on one fundamental political issue, and here we explore two different but connected attitudes: firstly on attitudes to redistributing wealth (Fig 3) and second, on attitudes to immigration (Fig 4). A split of opinion on these matters, like the Brexit vote, might be seen as an indication of division in people's vision of a good society. How people feel about redistribution of incomes also speaks directly of a sense of shared responsibility for one's fellow citizens and an acceptance that resources should be shared.

In all six countries those with lower educational attainment are more inclined to agree, across the board, that governments should redistribute incomes from the rich to the poor, probably reflecting the tendency of the

### Data and methods

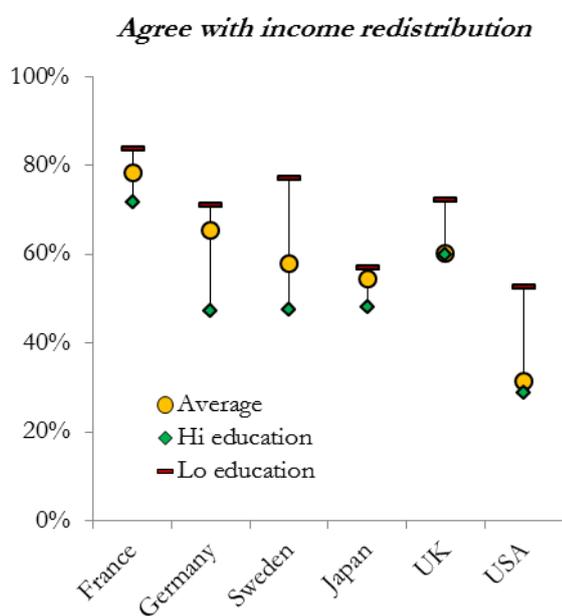
For much of the analysis we use data from the International Social Survey Programme (ISSP) from 2008 and 2014. We define high education as having tertiary education (such as a university degree) and low education as Lower Secondary qualifications or below. For voter turnout we use the Comparative Study of Electoral Systems (UK 2015; France and USA 2012; Germany and Japan 2013; Sweden 2014)

Education is somewhat confounded with age (as younger people have a far higher chance of having a degree, for example, than older people) and so all the estimates reported in this briefing note have been adjusted for age.

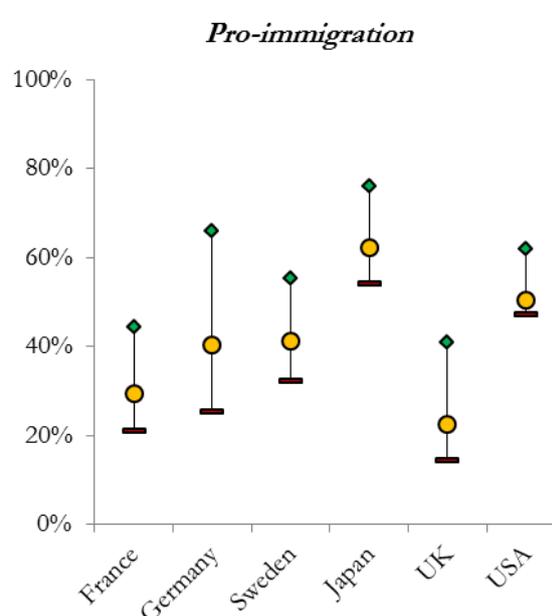
low-educated to have lower-paid and less secure employment. Here, in terms of the average, 60% of Britons agree that it is the responsibility of the government to reduce the differences in income between people with high incomes and those with low incomes. This is a similar level to Sweden and Germany, and substantially higher than the USA where just 31% agree with this principle. It may come as a surprise to see that Sweden has a large divide by education of 30 percentage points. The issue is less divisive in the UK where the gap is 12 points and it is Japan that seems the least divided in this regard.

In terms of attitudes to immigration (Fig 4) the UK stands out as being the least pro-immigration with an average of just 23% agreeing that immigration should stay the same or be increased. Japan is the most pro-immigration by this measure. Across all six countries attitudes to immigration are socially divided. This is most evident in the case of Germany (which has a gap of 41 percentage points) and least evident in the USA (15 points). The size of the divide in the UK, 27 percentage points, is similar to Sweden and France.

**Figure 3: On attitudes to redistribution of income from the rich to the poor, the UK is less divided than Sweden, Germany and the USA**



**Figure 4: The UK is the least pro-immigration of these six countries, but not more divided**



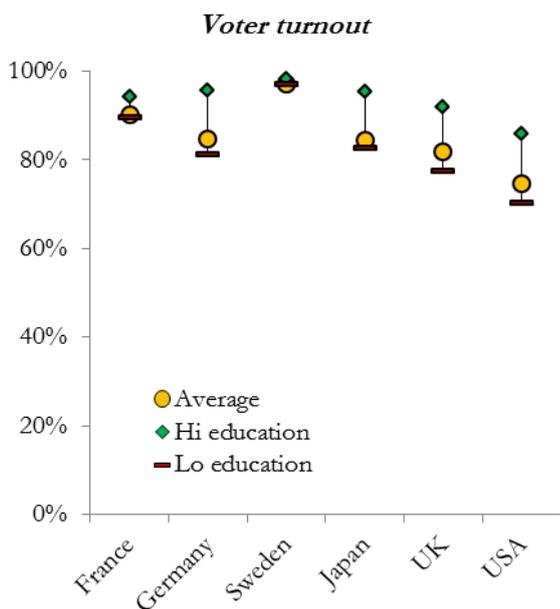
### Social and political disconnect

Another challenge to social cohesion may be that of declining vibrancy of civic life, declining trust in other citizens, and increasing disconnect from politics. Trust in others and active participation in collective projects has often been seen as a crucial ingredient of a cohesive society. Political scientists from Alexis de Toqueville in 1835 onwards have emphasized the importance of active participation in civic life for the health of democracy<sup>5</sup>.

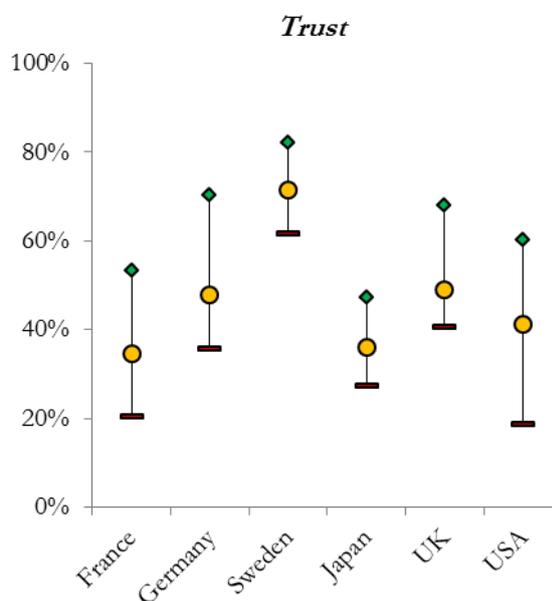
We find that voter turnout in the UK is rather low with a large difference of 15 percentage points between the high and low educated (Fig 5). The size of the gap is very similar in Germany and the USA. Sweden appears to be doing the best of the peer countries in this regard with high voter turnout regardless of education level. With our measure of trust, 49% of people in the UK trust their fellow citizens, a level very similar to

Germany and a little higher than Japan and France. The most divided of the peer countries is the USA with a gap in trust of 42 points between the high and low educated.

**Figure 5: Voter turnout in the UK is rather low, with large differences by education**



**Figure 6: In terms of trust, the UK looks rather similar to Germany. Both the USA and France are less trusting and are more divided**



## Conclusions

Exploring a range of indicators has revealed that there is no simple ordering of countries in terms of how cohesive they are. We expected Sweden to be an example of a cohesive society and indeed it does well on turnout and trust in particular suggesting that its citizens of all levels of education are actively engaged in social and political life. The USA also lives up to expectations in some regards: trust, voter turnout, and levels of agreement with redistribution of income are all low and divided. Feelings of belonging to the USA are also divided by education, more so than elsewhere. On the other hand, tolerance is high in the USA and does not appear to be divided on immigration to the same extent as the peer countries<sup>6</sup>. The UK is often in the middle of the pack by these indicators of cohesion and we look similar to Germany and France on several outcomes. Despite the pervasiveness of the idea of a ‘divided nation’ in the Brexit debate, our analysis suggests divides between liberal elites and more traditional non-elites are not a peculiarly British phenomenon.

**Lindsay Richards and Anthony Heath. February 2018**

**This briefing note draws on research for a forthcoming book on social progress in Britain, to be published in the autumn of 2018**

<sup>1</sup> See Goodhart D. (2017) *The road to somewhere: the populist revolt and the future of politics*, London: Hurst & Company. Hobolt SB. (2016) The Brexit vote: a divided nation, a divided continent. *Journal of European Public Policy* 23: 1259-1277.

<sup>2</sup> Miller D and Ali S. (2014) Testing the national identity argument. *European Political Science Review* 6: 237-259.

<sup>3</sup> Dame Louise Casey (2016) *The Casey Review: A review into opportunity and integration*

<https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/the-casey-review-a-review-into-opportunity-and-integration>

<sup>4</sup> Inglehart R, Foa R, Peterson C, et al. (2008) Development, freedom, and rising happiness: A global perspective (1981–2007). *Perspectives on Psychological Science* 3: 264-285.

<sup>5</sup> See Putnam RD. (2000) *Bowling alone: the collapse and revival of American community*, New York ; London: Simon & Schuster.

<sup>6</sup> This is a little surprising given the salience of immigration in Trump’s presidential campaign. Our data may not be picking up recent increases in salience, or the social divides may relate to particular types of immigrant, such as illegal Mexicans.