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The Political Integration of Ethnic Minorities in Britain

Anthony F. Heath | Stephen D. Fisher | Gemma Rosenblatt
David Sanders | Maria Sobolewska



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AFH, SDF, GR, DS, MS

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List of Abbreviations

AME	Average Marginal Effect
BES	British Election Survey
BME	Black and Minority Ethnic
CAPI	Computer assisted personal interviewing
EHRC	Equality and Human Rights Commission
EMBES	Ethnic Minority British Election Survey
ESRC	Economic and Social Research Council
IDEA	Institute for Democracy and Electoral Assistance
IMD	Index of Multiple Deprivation
ISCED	International Standard Classification of Education
LGBT	Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual and Transgender
LPBS	Labour Party Black Sections
LSOA	Lower level Super Output Area
MCDS	Managing Cultural Diversity Survey
MIPEX	Migrant Integration Policy Index
MP	Member of Parliament
NHS	National Health Service
ONS	Office for National Statistics
PSI	Policy Studies Institute
PSU	Primary sampling unit
UKIP	UK Independence Party

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Exclusion or Integration?

One of the most remarkable changes that Britain has seen over the last fifty years has been its transformation into a diverse multi-ethnic society, with growing numbers of citizens whose roots are to be found in the Caribbean, Africa, or South Asia. We estimate that around 8 per cent of the electorate is now from these origins, and in some areas of the country, especially London, the proportion is much higher. This is set to increase substantially given the youthful age profile of the minority population.

This transformation has presented many different opportunities and challenges to Britain. Not least, it challenges Britain to turn its liberal principles of equality of opportunity and fair play into reality. The first post-war migrants were actively recruited from new (a euphemism for non-white) Commonwealth countries by British employers and government in order to help fill vacancies in Britain's recovering economy and its new welfare state. But the welcome was not always a warm one, and Britain's record of prejudice, harassment, and discrimination is not one to be proud of. A great deal of evidence has shown that, even today, the children and grandchildren of these post-war migrants suffer varying degrees of exclusion and disadvantage in the British labour market. Ethnic minority unemployment rates have consistently been much higher than those of the white British majority group, and a long series of field experiments has demonstrated discrimination by employers.¹

In this book we set out to explore the extent and nature of the political rather than the economic exclusion and integration of Britain's growing ethnic minority population. Political exclusion can take the form of exclusion of ethnic minority members from becoming MPs or local councillors, or it can take the form of exclusion of ethnic minority interests and concerns from mainstream party politics. We will focus primarily on the latter form of exclusion, although we will also consider whether economic exclusion has political repercussions. Exclusion does not need to be a result of deliberate or conscious acts of discrimination by political elites. The law holds that indirect

discrimination, when standard practices and procedures unwittingly but disproportionately disadvantage certain groups, is illegal. Exactly the same would hold in politics. Practices for selecting candidates for Parliament or policies for inclusion in a manifesto may have evolved and become entrenched before Britain became a multi-ethnic society. But they may nonetheless disproportionately disadvantage Britain's ethnic minorities in comparison with the established ethnic majority.

Political integration can take many forms, and it is not our intention to set up any single ethical ideal of what should count as integration. However, it may be useful as a starting point to distinguish integration from its absence. In particular, we would argue that a situation analogous to the Troubles in Northern Ireland, where a significant proportion of the Catholic minority were hostile to or in active conflict with the British state, would count as lack of integration. A second potential case of lack of integration might be one where members of a particular minority disproportionately withdraw from any form of political engagement either in conventional politics (such as putting forward candidates for local councils or Parliament, or turning out to vote) or in protest politics.

In between these two contrasting cases of non-integration there may be various different forms of positive integration. One version would be engagement in conventional mainstream politics as individual citizens, similar to the white British majority group, turning out to vote in general elections and engaging in the standard repertoire of legal political action. Another version would be collective action by the minority, either in the form of pressure-group activity or the formation of separate (minority) parties aiming to advance minority interests. In this case, the minority might engage in British politics but in ways that are different from those practised by the majority group. Moreover, different minorities might well follow different models of political integration. It is not our purpose to establish a single one as the 'gold standard'.²

Our questions

Why might we think that there is any risk of either form of non-integration—withdrawal or conflict—occurring? One fear is that the same kinds of exclusion may occur in politics as have happened, and continue to happen, in the labour market. Scarcely any ethnic minority MPs were elected until 1979, and even after the 2010 general election, which saw a larger number of minority MPs (twenty-seven) elected than ever before, it was still the case that they made up only 4 per cent of the House of Commons, half the percentage of ethnic minorities in the electorate. Perhaps more importantly, as Donley

Studlar and Zig Layton-Henry have argued, ethnic minority political interests and concerns may be sidelined by the main political parties in Britain, and in effect may be excluded from the mainstream political agenda.³

Exclusion, whether from the labour market or politics, is inconsistent with the official rhetoric of Britain's leaders, who, like the great majority of British citizens, espouse liberal principles of equality of opportunity. Political exclusion also has worrying implications for the health and legitimacy of democracy, since it means that the voices and viewpoints of certain electors will not be heard in the political process. At its worst it has led to the 'tyranny of the majority', where a majority systematically excludes a minority from political influence but justifies their exclusion by majoritarian principles. Historically, Northern Ireland might well be regarded as an example, where it took three decades of Troubles to lead to the establishment of power-sharing arrangements.

There are, to be sure, many differences between the historical situation in Northern Ireland (or in other divided states that have been torn apart by ethnic conflict) and that facing post-war migrants and their descendants. In the case of migrants, the more usual current concern is with their low political participation. In many countries, migrants (and perhaps their children) appear to exhibit particularly low levels of turnout in elections and low levels of engagement with the mainstream parties; and in Britain too there has been some evidence in the past that black electors have low levels of turnout.⁴ The eminent US political scientist Sidney Verba and his colleagues have argued that low participation by minorities matters, since distinctive concerns of minorities will be heard less in the political arena than will others' concerns, and that this constitutes 'a violation of the principle of equal protection of interests' (1993, p. 455). They go on to argue that any such violation rests upon two fundamental criteria, namely whether minority interests and preferences differ from those of the majority, and whether abstention is the product of free and voluntary choice. To be sure, some commentators have suggested that minorities do not actually have any distinct interests and policy preferences but simply share the same political agenda as the wider British public. If this really does hold true, then the issue of exclusion of their political interests (if not of their candidates) does not arise. We clearly need to examine this.

Some key questions for us are:

Do minorities have distinct political concerns and interests that are different from those of the majority?

If so, are minorities excluded from British politics in the sense that these distinctive political interests and concerns are ignored or sidelined by the mainstream political parties?

In turn, does any such exclusion lead to withdrawal and lack of engagement or participation on the one hand, or to alienation, discontent, and protest on the other?

While our starting point is a fear that lack of political integration might be a consequence of the same kind of exclusion that has already been demonstrated in the labour market, we have to recognize that exclusion is not the only process that might be at work in generating withdrawal or alienation. As Sidney Verba's argument implies, minorities might freely choose not to participate. While the notion of a free choice is a rather slippery one, we can readily imagine a number of reasons why recent migrants might quite reasonably choose not to participate in British politics. They might, for example, see themselves as temporary sojourners who plan to return to their origin countries, and therefore do not care to take out British citizenship. Even if they plan to settle in Britain, they might have family and friends remaining abroad, perhaps in politically unstable situations, and they might choose to concentrate their energies on the politics of their origin country rather than on less pressing British political controversies.

While orientations towards the home country might lead to lack of interest in British politics and voluntary withdrawal from active participation, some public figures have raised less benign worries. There have, for example, been some suggestions in the recent debates about social cohesion and multiculturalism in Britain that minorities might choose to remain within separate ethnic communities, and that this might in turn have adverse implications for political integration. Social segregation was a major theme in the Cantle report of 2001 on the disturbances in Oldham, Burnley, and Bradford, and the issue of the extent to which minorities lead separate lives from the white British majority has been a recurring theme in the debates over multiculturalism.⁵ The Cantle report in particular focused on the extent of social segregation in these cities, and the implications for conflict and disorder.

In this kind of account, disorder and support for extremism is seen to grow out of social and cultural segregation, with minorities choosing or being encouraged to live separate lives and to maintain values, attitudes, and identities that are at odds with those of the British mainstream. As the eminent political theorist Brian Barry argued, 'a situation where groups live in parallel universes is not one well calculated to advance mutual understanding or encourage the cultivation of habits of co-operation or sentiments of trust' (Barry 2001, p. 88). This kind of account focuses particularly on Muslim groups, tending to ignore the various black groups who have long been known to have high levels of intermarriage with white British partners and high levels of social and residential integration.

To be fair, the Cantle report emphasized repeatedly that the formation of separate communities might not be a simple matter of choice but might also

reflect exclusionary practices in the housing market and constraints imposed by the wider society. The report also emphasized the importance of grievances over economic deprivation and disadvantage as a powerful ingredient in the sense of alienation among some ethnic communities. Cantle's segregation thesis should not be seen as in any way inconsistent with the exclusion thesis. Nevertheless, the main thrust of the Cantle report and its recommendations is that bridges need to be constructed between the parallel communities in order to promote understanding and cohesion.

A quite different formulation, however, might see segregation as an (indirect) source of political integration rather than an obstacle. Rahsaan Maxwell, for example, has claimed that social concentration may facilitate positive economic and political outcomes, since the strong social ties within separate communities can provide an effective basis for group organization in pursuit of common ethnic interests. This in turn can provide incentives for the established party elites to respond to minority concerns, and thus ensure that they are incorporated into the mainstream political agenda.⁶ A related stream of work has suggested that voter numbers are higher in socially and residentially concentrated ethnic communities. Cohesive ethnic communities might therefore foster rather than hinder political integration by encouraging members to participate in mainstream politics, and ensuring that their voices are heard.⁷

Key questions arising from these perspectives are thus:

To what extent do minorities have positive orientations towards and interest in mainstream British politics?

Can lack of engagement with British politics be explained by minorities' focus on politics in their countries of origin?

Do minorities lead separate social lives, apart from the mainstream?

If so, do separate lives, perhaps when accompanied by grievances over deprivation, lead to alienation and disaffection?

Or do cohesive ethnic communities provide collective resources fostering participation and engagement with mainstream politics?

These alternative perspectives all implicitly assume that, in one way or another, the ethnic minority experience of life in Britain has distinctive features, whether in terms of discrimination and exclusion, orientations to the home country, or separate social lives, which set them apart from other sections of British society. An alternative perspective emphasizes the commonalities. Minorities will surely have many of the same political concerns as fellow citizens from the majority group—for example, over the parlous state of the economy, high levels of unemployment, or cuts in public spending. Many, whether brought up in Commonwealth countries or, in the case of second-generation children of migrants, brought up and educated in British

schools, may share the same commitment to democratic values and norms of political engagement as other Britons—or, indeed, they may share the same cynicism and distrust of politicians that has become a widespread feature of young people in modern Western democracies.

Minorities might also be internally divided, for example by socio-economic position, in just the same way as the majority group is divided. Some of the sources of political participation and engagement, and some of the dividing lines in party preferences, might thus be very similar among minorities and the majority. Low minority rates of participation, or high levels of support for the Labour Party, might be explained by the same kinds of socio-economic interests and resources that explain participation and partisanship among the white British. Or might ethnicity trump class?

On this account we might expect to find similarities in minority- and majority-group patterns of engagement, particularly among those in similar socio-economic positions. This might be even more marked in later generations. Interest in the politics of the homeland, for example, might be stronger among recent arrivals from overseas and much weaker among later generations educated or born in Britain. Similarly, the most recent arrivals may not be so fluent in the English language, and may have little choice but to remain within the ethnic enclave. But the second generation will have acquired greater fluency, will be more likely to hold British citizenship, will have had greater opportunities for mixing with white British counterparts, and might hence exhibit more typically British patterns of engagement.

British studies, both official government and academic studies, have largely ignored issues of generational change. This may perhaps reflect the fact that immigration is a relatively recent phenomenon in Britain compared with the classic countries of immigration such as Australia, Canada, and the USA, where studies of generational change are standard. It may also reflect British antipathy towards US theories of generational assimilation, and the assumption in some older US accounts that minorities *ought* to assimilate (although many US scholars would dispute the claim that their theories imply any particular normative stances).⁸

We do not ourselves believe that assimilation is in any sense an ideal, just as we do not accept that there is any single ideal model of political integration. But it must at the very least be an important empirical question as to whether there are generational changes in patterns of political integration, and whether the first generation or recent arrivals from overseas have distinctive patterns of political orientations, identity, and behaviour, while the second and later generations look more like their white British peers.

Moreover, generational change might in principle move in very different directions, depending on the focus of our attention. For example, drawing on experience from other countries, we might expect to find that participation

and engagement in British politics was particularly low among recent arrivals, for reasons we have already sketched, while in the second generation we might see convergence with British levels of engagement. In contrast, the second generation might actually feel more strongly about discrimination and unfair treatment, and thus become more alienated or more radical than migrants. For example, the first (migrant) generation may tend to compare themselves with their compatriots who did not migrate rather than with the British, with whom they may have little contact or of whom they may have little knowledge. In contrast, the second generation, born and educated in Britain, may compare themselves with their white British peers, and may well expect to be treated in the same way and have the same opportunities in life. The frame of reference, and the comparisons made, may thus change between generations, and the new frame of reference may actually lead the second generation to feel more discontented, as they will be more aware of the exclusion and inequality of opportunity that they face.

We therefore have further questions to address:

In what respects do minorities and the majority share common political concerns that cut across ethnic divisions?

To what extent are minorities, like the majority, internally divided by socio-economic interests; or does ethnicity 'trump' class?

Do the second and later generations converge with British patterns of political engagement and participation?

Or do later generations of ethnic minorities come to feel more alienated and/or disengaged as they become more aware of the exclusion that they experience?

The Ethnic Minority British Election survey

To answer our questions, we draw on a major new survey (funded by the ESRC) conducted immediately after the 2010 general election.⁹ The aim of the survey was to provide a comprehensive resource covering the social and political attitudes, the electoral behaviour, and political integration, broadly defined, of the major established ethnic minorities in Britain—namely people of Indian, Pakistani, Bangladeshi, black Caribbean, and black African background. We reluctantly decided to exclude people of Chinese background, as this is a rather small and geographically scattered group that we would not have been able to sample in a cost-effective manner. We also excluded the larger numbers of recently arrived white minorities from the European Union. Few of these would have been eligible to vote in a general election, and they also have much higher rates of return migration to their origin countries than do the established minorities on whom we focus.¹⁰

Our survey was both large-scale (at least by the standards of academic studies) and rigorous, conducted to the highest standards of representative sampling and fieldwork. It thus gives us an authoritative basis for describing and understanding ethnic minority integration. It is the first study of this kind since 1997, when we conducted a smaller-scale exercise under Shamit Saggar's leadership. As with the 1997 exercise, our survey was closely integrated with the main British Election Survey, and we are thus able for many questions, although unfortunately not all, to compare the responses of our ethnic minority respondents with those of the white British.

The survey inevitably has its limitations. While it is national in coverage, it does not allow us to explore local politics, which is a major arena for minority engagement. And while it is relatively large, with 2,787 respondents (1,339 men and 1,448 women), it is not nearly large enough to investigate rare phenomena such as engagement in forms of extremist political behaviour. In any event, we very much doubt whether a survey of this kind is a sensible vehicle for investigating extremism, since extremists will almost certainly refuse to take part or to answer questions honestly. So while we are interested in questions about minority disaffection and protest, we must emphasize that this is quite different from extremism.

Our main findings

In Chapter 2, we begin by introducing our main ethnic groups. We provide the historical background to the migration of the five groups, and give some essential statistics about the socio-economic profile of each group. An important point that emerges from this chapter is the diversity both between and within each of the main ethnic groups, especially the Indian and most of all the black African groups (both in terms of ethno-religious differences and socio-economic situation). It would be quite wrong to think of the five main ethnic groups on which the book focuses as monolithic. The chapter also shows some major ways in which the groups differ across generations, with the second generation typically showing higher levels of British identity and higher levels of social integration than the first. The chapter also casts considerable doubt on the claim that, even in the first generation, minorities lead separate or parallel lives.

Chapter 3 starts by focusing on the orientations of the first generation who migrated to Britain as adults. It confirms that adult migrants do show quite high levels of interest in the politics of their homeland, while their interest in and knowledge of British politics is rather lower than that of the British majority group. But interest in homeland and British politics are not either/or alternatives. Instead, we find that they often go together, and that

membership of ethnic organizations often goes with increased interest in politics generally. Moreover, there is a major decline across generations in levels of interest in homeland politics, and a convergence towards British patterns. There is no sign that particular minorities, for example Muslim groups, are more resistant to change than others.

We also find that the first generation is highly committed to the duty to vote, even more so than the typical British citizen, although again we find some convergence with British norms across generations, albeit from the opposite direction. This is a very positive start to our story.

Chapter 4 asks whether there is a distinct ethnic agenda (or distinctive agendas), while Chapter 5 looks at the extent to which any such agenda is incorporated into mainstream politics. First, and unsurprisingly, we find that minorities share many of the concerns of white British voters, especially on issues like the state of the economy. Secondly, however, even on the mainstream agenda, minorities on average differ from the majority in the priority that they assign to various issues. For example, minorities assign a greater priority to unemployment, but are less concerned to maintain government spending; are somewhat more concerned to protect the rights of the accused and to help asylum-seekers; and are on average more supportive of the war in Afghanistan. These majority/minority differences on the mainstream issues should not, however, be taken to represent a fundamentally distinct ethnic agenda. There are very substantial differences between minorities on some of the issues, especially on asylum (on which the black African groups tend to be most supportive) and Afghanistan (where Muslim groups tend to be most opposed). These differences between minorities are sometimes much larger than those between the majority and the minority overall, with some minorities being more 'progressive' and some much less 'progressive' than the majority.

However, there is a distinct and dramatic majority/minority difference on the issue of securing equal opportunities for ethnic minorities and redress for racial discrimination. This is an issue that unites all the different minorities, but on which their views are not shared by their white British fellow-citizens, raising the crucial question of whether this central minority concern is excluded from the mainstream political agenda.

Chapter 5 sets out to determine how far this concern is represented by the major political parties, and also asks about minorities' perceptions of the main parties' commitment to their concerns. The key finding is that, despite the increasing number of ethnic minority candidates, neither the Labour nor Conservative manifestos for the 2010 general election made any explicit new commitments for redressing ethnic inequalities or addressing racial discrimination. There seems to be something of a mismatch between the increasing number of ethnic minority MPs and a declining attention to the redress of