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Chapter on 'Ethnic Diversity' for *The Routledge Handbook of British Politics and Society* (2020)

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Introduction

In this chapter, we first provide an outline of how ethnic diversity affects political participation in Britain. This includes the history of academic writing on this topic as well as the most recent practical developments. We focus especially on how ethnicity related barriers hinder political participation, before concluding that the political participation of ethnic and racial minorities is related to their political rights and the scale of their political representation. Another way of putting this is to say that any serious discussion of ethnic diversity in politics needs to consider the ways in which 'the historical domination of some groups has left a trail of barriers and prejudices that makes it difficult for historically disadvantaged groups to participate effectively in the political process' (Kymlicka, 1995: 141).

Ethnicity and Politics in Britain

Ethnicity is a term that describes the real or imagined features of group membership, typically in terms of one or other combination of language, collective memory, culture, ritual, dress and religion, amongst other features (Meer 2014). Self-description is central to ethnicity and there are a number of different group identities one could look at when examining 'ethnic diversity' in British politics. Our focus in this chapter, like that of the prevailing literature, is on those considered to be racial and/or ethnic minorities and how they feature in British political systems. One particular element of the criteria for ethnic boundaries identified by Modood (2005) is that of 'strategy' as ethnic groups who are the subject of particular experiences may mobilise and challenge their disadvantage. In this sense, we can certainly consider ethnic minorities in Britain as collectives that have mobilised for recognition, rights and equal representation. Indeed, political participation in Britain is profoundly affected by ethnic and racial dynamics which in turn are related to both political rights (in particular the

right to vote) and the scale of their representation (often judged by the number of representatives in elected settings who are from a minority background).

In this regard, one of the things that historically set Britain apart from many of its European neighbours was the fact that migrants from the former colonies already enjoyed voting rights as Commonwealth citizens. Although these rights have been somewhat restricted, there can be no doubt that this ability to vote and participate in the political life of the country facilitated the involvement of ethnic minorities in formal politics. These same rights also enabled Black and Minority Ethnic (BME) candidates to stand for election. We can point to a number of pioneering migrants who came to Britain in the post-war period and achieved notable 'firsts' such as Bernie Grant (1944-2000) who, after being leader of Haringey Council, became one of the first Black BME MPs in the post-war period.

Despite these conditions, it could be argued that for a long time, British politics did not come close to reflecting the ethnic diversity of the British electorate. A breakthrough for BME MPs came in 1987 with the election of Diane Abbott, Paul Boateng, Keith Vaz and the aforementioned Bernie Grant. Yet at subsequent general elections, the number of BME representatives in the House of Commons increased very slowly. For example, after the 2001 general election there were still just 12 BME MPs (equivalent to less than 2 per cent of the total) despite the census taken that same year indicating that 9 per cent of the UK population was non-white. The situation was improved only marginally in 2005 with the election of 15 MPs from ethnic minorities. In 2008, the House of Commons agreed to establish a committee to "consider, and make recommendations for rectifying, the disparity between the representation of women, ethnic minorities and disabled people in the House of Commons and their representation in the UK population at large". One key recommendation was that 'following the 2010 general election all political parties represented at Westminster should publish a statement setting out the current proportion of their Parliamentary party which is: female; from a BME community; and/or identifies as a disabled person. The statement should also set out what proportion of the Parliamentary party the national party would like to see appearing in each of these categories in December 2015 and December 2020' (House of Commons 2010). These statements were not produced and the debate over the necessity for introducing BME shortlists rumbled on (Hampshire 2012).

The 2010 election did represent something of a watershed though, as the overall number of ethnic minority MPs rose to 27, helped by the election of 11 BME Conservative MPs. It is worth pointing out that, until 2010, nearly all ethnic minority MPs had represented the Labour Party. A census of local councillors in England around this time showed that 4 per cent came from an ethnic minority background, with the highest representation in London, where 15 per cent of councillors were non-white (Wood and Cracknell 2013). Another significant shift occurred in 2015 with the election of 41 BME MPs and then, following the general election of 2017, there were 52 MPs from non-white backgrounds representing 8 per cent of the total compared to around 14 per cent of the whole UK population from a non-white background (Audickas and Cracknell 2018). By 2018 the number of BME local councillors in England was estimated at 14%, thus matching the figure of non-white people in the 2011 census (Operation Black Vote 2019). The 2019 general election resulted in an additional 13 non-white MPs bringing the total to 65 and thus 10% of the total. However, this diversity only extends to those who represents seats in England as there are currently no BME MPs in Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland. In 2020 both the Scottish Parliament and Welsh Assembly have just two BME representatives and in the House of Lords it is estimated that there are 44 members which would represent 5.5 per cent (Audickas and Apostolova 2017). The importance of ethnic diversity in British politics cannot, however, be reduced to representation in the legislature. Likewise, British politics is about more than just elections and voting.

Ethnic diversity and political participation in Britain

The Representation of the People Act 1918 laid the ground to eventually extend the franchise to 'British subjects' which at the time included the people of Ireland – then part of the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Ireland – and all other parts of the British Empire. During decolonisation, until they acquired one or other of the national citizenships of newly post-colonial countries, formerly British subjects retained their British status which conferred a right to the franchise (see Lester, 2008). This was enshrined in the 1948 British Nationality Act which also granted freedom of movement to all formerly or presently dependent, and now Commonwealth, territories (regardless of whether their passports were issued by independent or colonial states) by creating the status of 'Citizenship of the United Kingdom and Colonies' (CUKC). Although most of Ireland and the majority of the colonies became independent nations, their citizens retained the right to vote in British elections if they lived

in the UK. The 1948 Nationality Act thus gave those living in Commonwealth countries the right to British citizenship and therefore the right of entry and settlement on the British mainland.

Commonwealth migrants came to Britain in response to labour shortages during the 1950s and 1960s, followed by a second wave of immigration during the 1970s. Life was hard for many of these migrants as they were often obliged to work unsociable hours for rates of pay and conditions that were often less favourable than those of their native British counterparts. Even if they were unionised and had been in their jobs longer than others, they were often the first to be dismissed in times of redundancies (Wrench 2000). The first forms of political participation were various worker's campaigns which included organisations such as the Indian Workers Association (Josephides 1991). The necessity of forming such 'ethnic' trade unions was due to the lack of support from the British trade union movement. Indeed, as Satnam Virdee points out, trade unions consistently 'failed to counter the racist views and actions of some of their members' (Virdee 2000: 133). Labour institutions, in other words, were too often acting in the interests of the *white* working class. From the 1960s onwards, migrant workers were involved in a number of 'immigrant strikes' such as the pioneering industrial action of 1965 at the Red Scar Mill in Preston. This was followed by a series of other emblematic strikes such as those at the Coneygre Foundry in Tipton (1967-8), Mansfield Hosiery Mills in Loughborough (1972-3), Imperial Typewriters in Leicester (1974) and the Grunwick film processing in Willesden (1976-1977). The Grunwick dispute, involving many South Asian women (dubbed 'strikers in saris') ended in defeat for the strikers but was seen as a crucial moment in terms of defending the rights of migrant workers (Peace 2015b).

During the 1970s, new forms of activism also developed outside the workplace in response to increasingly restrictive government immigration policy and racism in British society. A number of racist murders gave impetus to an important anti-racist movement that involved many second-generation Afro-Caribbean and South Asian youths. Involvement in struggles inside and outside the workplace was an important introduction to left-wing activism and would shape the political engagements of many ethnic minorities in later years. Garbaye (2005: 119) has noted, for example, how after involvement in industrial disputes, 'many Pakistanis moved to activities as shop stewards in a union at their workplace, which in turn shaped their approach to politics, with activism in the Labour Party an almost natural step for

many.’ As Lent (2001) has observed, a number of activists who were involved in social movements in the 1970s decided to join the Labour party in the late 1970s and early 1980s. This was facilitated by decline in support for these movements, disputes between factions, the rise of the Labour Left and the pragmatic desire to join a party which had the power (at least in local government) to actually implement progressive policies. The Labour Party played an important role in the political socialisation of ethnic minorities in Britain. From the 1970s onwards, the party was the natural ally of ethnic minority concerns, particularly campaigns against racism. This does not merely refer to support from the party in terms of legislation seen as favourable to minorities, but also included grass roots solidarity on local or indeed national campaigns from Labour supporters. The Labour Party built on its early success in attracting a minority vote by developing a distinct ethnic electorate and promoting ethnic minority elites. The relation between Labour and this electorate became so entrenched that, come election time, these voters were addressed ‘on the premise that they were primarily concerned with issues specific to their non-white character’ (Garbaye 2005: 53).

Labour’s dominance in attracting ethnic minority voters prompted a reaction from the Conservative Party, and during the 1983 general election it made its first attempt to capture the ethnic vote with a poster campaign featuring images of Black and South Asian men with the claim that ‘Labour Says He’s Black - Tories Say He’s British’. A national exit poll after this election showed that the majority of ethnic minorities had still supported Labour (57 per cent), with just 24 per cent voting Conservative (Anwar, 1986). In fact, Labour remained the dominant party in relation to BME voters, leading Anthony Messina (1989: 151) to conclude that ‘Labour is the party of, if not unambiguously for, non-whites.’ It has been argued that ‘the legacy of these efforts to advance black interests has been the evolution of community norms and sentiments in favour of the Labour Party...community norms (and community activists) may have channelled black feelings of exclusion and disaffection away from mobilization in the streets and into electoral politics’ (Heath *et al* 2013: 205). The result of this has been an enduring loyalty to the Labour Party among ethnic minority voters.

Ethnic minorities were also influential *inside* the Labour Party, exemplified by the 10-year ‘Black Sections’ movement that commenced in 1983 and was the most important campaign for representation and self-organisation within the party. As Dianne Abbot herself said: ‘We created a climate where...all the constituencies that in 1987 elected Black MPs had Black sections because it was the Black sections inside the local parties that made common causes

with Black groups outside and said we want a Black MP in Hackney, Tottenham, and Brixton and so on' (interview with Meer, 2009). There is no doubt that this campaign led to the election of the BME Labour MPs in 1987 but it was also a political feat to pull off 'the construction of a black British political identity that does not ignore the lived reality of cultural difference but does not succumb to it either...It has never been possible to deliver the black vote in Britain in the sense that it has in the USA. Yet Black Sections have implied that it is possible, or at least the black vote might be lost if the Labour Party did not take their demands more seriously' (Jeffers 1991: 54).

The first-past-the-post electoral system made it essential for Labour to take such demands seriously, since ethnic minorities were often concentrated in specific (urban) constituencies and could thus play a vital role in winning individual seats. The same factors were important at the local level, where councillors are elected to specific wards which may have a significant proportion of voters from a particular ethnic background. This situation made certain communities 'king-makers' in local elections in Britain. The 1991 Census, the first to include a question on ethnicity, showed that 100 local wards had an ethnic minority population of over 43 per cent. Unsurprisingly, during the 1990s there was a huge increase in the number of ethnic minorities elected to local government.

In 1996 there were an estimated 600 councillors from a BME background in Britain (3 per cent of the total), but in those cities with a large BME population the representation on local councils was proportionate to their percentage in the local population (Garbaye 2005: 7). As of 2018, there are 7,306 BME councillors with local authorities such as Birmingham, Slough and Bradford, as well as many of the London boroughs, achieving the best levels of representation with most BME councillors still disproportionately affiliated with the Labour Party at 84.2 % (Operation Black Vote 2019). As Anwar (2001: 534) noted, it is 'the location, the concentration and the number of ethnic minorities in certain areas [that] make them statistically important in the political process. However, it must be stressed that it is not only the number of ethnic minorities in certain areas which makes them electorally important but also whether they actively take part in the process through registration on the electoral register, and, if they are on the register, whether they come out to vote and what their voting patterns are' .

Ethnicity and the Franchise

The formal political participation of ethnic minorities by means of voting is, inevitably, premised upon their levels of electoral registration. Yet this is not an easy figure to ascertain. As Fieldhouse and Cutts (2008: 336) have noted, ‘obtaining reliable registration rates can be a difficult and imprecise process given uncertainty about the size of the eligible voting age population (because of census under coverage, temporary residency of foreign nationals, etc.)’. An obvious methodological implication of these contingent factors for our understanding is that if a section of the population is under-represented on the electoral register, the level of turnout will appear artificially high, and not necessarily offer the most reliable account of formal political participation. In some countries, such as Australia, it is a legal requirement both to be registered to vote and to exercise your franchise by casting your ballot during a general election. In contrast, while it is a legal requirement to be registered to vote if you are a resident British citizen, of whichever category, individuals have only been prosecuted for actively avoiding electoral registration in order to commit fraud (local authorities, instead of a national body, have responsibility for compiling and updating individual electoral registers: see Chapter 6, above).

How, then, are levels of electoral registration affected by ethnicity dynamics? First, it is widely accepted that young people are less likely to be registered to vote than older people, and because the age profile of minority communities is often substantially lower than those of majority groups, some ethnic minority communities are disproportionately affected (Purdam et al., 2002). Registration rates are lower among ethnic minorities and according to the latest figures from the Electoral Commission, the completeness of local government registers among those from Asian and Black ethnic backgrounds is 76% and 75% respectively. Completeness stands at 69% among those from mixed backgrounds, compared with 84% from a white ethnic background (Electoral Commission 2019). It was reported in November 2019 that one in four black, Asian and minority ethnic (BAME) citizens were not registered to vote (Woolley 2019) and evidence suggests that fewer ethnic minority women register to vote than men. Other factors affecting ethnic minority registration, not only disproportionately in relation to the wider population but also individually, include an unfamiliarity with institutions and procedures or a ‘newness’, language difficulties, concerns over anonymity and confidentiality, fear of harassment, fear of officialdom, administrative inefficiency and anxieties over residence status. There is also the issue of housing tenure, since disproportionately high levels of some ethnic and racial minorities reside in social or

rented housing which can lead to frequent movement and thus a requirement to continually re-register. Given the transitory nature of contemporary migration flows, it can only be assumed that these patterns of residence are being replicated, although we are yet to generate large-scale meaningful data on this (see Favell, 2008).

The issue of voter registration and turnout was to become a dominant theme in the electoral participation of ethnic minorities. In 1996 Operation Black Vote (OBV) was founded with the aim of increasing registration and turnout among BME electors as well as promoting their political representation. The people least likely to vote in the UK were from communities of Black Caribbean and Black African heritage and all previous research had shown that people of Black African heritage had one of the lowest levels of registration. Black registration and turnout levels are lower than those of the white population, but Asian levels were similar or higher. The highest levels of turnout could be found among certain Asian communities and the lowest among communities of Black African and Caribbean heritage. Recent data suggest that among those who are registered, minority turnout rates are not that different from the majority but non-registration among minorities is still double that among white British (Heath *et al* 2013). This continued problem with registration means that the work of organisations like OBV is still important and it is also of concern to note that there is a gap in African/Caribbean representation in local government as even in areas with significant black populations, the number of African/Caribbean councillors is relatively low (Operation Black Vote 2019).

The state of play (developments in the subject)

The first studies into ethnic minorities and British politics were overwhelmingly focused on issues of 'race relations' and the reactions of the ethnic majority to the presence of non-white citizens (Deakin 1965, Rose 1969). Research into the participation of ethnic minorities in British politics did not appear until the 1970s and owes much to the pioneering work of Muhammad Anwar who started his research by firstly monitoring the participation of South Asians in Rochdale in the parliamentary by-election of 1972 and then participation by all ethnic minorities during the 1974 general election (Anwar and Kohler 1975). Indeed, this election prompted increased interest in how the issue of race was beginning to affect British politics, as exemplified by the volume edited by Ivor Crewe (1975). Following the 1979

election, Anwar published another study into the participation of ethnic minorities for the Commission for Racial Equality (Anwar 1980). Moving into the 1980s, interest in the topic began to grow even though some lamented the dominance of sociological studies about non-white ethnic minorities and 'the reluctance of political scientists to engage in extensive work on the politics of race in Britain' (Layton-Henry and Rich 1986: 2). This decade nevertheless saw the publication of a number of books which examined the effect on British politics of ethnic minorities and questions of 'race', particularly at the local level (Layton-Henry 1984, Ben-Tovim *et al* 1986). This was aided by the establishment of the Centre for Research in Ethnic Relations (CRER) at the University of Warwick in 1984.¹ A number of scholars passed through this centre including Zig Layton-Henry, Paul Rich, John Solomos, Harry Goulbourne and Muhammad Anwar whose publication *Race and politics: Ethnic Minorities and the British Political System* (Anwar 1986) can be considered a landmark in the field. At this time some small surveys were also being developed to understand ethnic minority policy preferences, such as that conducted by Donley Studlar (1986) who used poll data on the views of Afro-Caribbean and South Asian voters in Britain and demonstrated that the attitudes of ethnic minority voters were stable and very similar to those of the white majority, thus concluding that there was no such thing as a distinctive non-white political agenda. This was followed by other important studies by Anthony Messina (1989), Harry Goulbourne (1990) and the edited collection by Ball and Solomos (1990).

The 1990s saw a proliferation of studies of ethnic minority political participation. In particular, the work of Shamit Saggar (1991) and Andrew Geddes (1996) was influential. The first major survey of ethnic minority participation in a general election was that led by Shamit Saggar in 1997. The Ethnic Minority Survey was a subset of the British Election Survey and included 705 respondents with an ethnic boost generated by a random screening survey. The aims of this survey were (1) to measure the extent to which ethnic minority voters were integrated into the electoral process, (2) to evaluate, after taking into account social background, whether members of the main ethnic minorities voted differently from each other and from their white counterparts, (3) to examine whether the political attitudes of ethnic minority voters differed significantly from those of white voters, and (4) to explore whether members of ethnic minorities were influenced by different considerations than their

¹ CRER was originally founded at Bristol University in 1970, moved to Aston University in 1978 and finally to the University of Warwick in 1984. It was closed in 2011.

white counterparts in deciding how to vote, and to evaluate in particular the importance of issues of race and immigration in voting behaviour of ethnic minority and white voters.

The results of the survey demonstrated solid support for the Labour Party among minorities; among Afro-Caribbeans this reached the remarkable level 93.5 per cent (Saggar 2000). By the end of the 1990s and start of the 2000s, the study of ethnic minorities in British politics was becoming more mainstream and was joined by similar studies in Europe, notably the work of Meindert Fennema and Jean Tillie on the Netherlands, Ruud Koopmans on Germany and Marco Martiniello on Belgium. Indeed, while much work on ethnic minorities and politics in Britain was previously conducted in isolation, the early 2000s saw a number of cross-country comparisons that included Britain (Koopmans and Statham 2000, Koopmans *et al* 2005, Garbaye 2005). This was also the period when the focus of research shifted somewhat from ethnic minorities in general to Muslims in particular, a result of prominent political debates about multiculturalism that followed the urban disturbances of 2001 (Bagguley and Hussain 2008). A noticeable development in the subject area over the last ten years is an increasing focus on specific sub-groups within BME communities rather than treating them as a homogenous actor, although studies of BME parliamentarians have bucked this trend (Saalfeld and Kyriakopoulou 2010, Saalfeld 2011, Saalfeld and Bischof 2012).

The most important survey in recent times that examines the participation of ethnic minorities in British politics is the Ethnic Minority British Election Survey (EMBES) carried out in 2010 alongside the main British Election Survey. Analysis of this data by Heath *et al* (2013: 12) found, across the generations, ‘convergence with prevalent British patterns of political engagement, electoral and non-electoral participation...no widespread departures from political integration either in the form of withdrawal and disengagement or of protest and dissent’. The EMBES data revealed a number of interesting insights, including the fact that ethnic minorities are in general less supportive of government spending and therefore apparently less left-wing than their greater support for Labour would imply. Nevertheless, Labour was still viewed as the party that was most concerned with the interests of ethnic minorities; ethnic minority allegiance to the Labour Party was double that found among white British respondents and minorities were less likely to abstain or defect from Labour. EMBES data have also been deployed to examine predictors of ethnic minority turnout and party choice (Heath *et al* 2011), the relationship between party campaigning, individual mobilisation and ethnic population density (Sobolewska *et al*, 2013), the calculus of party

choice among ethnic minorities (Sanders *et al* 2014a) and the relationship between religious attendance and political participation of ethnic minorities (Sobolewska *et al*, 2015). The EMBES data pointed to important variations in patterns of democratic engagement across different ethnic-minority groups and across generations (Sanders *et al*, 2014b). There is now a rich literature on engagement among ethnic minority young people (O'Toole and Gayle, 2013, Martin and Mellon, 2019). Other studies have pointed to differences in turnout among religious minorities (Fieldhouse and Cutts 2008a) and how religiosity might promote civic integration (McAndrew and Voas 2014, Sobolewska *et al* 2015).

As mentioned above, among religious minorities Muslims have received the bulk of scholarly attention in terms of their political participation in Britain (Peace, 2015a). This is tied to a wider scholarly interest in the lives of Britain's Muslim communities which has highlighted the importance of political identities as Muslims (Modood, 2005) but also responds to concerns about their allegiance to 'British values'. Most research suggests that political activity by Muslims positively contributes to their sense of identification with Britain (Maxwell, 2006; Mustafa, 2015). Special attention has been paid to the surprising success of the Respect Party in 2005 general election, where Muslim voters in the East London constituency of Bethnal Green and Bow punished the Labour Party for its support for the Iraq War (Glynn 2008, Peace 2013). Recent work on the specifics of Muslim participation in British politics includes studies of electoral registration (Fieldhouse and Cutts, 2008b); how Muslims perform in UK institutions (Sinno and Tatari, 2009, Tatari, 2014, Kolpinskaya, 2015); and modes of Muslim representation in governance (Jones *et al*, 2015). One particular area that has received attention is the importance of *biraderi* networks among Pakistani communities (Akhtar, 2013; Peace and Akhtar, 2015) and its impact on candidate selection (Akhtar and Peace, 2019) but also potential cases of electoral fraud (Hill *et al*, 2017). The specificity of female Muslim political activism is also now a popular area of interest (Massoumi, 2015; Wadia, 2015; Lewicki and O'Toole, 2017) as well as the importance of 'identity politics' (Elshayyal, 2018). There are now also a number of important studies which look at British Muslim political participation in a wider European perspective (Peace, 2015b; Dancygier, 2017).

Conclusion

In this chapter we have outlined a number of ways in which ethnic diversity in politics matters. The first concerns representation: at present 1 in 10 MPs are from a minority ethnic background and this includes a number of Conservative MPs who are also in the Cabinet, including two of the four Great Offices of State.² However, if we look across the full gamut of elected bodies in the UK we can say that the proportion of ethnic minority representatives holding elected office still does not sufficiently reflect Britain's ethnic diversity. As such, less progress appears to have been made on this issue than on, for example, encouraging ethnic minority voter registration and ethnic minority voter participation even though this remains uneven amongst ethnic groups. The second way in which ethnic diversity matters is that it represents a dynamic challenge: presently, mainstream Muslim identity politics, by and large, appears to comprise another strand of this engagement and will provide an interesting dimension of the debate in coming years. Thirdly, it appears to remain the case that the challenge for political parties is how to appeal to all sections of society, including ethnic minorities, but specifically to ensure that ethnic minorities participate, and that minority candidates are selected and elected. This goes beyond numerical representation and links to a wider issue concerning civil society and the broader ethnic cleavages that frame the organisation of political systems. In this respect, the challenge of ensuring that Britain's political system provides a fair reflection of its ethnic diversity is also a more general challenge to a volatile and rapidly-changing society.

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² Sajid Javid became the first BME politician to hold one of the Great Offices of State when he was appointed Home Secretary in 2018. The current BME office holders are Priti Patel (Home Secretary) and Rishi Sunak (Chancellor of the Exchequer)

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