

MMMA Consultancy  
Omi Consultancy

Exploring and measuring the attitudes and behaviour of members of minority ethnic communities in Northern Ireland to participating in the democratic process generally and with specific regard to registering for and voting at elections.

Research report, June 2005

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# Executive Summary

## Introduction

The Electoral Commission retained the services of OMI Consultancy and MMMA Consultancy to carry out research into the attitudes and behaviour of members of minority ethnic communities in Northern Ireland. The research examines participation in the democratic process generally and has specific regard to registering for and voting at elections.

This research provides an evidence base that estimates the registration and voting levels among minority ethnic communities, and the reasons why minority ethnic people register and vote. It explores minority ethnic participation at the level of civic society via involvement in community and religious organisations. The efforts of political parties to engage with minority ethnic communities are also examined.

People from minority ethnic communities across Northern Ireland were asked for their views using a questionnaire survey and focus group discussions. Five hundred and two valid responses to the questionnaire were received and 152 people participated in focus groups. People from 59 different minority ethnicities responded to the questionnaire.

## Registration

Registration is the first step to becoming involved in the electoral process. Inclusion on the electoral register represents the opportunity to vote and is an important official recognition of a person's right to contribute to the democratic process.

The survey results showed that 40.0% of the sample was registered to vote. The focus group discussions showed that nearly one-third of those present were registered to vote. Furthermore, 48.2% of respondents to the survey knew they had to register every year. Previous research on the Chinese community in Northern Ireland showed a registration rate of 50% while research carried out in Great Britain showed a registration rate of 80% among black and minority ethnic communities.

Demographic factors had an impact on whether or not minority ethnic people were registered. The survey results showed that slightly more minority ethnic women (56.7%) were registered than men (43.3%). More people between the ages of 40 and 50 were likely to be registered than any other age group. Indians and Iranians were more likely to be registered than other minority ethnic communities. The high rate of registration among the Indian community was supported by findings in the literature from Great Britain that people from Asian communities were more likely to be registered and vote. Minority ethnic people working full-time were the most likely to be registered. Minority ethnic people with property being bought on a mortgage were most likely to be registered. Previous research carried out by the Commission supported the survey's evidence that people in lower socio-economic groupings were less likely to register to vote.

## The reasons for registering

The top three reasons why people registered were that an EONI canvasser called to the door, because they thought it was important and because advertising told them it was time to register to vote. The first and third reasons represented outreach work carried out by the Commission and the EONI and showed how effective it could be in leading more people from minority ethnic communities to register. The second reason showed how values of duty and responsibility motivated minority ethnic communities to register and participate in the democratic process generally.

Many focus group participants said that it would be helpful if they could get feedback as to whether or not they had been successful in their attempts to get on to the electoral register.

## The reasons for not registering

The top two reasons given for not registering were that people from minority ethnic communities did not know how to register or who to contact about registration and because they did not know they had to register. This was supported by focus group discussions where many participants also gave as reasons for not registering 'knowing nothing about it' and 'no one asked me to register'. The third reason given for not registering, among survey respondents, was that minority ethnic people were not interested in voting so there was no point in registering.

The focus group discussions revealed other issues which had an impact on whether or not people from minority ethnic communities registered to vote. Some lacked knowledge and understanding of the registration system, some continued to vote in their country of origin, some lacked trust in the registration process and were sceptical of authority and, for others, the language barrier remained an insuperable obstacle.

## Voting

Of those surveyed, almost half (48.3%) voted in the November 2003 Assembly election. This compared with a total turnout of 64% among the general population. Of the minority ethnic people who participated in that election, 86.6% said they voted regularly. On the other hand, 55.7% of all those surveyed said they had never voted.

In the November 2003 Assembly election, slightly more minority ethnic women than men voted and more older minority ethnic people voted than younger people. More minority ethnic people who worked full-time voted than any other working status category. More minority ethnic people who owned property bought on a mortgage voted than any other accommodation category.

## The reasons for voting

The top three reasons for voting were that minority ethnic people felt that it was their duty to vote, that it was a good way to have their say, and that as their community had been excluded in the past, it was important for them to vote. These reasons reflected a

desire on the part of minority ethnic communities to participate in the democratic process. That desire was a reflection of values that as a citizen one had a duty to vote. It was also a reflection of their experience of past exclusion and a desire to prevent future exclusion.

According to respondents, understanding the voting system was important. Third parties could effectively influence minority ethnic people to vote, for example a relationship with a politician. Some minority ethnic people came from countries where either it was compulsory to vote, or there was a strong ethos of voting, and so they continued to vote in Northern Ireland. The relatively recent signing of the Belfast/Good Friday Agreement had led some minority ethnic people to vote, where in the past they had not.

### The reasons for not voting

The primary reason minority ethnic people gave for not voting was that they were not registered (43.4% of the sample). After that the next three reasons for not voting were that minority ethnic people were not interested in politics (25.3%), that they had a lack of knowledge of the history of Northern Ireland and the political situation (22.3%) and that they did not want to take sides in Northern Ireland politics (19.9%).

Survey respondents expressed a low level of interest in politics, with 10.4% saying they were 'very interested', 26.5% 'fairly interested', 37.6% 'not particularly interested' and 25.5% 'not at all interested'.

Focus group discussions heard a recurring theme of not understanding Northern Ireland politics. Some typical comments included, 'If we understood politics in Northern Ireland it might be different – we don't know very much about it.' and 'Northern Ireland politics is about Protestants and Catholics – we don't understand this. We don't know what political parties represent and who they represent?' Coupled with this lack of understanding was a clearly expressed wish that minority ethnic communities do 'not want to take sides in Northern Ireland politics'. There was a fear of being perceived as having unionist or nationalist sentiments. The secret ballot did not appear to have an impact on this fear.

### Minority ethnic people and political parties

Both survey data and focus group discussions indicated that there was a lack of engagement between minority ethnic communities and political parties. Very few minority ethnic people in the sample were members of political parties. Although some minority ethnic people had had positive examples of engagement with individual politicians, overall they felt that political parties were not interested in the votes of minority ethnic communities. Political parties described their role in promoting specific examples of legislation in respect of the rights of minority ethnic communities and anti-racism work but none had measures in place to encourage members of minority ethnic communities to join the party or to stand as a candidate in an election.

The survey showed that seven of the 502 respondents were members of a political party, 27 of them had been asked to join a political party and seven had tried to join a political party. Focus group discussion noted that there was a lack of engagement between minority ethnic communities and political parties although many respondents said such approaches were welcome. There were isolated examples of where a personal connection or relationship with a politician had encouraged someone to vote.

While political parties were interested in the votes of minority ethnic people, their concerns were not specifically addressed in election manifestos. None of the parties had minority ethnic people as candidates in the 2003 Assembly election. All the political parties cited a lack of resources as a factor that inhibited them from taking any action to increase turnout by minority ethnic communities. Many political parties had specific anti-racism policies and practices, including but not limited to, support for hate crime legislation, membership of anti-racism coalitions and speaking out against racist attacks.

## Minority ethnic involvement in and engagement with civic society

Participation in the democratic process can take the form of involvement in and engagement with civic society. Respondents to the survey and participants in focus groups were asked to describe their involvement in community organisations, religious communities and political campaigns. The intention behind these questions was to paint a fuller picture of the ways in which and the degree to which minority ethnic communities participated in the democratic process.

The survey indicated that 34.1% were active in their religious communities and 39.2% in a community organisation. However, only three per cent of respondents said they were involved in any kind of political campaign. The researchers noted that this low level of stated involvement in political campaigns might have been due to the fact that respondents did not consider community/voluntary sector activity as a 'political campaign'. This assumption was confirmed in discussions with focus group participants.

The methodology used in this research, involved partnership working with minority ethnic community organisations. Those present at the focus groups held with the support of these organisations could be said to have been more likely to be involved in civic society than not. On the other hand, the variety and size of minority ethnic community organisations in Northern Ireland also shows the widespread involvement of minority ethnic people in civic society and in political lobbying. These organisations can play a key role working with the Commission, the EONI and political parties to increase minority ethnic people's participation in civic society and electoral politics.

## Improving minority ethnic participation in the democratic process

### The need for education on registering and voting

Minority ethnic people, in both the survey and focus groups, said that there was a need for information and education on the importance, purpose and benefit of registering and voting to be given to members of minority ethnic communities. There was general consensus that there was little information available. It was suggested that information and education on the electoral process took the form of seminars, in different languages, where appropriate. All consultees wanted such events to be held in community centres and organised through their community organisations.

### Tackling the language barrier

Focus group participants agreed that there was a need for the Commission and the EONI to tackle any potential language barriers. Consultations should take place with minority ethnic communities to determine whether materials should be translated into other languages. This priority was also ranked second highest in the survey.

### Advertising campaigns

Respondents to the survey were asked whether or not they were aware of any campaigns that encouraged them to vote. Twenty-nine per cent said that they had seen a television advertisement, 14.9% said that they had seen billboard advertisements and 10.4% said that they had seen advertisements in local newspapers. While survey results showed that television advertisements were the most effective campaigning method, focus group consultations indicated mixed views on the effectiveness of television advertising campaigns to encourage registration, noting that often minority ethnic people do not watch terrestrial channels, preferring home channels via satellite and cable.

### Outreach by political parties

Many minority ethnic communities wished to have constructive dialogues with all political parties in Northern Ireland. There are clear resource implications for all involved. Political parties should not assume that minority ethnic people are aware of their role in campaigning for, promoting and introducing legislation, which protects rights and addresses racism. Broad value statements to which a party subscribes may not be meaningful tools of engagement at local constituency level.

# 1 Background

Very little is known about the ways in which, and the reasons why, minority ethnic communities participate in the democratic process. The Electoral Commission initiated this research in order to establish baseline data on the degree to which minority ethnic communities are or are not participating in the democratic process. This participation may be expressed as involvement in electoral politics or involvement in civic society.

1.1 This research examines registration and voting among people from minority ethnic communities and their degree of involvement with political parties. The research considers the efforts of the Commission and the EONI to increase registration and voting among the general population and how successful these attempts have been in relation to minority ethnic communities. It explores what more can be done to increase existing levels of participation.

## The rationale for the research

1.2 The Electoral Fraud (Northern Ireland) Act 2002 made significant changes to the electoral registration process. Electoral Commission research published after the Act's first year of operation noted that approximately 120,000 people across Northern Ireland had fallen off the electoral register following its implementation.<sup>1</sup> Registration rates were particularly low for certain socio-economic groups including young people, people from disadvantaged backgrounds and people with disabilities. This matched similar research carried out in England.<sup>2</sup> Anecdotal evidence was provided that minority ethnic communities were less likely to register.

1.3 Two previous pieces of research carried out by the Electoral Commission had no information regarding Northern Ireland. 'Voter engagement among black and minority ethnic communities' (2002), had covered Great Britain only while 'An Audit of Political Engagement (2004)' had an insufficient number of respondents from Northern Ireland within the sample to enable meaningful conclusions to be reached about the situation here.

1.4 An initial literature review conducted by the Commission found little in the way of research into the participation of minority ethnic communities in the democratic process in Northern Ireland. A number of reasons were identified for this including that most recent research had focused on minority ethnic people as service users or victims of racism and what research had been done on engagement in the political process had tended to be based on a single minority ethnic identity. Therefore, the Commission undertook to focus on the specific issues relating to minority ethnic communities in Northern Ireland as part of its future work.

## Minority ethnic people in Northern Ireland

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<sup>1</sup> The Electoral Commission (2003) *The Electoral Fraud (Northern Ireland) Act 2002*.

<sup>2</sup> The Electoral Commission (August 2003) *Attitudes towards Voting and the Political Process in 2003*.

1.5 The Northern Ireland Census (2001) identifies a minority ethnic population of 14,272 persons, comprising 0.85% of the total population (1,685,267 persons) and covering more than 11 'ethnic categories', almost half of whom were born in Northern Ireland.<sup>3</sup> Table 1 provides the figures for the Census 2001 ethnic categories.

**Table 1: Census 2001 ethnic group (numbers and percentages)**

Ethnic Group	Numbers of persons in ethnic group	Percentage of persons in ethnic group
White	1,670,988	99.15%
Irish Traveller	1,710	0.10%
Mixed	3,319	0.20%
Indian	1,567	0.09%
Pakistani	666	0.04%
Bangladeshi	252	0.01%
Other Asian	194	0.01%
Black Caribbean	255	0.02%
Black African	494	0.03%
Other Black	387	0.02%
Chinese	4,145	0.25%
Other ethnic group	1,290	0.08%

1.6 There is a general consensus among minority ethnic communities in Northern Ireland that the 2001 Census underestimates this figure. In 1997, the Northern Ireland Council for Ethnic Minorities estimated the black and minority ethnic population at around 20,000 persons. Holder (2003)<sup>4</sup> pointed out that the Census identified only 4,200 Chinese people, while the generally accepted figure was 8,000<sup>5</sup>, and suggested that the reasons for the under count were both linguistic and cultural. He further noted that 'over 70 minority languages' were spoken in Northern Ireland.

1.7 There is a growing migrant worker population in Northern Ireland. Many come from southern and eastern European countries, which are members or applicant members of the European Union. There are also significant numbers of nursing staff being recruited to NHS hospitals across Northern Ireland, many from Asia, in particular India and the Philippines. The Census figures do not include many thousands of people who have arrived in Northern Ireland in recent years. The Labour Force Survey in Spring 2003 estimated that there were 9,000 non-UK and Republic of Ireland nationals working in Northern Ireland of which 7,000 had been issued with work permits and another 2,000 were undocumented.<sup>6</sup> Bell, et al (2004) identified over 40 nationalities among migrant workers.<sup>6</sup> Overseas students are also a part of the Northern Ireland minority ethnic population.

<sup>3</sup> *The Northern Ireland Census*, Northern Ireland Statistics and Research Agency (2002).

<sup>4</sup> Holder, D. (2003) *In Other Words*, Multi-Cultural Resource Centre, Belfast.

<sup>5</sup> Chinese Welfare Association's Strategic Plan 2001-04 estimates Northern Ireland's Chinese population as 8,000.

<sup>6</sup> Bell, K., Jarman, N. and Lefebvre, T. (2004) *Migrant Workers in Northern Ireland*, Institute for Conflict Research, Belfast.



## 2 Literature Review

This research explores and measures the attitudes and behaviour of members of minority ethnic communities in Northern Ireland to participating in the democratic process generally and with specific regard to registering for and voting at elections. As such, the research tells a story about minority ethnic communities but the issues and concerns that it raises are universal. Do minority ethnic people understand the registration and voting systems? Do minority ethnic people feel engaged by political parties in Northern Ireland? Do they feel that their vote will have an impact on how the country is run? Do they feel included in society?

### General views on political engagement

2.1 In 2004, the Electoral Commission in conjunction with the Hansard Society published for debate an audit of political engagement in the UK.<sup>7</sup> This study, based on findings from a MORI Political Engagement Poll undertaken in December 2003, made a number of points about how people viewed their own political engagement. There was no specific minority ethnic component in this study but its conclusions provided a broad backdrop against which this research was framed.

2.2 It noted that a minority of the public saw politics as something they were personally involved in. Politics tended to be seen as something done by, and for, others or as a system with which they were not particularly enamoured. 'Politics', as the public understood the term, was verging on becoming a minority interest with only half saying they were very or fairly interested. Only a minority of the population were involved in political participation over and above voting. However, three-quarters of the public said they 'want a say in how the country is run'.

2.3 People had more favourable opinions of specific individuals compared to their generalised views of institutions or politicians. More people had presented their views to a councillor rather than to an MP and more picked their local council as one of the institutions having the most impact on their lives.

### Registering to vote

2.4 To be eligible for registration in the electoral register of Northern Ireland, an applicant must:

- be 17 years of age or over;
- be a British citizen, Irish citizen, Commonwealth citizen, citizen of a member state of the European Union;
- not be subject to a legal incapacity to vote, e.g. convicted prisoners/those not capable of making a cognitive decision for whom to vote; and
- be resident in Northern Ireland for the three months prior to 15 October 2004 or date of signature on the rolling registration form.

**EONI, 2004**

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<sup>7</sup> The Electoral Commission and Hansard Society (2004) *An Audit of Political Engagement*.

2.5 The Electoral Fraud (Northern Ireland) Act 2002 requires people to register individually on an annual basis and provide personal identifiers in the form of their National Insurance number, date of birth and signature. Potential voters must also produce photographic identification at a polling station before being issued with a ballot paper.

2.6 Evidence of the disenfranchisement of potential voters was provided in the Electoral Commission's report on the 2004 elections.<sup>8</sup> The main cause of complaint reported by presiding officers was 'from people turning up to vote but refused a ballot paper because their name was not on the electoral register'. The presiding officers' findings were confirmed by a public opinion poll, which revealed that six per cent of people who did not vote cited the fact of not being on the register as their reason for doing so.<sup>9</sup> The report also expressed concern at the continued high numbers of invalid votes due to lack of understanding of the single transferable vote system, of voting privacy and secrecy in the new polling booths, as well as inadequate access for people with disabilities.

## Minority ethnic voters in Northern Ireland

2.7 Research undertaken early in 2004 by the Chinese Welfare Association was based on a questionnaire carried out in Belfast and Derry. The questionnaire asked whether members of the Chinese community were registered to vote; if they exercised their right to vote; what barriers inhibited them from voting; did the troubles and sectarian nature of society in Northern Ireland have an impact on whether or not they voted and what strategies and actions could the Chinese Welfare Association, political parties and the Commission adopt to encourage the Chinese community to become more engaged in politics.<sup>10</sup>

2.8 The report concluded that only half of the 8,000-strong Chinese community had registered to vote and of those registered, only 34% had at any time exercised their right to vote. Among the reasons for not voting cited by the majority of respondents was that the political parties in Northern Ireland neither represented, understood nor cared about the interests of the Chinese community, that many Chinese people did not know the difference between the parties and the language barrier.

## Minority ethnic voters in Great Britain and the Republic of Ireland

2.9 The Electoral Commission's concern at levels of voter turnout among certain minority ethnic communities at the 2001 general election led to new research being commissioned on the subject.<sup>11</sup> This studied the nature and extent of political

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<sup>8</sup> The Electoral Commission (2004) *The Northern Ireland Assembly election 2003*.

<sup>9</sup> MillwardBrownUlster research survey for The Electoral Commission, December 2003.

<sup>10</sup> Cox, L. (May 2004) *Voter engagement in the Chinese Community*, Chinese Welfare Association, Belfast.

<sup>11</sup> Purdam, K. and Fieldhouse, E. (2002) *Voter engagement among black and minority ethnic communities*, The Electoral Commission.

engagement and participation in politics among minority ethnic communities (with the exception of Travellers, Roma and Gypsies) and suggested some possible policy innovations. Registration and turnout levels were lower among black communities than those of the white population but levels in Asian communities were similar or higher. Non-registration was identified as a significant barrier to improving turnout.<sup>12</sup> Reasons for not voting included:

- ‘alienation and disenfranchisement’: it made no difference who won;
- ‘apathy’: a lack of interest in politics;
- ‘impact’: an individual vote would not make a difference;
- ‘participation’: politics was unrepresentative of black and minority ethnic communities; and
- ‘convenience’: voting was too time-consuming.

2.10 The Electoral Commission continued to express concern about the non-registration of electors noting that failure to register for elections could be described as a structural barrier to voter turnout. Their 2003 attitudinal study confirmed that ‘there is still significant under-representation of certain minorities on the Electoral Register – only eight in ten of BMEs [black and minority ethnic people] say they are registered’ and found that there was confusion about the current system of voter registration.<sup>13</sup> This study found no significant difference in the level of interest in politics among ‘black and minority ethnic residents’ compared with the rest of the population.

2.11 The absence of formal research in the Republic of Ireland into the participation of minority ethnic communities in the political process prompted the Africa Solidarity Centre<sup>14</sup> to conduct a survey of policies and good practices amongst Irish political parties relating to immigrants and minority ethnic communities. The report published in November 2003 showed that none of the parties had adopted any specific policies nor could point to any good practice to encourage members of immigrant and minority ethnic communities to become party members.<sup>15</sup> One party had a minority ethnic person as a candidate and two parties had identified specific initiatives to canvass support among immigrant and minority ethnic communities. All the parties had agreed to adhere to the anti-racism protocol governing the conduct of candidates during elections.

2.12 This initial report was followed with a sequel in 2004 when the Africa Solidarity Centre wrote to the same parties asking what, if any, new policies and practices they had introduced since the August 2003 survey. The second report found that all six parties had undertaken some new initiatives such as translating party material into

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<sup>12</sup> ‘Asian’ in this and other publications emerging from England refer to people from the Indian sub-continent only. This differs from the more accurate and substantially more comprehensive interpretation of ‘Asian’ that is used by the authors of this report. We understand ‘Asian’ to mean people who have originated from the Asian continent.

<sup>13</sup> The Electoral Commission (2003) *Attitudes towards Voting and the Political Process in 2003*.

<sup>14</sup> The Africa Solidarity Centre is a voluntary membership organisation, formed in 2000, to act as focal point for the growing community of African immigrants in Ireland.

<sup>15</sup> Fanning, B., Mutwarasibo, F. and Chadamoyo, N. (November 2003) *Positive Politics: Participation of Immigrants and Ethnic Minorities in the Electoral Process*, Africa Solidarity Centre.

'community languages', anti-racism training for candidates and advertising in immigrant and minority ethnic media.<sup>16</sup> Levels of participation by these communities in the main political parties remained very low with only two parties having a candidate from a minority ethnic background while six non-Irish national candidates contested the elections as independents.

## Conclusion

2.13 The larger framework as illustrated by previous work in Northern Ireland, Great Britain and the Republic of Ireland is that political engagement is declining in the overall population, but that there are specific reasons why minority ethnic people feel unable to or choose not to participate in the democratic process in large numbers.

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<sup>16</sup> Fanning, B., Chadamoyo, N and Mutwarasibo, F. (2004) *Negative Politics, Positive Vision: Immigration and the 2004 Elections*, Africa Solidarity Centre, Dublin.

## 3 Methodology

Following the Commission's specification of a participative qualitative and quantitative methodology, the researchers worked with a total of 24 minority ethnic community organisations over the course of the research. These organisations played a key role in enabling the researchers to talk to and work with their diverse membership through focus groups, and in developing and distributing the questionnaires.

3.1 Quantitative data was gathered using a structured questionnaire, developed with the involvement of minority ethnic communities. These communities suggested a number of adjustments, which included an open question on 'racial group', the retention of a closed question on 'ethnicity' and the inclusion of a definition of 'ethnic group'. These decisions proved appropriate as they dealt with the following:

- allowing respondents to define their own 'racial group';
- recognising that some communities might identify themselves both by their ethnicity and their religion; and
- acknowledging that while the Muslim community might be from many different countries, they experienced racism primarily as a result of their faith.

3.2 The questionnaire was designed to provide an in-depth demographic profile of each respondent as specified in the Commission's tender documentation, and more, including: gender, age, racial group, ethnicity, nationality, religious background, social class, tenure, urban/rural location, voters and non-voters, registered and non-registered. The demographic profile of survey respondents (Appendix A) enabled the researchers to make detailed conclusions about the attitudes and behaviour of members of minority ethnic communities in Northern Ireland to participating in the democratic process generally and with specific regard to registering for and voting at elections.

3.3 The questionnaire was translated into English, Chinese/English bilingual, Malay, Polish, Portuguese, Lithuanian, Tetum, Spanish, Arabic, Bengali and Urdu.

3.4 A total of 1,542 questionnaires were distributed to minority ethnic communities. One thousand were distributed by post between 7 January and 11 February 2005 with the exception of small numbers of one translated version, which was not distributed until March 2005. The remaining 542 questionnaires were either placed in partner agencies' premises for completion by minority ethnic people or disseminated by the researchers through their own professional networks.

3.5 A total of 502 valid questionnaire responses were received from a broad sample of 59 minority ethnic communities, before the deadline of 6 April 2005. This number represented a 32.6% response rate. A copy of the topline survey data can be referred to in Appendix B.

3.6 Focus group sessions were used to collect qualitative data for the research. Initially, the researchers made a set of assumptions based on anecdotal evidence that minority ethnic communities were experiencing alienation around voting and

democratic involvement and, as a result, it would have been a mistake to rely on a high return rate for questionnaires. Focus groups offered a rich opportunity to reach a broad sample of respondents, given the high degree of involvement by minority ethnic community organisations in the research process.

3.7 The researchers' previous experience of working with minority ethnic communities indicated that some groups preferred to participate in separate gender-based focus groups. Therefore much of the focus group work was built around the group activity of participating minority ethnic community organisations. This ensured the best use of the resources of participating organisations, allowed for planning but did not place an undue burden on either the organisation or participating individuals. Furthermore, questionnaires were made available at those sessions for completion and/or distribution. Interpreters were engaged in eight of the focus group discussions.

3.8 The Commission wrote in November 2004 to all political parties registered in Northern Ireland, advising them of the research and seeking their co-operation. The researchers developed a semi-structured questionnaire for response by political parties. This questionnaire was sent in January 2005 to the 17 parties as provided by the Electoral Commission. A covering letter from the researchers afforded the opportunity of an in-depth interview to complete the questionnaire. One political party accepted the offer of an in-depth interview and six parties returned the questionnaire after a series of follow-up letters, electronic mailings, faxes and phone calls.

3.9 The researchers met with a senior official at the EONI in December 2004. This provided an opportunity to ensure that the researchers information about registration and voting was up to date and accurate and to hear any concerns that the EONI had about the electoral process, which might impact negatively on minority ethnic communities. It also afforded the EONI an opportunity to describe any proactive measures they were taking to reach marginalised and excluded people, including those from minority ethnic communities.

## 4 Minority ethnic communities and registration

Registration is the first step to becoming involved in the electoral process. Inclusion on the electoral register represents the opportunity to vote and is an important official recognition of a person's right to contribute to the democratic process.

4.1 The survey results showed that 40.0% of the sample was registered to vote. The focus group discussions showed that nearly one-third of those present were registered to vote. Furthermore, 48.2% of respondents to the survey knew they had to register every year. Previous research on the Chinese community in Northern Ireland showed a registration rate of 50%, and research carried out in GB showed a registration rate of 80% among black and minority ethnic communities.

4.2 Demographic factors had an impact on whether or not minority ethnic people were registered. The survey results showed that slightly more minority ethnic women (56.7%) were registered than men (43.3%). More people between the ages of 40 and 50 were likely to be registered than any other age group. Indians and Iranians were more likely to be registered than other minority ethnic communities. The high rate of registration among the Indian community was supported by findings in the GB literature that people from Asian communities were more likely to be registered and vote. Minority ethnic people working full-time were the most likely to be registered. Minority ethnic people with property being bought on a mortgage were most likely to be registered. Previous research carried out by the Commission supported the survey's evidence that people in lower socio-economic groupings were less likely to register to vote.

### The reasons for registering

4.3 The top three reasons why people registered were that an EONI canvasser called to the door, because they thought it was important and because advertising told them it was time to register to vote. The first and the third reasons represented outreach work carried out by the Commission and the EONI and showed how effective it could be. The second reason showed how values of duty and responsibility motivated minority ethnic communities to register and participate in the democratic process generally.

4.4 The reasons why minority ethnic people register are provided in Table 2.

**Table 2: Reasons for Registering**

<b>Reason for registering</b>	<b>Percent (of sample)</b>	<b>Rank</b>
A canvasser called at the door	25.7%	1
I think it is important	15.5%	2
Advertising told me it was time to register to vote	5.8%	3
The influence of friends/relatives/neighbours	2.4%	4
Political parties came to canvass	1.8%	5
Community groups organised sessions to encourage	1.6%	6=

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registration		
I wanted to obtain photographic identification	1.6%	6=
Registering is compulsory/it's the law	0.4%	8
To open a bank account	0.2%	9
<i>Base 201</i>		

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## EONI canvasser called to the door

4.4 In the survey, 64.2% of the respondents who were registered to vote gave a canvasser calling to the door as the reason, with the highest reported levels coming from the Chinese and Indian communities. This suggested that face-to-face communication between canvasser and minority ethnic people could be an effective way to encourage minority ethnic people to register. However, some minority ethnic people recalled negative experiences of canvassers. One person in a focus group noted:

‘When the person came with the form, the first assumption she made was that I wouldn’t vote; she was very patronizing and thought that I didn’t understand the form.’

**Focus group participant, Craigavon**

## I think it’s important to register

4.5 The second reason given by 38.8% of respondents for registering was that they thought it was important to register. A relatively high number (compared to their size in the sample) of Indian people said they thought registration was important. People from other minority ethnic communities also mentioned this opinion in focus groups: ‘I do believe in citizenship and participation’.

## Impact of advertising

4.6 Survey data showed that television advertising was the most effective advertising method, followed by advertising on billboards and in local newspapers. Focus group consultations indicated mixed views on the effectiveness of television advertising campaigns aimed at encouraging registration. A viewer who did not understand English was unlikely to find television advertisements of much value unless they were subtitled. Consultees in focus groups noted that, with the availability of satellite and cable broadcasting, many minority ethnic people watched ‘home channels’ rather than local channels.

## Feedback on registration applications

4.7 One issue raised in some focus groups was the lack of feedback offered to individuals after they had returned their registration forms. Later, when their poll cards did not arrive, they were not sure why they had been rejected. In one focus group, three people with European citizenship entitlement had completed the electoral

registration forms and were then subsequently asked to complete an electoral identification form, suggesting that their names had been placed on the register. Only one of the applicants received his electoral identification. The other two pointed to great difficulties with language when they tried to find out what had happened to their applications for electoral identity cards and they eventually gave up. One respondent said that she only knew she was registered when she got a letter calling her for Jury Service. She had not been aware this was a possible consequence of electoral registration.

## The reasons for not registering

4.8 The top two reasons for not registering were that minority ethnic people did not know how to register or who to contact about registration and because they did not know they had to register. This was supported by focus group discussions where many participants also gave as reasons for not registering ‘knowing nothing about it’ and ‘no one asked me to register’. The third reason given for not registering was that minority ethnic people were not interested in voting so there was no point in registering.

4.9 The reasons why minority ethnic people do not register are provided in Table 3.

**Table 3: Reasons for not registering**

<b>Reason for not registering</b>	<b>Percent (of sample)</b>	<b>Rank</b>
Did not know how to/who to contact	28.9%	1
Did not know I had to	25.1%	2
Am not interested in voting so there is no point registering	12.7%	3
It should be automatic	8.0%	4
Have just moved house	7.4%	5
Am registered in another country	6.8%	6=
Have not got around to it/will do it sometime	6.8%	6=
I am not eligible to vote	5.4%	8=
Worried private information about me would be misused	5.4%	8=
The guidance leaflet was in the English language	5.4%	8=

*Base 301*

## Lack of knowledge and understanding of the registration system

4.10 Many focus groups participants said that it was crucial that the registration forms were simple and that assistance in completing the forms was offered to those communities with less experience of doing so. Although one group noted that the forms had been recently simplified, some of the consultees pointed out that the completion of forms was not so much a literacy issue as one to do with plain English.

‘If someone helped us with the forms and explained the complicated words, then people would fill them in.’

**Focus group participant, Dungannon**

4.11 Difficulties with registration were exacerbated by the fact that some minority ethnic people did not have all the forms of identification that people who were born in Northern Ireland had. One consultee pointed out that when it came to registering ‘people who were born here have all their documents, but when you’re from a minority ethnic community you don’t, so all these formal things are harder’.

**Voting in country of origin**

4.12 Some consultees said they were registered in their home country/country of origin and were not sure if registering and voting in Northern Ireland would cause them to lose their domestic voting rights. A noticeable number of people from EU countries said they were not registered in Northern Ireland because they were registered in their country of origin.

**Lack of trust in registration process/authority**

4.13 Focus group discussion revealed a lack of trust in authority among minority ethnic communities and this had an impact on whether or not they trusted the registration process. Some examples of such comments were:

‘You’d be worried you’d be signing your life away.’

**Focus group participant, Derry**

‘Lots of black people don’t register because they are afraid of being asked stupid questions like “What brought you here?”, “Are you an asylum seeker?” and “Of all the countries, why did you choose Northern Ireland?”.’

**Focus group participant, Belfast**

4.14 In addition, some people in focus groups were worried that EONI officials would be sceptical of the identification they presented. They said they were unsure of how they might be treated by those in authority. This was often a result of people’s negative experiences of authority in their countries of origin.

4.15 Some focus group participants considered themselves as ‘third class citizens’, revealing a low sense of entitlement, in terms of access to and participation in, the democratic process as well as reflecting their experience of discrimination more widely.

**Language barriers**

4.16 Those consultees who could not read English stressed that they had not registered because all the materials were in English. One man who had been in Northern Ireland for 41 years, had never registered as a result of the language barrier.

A Chinese woman related how her misunderstanding of the term 'nationality' in the electoral registration form led her to declare her nationality as 'Chinese' instead of 'British'. She only realised her mistake through discussions with other people in her community about why she did not receive a polling card.

## Conclusion

4.17 It can be seen from the above data that effective, educated canvassing by EONI officials led to higher numbers of minority ethnic people registering. The data showed that advertising campaigns, if properly targeted, were thought effective. Given that many minority ethnic people registered because they thought it was important, there is an opportunity to harness this enthusiasm with more targeted outreach by the Commission, the EONI and political parties. This outreach may also help overcome the lack of trust in the registration process, which stops some minority ethnic people from registering.

4.18 The main reasons minority ethnic people did not register was because they did not know how to, they did not know whom to contact nor did they know they had to register. This means that any outreach done by the Commission, the EONI and political parties must include an education process, explaining the intricacies of the registration process, and crucially, the purpose and benefits of registering. Such an education process would go some way to addressing the fact that the registration forms are complicated and remove any confusion as to the meaning of terms due to language barriers. Furthermore, the EONI should provide feedback as to whether or not people have been successful in their attempt to get onto the electoral register.

## 5 Minority ethnic communities and voting

The research showed that minority ethnic people voted because they felt it was their duty to vote, because they thought it was a good way to have their say and because their community had been excluded in the past and therefore it was important for them to vote. These reasons for voting reflected a commitment to participating in the democratic process, and specifically, to ensuring that their community would not be excluded in the future. The theme of exclusion was echoed in the reasons why minority ethnic people did not vote. While many respondents to the survey said that they did not vote simply because they were not registered and because they were not interested in politics, just as many respondents did not vote because they did not understand Northern Ireland politics and did not want to take sides in Northern Ireland politics.

### Minority ethnic people and voting in the November 2003 Northern Ireland Assembly election

5.1 Of the total survey sample, 19.3% voted in the November 2003 Assembly election. However, when examined against those who were registered to vote, the percentage that voted rose to 48.3%. This contrasted with a total turnout of 64% among the general population in that election.

5.2 In the November 2003 Assembly election, slightly more minority ethnic women than men voted and more older minority ethnic people voted than younger people. More minority ethnic people who worked full-time voted than any other working status category. More minority ethnic people who owned property bought on a mortgage voted than any other accommodation category.

5.3 Of those who voted, 86.6% sometimes or always voted. This implied that those who voted did so regularly. However, 55.7% of the sample had never voted before. This meant that over half the minority ethnic people in the sample were not participating fully in electoral politics and thus in the democratic process generally.

5.4 The questionnaire asked the total sample to select the statements that described what was most important to them when they voted. Of the sample, 38.8% said that it was most important that they understood the voting system, 25.3% said their vote being private was most important, 23.5% said that it was most important that their vote was safe from fraud and abuse, and 12.4% of the sample said their vote being convenient was most important to them. This would support the conclusion that voting rates would be improved if minority ethnic people were better educated on the voting system, including information on protecting privacy and electoral abuse.

### The reasons for voting

5.5 The reasons why minority ethnic people vote are listed in Table 4.

#### **Table 4: Reasons for voting**

<b>Reason for voting</b>	<b>Percent (of sample)</b>	<b>Rank</b>
I feel it is my duty to vote	13.3%	1
Good way to have my say	10.0%	2
My community has been excluded in the past therefore it is important for me to vote	4.0%	3
My local councillor/MLA/MP is very responsive to my needs	3.2%	4
The political party I support is very active on issues of 'race' relations	3.0%	5
Know people who are involved in politics	2.6%	6
Interested in politics	2.4%	7
Because of an advertising campaign	2.2%	8
Community organisation encouraged me to use my vote	1.6%	9

*Base 97*

I feel it is my duty to vote/good way to have my say/my community has been excluded in the past

5.6 The top three reasons for voting were that minority ethnic people felt that it was their duty to vote, that it was a good way to have their say, and that their community had been excluded in the past and therefore it was important for them to vote. These reasons reflected the desire on the part of minority ethnic communities to participate in the democratic process. That desire was a reflection of values that as a citizen one had a duty to vote. It was also a reflection of their experience of past exclusion and a desire to prevent future exclusion. This attitude was reflected in focus group responses.

'We are part of the community; we want to use our rights to vote.'

**Focus group participant, Belfast**

Engagement with political parties

5.7 The engagement by political parties of minority ethnic people had a positive impact on whether or not they voted. Of those who voted, 16.5% gave as their reason the responsiveness of local councillors/MLAs/MPs and 15.4% said it was because they wanted to support the political party they considered to be active on issues of 'race' relations. One focus group participant said:

'My family had a problem with planning permission and I heard that I could call the local councillors and say that I had voted for them and then they would help me. I tried it and it worked. Two politicians showed up to help me. That would never happen in the country I came from. So now I vote.'

**Focus group participant, Belfast**

Interested in politics

5.8 Of those who voted in the November 2003 Assembly election, 12.4% said they voted because they were ‘interested in politics’. Over 50% of participants in focus groups held in Fermanagh expressed an interest in politics, with 75% of the consultees saying they believed that Northern Ireland politics were relevant to the concerns and interests of minority ethnic communities.

### Previous voting habits

5.9 Previous voting habits in a person’s country of origin appeared to influence their attitude to voting. A participant, who came from a country where voting was compulsory said ‘You have to get your card stamped at each election and they check up on you later, so that mentality remains’.

### The impact of the Belfast/Good Friday Agreement

5.10 There was one factor identified that had more recently encouraged people to vote - the Belfast/Good Friday Agreement. There was a consensus amongst Chinese and African focus group participants that more people had begun to vote since the referendum on the Agreement (1998). ‘That has captivated my interest’. One focus group participant said that he cast his first vote by voting ‘yes’ for the Peace Agreement and since then, he had continued to vote ‘because what I wanted has happened’.

### Changing attitudes to voting

5.11 Although Traveller women had a fairly disinterested view of politics and voting, there was some sign of changing attitudes.

‘Voting is important, because it’s a kind of acceptance. Before it was put down automatically that Travellers’ votes weren’t important. But that has changed. Now we get the forms. Now people are being accepted’.

**Focus group participant, Belfast**

### The reasons for not voting

5.12 The primary reason minority ethnic people gave, as their reason for not voting, was that they were not registered (43.4% of the sample). This was followed by not interested in politics (25.3%), a lack of knowledge of the history of Northern Ireland and the political situation (22.3%) and not wanting to take sides in Northern Ireland politics (19.9%).

5.13 The top ten reasons for not voting are provided in Table 5.

**Table 5: Top 10 reasons for not voting**

<b>Reason for not voting</b>	<b>Percent (of sample)</b>	<b>Rank</b>
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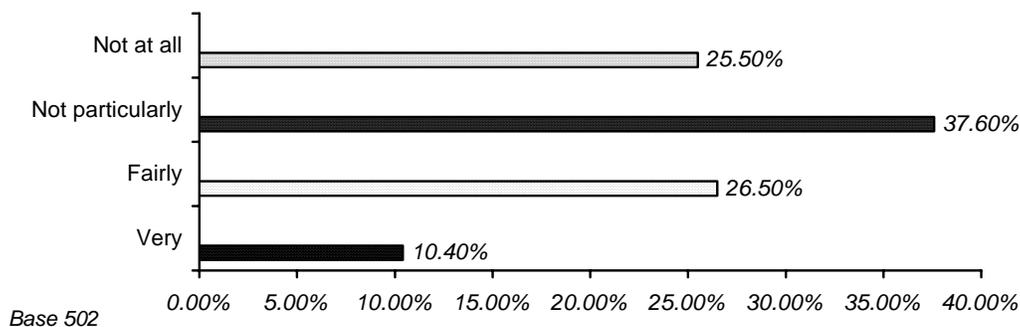
Not registered	43.4%	1
Not interested in politics	25.3%	2
Lack of knowledge of the history of Northern Ireland and the political situation	22.3%	3
Do not want to take sides in Northern Ireland politics	19.9%	4
Do not know what the parties stand for	18.5%	5
Do not know anyone who is involved in politics	17.3%	6
Does not do any good – political parties don't listen to black and minority ethnic communities	15.9%	7
Did not know there was an election	14.7%	8
Do not understand the electoral system	14.3%	9
No candidate represented my views	13.3%	10

*Base 405*

### Not interested in politics

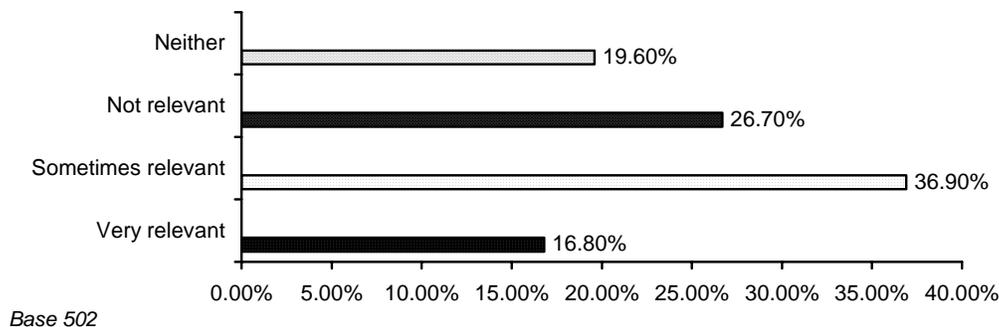
5.14 Survey respondents expressed a low level of interest in politics, with only 10.4% saying they were 'very interested' and 26.5% 'fairly interested'. 37.6% said they were 'not particularly interested, with 25.5% not at all interested (Figure 1).

Figure 1: Level of interest in politics



5.15 However, slightly higher numbers of minority ethnic people said that Northern Ireland politics were relevant to their concerns. Of the total sample, 16.8% believed that Northern Ireland politics were 'very relevant' to their concerns or interests, with 36.9% saying that they were 'sometimes relevant'. The remaining 46.3% said that Northern Ireland politics were either not relevant (26.7%) or 'neither' (19.6%) (Figure 2).

Figure 2: Level of relevance of politics to minority ethnic concerns and interests



A lack of knowledge of the history of Northern Ireland and the political situation

5.16 Despite the acknowledgement of Northern Ireland politics in 5.15, focus groups discussion heard a recurring theme of not understanding Northern Ireland politics. Some typical comments were:

‘If we understood politics in Northern Ireland it might be different – we don’t know very much about it.’

**Focus group participant, Dungannon**

‘Northern Ireland politics is about Protestants and Catholics – we don’t understand this. We don’t know what political parties represent and who do they represent?’

**Focus group participant, Derry**

Do not want to take sides in Northern Ireland politics

5.17 ‘Not wanting to take sides in Northern Ireland politics’ was a recurring theme amongst most of the minority ethnic participants. There was a fear of being perceived as having unionist or nationalist sentiments. The secret ballot did not appear to have an impact on this fear.

‘Sectarianism in Northern Ireland has an impact on whether we vote or not. In fact, sectarianism in Northern Ireland discourages me from taking a keener interest in politics.’

**Focus group participant, Enniskillen**

5.18 The degree of engagement was strictly circumscribed by the need not to be seen as ‘party political’. One consultee said he would be reluctant to openly display photographs taken of him with certain politicians for fear of being identified with the party. One focus group’s positive experience of engagement with nationalist parties in their local area was countered by a desire not to be seen as ‘pro-nationalist’ for ‘we want to maintain our neutral stance’.

‘We have to be neutral in terms of Northern Ireland politics. We have to stay neutral for our own safety.’

**Focus group participant, Enniskillen**

**Conclusion**

5.19 Most minority ethnic people voted because they thought it was their duty to vote and because it was a good way to have their say, particularly if their community had been excluded in the past. Third parties were able to influence minority ethnic people

to vote, for example as a result of a relationship with a politician or political party. Some minority ethnic people came from countries where either it was compulsory to vote, or there was a strong ethos of voting, and so they continued to vote in Northern Ireland. It was important to minority ethnic people when they voted that they understood the voting system.

5.20 Minority ethnic people did not vote because they were not registered or because they were not interested in politics. Many different minority ethnic communities shared a common lack of knowledge and understanding of Northern Ireland politics and a desire not to take sides in Northern Ireland politics and these factors contributed to their not voting.

## 6 Lack of engagement between minority ethnic communities and political parties

Both survey data and focus group discussions indicated that there was a lack of engagement between minority ethnic communities and political parties. Very few minority ethnic people in the sample were members of political parties. Although some minority ethnic people had had positive examples of engagement with individual politicians, overall they felt that political parties were not interested in the votes of minority ethnic communities. Political parties described specific examples of legislation, which sought to protect the rights of minority ethnic communities and

their involvement with anti-racism work but none had measures in place to encourage minority ethnic people to join the party or to stand as a candidate in an election.

## Membership of political parties

6.1 The survey asked whether or not minority ethnic people were formally involved in political parties. The survey showed that seven of the 502 respondents were members of a political party, 27 of them had been asked to join a political party and seven had tried to join a political party.

## Relationships with particular political representatives

6.2 Respondents to the survey and participants in focus groups were asked if they could name their political representatives. Of the total sample, 23.7% were able to name a local councillor, 16.5% an MLA and 18.9% an MP. Some focus group participants in Derry, Fermanagh and Belfast recalled face-to-face meetings with certain political party representatives. A few of the participants believed that these meetings increased their knowledge of political party policies and manifestos.

‘The relationship I have with a local councillor is very important. If that person has helped me, I will vote for his or her party and for that person in local elections.’

**Focus group participant, Craigavon**

## Elections

6.3 Only Chinese consultees had ever seen manifestos or party political literature in Chinese. Apart from that, no one could recall being particularly canvassed by political parties to vote for them.

6.4 Among all the focus groups conducted with an interpreter present, only one interpreter (Chinese) recalled ever been asked to translate candidates’ manifestos. This was for two candidates from one political party standing in the same electoral area at a council election. The failure to have electoral material translated was reinforced by the information gathered from political parties, which revealed that only one party, the Social Democratic and Labour Party (SDLP), said it had manifestos translated into other languages – Chinese and Punjabi.

6.5 Some Chinese participants, both in Belfast and Derry, believed that the situation might improve if candidates from within their own communities stood for election. ‘It is not necessarily the case that we will vote for them but at least we will understand their manifestos and what they stand for. We can then make an informed choice.’ Others thought that the ‘smaller’ parties (such as the Green Party or the Northern Ireland Women’s Coalition) offered better political choices but ‘if you do this [vote for smaller parties], your vote changes nothing and you feel your vote is wasted. It is the four main parties here that is it’. Muslim women in Belfast and Chinese women in Derry highlighted the need for political parties and politicians to engage with minority ethnic communities all the time, not just before an election.

## Responses of political parties

6.6 All the seven political parties who responded expressed a strong interest in the votes of minority ethnic people although this was not without difficulty for some. One party noted that, 'Other of our policies, such as gay rights and abortion rights, have lost us votes especially among Muslims.'

6.7 Most of the party political responses to the question about what policies or good practices they had to encourage minority ethnic people to become party members noted that they were engaging in this process through their own value system and/or outreach work.

6.8 Two political parties did not think that minority ethnic people wanted to be involved in party politics. Some of their comments included 'Minority ethnic people tend to keep their heads down, work hard and let political parties get on with it.' and 'Minority ethnic people do not volunteer to become involved in party politics'.

6.9 Very few of the parties' responses indicated that the concerns of minority ethnic communities were addressed in election manifestos. Instead, parties appeared to rely on dialogue and discussion with representative groups and non-governmental organisations and on dealing with minority ethnic people as constituents at local constituency and parliamentary level.

6.10 In terms of canvassing support among minority ethnic communities during the 2005 local Government elections, a number of the parties said they would consider printing some of their election literature in one or two languages used by minority ethnic communities. Others spoke in general terms about 'specific targeted literature,' 'links between minority ethnic people in local areas and local party branches' and 'contact with (minority) ethnic lobbies to ensure dissemination of policies'.

6.11 None of the parties had minority ethnic people as candidates in the 2003 Assembly election, although one party said they 'had only run two candidates'. Of those parties who responded to the questionnaire, none had selected any minority ethnic people as candidates for the District Council elections in May 2005. The Alliance Party said that two of its candidates were 'from overseas' and the Ulster Unionist Party (UUP) that it previously had members of the Jewish community as candidates in North Belfast. The Socialist Environmental Alliance said it had approached 'several members of minority ethnic communities [to stand as candidates] but they were unwilling'.

6.12 Virtually all of the parties cited lack of resources as a factor that inhibited them from taking any action to increase turnout by minority ethnic people at election times. Others said they relied on their parliamentary and legislative work to increase awareness of their party among minority ethnic communities. The Green Party offered the translation of their website and party literature as a positive action, while the United Kingdom Unionist Party said they ensured their manifesto was 'in the appropriate format' and they took steps to engage in personal contact with minority ethnic people.

## Opposing racism

6.13 Responses to the question about policies and practices to oppose racism in Northern Ireland indicated that political parties focused on their legislative role in this respect. The Alliance Party said it had initiated the campaign for the introduction of Hate Crime legislation in 2000 while the UUP were instrumental in ensuring that the Gangmaster legislation 2004 covered Northern Ireland. Other parties spoke about 'A Shared Future' and Good Relations policies as areas where 'race' and ethnic relations needed to be included. The SDLP pointed to its signing of the Charter of European Political Parties for a Non-Racist Society and its requirement, since June 2000, that all candidates signed an anti-Racism Protocol.

6.14 Some parties spoke about attending marches/demonstrations, inviting speakers from minority ethnic communities to address party conferences, headlining anti-racism in manifestos and policy initiatives, and opposing racism which 'comes from the top in society, e.g. the Home Secretary and Prime Minister talking about "maternity tourists", "illegal immigrants", etc'. Most parties said they spoke out against racist attacks and some had organised specific events around the theme of 'Combating Racism'.

## Conclusion

6.15 There was a lack of engagement between minority ethnic communities and political parties although many respondents said such approaches were welcome. Only seven respondents out of a possible 502 minority ethnic people were members of a political party. There were isolated examples of where a personal connection or relationship with a politician had encouraged someone to vote. However, it was also true that often minority ethnic people did not want to 'take sides' in Northern Ireland politics by supporting one party over another.

6.16 Two parties did not think that minority ethnic people wanted to be involved in party politics. Most political parties did not have specific mechanisms to encourage minority ethnic people to become party members. While political parties were interested in the votes of minority ethnic people, their concerns were not specifically addressed in election manifestos. None of the parties had minority ethnic people as candidates in the 2003 Assembly election. All the political parties cited a lack of resources as a factor that inhibited them from taking any action to increase turnout by minority ethnic people. Many political parties had specific anti-racism policies and practices, including but not limited to, support for hate crime legislation, membership of anti-racism coalitions and speaking out against racist attacks.

6.18 The lack of engagement between political parties and minority ethnic people is likely to have an impact on the numbers of people from these communities who register and vote. If closer relationships between political parties, especially individual political representatives, and minority ethnic communities were developed, it is likely that this would lead to an improvement in the number of minority ethnic people who register and vote.

## 7 Minority ethnic participation in civic society

Participation in the democratic process can take the form of involvement in and engagement with civic society. Respondents to the survey and participants in focus groups were asked to describe their involvement in community organisations, religious communities and political campaigns. The intention behind these questions was to paint a fuller picture of the ways in which and the degree to which minority ethnic communities participated in the democratic process.

7.1 The researchers explored whether minority ethnic people were active in civic society by asking whether or not minority ethnic people were active in religious communities and community organisations. The survey indicated that 34.1% were active in their religious communities and 39.2% in a community organisation.

7.2 However, only three per cent of respondents said they were involved in any kind of political campaign. The researchers noted that this low level of stated involvement in political campaigns might have been due to the fact that respondents did not consider community/voluntary sector activity as a 'political campaign'. This assumption was confirmed in discussions with focus group participants.

7.3 Latin American focus group participants said that while most people in their community did not vote they were all very active in other places and causes, such as church activities, International Solidarity and anti-discrimination work in Northern Ireland. However, many migrant workers said they had no time to be involved with community activity as they were busy working, trying to sort out their affairs in Northern Ireland, maintain contact with their families back home and learn English.

7.4 The fear that many minority ethnic people had of being seen to be partisan in Northern Ireland politics also prevented them from being willing to say they were involved in political campaigns.

## Conclusion

7.5 This is a brief outline of the ways in which and the degree to which minority ethnic people were involved in civic society organisations. The methodology used in this research involved partnership working with minority ethnic community organisations and focus groups were held with the support of those organisations. Therefore, those present could be said to have been more likely to be involved in civic society than not. On the other hand, the variety and size of minority ethnic community organisations in Northern Ireland also shows the widespread involvement of minority ethnic people in civic society and in political lobbying. These organisations can play a key role working with the Commission, the EONI and political parties to increase minority ethnic people's participation in civic society and electoral politics.

## 8 Improving the participation of minority ethnic communities in the democratic process

The research explored with participants ways to improve the participation of minority ethnic communities in the democratic process.

### The need for education on registering and voting

8.1 Minority ethnic people, in both the survey and focus groups, said that there was a need for information and education on the importance and benefit of registering and voting to be given to members of minority ethnic communities. There was general consensus that there was little information available. It was suggested that information and education on the electoral process took the form of seminars and education sessions, in different languages, where appropriate.

8.2 Consultees were of the opinion that the planned events should cover the registration and election processes, politics and political parties. The comment by one respondent that ‘politics is nothing to do with us – it is for upper class – we would need more education and knowledge’ reflected the views of many others, mostly women. All consultees wanted such events to be held in community centres and for such events to be organised through their community organisations. Focus group participants in Enniskillen asked that material be made available in local libraries, health centres and through the local media.

8.3 According to consultees, education around the electoral process and specifically the importance of voting would need to answer various questions in order to address the specific concerns of minority ethnic people:

- What is the benefit for us if we get involved and start voting?
- What are the consequences for us if we begin to influence politics?
- Is it for our benefit? Would it promote our status?
- Everyone wants their vote to count for a (public) good – would our needs (as a minority ethnic community) be better met if we vote?

### Tackling the language barrier

8.4 Focus group participants agreed that there was a need for the Commission and the EONI to tackle any potential language barriers. Consultations should take place with minority ethnic communities to determine whether materials should be translated into other languages. This priority was also ranked second highest in the survey. One person noted:

‘Everything is in English and unless people can read and understand the English language, no communication is possible on any subject’.

**Focus group participant, Enniskillen**

### Advertising campaigns

8.5 Respondents to the survey were asked whether or not they were aware of any campaigns that encouraged them to vote. Twenty-nine per cent said that they had seen a television advertisement, 14.9% said that they had seen billboard advertisements and 10.4% said that they had seen advertisements in local newspapers. While survey results showed that television advertisements were the most effective campaigning method, focus group consultations indicated mixed views on the effectiveness of television advertising campaigns to encourage registration.

## Outreach by political parties

8.6 Many minority ethnic communities wished to have constructive dialogues with all political parties in Northern Ireland. There are clear resource implications for all involved. Political parties should not assume that minority ethnic people are aware of their legislative role and activity. Broad value statements to which a party subscribes may not be meaningful tools of engagement at local constituency level.

## Conclusion

8.7 There is a need to organise education sessions, in consultation with minority ethnic communities and their support organisations, on the registration process and how to vote. There must be wider circulation of Commission materials to minority ethnic communities. Minority ethnic communities should be consulted about any planned translation of Commission and EONI materials into other world and/or community languages. While some people are aware of television advertisements, these can be more targeted at minority ethnic community audiences. The Commission needs to engage with minority ethnic community organisations in order to ensure that its efforts to increase public awareness do not themselves becoming 'exclusionary'.

## Appendix A – Demographic profile of survey respondents

### Ethnicity

The total sample (n=502) identified themselves by ethnicity. Fifty-nine minority ethnic groups were identified in the sample. They are listed in Table 1.

**Table 1: Ethnic group**

Minority Ethnic Group	Frequency	Percent (of sample)	Rank
African mixed	7	1.4%	12=
Algerian	1	0.2%	41=
Angolan	1	0.2%	41=
Argentinean	2	0.4%	28=
Asian mixed	5	1.0%	19=
Bangladeshi	7	1.4%	12=
Black and Asian	1	0.2%	41=
Brazilian	5	1.0%	19=
Brunei	7	1.4%	12=
Cameroonian	1	0.2%	41=
Chilean	3	0.6%	25=
Chinese	139	27.7%	1
Colombian	5	1.0%	19=
Croatian	2	0.4%	28=
Cuban	1	0.2%	41=
East Timorese	15	3.0%	7
Ecuadorian	2	0.4%	28=
Egyptian	1	0.2%	41=
European mixed	1	0.2%	41=
Filipino	12	2.4%	8
French	2	0.4%	28=
Ghanaian	1	0.2%	41=
Guiné-Bissau	9	1.8%	9=
Gypsy	6	1.2%	16=
Gypsy and Irish Traveller	1	0.2%	41=
Indian	37	7.4%	3
Indonesian	1	0.2%	41=
Iranian	8	1.6%	11=
Iraqi	5	1.0%	19=
Irish	1	0.2%	41=
Irish Traveller	63	12.5%	2
Italian	1	0.2%	41=
Jewish	3	0.6%	25=
Jordanian	3	0.6%	25=
Latvian	5	1.0%	19=
Lebanese	2	0.4%	28=
Lithuanian	9	1.8%	9=
Malay	35	7.0%	4
Mexican	2	0.4%	28=
Nigerian	1	0.2%	41=
North American	2	0.4%	28=
Pakistani	6	1.2%	16=
Palestinian	1	0.2%	41=
Peruvian	2	0.4%	28=
Polish	26	5.2%	5

Portuguese	17	3.4%	6
Puerto Rican	1	0.2%	41=
Punjabi	1	0.2%	41=
Roma	6	1.2%	16=
Sierra Leonean	2	0.4%	28=
South African	2	0.4%	28=
Sri Lankan	3	0.6%	41=
Syrian	2	0.4%	28=
Thai	1	0.2%	41=
Ugandan	1	0.2%	41=
White and Asian	5	1.0%	19=
White and Black African	2	0.4%	28=
White and Black Caribbean	2	0.4%	28=
Zimbabwean	7	1.4%	12=

### Racial group

In response to an open question, 59.4% (n=298) of respondents identified their racial group. Thirty-six types of responses were received. They are provided in Table 2.

**Table 2: Racial groups self-identified by some respondents**

<b>Racial group</b>	<b>Percent (of sample)</b>	<b>Rank</b>
African	1.0%	16=
Asian	6.4%	4
Asian mixed	0.7%	20
Bangladeshi	1.0%	16=
Black	4.0%	5
Black African	3.0%	7
Black Latino American	0.3%	27=
Black and minority ethnic group	2.7%	8=
Brown-skinned	0.3%	27=
Caribbean	0.3%	27=
Chinese	30.2%	1
Celtic	0.3%	27=
East Timorese	2.7%	8=
Eurasian	1.3%	14=
European	1.0%	16=
Filipino	0.7%	20=
Human race	0.3%	27=
Indian	3.4%	6
Indian Sikh	0.3%	27=
Iranian	2.0%	11=
Irish Traveller	8.4%	3
Jewish	0.3%	27=
Latino American	2.0%	11=
Malay	2.3%	10
Malaysian	1.0%	16=

Mixed	0.7%	20=
Mixed Caribbean and Irish	0.7%	20=
Mixed Latino American	2.0%	11=
Negroid	0.3%	27=
Pakistani	0.7%	20=
Portuguese	0.7%	20=
Sri Lankan	0.3%	27=
Thai	0.3%	27=
White	16.1%	2
White Latino American	0.7%	20=
White Traveller	1.3%	14=

## Religion

In response to an open question, 78.5% of respondents (n=394) stated their religion. Eighteen religions were mentioned and 14.5% of respondents said they had no religion. The responses are provided in Table 3.

**Table 3: Religion**

Religion	Percent (of sample)	Rank
Ancestral belief	0.5%	10=
Baha'i	2.3%	8
Baptist	0.3%	15=
Buddhist	2.8%	7
Christian	7.4%	4
Church of England	0.3%	15=
Evangelist	0.5%	10=
Hindu	5.6%	5
Jewish	0.8%	9
Methodist	0.5%	10=
Mixed	0.3%	15=
Muslim	22.1%	2
None	14.5%	3
Pentecostal	0.5%	10=
Protestant	3.3%	6
(Roman) Catholic	37.8%	1
Sikh	0.5%	10=
Taoist	0.3%	15=

## Gender

The total sample (n=502) identified themselves by gender, with 49.0% categorising themselves as male, 50.8% as female and 0.2% as 'other'.

## Age

The total sample (n=502) identified themselves by age with the most numerous responses from the following age categories: 21-25, 26-30, 41-45 and 46-50.

### Working status

Working status identifiers were provided by 99.6% of respondents (n=500). Eleven such identifiers were provided. The working status identifiers are provided in Table 5.

**Table 5: Working Status**

<b>Working Status</b>	<b>Percent (of sample)</b>	<b>Rank</b>
Working full-time (30+ hours a week)	46.6%	1
Working part-time (9-29 hours a week)	10.8%	3
Unemployed and seeking work	10.0%	4
Unemployed and not seeking work	2.6%	8
Retired	3.4%	6
Looking after house/children	9.4%	5
Invalidity/disabled	0.6%	10
Student	12.6%	2
Self-employed	2.8%	7
Temporary work	0.2%	11
Voluntary work	1.0%	9

### Job title

Over half or 54.8% of respondents (n=275) described their job. The proportion of questionnaire respondents from each social class is listed in Table 6.

**Table 6: Social Class**

<b>Social Class</b>	<b>Percent (of sample)</b>	<b>Rank</b>
Professionals, chartered people and fully qualified people with a large responsibility	4.0%	6
People with very responsible jobs	13.8%	3=
All others doing non-manual jobs	41.1%	1
Skilled manual workers/craftsmen	13.8%	3=
Semiskilled and unskilled manual workers	16.0%	2
Those on lowest level of subsistence	10.2%	5

### Accommodation

Nearly all the survey respondents, 99.8%, (n=501) specified the type of accommodation they lived in. In this respect, a table with 12 accommodation options, four of which were Traveller or Gypsy specific, was provided. Table 7 shows the details of responses provided.

**Table 7: Accommodation type**

<b>Accommodation type</b>	<b>Percent (of sample)</b>	<b>Rank</b>
Own the property in which I/we live outright.	19.4%	3
Property being bought on a mortgage.	21.2%	2
Rented from the Northern Ireland Housing Executive.	9.2%	4
Rented from a Housing Association.	2.8%	7
Privately rented.	35.3%	1
Accommodation provided by an employer.	3.4%	5
Accommodation provided by an employment agency.	0.4%	10=
A hostel.	0.4%	10=
A legal Traveller site.	2.6%	8
A co-operative Traveller site.	1.8%	9
An unauthorised Traveller site.	3.2%	6
Group housing Traveller site.	0.4%	10=

### Urban/rural location

The research specification required the sample to have regard to urban/rural location. In this respect, 56.2% (n=502) of respondents lived in an urban setting with 43.8% living in a rural area.

### Nationality

A total of 506 responses were provided to the 'nationality' question. This was because some respondents indicated that they had more than one 'nationality'. The most frequent individual answer was 'British citizen' (45.8% of sample), followed by 'Irish citizen' (20.1%), 'EU citizen' (19.1%) and finally 'Commonwealth citizen' (15.7%). Since these are not mutually exclusive categories, the information obtained could not be used to inform further analysis.

## Appendix B – Participation of Minority Ethnic Communities in the Democratic Process Northern Ireland Survey

Final Topline, 20 April 2005

A total of 1,572 questionnaires were distributed.  
Fieldwork took place between 7 January and 6 April 2005.

Where results do not sum to 100, this may be due to:

- the question being only applicable to some respondents (i.e. whether they have answered in the affirmative or negative to a previous question);
- multiple responses;
- computer rounding; or
- the exclusion of don't knows/not stated.

Results are based on all respondents unless otherwise stated.  
 Answers to questions 1 to 21 are presented as whole numbers, rounded to the nearest unit. An asterisk (\*) represents a value of less than one half or one percent, but not zero.  
 The demographic questions are those from 22 to 31. The answers to these questions are rounded to the first decimal point.

### Voting questions

#### Q1. Did you vote in the November 2003 Assembly election?

	%
Yes	19
No	81

#### Q2. Why did you vote?

*Base: All who say they voted in the November 2003 Assembly election.*

	%
I feel it is my duty to vote	13
Good way to have my say	10
My community has been excluded in the past; therefore, it's important for me to vote	4
The political party I support is very active on issues of 'race' relations	3
My local councillor/MLA/MP <sup>17</sup> is very responsive to my needs	3
Know people who are involved in politics	3
Because of an advertising campaign	2
Community organisation encouraged me to use my vote	2
Interested in politics	2
Other (please specify)	0

#### Q3. Why did you not vote?

*Base: All who say they did not vote in the November 2003 Assembly election*

	%
Not registered	43
No candidate represented my views	13
Don't want to take sides in Northern Ireland politics	20
Did not know there was an election	15
Lack of knowledge of the history of Northern Ireland and the political situation	22
Not interested in politics	25
I do not intend to remain in Northern Ireland	9
Doesn't do any good – political parties don't listen to black and minority ethnic communities	16
Political parties are racist	6
Don't know anyone involved in politics	17
Wanted to make a protest statement by not voting	2
Language barriers	12
Religious reasons	2
The parties are all the same	6
Don't know what the parties stand for	19
Did not receive a polling card	12
Don't understand the electoral system	14

<sup>17</sup> MLA: Member of Legislative Assembly (Northern Ireland)  
 MP: Member of Parliament (Westminster)

Northern Ireland politics are not relevant to me	9
Political activity is dangerous	4
Too busy/lack of time	8
Was away on election day	5
Too difficult to get to the polling station	3
Could not be bothered	7
Was not living in Northern Ireland at that time	3
Couldn't vote at that time	1
Was sick	*
Politics in Northern Ireland is sectarian	1

**Q4. Which one statement best describes your attitude to voting in Northern Ireland?**

	%
Have never voted	56
Rarely vote	9
Sometimes vote, depending on circumstances	15
Always vote	10
The first time I voted was during the November 2003 assembly elections	*
Used to vote but no longer vote	3
My vote does not count	2
I do not intend to remain in Northern Ireland	4
Other	*

**Q5. This question is for those who voted in Northern Ireland before. Thinking generally about elections, which one of the following statements would you say is most important for you when you vote?**

*Base: All who say they have voted in Northern Ireland before.*

	%
Understanding the voting system	39
Voting being convenient	12
My vote being safe from fraud and abuse	23
My vote being private	25

**Q6. What can the Electoral Commission do to encourage people in black and minority ethnic communities to vote? Please provide one or more answers.**

	%
Provide information in different languages	56
Explain the importance and benefits of registering and voting to members of black and minority ethnic communities	64
Arrange seminars/education sessions – in different languages, where appropriate – at convenient locations	43
Organise advertising and publicity campaigns to encourage people in black and minority ethnic communities to vote	47
Having minority ethnic candidates	1
Try to appeal to minority ethnic interests or with issues concerning them	2
Simpler registration system	*

**Registration questions**

	%	%
	Yes	No
<b>Q7. Did you know that every individual eligible to vote is required by law to register every year?</b>	48	52
<b>Q8. Are you registered to vote?</b>	40	60

**Q9. Why did you register? Please tick all the answers that apply to you.**

*Base: All who say they have registered.*

	%
A canvasser called at the door	26
Community groups organised sessions to encourage registration	2
I think it is important	16
Political parties came to canvass	2
I wanted to obtain photographic identification	2
The influence of friends/relatives/neighbours	2
Advertising told me it was time to register to vote	6
Registering is compulsory/It's the law	*
To open a bank account	*

**Q10. Which of the following reasons explain why you are not registered to vote? Please tick all the reasons that apply to you.**

*Base: All who say they have not registered.*

	%
Have just moved house	7
Didn't know how to do it/who to contact	29
Didn't know I had to	25
Don't want to/couldn't be bothered	6
Am registered in another country	7
I'm not eligible to vote (can't, don't fall into categories, residency qualification)	5
Haven't got round to it/will do it some time	7
Am not interested in voting so there is no point registering	13
It should be automatic	8
Someone else in my household fills in the form/s in charge of registration	2
Having to produce national insurance numbers	3
Worried private information about me would be misused	5
The guidance leaflet was in the English language	5
Fear of harassment	4
I do not intend to remain in Northern Ireland	6
Filled form in but had no reply	*

#### **Outreach/publicity**

**Q11. Are you aware of any recent campaign which encouraged you to register to vote?**

	%
Yes	39
No	61

**Q12. Can you indicate from the list below which of these methods of advertising you were aware of?**

	%
Television advertisement	30
Radio advertisement	7
Billboards	15
The back or side of buses	8
Local newspapers	10
Regional newspapers	7
Minority ethnic newsletter or website	*
Word of mouth	*
Canvasser calling	*

**Relationship between attitudes to voting and attitudes to political involvement more generally**

**Q13. How interested would you say you are in politics?**

	%
Very interested	10
Fairly interested	27
Not particularly interested	38
Not at all interested	26

**Q14. How relevant are Northern Ireland politics to your concerns or interests?**

	%
Very relevant	17
Sometimes relevant	37
Neither	20
Not relevant	27

	%	%
	Yes	No
<b>Q15. Are you a member of a political party?</b>	1	99
<b>Q16. Have you ever been asked to join a political party?</b>	5	95
<b>Q17. Have you ever tried to join a political party?</b>	1	99

**Q18. Can you name any of your local representatives?**

*Base: All those who can name at least one of their local representatives.*

	%
Councillor	24
Member of the Northern Ireland Assembly	17
Member of Parliament	19

	%	%
	Yes	No
<b>Q19. Are you active in your religious community?</b>	34	66
<b>Q20. Are you active in a community group?</b>	39	61
<b>Q21. Are you active in any kind of political campaign?</b>	3	97

**Demographics**

**Q22. Gender**

	%
Male	49.0
Female	50.8
Other	0.2

**Q 23. Age**

	%
16-20	6.4
21-25	16.7
26-30	14.9
31-35	12.5
36-40	10.6
41-45	13.9
46-50	13.5
51-55	6.4
56-60	2.6
61-65	1.4
66-70	0.6
Over 70	0.4

**Q24. Racial group**

*Base: All those who submitted an answer to this open-ended question.*

	%
African	1.0
Asian	6.4
Asian mixed	0.7
Bangladeshi	1.0
Black	4.0
Black African	3.0
Black Latinoamerican	2.0
Black and minority ethnic group	2.7
Brown-skinned	0.3
Caribbean	0.3
Chinese	30.2
Celtic	0.3
East Timorese	2.7
Eurasian	1.3
European	1.0
Filipino	0.7
Human race	0.3
Indian	3.4
Indian Sikh	0.3
Iranian	2.0
Irish Traveller	8.4
Jewish	0.3
Latinoamerican	2.4
Malay	2.3
Malaysian	1.0
Mixed	0.7
Mixed Caribbean and Irish	0.7
Mixed Latinoamerican	2.0

	Negroid	0.3
	Pakistani	0.7
	Portuguese	0.7
	Sri Lankan	0.3
	Thai	0.3
	White	16.1
	White Latinoamerican	0.7
	White Traveller	1.3

## Q25. Ethnicity

An ethnic group refers to people with:

- a long shared history of which the group was conscious and which distinguished it from other groups; and
- a cultural tradition of its own including family and social customs and manners often but not necessarily associated with religious observance.

		%
Caribbean	Cuban	0.2
	Puerto Rican	0.2
Asian	Bangladeshi	1.4
	Brunei	1.4
	Chinese	27.7
	East Timorese	3.0
	Filipino	2.4
	Indian	7.4
	Indonesian	0.2
	Iranian	1.6
	Malay	7.0
	Pakistani	1.2
	Punjabi	0.2
	Sri Lankan	0.6
	Thai	0.2
Mixed heritage	African mixed	1.4
	Asian mixed	1.0
	Black and Asian	0.2
	European mixed	0.2
	White and Asian	1.0
	White and Black African	0.4
	White and Black Caribbean	0.4
Nomadic peoples	Gypsy	1.2
	Irish Traveller	12.5
	Roma	1.2
	Mixed Gypsy and Irish Traveller	0.2
European	Croatian	0.3
	Cypriot	0.4
	French	0.4
	Irish	0.2
	Italian	0.2
	Latvian	1.0
	Lithuanian	1.8
	Polish	5.2

	Portuguese	3.4
Middle Eastern	Iraqi	1.0
	Jordanian	0.6
	Lebanese	0.4
	Palestinian	0.2
	Syrian	0.4
African	Algerian	0.2
	Angolan	0.2
	Cameroonian	0.2
	Egyptian	0.2
	Ghanaian	0.2
	Nigerian	0.2
	Sierra Leonean	0.4
	South African	0.4
	Ugandan	0.2
	Zimbabwean	1.4
	Guiné-Bissau	1.8
Latin American	Argentinean	0.4
	Brazilian	1.0
	Chilean	0.6
	Colombian	1.0
	Ecuadorian	0.4
	Mexican	0.4
	Peruvian	0.4
North American	American	0.4
Jewish		0.6

**Q26. Nationality**

		%
	British citizen	46
	Irish citizen	20
	Commonwealth citizen	16
	Citizen of a member state of the European Union	19

**Q27. Religion**

*Base: All those who submitted an answer to this open-ended question.* %

	Ancestral belief	0.5
	Baha'i	2.3
	Baptist	0.3
	Buddhist	2.8
	Christian	7.4
	Church of England	0.3
	Evangelist	0.5
	Hindu	5.6
	Jewish	0.8
	Methodist	0.5
	Mixed	0.3
	Muslim	22.1
	None	14.5
	Pentecostal	0.5

Protestant	3.3
(Roman) Catholic	37.8
Sikh	0.5
Taoist	0.3

**Q28. Which of these best describes your working status?**

	%
Working full-time (30+ hours a week)	46.6
Working part-time (9-29 hours a week)	10.8
Unemployed and seeking work	10.0
Unemployed and not seeking work	2.6
Retired	3.4
Looking after house/children	9.4
Invalidity/disabled	0.6
Student	12.6
Self-employed	2.8
Temporary work	0.2
Voluntary work	1.0

**Q29. What is your job title?**

*Base: All those who submitted an answer to this open-ended question.* %

Professionals, chartered people and fully qualified people with a large degree of responsibility	4.0
People with very responsible jobs	13.8
All others doing non-manual jobs	41.1
Skilled manual workers/craftsmen	13.8
Semiskilled and unskilled manual workers	16.0
Those on lowest level of subsistence	10.2

**Q30. Please select from the following what you think is an accurate description of your accommodation.**

	%
Own the property in which I/we live outright	19.4
Property being bought on a mortgage	21.2
Rented from the Northern Ireland Housing Executive	9.2
Rented from a Housing Association	2.8
Privately rented	35.3
Accommodation provided by an employer	3.4
Accommodation provided by an employment agency	0.4
A hostel	0.4
A legal Traveller site	2.6
A co-operative Traveller site	1.8
An unauthorised Traveller site	3.2
Group housing Traveller site	0.4

**Q31. Which of these best describes where you live most of the time?**

	%
Town/city	56.2
Countryside	43.8

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17 'Asian' in this and other publications emerging from England refer to people from the  
18 Indian sub-continent only. This differs from the more accurate and substantially more

- comprehensive interpretation of 'Asian' that is used by the authors of this report. We understand 'Asian' to mean people who have originated from the Asian continent.
- 13 The Electoral Commission (2003) *Attitudes towards Voting and the Political Process* in 2003.
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