

Black and minority ethnic communities' participation in the democratic process in Northern Ireland

The Electoral Commission contracted OMI Consultancy to conduct research into the participation of black and minority ethnic communities in the democratic process in Northern Ireland. The research found that, overall, levels of registration and the propensity to vote amongst these communities was much lower in Northern Ireland than in Great Britain. The research sought to benchmark the participation of black and minority ethnic communities in the democratic process and suggested steps that could be taken to improve levels of registration and voting.

The need for research

The Commission's research report into the impact of the Electoral Fraud (Northern Ireland) Act 2002 found that registration rates were lower among certain groups, including young people and students, people with learning disabilities, people with physical disabilities, people living in areas of higher social deprivation and those living in residential type accommodation.

The Commission was also aware from discussions with community organisations that registration rates among black and minority ethnic (BME) communities in Northern Ireland were considered to be low and this was a cause of concern. As a result, we gave an undertaking to conduct research focusing on the participation of BME communities in the democratic process in Northern Ireland.

Background: the BME population in Northern Ireland

The 2001 Northern Ireland Census recorded a minority ethnic population of 14,272. At the time, this equated to 0.85%

of the total population and identified 11 different 'ethnic categories'. When this figure was published it was considered by many of those working with and representing BME communities to have been an under-estimate of the actual numbers living in Northern Ireland.

For example, in 1997 the Northern Ireland Council for Ethnic Minorities estimated the BME population in Northern Ireland to be around 20,000. A 2003 report by the Multi-Cultural Resource Centre noted that over 70 minority languages were spoken in Northern Ireland and highlighted that the Census recorded only 4,200 Chinese people compared to a more generally accepted estimate of 8,000. In recent years the growing migrant worker population in Northern Ireland has greatly increased the number of people from BME communities living in Northern Ireland.

Research methodology

The research undertaken on behalf of the Commission was both qualitative and quantitative in nature. The researchers

worked closely with groups representing BME communities to ensure hard-to-reach groups within the communities were represented in the research. Over 20 community organisations assisted in the distribution of questionnaires and facilitated a number of focus group discussions. The questionnaire covered a broad range of issues including reasons for registering, attitudes to voting and interest in politics.

Altogether 502 responses to the questionnaire were received representing 59 BME communities. A further 152 people participated in the focus group discussions. Questionnaires were also sent to 17 of the political parties registered in Northern Ireland, with responses received from seven. Existing data and research on the subject was also considered.

Individual registration

The Electoral Fraud (Northern Ireland) Act 2002 fundamentally changed the voter registration system in Northern Ireland. Previously one member of a household, usually the head of household, completed a registration form on behalf of all eligible persons living there. Under the current system all eligible persons are required by law to complete an individual registration form. In Northern Ireland, compilation of the electoral register is the responsibility of the Chief Electoral Officer.

The survey findings revealed that while just under half (48%) of those who responded knew they had to register to vote, only

40% said they were actually registered. Research carried out for the Commission in England and Wales¹ estimates an 83% registration rate among BME groups although registration rates vary considerably among the different communities.

Reasons for registering

The main reason given by just over a quarter of respondents (26%) for registering to vote was that a canvasser from the Electoral Office for Northern Ireland (EONI) had called to their door. A further 16% said they registered because they thought that it was important and 6% had done so as a result of an advertising campaign encouraging people to register. The findings suggest that 'face to face' canvassing by officials from the EONI boosts the numbers of people from BME communities registering and that targeted advertising campaigns are also effective in encouraging registration.

Reasons for not registering

Almost a third (30%) said the reason they had not registered was either that they did not know how to or they were unaware who they should contact to register. A quarter (25%) did not know they had to register and a further 13% said the reason they had not registered was because they were not interested in voting. Other reasons given for not registering included: lack of knowledge or understanding of the registration process; language barriers; lack of trust in the registration process and the fact that some people were registered to vote in their country of origin.

Voting

Almost one in five (19%) of those sampled said they had voted in the November 2003 Assembly election. Among those who were registered, the figure was 48% compared with an overall turnout at the election of 64%.

Reasons for voting

The three main reasons given by people from BME communities for voting were: a feeling that it was their duty to vote, that it was a good way to have a say, and that their community had been excluded in the past and therefore it was important to vote.

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

**Focus group participant,
Belfast**

Some of those surveyed had come from countries where it was compulsory to vote or where there was a strong ethos of voting and they had continued to vote in Northern Ireland. The signing of the Belfast/Good Friday agreement also resulted in some people from BME communities voting for the first time.

Reasons for not voting

Just over four in 10 (43%) said the reason they had not voted was that they were not registered. A quarter (25%) said they were not interested in politics and 22% cited a lack of knowledge of the history of Northern Ireland and the political situation as their reason for not voting. One in five said they did

not want to appear to be taking sides in the politics of Northern Ireland. A common theme that emerged from the focus groups was that people had difficulty in understanding the politics of Northern Ireland.

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 they represent.

**Focus group participant,
Derry**

Lack of engagement between BME communities in Northern Ireland and political parties

The research looked at contact by political parties with BME communities and the efforts made by parties to engage with them.

The political parties that responded to the survey expressed a strong interest in the votes of people from minority ethnic communities. The parties referred to their support for legislation aimed at protecting the rights of BME communities and their involvement in anti-racism work. However, none had specific measures or programmes in

place to encourage people from BME communities to join their party or stand as candidates. The survey and focus group discussions revealed a lack of engagement between representatives of BME communities and political parties. Overall, people from BME communities believed that political parties were generally not interested in their vote. However, a number of examples of positive engagement with individual politicians were recorded. Of the 502 people surveyed, only seven said they were members of a political party, 27 had been asked to join a political party and seven had tried to join a party.

Most of the political parties who responded said they were in contact with people from BME communities through their outreach work. Two parties commented that they thought that people from BME communities were reluctant to get involved in politics.

Minority ethnic people tend to keep their heads down, work hard and let political parties get on with it.

Response from a political party

The research suggests that if closer relationships were developed between political parties, particularly individual political representatives, and BME communities, this could lead to an increase in the numbers of people from those communities both registering and voting in Northern Ireland.

Improving access to the democratic process

The survey and focus group discussions highlighted a need for targeted information on the importance and benefits of registering and voting. There was a consensus among those who took part in the research that provision of information in other languages and a focus on outreach, including seminars and educational sessions, could encourage greater involvement in the democratic process.

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**

Survey respondents thought that consultation should take place with BME communities to determine what materials should be translated into other languages and to examine other ways of tackling language barriers.

Television advertising was considered the most effective in terms of increasing levels of awareness. However, greater consideration of the need to use subtitles as well as advertising which specifically targeted BME communities was considered necessary.

There was a desire on the part of those representing BME communities in Northern Ireland for political parties and politicians to engage with them more extensively, particularly in the period outside of elections.

Conclusion

The registration rate for BME communities living in Northern Ireland is much lower than it is for similar communities living elsewhere in the UK. The main reason given for not registering is a lack of knowledge about how to go about it or who to contact.

Where people had voted it was often out of a sense of duty. By contrast a lack of interest in, and understanding of, politics in Northern Ireland were among the main reasons for not voting.

BME communities said that while there was a lack of engagement between themselves and political parties, there was a willingness on their part for greater involvement in the democratic process. The research has also highlighted the need for enhanced levels of accessible information as well as targeted educational programmes on the importance and benefits of registering and voting.

¹ The Electoral Commission (2005) *Understanding electoral registration: the extent and nature of non-registration in Britain*

Further information

The full report, *Exploring and measuring the attitudes and behaviour of members of minority ethnic communities in Northern Ireland to participating in the democratic process*, is available online from: www.electoralcommission.org.uk

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