Political engagement among black and minority ethnic communities: what we know, what we need to know

Paper prepared for The Electoral Commission's research seminar on 3 November 2003

Laura Richards and Ben Marshall
Address for correspondence:

Laura Richards and Ben Marshall
Research Team
The Electoral Commission
Trevelyan House
30 Great Peter Street
London SW1P 2HW

Tel: 020 7271 0500

e-mail:
lrichards@electoralcommission.org.uk
bmarshall@electoralcommission.org.uk
Introduction

This paper provides an overview of some of the main findings from research projects funded by The Electoral Commission to enhance our understanding of the attitudes of black and minority ethnic (BME) communities to politics, elections and voting. The first section provides a reminder of the report written for us in July 2002 by the University of Manchester – *Voter engagement among black and minority ethnic communities*. We then discuss the findings from academic and public opinion research projects conducted by the Commission since July 2002, including a survey of black Britons in Greater London and the West Midlands to coincide with Black History Month in 2002.

We also look ahead to elections next year – using our latest research report *Public opinion and the 2004 elections* – and consider attitudes among BMEs to electoral modernisation. Recognising the limitations of the some of the research we have at our disposal, Section two of the paper identifies the Commission’s current thinking about future research projects on this issue as well as some of our plans for general election projects.

This paper has been written for delegates of our seminar on 3 November seminar, which we are hope will provide further input into the Commission’s planning of BME research projects next year and beyond. It is available at http://www.electoralcommission.org.uk/elections/research.

1. What we know

The impetus behind *Voter engagement among black and minority ethnic communities*

Prompted by an estimated 2001 general election turnout of 47% among BME communities, and following a tendering exercise, The Electoral Commission retained a team based at the University of Manchester to investigate political engagement among BME communities. This incorporated a literature review and secondary statistical analysis of survey data and led to the publication of *Voter engagement among black and minority ethnic communities* by the Commission in July 2002.

This research project was designed to inform the Commission’s corporate aim to encourage greater participation in, and understanding of, the democratic process. Over the past 18 months, we have developed a research programme with a view to gaining a deeper understanding of the extent and nature of political and electoral participation in the UK. We have also used academic and public opinion research findings to inform the Commission’s policy reviews, support its public awareness campaigns and shape its strategic direction.

The research by the University of Manchester, as well as a similar project to better understand the reasons for lower turnout among younger people (and a project later this year to explore the impact of gender on political participation), reflects the Commission’s recognition that democratic participation will, at least in part, be a

---

product of identity and background. As Karamjit Singh – Electoral Commissioner and chair of the Commission’s research project with the University of Manchester – observed in 2002:

…it would be wrong to seek universal solutions to the problem of voter disengagement. In today’s diverse society, it is vitally important that research and policy responses in this area are sensitive to the different experiences and perceptions of different communities.²

Diversity in disconnection

The need for sensitivity to the needs of different communities was further evidenced by **Voter engagement among black and minority ethnic communities** which reported considerable variation in turnout levels between different BME subgroups, for example, participation among Asian communities is much higher than it is among black Afro-Caribbeans. Turnout among Asian communities has generally risen in the past 40 years but while people of Indian heritage are the most likely to turnout and vote at elections in the UK, other Asian communities such as Bangladeshis and Pakistanis are less likely to vote.

Similarly, non-registration among the BME population – a key obstacle to political participation and possibly as high as 15% in some constituencies – varies considerably among different BME communities. Those of black African heritage have one of the lowest levels of registration in the UK, while registration rates among certain Asian communities are as high, if not higher, than for the white population. Our research found that registration and turnout among BMEs is affected by generic socio-demographic factors including the younger age profile of the BME population and higher than average social and economic deprivation and urbanity. At the same time, concerns about anonymity, fear of harassment, language barriers and alienation from the political system can also dissuade BMEs from registering to vote.

**Voter engagement among black and minority ethnic communities** found several explanations for non-voting at elections including ‘alienation’ – the view that it makes no difference who wins – and ‘apathy’ – the lack of interest in politics. Scepticism about the efficacy of voting, a sense that politics is unrepresentative of BME communities and the inconvenience of voting are also identified as factors explaining non-voting among these groups. A review of the BME media also led the Manchester team to conclude that ‘the vernacular of the BME media is not subject to the same levels of mobilisation as the English-language press’.

After an analysis of 2001 election survey data, no real evidence was found of differential interest in politics or feelings of civic duty among BME communities. Some evidence was found however that dissatisfaction with political parties played a role in depressing turnout among BME communities. Moreover, many of the reasons for low turnout among BMEs were common to UK non-voters as whole – particularly the sense that the election was not a close contest and that the parties were not distinct from each other. The perception that ‘my vote will not make a difference’ was an important factor behind non-voting among all groups, including BMEs.

² The Electoral Commission (2002) **Voter engagement among black and minority ethnic communities**.
From research to action

The central objective of the Voter engagement among black and minority ethnic communities research was to ‘identify key research priorities and make recommendations to inform the ongoing research and voter education programmes of The Electoral Commission and other organisations’. The report identified a number of policy responses and possible policy innovations for increasing engagement among BME communities. These included making registration and voting easier, encouraging political parties and others to review BME representation within UK politics and ensuring public awareness campaigns reflect the diversity of BME communities and their consumption of culture and media.

As well as sharing the research with policy, academic, media and community stakeholders, the Commission has used the report in developing media campaigns specifically targeting BME groups. In 2002 we ran a series of advertisements as part of our Votes Are Power campaign to coincide with Black History Month. These were designed to encourage BME groups to register and to vote at the local elections in England.

Next year we will be underpinning our media campaigns with a new strategy for targeting BME communities in London and across the UK and this will be informed by Voter engagement among black and minority ethnic communities. The research has also provided a useful input into our New Initiatives Fund – which is being used to identify possible solutions to awareness, engagement and participation – as well as our outreach activities.

Research since 2002

Since the publication of Voter engagement among black and minority ethnic communities 2001 Census data has been published. This puts the number of BMEs living in the UK at 7.6% of the total population – about 4.5 million people. In England, the BME population rose from 6% in 1991 to 9% in 2001. The West Midlands contains one of the highest proportions of Asian communities (6.9%) and London’s ethnic mix is much greater than any other part of the UK. The capital’s population includes 28.8% BMEs comprising 10.2% Asian, 10.9% black and 7.7% ‘other’ groups. The Office for National Statistics estimates that the UK population will rise by 10% to 65m over the next 25 years, and the majority of that increase will be due to immigration.

Since 2002, the Commission has conducted a number of research projects covering issues and themes relating to Voter engagement among black and minority ethnic communities including interest in politics, electoral registration and electoral modernisation. In addition, since the report, there have also been elections for the Scottish Parliament and National Assembly for Wales although BME populations there are relatively small at about 2.7% and 1.9% respectively (our statutory reports on the elections are due for publication later this year). European Parliament elections next year will be UK-wide and the area of the UK with the largest BME

---

4 See www.electoralcommission.org.uk/your-vote/newinitiativesfund.cfm.
6 For more on the Census, see http://www.statistics.gov.uk.
constituency – London – also has elections for the London Assembly and the Mayor of London.

In England, turnout at the local council elections in 2002 was 32.8% and a slightly higher 34.9% this year. An NOP survey for the Commission in 2002 found an estimated 24% turnout among BME communities (the research also found that the public sees local elections as less important, less interesting and less likely to affect real change than general elections). A smaller MORI sample survey this year recorded 31% turnout among BMEs in England but this was not a statistically significant difference and is, at best, indicative. MORI were able to conclude that the survey showed that BMEs were:

…more likely to feel strongly that the campaign was dull, with 15% expressing this view compared to 7% overall. Perhaps reflecting their greater disengagement with politics, over one in five BMEs were unable to express an opinion about the campaign.

On our behalf, MORI also asked respondents whether or not they were registered to vote and 93% said yes. However, in line with previous research findings, claimed registration was lower among younger people, those in rented accommodation and among BMEs – 81% compared to 94% among non-BME groups.

Political representation

The last general election returned 12 MPs from BME communities (all representing the Labour Party). These included Paul Boateng who became the first black minister in May 2002, some 110 years after the election of Dadabhai Nairoji – the first BME MP. Following May’s elections there are currently no BME Assembly Members or Members of the Scottish Parliament – and nor were there there after the inaugural 1999 elections. An IDeA/Employers Organisation census of local government councillors found that the number of ethnic minority councillors had fallen from 3% in 1997 to 2.5% in 2001.

Some commentators have suggested that a shortage of BME representatives in UK politics contributes to disconnection among BME communities, a conclusion also reached by the Manchester University team:

…Outside of the debates about representation and identity it is clear that the individuals holding elected office in Parliament fail to reflect the ethnic diversity of the UK population. Any campaign to engage BME voters needs to take account of this, and parties should be encouraged to explore mechanisms to promote a more representative selection of candidates…

---

7 The Electoral Commission (2002) Public opinion and the 2002 local elections. NOP conducted 1,281 interviews between 3-9 May 2002 (and 90 with BME respondents) in areas of England where local elections were held.
8 MORI (2003) Attitudes to voting and the political process. MORI interviewed a representative sample of 1,500 adults across the UK between 2-11 May 2003.
9 The Electoral Commission (2003), Attitudes to voting and the political process.
A Hothouse Market Research survey for the Commission and Operation Black Vote (OBV) undertaken during Black History Month in 2002, found more than four in ten black Britons in Greater London and the West Midlands saying that better representation of black people within politics would be the most important of five factors encouraging them to vote. A further 37% say they want to see more politicians who are in touch with the concerns of black people and, perhaps of most concern, 13% said that nothing would encourage them to vote.

Q Which one of the following conditions would most encourage you to vote at elections?

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Condition</th>
<th>%</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Better representation of black people in politics</td>
<td>43</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Politicians being in touch with the concerns of black people</td>
<td>37</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Making voting easier and more convenient</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>More information about what politicians are doing for black people</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Making it easier to register to vote</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nothing</td>
<td>13</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: Hothouse Market Research for Electoral Commission/OBV
Base: 1,002 black adults in Greater London and West Midlands, 4-9 October 2002

Certainly these sentiments are not unique to BME communities although they were arguably more pronounced among these groups. MORI research for the Hansard Society after the 2001 general election found non-voters keen to see their elected representatives becoming more visible, more in touch and ‘more like me’.

Underpinning this, perhaps, is that different sections of the electorate have different expectations of what it means to be represented. This point was made by Stephen Coleman in A Tale of Two House: The House of Commons, the Big Brother House and the people at home published last summer. Using YouGov opinion polls, Coleman compared ‘BBs’ who regularly watch Big Brother and participate in weekly ‘eviction’ votes but have little or no interest in politics, and ‘PJs’ who are very interested in politics but do not watch Big Brother. He says that:

BBs tend to feel represented by Big Brother, in that it somehow reflects who they are within the world. It represents their reality, as they experience it. PJs prefer to entrust their reality to the mediating services of elected representatives…Big Brother’s claim to represent the public is based on the idea that to represent is to resemble in some way, or to be a microcosm of, that which is being represented; and that to represent is to capture and nurture what is authentic in the represented.

Perhaps the most striking finding of the Commission/OBV survey in 2002 was that while more than six in ten (64%) believed there would never be a black England football team manager, more than nine in ten (94%) said the same of a black Prime Minister. One in three (33%) felt that England would have a black England football

---

12 Hothouse Market Research interviewed 1,002 black adults in Greater London and West Midlands, 4-9 October 2002.
14 S. Coleman (2003) A Tale of Two Houses: The House of Commons, the Big Brother House and the people at home.
team manager in the next 25 years, but only 5% felt that the UK would have a black Prime Minister in the same period. Simon Wooley from OBV responded to these findings by saying:

These findings are a shocking indictment on the political establishment. For so many black people to believe that Britain is a place that will never have a black Prime Minister highlights a community’s frustration that despite the political rhetoric, no progress is taking place.\(^{15}\)

**Attitudes to voting, political interest and the 2004 elections**

Despite the dissatisfaction with representation identified by *Voter engagement among black and minority ethnic communities* and the subsequent Hothouse survey, there is evidence that the BME population has a strong sense that voting is an important civic responsibility. In May 2001, during the general election campaign, three-quarters (76%) of BME respondents agreed that ‘I feel it is my duty to vote’ and nine in ten (89%) disagreed that ‘I don’t think voting is very important’.\(^{15}\) The 2002 Hothouse survey among black Britons found 83% and 75% saying they would rather give up television and their mobile phone respectively than their right to vote (although only 11% said the same about music).

According to a MORI survey for the Commission this year\(^{17}\), there is no statistically significant difference between levels of interest in politics among BMEs and the rest of the population – 53% and 57% respectively say they are ‘fairly’ or ‘very’ interested in politics. However, BMEs were significantly more likely to claim to be ‘not at all interested’ in politics – one in five (21%), compared to one in ten British adults as a whole (11%).\(^{16}\) BME adults were also less interested in local and national issues than adults as a whole: 65% of BMEs are interested in local issues compared to 80% of all adults, while 71% of BMEs have an interest in national issues compared to 82%.\(^{19}\)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Q How interested would you say you are in…</th>
<th>% very/fairly interested</th>
<th>% not particularly/not at all interested</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>All adults</td>
<td>BME</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>…politics</td>
<td>58</td>
<td>58</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>…national issues</td>
<td>82</td>
<td>71</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>…local issues</td>
<td>78</td>
<td>65</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>…news about elections</td>
<td>60</td>
<td>60</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Source: MORI/The Electoral Commission*

*Base: 1,500 UK adults aged 18+, 2-11 May 2003 (169 BME adults)*

Leaving aside differences in the levels of interest in national and local issues (and similar levels of interest in politics and news about elections) between BME and on-BME groups, it is clear there is a disconnection between interest in issues and


\(^{17}\) MORI (2003) *Attitudes to voting and the political process.*

\(^{18}\) The Electoral Commission (2003) *Attitudes to voting and the political process.*

\(^{19}\) *Ibid.*
turning out at elections. This, and other research, suggests ‘a need for politicians and others to make better ‘cause and effect’ connections between elections and policy issues’.20 Certainly this will be important in attempts to communicate the relevance of next year’s European Parliament elections to the UK population (and the London Assembly and mayoral elections to those living in the capital).

The 2004 elections

According to a MORI/Commission poll conducted in April 2003, one third of those living in London are definitely expecting to vote at elections in the capital next year, with whites more likely to vote than Asians and black Africans and Caribbeans having the lowest propensity to vote:

| Q How likely are you to vote in elections for the Mayor of London and London Assembly due to be held on a scale of 1 to 10, where 10 means you would be absolutely certain to vote, and 1 means you would be absolutely certain not to vote? |
|---|---|
| % scoring 10 |
| All adults | 33 |
| White | 36 |
| Asian | 30 |
| Black | 24 |

Source: MORI Base: 440 adults in Greater London, 24-28 April 2003 and 8-12 May 2003

An analysis of past turnout data, demographic data and surveys reporting current propensity to vote, led Professors Rallings and Thrasher and MORI to conclude that:

Ethnicity too, may affect turnout. Rates among some Asian groups may be high but lower among African and black Caribbeans. In areas like the North East and Scotland the Census finds small proportions of non-white residents. In the West Midlands overall turnout may be higher because of the high proportions of Asian electors.

London has a complex ethnic mix...Ethnicity is likely to have a neutral impact upon turnout overall, but may have some local impact. The Brent and Harrow constituency has 13% black and 23% Asian residents. In Bexley and Bromley, the population is overwhelmingly white. Neighbouring regions and constituencies could have sharply different experiences in turnout.21

As part of our Public opinion and the 2004 elections research, focus group participants were presented with a series of boards featuring different messages about voting to explore general attitudes towards voting and what might be used to encourage people to vote next year. The messages were included within three broad headings – voting as ‘a duty’, an opportunity to ‘make your voice heard’ and to ‘have an influence’ – and the group participants’ reaction to these is written up extensively in Public opinion and the 2004 elections. While there were few differences among participants of different ethnic backgrounds, MORI report that the idea of voting as a way of ensuring that everyone has an equal say in how the country is run had particular resonance with those from BME communities.

The authors of *Public opinion and the 2004 elections* identify several key challenges for those involved in mobilising the electorate to vote next June. These include deep-rooted scepticism about politics and the impact of voting and significant ‘information gaps’ about the institutions in question, their performance to date and the issues at stake next year. All of this raises several issues for those stakeholders interested in facilitating greater engagement with, and participation in, the political process – issues we explore further in *Turnout, attitudes to voting and the 2003 elections.*

**Can electoral modernisation make a difference?**

Since 2000 there have been over a hundred pilot schemes trialling new ways of voting including all-postal voting, voting by telephone, via the internet, digital TV and using kiosks. All-postal schemes have delivered real and sustained improvements to turnout by making the process of voting more convenient – although the potential impact of this should not be over-estimated. To inform our statutory evaluation of pilot schemes this year we used public opinion surveys to understand the public’s response to new voting arrangements. The BME population in pilot areas was more likely to be negative about the new arrangements than non-BME groups – 48% said they thought that these new arrangements had made the process of voting better, compared with an overall figure of 56%. However, this is a relative difference and BME respondents are, in absolute terms, positive about the new arrangements. They were also as likely as other respondents to claim that these had a positive impact on their decision to vote (31% and 30% respectively).

Of all the new methods piloted at the May elections, all-postal voting and telephone voting seem to be the most popular among BMEs, with these methods being rated most highly in terms of convenience and ease of use. The preference among BMEs for postal voting is reaffirmed by 60% saying they would be interested in requesting a postal vote, compared with only 48% of non-BME groups. Again, however, low awareness of electoral arrangements stands as a barrier to this interest being translated into action, with 60% of BMEs unaware that the law already allows postal voting ‘on demand’.

**2. What we need to know**

*Voter engagement among black and minority ethnic communities* identified a ‘lack of reliable and compelling survey evidence regarding BME turnout and what would improve it’ and outlines a number of research priorities for the future. The research done by the Commission and others since the publication of *Voter engagement among black and minority ethnic communities* has contributed to our collective evidence-base but has had some limitations, particularly in terms of sample size.

Several forthcoming Commission research projects will help us to meet the suggested research priorities identified in *Voter engagement among black and minority ethnic communities*. We are currently scoping a project to understand the

---

24 MORI (2003) *Attitudes to voting and the political process*.
25 Ibid.
extent and nature of non-registration in the UK. We are also exploring the possibility of a project involving comparative research (drawing upon international and domestic case studies) with the aim of identifying best practice examples of parties engaging with the public. In doing so, we will seek to identify best practice in engaging with certain groups including BME communities.

Next year we will conduct a post-election survey and focus group programme across the UK, including London with its significant BME population. This will help us to understand public attitudes towards the 2004 elections and will inform our statutory report on these.

We also recognise the media’s contribution to mobilisation of the electorate and through research projects and seminars will attempt to better understand what is being done and what could be done in relation to this. Next year we plan to review the voter education strategies used across the European Union and will want to consider how these have been targeted at certain electoral groups such as young people and BME communities.

We are conscious of the need for larger ‘dedicated’ sample surveys among the BME population in preference to conducting basic ‘booster’ samples alongside surveys of the general public. Such an approach would allow more robust analysis at the aggregate level while enabling us to be sensitive to the diversity among different BME communities.

Beyond the projects we plan to do this year and next, and looking ahead to the next general election, we are interested in conducting a ‘dedicated’ BME public opinion research project. This might involve a large sample survey as a component of our post-election opinion research and to complement anything being done as part of the British Election Survey programme.

We also recognise the importance of exploring new research techniques – for example, election diaries, longitudinal surveys, re-convened focus groups and ethnographical research – and considering their use to better understand attitudes towards politics and voting among BME and other groups.

Conclusion

In this paper we have summarised the main findings from Voter engagement among black and minority ethnic communities and subsequent research done by the Commission. Such research has been useful in its own right, but has also proved invaluable as we develop advertising campaigns and outreach activities designed to boost participation. The research has also been effective in acting as something of a ‘call to arms’ for stakeholders.

Looking ahead, and with an eye on the next general election in particular, we are keen to supplement the research done by the Commission and others with ‘dedicated’ BME public opinion research projects involving larger sample surveys. We are also open to the ideas and suggestions of others and hope that this seminar will be particularly productive in this regard.