

Ethnic Minorities at the 2017 British General Election

Nicole Martin and Omar Khan

Summary

- **Labour remained the most popular party among ethnic minority voters in both 2017 and 2015, receiving 77% of ethnic minority votes in 2017.**
- **Ethnic minority voters made up 1 in 5 of Labour voters, but only 1 in 20 of Conservative voters.**
- **More ethnic minority voters supported Brexit in 2016 than the Conservative party in 2015 or 2017.**
- **There are double the number of ethnic minority MPs in 2017 compared with 2010.**

Introduction

Between 2015 and 2017, race and immigration were never far from the political agenda, from Ed Miliband's surprise defeat in 2015 to the calling of the 2017 snap election. Jeremy Corbyn was elected leader of the Labour party, with credentials from his anti-war and anti-racism campaigning as an activist backbencher. Public concern about immigration peaked in the year before the Brexit referendum, which was held in the wake of the European refugee crisis. During the referendum campaign the Labour MP Jo Cox was murdered by someone with far-right links, and reported hate crimes rose after the referendum. In the same year, London's first Muslim mayor was elected. Meanwhile, the policy decisions that would become the Windrush scandal were implemented, and the Race Audit revealed inequalities that ethnic minorities are familiar with.

The 2017 general election has been characterised as the 'Brexit election', where the values divide evident in the referendum challenged economic left-right concerns, and some voters switched their party based on their preference for a cosmopolitan or a traditionalist Britain. But what do we know about how ethnic minorities voted in the 2017 general election? This briefing seeks to shed some light on these important issues. What proportion of the electorate belong to an ethnic minority group? Which parties do black and minority ethnic (BME) voters support, and how has this changed? And how did Brexit change all of this, if at all?

How many ethnic minority voters are there? Eligibility and registration

To understand the potential electoral effects of ethnic minority political choices, we need to know three things: how many people from ethnic minority backgrounds are eligible to vote, how many are registered (electors), and how many actually go

to vote? There are no official estimates of the ethnic minority electorate in 2017. We estimate that around 11% of people eligible to vote in the 2017 general election were from an ethnic minority background. In line with the national population, British Asians are a larger share of this group than black British people – our estimates suggest that for every eligible black person there were two Asian people who were eligible to vote in 2017. Registration rates are lower among ethnic minorities – according to the Electoral Commission, in December 2015, 76% of the black population who were eligible to vote were on the electoral register, compared with 80% of British Asians. This compares with 85% of white people.¹ Allowing for these registration differences, we estimate that 10% of the 2017 electorate were from a minority background. This is 4.8 million potential minority voters. To put this in context, Scotland as a whole had 4.1 million electors in the same general election.

Turnout

These are only potential voters, though. What really matters – both to politicians deciding policies, and in terms of who wins the election – is whether people actually make it to the polling station. Unfortunately, data on this is especially patchy. Since 2010, we have known that ethnic minorities on the electoral register are just as likely as white British electors to vote – although there is some evidence that black Caribbean and black African voters have slightly lower turnout.² Data from 2017 suggests that this is still true. *Understanding Society* data overestimates turnout for all groups, but suggests that black electors are slightly less likely to vote than white British and South Asian electors.³ It appears that 2017 confirmed that the (modest) gap in electoral participation between white British and ethnic minority citizens is explained by registration rates, not turnout.

Vote choice: Labour are still ahead by a long way

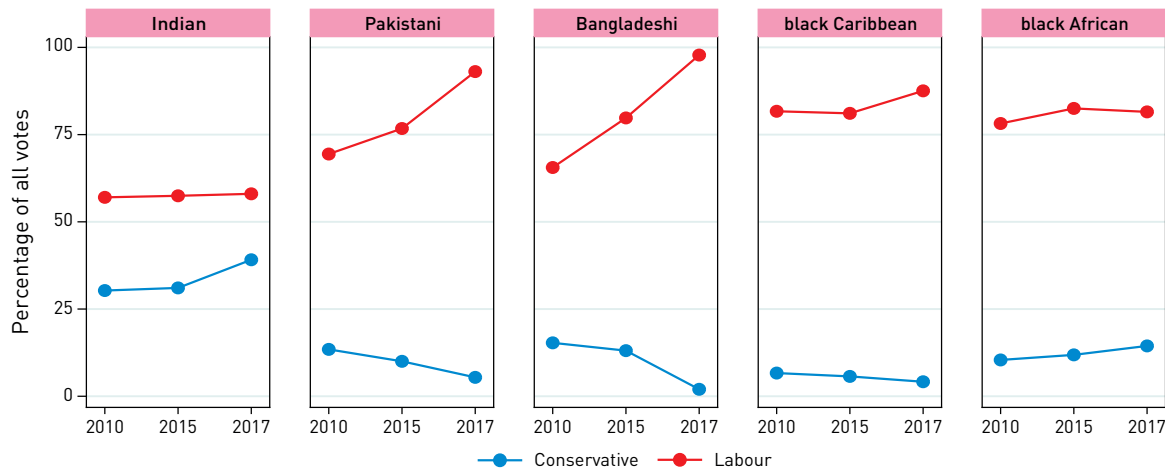
How did the parties do among ethnic minority voters in 2017? The Labour party has traditionally received the lion's share of votes from ethnic minorities, although this tendency has

¹ Electoral Commission (2016) *The December 2015 Electoral Registers in Great Britain*.

² Heath, A.F., Fisher, S.D., Sanders, D. and Sobolewska, M. (2011) 'Ethnic heterogeneity in the social bases of voting at the 2010 British general election', *Journal of Elections, Public Opinion and Parties* 21(2): 255–277.

³ The estimated 95% confidence intervals for self-reported turnout in 2017 from *Understanding Society* data are 74–91% for South Asians, 51–85% for black Caribbeans and Africans, and 82–83% for white British. These are much higher than official turnout figures because surveys like *Understanding Society* tend to interview more people who are politically interested.

Figure 1: Labour and Conservative vote shares among different minority groups in 2010, 2015 and 2017



lessened since 1997, when 80–90% of ethnic minority voters voted Labour. This pattern was repeated in the 2017 general election: Labour received 77% of ethnic minority votes, with 20% going to the Conservatives and 3% to other parties.⁴ Labour did especially well among Muslim voters in 2017; in 2015, Labour received 74% of votes from British Muslims – in 2017, this had risen to 87%. We can see this in Figure 1, which plots Labour and Conservative vote shares from the *Understanding Society* survey among different minority groups; Bangladeshi and Pakistani support for Labour increased from the high 70s to the mid-90s. This is reflected in constituency results – Labour’s vote increased by 12 percentage points in constituencies where more than 4% are Muslim, compared to an average of 10 percentage points elsewhere in England and Wales.⁵

To understand the importance of this, we can compare ethnic background to other common demographic predictors of vote choice. In 2017, 77% of ethnic minority votes were for the Labour party and 20% for the Conservatives, compared to 37% and 45% for white British voters respectively. Labour had an advantage of 56 points over the Conservatives among minority voters, and white British voters were over twice as likely to support the Conservatives than ethnic minority voters. This far outstrips the 10 point advantage to Labour among degree holders, or their 13 point advantage among those in routine occupations. In 2017, the size of the gap between ethnic minority and white voters was almost matched by that between age groups – Labour had a 32 point advantage among 18–30 year olds, compared to a 25 lead for the Conservatives among 61–80 year olds. As in previous elections, ethnicity remained one of the most stark electoral divisions in 2017.

There was a corresponding decrease in the Conservative vote share among most minorities in 2017, but not of the same magnitude as the rise in Labour’s vote share. This is because the number of third-party voters declined in 2017 among minorities too – just as in the electorate as a whole. Instead of the collapse of the UKIP vote, however, for minorities it was the Liberal Democrats who had previously taken the majority

of third-party votes.⁶ A substantial minority of Muslim voters switched their vote from Labour to the Liberal Democrats in 2005 after the Liberal Democrats were the only party which officially opposed the war in Iraq, and although many switched back in 2010 and 2015 (see below), it might be that Jeremy Corbyn’s well-known opposition to the war in Iraq, along with his status as an anti-racism campaigner, attracted back some Muslim voters who had previously supported the Liberal Democrats or other independents.

One minority group did noticeably increase its support for the Conservatives in both 2017 and 2015 – British Indians, and Hindus in particular. From 30% in 2010, the Conservatives share of the votes of British Indians went up to 40% in 2017. This increase is steady across elections, supporting the idea that it is built on underlying demographic changes combined with sustained campaigning by the Conservatives. Hindus are the ethnic minority group that most fits the stylised story of generational political change in Britain. As this electorate is increasingly made up of the UK-born children of immigrants, rather than their parents, who faced more discrimination on arrival and tend to be employed in working-class occupations, Hindu voters have become more similar to right-wing white voters: more middle-class, more suburban, wealthier. The fact that this demographic story applies to other minority groups too, however, suggests that it is also the campaigning and policy choices of parties that are driving this relationship. Conservatives might also take heart in the small but statistically significant increase in their support among black Africans since 2010, from 11% to 14% (although the vast majority of people from this ethnic background still support Labour).

Vote choice in context: what happened between 2015 and 2017?

How does this compare with the 2015 general election? If the 2017 general election can be characterised as Labour winning back Muslim voters from the Liberal Democrats and elsewhere, 2015 might be best characterised as an apparent standstill for Labour and Conservative as the two largest parties.

⁴ Data from *Understanding Society*.

⁵ Curtice, J., Fisher, S.D., Ford, R. and English, P. (2018) ‘Appendix 1: The results analysed’, in Cowley, P. and D. Kavanaugh, *The British General Election of 2017*, Palgrave Macmillan: Basingstoke p.458.

⁶ Most ethnic minority voters live in England and Wales, so the SNP is less relevant to this electorate.

In 2015, it was thought that the Conservatives had broken through with ethnic minority voters. This was important because attracting new, younger minority voters was a bellwether for the broader Conservative modernisation project. Conservative strategists had long argued that there was a potential pool of ethnic minority Tory voters who had conservative views on both economic and social matters. Recent research shows, however, that the poll which suggested the Conservative breakthrough was mistaken, because the people who participated were not representative.⁷ Once this was corrected for, what had looked like a bang became a whimper: the Conservatives had managed to gain a few more votes from British Indians in 2015 – in particular from Hindus – but Labour had maintained their high vote shares among other minority groups, and gained some new voters. This is because twice as many ethnic minorities who had voted for the Liberal Democrats in 2010 moved to Labour in 2015 than moved to the Conservatives. The other beneficiary of the Liberal Democrats' 2015 collapse – UKIP – unsurprisingly did not do well among ethnic minority voters.

So what does this tell us about the 2017 election? Prior to the 2015 general election, the Conservative party had made a concerted effort to appeal to minority voters: ministers were instructed to go to community events and places of worship, minority MPs were promoted to cabinet roles, and a number of symbolic policy announcements were made, signalling a greater willingness on the part of the party to address concerns specific to minority Britons. These included targets to increase the number of BME people in employment, apprenticeships, university, receipt of business loans, and the police and Armed Forces. The 2014 budget reversed an increase on air passenger duty for flights to the Caribbean, and the government also extended the exemption that permits Sikhs to wear turbans to more places of work where hard hats are required. Nevertheless, the Conservatives gained few new minority voters in 2015.

Similar efforts can be seen in 2017. Theresa May's 'burning injustices' speech took up a similar theme, and the Race Audit highlighted Britain's harshest ethnic inequalities. However, this focus was less central in 2017, and other factors – such as Brexit, public spending cuts (ethnic minorities are still more likely to live in poverty, and are worst affected by budget decisions⁸), or what would emerge as the Windrush scandal – might have pushed potential minority Conservatives further away from the party. An important source of votes for the Conservatives in 2017 was mobilising pro-Brexit voters, including those from other parties. As the next section explores, this was not a good strategy to win more votes from minorities.

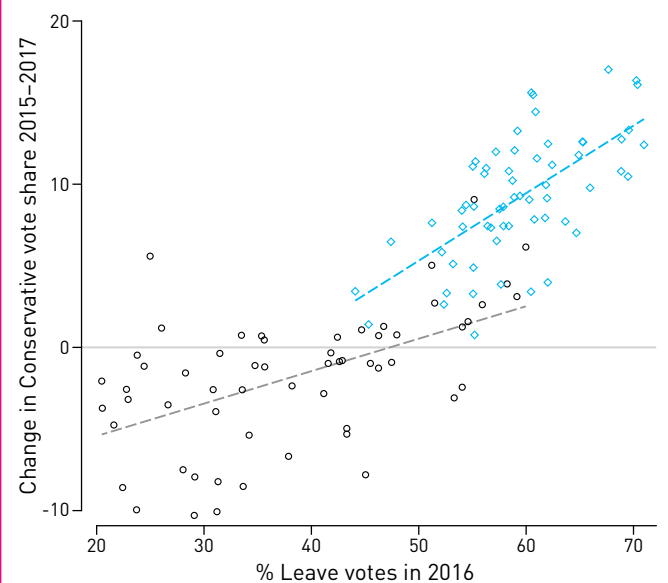
Brexit: did the Conservatives convert ethnic minority Leave supporters into new votes?

The 2017 general election was held in the shadow of the 2016 referendum. The Conservatives' campaign sought to portray Theresa May as the strong and reliable leader who would deliver Brexit. Although over the course of the campaign other issues came to the fore, voters from all parties sorted themselves according to their position on the 2016 issue,

with the Conservatives attracting those who had voted Leave – especially former UKIP voters – and Labour gaining some Remain votes. Did these dynamics also apply to ethnic minority voters? The number of minorities who supported Brexit but not the Conservatives previously was substantial. Ethnic minority support for Brexit is often underestimated. Although minorities were on average pro-Remain – around one-third supported Leave⁹ – their support for Brexit was around 50% higher than the Conservatives' vote share in the 2010 and 2015 elections. That is, (many) more ethnic minority voters supported Leave in the EU referendum than have ever voted for the Conservative party. So, can we tell if Brexit made any minority voters change their vote from 2015 to 2017?

There are two bits of evidence that suggest they did not. First, as already seen above, the Conservatives did not experience an increase in their vote share among ethnic minorities from 2015 to 2017. Although the group that increased their support for the Conservatives was the most Eurosceptic (see Box: *How many ethnic minority voters supported Brexit?*), Hindu support for the Conservatives also increased from 2010 to 2015, when Europe was much less salient. It is more likely that this change was due to other non-Brexit reasons. Second, although the Conservatives tended to gain more votes in constituencies with more Leave voters, this is not so true in seats with many minority voters. You can see this in Figure 2: in the 10% most-diverse seats in England (the black circles and grey line), the relationship between Leave support and Conservative vote change from 2015–17 is not very strong – for every 10-point increase for Leave in 2016, the Conservatives gained 0.25 points from 2015 to 2017. However, in the 10% least-diverse seats (blue diamonds and blue line), the Conservatives gained more votes in seats where Leave did better – a 10-point increase in Leave support here meant a 2-point increase in Conservative votes in 2017. Conversely,

Figure 2: Change in Conservative vote share in England in 2015–17 by Leave votes in 2016, in (i) the 10% most-diverse constituencies (black circles and grey line), and (ii) the 10% least-diverse constituencies (blue diamonds and blue line)



⁷ Martin, N.S. (2019) 'Ethnic minority voters in the UK 2015 general election: A breakthrough for the Conservative party?' *Electoral Studies* 57: 174–185.

⁸ Runnymede and Women's Budget Group (2017) *Intersecting Inequalities: The Impact of Austerity on Black and Minority Ethnic Women in the UK*, Runnymede Trust and WBG, London.

⁹ Martin, N.S., Sobolewska, M. and Begum, N. (2019) 'Left out of the left behind: Ethnic minority support for Brexit', University of Manchester, <https://ssrn.com/abstract=3320418>.

How many ethnic minority voters supported Brexit?

It's hard to get reliable estimates on this – all the post-election surveys overestimate Remain support, and most have far too few minority respondents to give a definitive answer. The only survey that does – *Understanding Society* – measured people's opinion rather than their vote choice or turnout. Nevertheless, we can be sure that BME support for Brexit was much lower than white British support. *Understanding Society* suggests that 71% of ethnic minorities supported Remain; the British Election Study Internet Panel (BESIP) figure was 67%, and the British Social Attitudes study reported 68%. One consistent finding across surveys is that Indians and black Caribbeans were more pro-Brexit than other minority groups; in *Understanding Society*, British Indians were 67% in favour of Remain, as were 66% of black Caribbeans. Other minority groups ranged from 74% to 75% in favour of Remain. The same pattern was evident in the BESIP data (although the sample size is smaller): 65% of Indians and 63% of black Caribbeans voted Remain, compared with 67% to 76% among other minority groups. All surveys over-represent Remainers, so these should be considered as estimates at the upper end.

Labour gained fewer voters as the Remain vote increased in more diverse areas. So, there is little evidence that the greater ethnic diversity of the Leave vote translated into changes in voting patterns. Indeed, it might be that the Conservative's issue ownership over Brexit cost them ethnic minority votes, just as it cost them white university-educated voters.

This is interesting; the Leave campaign – as divisive and nativist as parts of it were – managed something in a couple of years that the Conservative party has not yet achieved in decades of trying. Any party which wishes to attract new ethnic minority voters could look at the successes of the Leave campaign in this regard. However, in contrast to the rest of the electorate, voters' realignment along Brexit and age lines did not help the Conservatives among minorities – there are still more minority voters who supported Leave than who voted Conservative in 2017. Politicians who are interested in the age divide which dominated discussion of the election should bear in mind that minority voters are over-represented among the young.

Ethnic minority representatives in 2017

The 2017 Parliament has a record number of ethnic minority MPs, at 52 – almost twice as many as the 27 elected to the 2010–15 Parliament. Both Labour and the Conservatives selected more minority candidates: 10% of Labour's candidates were from an ethnic minority background in 2017 (8% in 2015), as were 7% of the Conservatives' candidates (9% in 2015). Both parties stood BME candidates more often in areas with more-diverse electorates – but this was especially the case for Labour: 83% of Labour's BME candidates were in seats

with higher-than-average ethnic diversity, compared with 64% of BME Conservative candidates. Despite standing fewer minority candidates than in the previous election, however, the Conservatives increased their number of BME MPs from 17 to 19. This greater diversity of candidates and MPs is welcome, and shows that the trend of putting minority candidates in winnable seats has continued. This might be due to the stronger hand taken in the selection of the 2017 candidates – faced with the short election cycle, Conservative Party Headquarters allocated candidates to constituency shortlists.¹⁰ This might have made it easier to adopt the policy of including BME candidates on shortlists in safe seats. Nevertheless, there is some evidence that minority candidates faced some bias at the ballot box: the Conservative party gained 1 percentage point fewer votes on average where they stood a minority candidate in 2017 but not in 2015, and gained 3 percentage points more on average where they stood a minority candidate in 2015 but not in 2017.¹¹

Conclusions

The 2017 Parliament is the most ethnically diverse on record; yet this change in who our representatives are has not been matched by changes in ethnic minority voting patterns. The Conservatives still find it extremely hard to win in seats with more than 30% non-white British residents – in 2017, they won just 16 of these 110 seats, down from 24 in 2015 and 27 in 2010. If the Conservatives had done just as well in these particular seats as in 2015, they would have kept their majority. Of course, this may have come at the cost of losing voters elsewhere. As this briefing suggests, this might be a consequence of fighting the election on a pro-Brexit platform. However, the greater success of the Leave campaign among minorities shows that it is possible to campaign on values and positions more associated with the Conservatives, and still win a good number of ethnic minority votes.

Parties should also be careful that micro-targeting does not become a self-fulfilling prophecy; although short-term gains among one minority group might be helpful in winning the closest election, it will not necessarily succeed in building lasting relationships with voters. It is possible that local Conservative engagement with Hindu nationalism gained them a few votes in the 2016 London mayoral election – but equally possible that this was a contributing factor in losing some votes from British Muslims in 2017. Meanwhile, Labour in the past has suffered from the perception that minority voters are taken for granted – for instance, this dissatisfaction contributed to George Galloway's 2012 win in Bradford West.

In 2017, 1 in 5 of Labour's voters were from an ethnic minority background; for the Conservatives it was 1 in 20. This is the same as in the 2010 general election. In this remarkable period of political change, ethnic minority voting patterns have changed little. However, changes at the margins – increasing Conservative support among Hindus, and more Muslims voting for the Labour party – suggests that demography need not be destiny.

¹⁰ Cowley, P. and Kavanaugh, D. (2018) *The British General Election of 2017*, Palgrave Macmillan, Basingstoke.

¹¹ Curtice, J., Fisher, S.D., Ford, R. and English, P., 'Appendix 1: The Results Analysed'.