

Diversity and Democracy: Race and the 2015 General Election

Summary

- In 2015, Labour remained the first preference for most Black and minority ethnic voters, with around 60% choosing Labour. The Conservatives have increased their vote share significantly, from around 16% in 2010 to over 25% in 2015
- The Liberal Democrats got around 5% of the BME vote, and the Greens less. Only 2% of BME voters chose UKIP
- There is increasing variation in how different ethnic minority groups vote, as well as regional differences
- There are now 41 BME MPs, a significant rise, suggesting a future BME Prime Minister could now be sitting in Parliament
- The success of Britain's democracy depends not only on BME voter participation and representation, but on policymakers responding to ethnic inequalities

Introduction

The 2015 General Election saw the Conservative Prime Minister David Cameron returned with his party's first overall majority since John Major's win in 1992. Before the election, Runnymede published a volume, '[Race and Elections](#)', indicating the increasing importance of Black and minority ethnic (BME) voters. This briefing updates those findings with the 2015 election results.

Historically BME voters have been very strong supporters of the Labour Party, with as many as 90% choosing Labour until the 1990s. In the 2010 General Election, [68% of BME voters](#) supported the Labour Party, compared to 16% supporting the Conservatives, and 14% supporting the Liberal Democrats.

Contrary to some expectations before the election, we expect that the Labour party maintained most of its support among BME voters, with indications that around 60% still support Labour. This is because Labour increased its vote share significantly more (over 10%) in its most diverse seats, compared to their overall increase of just 1.5%. The Conservatives appear to have increased their vote significantly, to perhaps 25-30%, while the Liberal Democrats are unlikely to have won more than 5% of the BME vote in 2015.

To put these numbers in context, overall the Conservative vote share increased by 0.8% to 36.9%, while the Labour vote went up by 1.5% from 28.9% to 30.4%. The Liberal Democrat vote share plummeted 15.2% to 7.9%, a two-thirds decline in their vote share.

BME Voting in the UK's Most Diverse Seats

By contrast, in the top 25 most diverse seats the Labour vote share went up by 11%, compared to a Conservative decline of -0.9% and a Liberal Democrat decline of -14.8%. This suggests an increase on the Labour BME vote share, no overall improvement (and perhaps a slight decline) for the

Table 1. Top 15 Labour vote share increases in diverse seats, 2015

Constituency	Labour increase	Minority population
Birmingham, Hall Green	26.9%	64%
Brent Central*	20.9%	61%
Poplar and Limehouse	18.6%	57%
Bethnal Green and Bow	18.3%	53%
Birmingham, Ladywood	18.0%	73%
Walthamstow	17.0%	53%
Manchester, Gorton	17.0%	48%
Birmingham, Hodge Hill	16.4%	64%
Leyton and Wanstead	15.0%	51%
Ilford South	14.6%	76%
Leicester South	14.2%	51%
Bradford East	13.8%	47%
Bermondsey and Old Southwark*	13.8%	42%
Ealing Southall	13.5%	70%
Ealing Central and Acton*	13.1%	37%

* = Labour gain

Conservatives, and a sharp decline for the Liberal Democrats. It is significant that Labour increased their share in seats where they already had very safe majorities, with Table 1 showing the largest increases in their diverse seats.

For the next 50 most diverse seats (ranked 26th to 75th in BME population), a similar pattern emerges. We have analysed these top 75 most diverse seats because their large BME populations make us more certain of the significance and direction of any BME vote change, and because together these seats represent half of the UK's overall BME population (i.e. just over 4 million out of a total of just over 8 million). In other words, they are a good guide to BME voting behaviour in the UK overall.

In the UK's 75 most diverse seats (all in England), the Labour vote went up 8.4%, the Conservative vote down very slightly (-0.2%), with the Liberal Democrats declining by -14.9%. This latter figure represents a vote loss of nearly 75% of 2010 Liberal Democrat voters in the UK's most diverse areas, and suggest that the BME vote share for the Liberal Democrats may now be below 4% (compared to the 14% share they won in 2010). If these figures were to be extended across the UK, we might expect the following vote share figures: Labour (75%); Conservatives (16%); Liberal Democrat (4%); Other (<5%). As a result, Labour now hold 48 of the top 50 most diverse seats (all but Harrow East and Hendon). And if we look at Labour gains, we find that many were in seats with large BME populations: Brentford and Isleworth (10.2% increase; 42% BME population); Ilford North (9.6% increase; 47% BME); Birmingham, Yardley (9.4% increase, 34% BME); Enfield North (5.2% increase; 32% BME); and Wolverhampton South West (4.2% increase; 36% BME).

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Table 2: Top 75 most diverse seats, change in vote share by party

	Lab change since 2010	Con change	LD change
Seats 1-25 (51-77% BME)	10.9%	-0.9%	-14.8%
Seats 26-50 (39-50% BME)	7.4%	-0.5%	-14.4%
Seats 51-75 (30-39% BME)	6.7%	0.7%	-15.6%
Seats 1-75	8.4%	-0.2%	-14.9%

Table 3. Ten Most Diverse Seats with Conservative MPs

Rank	Seat (BME%)	MP	Con share since 2010	Lab share since 2010
13	Harrow East (60.8)	Bob Blackman	5.7	3.1
35	Hendon (45.1)	Matthew Offord	6.7	-0.6
51	Croydon Central (38.6)	Gavin Barwell	3.6	9.1
62	Finchley & Golders Green (33.6)	Mike Freer	4.9	6.1
67	Kensington (32.1)	Victoria Borwick	2.2	5.6
70	Cities of London and Westminster (31.5)	Mark Field	5.2	1.9
74	Uxbridge & South Ruislip (30.1)	Boris Johnson	2.0	3.0
75	Enfield, Southgate (30.0)	David Burrowes	-0.1	6.8
79	Ruislip, Northwood and Pinner (29.6)	Nick Hurd	2.1	0.6
82	Chipping Barnet (28.2)	Theresa Villiers	-0.2	8.9

Variation in BME Vote Choice

The vote share in more diverse seats is likely to overstate Labour's level of support, and understate Conservative support among BME voters. A [Survation Poll for British Future](#) suggests that 52% of voters supported the Labour party, and 33% supported the Conservatives in 2015, with 5% each voting Liberal Democrat and Green and 2% voting UKIP. Other polls from the British Election Study and [Ipsos MORI](#) concur with the Green, Liberal Democrat and UKIP vote share, but put the Labour vote over 60% and the Conservative share in the low 20s. This is, however, still a significant rise from the 16% vote share they received in 2010. Given their national vote share was 7.9%, the Liberal Democrats probably secured no more than 5% of the BME vote.

While Labour's share of the BME vote held up in 2015, this is partly because of the Liberal Democrat decline, a point that also highlights the role of area or place of residence in BME voting patterns. In much of England the Conservatives were the main beneficiaries of the Liberal Democrat collapse, but in urban seats with large BME populations, the vote appears to have turned more to Labour. It appears unlikely that many BME voters who supported the Conservatives in 2010 transferred their allegiance to Labour in 2015. Instead, with [Survation polling](#) suggesting one in six London Labour supporters in 2010 voted Conservative in 2015, and British Future findings of a strong London BME performance for the Conservatives, it appears some BME Londoners switched to the Tories in 2015.

Even in areas with large BME populations, there were places where the Conservatives did hold on to and even increase their BME vote share. Although they lost five of their nine most diverse seats, they held on to the others, including Harrow East, Croydon Central, Hendon, and Finchley and Golders Green. In these London constituencies, the standing Conservative MPs increased their vote share, though as Table 3 indicates, the Labour vote share often went up by even more. There are key lessons for the Conservatives (and indeed Labour) in these seats, and in Ilford North, Ealing Central and Acton and Brentford and Isleworth where Labour increased their vote share to take some of their few seats from the Conservatives, despite these being notionally further down their target list in terms of the size of the 2010 majority.

Somewhat related to area differences are significant differences in how particular ethnic groups vote. Generally speaking, Indian Hindus are most likely to vote Conservative, with more anecdotal evidence that Chinese groups are also more inclined

towards the Tory party. A plausible reason for this is their greater success in the labour market, or the relatively higher earnings and home ownership among these groups.

Even in 2010, support for Labour was [under 50% for East African Asians](#), compared to 87% for Black Africans, although it was still over 60% for the five largest BME groups in Britain (Indian, Pakistani, Bangladeshi, Caribbean and African). As then, we anticipate that most groups were still more likely to vote Labour in 2015, but with much greater variation within the BME population whether in terms of ethnicity or area. Asian groups' greater willingness to vote Conservative is now perhaps more pronounced, with Indian Hindus (though not Indian Muslims and Indian Sikhs) perhaps slightly preferring the Conservatives, and increased variation within the BME population in terms of voter preferences.

Why Do BME Voters Choose Who They Choose?

One explanation for the increasing variance between Hindu and Black Caribbean voters is the overall class composition of each group, which may better explain voter choice than an individual's class position. Hindus in Britain are more similar to White British people in having significant numbers of middle class families, so that for some individual voters, all of their friends and family are doing relatively well. But the relatively few Black middle class individuals are not only themselves more at risk of unemployment, but they are also much more likely to have friends and family who have experienced unemployment directly, and so being individually 'middle class' may not make them as inclined to vote for the Conservative party.

As explained in the 2010 EMBES study, BME voters are like all voters in voting on the basis of their interests and preferences. But there are some interests and issues on which they have tended to have different opinions, including on unemployment and discrimination, attitudes that have tended to benefit Labour. For example, in 2010 BME voters were more likely to have confidence in Gordon Brown's economic credibility.

In 2015 there are some indications that more BME middle class voters agreed that a Conservative-led government would lead to better economic policy. The British Future poll found a strong regional difference in BME voting patterns, with voters in the South being much more supportive of the Tories than elsewhere. This finding offers one answer as to why some BME people were more likely to vote Conservative in 2015 than in previous elections: because they agreed along with other voters that a David Cameron-led Conservative government was the best outcome. That this was particularly so in the South

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of England suggests that BME voters living in this region are now more like their neighbours in being more likely to vote Conservative. Although such voters are a minority, they are a growing one, and may be viewed as indicative of the future patterns of a growing BME middle class.

There are three reasons why the Conservatives may have not seen a larger rise in vote share in 2015, despite a marked increase in outreach to various communities, especially Indians, during the campaign and over the past five years. First is that previous evidence shows that even where BME groups become better off, they are less likely to vote Conservative than their middle class white peers. This leads to a second reason, namely that there is still an anti-Conservative preference among many BME voters, sometimes linked to Enoch Powell's influence in the 1960s and 1970s, [but continuing into recent years](#).

Third and lastly is that the 2010-2015 Coalition Government rarely discussed race issues, while some ethnic inequalities increased over this period. More specifically, BME youth unemployment worsened, and unemployment was the top voter choice issue for BME voters in 2010. Home Secretary Theresa May did focus on and deliver a reduction in the use of stop and search, but this is unlikely to have been enough to have overcome the wider inattention to racial inequalities and the historic anti-Conservative preference, especially among older BME voters. Whether or not these trends will continue for 2020 and beyond depends on how far David Cameron is able to achieve greater outreach to BME communities, how far younger ethnic minority voters respond to these messages, and how far the aspirations of ethnic minorities are realised and ethnic inequalities reduced over 2015-2020.

BME Members of Parliament

One of the clear positive outcomes of the 2015 General Election was the increase in the diversity of parliament, at least in

terms of gender and ethnicity (though perhaps not in terms of education or social class background). In 2015, there were 41 BME MPs elected, up from 27 in 2010, and continuing a significant rise from what had been a relatively slow increase from 1987, when the first postwar BME MPs were elected, onwards. As Table 4 indicates, a clear reason for this increase is the Conservative Party's commitment from 2010. The increase for Labour means that 10% of their MPs are now BME.

An interesting difference between Conservative and Labour BME MPs is the kind of constituency they tend to represent. In part, this is due to the kinds of constituencies that each party tends to win, with the most diverse urban seats being among the safest Labour seats, while the safest Conservative seats tend to be much less diverse. For each party, the best way to ensure BME candidates are elected as MPs is to stand them in such safe seats, with the Conservative Party's recognition of this reality driving their large increase in BME MPs.

Table 4. Black and minority ethnic MPs, 1987-2015

Year	Total BME MPs	Labour	Conservative
1987	4	4	0
1992	6	5	1
1997	9	9	0
2001	12	12	0
2005	15	13	2
2010	27	16	11
2015	41*	23	17

*1 SNP MP elected in 2015. There were three BME MPs before the 1930s, but none again until 1987.

As Table 5 indicates, most (21 of 23) Labour BME MPs are elected in seats where more than a quarter of the electorate are BME voters. By contrast, Alok Sharma in Reading West

Table 5. Black and minority ethnic MPs, by share of BME population in their constituency

Labour MP (Constituency)	BME %
Shabana Mahmood (Birmingham Ladywood)	72.7
Virendra Sharma (Ealing Southall)	69.6
Keith Vaz (Leicester East)	68.6
Naz Shah* (Bradford West)	62.9
Dawn Butler* (Brent Central)	61.2
Khalid Mahmood (Birmingham, Perry Barr)	60.3
Seema Malhotra (Feltham and Heston)	55.1
Rushanara Ali (Bethnal Green and Bow)	53.1
Kate Osamor* (Edmonton)	52.7
David Lammy (Tottenham)	49.9
Imran Hussain* (Bradford East)	46.9
Diane Abbott (Hackney North and Stoke Newington)	42.3
Chuka Umunna (Streatham)	41.8
Valerie Vaz (Walsall South)	39.3
Rupa Huq* (Ealing Central and Acton)	36.7
Tulip Siddiq* (Hampstead & Kilburn)	34.5
Sadiq Khan (Tooting)	34.1
Yasmin Qureshi (Bolton South East)	27.0
Chi Onwurah (Newcastle upon Tyne Central)	25.8
Thangam Debbonair* (Bristol West)	25.5
Mark Hendrick (Preston)	23.7
Clive Lewis* (Norwich South)	10.0
Lisa Nandy (Wigan)	2.9

Conservative MP (Constituency)	BME%
Alok Sharma (Reading West)	19.1
Adam Afriyie (Windsor)	13.2
Kwasi Kwarteng (Spelthorne)	12.7
Rehman Chishti (Gillingham and Rainham)	10.4
Helen Grant (Maidstone)	6.9
Sam Gyimah, (East Surrey)	6.5
Shailesh Vara (North West Cambridgeshire)	6.3
Ranil Jayawardene* (Hampshire North-East)	4.5
Sajid Javid (Bromsgrove)	4.2
Suella Fernandes* (Fareham)	3.4
James Cleverly* (Braintree)	3.3
Priti Patel (Witham)	3.0
Nadhim Zahawi (Stratford-on-Avon)	2.9
Alan Mak* (Havant)	2.9
Rishi Sunak* (Richmond)	2.9
Seema Kennedy* (South Ribble)	2.8
Nusrat Ghani* (Wealden)	2.7

Scottish National Party MP (Constituency)	BME%
Tasmina Ahmed-Sheikh* (Ochil)	1.5

* = newly elected, 2015

is the BME Conservative MP with the largest number of BME constituents at 19.1%, while the majority (13 of 17) hold seats below the England median seat of 6.9% BME population, and far below the England BME average of 14%. If anything, this tendency is somewhat increasing, with all six of the 2015 class of Conservative BME MPs winning in seats with 4.5% BME populations or less. The only other BME MP won Ochil for the Scottish National Party in 2015, a seat where only 1.5% of the constituents are Black and minority ethnic.

Why this focus on the ethnic population of the seats held by Britain's Black and minority ethnic MPs? One reason is that in a constituency-based Parliamentary system, MPs are expected to respond to their voters' particular interests, whether those are farming interests in a rural constituency, defence interests in a seat with RAF installations, or interests around racial discrimination or unemployment in the labour market. While it is sometimes argued (including by BME MPs) that they don't wish to be 'ghettoised' by only speaking about BME interests, the reality is that BME people in Britain have specific concerns around racial inequalities, particularly in the labour market and the criminal justice system.

In fact, there is [evidence](#) that MPs in seats with high BME populations do raise these issues more in Parliament. Here the ethnicity of the MP matters somewhat less than the ethnic makeup of the constituency. So White British MPs – Labour and Conservative – are more likely to raise issues about race and racial discrimination where they hold diverse seats. This may be particularly relevant for the Conservative Party, as their top 28 most diverse seats are all held by white MPs. We might then expect such MPs – Bob Blackman in Harrow East, Gavin Barwell in Croydon Central, Mike Freer in Finchley and Golders Green – to speak more about race equality than Conservative BME MPs holding seats where the BME population is under 3%.

Conclusion: 2020 and Beyond

By way of conclusion, we can forecast what these current trends from 2015 mean about the future. First is that we can expect the major parties to increase their BME representation in terms of elected MPs. Over time, as more of these MPs gain experience, we should also expect more BME ministers and cabinet members and eventually Britain's first BME Prime Minister.

For the main political parties, there are signs of optimism as well as concern. For the Conservatives, they have clearly increased their vote share across the board, but particularly among certain communities. Better off groups, whether in outer London or the suburbs, and especially Hindu Indians (see their increased vote share in Harrow East, Harrow West and Hendon) appear increasingly willing to vote Conservative. The British Future poll suggested the Conservatives may have won more votes among Indians, and definitely among Hindus. If they can respond to racial inequalities over the next five years while in government (something they didn't do from 2010-15), this will not only allow for greater opportunities for BME people, but also extend their vote share to their performance nationally.

For Labour it's clear that they still have strong support among BME voters, evidenced by increased majorities in the most diverse seats, and in many of their safest seats. In many of

these seats the Labour vote share is more than 50%, rising to over 70% in a few such constituencies. Of Labour's 22 seat gains, 11 came in Britain's 80 most diverse seats, but there are now relatively few more gains to be made given the level of their support. And where a Conservative MP is able to represent a seat with a large BME population, it appears Labour finds it more difficult to dislodge them, suggesting both that such MPs better respond to these voters' needs and preferences, but also that Labour cannot forever rely on an anti-Conservative sentiment among BME voters, just as they can no longer rely on such sentiment in Scotland or among the white working class population. For the Liberal Democrats, their vote share of below 5% and the loss of all of their diverse urban seats suggests they have a long-term local rebuilding effort, and one that will arguably need to engage BME communities more directly.

In 2020 and beyond, the BME vote will continue to increase in the top 100 or so very diverse seats, but arguably more relevant is the rise among the next 100 seats, now all over 11% BME, and including such areas as Warwick, Gloucester, Hemel Hempstead, Cheadle and Windsor. By 2020 these seats will all top 15%, and in many the BME population will surpass 20%. The 'typical' English seat will have a BME population of around 10%. This will mean that MPs across the country will need to respond to many more BME constituents, and should result in this being a national rather than solely urban phenomenon. By 2021, even Tunbridge Wells and Thanet will likely have BME populations approaching 8-10%. The question is whether the younger BME people who grew up in such areas and pass the voting age are more likely to vote Conservative than their parents, or whether those moving out of urban areas into these areas keep their Labour preference or adapt to more typical middle class voting patterns. If Labour have some grounds for optimism based on their performance in the top 75 most diverse seats, the Conservatives may alternatively feel the 2015 results show that outside these areas they are now in position to outperform Labour.

Given that all parties now have the experience of successful BME MPs, as well as effective white British MPs in seats with large BME populations, there are grounds for cautious optimism. This optimism should be tempered by the fact that all governments have struggled to respond to racial inequalities over the past few decades, with employment gaps not much different from the 1980s and rising BME youth employment. How far British democracy successfully fulfills the promise of equal participation and opportunity will depend not just on how well the parties do in winning votes and securing BME MPs, but in responding to ethnic inequalities in the 21st century.

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