

# Politicians need a less crude approach in attracting growing number of BME voters

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A [report](#) by Policy Exchange tries to understand the differences between and within ethnic minority communities in the UK, arguing that policymakers need to do better in attracting and understanding voters from diverse ethnic backgrounds as their numbers grow. Politicians with a more sophisticated understanding will be better placed to engage minorities and gain their votes, writes **Sara Rajeswaran**.



Earlier this month, Policy Exchange published the [first report](#) from our new Black and Minority Ethnic (BME) Research Unit, which showed that, people from BME backgrounds are already a major part of Britain's fabric, and are likely to represent [up to a third of the UK population](#) by 2030.

It is clearly not the case that Britain's ethnic minorities hold similar views or live similar lives. Yet, political parties and others, often assume they can appeal to all minorities in similar fashion. Whether in formulating policy or attracting votes, it is important to understand the differences between and within ethnic minority communities in the UK and not treat them as a single homogeneous group. As Henry Kissinger once remarked of Europe: "there is nobody to call if you want to speak to 'ethnic minorities'".

However, our report recognises that a proper understanding of ethnic minorities in the UK is no small task. Today, there are at least five major BME groups in the UK: Indian, Pakistani, Black African, Black Caribbean and Bangladeshi. The Chinese community is smaller but growing fast. As are white European ethnic groups, which are not limited to Eastern Europeans alone – in 2012 the French consulate in London [estimated that London was the sixth largest French city](#) in terms of population, with 300,000 to 400,000 French nationals living in London. Added to this are communities that might self-identify together and share aspirations, for example Jews or Sikhs.

Moreover, cutting across these distinct groups is the UK's fastest-growing minority community, the Mixed population, which is already the second largest group of all. In the coming years, the growth of the mixed population is likely to account for a significant part of general population growth in the UK – already today half of all Black Caribbeans in a relationship are in a mixed race relationship. It was therefore fitting that a mixed race family starred in the London 2012 Olympics Opening Ceremony, and that Jessica Ennis became the face of our sporting success.

**Table 1: UK population by ethnicity**

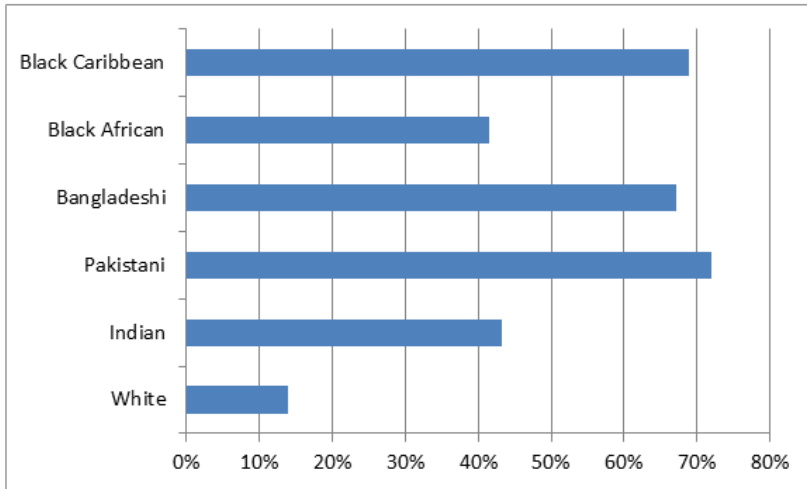
	2001		2011		2001-2011 % increase
	Number	% of Total	Number	% Total	
All	52,041,916	100%	56,075,912	100%	7.8%
White	47,520,866	91.3%	48,209,395	86.0%	1.4%
Mixed	661,034	1.3%	1,224,400	2.2%	85.2%
Indian	1,036,807	2.0%	1,412,958	2.5%	36.3%
Pakistani	714,826	1.4%	1,124,511	2.0%	57.3%
Bangladeshi	280,830	0.5%	447,201	0.8%	59.2%
Black African	479,665	0.9%	989,628	1.8%	106.3%
Black Caribbean	563,843	1.1%	594,825	1.1%	5.5%
All other ethnicities	784,045	1.5%	2,072,994	3.7%	164.4%

Source: *Census 2001 and 2011*

On almost any dimension, ethnic groups in the UK display differences with one another: in their origins, geography, mobility, economic activity, health outcomes, educational attainment, household composition and political activity. Even when it comes to religion – the area where minorities are most often assumed to be similar – there are notable variations between communities. Indians and Black Africans are two to three times more likely to say religion makes

little or no difference to their lives compared with other groups. And it is Black Caribbeans who attend religious services the most often.

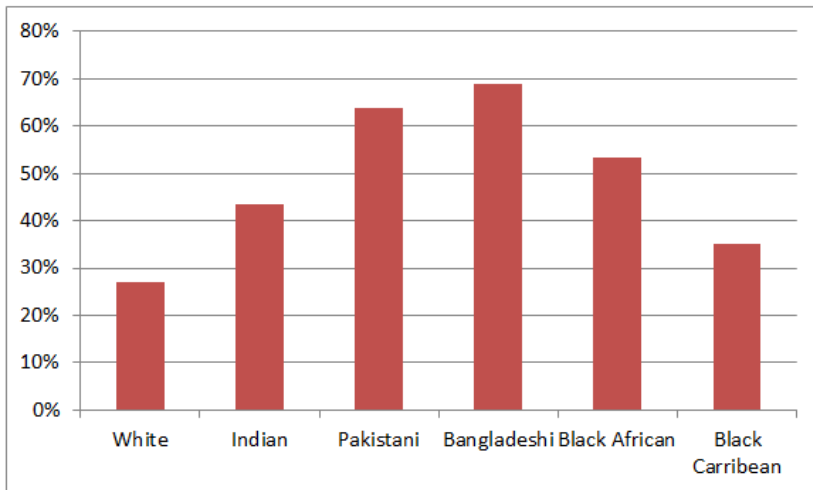
**Figure 1: Ethnic groups by percentage who state that religion makes a great difference to their lives**



Source: *Understanding Society, Wave 1, 2011*

These differences have a direct impact on policy makers and are important for politicians to bear in mind. Policies affecting children will disproportionately impact Bangladeshi communities, where almost 70% of all households contain dependent children.

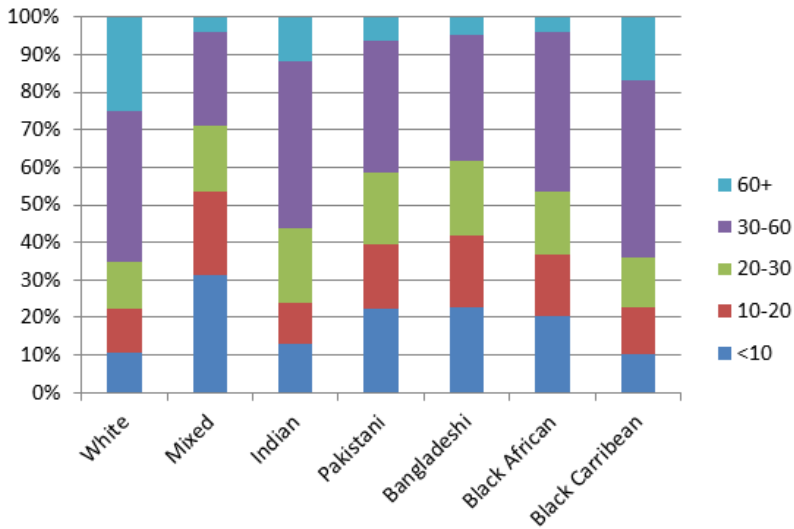
**Figure 2: Percentage of households with dependent children**



Source: *ONS, Census 2011*

In contrast, policies affecting retirees will most affect the Black Caribbean community, who have been in the UK longest, and who also have the closest age profile to the White population.

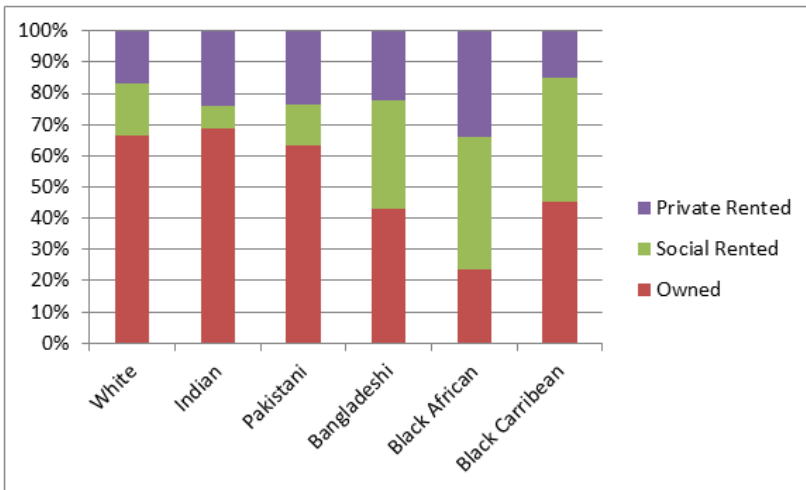
**Figure 3: Age Structure by Ethnicity**



Source: ONS, Census 2011

The Black community will be acutely sensitive to policies affecting social housing or lone parents; the Indian community most impacted by policy affecting home owners.

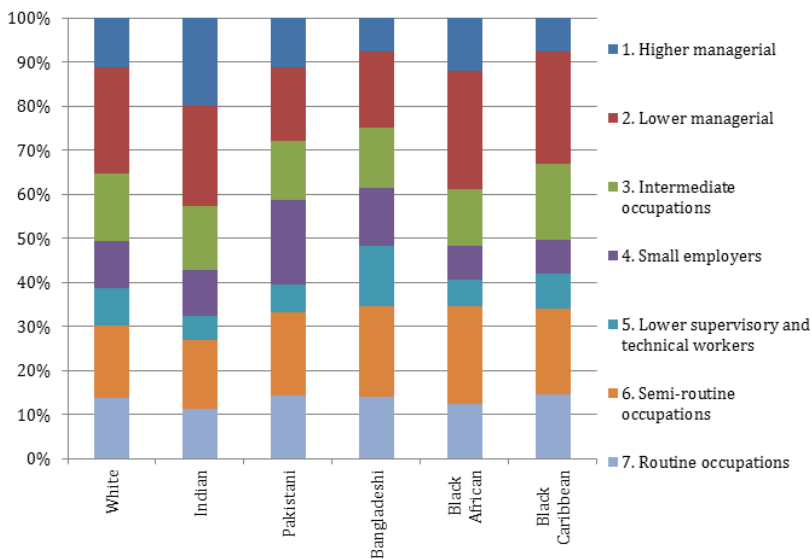
**Figure 4: Housing tenure by ethnicity**



Source: ONS, Census 2011

Furthermore, the tendency of minorities to cluster together in a particular industry means small changes in just one sector of the economy can be felt across an entire ethnic population. Large numbers (24%) of Pakistani men work as taxi-drivers, and almost half of Bangladeshi men work in restaurants. Furthermore, Pakistanis are often self-employed and almost half of all employed Bangladeshis work part-time. So changes in specific tax policy or particular employment laws can have a large impact on these communities.

**Figure 5: Socio-economic groupings by ethnicity**



Source: ONS, Census 2011

With very young populations, minorities account for almost a third of all primary school pupils. Indians are a success story at almost every level, from Key Stage 1 to university admission. However, the improvements amongst Bangladeshi students are less well known. Over the past few years, the percentage of Bangladeshi students obtaining five A\*-C grades at GCSE (including Maths and English) has risen by *half* to 62%. Therefore, from a poor start, Bangladeshis are now the second best performing ethnic group (and notably ahead of their White peers).

Policymakers would do well to study this success story to see what lessons can be applied more broadly. Improvement was possible in spite of many Bangladeshi students receiving free school meals; and, with a quarter of the UK's Bangladeshi population living in just two London boroughs, it is likely a small number of identifiable schools made the difference.

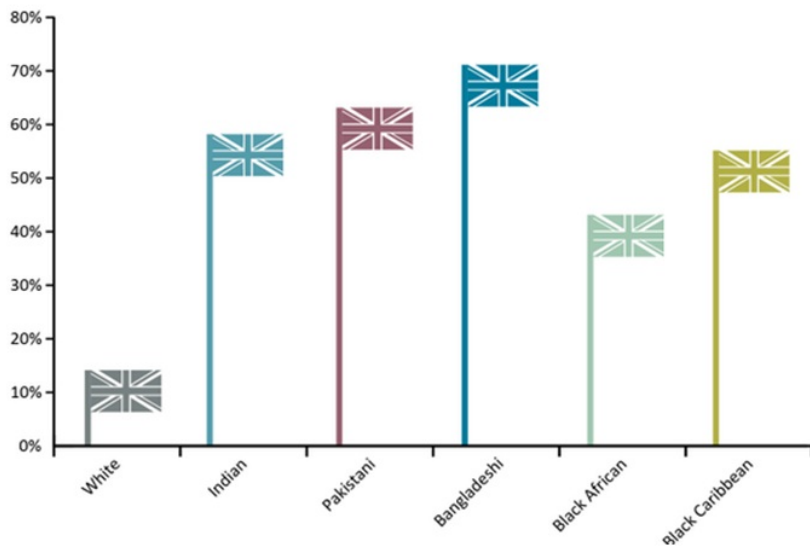
**Table 2: Percentage of pupils attaining different levels at Key Stage 4 (16 year olds)**

	5 A*-C	Including Maths & Eng	Including Mod Lang
White	83%	59%	28%
Indian	91%	74%	47%
Pakistani	83%	54%	29%
Bangladeshi	85%	62%	29%
Black African	84%	58%	32%
Black Caribbean	80%	50%	19%

Source: DfE, National Pupil Database

Perhaps fittingly, one of the few common traits amongst minorities is their shared sense of “British-ness”. Almost all ethnic minorities have a much stronger commitment to the notion of “British-ness” than their White peers and feel it is an important part of their identity. In contrast, the White population prefers to identify itself with the individual home countries and “being British” appears to be much less important to them.

**Figure 7: Percentage of five main ethnic minority groups identifying with a 'British only' identity**



Source: ONS, Census 2011

Furthermore, with the predicted growth in ethnic minorities and their young age profile, it is likely that for the generation of school children today, and successive generations in the future, ethnic diversity and mixed ethnicity is more of a norm than an exception. And this bodes very well for the future of cohesion and integration in the UK.

Ethnic minorities are already having an impact on UK elections and their influence will become more significant as time passes. Old voting habits may become more fluid and BME populations are young with lots of new voters. Similarly, as the many BME groups come to represent a larger proportion of the UK population, attracting voters from diverse ethnic backgrounds will soon become as fundamental to winning elections as attracting both male and female voters. But as politicians scramble to win the votes of ethnic minority individuals, they should first take a step back and appreciate the significant differences between these communities. The first political party to develop this more sophisticated understanding will be better placed to engage minorities, address their needs and ultimately be rewarded with their votes.

*Note: This article gives the views of the author, and not the position of the British Politics and Policy blog, nor of the London School of Economics. Please read our [comments policy](#) before posting.*

### About the Author

**Sara Rajeswaran** is the Deputy Head of the Black and Minority Ethnic (BME) Research Unit. This Unit will research, analyse and understand Britain's increasingly significant BME communities. Prior to joining Policy Exchange, Sara was Chief of Staff to Sir David Higgins, Chief Executive Officer of Network Rail, and previously Strategy Adviser to the Board of Network Rail – for whom she undertook reviews of Network Rail's corporate governance and of the role of public engagement in railway strategy.

