The
Electoral
Commission

Voter engagement among black and minority ethnic communities

Contents

2

Preface

This report presents the research findings of a study, funded by The Electoral Commission, into voter engagement within black and minority ethnic communities. The research was conducted by the Cathie Marsh Centre for Census and Survey Research, the Department of Government and the Department of Sociology at the University of Manchester. Overall responsibility for the report rests with Dr Kingsley Purdam and Dr Ed Fieldhouse, with contributions from Dr Virinder Kalra and Dr Andrew Russell. It should be noted that the suggestions and recommendations contained within this report are those of the authors and not of The Electoral Commission.

Research by the MORI Social Research Institute at the time of the 2001 general election suggested that turnout among younger people and certain black and minority ethnic communities was significantly lower than the national turnout of 59.4%. The Commission's report on that election, *Election 2001: The Official Results*, included a commitment to developing a programme of research, examining the reasons for lower turnout among these and other groups. The aim was to create a body of research that would assist the Commission in developing, in discussion with other stakeholders, a clearly targeted programme of voter education.

Levels of electoral turnout provide an indication of the current health of our democratic system. The fact that large numbers of eligible voters are choosing not to exercise their democratic right is increasingly a cause for concern among commentators and politicians of all persuasions. But 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 particular communities.

This report considers the research that has been carried out in recent years into voter engagement within black and minority ethnic communities. It also identifies a range of research priorities and policy innovations which may guide further work in this field. As such, it will be of interest to all those who are concerned about current levels of voter turnout and who are keen to see citizens from all communities participating in and contributing to the development of our democratic system.

Karamjit Singh CBE
Electoral Commissioner
Chair of the Black and Minority Ethnic Community Research
Steering Group
July 2002

Terms of reference

The Electoral Commission contracted the Cathie Marsh Centre for Census and Survey Research (CCSR), the Department of Government, and the Department of Sociology at the University of Manchester to undertake a review of existing research on voter engagement among black and minority ethnic communities in the United Kingdom.

The research team comprised Dr Kingsley Purdam (CCSR), Dr Ed Fieldhouse (CCSR), Dr Virinder Kalra (Department of Sociology) and Dr Andrew Russell (Department of Government).

The project had three key aims:

1. to provide a literature review of recent research studies that have been conducted into black and minority ethnic voter engagement in the UK;
2. to provide secondary analysis of two MORI surveys which were conducted during May and June 2001 (http://www.mori.com/polls/2001/elec_comm.shtml), and to identify and review other recent surveys examining black and minority ethnic voter engagement;
3. to identify key research priorities and make recommendations to inform the ongoing research and voter education programmes of The Electoral Commission and other organisations.

Black and minority ethnic communities in the UK

Ethnicity is a widely debated term. For the purposes of this review it is used in accordance with Commission for Racial Equality (CRE) guidelines to refer to non-white British ethnic minorities. As such, the term 'black and minority ethnic' (hereafter referred to as BME) includes consideration of the sometimes shared and often differing experiences of black and Asian communities including those of African, Caribbean, Chinese, Indian, Pakistani and Bangladeshi heritage, with an awareness that there is religious, cultural and linguistic diversity within these communities. As will become clear, research into voter engagement also needs to take into account differences in age, gender, geographic location, social class and education within and across BME communities, as well as election-specific issues such as voting systems, voting arrangements and political competition.

According to this definition, BME communities at the time of the 1991 Census made up 5.7% of the UK population, with

6

a clear majority born in this country. This figure is expected to have increased substantially since then. It is reported that the 2001 Census will show that the BME population has grown to over 10% (Travis, 2001). People of Indian heritage are the largest minority ethnic group, making up 24% of the BME population, while Pakistanis comprise 17% and Caribbeans 13% (CRE, 2002).

It is essential to have an understanding of the cultural and religious identities of those individuals classified in terms of categories such as 'black' and 'South Asian' (Weller, 2001; Modood and Berthoud, 1997). For example, evidence suggests that people of Indian heritage are more inclined to vote than other South Asians. Where research data allow, these differences will be highlighted in order to inform ongoing policy development and research priorities. It should also be noted, however, that when discussing voter engagement projects in the past, the terminology and concepts used as a basis for data collection have not been altered to reflect current usage.

Research steering committee and independent evaluation

The project was supervised by a steering committee convened by The Electoral Commission. The steering committee consisted of:

Karamjit Singh CBE, Electoral Commissioner;

Dr Mark Williams, Assistant Policy Manager, The Electoral Commission;

Ashok Viswanathan, Co-founder and Deputy Co-ordinator, Operation Black Vote;

Greville Percival, Research and Customer Services Manager, Commission for Racial Equality.

In addition, the literature review and secondary data analysis were guided by input from two independent referees:

Professor Muhammad Anwar, Centre for Research in Ethnic Relations, University of Warwick;

Dr Andrew Geddes, Department of Politics and Communication Studies, University of Liverpool.

Acknowledgements

Executive Summary

Levels of turnout

- The turnout of 59.4% at the 2001 general election was the lowest since 1918, and the lowest ever under the full democratic franchise.

- This marked a dramatic fall since 1997 (71.6%) and 1992 (77.7%) and follows a period during which there was an underlying downward trend since turnout peaked in 1950 at 84%. The UK also has the lowest rate of turnout at European elections.

- Low turnout was not exclusively a problem in black and minority ethnic communities. There is also evidence of considerable diversity between BME groups in relation to turnout, with the highest levels among certain Asian communities and the lowest among communities of black African and Caribbean heritage.

- Research consistently suggests that certain types of people are more likely to vote than others. In the UK, turnout has been shown to vary by area, age, gender, ethnicity, social class and education, and by type and closeness of election. For example, in general, the affluent and the more educated middle classes are observed to have higher levels of registration and turnout.

- The people least likely to vote in the UK are from communities of black Caribbean and black African heritage. In addition, research has shown that people of black African heritage have one of the lowest levels of registration.

- In general, the turnout of white people falls some way between the levels of turnout among BME groups, although there is considerable variation. It is notable, for example, that some of the lowest turnout figures in recent elections have been recorded in largely white-populated, inner-city areas.

Registration

- The turnout rates that are frequently reported are likely to be an under-recording of the number of people not voting in the UK. Reported figures do not usually take account of those people who are not registered to vote.

- The numbers of unregistered voters may be as high as 15% of the eligible electorate in some constituencies, and higher among certain age groups and the black African and black Caribbean population. Registration rates for certain Asian communities are as high as or higher than for the white population.

- Reasons for not registering to vote include concerns about anonymity, fear of harassment, language barriers, administrative inefficiency, having recently moved, alienation from the political system and deliberate avoidance of registration in relation to the secondary uses of the register.

Explaining turnout

- BME turnout rates are affected by generic factors including the younger age profile of these communities, the higher levels of social and economic deprivation experienced among these groups, and the fact that they predominantly live in urban areas where turnout levels tend to be lower than average. There are also community-specific factors affecting turnout such as lack of representation in high-profile public positions.

- For some BME communities in the UK, turnout and registration levels have undergone dramatic change over the past 40 years. Detailed analysis is limited because of the aggregated identity categories and the limited scope of survey data, but in the mid-1960s research by Le Lohe (1975) found that only 13% of Asians turned out to vote at local elections. Research by Anwar (1994, 1998a, 2001); Le Lohe (1982, 1990) and by Saggar (1998a) has consistently shown that people of Indian heritage are now the most likely to turn out and vote at elections in the UK. Other Asian communities, such as Bangladeshis and Pakistanis, are, however, less likely to vote.

- A limited review of the BME media suggests that the vernacular ethnic media are not subject to the same levels of mobilisation as the English-language press.

8

These differences in levels of coverage need further consideration.

- The reasons for not voting vary within and across all communities and include:
  - alienation and disenfranchisement (the view that it makes no difference who wins);
  - apathy (the lack of interest in politics);
  - impact (the view that an individual vote will not make a difference);
  - participation (the view that politics is unrepresentative of BME communities);
  - convenience (the view that voting is too time consuming).

Survey evidence 2001

- Black registration and turnout levels are lower than those of the white population, but Asian levels are similar or higher.

- There is some evidence to suggest that dissatisfaction with political parties played a part in depressing turnout among BME communities.

- The context of an election is crucial, and the 2001 general election was not perceived as a close contest, making voting seem devalued.

- The parties were not perceived as being very distinct from each other, reducing the incentive to vote.

- Constituency context was important, particularly the level of marginality.

- The idea that *'my vote will make no difference'* was an important reason not to vote for all groups, including among BME communities.

- The concept of *civic duty* is important in determining whether people vote, but there is no real evidence of differential interest in politics or feelings of civic duty among BME communities.

- Survey data on the topic of voter engagement among BME communities are subject to substantial response bias and non-response bias. Analysis is limited by the lack of a long-term, large-scale study and limited possibilities for the disaggregation of data.

Implications

- Policy responses should reflect the diversity of the BME population. For example, research shows that not all BME communities have low levels of turnout.

- In order to tackle low levels of participation in elections among BME communities, it is necessary to take into account and address issues of social, political and economic exclusion.

- Non-registration constitutes a significant barrier to improving turnout. It is therefore essential to ensure that registration procedures are made more accessible and to increase levels of registration.

- Innovations aimed at making voting easier – e.g. electronic voting – may bring about improvements in levels of turnout, but may not resolve the more fundamental problems of voter disengagement.

- Voter information and awareness campaigns could play an important role in increasing turnout but need to reflect the different needs, interests and existing levels of engagement within BME communities.

- Evidence suggests that voter engagement is influenced by the electoral system. It is important that the political parties attempt to engage voters in all parts of the country and not just in marginal constituencies.

- There is a lack of reliable and compelling survey evidence regarding BME turnout and what would improve it. In order to target resources and policies effectively there is a need to conduct further research in a number of key areas. However, this should not be at the cost of the development of policy in areas where it is clear what needs to change.

Introduction

The 2001 general election saw turnout drop to 59.4%, its lowest level since 1918 and the lowest ever under the full democratic franchise[1]. This represented a fall of 18.3% since the 1992 general election. At the 2001 general election there was a 38% turnout differential between the constituency with the lowest turnout and the constituency with the highest turnout. Such polarisation in turnout between areas is clearly an issue of concern.

The decline in turnout in 2001 was in spite of a number of electoral innovations in the UK, including increased access to postal voting, the extension of the vote to previously excluded groups, and the use by political parties of the internet and text messages for campaigning.

Declining levels of voter turnout are not unique to the UK, but are typical of 'mature democracies' (Lijphart, 2001). Research by International IDEA also points to a gradual convergence between the average turnout of mature democracies (73%) and the rest of the world (58%) (International IDEA, 2002). It is apparent, however, that recent turnout levels in the UK are somewhat lower than expected for a mature democracy.

Research consistently suggests that certain types of people are more likely to vote than others. In the UK turnout has been shown to vary by area, age, gender, ethnicity, social class and education, and by type of election (Denver and Hands, 1997; Swaddle and Heath, 1989; Parry et al, 1992; Johnston and Pattie, 1998; DETR, 2000). There are substantial differences in turnout rates at local, national and European Parliament level elections.

It should also be noted that the turnout rates which are frequently reported are likely to be an under-recording of the number of people not voting in the UK. The reported turnout rates do not usually take account of those people who are not registered to vote. Turnout is calculated as the number of people casting a vote as a percentage of registered electors. The numbers of unregistered voters may be as high as 15% of the eligible electorate in some constituencies, and higher within certain BME communities and age groups and among people living in certain areas.

Over the past 40 years turnout and registration levels in some communities have undergone dramatic change. Detailed analysis is limited because of the aggregated identity categories and the limited scope of survey data, but in the mid-1960s research by Le Lohe (1975) found that only 13% of Asians turned out to vote at local elections. More recent research has consistently shown that people of

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1 It is possible to suggest that the turnout in 2001 was even worse than in 1918 considering the circumstances surrounding the 1918 election, including the problems relating to the administration of the extended franchise and the electoral register, and the votes of the armed forces (see Butler and Kavanagh, 2001).

10

Indian heritage are now the most likely of all the electorate to turn out and vote at UK elections (Anwar, 1994, 1998a, 2001; Le Lohe, 1982, 1990; Saggar, 1998a; Saggar and Heath, 1999). Other Asian communities, such as Bangladeshis and Pakistanis, are less likely to turn out and vote.

The people least likely to vote are black Caribbean communities and particularly people of black African heritage. Variations in registration also need to be considered alongside these turnout levels. Such differences are important in informing any policies aimed at increasing turnout, but it is also important to examine any shared experiences of racism, unfair treatment and voter intimidation contributing to exclusion and non-engagement among BME communities.

In general, the turnout of the white population falls somewhere between these communities, although there is considerable variation. It is notable, for example, that some of the lowest turnout levels in recent elections have been recorded in largely white populated, inner city areas.

A number of questions remain:

• How accurately have differences in turnout levels between BME groups been estimated?[2]

• How can the increased turnout levels among people of Indian heritage be understood in comparison with the lower levels of turnout found among people of black African and Caribbean heritage?

• To what extent are differences in the levels of voter engagement between BME groups related to external factors such as age, gender, education, social class and where they live?

• Is ethnicity a contributory factor to low or high turnout in its own right?

• What can be done to maintain and increase the levels of voter registration and turnout across all communities?

Voting is just one aspect of political engagement. There are many more political activities that people participate in, such as neighbourhood and community groups and supporting pressure groups. However, voting is arguably one of the simplest and quickest ways to engage in politics. Not voting raises the question of whether people are participating in other forms of political activity.

This report considers the research that has been conducted in recent years in the UK into voting engagement among BME communities. The report is divided into seven main sections. The first considers turnout and who actually votes. Section two reviews some of the theoretical debates around voter engagement. Section three explores why people do not vote. Section four provides an overview of the BME press in relation to the 2001 general election. Section five provides some secondary analysis of a two-part survey of voter attitudes conducted in 2001 by MORI on behalf of The Electoral Commission and also includes some secondary analysis on a range of other surveys and voting data. Section six provides a discussion of some of the research methodology issues raised in conducting surveys on voting behaviour. Section seven identifies a range of policy innovations and research priorities in order to provide a map with which to guide further policy development in this area. Finally, there is a bibliography of recent research conducted on voter engagement, particularly in relation to BME voter engagement.

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2 A range of issues is raised by the ways in which voting behaviour data are collected and their accuracy. For example, the accuracy of the information given when people are asked if they voted needs to be examined closely. See Section 6 for a more detailed discussion of these issues.

Changes in turnout

1.1 Trends in turnout

At 59.4%, turnout in the 2001 general election was at is lowest since 1918, and the lowest ever under the full democratic franchise. This marked a dramatic fall since 1997 (71.6%) and 1992 (77.7%), and follows a period during which there was an underlying downward trend since turnout peaked in 1950 at 84% (see Butler and Kavanagh, 2001), although others have referred to 'trendless fluctuation' (Heath and Taylor, 1999). Pattie and Johnston (2001) suggested that there had been a secular decline between 1950 and 1970, and that this then levelled off. However, this was written before the 2001 general election. Turnout levels in the 2001 general election in Scotland (58.1%) and Wales (61.4%) were consistent with the turnout levels in England. Turnout in Northern Ireland rose by 1% from 1997 to 68% (The Electoral Commission, 2001).

In second-order elections, such as those for local government in Britain and for the European Parliament, however, there does seem to have been a clear secular decline in turnout rates (see Rallings and Thrasher, 2001; Blondel *et al*, 1998). According to The Electoral Commission (2001), the UK has the lowest rate of turnout at European elections (24% in 1999) and at local elections, with an average of 29.6% in 2000 (in metropolitan areas the equivalent figure was only 26.1%). This marked a fall of 9% from 1996, although it is notable that at the 2002 local elections increases in turnout were recorded particularly in areas in which there were experiments with all-postal ballots. Nationally, turnout at these elections rose to 35%.

Turnout levels at the 1999 Scottish Parliament and Welsh Assembly elections, both held under a form of proportional representation (PR), were 58% and 46% respectively. In one sense these levels are surprising, considering the profile and publicity surrounding the new bodies. However, it is possible that as such institutions become recognised as policy-making bodies, the election of representatives will generate more interest and more competition. The level of polarisation in turnout is also of concern. For example, in the 1999 Welsh Assembly elections the turnout in Carmarthen East and Dinefwr was 60.9%, compared to 32% in Alyn and Deeside (Morgan, 1999a). In the Scottish Parliament elections of the same year, 67% of voters turned out in the constituency of Stirling, compared to 40.3% in Glasgow Shettleston (Morgan, 1999b).

In the London mayoral election of 2000, 34.7% of registered voters turned out, compared to 34.75% of registered voters for the borough elections. In addition, 2.2% of votes for the mayoral election and 5% of the votes for the Greater London Assembly were declared invalid (*Independent*, 22.5.01). Such turnout rates are compounded by the fact that the levels of non-registration in London are among the highest in the UK (Electoral Reform Society, 2000).

In relation to referendums which took place under the Local Government Act 2000 (LGA 2000), of the 16 local authorities conducting separate mayoral referendums in 2001, turnout averaged 29.5% (The Electoral Commission, 2002). These levels of engagement are of particular concern considering the democratic renewal aspect of the LGA 2000.

Figure 1 Turnout as a proportion of the total number of registered electors, 1929–2001
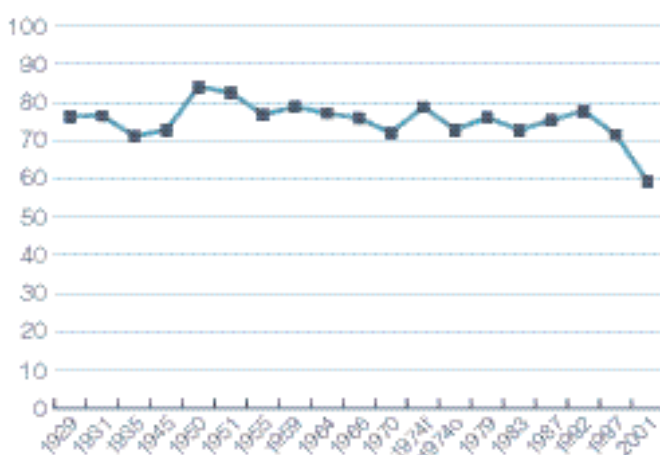
Source: Butler and Butler, 2000; The Electoral Commission, 2001)

12

This decline in turnout is not unique to the UK but is typical of 'mature democracies' (Lijphart, 2001). Turnout seems to be falling in most established democracies across all orders of election (Blondel et al, 1998; Dalton, 1988, 1996). At a global level, turnout steadily rose between 1945 and 1990, increasing from 61% in the 1940s to 68% in the 1960s (International IDEA, 2002). However, since 1990 the average has fallen back to 64%. Research by International IDEA also points to a gradual convergence between the average turnout of mature democracies (73%) and the rest of the world (58%).

Declining levels of turnout in all UK elections are despite recent innovations such as rolling registration, universal postal voting, early voting and weekend voting in some wards, all of which were introduced under the Representation of the People Act 2000. The impact of the ongoing modernisation of voting in the UK is considered in more detail below.

1.2 Variations in turnout

There are many factors that affect turnout, both within and between countries. Turnout in Britain varies between different social and demographic groups (Swaddle and Heath, 1987; Department of Environment, Transport, and the Regions, 2000) and also between BME groups (Anwar, 1998a, 2001; Saggar 1998a).

In an analysis of constituency-level turnout at the 1997 general election, for example, Denver and Hands (1997) show that turnout was related to a number of social and political factors, including class composition, housing characteristics and age profile, and the electoral and tactical context (see also Johnston and Pattie, 1998).

In general, the affluent and the more educated middle classes are observed to have higher levels of turnout (Crewe, 1981; Lijphart, 2001; Parry et al, 1992). For example, MORI found from its aggregation of all surveys conducted during the 2001 general election that 68% of those classified as AB people voted compared to 53% of DE classified people.[3]

The young are less likely to vote than the old (Russell *et al*, 2002) and women are more likely to vote than men (although 2001 proved an exception). MORI found that, at the 2001 general election, 39% of registered 18–24 year olds voted compared to 70% of those aged 65+. In relation to gender, 61% of registered men voted compared to 58% of women, although it is notable that this gender difference in voting has changed in recent years and also varies according to age and type of election (Norris, 1999; see also Parry *et al*, 1992; Crewe *et al*, 1977).

Turnout also varies geographically and is lowest in inner-city and socially deprived areas. Lowest levels of turnout in 2001 were in poor inner-city areas such as Liverpool Riverside (34%) and highest in affluent rural and suburban marginal seats (e.g. Winchester, 72%). Such polarisation is of increasing concern as the threat of democratic disengagement on a community wide level becomes real.

1.3 Turnout among black and minority ethnic communities

There are important issues relating to racial discrimination and exclusion that need to be considered when looking at the turnout of BME communities as a whole. However, it is important to begin by comparing and contrasting voter engagement levels among different BME communities. Detailed analysis over time is limited because of the aggregated and changing identity categories and the limited scope of survey data.

As outlined above, for some communities turnout and registration levels have undergone dramatic change over the past 40 years. In the mid 1960s, research in Bradford found that only 13% of Asians turned out to vote in local elections (Le Lohe, 1975). Surveys in Bradford and Rochdale found that in the October 1974 general election turnout among Asians was 57.7% compared to 54.6% of non-Asians. The actual turnout rate across the country as a whole in 1974 was 78.15% (February) and 72.8% (October) (Anwar, 1976).

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3 The aggregated data includes interviews with 18,657 individuals. The data is weighted at a regional level to the final result of the election (see MORI, 2001).

At the 1983 general election a survey of 20 constituencies found that 81% of Asians turned out to vote compared to 60% of non-Asians (Anwar, 1980). In 18 out of the 20 constituencies included in the survey the turnout among Asians was higher than non-Asians. In Le Lohe's research in 1987 in Bradford, a comment from a local councillor was noted which indicated that the council recognised that Asians were twice as likely to vote in council elections as white voters (Le Lohe, 1990). Turnout among those identified as Afro-Caribbeans remained substantially lower than that of Asians. As Le Lohe (1990) summarises, a Harris/*Asian Times* voting intention survey found that 74% of Asians stated that they were absolutely certain to vote compared with 51% of Afro-Caribbeans (*Asian Times*, 11.06.89). Supporting these findings, Le Lohe found from a recall study of voting at the 1987 general election that 63.8% of Asians, 45.2% of whites and 36.3% of Afro-Caribbeans claimed to have voted. No further breakdown of categories was available. The turnout nationally in 1987 was substantially higher at 75.3%.

Saggar's research into the 1997 general election, which was based on the British Election Survey, a BME booster sample for England and Wales, together with a series of recall face-to-face interviews, reported the following turnout levels: Indians 82.4%, Pakistanis 75.6%, Bangladeshis 73.9%, black Caribbean 68.7%, black African 64.4% and white 78.7% (Saggar, 1998a).

Anwar's survey of five constituencies, which asked respondents to state whether they would vote in the 1998 local elections, found that 64% of Asians were likely to vote compared with 52% of black people and 55% of white people (Anwar, 1998a). The survey found that Asians respondents were also the most likely of all to have voted in the past. The turnout rate among voters of Indian heritage is particularly significant in relation to their high levels of registration.

These turnout rates raise some important questions in relation to engagement and mobilisation, and such questions are even more pressing once registration rates are included in the calculation of turnout. For example, although 73.9% of Bangladeshi respondents in Saggar's research claimed to have turned out to vote, only 91.3% were registered (Saggar, 1998a).

The lowest turnout at the 2001 general election was in Liverpool Riverside (34%). The area was the major port for Irish settlement and has a longstanding black community and other ethnic, racial and religious groups, including the oldest Chinese community in the UK. Only limited information is available on Chinese communities in the UK, and even less on the specific issue of voter engagement among these communities (Ghuman, 1999; Wong, 1989).

In relation to European Parliament elections, higher levels of turnout among the South Asian population also seem to occur (Le Lohe, 1990). In the 1979 European Parliament elections, Asian turnout was measured by observation of three polling stations in Bradford and estimated to be 37.7%, compared to the national average of 32.1%. In the 1984 European Parliament elections, Asian turnout in the University ward was recorded at 42.3% of registered Asian voters, which was substantially higher than in any other community (Le Lohe, 1990).

In an Operation Black Vote (OBV) face-to-face poll of 1,000 BME voters in Britain, which examined hopes and fears and voting intentions for the 1999 European Parliament elections, it was found that only 8.5% of respondents were very likely to vote, 37.5% were fairly likely to vote, 6.8% didn't know, 37.2% were fairly unlikely to vote and 10% were very unlikely to vote (OBV, 1999).[4] No further breakdown of BME communities was available.

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4 OBV poll conducted by Hothouse Market Research in England and Wales in May and June 1999. The sample included black, Asian and Chinese respondents. See OBV (1999).

14

Voting: some theoretical considerations

2.1 Does it matter if people don't vote?

Inevitably, as participation declines, the legitimacy of elected governments is threatened. Although some writers have argued that falling turnout in elections may be associated with voter contentment (Butler, 2001) and may even be good for democracy (Berelson *et al*, 1954), there is a general consensus that a more likely explanation is voter disengagement linked to disenchantment with the political system.

The problem is exacerbated where participation is concentrated among certain populations and in certain areas. As discussed, there is considerable evidence that both voter turnout and voter registration in Britain are unevenly distributed, reflecting the political alienation of these populations. In particular, BME groups are often identified as having lower levels of participation in the formal democratic process (Anwar, 1990; Ali and Percival, 1993; Saggar, 1998a, 1998b; (Hill and Leighley, 1999). However, there are substantial differences between BME groups in turnout and registration, with individuals of Indian heritage having rates comparable with (and sometimes higher than) the white population. These differences are important insofar as electoral participation is seen as an indicator of wider integration of BME communities and the quality of the democratic system (Saggar, 1998b, 2000; Saggar and Heath, 1999).

2.2 Theories of voting and non-voting

Most observers of the trends described above ask 'why do so few people vote?' However, a more fundamental question that has troubled political scientists around the world is 'why do people vote at all?'

In the 1950s and 1960s political scientists, especially in the United States, looked towards 'rational choice' models of political behaviour (e.g. Downs, 1957; Riker and Ordeshook, 1968; Berelson *et al*, 1954; Ferejohn and Fiorina, 1974, but see also Dunleavy, 1991, for more recent British examples of this approach). With regard to voting, Downs, for example, concluded that it might be irrational for people to vote as the

costs involved, such as the time taken to visit the polling station, may be more than the expected or perceived benefits. The benefit would be derived from the different policies put in place if the voter's preferred party should win the election rather than another. However, because the chance that an individual voter will actually affect the result is extremely small, the expected benefit may be negligible. Indeed, anyone is equally able to enjoy the benefits if their preferred party wins the election whether or not they vote (Olson, 1965).

In order to resolve this paradox, some authors have stressed alternative rationales for the action of voting. Although the costs of voting may be quite small, they may nevertheless outweigh the individual benefit derived from voting (see Ferejohn and Fiorina, 1974; but also Smith and McLean, 1994; Dunleavy, 1991; Buffachi, 2001). So we are faced with the question 'why does anyone vote at all?' Olson also makes the point that where costs are very low, or imperceptible, they are unlikely to act as a deterrent. In other words, the potential voter might think, 'what if I didn't vote and my preferred party lost by one vote?' (Ferejohn and Fiorina, 1974). In terms of understanding why people vote it is important to distinguish when costs are no longer imperceptible. Thus, if it rains heavily on the day of the election, this may be sufficient to deter the less determined voter.

Such an approach then leaves some hope for democracy! While the costs of voting are known they are also small and reforms may make the costs less burdensome, yet the benefits are largely unknown even if in most instances they are negligible. In order to formalise this approach we can say that the decision to vote is a function of the likelihood of affecting the result or the perceived political efficacy, the perceived benefits (related to the difference in the parties) and the cost. Using a spatial proximity model of voting (see, for example, Merrill and Grofman, 1999) we might expect that as parties become more similar and/or elections become less closely competed, fewer people will vote. There are a number of evidence-based studies that seem to bear out these expectations. Heath and Taylor (1999) and

Pattie and Johnston (2001), for example, demonstrate that turnout is closely correlated with closeness of the election.

We would argue that while rational choice is not a very satisfactory or complete model of the voting decision, these general observations remain useful. However, because the model seems unsatisfactory – in that it does not seem to resolve 'the paradox of voting' – a number of writers have looked for alternative motivations. Regular voters may make recourse to communal responsibility or civic duty to vote in an election, or do so in order to have a say in the democratic process (Jones and Hudson, 2000), while other accounts have tended to address the 'cultural' dimensions of civic responsibility and the public's predilection to vote (see Almond and Verba, 1963; Butler and Stokes, 1971; Clarke *et al,* 2001).

Civic duty is essentially an 'expressive motivation' and as such does not truly fit into the economic approach described by Downs (Blais, 2000). However, it does allow us to capture one of the main motivations for voting: that it is perceived to be a duty or part of citizenship or belonging to society more generally. This feeling of civic duty may be compounded by an additional cost of feelings of guilt associated with non-voting. This might occur through peer pressure – for example, if asked by a friend how you voted (Ferejohn and Fiorina, 1974). This may explain why people commonly misreport that they have voted to pollsters (see Sections 5 and 6 below and Harbaugh, 1996). However, it has been argued that levels of civic engagement and civic duty have declined as society has become more privatised (Putnam, 2000). Putnam links this with a decline in political participation and a weakening of traditional models of democratic governance.

As well as the benefits derived from fulfilling civic duty, voters might also gain utility (or satisfaction) from expressing a preference or having a say (Jones and Hudson, 2000). Dunleavy (1991) argues that a rational voter with a strong partisan attachment might vote in order to maximise his or her party's support. A number of empirical studies support this view (Crewe *et al*, 1977; Sabucedo and

Cramer, 1991; Franklin, 1996). This is akin to regarding an election as a means of expressing approval or disapproval (or reward or punishment) for the government.

Many other modifications and alternatives to the rational choice approach have been advocated, but we cannot deal with all of these here (for more details see Blais, 2000; Parry et al, 1992; Whiteley, 1995). They include 'civic voluntarism' (Verba *et al*, 1995), relative deprivation, modified rational action and 'general incentives' models (Whiteley, 1995).

2.3 Black and minority ethnic communities and theories of non-voting

The theories outlined above do not present specific reasons for ethnic variations in levels of turnout. Turnout has also been shown to be related to a number of general factors such as age, social class and political context, which may have a greater or lesser impact on BME communities. It is important to unravel how such factors for non-voting are manifested among BME communities and what other factors have to be taken into consideration.

These general factors might be usefully divided into *individual* effects (such as age or social class) and *systemic* effects relating to the operation of the electoral system (such as the difference between the parties, whether one lives in a marginal seat or the closeness of the election overall). These first two factors may not affect BME groups equally. Specific or *community-based* reasons are likely to relate to issues of representation (e.g. failure to represent particular views or lack of BME candidates), exclusion and combating racism, but these are equally reasons why BME communities may decide not to vote. These three factors are considered in more detail below although all three are likely to be closely related.

2.3.1 Individual effects (e.g. age, gender, social class)
BME communities are disproportionately affected by the low levels of turnout among young people (see Russell *et al*., 2002). The age profiles of BME communities, particularly Pakistanis and Bangladeshis, are substantially lower than those of white people (Modood and Berthoud, 1997;

16

Population Trends, 2001). It has been estimated that at the 2001 general election the turnout of 18–24 years was 39% (MORI, 2001).

Gender also has an impact on turnout. Evidence suggests that fewer women voted than men in 2001. Survey research also suggests that this is substantially more apparent among BME voters. An OBV opinion survey conducted in 2001 found that 60% of black and Asian men voted compared to 44% of black and Asian women (OBV, 2001).

Turnout is also related to social class, with middle-class electors being more likely to vote than working-class voters (see Section 1). Because certain BME communities groups (in particular people of black African and Caribbean, Pakistani and Bangladeshi heritage) are under-represented in middle-class occupations (Modood and Berthoud, 1997), this is likely to have knock-on effects on turnout levels within these communities. Similarly, we argued above that turnout is affected by social and economic deprivation. It is well documented that these same BME communities suffer much higher levels of deprivation than the population in general (Fieldhouse and Tye, 1996).

The limited research undertaken has shown that people of Indian heritage are the people most likely to vote in elections in the UK and that they have been educationally and economically successful over recent years. The Fourth National Survey of Ethnic Minorities (Modood and Berthoud, 1997) found that Pakistanis and Bangladeshis were the most likely to live in households with no earner, compared to Indian households (*ibid*, p. 152). The survey also found that persons of Indian heritage had among the highest household incomes, second only to Chinese households, and that Pakistanis and Bangladeshi households had the lowest average income per worker of any group. Research by Gillborn and Gipps (1996) has highlighted the high educational achievement of Indian pupils compared to their white contemporaries. Young people of Chinese heritage in the UK have some of the highest participation rates in further and higher education (Drew, 1995; Modood, 1993; Modood and Berthoud, 1997). Pakistani and Bangladeshi

pupils are not achieving as highly as their white peers. Anwar's (1998b) research confirms this polarisation between South Asian communities. Saggar (1998b) suggests that the Indian diaspora represents a highly engaged community with a commitment to the mainstream political institutions (see also Modood, 1991).

More recent survey data from Cabinet Office research into BME employment confirms these trends, but also highlights further complexities. For example, it was found that black Caribbean men earn £115 a week less than white men, while black Caribbean women earn £30 more than white women (Walker, 2002; Cabinet Office, 2002).

2.3.2 Systemic effects (e.g. geography)
The level of voter engagement among people of Indian heritage is even more surprising because turnout has a strong spatial dimension – we might expect BME communities such as these (like other BME groups) to have lower levels of turnout as they live in areas characterised by low turnout (especially metropolitan areas). For example, this may be because they are likely to live in marginal constituencies. However, there is some evidence that, although BME communities live in areas of lower than average turnout, their own levels of participation are higher than an ecological model might suggest. This is known as the ecological fallacy (see Robinson, 1950; Tranmer and Steel, 1998). The possible impact of system-led effects on BME turnout is discussed in more detail in Section 3.

2.3.3 Community-specific factors (e.g. community engagement)
As has been outlined, one argument put forward to explain voter disengagement is the wider breakdown of community networks. It may be possible to suggest that, within certain BME groups, extended family and community networks remain significant factors. There is limited research on this in relation to voter engagement, but it has been shown that, in relation to employment, welfare and mutual support within certain communities, networks continue to be maintained and developed (Werbner and Anwar, 1991; Lewis, 1994; Solomos and Back, 1995).

The wider issues here relate to the changing citizenship and identities among BME communities. Views and perspectives towards political engagement are likely to change over time and in relation to different contexts. It is estimated that well over 50% of the BME population is now born in the UK. This is likely to have an impact not only on how they see themselves but also in relation to how they view and value political participation; see, for example, Modood and Berthoud's findings concerning the sense of Britishness among Pakistanis and Bangladeshis (Modood and Berthoud, 1997). For a discussion of changing ethnic identities in the UK see Modood (1994) and Alibhai-Brown (2001).

On a community level, research also suggests that BME communities may face collective experiences of exclusion as a result of racism, unfair treatment and voter intimidation, contributing to disengagement and alienation. Specific examples may include barriers to securing elected office and positions of power within political parties, lack of internal party support, lack of representation of BME concerns in mainstream politics and the holding of elected office, and policy delivery on specific issues of concern. These issues are considered in more detail in Section 3.

2.4 Why was turnout so low in 2001?

A number of explanations have been put forward for the low level of turnout in the 2001 general election. Two observers have labelled the outcome of the 2001 general election an 'apathetic landslide' (see Norris, 2001; Harrop, 2001). McAllister went so far as to say that the low turnout was the only remarkable thing about the 2001 general election (McAllister, 2001).

The accounts of Norris and Harrop offer different interpretations of the causes and consequences of the high rates of voter abstention in 2001. For Pippa Norris, the low level of voter engagement was 'less a dramatic crisis of British democracy, nor widespread public cynicism', and more the inevitable consequence of a media which, during the run-up to the 2001 election, focused on the election result being a 'foregone conclusion' (Norris, 2001). One

reason for the apparent strong relationship between the competitiveness of elections (and, at the local level, constituency marginality) and turnout may lie in the increased number of opinion polls reported in the press, giving an impression that an election is already decided before it occurs (e.g. Coleman, 2001). The Electoral Commission (2001) argues that declining turnout is 'not a function of declining interest in politics or elections but rather of the failure of the campaign to connect with the electorate'. This would imply that there are not necessarily any fundamental reasons why turnout should continue to decline. Another contextual explanation put forward is that there was a disenchantment with the Labour Party in 2001, particularly in the Labour heartlands, as the party abandoned its socialist traditions and attempted to appeal to voters in 'middle England' (see, for example, Clarke et al, 2001, for the evidence). Perhaps the most optimistic explanation is that the electorate was simply quietly content and did not feel the need to vote.

In keeping with these accounts, McAllister (2001) also argues that what mattered was the peculiar circumstances of the 2001 general election rather than a more general crisis of British democracy. In contrast, Harrop suggests that the problem may be more fundamental. He argues that the historic low turnout of 2001 might have repercussions for the very nature of British democracy; in particular, elections may have suffered some permanent loss of authority (Harrop, 2001, p. 295).

18

Understanding why people don't vote

The previous section highlighted some general theories of why people may not vote, and how these might relate specifically to BME turnout. Research suggests that there are many reasons for not voting. The rational choice model also showed that the decision to vote should not be considered automatic or even 'normal'.

A number of explanations have been put forward for non-voting, chief among them the following:

- Legal or non-registration. Specific reasons for people not being registered are likely to include some of the issues below such as lack of awareness, lack of interest, apathy and also concerns about the use of the electoral register. Certain populations such as the young and the transient are more likely not to be registered.

- Alienation (the disenchantment with the political system among specific groups and hence an absence of feelings of civic duty). Variations on this include relative deprivation explanations. Deprived and socially marginalised groups are more likely to be alienated from the political system.

- Lack of interest or apathy (the feeling that it does not really matter which party or candidate wins as it will not have any policy benefits). This may be related to the closeness of the parties and may have had a substantial impact on the 2001 general election.

- Lack of impact or political efficacy. For example, can the individual affect the result of the election? Is the election locally/nationally a foregone conclusion?

- The openness and transparency of the political system.

- Personal or convenience issues (too busy, illness, bad weather, other problems such as, for example, foot and mouth disease).

These reasons for non-voting may, to varying degrees, be responsible for declining turnout. It is apparent, however, that the reasons for individuals not voting are likely to be interrelated. For example, certain individuals may not register to vote because they feel alienated from the democratic system, while others may want to vote but find it difficult to register. Whereas personal or convenience issues may remain fairly constant over time and voting can be made easier and more accessible, there may be progressive and sustained increases in feelings of apathy, alienation or lack of efficacy. BME communities can be disproportionately affected by some of these general factors

compared to the white population. As argued above, there are also ethnic-specific factors which may affect turnout. These might include the lack of representation of BME communities in politics generally and the impact of direct and indirect racial discrimination.

Drawing on these causes of non-voting, we summarise below research that informs our understanding of non-participation among certain BME communities. One of the challenges here, however, is that there is limited attitudinal research on the reasons why BME communities have different levels of turnout from the rest of the population.

3.1 Registration

Levels of turnout are directly related to the completeness of the electoral register and therefore cannot be fully understood without also considering registration. As stated above, non-registration levels are rarely included in calculations of turnout.

It is a legal requirement to be registered to vote if you are a UK citizen.[5] There have only been prosecutions of individuals who had actively refused to be on the electoral register in order to avoid paying council tax or where fraud was found to have taken place. Local authorities have responsibility for compiling and updating individual electoral registers. Historically, local authorities have had contrasting policies on updating the register, resulting in different levels of accuracy (DETR, 2000). As outlined below, recent changes now allow registration on a monthly basis rather than just once a year.

Registration varies by age, sex and ethnicity (Smith, 1993). It is also possible that registration varies by religion, although there is only limited research in this area (Kotler-Berkowitz, 2001; Heath *et al*, 1993).

Levels of turnout therefore mask the true level of non-participation. If a section of the population is under-represented on the electoral register, the level of turnout will

5 Failing to complete the electoral register can result in a £1,000 fine.

appear artificially high. Because of the high levels of non-registration of eligible voters, particularly in certain areas and in certain groups, it is not possible to assess participation simply by reference to turnout.

3.1.1 Registration and BME communities
BME registration levels have increased substantially over recent years, though not uniformly for all groups. Detailed analysis of the change is problematic because of the limited breakdown of ethnic categories available. In the early 1960s Deakin, in a series of case studies of BME involvement in politics, found that less than half of all Commonwealth immigrants were registered (Deakin, 1965). By the mid-1970s a small sample survey by Anwar and Kohler, which followed up Deakin's work, found that when new voters and people who had recently moved were excluded, 32% of BME communities were not registered to vote (27% Asians and 37% Afro-Caribbeans), compared with 6% of the white population (Anwar and Kohler, 1975).

In the early 1980s the CRE found that in inner-city areas 20% of BME communities and 17% of the white population were not registered to vote (Anwar, 1984). In 1991 an Office of Population Censuses and Surveys (OPCS) survey found that 24% of black people, 15% of South Asians and 24% of 'other' ethnic groups compared to 7% of white people were not registered (the survey collected data on the basis of the 1991 Census categories) (Smith, 1993). A detailed review of the changes in levels of registration is provided in Anwar's extensive work (e.g. Anwar, 1994); see also similar small case surveys studies by Le Lohe (1975, 1984, 1998) and Amin and Richardson (1992).

Saggar's research into the 1997 general election found that people of black African heritage had one of the lowest registration levels at 87.1% compared with those of black Caribbean (96%), white (96.9%), Indian (96.9%), Pakistani (90.2%) and Bangladeshi (91.3%) heritage (Saggar, 1998a). These findings shed more light on some of the variations across BME communities and are particularly important when estimating turnout rates. It should be noted, however, that these particular findings are based upon small

numbers, and it would also be important to consider the substantial numbers of respondents who stated that they were registered to vote but not at the particular address at which the interview was being conducted. There are also variations in levels of British citizenship status across different BME groups, with the highest levels of non-citizenship among black Africans and Bangladeshis (*ibid*).

In 1998 Anwar conducted a face-to-face sample survey across five local authority areas and found that non-registration levels were as follows: black Caribbean (26%), black African (25%), black other (45%), Indian (24%), Pakistani (17%), Bangladeshi (13%), Chinese (11%), other ethnic minorities (48%) and white people (18%).

It is important to consider the differences between the findings of each of these surveys, particularly as they were conducted less than a year apart, and to consider the implications of such registration levels for estimations of turnout. For example, in relation to turnout, Saggar's research at the 1997 general election found that only 64.4% of the 87.1% of black Africans registered to vote, actually turned out to vote (Saggar, 1998a).

3.1.2 Reasons for differences in registration levels
The electoral register is an incomplete record which, it is argued, is never more than 94% accurate as a result of new voters coming of age, people who have moved and people who have died (Smith, 1993). Registration also varies with a range of other factors. Following the introduction of the 'Poll Tax' in 1990, there was evidence of large numbers of people, especially young men, leaving the register (Smith and McLean, 1994), although there had already been a small decline in the preceding decade. It has also been suggested in a recent Private Members Bill by the Labour MP Phil Woolas that people deliberately avoid being on the register so as maximise benefit entitlements, particularly the single person's council tax rebate (Guardian, 3.04.01).[6]

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6 Woolas claimed that in his constituency there were estates where the electoral roll comprised 80% women despite the estates being 50–50 male–female.

Registration among various communities can also vary in relation to the methods used by electoral registration officers (Smith, 1993). Local authorities have contrasting policies on updating the register, resulting in different levels of accuracy (LGA, 2000). The Electoral Commission noted that there is a considerable level of public confusion about how the electoral register works (The Electoral Commission, 2001).

Anwar, in discussing the performance of electoral registration offices and, in particular, completion of the appropriate forms, argues that although there are examples of improvements and a national Code of Practice, registration offices have not sufficiently changed their methods to meet the needs of their ethnically diverse electorates (Anwar, 1990, 1998a).

Reasons given for non-registration among BME communities have included newness, language difficulty, alienation, concerns about anonymity and confidentiality, fear of harassment, fear of officialdom, administrative inefficiency and doubts about residence status (Anwar, 1990, 1996, 1998a). Some of these factors can affect BME communities not only disproportionately in relation to the wider community but also singularly, particularly those relating to language difficulties and concerns about safety and fear of harassment.

Le Lohe's survey in Bradford in 1987 found that only 0.9% of all Asian respondents were missing from the register on the grounds that they did not want to participate in politics. Other groups were reported as having much higher levels of deliberate non-registration (Le Lohe, 1990).

Geography, tenure and deprivation
Le Lohe suggests that Asians living in inner-city areas are also more likely to have recently moved and are therefore more likely to be missed off the register (Le Lohe, 1990). It should be noted, however, that there are disproportionately higher levels of home ownership among South Asian communities, which can shore up urban stability (OPCS, 1993). By contrast, disproportionately high levels of people

of black African and black Caribbean heritage live in social rented housing, which can lead to greater movement, thus increasing the need for re-registration.

It is estimated that nearly three quarters of all people from BME groups in the UK live in metropolitan areas (London, Manchester, West Yorkshire and the West Midlands) (*Population Trends*, 2001). In urban areas and areas of economic deprivation levels of non-registration are substantially higher, and it is not clear why this is so. However, it is likely to be linked with wider social disengagement from key public institutions and deeper levels of political alienation.

Age and registration
BME communities have disproportionate numbers of young people, which in turn has a disproportionate impact on overall registration rates. Young people are more likely not to be registered than older people. For example, in a *Newsbeat* 2001 First Time Voters poll, 15% of the respondents were not registered to vote (*Newsbeat*, 2001). The levels of non-registration have serious implications for estimates of turnout and the geographic concentrations of non-registration can have implications for a specific local area and democracy within it.

3.1.3 Initiatives to increase registration levels
As we have seen, the levels of registration among BME communities have increased substantially in recent years, although in varying degrees across and within different communities. Specific initiatives in certain local authority areas have proved that there is scope for significantly increasing registration levels among BME communities. Recent campaigns by OBV, which was set up in 1996 in order to increase the number of BME communities registered to vote, have had a major impact.

At the 1997 general election and 1998 local elections OBV launched national campaigns to increase registration among BME communities. The 1998 OBV local election campaign included registration cards, leaflets and posters and the setting up of over 90 registration points in venues

such as colleges, religious centres and community centres. It is estimated that over 2,000 people directly registered to vote during this campaign (OBV, 2000). In the 1999 European Parliament elections, OBV, along with a number of local authorities and race equality councils, conducted a major registration drive which also resulted in a substantial increase in BME registration. Other campaigns were conducted across the country in relation to the devolved government elections and the 2001 general election.

Such a dramatic impact suggests that, given guidance and encouragement, BME communities are not against being registered to vote. Such campaigns require the targeting of resources, but it may also be that other forms of politics are operating in some local authorities. For example, what are the political implications of increasing the registration levels of a largely Labour-supporting section of the electorate? As is outlined below in relation to encouraging turnout, Rallings and Thrasher (1996) found evidence of inconsistency across different local authorities (see also LGA, 2000)

Changes introduced in 2001 served to make registration easier with the introduction of a rolling registration programme. The register is now updated each month and people can register to vote in the weeks before the election, but not once the election has been called. There was a 1.3% increase in the number eligible to vote in 2001 compared to 1997 (The Electoral Commission, 2001). However, research by MORI on behalf of The Electoral Commission indicates that around 15% of non-voters were not registered (The Electoral Commission, 2001; and see Section 5). At the 2001 general election The Electoral Commission was made aware of a number of errors in the electoral register by people who claimed to have registered or whose details had not been correctly recorded. The Electoral Commission reports some concerns with the gap between the last day for registering and the actual day of voting (*ibid*). In the United States, individuals can register to vote on the day of the election. Lijphart argues that automatic registration can increase turnout by at least 10% and possibly by 15% (Lijphart, 2001).

22

Further reforms of the electoral register are proposed in the UK with the development of an electronic version by the Improvement and Development Agency. Although under current proposals the management of the register would remain locally based, it is likely to form the basis of the development of a fully automated national register. It is clear that, in the pursuit of increasing voter engagement, ensuring accurate and high levels of registration is a key starting point.

International examples of successful voter engagement may be informative here. For example, in Bangladesh voter awareness and education programmes have reportedly increased turnout by 50%. Innovative campaigns supported by the Department of Mass Communication and the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) have focused on women and involved the establishment of 15,000 trainers working nationwide. Education rallies, at which participants can discuss their voting rights and responsibilities, develop strategies for dealing with any obstructions to voting and enter voter education slogan contests, have formed a key part of these campaigns. In the 2001 general election in Bangladesh, over 80% of eligible women voters voted, double the number in 1991, contributing to the largest turnout ever of 74% (http://www.unbd.org/undp/feature/2001/09/).

3.2 Political and social alienation: 'It makes no difference who wins – the government always gets in!'

The concept of alienation reflects a disengagement from democratic politics resulting from the failure of the political system to represent voters' views and to deliver policy that is relevant or beneficial to those concerned. Thus, in part, alienation may be a reflection of the ideologies of the parties, and the role of individual candidates, but also the democratic system as a whole (Gibbons, 2001).

Alienation may therefore be loosely related to the concept of exclusion, whether it be political, economic or social. For example, relative deprivation explanations of declining turnout normally rely on the mechanism of alienation. In other words, voters become disenchanted with politics and

politicians due to their perceived failure to effectively represent the interests of those excluded groups. These issues may particularly affect BME groups, some of which are over-represented among the poor and the socially excluded, and who, in addition, face the alienating experience of discrimination and racism. For example, as summarised by the CRE, the unemployment rate among people from BME communities (19%) is more than twice the rate among white people, three times the number of BME families are homeless compared to white families, and pupils from BME communities are five times more likely to face permanent exclusion from school (CRE, 1998). As mentioned above, however, there are substantial variations across BME communities.

Alongside and related to the problems of social exclusion and deprivation is the issue of community segregation. The Cantle report into the summer 2001 riots identified the depth of polarisation, or the 'parallel lives', as contributing to disharmony (Cantle, 2001) and called for a number of reforms of political and community leadership (*ibid*, Section 5). This, in turn, is likely to be linked to participation in mainstream politics.

3.2.1 The role of parties

In addition to the experience of exclusion, it is widely perceived that the mainstream political parties do not always reflect minority interests (see also Section 3.5). This may lead to a distrust of the political parties, and also to a more general distrust of politicians. In a BBC poll of non-voters in 2001, 65% stated that they 'did not trust politicians'. In an OBV survey conducted in 2001, principal factors that would encourage black and Asian non-voters to cast a vote included 'listening to black concerns' (black 34% and Asian 17%) and 'politicians doing what they promise' (black 24% and Asian 13%). However, 15% of black respondents and 35% of Asian respondents said that there 'was nothing that could be done to make them go out and vote' (OBV, 2001).

BME communities have been shown to largely support the Labour Party (Le Lohe, 1990; Anwar, 1994, 1998a; Saggar,

1998a). For example, at the 2001 general election a sample survey conducted by MORI found that 76% of black respondents and 69% of Asian respondents voted Labour. Saggar (1998a) found that 80.3% of Indians supported Labour compared to 93.9% of black Caribbeans and 47% of white people. This support, in part, is considered to be a result of a negative perception of the Conservative Party on issues such as equal opportunities, tackling racism and immigration.

It is clear that BME communities share common concerns with the wider electorate about education, health care, crime and unemployment. However, the CRE (1998) states that in relation to these and other areas of concern, including housing and safety, race-specific policies need to be adopted. BME communities may also have specific concerns about racial discrimination, immigration policies and international issues. Such concerns, which may be specific to particular BME communities, can be in tension with the political outlooks and campaign strategies of political parties or particular groups in a party (Knowles, 1992; Ali and Percival, 1993; Saggar, 1998b; Malik, 1995; Messina, 1998; Purdam, 2001). There is evidence of BME councillors being contacted by BME members of the electorate from outside their ward on the basis that they were more likely to respond to their concerns (Purdam, 2001).

Despite the level of loyalty to Labour, a number of studies have highlighted experiences of discrimination and the frustrations of many BME communities with the Labour Party at a national and local level. These frustrations centre on the failure to represent issues of concern or to allow equal access to positions of power, or to promote and support BME candidates (Amin and Richardson, 1992; Fitzgerald, 1987; Solomos and Back, 1995; Geddes, 1993, 1998; Messina, 1998; Jeffers, 1991; Ali and O'Cinneide, 2002). This may go some way to explaining the steady realignment of substantial numbers of BME voters, particularly persons of Indian heritage, to the Conservative Party (Layton-Henry, 1992; Anwar, 1998a; Rich, 1998). Other factors, such as increases in social mobility, also need to be considered,

particularly in light of the political realignment of Jewish communities in the UK (Alderman, 1983). Sample survey research has shown, however, that less than 1% of Conservative Party members were from BME communities (Whiteley et al, 1993). OBV is campaigning for all political parties to introduce records and monitoring of BME membership.

Feelings of alienation and lack of representation are commonly expressed in research on young people's attitudes to voting. Turnout is falling most swiftly among the youngest sections of the electorate (see Lutz, 1991; Crewe et al, 1992; Denver and Hands, 1997; Whiteley et al., 2001; Russell et al, 2002). Huggins (2001) uses low turnout rates among first-time voters in the 1996 US presidential election to claim that 15–24 year olds were becoming 'increasingly alienated from the political process'. Dionne (1991) commented on the 'hatred' for politics exhibited by American youth, and Nye (1997) asserted that young electors were the most likely to have a deep mistrust of government and government structures.

A related concept is that of disenfranchisement, a term that has been used by OBV to describe the political experience of certain BME communities (see, for example, Viswanathan, 2001). It implies that through a similar process to alienation BME voters are effectively stripped of an effective vote. However, although this is an important argument, the term 'disenfranchisement' has a technical meaning, which is essentially that a person or group is legally or physically prevented from voting. Thus, while some groups may be *effectively* disenfranchised, it is unlikely that they are technically so.

3.3 Apathy: 'I couldn't care less about who wins the election. It has nothing to do with me'

3.3.1 Apathy and alienation
Another widely used explanation of low turnout (especially popular with the media) is voter apathy. While the concept of apathy is commonly confused with alienation, apathy describes a voter's lack of interest. Whereas alienation

implies a positive dislike or distrust of politics, apathy implies ambivalence. In other words, people simply do not care about politics. Whereas alienation implies a problem of exclusion, apathy might, but does not necessarily, reflect contentment. In many circumstances, alienation may cause apathy: it may lead one to think 'why should I care?'

In a BBC poll of non-voters in 2001, 77% stated that there was 'no point voting because it would not change a thing' (BBC Radio 4, 2001), and, in an OBV opinion survey conducted in 2001, 34% of black respondents stated that they 'could not be bothered to vote' compared to 24% of Asian respondents (OBV, 2001).

3.3.2 Whose consensus?
Rational choice models predict that majoritarian systems will encourage consensus between two major parties (Downs, 1957). Rational choice models also predict that, if there is little difference between the parties, fewer people will be inclined to vote. There is considerable evidence that, in recent years, the parties have been increasingly similar in policy terms (e.g. Budge, 1999) and that this is matched in the public's perception of the parties. Heath and Taylor (1999) and Pattie and Johnston (1998) found this perception to be associated with abstention in 1997. Consensus between the parties may also be associated with declining partisanship which may in turn reduce turnout (Dunleavy, 1991). For example, there is an argument that core supporters of the Labour Party may have become increasingly likely to abstain, although there is limited evidence of this (Clarke *et al*, 2001). If this is the case, it may have affected BME turnout disproportionately due to their level of support for Labour in the past. An ICM/Radio Four survey of non-voters at the 2001 general election found that 53% of respondents were Labour supporters, 19% were Conservative supporters, 14% supported the Liberal Democrats and 13% supported other parties (BBC Radio 4, 2001).

Even though there has been a movement of the major parties to the centre, it is notable that parties with radical policies in relation to the mainstream political parties do receive substantial support, despite their chances of being elected to form a government being small. As Young reports in relation to the Scottish Parliament elections, 30% of the electorate in every region voted for parties that supported unilateral disarmament and withdrawal from NATO and opposed the bombing of Serbia (Young, 1999).

Parties set up to exclusively represent black or Asian communities in the UK – for example, the Islamic Party of Great Britain – have had little electoral impact. However, an additional dynamic of political engagement among certain BME communities in the UK is their engagement with politics and political parties in their country of departure, some of which have been organised in Britain (Ellis and Khan, 1996). For example, a number of Pakistani political parties based in the UK are organised around the issue of Kashmir, but are also concerned about specific local issues. Birmingham City Council in 2002 has five councillors representing the People's Justice Party. The legitimacy of such mobilisations has been questioned, but it can be seen as part of the successful globalisation of democratic politics and the failure of mainstream political parties to represent some of the concerns of particular sections of the electorate.

Following the 2001 general election, it has been argued that apathy reflects not so much the failure of politicians as a genuine lack of interest of the public in the mundane detail of everyday politics (Young, 2002). It is argued that we live in an age where fundamental political conflicts are replaced by technical and managerial minutiae. Most voters are simply not interested in the timing of entry into the Euro or the funding of public transport. It is this essential tedium of politics that breeds apathy. The voter is faced with the question of who would best manage the economy rather than competing ideologies (*ibid*).

In relation to the theoretical framework discussed above, political consensus or lack of difference in the parties inevitably leads to a decline in turnout. With regard to understanding differences in turnout in general and among BME communities this argument has limited value. There is

no particular reason, or indeed evidence, that BME communities should be more affected by apathy, except in the sense that it may stem from alienation. The argument also seems to oversimplify the very nature of the impact of politics on individual lives.

3.4 Impact and political efficacy: 'My vote won't make a difference to the outcome anyway!'

This view centres on the perception that an individual's vote will not have an impact on the final result, and, more broadly in relation to democracy, that individual voices are not heard. These are the systemic causes of non-voting identified above. In an OBV opinion survey conducted in 2001, the most common reason given by black and Asians for not voting was 'feeling that their vote would not make a difference' (34%). However, there was a difference between the responses of the BME respondents in that 37% of Asians respondents felt that 'their vote would not make a difference' compared to 30% of black respondents (OBV, 2001).

3.4.1 Closeness of the election: national and constituency marginality

It is clear that turnout is affected by the closeness of the election. At the national level, people may perceive that the result is a foregone conclusion if one party is a long way ahead in the polls. Evidence of this is provided by Pattie and Johnston, who demonstrate that turnout in Britain is related to how close the election is perceived to be (Pattie and Johnston, 2001). International IDEA (2002) also supports the argument that the closer the election, the higher the turnout. Using data from around the world, they show that there is a clear link between voter turnout and competitiveness. Thus, in 542 elections where the largest party won less than half the votes, turnout was 10% higher than in the 263 elections where a single party won over 50% of the popular vote.

At the constituency level, voters may believe there is little point in voting if they live in safe seat constituencies (Denver and Hands, 1997; Pattie and Johnston, 2001). Others have argued that this is not important once individual-level factors

are taken into account (Matsusaka, 1993; Matsusaka and Palda, 1993; Pattie and Johnston, 1998). This may be compounded by the behaviour of political parties if they campaign harder in marginal constituencies and ignore voters in safe seats (Johnston *et al*, 1999). Most election results are not that close, but some have been decided by a handful of votes. For example, in the 2001 general election the constituency of Cheadle in the North West was won by the Liberal Democrat candidate by just 33 votes. Survey evidence of the impact of marginality at the 2001 election is outlined in Section 5.

3.4.2 BME marginals and population change

Due to population concentrations it is possible for certain BME communities to have a disproportional impact on the result of an election both at the constituency and national level. This may, in the long term, contribute to increasing voter engagement. However, it is reliant on assumptions about political alignment that have so far proved unfounded, although it does have an impact on candidate selection. The concept of an 'ethnic marginal' has received a lot of publicity, particularly through OBV who argued that, at the 2001 general election, the result in up to 100 constituencies at the 2001 general election could have been determined by the black vote (Viswanathan, 2001).

Reference to ethnic marginals would seem to have first appeared in the mid-1960s, when most research into the role of BME communities in the British electoral system began. The argument was dismissed at the time by Deakin as being irrelevant, due to the divergent 'sociological and psychological' differences that existed among Britain's BME population (Deakin, 1965). It was not until the February and October general elections of 1974 that the debate began to gather momentum. This stemmed from the argument that it was largely as a result of Labour's appeal to Britain's BME communities that the party was able to retain power with an increased majority in October 1974 (Saggar, 1992). However, ethnic marginals were once again under discussion in the run-up to the general election of 1997, despite the differences in political climate that existed at each of these elections.

Aside from the fact that the 2001 general election never appeared to be a close-run affair, there are a number of reasons why the importance (or even validity) of ethnic marginals might be questioned. As Crewe (1983, p. 268) argued, for an ethnic marginal to exist, a number of conditions must be met, including the high turnout and uniform political alignment of the BME community in a strategic location where the net effect in terms of seats over the country as a whole outweighs that of any white, anti-BME vote.

Arguably, these conditions were not met in any constituencies in 2001, although clearly given a particular issue or climate the potential disproportionate impact was there. Yet, as has been discussed, BME communities in the UK on the whole tend to vote along traditional party lines (Anwar, 1998a) even in the face of autonomous minority parties and independent BME candidates. This reflects, in part, the internal diversity within particular communities.

On a national scale, there is minimal electoral capital for the major parties in appealing for the BME vote, especially as it may be perceived to alienate wider support. On a local level, it is clear that party campaigning reflects more specifically some of the concerns of particular BME communities. Also, as was noted above, BME populations are concentrated in metropolitan areas which contain fewer than average marginal seats.

3.4.3 The electoral system
Evidence from around the world indicates that turnout is significantly higher in proportional systems than in majoritarian systems. Lijphart argues that proportional representation (PR) systems tend to stimulate voter participation by removing the 'wasted votes' phenomenon, by making it important for parties to campaign in all constituencies, and by offering a greater choice of parties (Lijphart, 2001). It has been argued that 'first-past-the-post' systems are less effective in producing parliamentary representation from women and BME communities. Ultimately, it is the role of the political parties that is central, but a party committed to the promotion of women and BME candidates is likely to find it easier in a system that is not

solely based on single-member constituencies (Independent Commission on the Voting System, 1998).

Farrell (2001) shows that, in the most recent election in 39 democracies where voting is not compulsory, turnout averaged 68.2% in non-proportional systems and 70.8% in proportional systems. Lijphart (1994) showed that the average voting participation is about nine percentage points higher in PR systems than in non-PR systems. Using percentage of voting age population (and therefore allowing for non-registration), International IDEA (2002) show that plurality and semi-PR systems average turnout rates of 59–60%, while straight PR systems average 68%. However, on the available evidence it is not clear that PR has delivered higher turnout in the UK in elections to the devolved legislatures and the European Parliament.

A survey of five constituencies conducted in 1998 found that, of those BME respondents who had never voted, 61% stated that they would be 'more likely to vote in a proportional representation system' (Anwar, 1998a). However turnout at European Parliament elections is in decline at just 24% in 1999 (Rallings and Thrasher, 2001; Blondel *et al*, 1998). Turnout levels at recent devolved elections, which were held under a form of PR, were similar to those for the 2001 general election for the Scottish Parliament (58%), but substantially lower in the case of the Welsh Assembly (46%).

In the 2000 London mayoral election 34.7% of registered voters turned out while 34.75% of registered voters took part in the borough elections. In addition, 2.2% of votes for the Mayor and 5% of the votes for the Greater London Assembly were declared invalid (*Independent*, 22 May 2001). The implications of these low levels of turnout in the long term are of concern, particularly in relation to the standing and perceived legitimacy of the new representative bodies, and also in relation to the potential improvements in turnout that might arise through electoral reform. However, it is difficult to critically assess the levels of turnout in the elections to new bodies as there is no clear benchmark. In any case, turnout normally tends to be lower in second (or third) order elections (Blais, 2000).

3.5 Participation and representation: 'There are not enough members of my community in politics'

Politicians are generally seen as being unrepresentative of the wider population in the UK in terms of age, gender, ethnicity and social class. Only one in every eight MPs is a woman. There were no BME candidates elected to the Scottish Parliament or the Welsh Assembly. Four of the UK's MEPs are from BME communities (Saggar, 2001).

In terms of openness and equality of opportunity, the lack of transparency in party membership, candidate selection procedures, party funding, the activities of MPs and the failure to introduce independent observers at polling stations are all likely to have some impact on the way the democratic system is perceived and consequently on voter engagement.

3.5.1 BME political participation and mobilisations

It is evident that BME communities have increasingly begun to mobilise in democratic politics, mainly through local politics and through local political parties. Le Lohe (1998) provides a useful overview of BME participation and representation in the British electoral system. Le Lohe identifies the growth in the number of Asians serving as local councillors. For example, in seven local authorities outside London where the Asian population exceeds 10%, Asians provide 13% of all councillors (Le Lohe, 1998, p. 73).

It should be noted, however, that these mobilisations have in some cases been problematic and have not necessarily been welcomed by established party members. In addition, there have been various accusations of vote brokering among particular communities and allegations of unfair treatment and racism within local parties (Ali, 2001; Cantle, 2001; Shukra, 1998; Solomos and Back, 1995; Malik, 1995; Sewell, 1993; Geddes, 1998; Purdam, 2001). At the same time, some local Labour parties claim to have 'gone out of their way' to overcome language barriers through the translation of newsletters and the employment of translators at party meetings (Purdam, 2001).

Voter intimidation is an under-researched area in UK politics. There were anecdotal reports of the intimidation of BME voters in certain areas where the British National Party (BNP) was campaigning in the 2001 general election. The Newham Monitoring Project, which is a grassroots, community-based organisation providing independent help and support to members of the black community who are on the receiving end of racial and civil injustice, is particularly active in challenging voter intimidation by the BNP and far-right groups. It focuses not only on encouraging BME communities to vote, but upon providing a presence at specific polling stations during elections.

The high numbers of individuals from certain Asian communities holding elected office at a local level in the UK are not evident among communities of Afro-Caribbean heritage. At the parliamentary level and in European elections, the number of BME elected representatives is low for all such communities. For example, following the 1997 general election, only five Labour MPs from BME communities were re-elected, along with three new MPs and one BME Conservative MP. At the 2001 general election 11% of Labour's candidates were from BME communities. However, questions surround the lack of candidates placed in winnable seats. Butler and Kavanagh (2001) suggest that there is a lack of individuals putting themselves forward. If this is the case, it is surprising, particularly considering the substantial number of people from BME communities serving as local councillors, which is often a stepping stone to Westminster (Widdecombe, 1986; Geddes, 1993, 1998; Lovenduski and Norris, 1994; Purdam, 2001). It is notable that the CRE has called for greater transparency in candidate selection (CRE, 1998).

Following the 2001 general election there were 12 BME MPs. Most had been elected to represent constituencies with substantial BME populations. This in itself raises concerns about the failure to involve individuals from BME communities more widely in politics (Geddes, 1993; Messina, 1998; Anwar, 1998a; Ali and O'Cinneide, 2002). There are 20 BME members of the House of Lords (Anwar, 1998a).

It is clear that the number of individuals from BME communities in national politics has increased in recent years, but BME communities remain proportionally under-represented. Le Lohe (1998) concludes that prejudice among white voters does cause candidates to lose some support, although this can be overcome in certain constituencies where BME voter turnout is high. Anwar (1990) has found that BME voters continue to vote along party lines although, as outlined above, the local electoral success of the People's Justice Party in Birmingham raises a number of new issues.

It is an oversimplification to assume that the presence of BME representatives ensures representation of BME concerns and interests. Often concerns and interests are diverse and can be in tension with other communities and BME groups and in relation to national and local party policies.[7] However the importance of the presence of BME representatives in elected office is clear in terms of giving messages about the openness of the system and encouraging the participation of BME communities.[8] In Anwar's 1998 survey of five constituencies, 98% of BME respondents and 91% of white respondents agreed that there should be more elected representatives from BME communities (Anwar, 1998a).

3.6 Convenience issues: 'I didn't have the time to vote', 'I couldn't get to the polling station'

According to rational choice theories of voting, the difficulty and inconvenience of voting can have a big impact on whether individuals vote. Arguably, voting requires few resources, although it could be made easier and more accessible particularly for those who might be working on election day, are away from home (including students), are

house bound, have child care problems, who may not wish to go out at night and who live in remote areas. As Lijphart (2001) points out, research dating back to the work of Gosnell in the 1920s has firmly established the link between turnout rates and ease of voting (Gosnell, 1930). More recent survey research focusing on more than 350 local authorities in the UK (Rallings and Thrasher, 1996) suggests that there is demand for modernisation within many local authorities, and a range of innovations have been trialled by a number of local authorities.

In the UK, recent modernisation suggestions include simplifying registration procedures, advance voting, improving access to polling stations, the extended opening of polling stations, weekend voting, extension of postal voting, simplifying the design of the ballot paper, use of electronic and telephone voting and mobile polling stations. A number of pilot schemes conducted at the May 2002 local elections employed a range of these innovations, and the results of The Electoral Commission's evaluation will be available soon (DTLR, 2001b; LGA 2000). In the majority of the local postal voting pilot schemes in 2000, turnout increased by at least 50% (The Electoral Commission, 2001). In the recent mayoral referendums, carried out under the Local Government Act 2000, turnout was much higher where postal voting was either an option or the only option. For example, in Sunderland, where the referendum was conducted at polling stations without the option to vote by post, the turnout was 10% compared to an average for all postal referendums of 29% (The Electoral Commission, 2002).

The Representation of the People Act 2000 provides for applications to vote by post for either a particular election or for an indefinite period to be granted on demand (excluding Northern Ireland). Initial analysis by The Electoral Commission suggests that, at the 2001 general election, at least 1.4 million postal votes were cast, almost double the amount cast in 1997. The 35% average turnout at the 2002 local elections is also considered to have been boosted by postal voting.

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7 For further discussion concerning the issue of representation see Adolino (1998), Nixon (1998), Purdam (2000, 2001), Shukra (1998) and Judge (1999). Also see Cantle (2001, Section 5) for discussion of the need for political parties to agree and implement effective codes of practice for local councillors.

8 See, for example, the pioneering *Tomorrow's Politicians*, an MP and Lords shadowing scheme organised by OBV (Saggar, 2001).

Extending the opening hours of the polling station and/or weekend voting has also been found to have had an impact on turnout. Lijphart's (2001) analysis of turnout in 29 countries found that weekend voting increased turnout by 5–6% (9% in European Parliament elections) and that postal voting increased turnout by 4%.

Access to the polling station is also an important issue for some individuals with disabilities. A nationwide survey in 1997, conducted by the disability organisation SCOPE, found that of 1,965 polling stations, 94% had one or more access problems. In 2001, it was found that only a third were fully accessible (SCOPE, 2001).

3.6.1 Impact on BME communities
There has been little research on whether the issues related to the convenience of voting affects BME communities differently. Making voting easier may encourage those who have been put off voting because of fears of going to the polling station or of intimidation. Research by MORI found that more needed to be done to raise awareness of postal voting among non-voters, young people and BME communities. In terms of voting at polling stations, The Electoral Commission is considering the case for the provision of information in minority languages.

In a survey of five constituencies conducted in 1998, it was found that, of those respondents who had never voted, 60% stated that this was a result of practical rather than political reasons (Anwar, 1998a), suggesting that making voting easier may have a big impact on BME communities who had never voted. Of the non-voters, 54% of black respondents were more likely to vote if there was universal postal voting compared to 53% of Asian respondents and 46% of white respondents. However, it is notable that the research discovered some negative perceptions of universal postal voting, with 28% of Asian respondents, 20% of black respondents and 18% of whites being less likely to vote. This is difficult to explain, but it may relate to feelings that postal voting devalues the collective dynamics of voting or concerns about potential corruption.

With respect to being able to vote early, or at one's convenience, 62% of black respondents, 62% of Asian respondents and 53% of white respondents stated that either of these would increase the likelihood of their voting. However, the research also reports that substantial numbers of all respondents might be less likely to vote if they were able to vote early or at their convenience, and it is not clear why this might be. As reforms begin to make voting easier and more convenient, it is important that there is consistency across local authorities, particularly in relation to who is responsible for increasing turnout and that best practice in these areas is ensured (Rallings and Thrasher, 1996; DETR, 2000).

Evidence suggests, however, that there is also a limit on how far making voting easier will affect acutely disengaged individuals. As mentioned above, in an OBV opinion survey (OBV, 2001), 15% of black respondents and 35% of Asian respondents said that there was 'nothing that could be done to make them go out and vote' (see Section 5). Such levels of disengagement are especially apparent among young voters. In a BBC first-time voters' poll in 1997, 20% of respondents stated that they were 'unlikely' or 'almost certainly not going to vote' (BBC, 1997). As has been outlined above, increasing the number of ways in which people can vote will only have the effect of increasing voter engagement in the long term if people perceive that their vote will make a difference to the outcome of the election, or if they feel that the election's outcome will make some difference in terms of policy.

The use of electronic democracy for the engagement of citizens through on-line policy participation and deliberations is considered to have greater potential for engaging non-voters in the long term (Coleman and Gotze, 2001). The findings of ongoing research into e-democracy by the Hansard Society are awaited.

Black and minority ethnic press coverage at the 2001 general election

The BME press comprises over 100 publications.[9] English is the main language of publication, but there are substantial publications in vernacular languages. However, it is very difficult to gauge the extent of their usage as only the *Daily Jang* (which has a daily circulation of over 16,000) is subject to ABC (media auditing). A further difficulty with accessing ethnic language media is the lack of any repository such as the British Library holding back copies of the non-English press.

This review is divided into two parts. The first concerns the main media in the English language from the two largest BME groups – Asians and African-Caribbeans. The project team recognise that this leaves a large gap in terms of the coverage from other communities (we would note the Arab and Chinese press as perhaps the most significant absences). The second part of our review covers the vernacular press and is again very narrow in its focus, looking at only the Urdu and Punjabi language leading papers. The main gaps here relate to the Gujerati and Bengali papers.

4.1 English language and BME press

Our review focuses on the *Asian Times and Caribbean Times*, the *Voice* and the *Eastern Eye*. These publications are the most popular of the English language papers for the main BME groups of Asians and African-Caribbeans. The project team also looked at the monthly paper *Q-News* and *Muslim News*, which are both publications of relevance to young Muslims. These papers revealed a number of pertinent issues. First, the coverage of the 2001 election was relatively minimal. Indeed, the *Caribbean Times* – partially reflecting its focus – only covered the event in its Public Sector supplement, which it shares with its sister paper the *Asian Times*. Of all the weeklies, the *Voice* and the *Eastern Eye* were very active in their coverage.

All the weeklies took a proactive stand in encouraging BME communities to vote. OBV state that they spoke to all editors in order to influence positive editorial coverage to facilitate turnout, and the organisation also placed a series of advertisements in the black press, the local press in some areas and in a number of magazines.

The main tone of these interventions was to articulate the moral imperative to vote, as well as the political necessity of doing so for the communities. An example of this was the *Voice*, which ran a cover story headlined 'Wake up: Don't fall into the trap of not voting' alongside pictures of Martin Luther King and Nelson Mandela. In went on to state that 'Both these great leaders dedicated their lives to winning the franchise for black people. Are we to squander their legacy?

9 See CRE website for a comprehensive list
 (http://www.cre.gov.uk/media/em_media.html).

… But if we turn our backs on the ballot box, we turn our backs on our rights. It is not only our right to vote, but our duty.' (*Voice*, 14 May 2001)

However, in the pages of the same paper there was evidence of the opposite view, which actually reflected the undercurrent concerning the lack of representation of BME communities in the parliamentary system in all the papers. Thus '*Observer* urges all to watch, listen and participate in the forthcoming campaigns as much as possible. On the other hand, *Observer* will not blame those who, come June, remain unconvinced by any other choices before them and refuse to vote.' (14 May 2001)

Indeed, the main issues taken up by all of the papers concerned the marginal representation of BME communities in Parliament. On the basis of 1991 Census statistics, it can be argued that there should be over 50 MPs from BME groups in Parliament. The argument advanced by all of the papers was that lack of representation leads to apathy. There were snipes at the Labour Party for not including more BME candidates in the seats that became available between 1997 and 2001, although the pro-Labour *Asian Times* and *Caribbean Times* led their post-election coverage (on 15 June) with the slogan: 'We won', highlighting support for the Labour Party.

In terms of promoting the election, the *Voice* and the *Eastern Eye* were proactive in terms of providing information and comment with respect to candidates as well as issues pertinent to the black and Asian communities respectively. These papers also carried voices of dissent in their populist columns. For example, Tony Sewell wrote in his column 'Live and kicking' in the 14 May issue of the *Voice*: 'The need for new politics: The main parties routinely fail the poor. Why then should we vote?' The debate also highlights the understanding that voting among black Caribbeans is the lowest among all BME groups. But a similar level of dissent was also present in *Q-News* where there was a questioning of the perceived Zionist links behind most mainstream political parties ('Lessons from the election' by Nafiz Ahmed, No. 333, July 2001, p. 16).

Perhaps the most interesting intellectual intervention came from a debate in the letters section of Muslim News (May 2001 internet edition), which began with a letter entitled 'Election is Haram [not pure]'. This asked whether Muslims should vote at all in the light of Muslim law and was followed by five responses in the next edition (http://www.muslimnews.co.uk/archives/). However, the magazine itself covered the election extensively and was in favour of strategic voting, despite some dissenting voices.

4.2 Vernacular press

There are over 50 publications in vernacular languages currently published in Britain. Our focus is very narrow, and given greater resources it would be interesting to look at Arabic and Chinese publications. The four main publications of concern – reflecting the main South Asian language communities – are the *Daily Jang* (Urdu), *Des Pardes* (Punjabi), *Garavi Gujerat* (Gujerati) and *Janomoti/Surma* (Bengali). Due to the great difficulties in obtaining back copies, we have only been able to focus on *Des Pardes* and the *Daily Jang*.

The *Daily Jang* is published six days a week, and we looked at copies between 21 May and 14 June. The coverage of the election in the Urdu section was the most extensive of all the publications under consideration. Indeed from the week beginning 21 May there was a separate page titled 'Election 2001' which was devoted to coverage of the main issues. Thematically this fell into:

* coverage of general issues, gleaned from press releases. On 25 May there was an article on the role the Euro might play in the election;

* coverage of specific party issues which included advertisements by various candidates. This type of coverage was prevalent in every issue and included advertisements for the Labour Party from Lord Nazir and also from some Muslim Conservative Party supporters;

* coverage and commentary specific to Muslim communities in Britain.

32

This final theme is of importance when considering the issue of voter engagement. Perhaps most significantly, there was no direct editorial comment on the issue of whether to vote or who to vote for.

Where voting became an issue it was from the edicts of politicians. Thus on page five of the 4 June issue Lord Nazir urged Muslims voters to go out and vote. In the same issue a commentary article argued that the best way Muslims could protect their rights was by voting for appropriate candidates. This idea of strategic voting was strongly present in the coverage a few days before the election. On 5 June a British Kashmiri leader urged the Kashmiri population to vote for those candidates who would represent their interests in terms of the Kashmir conflict (there was also an advertisement to this effect). Indeed, many of the articles seemed to follow from the amount of advertising present for a particular party (this is especially the case in *Des Pardes*).

The only voices of dissent to be found in the *Daily Jang* appeared in the advertisements – on 3 June an advertisement stating 'Voting is against Islam' was placed by the Khilafah Movement in association with other Islamicist groups. It called for 'Muslims in the UK to say no to voting in the general elections'. This advertisement was not an editorial and was actually taken up over the next few days in reports such as 'Midland Islamic organisations boycott boycott and go to the polls' (7 June, p. 5). A great deal of space was again given to party advertisements and the idea of strategic voting.

The research team also looked at *Des Pardes* from 4 May until 22 June. This is a weekly magazine and therefore the coverage of the election continued well past the date of the election. Once again, coverage in *Des Pardes* mainly consisted of articles lifted from press releases, coverage of individual candidates and some general news. The largest number of pages of coverage was given over to advertisements from the various parties. Of particular note was the constant coverage given to the Conservative candidate for Ilford South, who appeared in every paper

from 4 May until 22 June. There was no editorial comment on voting as a general principle and no apparent intervention by OBV. There were two articles which took up the general issues of BME representation: '53 Black and Asian candidates to stand in forthcoming British election' (No. 1664, 1 June 2001, p. 5) and 'Seven Asians become Members of Parliament' (No. 1667, 22 May 2001, p. 10) were the headlines. However, there was little comment in the articles, which focused mainly on names and constituencies. The more specific and comment-laden coverage was given to the elections in West London, specifically in the Ealing-Southall constituency. Despite *Des Pardes* being a national newspaper, the coverage was very localised and again raised voter turnout only as a passing issue.

4.3 Media: policy implications

While this has necessarily been a limited review of the minority media and its view of the election, a number of important issues can be highlighted. First, it seems that the vernacular media is not subject to the same mobilisation as the English-language press, and this can easily be rectified. Second, mobilisation of other forms of media has not been considered here, but the limited use of digital radio and television to target specific minority groups who are not turning out to vote needs to be actively expanded in the future. In addition, there is a need for more research on the election coverage in the Chinese and Arabic press. Finally, it is important that some consideration be given to establishing a national archive of BME press in the UK.

Survey analysis 2001

The Electoral Commission contracted MORI to conduct a two-part survey into public attitudes in May and June 2001 (The Electoral Commission, 2001). The survey involved interviewing UK representative samples between 9 and 15 May (phase 1) and 9 and 18 June (phase 2). The surveys were designed to gauge public attitudes towards voting, elections and the political process.

The surveys revealed that interest in politics has remained stable over the past three decades, that civic duty and habit are the key motivators to voting and that people have positive attitudes towards voting (The Electoral Commission, 2001; Gibbons, 2001).

In this section we revisit the MORI surveys with particular focus on BME respondents. In addition, we also draw on evidence from the British Election Survey (BES) and the constituency election results. We also report on an ICM poll conducted on behalf of OBV.

Although BME communities were 'over-sampled' in relation to their population in the MORI surveys, there were only a relatively small number of BME respondents. Table 1 shows the sample size in each BME group.

Table 1. Sample composition				
	Frequency Phase 1	Per cent Phase 1	Frequency Phase 2	Per cent Phase 2
White	1,386	77.0	905	77.9
Black	155	8.6	108	9.3
Asian	173	9.6	108	9.3
Other	87	4.8	41	3.5
Total	1,801	100.0	1,162	100.0

Source: MORI/EC survey, phase 1 and 2

Because of the small numbers and limited disaggregation of identity classifications, it is important to treat the ethnic comparisons with a degree of caution. This is particularly true when we are reporting reasons for non-voting, as up to four out of five respondents claimed to have voted. As explained below, this reported level of turnout is much higher than the actual turnout level in the general election as a whole. It also means, in sample terms, that there were only 257 BME voters in phase 2 in the MORI survey. Reported ethnic differences are indicative only.
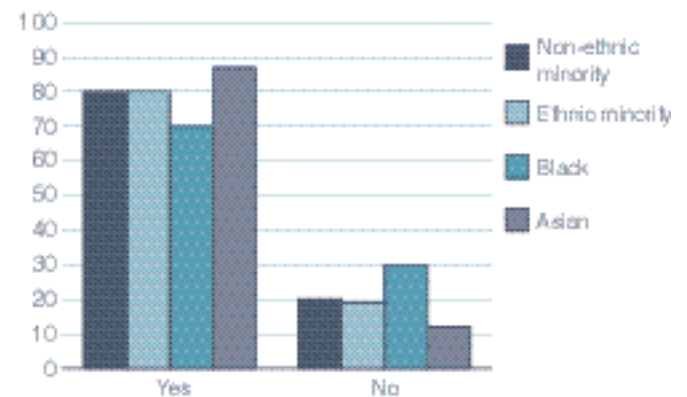
34

5.1 Voting intention and turnout

Phase 1 of the survey showed that there were differences in voting intention between BME groups. While white people were more likely to say they were certain to vote, Asians were more likely than black respondents to say likewise (Figure 2).

How did this translate into actual turnout? Figure 3 shows that these differences did not persist when it came to actual voting. If we can believe reported behaviour the level of voting in the Asian communities was over 80%, and around 70% among the black electorate. However, as noted in Section 6 of this report, there are two reasons why surveys overestimate reported turnout. First, people who respond to surveys are more likely to be interested in politics and therefore to have voted (non-response bias) Second, people in general misreport whether they have voted as it is regarded as a public good.

Analysis of validated turnout in the BES shows that a substantial proportion of respondents misreported having voted and many of these were not even registered (numbers are too small for a reliable ethnic breakdown). Overall, 21% were found to be registered and to have claimed to have voted but had not, and a further 6% claimed to have voted

but were not registered. Validated turnout was found to be 72% for white respondents and 67% for BME communities. This is still well above the actual rates at the general election, demonstrating that non-response bias (as well as misreporting) is a significant factor in this type of research.

Figure 3. Reported turnout (percentage)

Q.1. Some people did not vote at the general election on the 7th June. Did you vote at the general election on the 7th June?
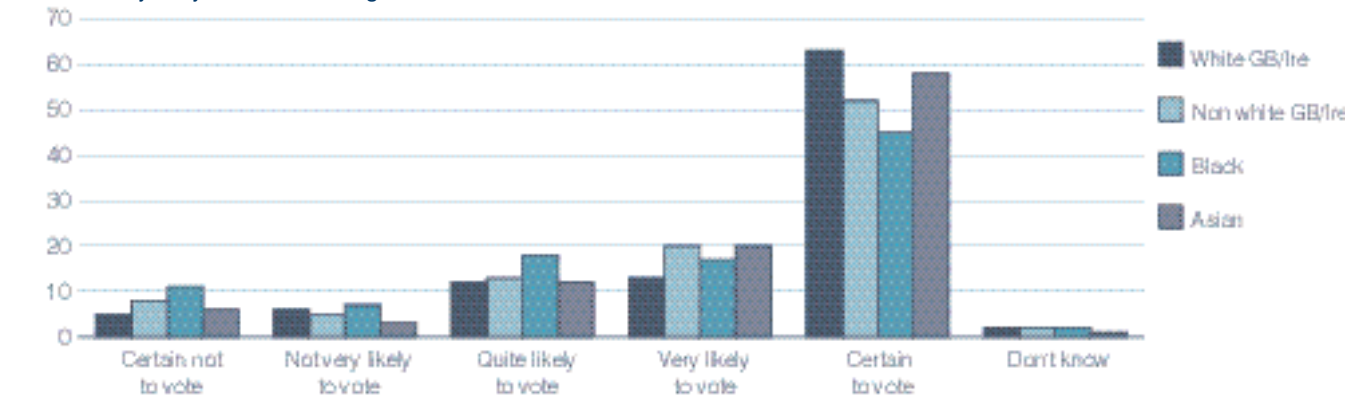

Source: MORI/EC phase 2

Figure 2: Likelihood to vote (percentage)

Q.3. How likely are you to vote at the general election?

Source: MORI/EC phase 1

Voter engagement among black and minority ethnic communities

It is therefore very difficult to assess the true extent of voter apathy or alienation when those most affected are, inevitably, the least likely to respond to a survey. These issues are discussed in more detail in Section 6. However, an ICM poll for Operation Black Vote (OBV) estimated BME turnout to be much lower – just over 50% – with little difference between black and Asian voters. Given the overestimate of white turnout in the MORI poll (also 80%), it is likely that the ICM figures are more realistic. Notwithstanding this, we see that Asians were the most likely to vote, followed by white respondents. Black respondents were least likely to vote. This is in keeping with findings of previous research, as reported above.

Respondents were also asked in phase 1 of the MORI survey how often they usually voted in general elections. Only around half of black and Asian respondents reported that they always voted, compared to 70% of white respondents. Although there is an age dimension to this (as previously outlined, BME voters have a younger age profile) we find that even among voters aged over 24 these differences persist.

Comparing answers to the pre- and post-election phases, we find that of those who said they were 'certain to vote'

91% actually claimed to have done so. Of those who were 'not certain to vote' only 30% did so. This indicates that immediate or convenience-related reasons on the day may not have been very important. Although the sample is too small to investigate this by ethnicity, in general those who were 'not certain to vote' were less likely to report that they were 'too busy to vote' and more likely to give the reason that they were 'not interested in politics'. The comparative percentages turning out among those who claimed to be certain to vote were 92% white, 90% Asian and 79% black. Thus we see that, even among those most committed to voting, the black population were much less likely to turn out on the day.

Exploring the responses in more detail, we find that whereas for white people the most common reason for non-voting was inconvenience, for Asians the most common reason was that they were too busy (Figure 4). For black people, the most common reason was not being registered to vote (see below). However, the numbers in the sample were small and should be treated with caution.

In contrast, the ICM/OBV poll (see figure 5 overleaf) found that among non-voters the belief that 'voting would make no difference' was the most common reason for not voting

Figure 4. Reasons for not voting (percentage)

Q.5. People give many reasons for not voting at elections. Why did you not vote at the general election on 7th June? Base: All who did not vote
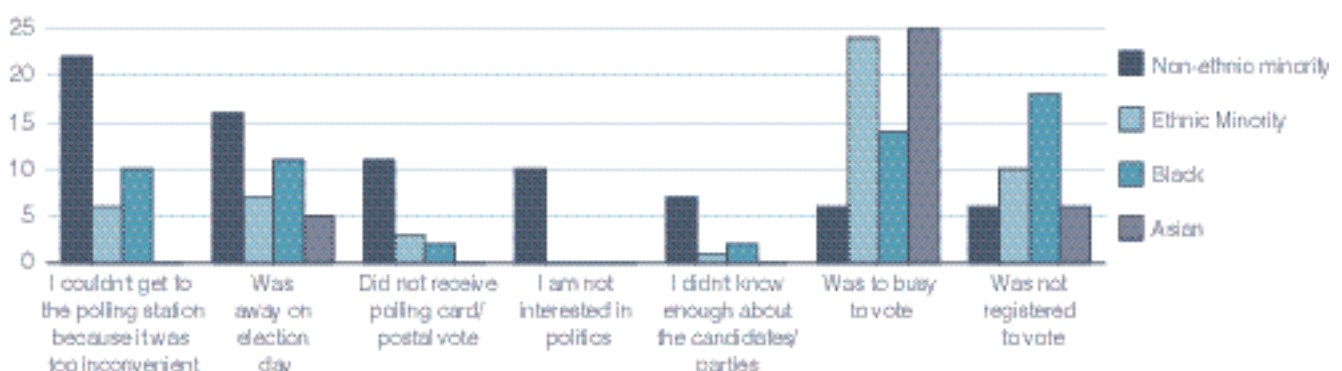
Source: MORI/EC phase 2

Figure 5. ICM/OBV survey: reasons for not voting – black and Asian non-voters (percentage)

Q.4. Which of these reasons best describes why you did not vote? Base: All respondents who did not vote
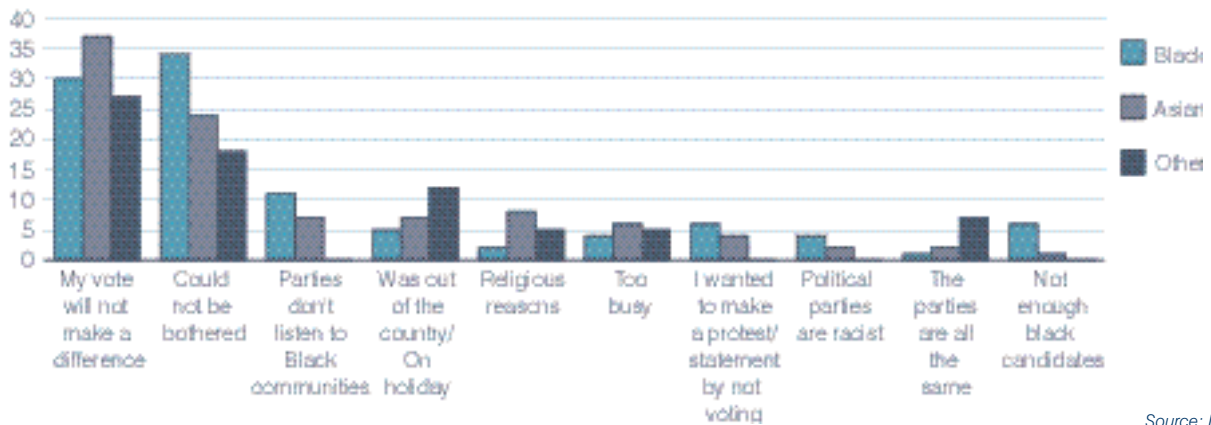
Source: ICM/OBV survey

(34% of black and Asian voters). Twenty nine per cent (29%) stated that they 'could not be bothered' and 9% said that the 'parties don't listen to black communities'. This puts apathy and alienation and lack of political efficacy much higher up the agenda than the MORI figures indicated.
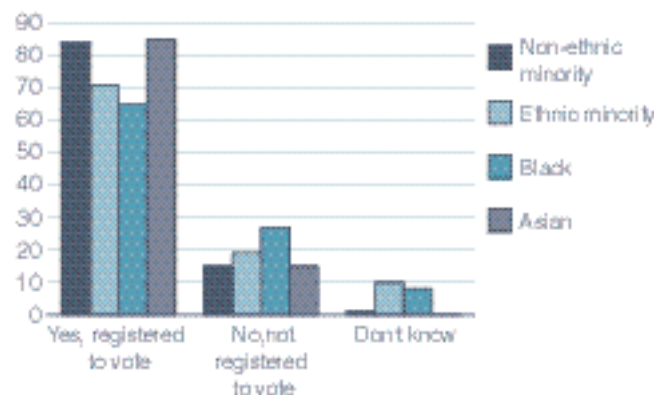
5.2 Registration

In phase 1, MORI respondents were asked whether they were registered to vote. White respondents (97%) were more likely to respond positively than either Asians (92%) or black respondents (90%). In phase 2, respondents who did not vote were asked whether they had been registered to vote. BME respondents were more likely to have not registered, although this was still a minority of those not voting (Figure 6). This is in keeping with the literature reviewed, which indicated higher levels of registration for some Asians, but lower levels for African and Caribbean communities. Clearly, non-registration is a problem in that non-registered electors cannot vote even if they wish to. However, these still make up a minority of non-voters and, furthermore, non-registration is likely to be higher among those less inclined to vote or less interested in politics.

For the same reasons identified in relation to the MORI survey's overestimation of turnout, registration is likely to be

Figure 6. Registration (percentage)

Q.3. Were you registered to vote or not? Base: All who did not vote

Source: MORI/EC phase 2

similarly overestimated. This can be checked for BES respondents for whom registration was verified against marked electoral rolls. Analysis of this data shows that 86% of all BME respondents were registered in 2001, compared to 95% of whites. It also shows that around half of non-registered voters claimed to have voted, further indicating a problem with reliance on reported turnout.

5.3 Interest in politics

One of the explanations for low turnout is a lack of interest in politics. However, this raises the question of whether such lack of interest should affect BME communities any more than the white population. The MORI data suggests that there was little difference in expressed interest in politics, with black people being the most likely to claim to be 'very interested' (Figure 7). This is particularly apparent in the younger age groups, with over 70% of Asians and 64% of black respondents under the age of 24 claiming to be very or fairly interested in politics, compared to less than half the white respondents.

However, again we find that this is at odds with other evidence. Analysis of the BES shows that less than 30% of respondents claimed to have 'quite a lot' or 'a great deal of interest in politics' (and there was little difference between BME groups). There was no difference in the proportion citing lack of interest in politics as a reason for not being certain to vote at the general election. Similarly, there were no apparent differences in the level of interest in the news about the election campaign, with less than a third of voters of all BME groups declaring little or no interest. BME respondents to the BES were more likely to say they were 'very' or 'somewhat interested in the election'. Furthermore,

black and Asian voters were more likely to believe that the election campaign was fought by the 'parties putting forward their own policies and personalities', whereas white people were more likely to believe it was a negative campaign. In general, those believing it was a negative campaign were less likely to vote.
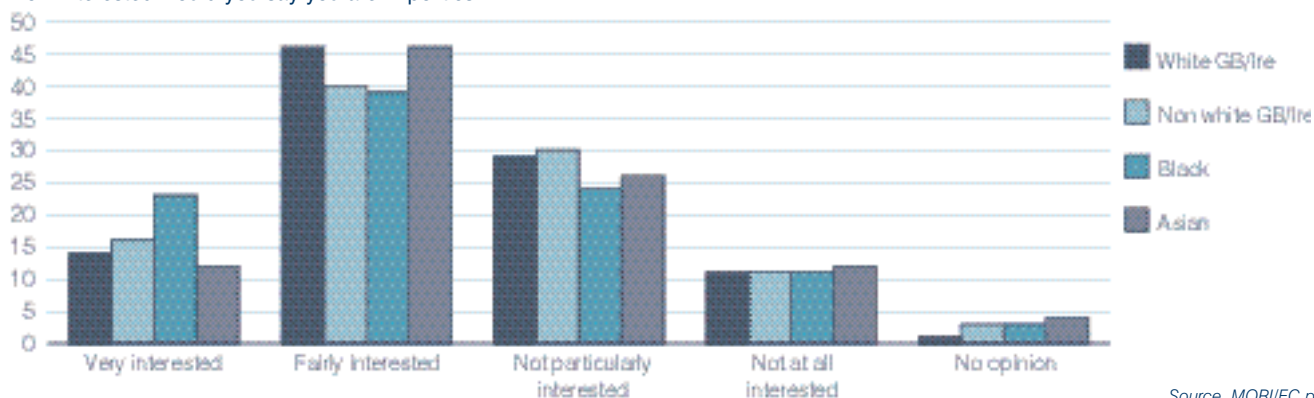
5.4 Civic duty

If we look to civic duty as a possible explanation of *differential* turnout rates we find that there is no significant difference between BME groups in their tendency to agree with the statement, 'I feel it is my duty to vote.' However, a large majority (over 80%) of all groups agree with this statement. The ICM poll for OBV also found civic duty to be the most common reason for casting a vote. Similarly, a substantial majority of all BME groups believed that voting was important.

We can investigate this sense of civic duty further using the British Election Survey. Respondents were asked if they agreed with a range of statements about civic responsibility and voting. These statements are summarised in the first column of Table 2 overleaf. The table gives the results of a principal components analysis. This allows us see which of these beliefs tend to be associated with each other or, in

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Figure 7. Interest in politics (percentage)

Q.5b. How interested would you say you are in politics?

Source. MORI/EC phase 1

Table 2. Civic duty: principal components analysis

|	Civic duty	Distrust of politicians	Disillusionment with politics
Seriously neglect duty if not vote	.86		-.14
Feel very guilty if not vote	.84		-.14
Every citizen's duty to vote	.77		-.10
Sense of satisfaction when vote	.73	-.20	
Democracy only works if vote	.62		
Government doesn't care		.81	.14
Parties only interested in votes		.79	.15
MPs lose touch with people		.73	.17
People like me have no say		.68	.17
Govt treats people like me fairly	-.17	-.58	
Voting can change Britain	.43	-.50	.21
Politics difficult to understand		.19	.69
Gap between expectations and actually get		.23	.62
People too busy to vote	-.25		.57

Extraction method: Principal Component Analysis. Rotation method: Varimax with Kaiser Normalization. Component loadings > 0.1 are shown.

Source: BES, 2001

other words, form natural groups of issues. We find that we can summarise the 14 beliefs in three summary indexes. The first index represents voters' feelings towards civic duty. The second we might describe as distrust of politicians, and the third represents a more general disillusionment with the political process. The score of each statement on these summary indexes represents how closely that variable correlates with the index.

The advantage of this analysis is that we can now compare how people score on these broad issue groups, without having to rely on single responses which tend to be more volatile. The index scores are recoded so that a high score reflects a high level of civic duty, distrust and disillusionment respectively. As we might expect, what we find is that non-voters score much lower on the civic duty scale (Figure 8). However, distrust of politicians is much less closely associated with turnout. There is a strong relationship between the disillusionment scale and reported turnout, with non-voters much more likely to find politics difficult to understand or to think that people are too busy to vote. BME communities score very close to the average on the

Figure 8. Index scores by key characteristics
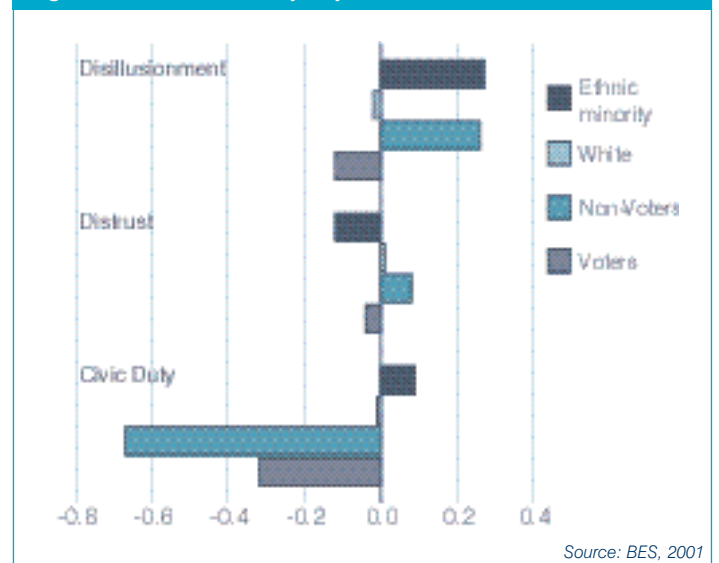
Source: BES, 2001

civic duty index, therefore this cannot be advocated as a serious explanation of differential turnout. Their mean score is actually slightly higher than the white population. They also score slightly lower on the distrust of politicians index, giving little support to the argument that political parties and politicians are regarded less favourably by minority groups. Finally, BME communities score substantially higher on the disillusionment scale, which is also related to turnout. This may be a potential explanation of differential turnout levels.

5.5 Attitudes towards the parties

The MORI data allow us to explore attitudes to the political parties in more detail. According to these data there is some difference in knowledge about the parties. Around a third of white and Asian respondents said they did not know enough about what the parties stood for, compared to 40% of black respondents. There was also a substantial difference in terms of the proportion of respondents who claimed to know 'hardly anything about how the Westminster Parliament works' (Table 3). Black respondents, in particular, were less likely to know at least 'a fair amount', and most likely to know 'hardly anything'.

BME voters were more likely to believe that none of the parties stood for policies that they would like to see (Table 4). While only a quarter of white respondents agreed with this statement, the figure for minority groups was closer to one third. This is consistent with the argument that the parties do not effectively reflect BME voter interests. It is also supported by evidence from phase 2, which shows comparative figures of 34% (BME) and 29% (white) and suggests that this was an important influence on turnout rates. Whereas 30% of voters (32% BME communities) who believed that none of the parties stood for policies that they would like to see reported not voting, the comparative figure for those disagreeing with this statement was only 11% (and 15% for BME communities). This suggests that dissatisfaction with the parties may have been important in depressing turnout for both BME groups and the population as a whole.

However, BME respondents to the BES were almost as likely to have a party identification as white voters, with only 12% (13% white) expressing no party identification. Furthermore the ICM/OBV poll showed little evidence that the perception that political parties did not represent BME interests made much difference to turnout.

Table 3. How much do you feel you know about the way the Westminster Parliament works? (Cross-tabulation; % within ethnic group)

Q.21. How much do you feel you know about the way the Westminster Parliament works?

ETHNICITY	Great deal/Fair amount	Just a little/don't know	Hardly anything/ Never heard of	Total
White	45.1	31.1	23.8	100.0
Black	29.7	36.1	34.2	100.0
Asian	35.3	39.9	24.9	100.0
Other	37.9	31.0	31.0	100.0
Total	42.5	32.4	25.2	100.0

Source: MORI, 2001

Table 4. How much do you agree or disagree with the statement 'None of the parties stands for the policies I would like to see'? (phase 1; % within ethnic group)

Ethnic group	Agree	Neither	Disagree	Total
White	26.5	15.3	58.2	100.0
Black	34.2	11.0	54.8	100.0
Asian	34.7	11.0	54.3	100.0
Other	32.2	20.7	47.1	100.0
Total	28.2	14.8	57.0	100.0

Source: MORI/EC phase 1

In phase 2 respondents were also asked whether they agreed with being offered the option of voting for 'none of the above'. BME communities were relatively strong in their support for this proposition, again indicating dissatisfaction with the parties and candidates rather than with politics in general. A substantial proportion of respondents also claimed that they would be more likely to vote if offered this choice (12% white and 19% BME). Furthermore, similar proportions claim they would have voted for 'none of the above'. Again, however, we must treat these results with caution, as actual behaviour and expressed intention can be markedly different. Finally, there were no ethnic differences in the proportion who felt there was little to choose between the parties, with around 4 out of 10 of all BME groups agreeing or tending to agree with this statement.

5.6 Political impact, efficacy and constituency context

It was suggested above that part of the explanation for low turnout might be that the electorate did not believe voting would make much difference. However, the MORI data suggest that the majority of all voters in phase 2 thought that voting would make a difference, and this was slightly higher among BME than white voters (Figure 9). The apparent self-reported efficacy of voters is slightly at odds with the evidence from an analysis of constituency-level

results, which strongly indicates that voters are less likely to turn out if the constituency battle is not close. This apparent inconsistency highlights the problem that while voters might readily articulate one sentiment their actual behaviour might tell us something else. This is discussed in more detail in Section 6. The ICM/OBV poll did find that, among non-voters, the belief that voting would make no difference was the most common reason for not voting.

If we look at the actual level of turnout by constituency, we find that there is a close correlation (+0.77) with margin of victory at the last election (i.e. how close the seat was). This is illustrated in broad marginality groupings in Figure 10 opposite, which shows that in very safe seats turnout averaged 55%, while in marginal seats it was nearly 65%.

After allowing for marginality and the size of the Labour vote (which was also related to turnout) there was a small but significant relationship between the size of the BME population and the turnout (Table 5 opposite).[9] For approximately every 5% increase in the size of the margin and the percentage of the population from BME

[9] This is based on a multiple regression analysis. Ethnicity of candidates was also included but was not statistically significant. The model explained 58% of the variance in turnout with just three variables.

Figure 9. Would voting make a difference? (percentage)

Q.16. I am going to read out a number of statements ... made about the general election campaign this year.
Please tell me how much you agree or disagree with each. a) I did not believe that voting would make much of a difference
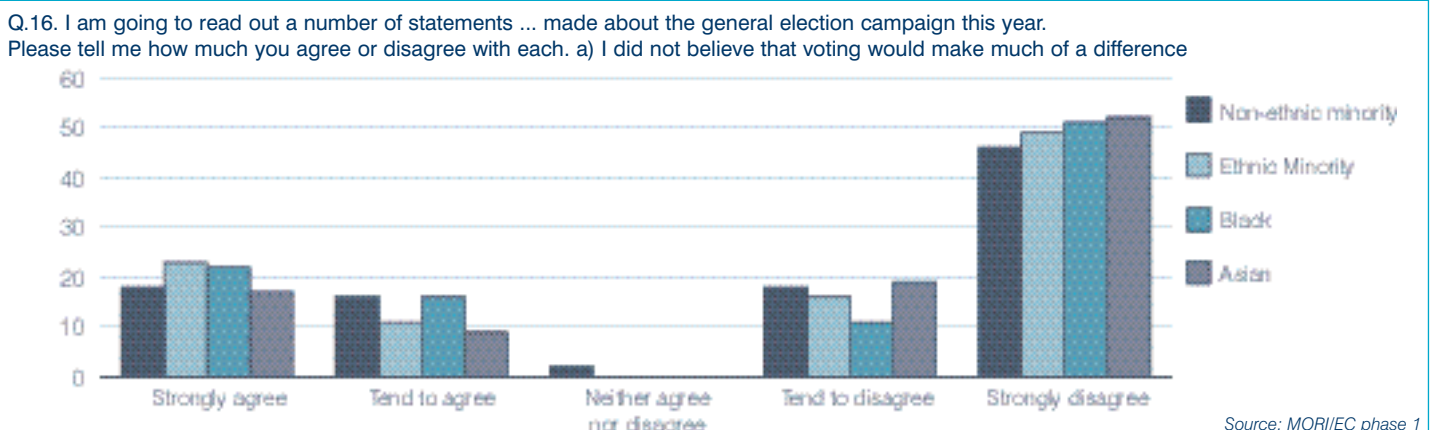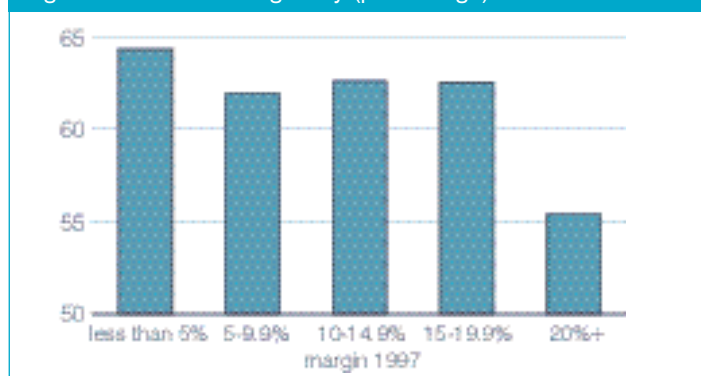

Source: MORI/EC phase 1

Figure 10. Turnout marginality (percentage)

Source: Constituency Election Database[10]

Table 5. BME population size and turnout

Variable	Regression coefficient (b)
Constant	68.0
% marginality	-0.18
Non-white %	-0.19
% Labour vote 2001	-0.08

Source: Constituency Election Database

communities, there was a 1% drop in turnout. However, this does not necessarily mean that it was BME communities who were the non-voters, but that there are low levels of turnout in the areas where BME communities are concentrated (see the earlier discussion of the 'ecological fallacy'). Also, a larger Labour vote tended to suppress turnout. This may be because the party's lead in the opinion polls meant that in Labour heartlands the actual competitiveness of the seat was less than the marginality would indicate. Another argument is that there may have been some disillusionment of traditional Labour voters (also previously discussed). Given that, according to the ICM/OBV poll, over 70% of BME voters voted Labour, this may have affected turnout in these groups to a greater extent.

5.7 Combining individual and contextual factors affecting turnout

It has been argued above that various individual-level characteristics and attitudes affect the propensity to turn out and vote, but also that constituency context plays an important part. In order to test which factors most influence turnout, we fitted a logistic regression model of non-voting using the BES and the constituency database. The model simply estimates which variables best predict which respondents vote and which will not. A wide range of explanatory variables were included measuring demographic and social characteristics, attitudinal measures of civic obligation and views about the political parties and the political system. In addition, constituency-level variables were added based on the characteristics of the constituency in which the respondents were surveyed. Given the strength of the relationship between marginality and turnout at the constituency level (see Tables 4 and 5), it was surprising that constituency-level characteristics proved not to be significant. This may indicate further limitations of the survey approach to non-voting. Clearly, people who respond to a survey are keen that their opinions are heard. These are the very people who are least likely to be dissuaded from voting simply because they do not live in a marginal seat.

What the model does show us, however, is the importance of a feeling of civic duty in influencing turnout (Figure 11 overleaf). This sense of civic duty may also be related to the same factors as non-voting (for example deprivation or social exclusion). The model similarly shows distrust of politicians and general disillusionment to be important factors. Age and strength of party identification were also found to be important (see also Clarke et al, 2001). Finally, we note that even after allowing for these other factors, belonging to a BME group had an additional impact on the likelihood of voting. BME communities were around 1.5 times more likely to be non-voters after taking these other factors into account.

10 Data compiled by Pippa Norris, Harvard University.

Figure 11: Significant influences on turnout at individual level (odds ratios from logistic regression analysis)
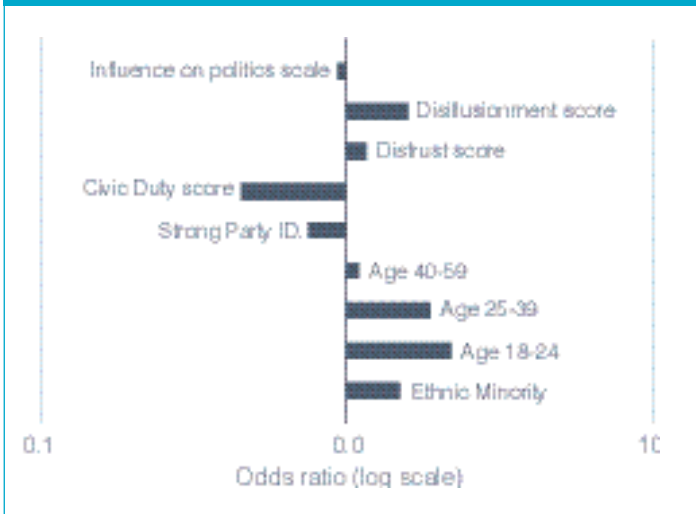

Insignificant variables: age on completing education, whether canvassed, social class, gender, constituency majority 1997, constituency Labour vote 1997, constituency non-white population %, interest in politics, respondent difference in party positions.

5.8 Changes in voting procedures

There was some evidence of different views about changes to voting rules. For example, black and Asian respondents were less likely than white respondents to support compulsory voting (phase 1 MORI survey). In phase 2, non-voters were asked whether certain measures would have made them more likely to vote. Since only around 200 persons in the survey claimed to have not voted, statistical comparisons between ethnic groups do not have a high level of reliability. However, we note that voting at the weekend, 24-hour polling stations and internet voting were relatively popular with minority groups, especially black respondents (see Figure 12). Postal voting was also identified by a number of non-voters, even though postal votes were available. Only around 70% claimed to be aware of the entitlement to postal votes, and this is likely to be an overestimate.

When asked what might improve levels of turnout, few of these initiatives scored particularly highly, although voting by internet and by post were relatively popular among BME communities (Figure 13 opposite). The most common suggestion was making voting compulsory (17%). However, the ICM/OBV poll asked a similar question with very different results. Rather than procedural issues emphasised by the

Figure 12. Summary of questions 47–52. What would make you more likely to vote? (Percentage)
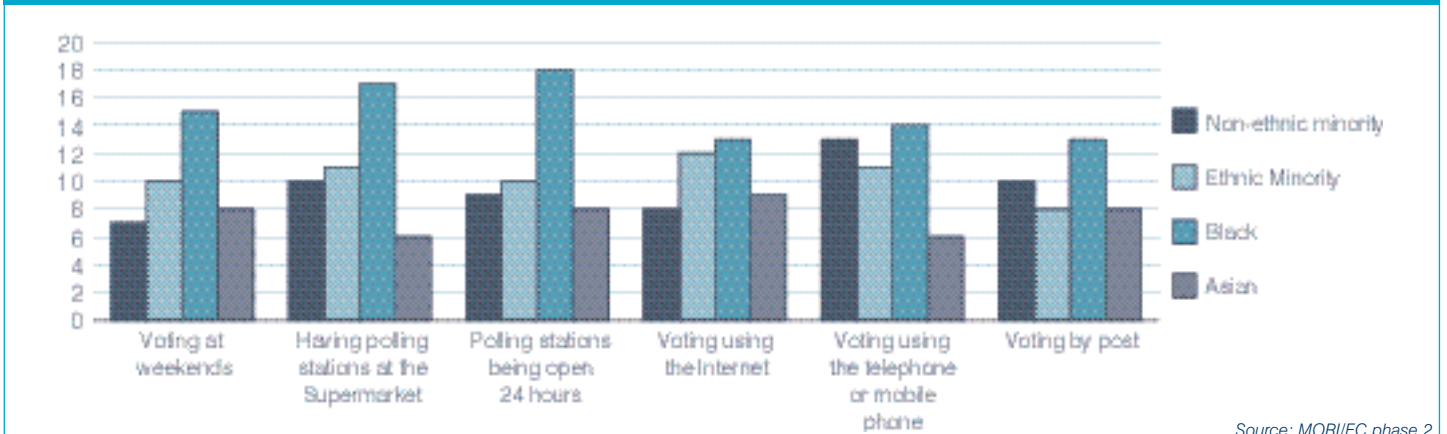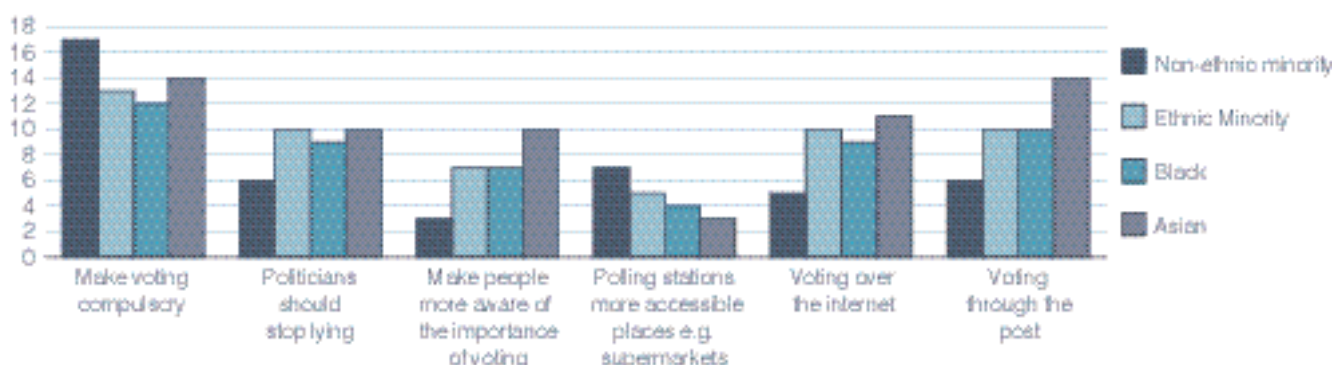

Source: MORI/EC phase 2

Figure 13. Methods to increase turnout (percentage)

As you may be aware, of those eligible to vote 59% voted in the general election.
What, if anything, do you think can be done to increase the number of people voting at general elections?

Source: MORI/EC phase 1

MORI findings they identified issues such as 'parties listening to black concerns', 'politicians doing what they promise' and 'doing more to improve the NHS/schools'. Only 13% mentioned making voting easier.

5.9 Influence of the media

The MORI survey also asked respondents about their different sources of political information in relation to the election. The responses showed only slight differences between BME groups. However, BME groups were slightly more likely to use the internet and television as a source of information, and white respondents more likely to use daily newspapers. In phase 2, BME groups were more likely than whites to say that almost all forms of media had some influence on what they did on the day of the election. This was true of TV, opinion polls, party election broadcasts, the internet and leaflets. Black and Asian voters were also more likely to find party election broadcasts interesting and informative. It is therefore, according to this data, unlikely that lack of access to information about the election contributes to low turnout among the BME population.

5.10 Conclusions of secondary data analysis

The MORI data suggested that perhaps BME communities and the population more widely are not suffering from apathy, alienation and lack political efficacy, but may simply find voting rather inconvenient. This would suggest there is no great crisis of democracy, but simply a need to improve the mechanisms by which we vote. Certainly there is no compelling evidence that BME voters were any less interested in politics or in the election, although black voters at least were less likely to actually turn out than whites or Asians. A sense of civic duty was important in influencing whether or not people voted, and this is still relatively widespread.

However, we have identified a number of methodological weaknesses of the survey approach, which lead to an underestimation of voter apathy and alienation. Other data sources, including the ICM/OBV poll, the British Election Survey and the constituency election results tend to support this (see Section 6 for further details). In short, the facts of what happened at the election do indicate that turnout was related to constituency marginality and hence to how much impact people felt their vote would have. More attention needs to be paid to these simple facts.

A review of research methods in voting studies

Levels of voting and non-voting are widely misreported. As a result, survey data has to be treated cautiously as it is frequently at odds with what we know to be true – the official reported levels of turnout. Unfortunately, the latter does not allow disaggregation by individual characteristics such as ethnicity.

The only alternative to survey analysis is ecological analysis.[11] This requires us to infer that if BME communities are more likely to live in areas of low turnout then they are less likely to turn out themselves. As we note above, this is possibly subject to the ecological fallacy. In other words, BME communities may simply live in low-turnout areas (e.g. inner cities), but their levels of turnout may be higher than those living around them. As a result of this problem, and the fact that we cannot find anything about people's views from ecological analyses, we turn to survey data and the associated problems we have documented.

The problem of measuring both non-voting and the reasons for it with surveys relate to the fact that the sample of the electorate is not likely to represent non-voters in their true proportions and that the responses of those sampled are not reliable.

6.1 Non-response bias

Non-response bias is a potential problem in any survey (Fowler, 1993; Kalton, 1983). Survey respondents may be self-selecting. In relation to examining voter engagement, those who agree to be interviewed are likely to be over-representative of those who voted. This may be because the view of civic responsibilities that includes voting may also include participation in social science research. Whatever the reason, if it is related to both responding to a survey and turning out to vote, then any sample of voters may not be representative of the electorate as a whole.

In the MORI/The Electoral Commission phase 2 poll 78% of all respondents claimed to have voted, in sharp contrast to the 59% of the electorate who voted according to official turnout returns. Non-voting can also be shown to be systematically under-represented in surveys where voting can be verified. For example, we saw that in the BES

11 An exception to this is the analysis of marked electoral registers which show whether someone voted or not. Using specialised computer software, South Asians can be identified from marked electoral rolls and accurate estimates of turnout can be made. This method has not yet been widely used.

validated turnout was found to be 72% for white respondents and 67% for BME communities. This is well above the actual rates at the 2001 general election, demonstrating that non-response bias remains a significant concern for studies of voter engagement based on survey data.

Furthermore, given the strength of the relationship between marginality and turnout at the constituency level, it was surprising that constituency-level characteristics proved not to be significant in explaining variation in constituency turnout rates. This may indicate further limitations of the survey approach to non-voting, insofar as it provides further evidence that people who respond to a survey are keen that their opinions be heard. These are likely to be the very people who are also least likely not to vote. Voter apathy is related to whether or not someone responds to an election survey, so that any such survey is likely to underestimate the extent of voter apathy in the electorate.

6.2 Response bias

A common feature of many studies of participation and voter engagement in Britain is that they have tended to uncover a highly participant culture among the British (for instance, see Almond and Verba, 1963), or a well-developed sense of civic responsibility among British voters (Parry *et al*, 1992). Recent work from the ESRC-sponsored Democracy and Participation study has revealed that there persists a high expectation that at the aggregate level a British citizen ought to vote in elections regardless of an individual's propensity to vote in any particular electoral contest (Pattie *et al*, 2002). Hence, if voting is among the essential characteristics that the public see as civic responsibility, individuals wishing to present themselves as good citizens are likely to report that they were voters rather than non-voters. As such, the act of voting may become a valence issue (see Norpoth, 1992); widespread agreement about the desirability of participation in general and voting in particular might lead to individuals over-reporting their record of voting.

It was previously noted that the feeling of civic duty may be compounded by an additional cost of feelings of guilt associated with non-voting (Ferejohn and Fiorina, 1974). This may explain why people commonly misreport to pollsters that they have voted (see also Crewe *et al*, 1992; Harbaugh, 1996).

On a related theme, a classic 'spiral of silence' around non-voting may develop among a sampled population. A valence issue such as voting may encourage respondents to over-report their own voting record because they perceive an expectation that they *ought* to have voted (see Noelle-Neumann; 1984; Crewe *et al*, 1992).

Analysis of validated turnout in the British Election Survey reported above showed that a substantial proportion of respondents misreported having voted, and many of these were not even registered (numbers are too small for a reliable ethnic breakdown). Overall, 21% were found to be registered and to have claimed to have voted but had not, and a further 6% claimed to have voted but were not registered.

Furthermore, if respondents cannot be relied on to say accurately whether they voted, they may also be prone to give inaccurate reasons for voting and non-voting. This is not just a problem with those who misreport voting, but a more general issue about how accurately people are able to articulate motivations for behaviour, especially where it is hypothetical or counterfactual. For example, it might be unreasonable to expect an individual to assess their improved chances of voting if internet polling was introduced. The gap between the abstract and the reality is simply too large. Figure 12 in Section 5 indicated that as many people claimed they would be more likely to vote if they were allowed a postal vote as made the same prediction for internet voting. The irony, of course, is that in 2001 postal voting was more readily available than at any other British general election. It is unclear how many of these respondents thought they were answering a specific question about elections that are conducted solely through postal votes (along the lines of the 2000 local election

experiments). Such confusion highlights the need for specific, carefully worded questions in surveys. Other issues are raised by question ordering effects and question types in voting intention surveys (see Moon, 1987, 1996). Responses may also be sensitive to distortion due to question order. For example, there has been debate about whether asking a question about voting behaviour before asking one about party identification may result in contaminated results (Heath and Pierce, 1992; Sanders *et al*, 2002; McAllister and Wattenberg, 1995).

If respondents are likely to give interviewers answers that they assume to be socially acceptable it could seriously contaminate the interpretation of data. For example, if it is more socially acceptable to say that pressure of work or illness or other constraints forced an individual's abstention rather than their disinterest in or alienation from politics, interpretations of data may be distorted as a result (particularly when it came to preferred solutions to lack of engagement).

An associated problem concerns the recall of voting. Several accounts have found evidence of misreporting of which party individuals actually voted for, even after only a short period of time (Broughton, 1995; Worcester, 1983; Ranney, 1985; Sparrow, 2001; Russell *et al*, 2002). This problem is often heightened by an apparent tendency to retrospectively side with the victorious party (Broughton, 1995; Moon, 1996). The value of response may also be affected by the relationship between the interviewee and the interviewer (e.g. are they of similar age or ethnicity?).

6.3 Sample size

All sample surveys are subject to sampling error – the random differences between the population and the sample. According to the central limit theorem, with a sample size of around 1,000 it is possible to achieve margins of error of around +/- 3% around a single item of measurement such as voting intention (Kurtz, 1983; Blalock, 1982). In an often-cited analogy, a poll of 1,000 respondents should be as representative of the views of the electorate as the first ladle of soup is of the contents of an entire cauldron. However,

when one is interested in a sub-population, particularly where that population is small (such as the BME population), a much larger overall sample or a booster sample of the groups of interest is necessary. Notwithstanding the problems of response bias discussed above, the sampling error alone for a sub-sample of around 400 or 250 persons of BME origin (as in the surveys reported) makes accurate analysis less precise. In short, to understand ethnic differences high-quality survey data such as the British Election Survey require a substantial booster sample of BME populations (as was provided in the 1997 BES: see Saggar, 1998a).

In conclusion, there is a need to do more research on what people do rather than what they say they do. This may take the form of experimental research where the impact of different factors is assessed directly through the testing of those mechanisms in actual elections. The experimental studies of Sanders and Norris on voters' interpretations of media portrayal of general election campaigns might prove a useful template here (forthcoming, sponsored by the ESRC). The findings of the 30 local authority pilot public communication and engagement schemes being conducted in 2002 are also awaited with interest.

It is important to adopt methods that further reduce the risk of misreporting or that allow us to make effective adjustments. Finally, it is necessary to undertake surveys in which BME communities are sampled in sufficient numbers to allow meaningful analysis.

Implications and research priorities

On the basis of the review of existing literature on voter engagement and the survey data, the research team were asked by the The Electoral Commission to identify a range of possible policy innovations which could be considered in order to increase voter engagement among BME communities in the UK.

It should be noted that the policy responses identified are not derived from a detailed evaluation of existing policies but from the review of existing research and survey data. As part of this consideration of policy responses, the research team were also asked to identify any areas where there was a need for further research. Our conclusions are as follows:

7.1 Recognising diversity

- Low turnout was not exclusively a problem in BME communities, and there is evidence of considerable differences within and between these communities in terms of levels of turnout. For example, people of Indian heritage are the most likely of any people in the UK to turn out and vote. Policy responses should reflect these differences and identify and disseminate successful examples of voter engagement, and not treat BME voters as a homogeneous group (Section 1.3).

- Voter engagement and political participation in the UK should reflect the diversity of the British population, and barriers to participation should be identified and challenged. It is clear that a lack of ethnic diversity within political organisations and institutions can inhibit the engagement and participation of BME communities (Section 3.5).

- Tackling non-voting among BME communities has to include specific measures to address the disengagement among different sections within particular communities, including young people and women (Section 2.3).

- Voter information campaigns should recognise diversity of needs and interests – for example, in relation to the different engagement levels across BME communities and the different needs within these communities, such as the language needs of some of the older generation (Section 3.1).

7.2 Tackling social, political and racial exclusion

- The issue of voter engagement needs to be viewed in conjunction with problems of social, political and economic exclusion which, while not limited to BME populations, may be more widespread among certain parts of these communities. In general, the affluent and more educated middle classes are observed to have higher levels of turnout (Section 1).

- It is also important that policy responses take account of the evidence that certain BME communities face shared

experiences of exclusion, for example, in relation to party membership, office-holding and candidate selection (Section 1 and Section 2.3).

- Research continues to suggest that segregation, racism and unfair treatment affect the lives of BME communities. The implications for tackling voter disengagement among BME communities are far reaching, and policies designed to improve political participation in general and within political parties themselves need to take into account the recommendations of other key reports, including the Community Cohesion Report (Cantle, 2001), and the Stephen Lawrence Report (MacPherson, 1999) (Section 3.5).

- Following the 2001 general election there were only 12 BME MPs. Most had been elected to represent constituencies with substantial BME populations. 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, especially in winnable seats and in constituencies which are not predominantly populated by BME communities (Section 3.5).

- There is also a lack of information about the exact levels of political party membership among BME communities. It is clear that there is a long-standing failure to involve individuals from BME communities more widely in mainstream politics. This is evident both in the allocation of official positions in local parties and in the selection of parliamentary candidates (Section 3.5).

7.3 Making registration easier

- Accurate and high levels of registration are a key precursor for increasing voter engagement. It is clear that there are considerable variations in the scope and content of voter registration campaigns across different local authorities. Consideration also needs to be given to the introduction of a form of electoral register which is used solely for the purposes of voting (Section 3.1).

- The procedures and language of registration, and the information provided at the polling station or for remote voting, can inhibit the participation of certain BME communities. There is a need for more user-friendly language for some forms available in the English language– for example, 'Form A' – and a need to increase the availability of translated materials for older members of certain BME communities (Section 3.1).

- Registering to vote should be made as simple as possible, and the system of rolling registration which has recently been introduced in the UK might be developed further to allow people to register even closer to the election, as is available in other countries (Section 3.1.3).

- On a small scale in the UK, OBV has demonstrated that it is possible to convince BME communities of the importance of being registered to vote and of actually turning out to vote. Such campaigns should be supported. The innovative use of registration cards pioneered by OBV should be extended. Other countries such as Bangladesh can also provide useful examples of innovative registration and voter information campaigns. These can also have immediate relevance to certain BME communities in the UK (Section 3.1.3).

- Targeted voter engagement campaigns need to be ongoing to maintain and increase the levels of registration across different BME communities. They should also focus on trying to increase public engagement in politics and decision making more generally (Section 3.3).

7.4 Making voting easier

- The various initiatives introduced to make voting easier and more convenient, such as increased access to postal voting, trials of remote voting, extended voting hours and redesigning ballot papers/electronic voting, are important steps forward in the modernisation of democratic engagement. However, such initiatives are likely to have only a limited impact on more acutely

disengaged non-voters and communities. Ultimately, it is the politics that counts in ensuring voter engagement. Media and political preoccupation with the issue should not detract from the more critical issues such as disengagement and alienation (Section 3.6).

- Further research and pilot studies are required, focusing on the wider potential of electronic democracy to provide new means and contexts for political engagement. Consideration also has to be given to the social exclusion issues surrounding access to the internet and digital television. The reports of ongoing pilots relating to electronic democracy and public engagement being conducted by the Hansard Society are awaited. Other countries can also provide useful examples of electronic means of voter engagement (Section 3.6).

- In order to encourage the turnout of older members of certain BME communities it is important that voting and publicity materials include translated guidance. It is important to establish national standards for quality and good practice with respect to the translation of materials from English into other languages (Section 3.1).

7.5 Raising awareness

- Increasing the recognition of the relevance and impact of politics at a local, national and European Union level on non-voters' everyday lives will be a key part of any successful voter engagement campaign. One aspect of this will be to emphasise the link between voting and policy rather than just elections, and to raise awareness of the fact that everyone is involved in politics, but few are involved in the actual decision making (Section 3).

- It is important that information campaigns distinguish between active withdrawal of support for parties and broader issues of alienation and disengagement (Section 3).

- In relation to any public information campaigns that are initiated, the focus should be on ensuring relevance to the particular groups within those communities. The medium by which information is provided needs to reflect the diversity of BME culture and media

consumption in the UK, and should also employ innovative formats to ensure a positive impact of such campaigns on different age groups. Drawing on the expertise and good practice demonstrated by the CRE and OBV in these areas will be important (Section 4).

- From the limited review of the BME media, it seems that the vernacular ethnic media are not subject to the same levels of mobilisation as the English language press. These differences in levels of coverage need further consideration (Section 4).

7.6 Voter choices and the electoral system

- Research suggests that proportional electoral systems tend to have higher rates of turnout. However, there has been no specific research on the impact of alternative elections systems on BME voter engagement in the UK (Section 3.4.3).

- Other research has indicated that 'first-past-the-post' systems are less effective in producing parliamentary representation from women and BME communities. Ultimately, it is the impact of the role of the political parties that is central, but it has been argued that a political party committed to the promotion of BME candidates is likely to find the task easier in a system that is not solely based on single-member constituencies (Section 3.4.3 and Section 3.5).

- Under the 'first-past-the-post' system the electorate in non-marginal seats is largely ignored by the political parties. If political parties are committed to voter engagement and to improving turnout, election campaigns should be rolled out to people living in all parts of the country (Sections 3.4.1 and 3.4.3).

- While survey evidence suggests that the introduction of compulsory voting is regarded by some as a potential way of increasing turnout, the MORI data suggest this is relatively unpopular among BME communities who may see non-voting as a statement of dissatisfaction. It also does little to tackle the root causes of non-voting (Sections 3.4.3 and 5.8).

- The introduction of a 'none of the above' option on the ballot paper is considered to be likely to have an impact on turnout. Substantial numbers of respondents in the MORI surveys claimed that they would be more likely to vote if offered this choice (12% white and 19% BME). Furthermore, similar proportions claim they would have voted for 'none of the above'. It is suggested that a number of pilot schemes be conducted if this is seen as a potential way forward (Section 5.5).

- The transparency of the electoral process, the accountability of holders of political office and party funding are important in maintaining the BME voters' trust in the political system (Section 3).

7.7 Research priorities

- There is a lack of reliable and compelling survey evidence regarding BME turnout and what would improve it. In order to target resources and policies effectively there is a need to conduct further research in a number of areas. These are outlined below, although this should not be at the cost of the development of policy in areas where it is clear what could be changed immediately.

- More accurate estimates of turnout need to be developed, based on the number of estimated eligible voters in the country. Existing estimates of turnout based on the number of registered voters are unreliable. They also exclude some of the most disengaged individuals.

- More reliable survey data and larger samples are required. In particular, more research is needed which allows for the verification of voting and the assessment of different methods of voting.

- To understand differences between ethnic groups, high-quality survey data such as the British Election Survey (BES) require booster samples of minority populations. This was provided to some degree in the 1997 BES, but such work needs to be ongoing and seen as integral to comprehensive studies of voter engagement rather than funded on an *ad hoc* basis.

- There is a need to do more research on what people do rather than what they say they do. This may take the form of experimental research methodologies in which the impact of different factors is assessed directly through the testing of those mechanisms in actual elections. Alternatively, methods should be adopted which further reduce the risk of misreporting or allow effective adjustments to be made.

- The polarisation of registration and turnout across constituencies requires further research in order to establish more detailed information on the links between deprivation, electoral context and non-voting.

- Further research is required into the issue of voter intimidation by far-right groups, party activists and also within BME communities.

- Further research and also scrutiny are required of the inner workings of political parties in terms of membership, office holding and candidate selection and the ways in which these are serving as barriers to greater BME participation. The focus of the research should be on examining differences in levels of recruitment, retention and promotion.

- More detailed information is required about how politicians engage with BME communities. This should include coverage of local, national and also international issues, which often have a particular relevance to certain BME communities.

- Specific research is required on the impact of both electronic democracy and alternative voting systems on BME communities.

- The levels of disengagement are highest among young people from certain BME communities, and further research is required to identify ways to tackle this. This may be possible through the surveying of specific BME groups or more qualitative ethnographic research.

- Little is known about the various attitudes to voting of people of Chinese of black African heritage in the UK, and further research is required on why turnout among

people of Indian heritage is the highest of all communities in the UK. It would also be important to find out more about what can be learnt from different communities' experiences of voting from a more qualitative perspective. The findings from the ESRC-funded Ethnic Minority Political Participation study being conducted by Sheffield University (due for completion in 2003) are awaited with interest.

- More research is also required on the extent to which local radio and cable television stations representing BME communities have covered election-related issues. In addition, there is a need for more research on the election coverage in the Chinese and Arabic press. It is also important that some consideration be given to establishing a national archive of BME media in the UK.

- International comparative research would be valuable. Research is required on what voter engagement campaigns in the UK can learn from other countries.

52

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54

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Notes

60

The
Electoral
Commission

We are an independent body that was set up by Parliament. We aim to gain public confidence and encourage people to take part in the democratic process within the United Kingdom by modernising the electoral process, promoting public awareness of electoral matters, and regulating political parties.

On 1 April 2002, The Boundary Committee for England (formerly the Local Government Commission for England) became a statutory committee of The Electoral Commission. Its duties include reviewing local election boundaries.

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