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Ethnic minority voters in the UK 2015 general election: a breakthrough for the Conservative party?

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Abstract

It was widely reported that the 2015 UK general election represented a breakthrough election for the Conservative party among ethnic minority voters – specifically that their vote share among minorities increased, and overtook that of Labour for the first time among some groups. I show that analysis using more representative data yields markedly different results. Looking at (i) party preference from 2010 to 2015, and (ii) reported vote shares from a nationally representative probability survey, I show that the Conservatives increased their support among Hindus - but the Labour party gained in support elsewhere. This is due to movement away from the Liberal Democrats; 2010 minority supporters of the Liberal Democrats moved to supporting Labour rather than the Conservatives in 2015 at a ratio of 2:1. There is also considerable individual-level volatility in party support among ethnic minorities, which is masked by a high level of stability at the aggregate level.

1. Introduction

1.1 Introduction

The antipathy of ethnic minority voters in the UK to the Conservative party has been well-documented (Anwar 1986; Anthony Heath et al. 2011; Layton-Henry and Studlar 1985; Saggar 2000; Saggar and Heath 1999). The 2010 Ethnic Minority British Election Study suggests that ethnic minorities were 21 per cent of Labour voters in the 2010 UK general election, but just 5 per cent of Conservative ones. This phenomenon is not unique to the UK; scholars have observed that ethnic minority voters in many European countries tend favour social democratic parties by large margins (Bergh and Bjørklund 2010; Dancygier and Saunders 2006; Leighley 2001; Maxwell 2012), although not universally (Teney et al. 2010). However, some have argued that the predominance of social democratic parties among these electorates will reduce over time, as second generation voters become a larger share of the electorate, racial prejudice declines, and the relative economic disadvantage of ethnic minorities decreases (Saggar and Heath 1999). This paper argues that the main predictions of this theory are not substantiated by the UK case.

This paper is specifically concerned with the perceived breakthrough for the Conservative party among ethnic minority voters in the UK 2015 general election. This has been understood as an important shift in British electoral politics because of the growing demographic size of the ethnic minority electorate, and the long-standing hostility of these voters to the Conservative party. I show that this shift has been exaggerated due to poor quality survey data, and that there has been no large increase in the number of minorities supporting the Conservatives since the 2010 general election. Instead there has been a noticeable increase in the party's support among Indians only, and Hindus in particular. Consequently, we should be sceptical that dealignment or even realignment with right-wing parties is the most likely trajectory of ethnic minority voting preferences. The 2015 general election was a test case where many of the pre-conditions for this shift to occur are present – well-established

minority groups with a large proportion of 2nd and 3rd generation voters, few substantial gaps in political participation, and a centre-right party which energetically campaigned to win votes from ethnic minorities. Despite this relatively favourable setting, there is little evidence of any further move towards the centre-right party for all minority groups bar one, nor of partisan dealignment.

This paper proceeds by setting out in more detail why it was expected that the Conservative party would win more support from ethnic minority voters in 2015, and the electoral context in general. It then examines the basis of claims that they had succeeded in doing so, and considers what electoral choices these voters made instead. Finally, it tests two key predictions of the theory that partisan dealignment is occurring among ethnic minority voters. The overall conclusion is that the return of ethnic minority former Liberal Democrats to Labour, and the lack of a sustained increase in minority support for the Conservatives demonstrate the remarkable stability of Labour support among ethnic minority voters in the UK.

1.2 The electoral context in 2015

In 2012, Lord Ashcroft – a prominent Conservative peer – published a report on ethnic minority attitudes to the Conservative party. It painted a picture of voters who were deeply hostile to the Conservative party, and associated it with racist attitudes. One of the more complimentary respondents described the party thus; “the Conservative Party – without wishing to sound derogatory or offensive – is a party for the white middle class educated person” (Ashcroft, 2012, p.36). Others were more direct; “The Tories had a lot of racist policies so it was easy not to vote for them ... ‘If you want a n*gger for a neighbour, vote Labour’ ” (p.36). Often these perceptions related to historical events or policies – but these were still associated with the party of the current day.

However, two weeks after the May 2015 general election an opinion poll was published by the think tank British Future which suggested the Conservatives had received a much higher share of the vote among ethnic minorities in 2015 than previously. The poll suggested that Labour had received 50% of the vote among ethnic minorities (defined here as Indian, Pakistani, Bangladeshi, black Caribbean and black African voters), and the Conservative party 38%. Papers who had supported the Conservatives during the election campaign ran enthusiastic headlines with the news: ‘Winning over the Tories of the future’ (Telegraph), and ‘How ethnic minorities turned Tory’ (Daily Mail).

There were a number of reasons to expect the Conservatives to make some progress in recruiting new ethnic minority voters. In common with similar European democracies, the UK ethnic minority electorate contains increasing proportions of 2nd generation voters, who face less racial prejudice than their parents, and have better access to higher education and middle class jobs. Most immigrants who have not attained UK citizenship are able to vote in all elections if they are citizens of a Commonwealth country. This has minimized the differences in participation rates between minorities and the white British (Heath et al. 2013). Aware of this demographic opportunity, the Conservatives enacted strategies to appeal to minority voters. They increased the number of Conservative ethnic minority parliamentarians by placing them in safe seats (Sobolewska 2013), and ethnic minority politicians were promoted quickly and given prominent roles. Baroness Warsi was a parliamentary candidate for the Conservatives in 2005, advising Michael Howard and subsequently appointed as a Conservative party peer and Cabinet member. Priti Patel entered

parliament in 2010 and quickly became a junior minister in 2014. Sajid Javid (later appointed Home Secretary in 2018) was the first from the 2010 cohort of MPs to enter Cabinet, and won an award for the best newcomer MP in 2010 from the Conservative Home website. It was clear his name was foremost in the minds of many when David Cameron said that the Conservatives “are going to be the party of the first black or Asian prime minister” in a speech on the 25th April 2015.

The opportunities created for ethnic minority politicians were paralleled by a strategy of media engagement. Gavin Barwell, the MP for Croydon Central, argued strongly that the Conservative party needed to engage with ethnic minority voters, and offered strategies on how to do so. This included engaging with targeted media outlets, visits by prominent Conservative party figures to religious sites and events of national and international importance to different minority voters – the Golden Temple in Amritsar for instance, or the Festival of Life, a Christian festival led by Pentacostal preacher Pastor Adeboye. These visits were often mocked on social media – for instance, Cameron’s visit to the Festival of Life shortly before the election drew humorous comparisons to Goodluck Jonathan’s own visit seeking the approval of Pastor Adeboye before losing his own general election in Nigeria – but they indicate a willingness by the Conservative party to engage with and explicitly court minority voters.

This willingness was also evident in party manifesto content as well. The Conservatives committed to targets for increasing the number of black and Asian people in employment, apprenticeships, university places, business loans, police officer recruits and the Armed Forces. These manifesto promises were backed up by targeted policies passed in the 2010-15 parliament. The 2014 budget reversed an increase on air passenger duty for flights to the Caribbean, in response to a campaign by Caribbean groups in the UK. The government also extended the exemption that permits Sikhs to wear turbans rather than hard hats from construction sites to other places of work where hard hats are required. These policies may have signaled a willingness of the Conservatives to engage with policy issues that affected minorities in particular.

There was a further reason that the Conservatives could be optimistic about their chances with ethnic minority voters in 2015. A letter was published on the website of the National Council of Hindu Temples, which expressed support for the Conservative party in response to legislation enacted by the Labour government that outlawed caste discrimination. The minister for equalities Helen Grant told Hindu groups that the government did not believe there was sufficient need for the legislation, and that they would consider removing the caste-specific part of it. The support of the NCHT was seen as a reassuring sign for those expecting the Conservatives to gain votes among Hindu voters. The symbolism of a prominent minority civil society group backing the Conservative party – unthinkable at previous elections - was seen as an indication that campaign efforts might pay off in electoral gains.

If the Conservatives had reason to hope their bid to win more minority voters might be successful, incidents during the 2010-15 parliament suggested that Labour might be vulnerable on this front. At the 2012 Bradford West by-election, Labour lost what was seemingly a safe seat (due to the large Muslim population) to George Galloway – seeing their vote share drop 20 points from 45.3% to 25.0% in two years. The Scottish independence referendum, and expectations prior to the general election that Labour

would suffer heavy losses to their share of the vote, were another example of how voters that Labour had become accustomed to relying upon could be lost by a party with an alternative, more appealing offer. Although he had initially been a Labour candidate, the controversial mayor of Tower Hamlets Lutfur Rahman won two mayoral elections as an independent in a multicultural and strongly Labour-supporting constituency.

The Labour party had previously demonstrated its ability to lose ethnic minority votes when the Liberal Democrats gained a number of new Muslim voters who were strongly opposed to their previous party's policy of military intervention in Iraq. Although many of those voters had returned to Labour in 2010, not all had done so (Curtice, Fisher, and Ford 2016), and more importantly this demonstrated that ethnic minority voters would stop supporting Labour over a salient policy disagreement. Moreover, Liberal Democrats in the run up to the 2015 general election had seen their support collapse in political polls, to the benefit of the Conservatives – their senior coalition partner. It seemed possible that ethnic minority voters who previously had supported the Liberal Democrats would be more easy to convince to support a new party (the Conservatives) than those whose support for Labour (and partisanship) had remained constant. Each of these circumstances had some unique factor – but taken together, they could have been read as signs that groups of voters previously thought to be unshakably Labour could be convinced by alternatives.

1.3 Dealignment

Away from the specifics of manifesto commitments, it had been predicted that ethnic minority voters might undergo a process of partisan dealignment i.e. that ethnicity might become less associated with partisanship in the future (Heath et al. 2011; Saggar and Heath 1999). The theory predicts that as ethnic minority groups gain more access to middle class jobs, and racial prejudice declines, ethnicity will cease to be as politically important. In other words, greater economic diversity of experiences will mean that ethnic minority loyalty to the Labour party will become less strong. Empirically this theory has some evidence to recommend it; ethnic minority voters in 2010 were more divided by class than in 1997 (Heath et al. 2011). 1.5 and 2nd generation voters (who make up a large and increasing proportion of the ethnic minority electorate) are less partisan than comparable 1st generation immigrants, and among immigrants more recent arrivals are also less partisan (Heath et al. 2013). 2015 offers a favourable test case for this theory; therefore this paper investigates whether these changes among the population of ethnic minority voters resulted greater economic stratification of party preferences among ethnic minority voters, or an increase in those with no partisanship?

1.4 Poll results

This electoral context, along with long-term predictions about partisan dealignment among ethnic minorities, makes it unsurprising that the Survation/British Future poll reporting a Conservative breakthrough among minority voters was widely believed. However, soon afterwards a blog post was published by Ford, Sobolewska and Janta-Lipinski questioning the findings of the Survation/British Future poll (Ford, Sobolewska, and Janta-Lipinski 2015). They argued that constituency returns showed that Labour had increased their vote share in constituencies with many ethnic minority voters. This was difficult to square with the Survation/British Future poll results – if both were true then there would need to have been a large swing towards Labour among white voters specifically in wards with many ethnic minority residents – larger in fact than the swing to the Conservatives apparently observed among ethnic

minority voters. This seemed unlikely when looking at results from constituencies with mostly white voters, which on average did not show a strong swing from the Conservatives to Labour.

Given the initial scepticism of the British Future poll result, this paper therefore looks to other sources of data on ethnic minority vote choice and party preference, and explores the possible reasons for the discrepancy.

2. Hypotheses

There are three main research questions answered by this paper. Firstly, is the data used in the Survation poll sufficiently representative to draw strong conclusions about ethnic minority vote choice? Secondly, is the increase in support for the Conservative party indicated by the Survation poll substantiated by other survey data? And thirdly, are other indicators of dealignment (non-partisanship, social stratification by occupational class) higher in 2015 than 2010, as predicted by the theory that dealignment is occurring among ethnic minority voters?

To answer the first research question, I identify groups that would be ineligible to participate in an opt-in internet panel, and compare their prevalence among different ethnic groups. I also look at reported 2010 vote choice in two types of survey. If opt-in online panel data is representative of voters in 2015, then we would expect it to accurately represent 2010 vote choice among ethnic minorities, and we would also expect similar levels of non-eligibility for the survey between different ethnic groups.

If 2015 was a breakthrough election for the Conservative party among ethnic minority voters, we should see a corresponding increase in expressions of party support among ethnic minorities in the intervening years. Furthermore, if the evidence from the Survation/British Future poll is correct, we should see an increase in support among different minority groups – rather than the increase being restricted to one group. Given the importance of the decline in the Liberal Democrat vote in 2015, it would also be expected that the Conservatives in 2015 benefitted from the support of ethnic minority former Liberal Democrat supporters.

To test the theory that partisan dealignment is occurring among ethnic minorities in the UK, I test two further hypotheses. If dealignment is occurring, there should be an increase in the proportion of minorities who have no party identity. Moreover, if personal economic circumstances are becoming more important for minorities in shaping patterns of party support (rather than ethnicity), there should be an increase in the association between occupational class and party political preferences. I focus on class because that has traditionally been the principal social cleavage used in analysis of UK elections, and to ensure comparability with earlier authors (Heath et al. 2011; Saggart and Heath 1999).

3. Data & Methods

3.1 Datasets used in this paper

The principal dataset used in this paper is *Understanding Society* (University of Essex, 2018) – a household panel study. I use information on political preferences from 2010-2015 and reported vote choice in the 2010 and 2015 UK general elections contained in *Understanding Society*. The sample size is large, and includes a substantial ethnic minority boost sample. Only a subsample were asked their reported

vote choice after the general election however, so the sample size for these items is much smaller. *Understanding Society* is used to estimate levels of partisanship and support for different parties among ethnic minorities from 2010-2015, to test the representativeness of existing internet panel data, and to test hypotheses about the correlates of party support. All estimates presented from *Understanding Society* are reported using cross-sectional weights, and standard errors are adjusted to reflect the complex survey design.

The British Election Study Internet Panel (BESIP) (Fieldhouse et al. 2018) was conducted by the polling company YouGov, with respondents drawn from its existing internet panel of respondents. It is a panel study with top-up samples at each wave. I use the post-election wave 6, in which there were 543 respondents who described themselves as either Indian, Pakistani, Bangladeshi, black Caribbean, or black African. Although not the same data used by Ford *et al.* (2015), it is a sample from the same internet panel. It was subject to the same biases in misreporting the Conservative and Labour vote shares during the general election as other online polls. I use it as an example of data from an opt-in internet panel.

The Ethnic Minority British Election Study 2010 (EMBES) (Heath et al. 2010) is a representative face-to-face probability sample of 2010 ethnic minority adults in areas of the country that had at least 2% ethnic minority residents in the 2001 Census. There were 2,787 respondents of Indian, Pakistani, Bangladeshi, black Caribbean or black African ethnicity. I use EMBES data to establish the 2010 general election vote shares among different ethnic minority groups.

In this paper I use the term ‘ethnic minority’ to refer to individuals who describe themselves as one of Indian, Pakistani, Bangladeshi, black Caribbean, black African or Chinese. This is because these are the main established ethnic minority groups in the UK, members of these groups are prevalent in surveys, and most are eligible to vote in national elections, unlike other immigrant-origin groups including Polish, Spanish and Romanian residents.

3.2 Online opt-in polls are unrepresentative of ethnic minority voters

One of the key contributions of this paper is that using different data sources gives different pictures of ethnic minority voter behaviour. Specifically, the BESIP (and – I argue – other internet-based non-probability samples of ethnic minority voters) is unrepresentative of ethnic minority electors. Therefore, it should not be compared with previous face-to-face probability samples. In this section I present evidence for this conclusion; (i) more ethnic minorities would be ineligible for such surveys, and (ii) reported vote choice in 2010 in these surveys shows a marked bias towards Conservative voters.

The most obvious ways in which opt-in internet panels are unrepresentative is that they exclude people who do not have access to the internet, and those without sufficient English language skills to enroll in the panel or complete the survey. *Understanding Society* data suggest that this excludes significant proportions of the population, especially for ethnic minorities. Table 1 presents the proportion of respondents aged 18 and over in *Understanding Society* who say they have no access to the internet at work, home, or elsewhere; who requested a translated interview; who report difficulty in speaking English in everyday situations; and finally the proportion of each ethnic group who report at least one of these factors. These are minimum

criteria that would need to be met before someone was invited to become a member of an internet survey panel.

Table 1: Data from *Understanding Society* wave 6 (2014-15). Weighted to correct for sample design and non-response.

Ethnic group	No access to the internet	Interview translated	Difficulty speaking English	Any of these
White British	14%	0%	<1%	13%
Indian	4%	3%	6%	10%
Pakistani	6%	8%	17%	23%
Bangladeshi	6%	9%	15%	23%
Black Caribbean	14%	0%	2%	15%
Black African	4%	<1%	4%	8%
Chinese	1%	<1%	4%	5%

The column titled “Any of these” illustrates that internet survey panels exclude a not insignificant proportion of the voting-age population. 13% of white British adults would not appear in such a panel, a similar figure to Indians and black Caribbeans, Black Africans and Chinese are more eligible than other ethnic groups for these panels, due to low rates of difficulty speaking English and high levels of access to the internet. For black Caribbeans and white British respondents, not having access to the internet is the more important factor, whilst for other ethnic groups English language speaking is a more important reason for ineligibility. The two ethnic groups that are most excluded from being in an internet panel are Bangladeshis and Pakistanis (both 23%). These are minimum estimates, rather than the upper bound – it is reasonable to think that people who have access to the internet but say they never use it would also not be included in an internet survey panel. That would exclude a greater proportion of all ethnic groups, but especially Pakistanis and Bangladeshis. This also ignores all unobservable characteristics which make some people less disposed to sign up to polling agency samples. The under-representation of these groups is important for the purpose of this paper because these groups are more supportive of the Labour party, so under-representing them might lead to a downward bias of Labour party support.

We can compare vote choice at the previous general election in 2010 between the different types of survey to see the extent that this coverage error is correlated with voting behaviour. Table 2 does this. Caution is needed here, as the sample size is quite small. However, it is interesting that for the four ethnic groups included in EMBES where there are at least 60 reported 2010 voters in the BESIP wave 6, the proportion who report voting Labour in 2010 is lower in the BESIP than in EMBES, whilst the proportion voting Conservative in 2010 is higher or the same. We can weight for observable characteristics like vote choice – this approach was taken by Ford *et al.* However, it is more likely that these differences in vote choice in 2010 coincide with an underlying political attitude that is not measured or included in the post-stratification weights used by Ford *et al.* Particularly, given that the BESIP ethnic minority respondents were in 2010 less likely to support the Labour party than were other minority respondents, it is reasonable to think that they might be more likely to shift to the Conservatives in 2015 than the group of respondents who were not covered by the internet survey. Importantly, this might apply even to those respondents reached by an internet survey who did vote Labour in 2010, so weighting by past vote choice would not be enough to counter this problem.

Table 2: Proportion of 2010 voters supporting Labour or the Conservatives in the 2010 Ethnic Minority British Election Study, or the 2015 British Election Study Internet Panel (wave 6). Data are weighted.

Ethnic group	EMBES Labour	EMBES Conservative	EMBES N	BESIP Labour	BESIP Conservative	BESIP N
Indian	61%	24%	409	37%	29%	165
Pakistani	60%	13%	449	50%	13%	70
Black Caribbean	78%	9%	371	52%	14%	66
Black African	88%	6%	298	66%	14%	71
Total minority*	69%	15%	1884	51%	21%	388

*Indian, Bangladeshi, Pakistani, black Caribbean, and black African voters. Chinese voters are excluded from consideration here for comparability as they were not included in EMBES 2010.

3.3 Patterns of party support among ethnic minorities 2010-2015: Methodology

The previous section demonstrates that existing data on ethnic minority votes choices in 2015 is flawed in ways that are unlikely to be fixed even with post-stratification weighting. Therefore, I use *Understanding Society* data to look at patterns of party support and reported vote, which has a better claim to representativeness due to its stratified probability sample. I use both reported vote choice for 2010 and 2015, and other measures of party support. This is for two main reasons. Firstly, reported vote choice is asked only of a subset of respondents in *Understanding Society*, which means that the sample size for ethnic minority respondents is reduced¹. Secondly, vote choice at 2010 and 2015 does not allow us to look at individual-level changes, or changes in party support between elections.

Partisanship and party preference is measured in *Understanding Society* in three stages. Respondents are first asked if they consider themselves a supporter of any party (and if so which one); if not, they are asked which party they feel closest to; and finally, if they neither support a party nor feel close to one, which party they would vote for if there were a general election tomorrow. I use this party preference data to investigate whether there have been changes in patterns of support for different parties over the time period from one general election to the next (2010-15). Although not an exact substitute for voting behaviour, I believe that this measure will move in the same direction as vote choice, and any collapse in support for one party should be detected by both measures.

The other difficulty with using a party preference measure to understand likely vote shares in 2015 is that the study contains people who have a party preference, but will not have voted in 2015. I adjust for this by estimating each respondents' likelihood to vote, and present patterns of support among likely voters.² Eligibility was derived from respondents' self-reported country of birth and citizenship. The assumption was made that respondents were not in the country illegally or on a tourism visa. This approach is also blind to tactical voting.

¹ 791 ethnic minority respondents reported voting for a particular party in 2015, and 1, 126 in 2010, for the definition of 'ethnic minority' used in table 2.

² Similar estimates for eligible voters only are available in the Supplementary Information.

‘Likely voters’ are identified in the following way. Part of the *Understanding Society* sample were asked if they voted in the 2010 general election. I constructed a logistic regression model of turnout (among those eligible) to produce predicted probabilities that could act as a predictive tool in the rest of the sample. Separate models were developed for white British and ethnic minority respondents.³ The predictive efficiency of the model was evaluated using an ROC curve (receiver operator characteristic)⁴; the area under the curve (AUC) in the final models was .85 for ethnic minorities and for white British – both values that represent a good diagnostic test.⁵ The coefficients from the logistic regression model were then combined with the characteristics of respondents at each wave to estimate each respondent’s likelihood of voting. The Youden index was calculated and taken as the cutoff point – the Youden index was chosen because it maximizes the difference between the true positive rate and the false positive rate. Respondents whose predicted probability of voting was greater or equal to than the cutoff were considered to be likely voters, and respondents whose predicted probability of voting was less than the cut off were considered to be likely abstainers.⁶

This classification is dependent on a number of assumptions, especially immediately either side of the cutoff point. The assumption that the relationship between different predictors and turnout remains constant over the time period cannot be tested with the current data. A limitation is that there is no data available on electoral registration, so the predictive model of turnout is also modeling unobserved registration behaviour (Timpone 1998).

4. Results

4.1 Patterns of party support among ethnic minorities 2010-2015: Results

Figures 1 and 2 present patterns of party support among different ethnic and religious groups from 2010 to 2015, using data from waves 1-6 of *Understanding Society*. The underlying numbers behind these graphs can be found in table 7 in the supplementary information.

In these figures the proportion of likely voters⁷ who supported either the Conservatives or Labour is plotted over time, with ethnicity identified by the style of

³ Explanatory variables in the final model for ethnic minorities were ethnicity, highest educational qualification, age, how much the respondent likes the Labour party, feeling that voting is a civic duty, how strongly the respondent intends to vote, satisfaction with democracy, employment status, religion, whether there are children in the household, marital status, and if the respondent was born in the UK. For white British respondents the model did not include if the respondent was born in the UK, religion, or ethnicity, and also included how much the respondent likes the Conservative party and the Liberal Democrat party.

⁴ The ROC curve is frequently used in medical settings, and is a global measure of the diagnostic accuracy of a continuous test that reflects the degree of overlapping of test results in healthy and diseased populations. It is independent of the prevalence of a disease. In our context ‘disease’ is having reported voting.

⁵ The AUC takes values ranging from 0.5 (uninformative test) to 1 (perfect test).

⁶ For ethnic minorities the cutoff point was 0.7611, whilst for the white British group it was 0.7919.

⁷ Estimates for eligible voters can be found in the Supplementary Information. The patterns are not markedly different. Support for both parties is generally higher among likely voters than among all eligible voters. This is reassuring because it suggests that the survey is not omitting disengaged voters – one of the difficulties that general election polls faced. The gap

the line and marker. Each proportion is lower in 2010 than the estimated vote share of the party among each ethnic group. This is because the base is all likely voters, including those who did not give a preference. In addition, some people will vote for a party at election time, but not express a definite preference beforehand. The graphs show that Labour have not suffered a dramatic decline in party support from 2010 onwards. Indeed, for Pakistanis, black Africans, black Caribbeans and Bangladeshis it appears that support for Labour has increased. The one exception is that support for Labour declined among Indian likely voters.

[FIGURES 1 AND 2 ABOUT HERE]

From 2010 to 2011, Labour became more popular among every ethnic minority group. This was a period in which Labour elected a new leader who was more popular than the previous Prime Minister Gordon Brown. However there was also a change in the showcard given to respondents between wave 1 and wave 2; in wave 1 (so half of the respondents for 2010), the showcard included the options 'None', 'Can't vote', and 'Other party', but in other waves these options were spontaneous only. Therefore lower party support in 2010 is likely to be partly due to questionnaire design. From 2011, the trends diverge. Black African voters do not become more supportive after 2011, but are the most pro-Labour ethnic group. However, there is also an (insignificant) increase in black African support for the Conservatives from 2011 to 2015 (7% to 11%). Black Caribbean support for Labour increased by only 2 points from 2010 to 2015 among likely voters.

Among Pakistanis, support for the Labour party among Pakistanis increases and reaches a high point in 2011 and 2012. It decreases after that until 2015, when it is still higher than in 2010. This is not evidence for a collapse in Labour support among Pakistanis in the years before the general election. Similarly, support for the Conservatives decreases by 1-3 points to 8% of likely voters. Labour continues to become more popular among Bangladeshis over the time period, with a 7 percentage point increase in the proportion supporting Labour from 2010 to 2015. There is also a peak in popularity for Labour among Bangladeshis in 2012. This does not support the contention that Asian voters in general moved towards the Conservatives in 2015.

Conversely, support for the Labour party among Indian voters has decreased by 2015 by 7 points. This decrease appears to be most evident after 2012. At the same time, support for the Conservatives among Indian voters increased from 17% of likely voters in 2010 to 32% in 2015. Previous work noted that Hindus were more Conservative than other minority religious groups (Heath et al. 2013). Figure 3 confirms that this is still the case, showing Labour and Conservative support among likely voters by religion (Hindu, Sikh and Muslim). Consistent with previous research, Labour support is lower and Conservative support is higher among Hindus. Support for the Labour party among Indian Sikhs and Muslims rose and then fell over the time period in question, ending in 2015 at approximately the same level as 2010, whilst it underwent a steady, slight decline from 2012 among Hindus. The Conservative party remained just as unpopular among Muslims and Sikhs in 2015 as in 2010, but became more popular among Hindus (from 20% to 35%). The only statistically significant increases in support for the Conservatives from 2010 to 2015 are among Indians in general, and Hindus in particular. Underlying numbers for this figures are available in the supplementary information

is bigger for the Labour party, but this is because the Labour supporters are a bigger group overall.

[FIGURE 3 ABOUT HERE]

Although the sample size is small, this data allows the first probability sample of UK voters with a Chinese background. Contrary to other minority groups, Chinese electors have higher support for the Conservatives than for Labour, and this remained true from 2010 to 2015⁸.

4.2 Reported vote choice among ethnic minority voters in 2010 and 2015

Although the sample size is much reduced, it is possible to look at data on reported vote choice in both 2010 and 2015. Figures 4 and 5 shows the proportion of ethnic minority voters for the Conservative and Labour party in 2010 and 2015, first by ethnic group, and then by religious minority group. Underlying numbers for these figures are available in the supplementary information. In the first panel we can see that Labour party reported vote share does not appear to have dropped from 2010 to 2015 in any of the ethnic minority groups studied, and for Bangladeshis and Pakistanis it appears to have risen. These are based on small sample numbers (445 Pakistanis and 306 Bangladeshis over both elections), so the confidence intervals are wide. Moving on to Conservative vote share, there do not appear to be any obvious changes in their vote share among any minority group, including Indians. Figure 5 shows reported vote choice by religious group. In contrast to the lack of a difference in reported vote choice among Indians between the two elections, among Hindus there appears to be a drop in Labour's vote share and increase in that of the Conservatives from 2010 to 2015. This is not statistically significant however, probably because the number of Hindus in the sample who report a vote choice in either election is 201. This result should be viewed therefore as indicative, and assessed in light of the more highly powered analysis party preference. The increase in Labour vote share among Muslims (N=902) from 2010 to 2015 is statistically significant at the 10% level ($p=0.06$). For the most part, these results from looking at reported vote share corroborates the evidence from patterns of party preference in the years between elections: there was no large shift towards the Conservatives among minority voters – however a few Hindu voters in particular may have moved towards the Conservatives and away from Labour. Muslim support for Labour may have increased. However, the low N for these items mean that we should be cautious in drawing strong conclusions. There is also no evidence of change in Labour or Conservative vote share among black Caribbean and African voters.

[FIGURES 4 AND 5 ABOUT HERE]

4.3 Inflows of former Liberal Democrat supporters

A defining feature of this period in British politics was the precipitous decline in support for the Liberal Democrats. Although they gained in popularity in Muslim areas in 2005 (following their opposition to the war in Iraq), ecological analysis suggested that this effect had 'unwound' by the 2010 election (Curtice, Fisher, and Ford 2010). However, 25% of Pakistani voters in 2010 chose the Liberal Democrats (EMBES), implying that Labour had not recovered all the voters it lost over foreign policy. Given the collapse in Liberal Democrat support among the electorate as a whole from 2010, it is important to ask where did ethnic minority Liberal Democrat voters go?

⁸ Although there are changes in the proportion of Chinese voters' support for different parties, the numbers are too small to draw meaningful conclusions from these changes.

To do this, I look at people who both said they supported the Liberal Democrats or actually voted for the Liberal Democrats in 2010, and see which party they support in the following years. Table 3 shows the results. It is necessary to group all ethnic minority respondents together due to smaller sample sizes. This is not a measure of 2010 or 2015 vote share - there were some people who both reported voting for the Liberal Democrats in 2010, but also reported feeling closer to Labour or the Conservatives in that year as well. In 2015, 19% of these ethnic minority former Liberal Democrat supporters or voters still supported them. However, 32% had moved their preferences to Labour compared to only 14% for the Conservative party. This contrasts to what happened to white British former Liberal Democrat voters - the equivalent figures from *Understanding Society* data shows that among white British people who voted for or supported the Liberal Democrats in 2010, Labour was only slightly more popular than the Conservatives in 2015 – 23% went to Labour and 19% to the Conservatives, and 6% to UKIP. So Labour benefitted far more than the Conservatives among ethnic minority former Liberal Democrats than their white British counterparts.

Table 3: Party preference of ethnic minorities who voted for, supported, felt closer to, or would have voted for the Liberal Democrats in 2010. Source: *Understanding Society*, data are weighted.

Party preference	2010	2011	2012	2013	2014	2015
Conservative	3%	9%	7%	8%	11%	14%
Labour	10%	34%	36%	36%	31%	32%
Lib Dems	83%	30%	28%	26%	21%	19%
UKIP	0%	0%	0%	2%	3%	2%
None	3%	19%	20%	19%	20%	17%

The other principal difference between ethnic minority and white British Liberal Democrat defectors is that few ethnic minority former Liberal Democrat supporters transferred their preference to the United Kingdom Independence Party (UKIP). This is in contrast with the role that UKIP played for Conservative-leaning white British voters when the Liberal Democrats were in coalition. Previously, the Liberal Democrats benefitted from the votes of otherwise Conservative voters who wished to register a protest vote, without supporting Labour. However, when the two parties were in coalition together the Liberal Democrats no longer were an effective protest vote, and for some white British voters UKIP now provided this function – 6% of white British 2010 Liberal Democrats went to supporting UKIP in 2015. This was emphatically not the case for ethnic minority defectors from the Liberal Democrats, underlining the differing bases of support that the party had relied on in the past.

The other way of looking at this is to see which party people who moved into supporting either Labour or the Conservatives had come from. Tables 4 and 5 show the proportion of ethnic minority voters supporting either Labour or the Conservatives in 2015, and which parties they previously supported. 8% of those who supported the Conservatives in 2015 supported the Liberal Democrats in 2010, and that proportion is similar (7%) for 2015 Labour supporters. However, the number of ethnic minorities supporting Labour is far higher, and therefore 7% of this group is a larger proportion of all voters. There is some good news for the Conservatives in this table however. 73% of Labour's ethnic minority supporters in 2015 also supported the party in 2010, but for the 2015 Conservatives this was true of only 56%. Although numerically small, the Conservatives did gain some new supporters among ethnic minorities. This is partly a function of the relative sizes of the two groups, but it nevertheless shows

that a greater number of ethnic minority Conservative supporters have recently supported their main opposition in the Labour party. Whilst this is better than gaining no new supporters, it underlines that this support might be temporary. A greater proportion of ethnic minority Labour supporters in 2015 supported the party consistently throughout the intervening period, underlining the stability of this support.

Table 4: Party preference of ethnic minorities who supported, felt closer to, or would have voted for the Labour party in 2015. Source: *Understanding Society*, data are weighted.

Party preference	2010	2011	2012	2013	2014	2015
Conservative	5%	3%	2%	2%	4%	0%
Labour	73%	77%	81%	77%	76%	100%
Lib Dems	7%	4%	2%	3%	2%	0%
None	12%	14%	12%	15%	13%	0%

Table 5: Party preference of ethnic minorities who supported, felt closer to, or would have voted for the Conservatives in 2015. Source: *Understanding Society*, data are weighted.

Party preference	2010	2011	2012	2013	2014	2015
Conservative	56%	54%	54%	55%	60%	100%
Labour	20%	21%	20%	16%	17%	0%
Lib Dems	8%	5%	5%	4%	3%	0%
None	13%	18%	19%	19%	16%	0%

4.4 Is there the beginning of partisan dealignment?

Even if ethnic minority voters have not moved noticeably towards the Conservative party in their vote preferences since 2010, it has been suggested that there is a continuing process of dealignment, with party identity loosening for some ethnic minority voters, and class becoming more important. Heath *et al.* (2013) note the stability of Labour partisanship, but also highlight that it is lower than in 1997. The evidence presented above suggests that Labour have not lost many ethnic minority voters, but it might be that party identity is weakening nevertheless - leaving the door open for future appeals from other parties. Figure 6 plots the proportion of different ethnic minority groups in *Understanding Society* who have no party identity from 2010 to 2015. In contrast to the hypothesis of dealignment, we can clearly see that there has been little change in the number of non-partisans from 2010 to 2015. Two ethnic groups did have a growing number of non-partisans until 2014 – Bangladeshis and white British – but the 2015 election halted this trend. Other groups showed no evidence for dealignment even prior to the unusually polarising 2015 general election. However, it should be noted that, without adjusting for the older age profile of the white British group (Martin and Mellon 2018), there is not a strong pattern of greater partisanship among ethnic minority voters – indeed Pakistani, Bangladeshis, Chinese and Indians have – on average - higher proportions of people saying that they have no party identity. Therefore there might not be a (further) period of weakening party identity in the future – although that does not preclude the possibility that the balance of Labour and Conservative partisans might become more even.

[FIGURE 6 ABOUT HERE]

Table 6 explores the association between occupational class (three-part NS-SEC) and party preference. Cells contain the average marginal effect of being in

professional/managerial occupation on support for Labour among ethnic minorities compared to those in routine occupations. These are adjusted for age, sex, generation and educational attainment. Statistically significant effects at the 5% level are indicated in boldface italic type. As elsewhere, standard errors are adjusted to account for the complex survey design and probability weights are used. Black Caribbean support for Labour is significantly related to occupational class in two years – and with professional workers being more likely to support Labour. The average marginal effect of class is often significant and negative for Pakistanis, Indians, Bangladeshis, and black Africans. A negative marginal effect indicates greater support for Labour among those in routine occupations. The size and significance of these effects is not consistent from year to year – unlike differences between ethnic minority groups, which are clear over time (as shown in figures 1 to 6). There is no clear trend to class having a larger marginal effect over time. These results corroborate Heath *et al.*'s (2011) finding that party support among most ethnic minority groups is now stratified by occupational class – but do not suggest that the relative influence of this factor is increasing.

Table 6: Average marginal effects of professional/managerial occupations supporting Labour compared to routine. Source: *Understanding Society*, data are weighted. Significant coefficients are highlighted in italics and bold type.

	Indian	Pakistani	Bangladeshi	Black Caribbean	Black African
2010	<i>-.10</i>	<i>-.12</i>	-.02	-.009	-.06
2011	-.06	<i>-.09</i>	-.04	.01	<i>-.15</i>
2012	-.03	<i>-.16</i>	-.05	<i>.08</i>	.009
2013	-.06	<i>-.22</i>	.02	.04	.06
2014	<i>-.09</i>	<i>-.14</i>	<i>-.27</i>	0.004	<i>-.13</i>
2015	<i>-.10</i>	-.03	<i>-.17</i>	<i>.09</i>	<i>-.10</i>

4.5 Robustness checks

There are possible concerns of panel conditioning or attrition due the longitudinal nature of *Understanding Society* data; these concerns are addressed with robustness checks contained in the supplementary information.

5. Conclusions and implications

This paper presents evidence that there were no broad changes in political party preferences among ethnic minorities in the UK between 2010 and 2015, and consequently that there has been no large-scale dealignment among ethnic minorities since 2010. The big shifts that did occur happened between 1997 and 2010. This suggests that Conservative party efforts to ‘detoxify’ their party’s brand among ethnic minority voters had little effect once in government. This is despite sustained efforts in media strategy, targeted policies, selecting more ethnic minority candidates, and placing minority politicians in high-profile government roles. The implications of this for the theory that migrant-origin minority groups will have the same trajectory of political preferences are clear; just as scholarship on immigrant integration has moved away from the expectation of a simple linear trend in favour of more complex and idiosyncratic trajectories, party political preferences may have different trajectories among different groups. In the UK, only Indians – in fact only Hindus, according to this data – are following the path expected by the theory of dealignment. Instead of applying this expectation to other ethnic minority groups, scholarship should focus instead on why preferences are changing in this group, and not elsewhere.

The paper also suggests that previous data used to assess changes in ethnic minority political preferences since 2010 suffered from considerable bias, and that the conclusions drawn at the time by many commentators and politicians are likely to have been incorrect. This is important because civil society and parties seeking to represent minority voters should be led by the best information available.

What then should be made of the Conservative's progress to date among minority groups? The lack of increasing support for the Conservatives as younger minority voters entered the electorate suggests that relative advantage the party has among second generation voters is not increasing. This data does not directly tell us about attitudes or responses to campaigning, but the lack of response in terms of party preferences suggests that existing measures to attract minority voters to the Conservative party have, by and large, been unsuccessful since 2010.

There are many potential reasons for this, aside from the long-standing antipathy of many minority voters to the Conservative party. The explanation may also differ between minority groups. However, some policy decisions taken since 2010 are especially likely to have alienated some of the minority voters they might have otherwise attracted. Such policies include increased restrictions on migration from non-European countries that have been unpopular with many ethnic minorities due to restrictions on friends and family. The explicit commitment of the 2010-15 coalition government to reduce net migration saw caps imposed on certain visa categories, and stricter conditions on others.

The so-called 'hostile environment' also came into effect during the 2010-15 Parliament. This meant making life in the UK more hostile for people who were in the country illegally. The policy required employers and landlords to check the immigration status of employees and tenants, giving the Home Office greater powers to investigate 'sham' marriages, and reforming the appeals process by giving authorities the power to 'deport first, appeal later'. In theory, these measures ought not to have affected many settled migrants in the UK – but in reality some UK citizens from ethnic minority backgrounds were negatively affected, leading to the later resignation of the Home Secretary in 2018. Even where ethnic minority voters themselves had no problems as a result of the hostile environment, Yuval-Davis, *et al.* (2018) highlight how the 'everyday bordering' of these policies can shape the politics of belonging. Policies seen to target migrants and ethnic minorities of migrant origin are often unpopular with these voters when they are perceived as xenophobic and increase racial profiling.

An alternative explanation is that the economic and social policy of the coalition government suppressed Conservative support. Ethnic minorities are more likely to be in unemployment and in poverty than the white British, so social policy that is not redistributive, or increases conditionality for access to unemployment benefits will affect these groups especially. Ethnic minorities are on average younger, and have more children, so these voters will have felt the effects of a cap on child benefit especially keenly. However, from the data it is very difficult to settle on any one particular explanation – indeed, it might be that the self-sustaining heuristic of partisanship explains the lack of any move the Conservatives, as much as any supply-side party explanation.

Although the big picture does not favour them, there were some movements that the Conservative party might be optimistic about. Greater support for the Conservatives

than Labour among Chinese voters as demonstrated in this data is the first time this has been shown with data from a probability survey, and underscores the importance of understanding group-specific characteristics and trends. Hindus are the one group that had a sustained move towards the Conservative party across the 2010-15 parliament, and away from Labour. This group became more supportive of the Conservative party from 1997 to 2010, and this paper suggests that the change is continuing. Further research might examine why attitudes are changing among Hindus – what factors are specific to this group – rather than placing this as part of a more general theory that sees Hindus as early adopters of supporting a party other than Labour.

What are the prospects for the Liberal Democrats among ethnic minority voters? Although not as popular among minorities as among white British voters, they were in a position of relative strength in 2010 among Pakistani voters (and presumably in 2005). These new data show that they have experienced a drastic decline in support among minority voters since then, just as among white British voters. Jeremy Corbyn (Labour party leader since 2015) is also known for opposing the war in Iraq, and anti-racism campaigning early in his career. Compounding this, the Liberal Democrats might find it especially hard to attract minority voters when faced with a Labour leader who is distinctive for his pitch to minorities and immigrants, and also a party that was instrumental in preventing large scale British military intervention in Syria. As the conflict in Iraq is overtaken by other policy concerns, and the differentiation with Labour over this issue is lost by the election of Corbyn, the Liberal Democrats may struggle to attract or retain Muslim voters.

A group not mentioned previously in this paper are Jewish voters, who appear to be overwhelmingly more favourable towards the Conservative party than Labour, perhaps because of recent scandals about anti-Semitism in the party (Barclay 2018). In some ways this illustrates the Conservative's problem with ethnic minorities but in reverse. Parties should be aware of the lasting reputational costs among minority ethnic and/or religious groups that perceptions of prejudice can bring about.

The final conclusion to draw from this analysis is that, despite a high aggregate level of stability, there is considerable individual-level volatility in the political preferences of minorities in the UK. There is movement not just from supporting one party to supporting none, but from supporting the Conservatives to Labour, and vice versa. What sustained Labour's support from 2010 to 2015 was not that minority voters stopped changing their mind, but rather that more of those who previously preferred the Liberal Democrats switched to Labour than switched to the Conservatives, and in contrast with the white British virtually none switched to UKIP. Minorities did switch their preferences from Labour to the Conservatives – but an equal number switched from the Conservatives to Labour. This individual-level volatility might be the best news for any party hoping to gain voters – there are more chances of convincing a voter to change their preference than might be assumed from looking at the aggregate trend, and the voters who are only loosely attached to Labour will be the first to move if there is a more appealing alternative.

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Figure 1: Labour party support among ethnic minority likely voters. Source: *Understanding Society*.

Figure 2: Conservative party support among ethnic minority likely voters. Source: *Understanding Society*.

Figure 3: Labour and Conservative support from 2010-2015 by religion. Source: *Understanding Society*.

Figure 4: Vote shares for Labour and the Conservatives by ethnicity. Base: all voters. Source: *Understanding Society*.

Figure 5: Vote shares for Labour and the Conservatives by religion. Base: all voters. Source: *Understanding Society*.

Figure 6: Voters with no party identity by ethnicity. Source: *Understanding Society*.

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