POLICY BRIEF

ACCEPT PLURALISM

British Muslims and the 2010 Election

Jan Dobbernack, Tariq Modood & Nasar Meer

University of Bristol

Over the last two decades there has been a growing number of ethnic minority Britons holding elected office. This was made possible by **electoral competition for the minority vote among mainstream parties** and by **changing social attitudes** in favour of ethnic minority presence in public life. The number of sitting ethnic minority members of the Westminster Parliament has increased from 4 in 1987 to 27 in 2010. These 27 MPs account for about 4% of 650 sitting MPs. Despite this increase, the level remains below the UK's non-white population of 9%.

Among mainstream parties, an acknowledgment of the electoral weight of minority constituents does **not always translate into a positive attitude towards their full, equal and active participation**. This is particularly the case where religious concerns and identities are highlighted. Political activists that mobilize on the basis of such concerns or identities are often **accused of divisive 'identity politics' and portrayed as particularist or sectarian**. Rather than being viewed as legitimate participants in British political life, in particular **Muslim minority activists experience widespread suspicion**.

Although there have been advances, **equitable representation has not been fully achieved** and obstacles towards the full inclusion remain. Many of these are not the result of material restrictions or lack of legal rights. They often result from **subtle obstacles**: an **atmosphere of distrust and suspicion** makes Muslim political involvement appear threatening. Publicly visible Muslims often face unfounded allegations of extremism. This atmosphere makes it more difficult for Muslims to participate.

This policy brief considers subtle obstacles that Muslim and other ethnic minority politicians and activists face in British political life. It draws on research into the experience of political campaigners involved in a number of national-level organisations that mobilized Muslim constituents during the General Election of 2010.

"If those of us who try to participate in public life (...) are constantly painted with a broad brush of suspicion and distrust, then what hope is there for the thousands of young British Muslims who feel alienated and marginalized from the political process?"

(Mehdi Hasan)

Issue 2012/11

Evidence & Analysis

Among the organisations and initiatives that were active during the 2010 general election are the **Muslim Council of Britain (MCB)** with its 'Muslim Vote 2010' campaign, the **Muslim Public Affairs Committee (MPACUK)**, **Operation Black Vote (OBV)**, **ENGAGE** and **YouElect**. Despite considerable differences between these groups, they generally tackled a number of recurring issues that can be considered as experiences of **'misrecognition'**.

Political philosophers consider **recognition to be a 'vital human need'**. Recognition is acknowledgment of and respect for another person's identity. Misrecognition entails disrespect and can lead to a lack of self-regard. We suggest that British Muslims experience **misrecognition**. While no social or political identity is ever fully recognized, it makes sense to speak of misrecognition when **claims for equality and civic inclusion are rejected on the basis of unreasonable perceptions**. The political activism of British Muslims reflects an aspiration to overcome misrecognition and to be acknowledged as normal participants in British political life.

The concept of recognition and misrecognition in British political life.

A 'Muslim Vote'?

While all mobilizations on the basis of race are often viewed suspiciously in British politics, **the focus on religious identities is particularly contentious**. The voting behaviour of British Muslim populations particularly attracts considerable public interest, and problems with their political representation have been widely reported. The abuse of communal power structures, patronage relationships and kinship networks (*biraderi*), usually to funnel votes to Labour candidates, has been singled out for criticism.

Muslims resist the representation of their political identities as abnormal and impossible to accommodate.

The long-term Labour MP Roy Hattersley remarked that, up to 1997, when he "heard of a Khan, Saleem or Iqbal who did not support Labour I was both outraged and astonished." Such assumptions about **simplistic preferences among British Muslims have been put into question**. As a result of the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan, an automatic and unquestioning preference for Labour can no longer be taken for granted. This has somewhat opened the field of political competition for the 'Muslim Vote'.

Muslim advocacy groups are aware of remaining preferences for Labour but keen to downplay its significance, such as when they **reject the idea of a Muslim 'block vote'**. The Muslim Council of Britain (MCB) suggests that "the Muslim voter, like any other Briton, may well make discerning choices of which their 'Muslim identity', if ever there was one, is only a part of a menu of considerations." The MCB and other organisations argue that British Muslims are a **dynamic constituency** and that they require **no special status** but acceptance on similar terms.

A dynamic constituency

The diversity among British Muslim voters was widely highlighted by the various initiatives that were mobilizing voters in 2010. This is a response to the labeling of **Muslim politics as based on narrow or simplistic identities.** It also suggests that the 'Muslim vote' is not tied to Labour and thus a force to be reckoned with.

> *"When politicians are looking around for a Muslim voice, they are all automatically confronted with Muslim voices, and they have to get over this idea that a Muslim voice will suffice, because they are confronted with a cacophony of voices. And annoying as it is, you have to deal with it, because that's the reality of the British Muslim community."*
>
> **Muslim Community Organizer (Interview, February 2012)**

There are frequent requests from all parts of British political life that Muslims should **downplay concerns that are connected to their religious identities**. But the request that minority groups, sometimes even above all others, live up to idealized understandings of citizenship and democracy can be exclusionary. British Muslim politics is characterized by diversity, and **faith plays a multi-faceted role in their political engagement**. Although the concern to overcome stigmatization may be widely shared, the strategies and political objectives of Muslim advocacy organisations vary in line with religious, strategic and ideological commitments.

> *"You're now at the point where many say, well, the Sunnis don't represent the Shi'ites and the Shi'ites don't represent the Ismailis … and so you go on. But I think that's a fight that Christians would have, that men have, that women have. No way can a single representative - be it a man or a woman - actually represent all diversity."*
>
> **Muslim Member of the House of Lords (Interview, January 2012)**

No special status

There has been a strong critique of the shortcomings of British Muslim politics (communal hierarchies, patronage networks). Yet these problems should not be confused with **the role that ethnicity and religion** *as such* **can play in politics**. Race- and faith-based mobilizations can be bottom-up and certainly are not always be manipulated by vested interests. While it is important that some sense of commonality is fostered, **in a democracy it has to be possible for politicians to appeal to groups in the population** (e.g., the working and middle class, women, young people). It is important that the dismissal of the 'identity politics' of minority groups is not selectively used to marginalise and disadvantage some groups, especially minorities.

Muslim politics: guarded and assertive

The experience of stigmatization and suspicion in the public sphere leads some organisations to be careful when framing their political concerns. *YouElect*, for example, chose not to prominently highlight Muslim-specific issues. The concern was that anything with "*the pre-fix of Islam or Muslim has a negative connotation immediately and [that] there is a counterproductive element*" with such emphases – a result of the public 'toxicity' of Muslim concerns.

Responding differently to such negative perceptions, other organisations highlight a Muslim agenda in order achieve an "*acknowledgement that this is a constituency that [politicians] cannot ignore*". They suggest that an **assertive appeal to shared identities** can help to increase the public visibility of important concerns and elicit a response from campaigning politicians.

> *"Our opposition will simply try to portray us as extremists and that this [candidate] is in our pocket. So, deliberately, what we do is we keep distance from any candidate that we endorse. We're not asking for their endorsement. We're endorsing them."*
>
> Muslim activist, Interview (February 2012)

Overcoming a negative climate

Despite considerable difference, there is a common desire among Muslim advocacy groups for the **recognition of the democratic normality of their political identities and concerns.** Yet they face a climate of suspicision where – in parts of the press and of the political mainstream – unfounded accusations of sectarianism, radicalism and extremism are frequently made. This negative climate stifles participation and continues to make it difficult for British Muslims to take part on equal terms in political life.

Key Messages for Policy Makers

1. *National broadcasters* and *news agencies* must show better awareness and training on the diversity of Muslim concerns. Graduate and in-house journalism training should emphasize that Muslim 'identity politics' **should not be publicly presented as markedly different in kind to other identity politics,** or even interest group politics more generally. It should be made easier to address inaccurate and sensationalizing coverage within **an improved system of media regulation**.

2. All *political parties* should develop **better relationships with Muslim organizations**, to reach out and encourage participation in a manner that would serve as a conduit for the mainstream presence of Muslim actors. This can be achieved through better points of contact, in particular to **channel Muslim youth and women's groups into mainstream political arenas** at local and national levels, and so to ensure that these voices are not ignored.

3. There should be more interest in **the everyday work and the civil society-based contributions** of Muslim social and political activists. At a local level, *city councils* and the *voluntary sector* will find willing interlocutors in Muslim civil society as well as among mosques. Nationally, counter-terrorist measures that put Muslim communities under blanket suspicion should continue to be reformed to allow for local dialogue.

4. Muslim representatives often **only gain public visibility when they express grievances** and are then criticized for being too demanding or for making 'exceptional' claims. To challenge such accounts, it is a task for *citizenship education* and *schoolteachers* to provide for a better understanding of the democratic process. Schoolchildren should be made aware of social and cultural pluralism and of the way in which not just religion – but also gender and class – have a legitimate place in British politics.

Methodology

The analysis draws on a review of the literature, a press review, a collection of secondary sources and interviews with representatives from the following political organisations.

Muslim Council of Britain: http://www.muslimvote.org.uk/

ENGAGE: http://www.iengage.org.uk/

YouElect: http://youelect.org.uk/

Muslim Public Affairs Committee: http://www.mpacuk.org/

Operation Black Vote: http://www.obv.org.uk/

Cordoba Foundation: http://www.thecordobafoundation.com/

Additional interviews were conducted with a member of the House of Lords and a Mosque representative. The interviews took place in January and February 2012 at locations in London, Leicester and York. The interviews were transcribed and form the basis of an extended report entitled *The Muslim Vote in 2010: Misrecognition and political agency* (available online, pdf 750kb).

Project Identity

Acronym:	ACCEPT PLURALISM
Title:	Tolerance, Pluralism and Social Cohesion: Responding to the Challenges of the 21st Century in Europe
Short Description:	ACCEPT PLURALISM questions how much cultural diversity can be accommodated within liberal and secular democracies in Europe. The notions of tolerance, acceptance, respect and recognition are central to the project. ACCEPT PLURALISM looks at both native and immigrant minority groups.
	Through comparative, theoretical and empirical analysis the project studies individuals, groups or practices for whom tolerance is sought but which we should not tolerate; of which we disapprove but which should be tolerated; and for which we ask to go beyond toleration and achieve respect and recognition.
	In particular, we investigate when, what and who is being not tolerated / tolerated / respected in 15 European countries; why this is happening in each case; the reasons that different social actors put forward for not tolerating / tolerating / respecting specific minority groups/individuals and specific practices.
	The project analyses practices, policies and institutions, and produces key messages for policy makers with a view to making European societies more respectful towards diversity.
Website:	www.accept-pluralism.eu
Duration:	March 2010-May 2013 (39 months)
Funding Scheme:	Small and medium-scale collaborative project
EU contribution:	2,600,230 Euro
Consortium:	17 partners (15 countries)
Coordinator:	European University Institute (Robert Schuman Centre for Advanced Studies)
Person Responsible:	Prof. Anna Triandafyllidou
EC officer:	Ms Louisa Anastopoulou, Project Officer