



COMPARATIVE POLICY BRIEF

Minority Mobilization in the United Kingdom and France



Policy orientation from ACCEPT Pluralism, an EU-funded research project investigating the state of tolerance in European societies.

With a focus on Muslims, this policy brief compares minority mobilization in France and the United Kingdom, examining obstructions to equal opportunity and conditions that foster stigmatization.

On-going project

October 2012 – Issue 2012/13

INTRODUCTION

The European Convention of Human Rights provides each European citizen with the right to be politically represented. Exercising this right, however, can be difficult for minority citizens with an immigrant background. The problem is illustrated by the experience of minority citizens in France and the United Kingdom, both European Union Member States with lengthy histories of immigration. In these two countries the interests of minorities are often marginalized.

In France and the UK, minority citizens with an immigrant background are frequently obstructed from exercising their right to political representation. The driving force behind this obstruction in both countries is stigmatization.

Stigmatization blocks some minorities from exercising their right to political representation

Stigmatization works differently in France and the UK, reflecting different attitudes towards minority participation and different political structures. Immigrant associations in France, for example, have traditionally articulated their claims in terms that are acceptable to the state. Articulating *group ethnic and religious demands*, however, is generally regarded as unacceptable. In the UK, meanwhile, group representation is accepted and ethno-religious identities are considered a legitimate basis for mobilisation.

France and the UK nonetheless show considerable similarities in minority mobilization involving one particular group: Muslims. Similarities are evident both in the way these minorities express their demands and in the way the state responds to them. While Muslim minorities ask to be treated as equal citizens and contend that their demands should be considered 'normal', the state is suspicious of their claims and sees them as too specific or sectarian.

Policy should address stigmatization and the conditions that foster it

The ability of minorities to express their specific concerns is an indicator of the level of acceptance within a country's political life. With research suggesting this ability remains underdeveloped in both France and the UK, efforts should be undertaken in these countries to raise awareness of stigmatization and foster dialogue between majority and minority populations.

KEY OBSERVATIONS

I. Different approaches to political representation affect the way minorities participate in politics.

The UK and France take divergent directions when it comes to minority representation.

The UK advocates pluralist representation and multiculturalism

The UK is often seen to espouse a 'pluralist model' that embraces multiculturalism and the representation of multiple groups. Ethnic and religious backgrounds are recognized parts of civic identity, and ethno-religious interests are generally seen as legitimate reasons for mobilization. In principle, the British framework allows for the political representation of 'differences'.

France advocates singular representation and integrationism

France, on the other hand, strives for integrationism. There is a belief in a single French identity that all citizens can relate to. The state confines ethno-religious practices to private life and only publicly acknowledges concerns that affect the general population. As stated in Article 1 of the 1958 French Constitution, France 'shall ensure the equality of all citizens before the law regardless of their origin', which has generally been understood as an invalidation of any mobilization based on ethnic or religious affiliations.

These differing approaches have shaped the manner in which minorities interact with the political system.

More ethnic minorities in the UK have citizenship rights that allow for participation in the political system

In both countries, complete access to political participation is contingent upon obtaining citizenship. In France, 40 percent of the foreign-born population currently holds citizenship whereas in the UK, 65 percent of the foreign-born population holds citizenship rights. This higher percentage results from the special access to citizenship rights that were given to arrivals from former colonies (India, Pakistan, and the Caribbean). This accounts for why Britain currently has one of the largest ethnic minority populations with citizenship titles and rights to vote in Europe.

There are more political representatives with ethnic minority backgrounds in the UK than in France

Differences are also apparent in the number of ethnic minority representatives, with the UK having more political representatives with ethnic minority backgrounds than France. The House of Commons (the UK's lower house of parliament) has 27 members with ethnic minority backgrounds (representing 4 percent of the total) while the House of Lords has 48 members (5 percent). At local government level, roughly 3-4 percent of councilors in the UK have an ethnic minority background. In France, on the other hand, the current National Assembly has only 10 members with such a background, accounting for just 1.8 percent of the total.

Minority representatives in France and the UK are mainly left wing. All minority deputies in the French National Assembly belong to the Socialist Party. As for British minority MPs, most of them are Labour MPs although the number of Conservative MPs is increasing. Historically, there was a clear alignment of interests between Labour and immigrant groups, and the Labour Party became the near-exclusive entry point for ethnic minority citizens into politics well into the 1980s.

Demands from ethno-religious groups are often seen as beneficial only to minorities

II. The demands of ethnic or religious groups are often dismissed because they are seen as sectarian and threatening.

Both France and the UK have dealt with demands from minorities in similar ways, dismissing them as only beneficial to minorities.

For example, although the British Labour Party is often cited as a channel for ethnic minority participation, it does not necessarily welcome the assertion of minority identities and interests. Minority demands have often been rejected on the grounds that they are 'sectarian' and defy Labour's claim to address a wider constituency. Many politicians with minority backgrounds who have fought for minority-related claims have been accused of having 'separatist' agendas and have had burdens put on them to prove the opposite. This has led to a situation in which Muslim actors, such as the Muslim Council of Britain, now feel the need to emphasize that their main goal is 'to work for the common good' and not to disrupt social unity.

Similarly, 'sectarianism' is used in France to dismiss claims from ethnic and religious groups. These groups are seen as threats to unity, and their demands are often ignored because of the underlying assumption that minority interests are exclusively beneficial to minority groups and not applicable to the general population.

In order to avoid being seen as sectarian, immigrant-based organizations adapt their demands in ways that merge with national values such as *laïcité* (secularism and neutrality). During the demonstration against the 'Official Debate on Laïcité' on 2 April 2011, Muslim-based associations argued that the state's use of *laïcité* was a distortion of its original meaning and not a protection of religious freedom. Associations made their claims against discrimination by referring themselves to this Republican value rather than opposing it. This is an example for how minorities adjust their claims when they are constantly assumed to be threatening or sectarian.

III. The stigmatization of Muslims has obstructed their rights to political representation.

Stigmatization is a fundamental reason why minorities cannot equally exercise their right to political representation. When Muslim actors are negatively labelled and seen to fall outside of what is politically acceptable, they struggle to get their demands through to political channels.

In the UK, demands from Muslims are seen as impossible to accommodate

In the UK, demands from Muslims are generally seen as exceptional, homogeneous, reactive, and impossible to accommodate. This was evident in the 2010 British General Election.

First, during the election British-Muslim constituents and Muslim advocacy groups tended to be homogenized. Internal divisions such as around local interests, gender, and class were not acknowledged. As a result of this focus, British Muslim constituents felt the need to abjure their ethnicities in order to obtain more encompassing political identities. While other religious affiliations rarely consume a person's

entire political identity, this was seen to be the case with Islam. Some organizations felt that this homogenization was a symptom of the stigmatization of British-Muslims; they were not being recognized as common citizens but distinctly as Muslim and separate. Other organizations felt constrained in expressing shared concerns without needing to highlight their religious identities. In both scenarios, organizations contested stigmatizing and constraining ways in which Muslims were perceived.

Second, demands from Muslims were mostly seen as reactive and fuelled by grievances. Muslims were not seen to have the power to make and enforce decisions, but just to be in positions to react. Considering Muslim agency as purely reactive was a form of stigmatization.

Thirdly, mainstream actors often viewed the demands of Muslims as toxic and refused to associate themselves with Muslim actors. During the election, some Muslim-based organizations adapted their strategies to respond to this perceived ‘toxicity’. Such caution-and-avoidance strategies underline a weak relationship between Muslims and mainstream political parties.

In France, *laïcité* is used to legitimize the stigmatization of Muslims.

Stigmatization in France is also prevalent, even though diversity is hidden underneath a propagation of invisibility that tends to conceal the full effect of discrimination.

Religious diversity is managed under *laïcité*, a French term denoting secularism and neutrality. It is a Republican principle that separates the state and the Catholic Church, confining religion to the private sphere. Over the past two decades however, *laïcité* has been increasingly used to respond to the perceived growth of religious diversity, and more specifically to Islam. Since the first headscarf affair of 1989 (which initially linked *laïcité* with the restriction of Muslim expression) the problematic association has grown stronger. In 2011, when the Interior Minister Eric Besson wanted to launch an ‘Official Debate on Islam’, it quickly got relabeled to an ‘Official Debate on *Laïcité*’. In a context where religion is not openly discussed, *laïcité* is commonly used as the signifier for a discussion on Islam.

Over the past two decades, non-governmental organizations in France have argued that the *laïcité* principle has been used to restrict Muslim practices instead of protecting religious equality. Immigrant and Muslim organizations have rallied in ‘defense of *laïcité*’ and against the state’s distorted use of the principle. Human rights associations, feminist groups and other majority organizations have also shifted their approach. Instead of defending *laïcité*, they have argued against its systematic exploitation to pass laws restricting Islamic practices stigmatize Islam in general. The Islamic veil controversy is a case in point. While the veil was initially interpreted as a sign of religious extremism and gender discrimination, many human rights associations and feminist groups have now recognized the inherent stigmatization in those views.

IV. In response to stigmatization, Muslim activists ask to be treated as equal.

The alleged exceptionality of Muslim identity has produced obstacles for Muslim activists. In response to this, they strive to demonstrate the normality of their claim and ask to be treated as equal.

In the UK, Muslim activists ask to be treated as any other minority. They want to be seen as 'normal' political actors with broad interests and motives that are not exclusively Muslim. They feel that being seen as exceptionally different places them outside the norm. Their requests for normalization are requests to be admitted as equal into British political life.

In France, many Muslim-based activists contend that Islam should be treated like any other minority religion instead of being portrayed as alien to French values. They argue that it should be respected as a part of religious diversity, much like Protestantism and Judaism is. They are demanding not to be excluded from the boundaries of French normativity.

By reclaiming *laïcité* and arguing that the state distorts its meaning, Muslim-based activists in France show that politicians and members of the majority population do not have a monopoly on the right to determine the meaning of Republican values.

RECOMMENDATIONS FOR POLICY-MAKERS

The main obstacle to assuring equal opportunities for political representation is the stigmatization of minorities. To address this, policy must tackle stigmatization itself and the contextual conditions that foster it.

Use *laïcité* as a channel to teach about the current forms of stigmatization

1. Raise public and political awareness of existing forms of stigmatization, intolerance and discrimination.

In France, public religious expression is considered illegitimate. This view is exploited to justify intolerant restrictions on Muslim practices. This has concealed an underlying stigmatization of Muslims.

Laïcité, the principle used to justify these conditions, is one that is intended to protect equality and neutrality. Policy should therefore bring awareness to the original intention of *laïcité*, and how a distorted use of the concept leads to discrimination.

It is important that the focus is on theory and not on current events or specific religions.

In France, the following sites of influence should be targeted:

- a. The education system, from primary schools to institutes of higher education
- b. Print media outlets
- c. Material on civil servant entrance exams

In the UK, because Muslim actors are frequently stigmatized, their political participation is either obstructed or constrained. This feeds back into a collective ignorance about Muslim-based actors in politics.

In the UK, mainstream political parties should take the following steps to foster more realistic notions of Muslim-based actors:

- a. Develop better relationships with Muslim-based organizations.

Better relationships with these organizations will encourage them to be more politically involved, which will improve their political representation.

- b. Interact more with British-Muslims outside of a Muslim context.

Interactions with Muslims outside religious contexts will allow mainstream political actors to foster more accurate and well-rounded conceptions of Muslims, ones that do not just focus on their religious identity.

3. Citizenship tests: Create conditions to extend the meaning of what is considered 'normal' in a society.

Citizenship is a tool that directly affects the political power of minorities because it controls their access to political participation. It determines notions of what a 'natural' citizen should be like and where the boundaries of the normative lies.

Recently, **France and the UK** have altered their citizenship policies: the UK went from the simple requirement of five years of residency to a standardized English language and culture test; France introduced a language and culture test. This is a reflection of the recent European preference for integration, which assumes that minorities must learn the values of the majority and assimilate.

Foster dialogue to avoid reinforcing power inequalities

The definition of these values is a one-way dialogue: from the majority to the minority. It predetermines one party as subject to the standards set by another when in fact both contribute to the construction of the society.

To foster a two-way dialogue, tests should also consider the immigrant's ability to shape the normative. The test could include questions such as:

- a. 'What do you plan to contribute to the country or city once you have obtained citizenship?'
- b. 'What do you think you have contributed thus far?'
- c. 'How do you see yourself in this country ten years from now?'

RESEARCH PARAMETERS

Methodology

ACCEPT Pluralism is a research project funded by the European Commission under the Seventh Framework Program. It investigates the responses to diversity and the role of tolerance in 15 European states. In each country, research was conducted into the meaning and scope of 'acceptance' in education and political life. By looking at the struggles minorities face when interacting with the state, the research can determine barriers to tolerance and equal representation. Muslims are currently seen as one of the most challenging minorities in Europe, and the focus in the British and French reports is thus on Muslim organizations and their political claims.

Case studies of minority organizations, drawing on qualitative interviews, were conducted in both countries. Interviews were conducted with key actors and analyzed using the method of Critical Discourse Analysis.

In France, the researcher analyzed the reactions of organizations to *laïcité*. Organisations included : *Human Rights League*, *Ligue de l'enseignement*, *Collectif contre l'Islamophobie en France*, *Coordination contre le racisme et l'Islamophobie*, *Présence et spiritualité musulmane* and *Mamans toutes égales*. Some activists interviewed during this fieldwork participated simultaneously in several organizations.

In the UK, the researcher analyzed the reactions of organizations to various experiences of stigmatization. Organizations interviewed included those involved in the national British election of 2010: Muslim Council of Britain, Muslim Public Affairs Committee, Operation Black Vote, Engage and the Youelect initiative.

PROJECT IDENTITY

Acronym	ACCEPT PLURALISM
Title	Tolerance, Pluralism and Social Cohesion: Responding to the Challenges of the 21st Century in Europe
Short Description	<p>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.</p> <p>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.</p> <p>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.</p> <p>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.</p>
Author of this Policy Brief	Dr. Angéline Escafré-Dublet, CERI-Sciences Po Rosa Ng, London School of Economics
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