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**ACCEPT**  
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**The 'Muslim Vote' in Britain in 2010  
Misrecognition and Political  
Agency**

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**2012/11**

**4. National Case Studies - Political Life  
Final Country Reports**



EUROPEAN COMMISSION  
European Research Area



SEVENTH FRAMEWORK  
PROGRAMME

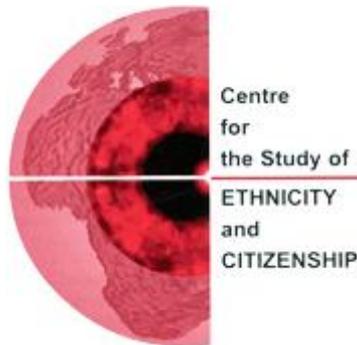
Funded under Socio-economic Sciences & Humanities



EUROPEAN UNIVERSITY INSTITUTE, FLORENCE  
ROBERT SCHUMAN CENTRE FOR ADVANCED STUDIES

# **The ‘Muslim Vote’ in 2010: Misrecognition and Political Agency**

**JAN DOBBERNACK, NASAR MEER  
AND TARIQ MODOOD**



**Work Package 4 – National Case Studies of  
Challenges to Tolerance in Political Life**

**D4.1 Final Country Reports on Concepts and  
Practices of Tolerance Addressing Cultural Diversity  
in Political Life**

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Published by the European University Institute  
Robert Schuman Centre for Advanced Studies  
Via dei Roccettini 9  
50014 San Domenico di Fiesole - Italy

**ACCEPT PLURALISM Research Project,  
Tolerance, Pluralism and Social Cohesion:  
Responding to the Challenges of the 21<sup>st</sup> Century in Europe**  
European Commission, DG Research  
Seventh Framework Programme  
Social Sciences and Humanities  
grant agreement no. 243837

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## **Tolerance, Pluralism and Social Cohesion: Responding to the Challenges of the 21st Century in Europe (ACCEPT PLURALISM)**

**ACCEPT PLURALISM** is a Research Project, funded by the European Commission under the Seventh Framework Program. The project investigates whether European societies have become more or less tolerant during the past 20 years. In particular, the project aims to clarify: (a) how is tolerance defined conceptually, (b) how it is codified in norms, institutional arrangements, public policies and social practices, (c) how tolerance can be measured (whose tolerance, who is tolerated, and what if degrees of tolerance vary with reference to different minority groups). The ACCEPT PLURALISM consortium conducts original empirical research on key issues in school life and in politics that thematise different understandings and practices of tolerance. Bringing together empirical and theoretical findings, ACCEPT PLURALISM generates a State of the Art Report on Tolerance and Cultural Diversity in Europe, a Handbook on Ideas of Tolerance and Cultural Diversity in Europe, a Tolerance Indicators' Toolkit where qualitative and quantitative indicators may be used to score each country's performance on tolerating cultural diversity, and several academic publications (books, journal articles) on Tolerance, Pluralism and Cultural Diversity in Europe. The ACCEPT PLURALISM consortium is formed by 18 partner institutions covering 15 EU countries. The project is hosted by the Robert Schuman Centre for Advanced Studies and co-ordinated by Prof. Anna Triandafyllidou.

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## Executive Summary

Immigrants to the United Kingdom, coming predominantly from Commonwealth countries, benefited from significant political rights upon arrival. As was to be expected, political participation was generally not among the highest priorities for most newcomers. Institutional obstacles and wide-spread racism meant that formal routes into mainstream politics were less open. Beginning in the 1950s, initial mobilizations on an ethnic minority-basis were largely in response to local experiences of racial discrimination. The current competition among the three mainstream parties, Labour, Conservatives and Liberal Democrats, for ethnic minority votes is a comparatively newer phenomenon, since the Labour Party has historically been the main vehicle for post-immigration groups into formal British politics.

Despite new attention to ethnic minority voters as a result of this competition, there remain a number of questions over equitable representation and access. Political activists that highlight ethnic or religious identities in some form tend to be portrayed as particularist, divisive or sectarian. The implication was, and to some extent still is, that in order to *be* representative and to address collective concerns, minority politicians and activists needed to undertake additional efforts. There is suspicion over their political agency which casts doubt on its legitimacy e.g., when it focuses on minority concerns or proceeds on the basis of minority identities. While such motifs have become weaker over the last few decades, they remain in place and reflect an environment where political representation and participation is evidently more challenging for minorities than it is for majority citizens.

In order to explore such features of the British political environment, the report considers the case of the General Election 2010 and how national-level organisations that mobilized in particular Muslim constituents conceived of their objectives and responded to pressures. The report explores a number of recurring issues, including the act of political representation, the ‘Muslim Vote’, and significant concerns to do with political neutrality and partisanship. Organisations and initiatives investigated in this report are the Muslim Council of Britain (MCB) for its ‘Muslim Vote 2010’ website, the Muslim Public Affairs Committee (MPAC), Operation Black Vote (OBV), ENGAGE and YouElect.

The report firstly shows that among the actors of the 2010 mobilization there was a measure of concern about dilemmas of representation. This concern was about the way Muslim political actors were forced to abjure their Muslimness in order to claim a more encompassing political identity. At the same time, there is some concern that increased minority representation will not provide a remedy to social injustice. How to balance the *politics of ideas*, for example a commitments to social justice, with the politics of ethnic minority *presence*, the commitment to increasing the number of minority representatives,, was a live issue for the respondents that we have interviewed.

Secondly, the notion of the ‘Muslim Vote’, and how actors of the mobilization consider or problematize its weight and coherence, points into a different direction for our concern with political agency. As with political representation, there are ambiguities to consider that are the reflection of a difficult environment. The aspiration to ‘normalize’ the participation of British Muslims – to emphasize that a ‘bloc vote’ no longer exists or to argue that bloc-like voting instincts need to be overcome in favour of informed political decision-making – runs through the responses of all of our respondents. At the same time, the strategic usefulness of the appeal to shared concerns is acknowledged and respondents are apprehensive about what they consider to be the disempowering effects of an individualizing perspective on shared concerns.

Thirdly, the appropriate distance or proximity to political parties and candidates is contested among the actors investigated in this report. Some organisations see themselves as ‘service facilitators’ and refrain from offering recommendations on who to vote for, as this would contradict their conception of self-reliance and sophistication among Muslim voters. Others offer specific advice and recommendations on the basis of strong of candidates’ policy record and their positive or negative

attitudes towards issues of concern to Muslims. In such calculations about endorsements, the organisations respond to what they perceive as a problematic environment for political positioning.

The report investigates such features of Muslim political agency by drawing on the concept of misrecognition, a concept that has analytical as well as normative significance. It points to a significant dissonance between how an individual or collective identity is experienced by actors and how it is socially understood. It thus allows for a consideration of how actors respond to perceived pressures, make claims and project identities in opposition to alleged misperceptions or the refusal to acknowledge desired self-descriptions. We highlight five specific types of misrecognition that we identify in an analysis of the language and the positions adopted by our respondents. These are the 1) misrecognition of Muslim identity politics as markedly different in kind to other identity politics; 2) misrecognition of the dynamic positioning and complexity of Muslim identities and concerns, 3) misrecognition of Muslim agency as purely reactive, grievance-based or 'pariah politics', 4) misrecognition of Muslim concerns as 'sectarian', not compatible with an orientation towards the common good; and the 5) misrecognition of Muslim political actors as 'toxic' and refusing political association.

While misrecognition is our focus, we do not suggest that it provides a complete or determinative account of Muslim political agency. Indeed experiences of misrecognition are not understood particularly well if they are viewed as merely oppressive and constraining, limiting spaces for agency and inviting nothing more than coping strategies and postures of defensiveness. The political positioning that is evident among the organisations examined in this report shows that constraints are often creatively dealt with and that perceived pressures invite a significant degree of reflexivity and strategic awareness. Although the past decade has been a challenging time for confident expressions of Muslim identities in British politics, there are some indications that political actors succeed in projecting political subjectivities that are not simply determined by the experience of misrecognition. The diversity of attempts to delineate such identities, as is evident among the mobilizations examined in this report, might indeed make it more difficult for Muslim political claims to be misrecognized.

**Keywords:** *British Muslims; participation; representation; citizenship; religious identities; misrecognition.*

## Introduction

This report explores aspects of the participation of ethnic minority populations in British politics and asks how it can be characterised within the normative framework of the ACCEPT Pluralism project (Dobbernack and Modood 2011). It focuses on initiatives that mobilized British Muslim constituents in the run-up to the General Election 2010, and the strategic thinking and positioning that was discernible among prominent actors in these mobilizations. By considering their political advocacy, the report seeks to provide an account of the environment for Muslim agency in British politics, for the articulation of claims and political practice that occurs on the basis, though not exclusively, of a religious identity category. Although political rights for British post-immigration groups have long been established, their participation in mainstream politics is not unproblematic. Minority citizens that run for elections or highlight issues of concern for their communities often do so cautiously, and Muslim political actors in particular are faced with special circumstances. They see themselves confronted by the alleged exceptionality of their claims-making, which is highlighted in a public discourse that is critical of ‘sectarianism’ and ‘identity politics’. In response there is an evident desire to project and practice civic identities, to demonstrate their normality and a commitment to the ‘common good’. Muslim advocacy groups are concerned to repudiate misperceptions of Muslim political agency as exceptional, ‘sectarian’ and impossible to accommodate. This report focuses on such efforts in the course of the general election 2010.

‘Misrecognition’, the report’s conceptual focus, assists a consideration of this type of political agency. It allows us to explore how actors respond to perceived pressures, make claims and project identities in opposition to alleged misperceptions or the refusal to acknowledge their desired self-descriptions. To this end three key issues concerning conceptualization and application are worth registering at the outset:

- Misrecognition is a distortion which may be based on a partially correct perception but which ignores features that are important to the group thus (mis)recognized. We acknowledge that minority struggles over recognition are usually for the removal of perceived distortions (against *misrecognition*) as well as for the validation of desired identity claims (against *non-recognition*). Despite such overlaps we distinguish between misrecognition and non-recognition and suggest that especially the former requires attention for its philosophical lineage as well as for its empirical modes. We build upon a recent literature that deepens and expands this concept and we locate misrecognition in relation to the normative framework of ACCEPT Pluralism.
- By highlighting ‘misrecognition’ we do not suggest that Muslim agency can be reduced to a reactive concern with social stigmas. While this concern is apparent, it is no more (and no less) than a starting point for political involvement. There is a diversity of ideas and strategies that are adopted in the movement *beyond* misrecognition and this diversity, we suggest, has to be of as much interest as the way in which Muslim actors see themselves misrecognized.
- It is furthermore important to point out that the focus on misrecognition does not mean to idealize the Muslim contribution to British politics. Advocacy groups, including nearly all of the organisations whose work we explore in this report, acknowledge severe problems. Patronage politics, such as the mobilization of *biraderi* networks (see below), is fiercely criticized by Muslim political activists who seek to overcome what they perceive to be its disempowering effects. The concept of ‘misrecognition’ does not mean to deny such problems.

In thus appropriating misrecognition as a concept to explore participation and representation of Muslims in British electoral politics, this report identifies a number of tropes which misrecognise political claims towards equitable participation and representation. This occurs, and so is not immune from, a wider landscape in which questions of minority political representation are unsettled. These

are summarized *firstly*. After considering methodological issues, *secondly*, the report offers a discussion of political agency and identity politics more generally. It considers the concept of misrecognition, *thirdly*, and outlines five modalities of the misrecognition of political agency, *fourthly*. *Fifthly*, the report explores aspects of the debate about Muslim representation, and, *sixthly*, investigates conceptions of the Muslim Vote and, *seventhly*, the limits of neutrality in politically partisan elections. By empirically working through these features of the debate about the political agency of British Muslims, we are able to illustrate some of the ways in which it can be misrecognised and how organisations respond to different types of misrecognition.

### **Ethnic minority participation in British politics**

In focusing on Muslim political agency, the report seeks to illuminate how it is part of a wider socio-political context of ethnic minority participation in British political life. This includes a number of significant advances in recent years. In 2010 ethnic minority Britons even surpassed the white average in their electoral turnout (Sobolewska et al. 2011), and in recent years, moreover, there have been advances in the number of non-white members of the Westminster Parliament (now including 28 ethnic minority MPs), the House of Lords (48 Peers), Scottish Parliament (2 MSPs) and Welsh Assembly (2 AMs). Minority representation in local government has remained relatively stable and has varied over the last decade between 3% and 4% (Parsons 2009, 7; Cracknell 2012).

Full political rights in Britain are secured by obtaining UK citizenship. This currently requires a minimum of five years legal residence in the UK, of which at least one year must be classed as 'indefinite leave to remain'. By international comparison these formal requirements are seen to be fairly liberal, and the comparative easiness of access to British citizenship has increasingly been regarded to be a problem. Recent governments, including the present coalition between Conservatives and Liberal Democrats, have introduced measures to make naturalisation conditional upon, for example, the command of the English (or Welsh or Scot's Gaelic) language, knowledge of British history and culture and participation in civil society (the latter suggestion by the former Labour government to make naturalisation conditional upon 'active citizenship' was later withdrawn). Gordon Brown (2007) spoke of the need to re-consider citizenship as a "contract between the citizen and the country, involving rights and responsibilities." David Cameron (2011) promised to revise the British Citizenship test and "to put British history and culture at the heart of it". While the scope of the citizenship reform policies that the current government may adopt is unclear at the current moment, there appears to be a trend towards more restrictive formal requirements for the acquisition of British citizenship, and certainly a desire for more civic investment on the part of a prospective applicant.

The backdrop for such revisions is the comparatively inclusive nature of citizenship. An anomaly in the United Kingdom are political rights that were historically connected to 'Citizenship of the United Kingdom and Colonies' (CUKC) – a category that included nearly 2 billion individuals across the Empire. Although from the 1950s the right of these citizens, such as from India and Pakistan or the Caribbean, to *access* mainland Britain were increasingly restricted, immigrants were from these countries were *eligible to vote* in national parliamentary elections upon their arrival. British ethnic minority populations have thus largely enjoyed full civic rights from the moment of their arrival (Hansen 2000, 3).

As was to be expected in the immediate aftermath of immigration, however, political participation was generally not among the highest priorities for newcomers. Institutional obstacles and wide-spread racism further meant that official channels for political participation were largely barred and that civic rights remained more formal than they were realized. In the late 1950s and early 1960s, the first political mobilizations on an ethnic minority-basis were predominantly in response to local experiences of racial discrimination. In 1963, the 'colour bar' in place at the Bristol Omnibus Company was effectively challenged in a campaign that was led by Paul Stephenson (Hiro 1992, 43). This campaign was inspired by civil rights campaigns in the United States and included a bus boycott.

Within the formal political process, throughout much of the 1980s and 1990s the Labour Party was the predominant entry point for ethnic minority citizens into mainstream politics. The increasing number of non-white Britons in elected office is the result of how obstacles were removed and channels for participation gradually opened in the 1970s and 1980s. In 2011 28 non-white Members of Parliament (MPs) account for 4.3% of the total numbers in the House of Commons (650 MPs). A representation of ethnic minority population in proportion with their presence in British society, would mean 78 MPs (Cracknell 2012, 4). In comparative terms, Britain is significantly closer to a proportional representation of minority citizens in elected office than Germany or France are; it lags behind other places, such as the Netherlands (ibid, 6-7).<sup>1</sup> The non-white population of the United Kingdom amounts to 9.1% of about 59 million, roughly 5.4 million persons (according to the 2001 Census). In 1987 the first four non-white MPs in post-war Britain were elected to parliament. This number has recently increased, most significantly as a result of the 2010 general election.

**Table 1: Ethnic minority representation in the House of Commons<sup>2</sup>**

	1992	1997	2005	2010
Number of MPs	6	12	15	27

The general election 2010 saw 27 minority background MPs being elected, 15 for Labour, 11 Conservatives, and no Liberal Democrats.<sup>3</sup> While this represents a significant increase from roughly 2% to 4% among all MPs, the bulk of this increase is due to nine newly elected Conservative MPs. It is thus a result of David Cameron’s commitment to increase the number of minority candidates in winnable seats (through the so-called ‘A-list’ of candidates): not because of “crude political calculation, or crazed political correctness”, but in order to improve the “political effectiveness” of his party (Cameron 2005; see also Green 2010; Walters 2010); it is consonant with a recent statement by the chairwoman of the Conservative Party, Sayeeda Warsi, that “unless and until campaigning with BME [black and minority-ethnic] communities is institutionalised and embedded in every aspect of what we do as a political party, we cannot win an overall majority in 2015” (Warsi cited in Mason 2012).

Regardless of such commitments, the Conservative party still lags behind Labour and there is limited evidence of increasing variation among some ethnic minority constituencies (Heath et al. 2011 and Table 4, Appendix). The issue of Conservative support highlight some discontinuities among ethnic minorities in British politics. While support for Labour is overwhelming among all groups, Black Caribbean Conservatives are statistically non-existent. Among South Asian immigrants, the picture is more varied, and Conservative voters are significantly more numerous among Indians (24%) than among Bangladeshis (16%), Pakistanis (12%), Black Caribbeans (9%) and Black African (6%) groups. While Black Britons are the ethnic group that is most hostile to the Conservative Party, British Muslims are the religious group that is least likely to vote Conservative (4% and 5%, respectively, indicating that they feel represented by the Tories and, conversely, 45% and 35% indicating that they would *never* vote Conservative). Conversely, support for Labour is highest among these two categories (55% and 47%) (Ashcroft 2012, 44-5).

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<sup>1</sup> Unlike national assemblies in the Netherlands and Germany, the House of Commons does not have an electoral system of proportional representation but simply ‘first past the post’ in single-member constituencies (Lijphart 1999).

<sup>2</sup> The categorisation of these MPs according to ethnicity or religion is a sensitive issue since both of these categories are highly personal. We can assume that up to half of the current ethnic minority MPs have some Muslim family background.

<sup>3</sup> With Seema Malhotra a 28th ethnic minority MP was elected for Labour in late 2011 in Feltham and Heston. With the resignation of Marsha Singh and the election of George Galloway in Bradford West (see below) this number is 27 again.

While a significant number of British Muslims view the Conservative Party in a negative light, this does not mean that support for Labour is as secure as it used to be in the past. The decision of the Labour government, lead by Tony Blair, to invade Afghanistan and Iraq has caused considerable alienation between Labour and its Muslim constituencies. The Respect party, formed by the break-away Labour MP George Galloway, successfully challenged the Labour incumbent in Bethnal Green and Bow in the General election of 2005 (Peace 2012). Salma Yaqoob came close to replacing Roger Godsiff in Birmingham Sparkbrook and Small Heath. Although Yaqoob continued to perform well in 2010, Respect fared badly at this election. Talk of Muslim electoral politics beyond Labour seems premature and in their 2010 EMBES study, Anthony Heath *et al.* (2011, 265) found “no evidence [...] of any realignment of minorities in general away from Labour to other parties”. The recent byelection in Bradford West, resulting in the sepectatular victory of the Respect candidate George Galloway, however pointed to an apparent dissatisfaction with Labour in constituencies with significant numbers of Muslim voters. While we do not claim that the Muslim vote is the only significant political phenomenon among British ethnic minority voters, we suggest that some of the most interesting and challenging aspects of the political accommodation of minority claims and identities can be illustrated with reference to the place of Muslims in British electoral politics.

### Research interests and methodology

Our concern with this report is to explore how different mobilizations that specifically spoke to Muslim voters conceived of a number of salient issues, including the act of political representation, the 'Muslim Vote', and significant concerns to do with political neutrality and partisanship. All of these issues are difficult and contested; they are presented here in order to highlight aspects of the experience of misrecognition. This includes definitions of the concept of the 'Muslim Vote', which, as we use it in this report but also as it is being employed by the majority of our respondents, is not a statistical figure but a discursive construct that is given different types of meaning, or even sometimes rejected as useless or meaningless.

The report draws on eight in-depth interviews with significant actors of the mobilization of Muslim voters in 2010. We have selected the most visible organisations that were operating at a national level. This means that we are not able to explore local particularities and grassroots experiences in detail; rather, our focus is on the construction of political messages, top-level discussions and strategic considerations. Interviews took place at locations in London, Leicester and York, predominantly in office buildings and professional environments. The length of interviews varied between 30 minutes and 2 hours.

**Table 2: Respondents**

Operation Black Vote	2 February 2012
MCB	12 January 2012
Youelect	25 January 2012
Finsbury Park Mosque	11 January 2012
House of Lords (Member)	23 January 2012
Cordoba Initiative	9 January 2012
ENGAGE	3 February 2012
MPACUK	28 January 2012

Although our interview sample is relatively small, it covers all of the significant national-level organisations that were specifically speaking to Muslim voters in 2010. We have been concerned to faithfully report positions and to point to interesting or exemplary strategies of argumentation. Where appropriate we are also examining the rhetoric and the discursive *topoi* that are discernible. We contextualize data from the interviews with campaign material, websites and brochures that the

relevant organisations have issued (e.g. MCB 2010; MPAC 2010; Youelect 2010; ENGAGE 2011; OBV n.d.). These are referenced throughout the text and listed in the bibliography.

### **The Concept of Misrecognition**

This report examines advocacy groups that attempted to mobilize Muslim citizens by appealing, in one way or another, to collective concerns, interests and identities. It explores efforts to channel Muslim political identities to address perceived challenges in the advocacy and grassroots work of a number of organisations that targeted Muslim voters in the run-up to the 2010 election. In so doing we are less concerned with the statistical significance impact of Muslim voting patterns in British electoral politics. Rather, we focus on the subjective dimensions to explore conceptions of and motivations behind the Muslim vote – the attempt to define a role for Muslims in British electoral politics – and how such conceptions are contested. This is important because the way in which the Muslim vote was conceived in 2010 illustrates a remarkable level of uncertainty and hesitancy.

None of the major political advocacy organisations that targeted Muslim constituents in the election referred to the Muslim vote in an unproblematic manner. Organisations such as the Muslim Council of Britain (MCB), ENGAGE, the Muslim Public Affairs Committee (MPAC) or the Youelect initiative, as well as non-Muslim organisations such as Operation Black Vote (OBV), show a considerable degree of reflexivity about the environment in which they operate. We suggest that their concern to construct political messages and convey civic identities responds to this environment and can be understood as the request for a type of socio-political recognition that is evidently incomplete and fragile. Yet the tendency outwith these groups is to ignore the dynamic features of such positionings and strategies, to deny actors an identity position from which they could reconcile a religious identity with full democratic membership, or to dismiss Muslim political mobilizations as inherently ‘sectarian’. In short there are a number of ways in which Muslim political actors see themselves misrecognized, and we argue that the concept of ‘misrecognition’ is helpful in understanding the environment in which Muslim political actors operate and in explaining some of the evident dissonances that are reflected in their advocacy work and political positioning. At this stage we will, firstly, delineate the concept of ‘misrecognition’ and, secondly, locate it within the ACCEPT Pluralism framework.

Misrecognition is obviously a term relational to recognition, and the two most best known proponents of this concept began their dialogues with the same source (Toppinen 2005). Charles Taylor’s essay on ‘The Politics of Recognition’ (1994) and Axel Honneth’s book *Kampf um Anerkennung* (1994), both widely regarded as landmark texts on the topic, spend some time engaging with—both appropriating and departing from—Hegel’s philosophical system. For example, shadowing Hegel’s account of the three *arenas* of recognition (family, civil society and the state), Honneth argues that there are three *modes* of recognition, which he refers to as love, respect and esteem. Love is the mode of recognition which, all being well, we receive from our small circle of significant others. Respect is that mode which we experience when our fellow citizens regard us as rights-bearing individuals. Esteem is the sort of recognition we enjoy when we are valued for our distinct contributions to society’s collective goals. Taylor, meanwhile, offers a philosophical and historical account of how the concept of recognition has come to reflect ‘a vital human need’ (1994, 26), one crucial to our ability to become full human agents. This claim stems from the Hegelian premise of the fundamentally dialogical character of human identity which Taylor elaborated on in *Sources of the Self* (1989). That is, one can become a self, capable of self-understanding and achieving ‘self-definition’, only in relation to other conversation partners, within ‘webs of interlocution’ (1989, 32, 36).

What is striking about these two leading authors is how little time they spend discussing misrecognition (cf. Martineau, Meer and Thompson 2012; Meer, Martineau and Thompson 2012). For Taylor, the concept of misrecognition is a relatively taken-for-granted inversion of recognition. Thus, he argues, “our identity is partly shaped by the recognition or absence, often by the misrecognition of

others” (Taylor 1994, 25). Honneth offers a marginally more sustained elaboration of misrecognition, regarding it as “the withdrawal of social recognition, in the phenomena of humiliation and disrespect” (Fraser and Honneth 2003, 134). Despite this, misrecognition is emerging as concept in its own right (Thompson and Yar 2011), and especially as a means to understand minority political mobilizations that span different categories of political recognition: from seeking statehood (Seymour 2012; Staples 2012) to pursuing participation in the public sphere as co-citizens (Lægaard 2012; Martineau 2012; Meer 2012).

We argue that the concept of misrecognition is especially helpful to our discussion in two respects. Firstly, misrecognition is not a ‘master concept’, but an empirically sensitive instrument to register the struggle over minority claims. With this contextually sensitive approach we are able to focus squarely on the specific strands and processes that make up Muslim political mobilizations in our cases. Secondly, misrecognition allows us to register how minority religions provide categories of identity-related claims-making. Such claims are in most cases for inclusion and full civic membership irrespective of the particularity of one’s ethnic or religious background; where, appropriating an idea by Jürgen Habermas (2005), the burden of ‘translating’ religious reasons into common language is not placed on the shoulders of religious citizens alone and is not used to disqualify their contributions to public discourse. In the following discussion, we thus identify five different, though related, strands of how Muslim political actors see their political agency misrecognized and how they seek to address and remedy this experience.<sup>4</sup>

Just as toleration is never pure and always includes the “ineliminable reference to the less than ideal” (Horton 1992, 65), so recognition is an aspiration that will rarely, if ever, be fully achieved. In both cases the counterparts of such positive conditions require our attention if only to obtain a more complete picture of what motivates social struggles. These are as much *for* tolerance and recognition as they are *against* intolerance and misrecognition. Non-acceptance and intolerance have to be of interest not merely as absences but as positions in their own right and with their own specificity, such as how permutations of liberal argumentation underpin new practices of intolerance across European states (Mouritsen and Olsen Forthcoming). More demanding positions in the ‘third class’ of acceptance, such as recognition or respect, equally correspond to specific social situations where they are not just missing or unrealized, but where the specific conditions of their absence need to be studied. Such absences and the ensuing struggles over misrecognition provide, as Honneth (1994, 274) suggests, a “critical, interpretive framework”. Similar to the arguments and anxieties that motivate intolerance, analysts of misrecognition have to identify social conditions, interpretive frameworks and discursive themes employed by actors that are engaged in such struggles.

What actors, or groups of actors, do in response to the experience of misrecognition will depend on the type of misrecognition, the group in question and the opportunities that are available. Misrecognized actors will take advantage of such opportunities to seek redress and to propose alternative truths about themselves that they wish to see recognized, although there may equally be situations of acquiescence and resignation. Offering a perspective that is especially helpful with regard to an environment with special ‘rules’, such as the political system, James Tully (2000, 479) suggest that

[w]hen a group puts forward a demand for recognition they seek to disclose the misrecognition or non-recognition in the existing rule of mutual recognition of themselves

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4 We are not seeking to reconcile misrecognition across psychological-political phenomena, but are instead using it as a civic-political concept in debates about formal participation and representation. This corresponds to the idea of multicultural equality and its account of the harm of ‘negative difference’ experienced by people so negativised (Modood 2007, 37). The concept of ‘misrecognition’, stripped of its psychological and culturalist-evaluatory connotations, can play a central role in a politics of multicultural equality and equal respect. While this includes the issue of subjectivities, we are interested in their articulations as political relationships and not matters of individual esteem or psychology such as in the ‘intersubjective conditions’ of identity-formation that Honneth addresses (eg., 1994, 280).

and others, to persuade others it is unjust and intolerable, and to display a preferred alternative.

He points to practices of disclosure, where actors seek to counter the experience of misrecognition through the projection and embodiment of alternative identities. These may then be registered (or not) by majority actors who might revise their conceptions of the minority in question. Yet even when the desired form of recognition isn't forthcoming, the proposition of alternatives might in itself be empowering: there are many examples of how oppositional identities that are asserted against the social mainstream may be experienced as profoundly empowering by the minority group in question.

Drawing on Tully's suggestions about reciprocal relationships in the struggle for recognition, there are three moments that we wish to highlight: (1) initial experiences of misrecognition motivate (2) claims for or the embodiment of desired identities that are then (3) socially acknowledged (or not) in a way that satisfies the desire to defeat misrecognition and achieve recognition. In the present report, we focus in particular on the first two moments of this relationship and only conclude with some limited predictions about the effects of Muslim efforts to project alternative civic identities in the course of the General Election 2010.

In conclusion, we suggest that the concept 'misrecognition' has analytical as well as normative purchase. Analytically it points to a significant dissonance between how an individual or collective identity is experienced and how it is socially understood and acted upon. When it systematically shapes the experience of particular social groups with shared 'interpretive frames' and shared claims for (a particular type of) recognition, misrecognition may motivate collective action. Although negative connotations of the concept are evident, we must not assume that it refers to the worst conceivable scenario of social marginalisation: voicelessness would obviously be a worse condition for minority groups. The conditions under which such groups are able to engage in the processes of interaction and disclosure that a struggle for recognition requires are *not minimal* but may be quite demanding and require that some type of civic inclusion has already been obtained. In this sense, this report investigates the flipside of types of acceptance that the ACCEPT Pluralism project clusters in its 'third class' of demanding forms minority accommodation (Dobbernack and Modood 2011, 32).

### **Misrecognising Political Agency**

In this section we introduce five forms of misrecognition of British Muslim political agency. These forms are derived from an analysis of speech-acts and arguments in our fieldwork, yet they correspond to objections that have been made against ethnic minority participation and representation more generally, not just vis-à-vis Muslim political agency. We acknowledge that these types – listed in Table 3 below – are not entirely self-contained. Although they overlap, they account for distinct experiences of misrecognition that should be analytically distinguished for how they invite different activities of 'disclosure' in response. As we have suggested above, this report pays close attention to two features of the struggle for recognition: (1) the experience of misrecognition and (2) the proposition of alternatives in response to this experience. At this point, we exemplarily illustrate types of misrecognition that ethnic minority Britons have faced in their political agency.

As a general proposition among mainstream actors in British politics, equitable political representation of ethnic minority populations is relatively undisputed. Yet progressives as well as conservatives frequently disavow political campaigns that emphasise specific identity markers or that prioritize minority issues. One of the more memorable instances of such disavowals was the well-known Conservative advert that, depicting a black man in a suit, stated: "Labour says he's Black. Tories say he's British".<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> The advert suggested that "the Labour Party aim to treat you as a 'special case', as a group all on your own. [...] To the Labour Party, you're a black person. To the Conservatives, you're a British citizen." The silence

It is in particular the critique of 'identity politics' around which both left- and right-wing commentators continue to coalesce. For example, Douglas Murray (2010), the former director of the neo-conservative Centre for Social Cohesion (now associate director of the Henry Jackson Society), chastised the Conservatives for appealing to Muslim voters and remarked that all

three of the major parties continue to think that the identity-group era of politics is still alive and well; that as part of the multiculti mindset it is inevitable that you say different things to different "communities"; and that therefore you can say anything at all to get the alleged "Muslim community" to vote for you.

On the Left, critics of 'identity politics' point to the disempowering effects of the appeal to ethnically or religiously demarcated communities, how this reinforces hierarchies and conservative forces in the respective communities (eg, Hundal 2006).<sup>6</sup> In a manifesto that drew attention to such pathologies, the New Generation Network (2006) made the case that in

a throwback to the colonial era, our politicians have chosen to appoint and work with a select band of representatives and by doing so treat minority groups as monolithic blocks, only interested in race or faith based issues rather than issues that concern us all, such as housing, transport, foreign policy and crime. [...] We need to foster a climate in which people can have private differences which include religion, language and culture, but also have a public space where such differences are bridged.

This critique appears to be particularly directed at a type of politics that mobilizes kinship ties, *biraderi* in the case of Pakistani communities (see Werbner 1990; Anwar 1995; Purdam 2001 and forthcoming work by Parveen Akhtar), and that has recently been identified as one reason for widespread disenchantment leading to George Galloway's victory in Bradford West (Akhtar 2012).<sup>7</sup>

Beyond the specific rejection of a type of politics that exploits communal hierarchies, it is often difficult to estimate the full extent of the critique of identity politics, such as of race- or faith-based mobilizations that happen to be bottom-up, do not perpetuate communal hierarchies and aren't manipulated by vested interests. In a democracy, while it is important that some sense of commonality is fostered, it is neither possible nor necessarily desirable for politicians to not appeal to groups in the population (eg., the working and middle class, women, young people). It is important that identity politics is not identified with 'monolithic' groups and its dismissal not selectively used to marginalise and disable some groups, especially new entrants. In fact, a type of misrecognition (**MI**, see table 3 below) that we identify in the following is distinguished by its rejection, often selectively, of group- or identity-based mobilizations in the case of Muslim political actors.

While some commentators berate those concerned with ethnic minority representation for their alleged divergence from consensual understandings of the nature of representative relationships, such relationships can indeed be understood in a number of different ways (see Pitkin 1967; Phillips 1995;

(Contd.)

of the well-dressed man in the advert is telling: he is portrayed as a non-actor who will acquiesce to whatever type of identity category political parties devise for him.

<sup>6</sup> While one can hardly expect this level of conceptual sophistication in policy discourse, Iris Young's distinction between 'identity politics' and the 'politics of difference' can be usefully applied here: the former is a type "solidarity-producing cultural politics" (2000, 103) that tends to be present among disadvantaged groups; the latter are political articulations of claims for "fairness, opportunity, and political inclusion" (107) that relate but are not reducible to the request for the recognition of 'identity'. Young's intervention is directed at a wider debate about the extent to which political claims for the recognition of minority identities need to be accompanied by an immediate concern with socio-structural conditions of mis- or non-recognized minorities, or not; these debates do not concern us here.

<sup>7</sup> However the by-election also illustrates some fissures that are only beginning to be registered: Respect was widely accused of promoting sectarianism and exploiting Muslim discontent over the last decade of British foreign policy. Yet patronage politics were seen to be particularly reflected in Labour, not Respect, and its electoral complacency about ethnic minority votes. What this shows is that patronage politics and identity politics are not as congruous as mainstream observers seem to think.

Young 2000). As Hannah Pitkin (1967, 210) suggested, the act of representation can be conceived in an abstract and disconnected way, akin to “representation of unattached interests” as conceived by Edmund Burke, or as particular and intimate connection where close ties between representatives and represented are necessary because “interest, wants, and the like [are] definable only by the person who feels or has them”. In British parliamentary democracy it is not usually the case that the role of elected representatives is clearly conceived according to either the former or latter model; different expectations exist and claims can be modelled in line with divergent understandings of what representatives are for and what representation is about.

The conditions for the civic self-constitution of post-immigration groups are usually fragile and the request that they, sometimes even above all others, approximate idealized understandings of citizenship and democratic agency can be, and historically has been (see Casanova 1994), an exclusionary device. British Muslims are clearly some way beyond exclusion and in the aftermath of the Rushdie affair distinct patterns of their political agency became more widely acknowledged (Modood 1990). It has been suggested that the experience of stigmatization has led to a type of ‘pariah politics’ (Saggar 2009), which is reactive and primarily articulates grievances. Undoubtedly, British Muslim politics is characterized by considerable diversity and, although the concern to defeat stigmatization may be widely shared, strategies in pursuit of political objectives differ in line with religious, strategic and ideological commitments and follow distinct grammars of political agency (see O’Toole and Gale 2010). While ideological or religious commitments are clearly significant, they are not the only predictors of political activism among British Muslims. Some organisations, such as the MCB, have established networks, liaise with decision makers and lobby behind the scenes. Others seek to effect political change through public engagement and media work (e.g., ENGAGE). Others, again, operate and mobilize predominantly locally, on the ground and through social networking sites (MPAC). It would be a mistake to suggest that Muslim political agency can be reduced to or is determined by narrow or static conceptions of religious identities; the diversity of political mobilizations that exist and the different way in which religious identities are emphasized or merely play a background role reflects a considerable heterogeneity. Misrecognitions of this diversity and of the dynamism of political agency are another one of the tropes that we propose to investigate in the following (M2).

In a similar manner, the notion that Muslim political agency is purely reactive (‘Pariah politics’) risks conflating the proliferation of alternative sites of Muslim civil society (in terms of media production and consumption, community and religious activism, and arenas for Muslim dissent more broadly). It considers such processes as evidence of withdrawal rather than political pluralisation of the public sphere. Accounts that treat Muslim or minority political agency more broadly as purely reactive face a related objection. It is not the case that outside pressures always *determine* the political agency of marginalised groups; at least they usually do not give a good account of motivations and objectives that exist beyond the concern to overcome such pressures. ‘Excluded groups’, Modood (2005, 159, emphasis in original) suggests, “seek respect for themselves as they are or aspire to be, not simply a solidarity on the basis of a recognition of themselves as victims; they resist being defined by their *mode of oppression* and seek space and dignity for their *mode of being*.” As such we have to be sensitive to the advent of increasingly salient Muslim identities that are adopted and deployed in various permutations by many Muslims themselves. A key issue is how this ‘Muslim-consciousness’ connects to the sorts of ‘civic status’ that Muslims are seeking. The types of civic status being referred to include those that have prevailed for other minorities under the terms of a peculiarly British multiculturalism, and which has sought to promote equality of access and opportunity, and has led to some significant recognition of particular minority ‘differences’. In this domain and in arenas of political participation more generally, the concern to project political identities is as evident as the desire to overcome pressures. Its portrayal as driven by and reducible to grievances, purely reactive to outside pressures and devoid of positive political objectives, indicates a type of misrecognition that confronts British Muslim claims-making (M3).

There has been a tendency to reject mobilisations on the basis of minority identities and minority representation generally for its alleged incompatibility with a political orientation towards the 'common good' (M4). A historical expression of this position within the Labour Party can be found in research by Les Back and John Solomos. In Birmingham Small Heath, the contender for the 1992 Labour candidacy – the current incumbent Roger Godsiff – was challenged at selection meetings by minority candidates. Godsiff enjoyed support from trade unions and the national party; his eventual selection was marred by allegations of vote-rigging. Godsiff defended his position and suggested that the

trouble with people trying to become MPs now, they're trying to become MPs because they're members of an ethnic community, they're not trying to become MPs because they concern the whole of the community and they represent a philosophy. They don't understand that, they need to stop to think about it. I have to tell my councillors, some of whom aspire to become MPs, that their job is to represent all the constituents they've got, and often they're not very successful at it. And that's sad, so they still are not fully integrated into the Labour party, never mind the community. (Interview quoted in Back and Solomos 1992, 11)

The suggestion is that in order to *be representative* and to embody, for example, the 'Labour philosophy', minority concerns would need to be abandoned. It will generally be the responsibility of minority politicians to prove their ability to represent: a burden that does not apply to white politicians, not even in constituencies with significant post-immigrant populations such as Small Heath (43% in 1992). The suspicion is that their political agency reflects 'sectarian' interests which can only be appeased through continuous demonstrations of their commitment to the 'common good'.

A final obstacle, frequently encountered by Muslim actors, is the difficulty to forge alliances as a result of the perceived toxicity of Muslim concerns. It is clear that different organisations deal differently with such difficulties. The MCB, for example, has sought to establish collaborative relationships across the party-political spectrum and has stopped short of endorsing particular candidates or parties. MPAC, on the other hand, has chosen an approach that reflects its combative posture: while it endorses candidates, it tries to maintain some distance towards these, since the association could potentially be damaging to the candidates that MPAC endorses. It seems that in particular the concern to overcome the idea of 'bloc votes' has meant that organisations that were active in the political mobilization of 2010 were sometimes conflicted about whether to take sides in electoral contests. The inclination to endorse particular candidates may be strong, such as in the case of Ken Livingstone at the last mayoral elections in London (see below). However, the concern is, although to a different extent, that such associations could prove to be damaging to the candidates in question as well as to the objective of educating Muslim constituents, rather than funnelling Muslim votes towards preconceived destinations. Such considerations are widely evident and will be considered below; the concern with the due proximity or distance to political candidates running for office points to a final experience of misrecognition that we investigate in the following (M5).

Table 3 (see below) provides a condensed version of these five experiences of misrecognition. As suggested above, we do not claim that these are discrete modalities. As is to be expected for categories that are derived from social experiences, they overlap and reinforce one another in how Muslim actors might experience a more general misrecognition of their political subjectivity. The following explores these modes through the rhetoric and argumentation of actors involved in the mobilization of Muslim constituents. This means that we are interested, firstly, in their accounts and interpretations of misrecognition and, secondly, in their suggestions about how this experience is to be overcome. We investigate these issues *in situ* – in relation to three noteworthy concerns and dilemmas that all of our respondents addressed. These are the questions of how best to represent Muslim concerns, how to conceive of the Muslim vote, and how to address a relationship between Muslim political agency and established political parties.

**Table 3: Five modes of misrecognition**

M1	Misrecognising Muslim identity politics as markedly different in kind to other identity politics
M2	Misrecognising the dynamic positioning and complexity of Muslim identities and concerns
M3	Misrecognising Muslim agency as purely reactive, grievance-based or ‘pariah politics’
M4	Misrecognising Muslim concerns as ‘sectarian’, not compatible with an orientation towards the common good
M5	Misrecognising Muslim political actors as ‘toxic’ and refusing political association

### **The politics of Muslim representation**

It is worth registering that all of the activists that we interviewed, Muslim and non-Muslim, show a considerable degree of reflexivity about dilemmas of ethnic minority representation. One respondent pointed in fairly stark terms to problems with a mere focus on increased minority presence, which he labelled as representation “at the level of the individual”:

we have one or two Muslim MPs that are absolutely dreadful. They happen to be Muslims but actually, they’re dreadful, and most of their positions, you know, vis-à-vis the Muslim community, are totally negative. It doesn’t really matter that they’re Muslim. (Interview, 9 January 2012)

The ability to judge candidates on the basis of their policy record, the respondent suggested, proved that “the Muslim community is issue-based, and not religion-based” (Interview, 9 January 2012), thus seeking to refute a simplistic conception of Muslim political agency and countering accusations of sectarianism. There are indeed examples of Muslim-based mobilizations against Muslim candidates that were highlighted by a number of actors: MPAC, for example, lobbied against Khalid Mahmood’s re-election in the Birmingham Perry Bar constituency. Mahmood, it, was claimed, had “relied on the Muslim vote to keep him in power until now, however MPAC are asking what did he do to stop the illegal wars abroad against Muslims and what did he do to stop the demonisation of Muslims in the UK” (MPAC 2010). A similar dynamic was evident in Bradford West where MPAC endorsed George Galloway and strongly argued against Labour’s Imran Hussein: “voters in the constituency a real chance to sweep aside the tired old pattern of voting in lack lustre candidates, just because they wear a red rosette” (MPAC 2012). In these cases, non-Muslims were favoured over Muslim candidates, and this was noticed, indeed highlighted, as an attack on a form of unthinking support for Labour and for co-religionists that was seen to have plagued a previous era of Muslim political participation.

Commenting on their strategic thinking in these and other cases, an MPAC representative suggested:

We’re not just asking for more Muslim MPs. We are underrepresented in the House of Commons. The latest intake has seen more Muslim faces but we’re not just saying: more Muslim MPs. What we’re saying is that non-Muslims MPs also need to address the concerns of their Muslim constituents, which we feel in a large extent are being ignored. But it’s not universal, there are very good MPs in the House of Commons, who are very sensitive to Muslim issues. But there are also many who aren’t. And what we’re trying to do is to get more participation, and we’re also encouraging Muslims not just to be consumers of politics but also be participants. (MPAC, Interview, 28 January 2012)

A respondent from the MCB agreed that particular types of community politics, which he labelled as the 'politics of representation', were detrimental to Muslim interests: "unity is dissipating where you have vested interests competing for that patronage for government access" and this "is damaging to the community itself and damaging especially to the younger people" (Interview, 12 January 2012). There is a concern, moreover, that the accentuation of diversity 'at the individual level' serves as a cover to conceal the lack of serious commitments to racial or religious equality. Commenting on the policy record of the current and the previous governments, one respondent suggested as much:

They've made this symbolic breakthrough of having a Westminster that's never looked like it has and yet race equality, up until very recently, up until last summer, was off the agenda. How ironic is that? And the irony is that our success led people to believe that we've done this now, we're in a different place. We've had two Muslims in the Cabinet. We have a party that's beginning to look like the people it serves and yet five years prior to that, race equality was going further and further away. Multiculturalism was being trashed. (OBV, Interview, 2 February 2012)<sup>8</sup>

The suggestion is that the 'politics of representation' or of 'presence', as Anne Phillips (1995) puts it, amounts to little more than a fig leaf if it is not accompanied by a critical concern with policy-making *after* elections. While this representative of Operation Black Vote highlighted the value of an ethnic minority presence in parliament, it is striking that Muslim mobilizing organisations were widely concerned to distance themselves from a 'politics of presence' and to highlight the significance of issues or ideas. The risk of misrecognition that the concern with 'presence' invites, but also the concern to keep a safe distance to traditional 'patronage' politics, might be reasons for why the interest to increase the number of Muslim representatives was not usually an overarching concern.

A representative of Youelect highlighted a different type of problem with Muslim representation. He pointed to the persistence of doubts about the Britishness of British Muslim, reflecting a situation where Muslim political agency is misrecognized as necessarily sectarian and incompatible with conceptions of the 'common good':

At the moment unfortunately any Muslim, either public figure or otherwise, is first a Muslim, then British and therefore his views are first pinned down to his Islamic identity rather than the British identity so I don't think we've overcome that yet. [...] [I]n a way, there's a dilemma that Muslims face. They consider this country as home yet they are asked to make choices that no other groups are asked to make choices, so their identity of being Muslim or British first, which is an absurdity. Why can't you be British and a Muslim, as if the two are not compatible. (Interview, 25 January 2012)

A different respondent pointed to his own political activism, including a candidacy for the Respect party, as an example for a similar experience of misrecognition:

One of the most common questions that came my way was, you know, 'If you decided to do this, why don't you go and establish a Muslim party?' My response is that would be the worst thing, not only for the Muslim community but also for society because we don't need a Muslim party, we're calling for Muslims to be part of society, I don't want them to stand on one side. You know, I don't want them to stand out as Muslims, I want them to stand out as good citizens, but not specifically as Muslims. I have some very bad Muslims who, you know, go to prisons and you'll see some Muslims who are drug dealers, who are in crime and the such, you know... it doesn't matter that they're Muslims. I have some wonderful politicians who aren't Muslims, who are Jews, Christians, Atheists and the such, wonderful politicians. I have some very lousy politicians who happen to be Muslim. I understand that and this is what we're pushing towards, this is what we're fighting for, this is what we hope to achieve one day – a society where people stand out because of their level of performance,

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<sup>8</sup> The incident the respondent referred to were 'riots' in English cities in the summer of 2011.

not on who they are, not on the colour of their skin or the language that their fathers' speak or their religion or faith or such. (Interview, 9 January 2012)

Among the actors of the 2010 mobilization there was thus a measure of concern about dilemmas of representation. This concern was about the way Muslim political actors were forced to abjure their Muslimness in order to claim a more encompassing political identity. At the same time, the notion that increased representation would provide a remedy to inequality that could be achieved without a serious and issue-based commitments was widely denounced. How to balance the 'politics of ideas' with the 'politics of presence' was a live political issue for our respondents and reflects a strong concern to counter simplistic or particularist mis-representations of their political agency.

### Conceiving of the 'Muslim vote'

The notion of the 'Muslim Vote', and how actors of the mobilization consider or problematize its weight and coherence, points into a different direction for our concern with misrecognition and agency. As with political representation, there are ambiguities to consider that are, to some extent, the reflection of a difficult environment. The aspiration to 'normalize' the participation of British Muslims – to emphasize that a 'bloc vote' no longer exists or to argue that bloc-like voting instincts need to be overcome in favour of informed political decision-making – runs through the rhetoric of all of our respondents.

While highlighting the complexity of the concept of the 'Muslim Vote', organisations involved in the mobilization are usually identifying concerns, including foreign policy issues, anti-terror legislation, and a generally negative climate of Islamophobic stigmatization, that they consider to be Muslim-specific. A MPAC respondent, for example, suggested that

there's a great deal of diversity amongst Muslim communities, always in the plural rather than singular ... but we do have common goals and issues that we all suffer [from], for example in domestic policies, we have, we can potentially be all victims of anti-terror legislation, stop and search, lengthy detention without charge, these sorts of cases affect us all. The issues such as education for our children, that concerns all communities, that sort of thing, job opportunities for Muslims, these sorts of things are universal, and then we can also talk about foreign policies. Now I'm not Palestinian but the issue of Palestine is extremely important to me and has been since I was a child. I'm not an Iraqi but the fact that my country who I believe does many good things in the world has in my opinion done something extremely bad, and something I'm very ashamed of, and that affects all Muslims. I would say the vast majority of Muslims would be extremely hostile to what was done in Iraq. So these issues do tie us together. (MPAC, Interview, 28 January 2012)

MPAC frames its activism with particular reference to the *ummah*, the global community of Muslims; its objective is the prevention of harm that Muslims experience internationally and domestically. While this does not necessarily mean a lack of concern for where oppression is experienced by non-Muslims, it is the case that other actors are keen to point towards a more encompassing concern with injustice: "Oppression, we don't accept it whether it is against Muslims or against any human being" (Finsbury Park Mosque, Interview, 11 January 2012.) To what extent the experience of oppression and injustice, or other issues that were seen to impact on British Muslims in a particular way, should be addressed as Muslim-specific, maybe even Muslim-exclusive, is thus somewhat contested. The reference to universal concerns, as with the MCB's public commitment to 'working towards the common good', thus contrasts with MPAC's (perhaps slightly less public) reference to the *ummah*.

Asked about the extent to which it was possible to speak of a 'Muslim vote', a representative for Youelect suggested that this was 'very difficult':

I've been thinking about this quite a lot since we had the election actually and whether the Muslim identity itself can determine which way they're going to vote or their personal

factors, like any economic profession and country of origin. And I would say I don't think there's such a thing as a Muslim vote, it would be very difficult to pinpoint that. (Interview, 25 January 2012)

The MCB's mobilisation in 2010 and preceding elections corresponds with this account: in 2005, it was argued that "the needs and aspirations of Britain's Muslim community are no different from those of our fellow citizens – whatever their beliefs or backgrounds" (MCB 2005, 3). In 2010, the MCB suggested 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" (MCB 2010). Highlighting the issue of apathy among young voters, an MCB representative emphasized the importance of considering non-Muslim factors:

my hunch is the reasons people haven't been voting in high numbers if because of a sense of disillusionment rather than anything else [...] it's been: 'well why should I be voting, what difference would it make?' If you are voting on Muslim issues, then you feel no difference can be made, number one. Number two, it's in the context of general youth apathy. Remember, in terms of election participation in this country, it's quite low anyway across the board. We cannot just use Muslim factors when asking ourselves why there are low numbers. (Interview, 12 January 2012)

In order to explain patterns of political behaviour amongst Muslim voters, the suggestion is that their religious identity would be just one aspect, and not necessarily the most important one, to consider. This clearly responds to a concern with being boxed-in and rejected as a result of simplistic conceptions of Muslim concerns.

Other activists of the mobilization in 2010 were carefully distinguishing between the problematic nature of the 'Muslim vote' and the legitimate concern to mobilize on the basis of Muslim concerns. A representative of ENGAGE, for example, suggested that

I don't like the term 'Muslim vote', because it kind of condenses and generalises and homogenises something that I think is a much more complex phenomenon. At the same time I'm resistant to efforts by political parties that like to articulate this idea that we want to engage with the Muslim as an individual, because I think within any democracy individuals exist *sui generis* ... but you have the freedom to associate, and by virtue of association you create organisations, and where organisations exist that lobby, I don't understand why this local party would say 'well you as a rugged individual I can deal with, but an organisation I won't'. (Interview, 3 February 2012)

Regardless of the empirical reality of a 'Muslim vote', the suggestion is that doubts about its coherence should not be used to discredit attempts to mobilize Muslim constituents. The dismissal of 'identity politics', in particular when it is selectively levelled at Muslim actors, but not at any other group that associates on the basis of a shared identity, corresponds to a type of misrecognition that we have identified previously. A different respondent argued along similar lines, that "I'm not someone who favours religious politics, but I believe that there is a call for religious politics at a time when a particular religion is being targeted" (Interview, 9 January 2012). In addition to such reactive justifications for mobilizing a 'Muslim Vote', which are reminiscent of debates about identity politics and 'strategic essentialism' (Spivak 1988), the same respondent suggested that religion should simply not be considered as singular case and as entirely distinct from other instances of interest- or group-based political activism.

If religion becomes a catalyst towards people taking part in a democratic process, I'm happy with that. If football becomes the catalyst for people to take part in something that is, you know, a democratic process, I'm happy for that. [...] We have, you know, communities or groups with interests, you know, whether based on ethnicity, race, religion, colour, creed, hobbies, leisure, entertainment, we have that. But we're talking about it as sort of an issue or a problem even simply because of the type, of the context, because we're operating within a

context that is defined by 9/11, it's defined by 7/7, it's defined by terrorism, it's defined by extremism, it's defined by wars, it's defined by, you know, all these issues. (Interview, 9 January 2012)

The stigmatization of Muslims or of Muslim concerns in the public sphere, however, meant that some organisations were clearly more careful when considering how to frame their political activism. Youelect, for example, chose not to prominently highlight Muslim-specific concerns or even name its actual target group on its website. A result of experiences of misrecognition, the concern was that anything with “the pre-fix of Islam or Muslim has a negative connotation immediately and I think there's a counter productive element there” (Interview, 25 January 2012). In contrast to such concerns about the risk of being dismissed or negatively perceived, other organisations appeared to see a certain strategic benefit in highlighting a Muslim agenda, an “acknowledgement that this is a constituency that they [politicians] cannot ignore” (Interview, 2 February 2012). The idea was that there is a certain strategic usefulness; despite difficulties in identifying a ‘Muslim Vote’, the appeal to this concept could help to increase the public visibility of important concerns and elicit some response from campaigning politicians.

This consideration, however, can be turned on its head, and with good reason. Even for merely strategic reasons, the emphasis of a ‘Muslim vote’ might encourage a type of intellectual laziness that some consider to be characteristic for how politicians had engaged ethnic minority groups in the past. By contrast highlighting the multiplicity of Muslim voices, as one of our respondents suggested, means that

you're able to populate that space and give voice to all the different perspectives that exist in the Muslim community, and it to me can only be a very good thing. Because it means that when politicians are looking around for a Muslim voice, they're all automatically confronted with Muslim voices, and they have to get over this idea that, you know, a Muslim voice will suffice, because they're confronted with a cacophony of voices and you have to deal with that cacophony. And annoying as it is, you have to deal with it, because that's the reality of the British Muslim community. (ENGAGE, Interview, 3 February 2012)

The suggestion is that the diverse engagement of a number of organisations, reflecting the complexity of British Muslim politics, would make it more difficult to mis-characterize their political agency.

### **Limits of neutrality and partisanship**

The 2008 election of the Mayor of London has been a particularly crucial case of contestation about how to speak to and mobilize Muslim voters. Widely considered sympathetic to Muslim concerns, the incumbent, Labour's Ken Livingstone, benefited from the support of the Muslims4Ken initiative. Livingstone lost the election and there were some concerns that Boris Johnson, the Conservative contender and elected Mayor, had been portrayed in a way that would make it more difficult for Muslims to engage with him. During the campaign, MPAC had urged its supporters to “help save us from a Zionist Islamophobe becoming Mayor of London” (MPAC 2008). Responding to controversial statements by Boris Johnson, Muslims4Ken portrayed the Conservative candidate as an “Islamophobe who has insulted and condemned Islam and Muslims”.<sup>9</sup>

In the Guardian, Asim Siddiqui attributed Livingstone's defeat to allegedly inept efforts by Muslim organisations in support of Ken and the backlash that these had triggered. Siddiqui pointed to “radioactive” effects and that “Muslim lobbyists can do little else but take note. If the very candidate

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<sup>9</sup> This condemnation was later re-written in slightly less devastating terms: “Boris Johnson's record doesn't hold much hope for London. He has no experience of running a city, has vowed to scrap many progressive policies and has insulted women, blacks, Muslims and many other groups. Vote Ken on May 1st for a progressive, diverse, forward-looking London” (see <http://muslimsforken.blogspot.com/>).

you are endorsing is being damaged by your endorsement, then surely it's time for a rethink" (Siddiqui 2008). Disputing this account, Challenging this account, Anas Altikriti took particular issue with the assumption that led Siddiqui to the conclusion that it was time to stop "to mobilize the 'Muslim vote'" (Siddiqui 2008). Altikriti argued that "[t]o suggest that while Muslims can come under collective attack, suspicion and scrutiny as a result of crimes committed by a few, but can only defend themselves and fight for their rights as individuals, is nothing short of absurd - discriminatory, even". Siddiqui's call for caution, Altikriti suggested, reflected the social stigmatization of British Muslims as a 'special case' and mainstream tendencies to individualize, misrecognize and discredit any collective articulation of Muslim political concerns.

Strategic considerations about how to mobilize voters in the run-up to the general election two years after Livingstone's defeat were clearly influenced by the experience of the mayoral campaign. The MCB, for example, which hadn't endorsed Livingstone despite clear preferences among its membership, felt encouraged in its position of neutrality. An MCB respondent pointed to the significance of the mayoral campaign when he argued that "it wasn't for MCB to endorse". The MCB would "do everything in terms of encouraging raising issues, but stop short of saying who to put in their ballot box. It's more of service facilitation. You make your own mind up" (Interview, 12 January 2012). The fact that a political campaign had used the notion of a 'Muslim Vote' in support of a specific candidate was registered as an anomaly, similar to Siddiqui (2008) who observed that there had been no "JewsforBoris" or, referring to the Lib Dem candidate, "GaysforBrian" campaigns: "You don't have a chief rabbi supporting a campaign for Boris" (MCB, Interview, 12 January 2012). This was not meant as a critique of mobilizations for Ken; the MCB, as a representative Muslim umbrella body, considered it necessary to maintain neutrality, despite clear affinities with Ken Livingstone and the Labour party, in order to be able to engage with elected representatives regardless of their party backgrounds.

In the mobilizations of 2010, similar differences of strategic positioning were evident. Youelect, for example, primarily intended to familiarize Muslim voters with policy issues and candidates' policy record. Just before the general election, however, it published links to two lists of recommended candidates (one by the British Muslim Initiative, closely connected to Youelect; the other by Salaam.co.uk). A respondent for Youelect introduced the rationale for this departure from a more neutral position as follows:

up until, I think it was the final week or the final two weeks, we didn't favour one over the other. We just said this is the information, these are the priorities, here's how it works, you go and decide, and you go and decide by meeting in your mosques and your community centres, in your homes, by talking, by discussing, by holding people accountable, asking them questions. [...] it was only towards, I think, the last week or 10 days of the elections that we started to come up with the idea of the lists, that, okay, fine, after all this and people, some of them have actually, you know, sent those by post. But we feel that now is the time when we should say well, listen, there are some really very bad candidates and regardless of where they stand on the playing fields, they are really, really bad candidates. (Interview, 9 January 2012)

A different respondent similarly suggested that "people appreciated the fact that we [Youelect] weren't spoon-feeding them or we're not dictating on what they should be doing, we were simply directing them" and that "people did feel empowered through Youelect but making sure we didn't encroach on their personal political space" (Interview, 25 January 2012). Accordingly, the reason why the organisations eventually offered concrete voting advice was "a lot of push coming from the community itself" (Interview, 25 January 2012).

By contrast, the position that ENGAGE adopted in line with its objectives was to provide background information without offering recommendations. It

would never advocate that you vote for this particular candidate, because it would be irresponsible to be fair, but also because it's the local communities that determine which candidates they want to elect. It's for... you know, you may necessarily agree that a Conservative candidate has more in common with you as a social conservative, but it may be that the local candidate is more appreciative, or more sympathetic, or more aware of your community's issues. So the decision you cast must be one based on the representation of your interests in parliament, and that's something we would never dictate (Interview, 3 February 2012)

MPAC was directly targeting candidates whose policy records it rejected. Without aiming for neutrality in its local interventions, it nonetheless did not endorse a specific party and displayed some awareness of dilemmas with its local activism. It was suggested for MPAC that

we have to be careful about how we position ourselves. So when we campaign, we campaign as an independent group, we are not in the pockets of anyone that we are trying to promote because what happens is, that can be used against them. So we're backing a candidate, for example from a party, his opposition will simply try to portray us as extremists and that this candidate is in the pocket of that group. 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*. (Interview, 28 January 2012)

The portrayal as 'extremist' was understood as a malign, but to some extent unavoidable, accusation in the present climate: "accusing people who are pro-democracy of having some kind of violent, extremist agenda. It's nonsense" (MPAC, Interview, 28 January 2012). Accordingly, while articulating sharp and opinionated positions in the course of electoral campaigns, MPAC sought to tread carefully in its relationship with politicians that it endorsed.

A different issue regarding the party-political preferences that were either present or absent in the mobilization pertains to the choice of 'mainstream' over 'fringe' parties. For Youelect, for example, it was suggested that the 'Muslim community'

in a cultural sense it has adopted a certain British cultural concept of trying to put your vote with mainstream parties. They understand that to be influential, you'd have to be with mainstream and in Britain, there's two parties. In a way, if you think about it, the Lib Dems should have been the more natural selection and in fact all polls initially indicated prior to 2010 election there'd be a massive swing towards the Lib Dem but it never materialised. That also shows that in a way, when push comes to shove, they will go with the mainstream cultural concept. So I think that was quite interesting, it's a very interesting evolution in the political thinking of Muslims. (Interview, 25 January 2012)

This position corresponds to considerations that an MPAC representative proposed: "left-wing, right-wing actually does not matter so much, what matters is political representation, to have a political voice, in both the left and the right" (Interview, 28 January 2012). It was his suggestion that Muslim voters had to be 'rational' decision-makers and that this would mean seeking access to mainstream political representation: "What we are saying is forget all the fringe parties, it's the three main parties" (Interview, 28 January 2012).

The emphasis on the maturity and sophistication of Muslim voters is perhaps the most widely shared point of reference in the rhetoric of the various initiatives that were mobilizing such voters in 2010. While this emphasis offers a strong challenge to frequent misrepresentations of Muslim political agency, it contains some ambiguities. While the definition of the 'Muslim vote' as the sum of discerning, hard-nosed and ideas-based choices might hold some strategic benefits, it may also limit the room for political manoeuvre and cement a 'special' status for Muslim political agency. The focus on mature and sophisticated political subjects that is proposed might point to a way towards a normalization of the Muslim presence in British political life. However, maturity and sophistication,

similar to the proof that minority politicians have to offer regarding their ability to be 'representative', might also constitute an additional burden for Muslim political agency.

### **Conclusion and recommendations**

While misrecognition has been our focus, we do not suggest that it provides a complete or determinative account of Muslim political agency. Indeed experiences of misrecognition are not understood particularly well if they are viewed as merely constraining opportunities for agency and inviting nothing but coping strategies and a posture of defensiveness. The political positioning that is evident among the organisations examined in this report shows that constraints are often creatively dealt with and that perceived pressures invite a significant degree of reflexivity and strategic awareness. Although the past decade has been a challenging time for confident expressions of Muslim identities in British politics, there are some indications that political actors succeed in projecting political subjectivities that are not simply determined by the experience of misrecognition. The diversity of attempts to delineate such identities, as is evident among the mobilizations examined in this report, might make it more difficult for Muslim political claims to be misrecognized. Moreover, the 'disclosure' of alternative truths about Muslim political agency, even where its particular claims fail to be registered or accepted, might in itself be a strong political signal. While British Muslim claims to be viewed as political agents of a particular kind may not (always) succeed, they may be viewed as political agents nonetheless and, as such, as legitimate interlocutors and fellow citizens.

In addition to defeating misrecognition, the wish for a certain civic normalization is widely evident, perhaps even more evident that the desire to propose oppositional identities against the social mainstream. This may be conceived as a desire for hyphenated British-Muslim identities to be recognized as 'normal' and thus for a situation where "difference does not make a difference" (Schiffauer forthcoming 2013). Alternatively, such aspirations may be seen to point to a type of 'respect' that results from the fact of common citizenship. In both cases, claims may be most appropriately conceived within a 'third class of acceptance', where "toleration is not enough and other normative concepts, namely those that focus on majority-minority relations and the reform of institutions and citizenship, are or should be more relevant" (Dobbernack and Modood 2011, 32). It would be widely acknowledged that such aspirations are currently not fully realized in British political life. As we have argued, the political agency of British Muslims is at least partially informed by pressures and obstacles that determine political standards of acceptability.

We have argued in this report that misrecognition does not mean 'misperception'. The concern with counter-narratives or to brush aside problems and idealize the political agency of British Muslims may not be appropriate or helpful. Indeed, the focus on misrecognition helps explain aspects of agency but it does not lend itself for an estimation as to *how* British Muslims desire to be politically recognized. Political theorists have recently emphasized the role that democratic agency has to play in any determination of the *terms of recognition* (eg, Tully 2004; Modood 2008, 49). Not just concerned to counter misperceptions, there is a wish to claim some ownership of the debate about the political presence of British Muslims. The initiatives that we have investigated in this report demonstrate this goal, which is not to project particular identities but to create a space where a number of civic identities can be projected.

The five types of misrecognition that we have identified in this report offer themselves for five corresponding policy recommendations.

- Muslim identity politics should not be conceived and publicly presented as markedly different in kind to other identity politics or even interest groups more generally. National broadcasters and news agencies must show better awareness and training on the diversity of Muslim political opinion groupings, as well as convergences on core issues, affecting Muslim communities and motivating their political participation.

- There should be an increased recognition of the dynamic positioning and complexity of Muslim identities and concerns. This could be achieved through better points of contact in particular to channel Muslim youth and women's groups into the mainstream political arenas at local and national levels, and so to ensure that these voices are not ignored.
- The notion that the political agency of Muslims is purely reactive should be challenged. Muslim representatives are often only given public visibility when they express grievances. While the expression of grievances is a normal political act and should be reported as such, there should be more interest in the media and the political mainstream for the everyday work and the civil society-based contributions of Muslim social and political activists.
- The representation of Muslim political advocacy as 'sectarian' and incompatible with an orientation towards the common good needs to be questioned. In light of the Leveson Inquiry it is important that news agencies make better efforts to include Muslim voices and Muslim actors in their reportage, so as to encourage a more accurate portrayal of the dynamic features of Muslim participation in mainstream politics. This is especially necessary where controversial issues are being reported and where there is a tendency sometimes to stigmatize but more often to sensationalize facts about British Muslims.
- The popular perception of Muslim political actors as 'toxic' is a form of stigmatisation that would be unacceptable if applied to other minorities. For mainstream politicians to go with such characterisations is damaging to an inclusive politics. All political parties should develop better relationships with Muslim organizations, to reach out and encourage participation in a manner that would facilitate a conduit for the mainstream presence of Muslim actors.

## **Appendix**

### *Interview guide*

- (a) What were you trying to achieve at the election? What approach was successful/unsuccessful? What are your thoughts on the future for this approach? If you could do it again what would you change and why?
- (b) What was characteristic of the mobilization of Muslim voters in 2010?
- (c) How does it compare to earlier attempts to mobilize ethnic minority votes?
- (d) What was the rationale of appealing to Muslim voters? Why is it important to increase the political participation of Muslim voters?
- (e) To what extent can there be a 'Muslim vote' given the diversity of orientations and preferences among British Muslims?
- (f) What was the response to mobilizations from Muslim voters and others (perception of media response, politicians, institutions)?
- (g) Was there any lasting impact of the 2010 campaign (in terms of political consciousness among voters or responsiveness of the political actors/institutions)?
- (h) How is the mobilization of a Muslim vote distinct from the appeal, for example, to the Black vote?

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