Symposium on minority representation - Introduction:

Are British ethnic minorities politically under-represented?

Abstract

Obama’s 2008 presidential victory in the US triggered a debate in Europe and the UK as to whether someone from an ethnic minority could achieve similar success in national politics. The 2010 General Election saw a small increase in ethnic minority candidates, but a near doubling of the number of black and Asian MPs in the House of Commons. During 2010 and 2011, the University of Manchester organised a seminar series on ethnic minorities’ political representation in Britain. This symposium features some of the highlights of that series. In this article we summarise some of the key arguments.

Unequal representation

The election of Barack Obama as President represented a landmark in the history of racial politics in the U.S, which proved inspirational well beyond the States. Obama’s victory triggered a wider debate in Europe and the UK particularly, as to whether someone from an ethnic minority could achieve similar success in national politics (e.g. Smee, 2008). The focus on descriptive representation of minorities (the number of non-white representatives) has been the dominant narrative in the study of ethnic minority disadvantage in politics. This, in part, reflects the relative abundance of data over-time and the ease with which scholars can quantify this descriptive representation. However, in this symposium we want to expand on this view and look at three distinct areas of representation. Next to three articles dealing with descriptive representation we juxtapose one article dealing with substantive representation, a concept which is notoriously difficult to conceptualise and measure. The disadvantages of not having one’s interests represented in the national legislature are fairly obvious, yet the debate surrounding the existence and nature of ethnic minority interests in Britain has been preventing much research into this form of representation (Studlar 1986, Sobolewska 2005). We also include an article examining the political mobilisation of minorities. This is usually treated as an explanatory factor in the analyses of under-representation in political office but we suggest that the lack of attention from the political parties to mobilise the vote of minorities is a form of political disadvantage in its own right. Although the claim that British ethnic minorities are being taken for granted by the main political parties regularly resurface (LeLohe 1998, Geddes and Saggar 2000), this area has received very little scholarly attention. In 2010 we have benefited from new data, which has allowed academics to give a fuller picture of whether minorities face less political mobilisation from political parties. Treating the issue of political representation in a wider context, beyond the most studies descriptive representation will give us a fuller understanding of the true face of political disadvantage in Britain today, but also of the common underlying causes.

Descriptive representation

We would like to thank the ESRC for their funding of this seminar series (grant number ES/H000836/1), the Hansard Society for their help in the organisation of the conference that concluded the seminar series, and all the contributors and participants of the series.
The 2010 British Election saw the near doubling of the number of minority origin MPs and the break in the traditional dominance of the Labour party in the field of minority representation. Some announced that the obstacles to minorities in politics have been removed (Katwala 2009). Yet, after this critical election the Commons had 27 BME members out of a total or 649 or 4.5 percent. Of these 11 were from the Conservative Party and 16 from Labour Parties, leaving the Liberal Democrats as an all-white parliamentary party. Even though this has been a major improvement since 2005, when the percentage of Commons members from ethnic minorities was lower at 2.3 percent (Equalities Review 2007: 41), with 15 members (www.parliament.uk 2010a), it still represents an under-representation of the 8 percent of the UK population who were from a non-white background at the time of the 2001 Census of Population (and which has since increased to about 10 percent). In relation to the House of Lords, Operation Black Vote lists 38 ‘Black peers’, all of whom are of BME background (Operation Black Vote 2010). In 2007, the Scottish Parliament contained no Black members and the Welsh Assembly had no members of any ethnic minority background (The Equalities Review 2007: 99).

This symposium presents a comprehensive picture of descriptive representation in Britain today at the national and local level. The first article dealing with representation in Westminster, takes an in-depth, qualitative approach to explaining the experience of minorities in becoming candidates to Parliament and in running for a seat. [Authors] address the barriers in the selection process, the infamous ‘secret garden of politics’ (Gallagher and Marsh 1988) and the nitty-gritty difficulties of candidature. The second article dealing with the national level offers the other side of the coin when it explores, in a quantitative manner, whether these minority candidates face an electoral penalty for their ethnic origin. The third of our articles on descriptive representation addresses an issue of local representation using a survey of local councillors. The issue of local representation is often thought to be unwieldy and difficult and many countries do not posses complete data on ethnic diversity of local governments.

**Substantive representation**

The second type of political disadvantage discussed in this symposium is the area of substantive representation. The link between descriptive and substantive representation has been a contested one from the beginning for at least three reasons. The first one has been the hypothesis that while an increase in descriptive representatives increased the number of members of parliament potentially interested in substantively representing their constituents, such link would undermine any previous substantive representation of minorities by other, non-descriptively matched, representatives. Secondly, there has been a controversy over whether descriptively matched representatives would in fact be able, or want, to represent their descriptive constituency over and above other constituents- especially in high party discipline systems like the British Parliament. Thirdly, both these questions have been hard to answer definitively because of the issue of measurement of substantive representation. Anything from roll-call votes, which suffer from the aforementioned problem in high party discipline systems, passage of specific policies, which may happen too rarely to provide good over-time measure, to parliamentary debates have been analysed and their respective value assessed, but the compromise has been hard to establish. [Authors] in this symposium have chosen to look at the Parliamentary Questions for
Written Answers [PQs], as these are one of the most internationally comparable measure, but also they correspond to a strong normative conceptualisation of substantive representation: that the descriptive representatives give voice to their descriptive constituency thus raising the quality of deliberation within Parliament (Mansbridge 1999).

Are interests of ethnic minorities represented in Westminster? Is the growing number of ethnic minority origin MPs translating into a better substantive representation of minorities? Are minority MPs the only ones carrying the can for minorities? Or are white MPs representing their minority constituents as well? [Authors] offer a glimpse into all these important issues when they analyse PQs during the last parliament 2005-10 and during the 20 months of the new parliament May 2010- December 2011. They show that although ethnicity of MPs matters, with ethnic minority MPs being more likely to engage with substantive interest of minorities in Westminster, it is the party represented and the constituencies’ ethnic diversity that drives this form of representation. With an increased number of Conservative black and Asian MPs representing almost entirely white seats being less likely to engage in ethnic issues, it is reassuring to learn that white MPs representing diverse constituencies do take the representation of their minority constituents seriously.

Political mobilisation

A third from of political disadvantage that we identify here is the supposed relative lack of political mobilisation from the mainstream political parties. In the final article in this symposium [authors] argue that ethnic minorities were less likely to report being contacted by the political parties during the election campaign in 2010. They test an alternative proposition that minorities are less likely to notice political campaigning due to lower levels of political resources, but instead show that the level of contact is dependent on where minorities live. However, analysis of campaign spending data suggests parties do not neglect areas with larger minority populations, but in some cases actually spend more in those areas. Certainly parties make more effort to target minority supporters in areas with larger minority populations, perhaps leaving minorities outside of these areas more marginalised (Saggar and Geddes, 2000).

Understanding political representation of minorities: what do we know?

The Factors that affect minority political disadvantage are complex and diverse, and relate to many different dimensions of social, economic and political life. These relate to socio-economic integration and inequalities; the demographic and spatial distribution of minority groups; the racial attitudes of the electorate; the participation and voting behaviour of minorities; and the selection procedures and policies of the parties (Geddes 1998, Ireland, 2000; Koopmans and Statham, 2000; Koopmans et al, 2005). In the following section we briefly summarise some of those factors, focussing on evidence drawn from the seminar series and the papers in this issue, and showing that they impact not only representation, but also other areas of political disadvantage.
Socio-economic inequalities

It is widely recognised that British ethnic minorities have long been disadvantaged in the labour market and are on average poorer than the white majority population (Heath and Cheung, 2007). Standard theories of resource mobilization suggest that groups with lower education and lower class positions will have lower rates of political participation. Previous research shows that some minority groups (but by no means all) are indeed less likely to be registered to vote than the white majority (Heath et al, 2011), which in turn means that the parties are less likely to seek minority candidates. The social class profile is also likely to have a direct impact on the supply of potential candidates which are increasingly drawn from the professional middle classes (Durose et al, this issue). We also see [in author this symposium] that minorities are more likely to live in poorer, more deprived areas, which experience less political mobilisation from political parties.

Demographics and spatial distribution

The size of the ethnic minority population is important as a benchmark for the level of representation. The difference noted above in representation at the national level in part reflects the relative size of the minority population in Britain and the U.S.\(^2\). However, Clark et al (2010) note that whilst making up nearly one in ten of state legislators and U.S representatives, African Americans make up 13% of the overall population. Compare this with Britain where only about 3% of councillors are from minority ethnic groups compared to about ten percent of the population (Clark et al. 2010; Thrasher et al, this issue). Local legislators and political class and constitute a substantial political class in the US which is lacking in Britain, which has repercussions for representation at the local level (authors, this issue).

The geographical distribution of minorities is also important. The relatively dispersed distribution of minorities across UK constituencies means that there are very few areas in which minorities constitute a large proportion of the electorate. As a result, any group or bloc voting influence is limited to a small number of these ‘ethnic marginals’ (Crewe, 1983). In consequence, before the 2010 election, almost all ethnic minority MPs represented areas which have the highest proportions of minority residents meaning that ethnic politics has been marginalised (Saggar and Geddes, 2000). The changes in the 2010 election, which saw a large increase of minority MPS from the Conservative party representing less diverse ‘white’ seats may signal a break with the traditional race relations paradigm in the area of minority representation (Sobolewska 2013).

Electoral rules and systems

The impact of the size and distribution of ethnic populations on representation is moderated by the electoral rules and systems (Togebey, 2008; Rule and Zimmerman, 1994). It is often argued that proportional list based systems give minorities better chance of being elected than simple plurality systems in which every candidate need to win over a majority of a local electorate (Norris, 1997). Under proportional systems, there is greater incentive for parties to put forward a list of candidates which resembles the population. In majoritarian systems like the UK, candidates are selected for single

\(^2\) Non whites make up about 1/3 of the population of the U.S and around 1/10 of the British population.
member district and the selection process is often in the hands of the local constituency party, who have incentive to pick candidates that most resemble the local population (in most cases white) but will not produce a balanced ticket at the national level (Bird et al., 2010). Electoral procedures and rules are also crucial. In the U.S. for example race is a criterion in drawing up district boundaries and used explicitly to advance the prospects of minority candidates (Canon, 1999; Lublin, 1999). In the UK, however, redistricting takes no account of ethnic minority populations.

Racial and ethnic prejudice in the electorate
Attitudinal factors within the wider white population may also play a significant role in preventing the success of ethnic minority candidates (McLaren and Johnson, 2007; Adolino, 1998; Ford 2009). Insofar as minority candidates rely on white votes to return them to office, the level of prejudice in a society is a crucial determinant of minority representation. Some show that party selectors take this into account while considering the selection of minority candidates (Norris and Lovendusky 1995). In this issue (authors) argue that where parties chose an ethnic minority challenger to an incumbent MP they lose two or three percent of the vote share. Whilst these penalties are only modest, they can be the difference between success and failure especially in tight contests, and can serve as a disincentive for parties to pick minority candidates.

Electoral participation and mobilisation of minority groups
The participation rates of ethnic minorities themselves may be important in determining the extent to which parties appeal to minority groups and select minority candidates (Fennema and Tillie, 1999; Le Lohe, 1998; Fieldhouse and Cutts, 2008). Parties play an important role in mobilising and incorporating minority groups into politics (Jones-Correa, 1998; Messina, 1998), and as gate-keepers of representation British parties are generally regarded as less permeable than their U.S. counterparts (Geddes, 1998). Research in the US has shown that racial diversity is associated with weak mobilizing forces (Hill and Leighley, 1999) but that parties target black voters especially in areas of high concentration (Leighley 2001). Similarly, in this issue [authors] show that in Britain Black and Asian voters were less likely to be contacted during the 2010 election campaign, but this varied according to the ethnic composition of the area. In areas of ethnic concentration parties were more likely to specifically target minority groups. Yet, despite this disadvantage in the levels of political mobilisation from mainstream parties, recent evidence shows that ethnic minorities in Britain participate in elections as much as their white counterparts (Heath et al 2011). This suggests that minorities draw on group resources and group mechanisms of mobilisation to compensate for the lack of attention from the parties in areas which parties consider not worth working in.

Selection of candidates: supply and demand
The representation of minority groups ultimately rests on the supply of and demand for candidates. The supply of candidates is influenced by the size of the population, the social characteristics of minorities, their engagement in electoral politics, and the extent to which the culture of political institutions is welcoming to minority groups (Norris
and Lovendusky 1995). (Authors, this issue) identify a number of barriers that affects the supply of minority candidates including personal and financial costs, informal and unwritten rules, and the operation of informal patronage and cliques in parties, hostility in selection process and and a general lack of contact between parties and with ethnic minorities. The demand for candidates is driven by political parties. In 2010 the chair of the Commission for Equality and Human Rights, Trevor Phillips, claimed that “if Barack Obama had lived here I would be very surprised if even somebody as brilliant as him would have been able to break through the institutional stranglehold that there is on power within the Labour Party.” (Authors) argue that the section procedures of the main political parties are a major factor in determining the low levels of representation (see also Bird et al, 2010). They argue that where aspiring candidates from under-represented groups have been selected, it was because they were ‘acceptably different’ conforming to other aspects of the ‘archetypal candidate’. These new professionalised routes into national politics have allowed greater diversity, but remain narrow and exclusionary. In what (Authors this symposium) show can be a justifiable perception, parties see minority candidates as vote losers and are therefore less willing to select them locally, despite attempts by the parties’ leadership to become more representative at a national level (Sobolewska 2013).

At the local level, we noted above that ethnic minorities are under-represented in local government as well as Parliament. In this issue, Thrasher et al. find that ethnic minority candidates for local government in many respects are similar to their white counterparts. One important demand side difference is that minority candidates were more likely to be selected in London than elsewhere, and that this largely reflected in different attitudes towards local parties. However, in absence of strong demand side factors the authors lean towards supply side factors, identifying a deficit in the numbers willing to put themselves forward. This in turn may reflect the culture of the parties and the perception among minorities of not being welcome to come forward. Certainly there is a widespread perception (among non-white candidates) that parties do not do enough to recruit minorities in local government.

**Conclusions**

The factors described above are by no means unique to the UK, yet Britain remains towards the bottom of the pile in respect to the level of minority representation (Bird et al. 2011). The papers in this symposium, and the evidence heard during the seminar series, does suggest that this issue is part of a broader picture of political disadvantage of British ethnic minorities. They also show that there are some particular conditions in the U.K. that contribute to low levels of ethnic minority representation and other forms of disadvantage. But, to some extent, these factors are present to varying degrees elsewhere. Underlying all these behavioural and institutional differences are deeper structural distinctions in political culture between the nations that should be considered when comparing levels of political representation of non-white populations (Bloemraad, 2006). The U.S. assimilationist or ‘melting pot’ model of immigrant integration, for example, differs from the British model of multiculturalism which seeks to preserve groups’ racial and ethnic identities. Arguably the ‘absorption’ rationale of the American approach may have helped in ‘normalising’ the political as well as social
integration of ethnic groups as part of the mainstream culture (Portes and Rumbaut, 2006; Gerstle and Mollenkopf, 2001; Smith, 1997). But which factors predominate when understanding variation between countries in their levels of minority representation? Ruedin (2010) suggests that cultural factors (measured by attitudes towards marginalised groups) are more important than electoral systems, rules and procedures. However, Bloemraad (2006) suggests that minority representation reflects a complex interplay of historical cultural factors including regimes of immigrant incorporation and levels of civic engagement in conjunction with electoral systems.

During the seminar series and reflected in the articles in this symposium, we found that minority candidates face difficulties at the selection stage, penalties in the electoral contest and have to walk a tight rope between their ethnic origin and strategies of fitting in. We identified the roots of these difficulties in the persistent socio-economic disadvantage of ethnic minorities in Britain, but also their specific geographical concentration in larger than average, deprived urban constituencies where Labour holds the balance of power without much real electoral competition. These disadvantages manifest themselves in both local politics and national politics. We identified some areas of progress, including the efforts by the main political parties to promote the diversity of candidates, and the closing of the gap between majority and minorities in political participation. Perhaps the most optimistic message is in the area of substantive representation: all MPs who represent minority electorates, regardless of their ethnic origin, appear to take more action in representing minority interests. Nevertheless, if the UK Parliament is to more closely reflect and represent its population, the major parties must continue to encourage and prioritise minority candidates for winnable seats, and not only in areas of minority population concentration, even where this proves unpopular with rank and file members.

REFERENCES


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