

Electoral participation of South Asian communities in England and Wales

This research measures electoral registration and turnout among South Asian communities in England and Wales. The study, by Ed Fieldhouse and David Cutts of the University of Manchester, is based on analysis of a large sample of marked electoral registers and the 2001 Census. The study found that:

- South Asian adults are less likely to be registered to vote than the rest of the population, partly because a larger proportion of the population is born in ineligible countries.
- Muslim communities (including both South Asian and other Muslim groups) have lower registration rates than South Asian non-Muslim communities before adjusting for ineligibility. After adjustment, the registration rate for both Muslim and non-Muslim South Asian groups is approximately 93 per cent.
- Muslim adults (including both South Asian and other Muslim groups) are more likely to be registered in areas with larger Muslim populations, but this pattern is not evident for other South Asian adults. Other factors affecting registration include population stability, home ownership, unemployment and social class.
- Registered South Asian electors are more likely to vote than non-South Asians. Hindus are the most likely to vote of all the religious groups common in the South Asian electorate.
- Registered South Asian women, especially Muslim women, are more likely to vote than South Asian men.
- All the identifiable South Asian groups, particularly Muslims, turn out in greater proportions in areas where they are most concentrated.
- The household is the most important unit of variation for turnout of all religious groups – people are more likely to vote if other members of their household are turning out.
- Higher levels of turnout are not explained simply by the social composition of the different religious groups.
- Home ownership – positively associated with the turnout of all groups – and the degree of marginality in the constituency were the only common factors affecting the turnout of all groups.
- Turnout is higher in areas where South Asians are more likely to be from lower social classes than in areas where more middle-class South Asians live, usually in less ethnically diverse neighbourhoods, supporting the hypothesis that South Asians living in South Asian communities are more effectively mobilised by political parties or community leaders than those living elsewhere.



Background

The turnout of 59.4 per cent at the 2001 General Election was the lowest since 1918. It has been widely assumed that electors from minority ethnic groups are less likely to vote in general elections than white electors. Furthermore, electoral participation is regarded as both an indicator of the integration of minority communities, and the quality of the democratic system. However, existing research that attempts to provide ethnic or religion estimates relies heavily on survey data, aggregate data or small-scale case studies. Such data is unreliable when measuring turnout, particularly amongst minority groups. This research used an innovative approach to estimating turnout, using marked electoral rolls, election results from the 2001 General Election and the 2001 Census of population. This allowed the researchers to make a reliable nationally representative estimate of South Asian electoral participation and represents the first nationwide study of actual (rather than reported) registration and turnout amongst South Asian communities.

Registration of South Asian populations: new evidence from the 2001 Census.

Although most policy debate about electoral participation concerns improving turnout, a substantial minority of the adult population never gets as far as the electoral register, let alone the ballot box. However, obtaining reliable registration rates can be difficult, especially for sub-groups of the population, due to uncertainty about the size of the eligible voting age population. Because the 2001 Census of Population was collected within little more than a month of the 2001 General Election, the researchers had a unique opportunity to make accurate estimates of registration.

Their analyses showed that South Asian adults were less likely to be registered than their non-Asian counterparts, although this can be partly accounted for by differences in country of birth. After allowing for ineligibility due to country of birth, the national (weighted) registration rate for both Muslim and non-Muslim South Asians is approximately 93%. However, in areas where South Asian populations were more concentrated, rates of registration for South Asian electors were much higher.

Turnout of South Asian electors: evidence from the marked electoral registers

At 59.4 per cent, turnout among South Asian registered electors was slightly higher than among non-Asians. However, once these figures had taken account of voters who were not registered, overall participation rates were lower for South Asians, particularly Muslims (see Table 1). The researchers found that South Asians of Hindu and Sikh heritage had higher rates of participation than Muslims, and that turnout was more than six percentage points higher among South Asian women than men. Muslim women were more likely than Non-Asian women to vote.

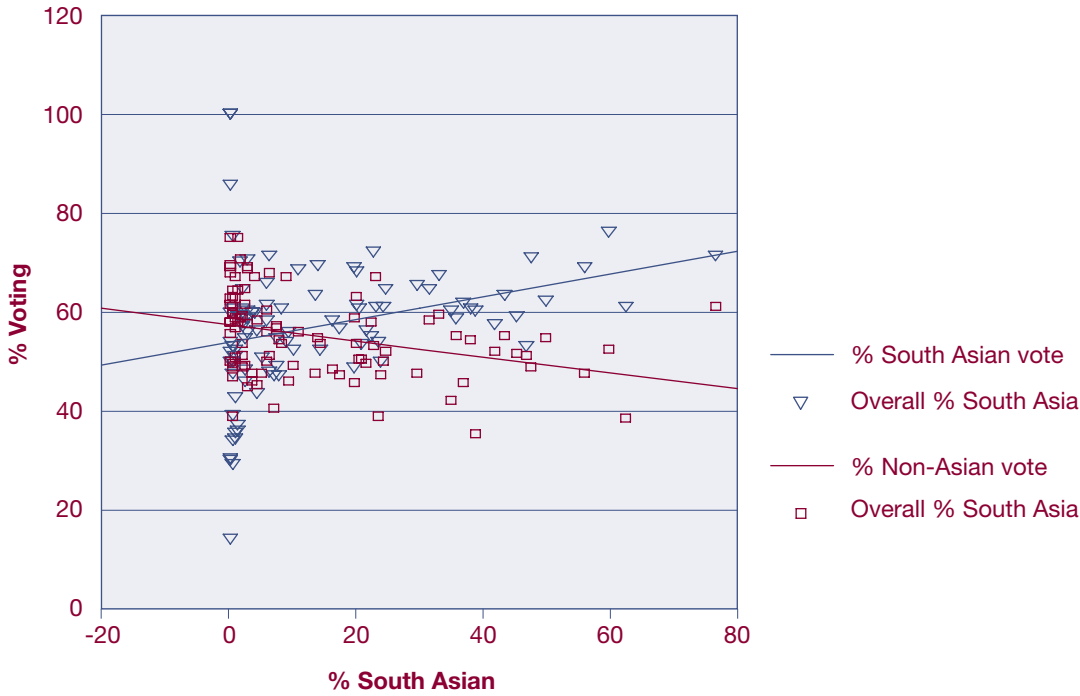
While geographical analyses indicated a negative relationship between ethnicity and turnout, the research showed that the relationship did not hold at individual level. This apparent paradox arose because South Asian turnout was highest where there were more South Asians in the electorate, which was where turnout for the rest of the population was lower (see Figure 1). The strength of community networks and effective mobilisation are possible explanations for this pattern.

The researchers used statistical models to understand some of these variations in South Asian turnout. The

Table 1 **Turnout by religion/ethnicity**

Religion/ethnicity	Turnout percent corrected for national turnout	Turnout after registration (with country of birth adjustment)	Turnout after registration (without country of birth adjustment)
Overall	58.3	58.5	57.4
Non-South Asian	58.3	58.6	57.7
South Asian non-Muslim	60.7	55.1	53.5
Muslim	58.5	53.5	48.0
All South Asian	59.4	55.5	51.2

Figure 1: **More South Asians vote than non-South Asians where there is a larger population of South Asians**



household was the most important unit of variation for turnout of all religious groups. In other words, people who lived together were more likely to vote together. However, this effect was slightly weaker for Hindus than other groups. Registered South Asian voters of all religions were more likely to vote than their non-South Asian counterparts, even after controlling for the clustering in the sample and the characteristics of the areas in which they live. It therefore appears that the differences in turnout were not the products of social structure but genuine differences in the propensity to vote or other unmeasured effects.

Different factors were found to be influential in the results of separate models for each religion than for the non-South Asian population. The only common factors in all these models were home ownership, which was positively associated with turnout of all groups, and the degree of marginality of the constituency.

The findings for South Asian electors contradicted the general pattern of higher social classes being more likely to vote. However, this is likely to reflect a complex relationship between social structure and the level of participation and ethnic composition of neighbourhoods. Turnout was higher in areas where South Asians were more likely to be from lower social classes than in areas where more middle-class South Asians lived, which tended to be less ethnically diverse.

This confirmed the mobilising effect of living within religiously diverse areas where electors from minority ethnic groups live within sizeable communities, but also suggested this effect is not always restricted to those living in the particular religious community to which they belong. The religious profile was not significantly related to the turnout of non-South Asian electors. These results support the hypothesis that South Asian communities are more effectively mobilised by political parties or community leaders and were consistent with social capital theory which suggests that more socially connected communities are likely to have higher levels of participation.

Conclusions

Contrary to common perceptions that electors from minority ethnic groups are less likely to vote in general elections than other electors, this research provides evidence that registered South Asian electors are actually more likely to turn out to vote. However, this is tempered by the finding that South Asian adults are less likely to be registered to vote than the rest of the population. Estimating the turnout as a percent of the voting eligible population, the researchers found there was very little difference between religious groups. The overall difference between South Asians and the rest of the population was three per cent.

Whilst lower registration amongst South Asians, especially Muslims, is partly attributable to a larger proportion of the population being born outside of eligible countries, the fact that the turnout rate after adjusting for registration is lower than the rate for non-South Asians suggests that focusing on the reasons for non-registration may be just as important as tackling non-voting. However, reasons for non-registration are poorly understood. The study's models show that in addition to the proportion born outside of the UK, Europe and the Commonwealth, other factors affecting South Asian registration include the level of unemployment, the number of older people and the extent of home ownership in the local area. Perhaps the most important factor, however, is the size of the local South Asian population. Whilst there is a negative correlation between the size of the South Asian population and registration, this does not indicate low registration of these groups, merely low registration of their neighbours. If anything, South Asian electors are considerably boosting registration (and turnout) in inner city areas. It is likely that political parties and community leaders play an important part in mobilising South Asian voters, especially Muslim voters, both in terms of persuading them to register and persuading them to vote.

The research showed that, like registration, turnout also varied between religious groups and between men and women. Hindu electors were the most likely to vote of all the identifiable religion groups common in the South Asian electorate. Sikh turnout was also relatively high, whilst Muslim turnout was very close to the overall

mean. As for registration, all the identifiable South Asian groups turned out in greater proportions in areas where they were most concentrated. Again this may be a result of enhanced mobilisation effects in more diverse areas.

About the project

This research used marked registers from the 2001 General Election for a sample of ninety-seven wards in England and Wales. Wards were sampled disproportionately in areas with a large Asian population to ensure the effective coverage of different subgroups but weights have been applied to make the sample nationally representative. The marked registers were analysed using name recognition software (Nam Pehchan and SANGRA) which is able to identify names with a South Asian origin (i.e. from the Indian sub-continent), allowing the authors to directly measure actual turnout rates of South Asian communities. Registration is assessed by comparing the 2001 Census population, by religion, with our sample of marked electoral registers.

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For more information

The full report, **Electoral participation of South Asian communities in England and Wales** by Edward Fieldhouse and David Cutts, is published by the Joseph Rowntree Foundation.

Published by the Joseph Rowntree Foundation, The Homestead, 40 Water End, York YO30 6WP. This project is part of the JRF's research and development programme. These findings, however, are those of the authors and not necessarily those of the Foundation. ISSN 0958-3084

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