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**Le domestique, lieu de production du politique / Le parlementarisme au prisme du modèle de Westminster : continuité, rupture, évolution**

# The 'Muslim Vote' Movement and Parliamentary Representation of Ethnic Minorities in the UK: A Critical Test for the Labour Party?

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Article publié le 15 juillet 2025.

**Donia Touihri-Mebarek**

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# Introduction

- 1 The 2024 general election is a landmark in the representation of ethnic minorities in the UK Parliament with the election of a record 90 ethnic minority MPs. This represents an increase of 24 MPs since the general election of 2019 to nearly proportionally reflect the electorate, 14% of whom are from an ethnic minority background (The British Future 2024). As the Director of British Future, Sunder Katwala, states, this progress coincides quite ironically with the end of Rishi Sunak's premiership as the first British Asian to hold the position (The British Future 2024).
- 2 While these figures signal significant progress in terms of parliamentary representation and underline political parties' efforts to select ethnic minority candidates, history evidences that political parties, including the Labour Party, have made progress in the promotion of ethnic minority representation in the House of Commons. While pursuing its strong commitment to race equality policies, the Labour Party's position on ethnic minorities' political participation was somewhat contradictory (Shukra 1990). Over the last 40 years, ethnic minority representation has been rather limited, with the election of the first four ethnic minority Labour MPs to the Commons in 1987.
- 3 By adopting a historical perspective, this article traces the evolution of ethnic minority representation in the House of Commons and analyses the mechanisms leading to a significant increase in the number of sitting ethnic minority MPs. First, this article investigates the ethnic minorities' historical allegiance to Labour and the factors that account for the inconsistency between this strong electoral alignment and minorities' lasting under-representation in the Commons. Second, it explores how the Conservatives have recently increased the number of ethnic minority MPs, seriously challenging the Labour monopoly on ethnic minority representation. Finally, considering the last 2024 general election and focusing on the Muslim Vote movement, this article emphasises how Muslims have successfully challenged and offered alternative forms of representation to mainstream political parties by presenting successful independent candidates. While both Labour and the Conservatives utilised common strategies

to increase ethnic representation, substantive representation<sup>1</sup> remains a key determinant of securing the Muslim vote.

# 1. Ethnic minorities and the Labour Party: A win-win relationship

## 1.1. The Labour Party and the 'ethnic vote'

- 4 The literature on the question of parliamentary representation highlights the very slow progress and persistent under-representation of ethnic minorities in the UK Parliament since the election of the first four ethnic minority MPs in 1987 (Messina 1989; Geddes 1998; Saggar 1990; Heath et al. 2013). This appears somewhat inconsistent with the strong popularity and party allegiance the Labour Party has historically cemented amongst ethnic minorities. In 1979, the Labour Party had already secured 86% of ethnic minority support, compared to just 8% for the Conservative Party (Saggar 2000).
- 5 Several factors contributed to the Labour Party's position as a home for ethnic minorities. The implementation of a race relations policy framework to combat discrimination and promote racial equality played a determining role in this process. Migrants' arrival in the post-war period generated significant anxiety about how immigrants could be absorbed into British society. The recession in the textile industries that employed many Asians exacerbated social problems in the 1950s. In the context of the race riots in Nottingham and Notting Hill in London in 1958, the race question became a sensitive issue for politicians. The Labour Party passed major pieces of legislation to support public order and relations between majority and minority populations (Favell 1998). The first Race Relations Act was passed in 1965 and made discrimination illegal in public spaces. The provisions of the law were expanded in 1968 to housing and employment, while the 1976 Race Relations Act outlawed indirect discrimination and established the Commission for Racial Equality with "duties to work towards the elimination of racial discrimination and to promote equal-

ity of opportunity and good relations between persons of different racial groups” (CRE 2002). The race equality agenda paved the way for the introduction of policies in the UK that were meant to safeguard ethnic minorities’ culture and religious specificities. As the application of these policies remained at the discretion of the local authorities, a kind of bargaining relationship between ethnic minorities claiming their cultural and religious rights – especially the recognition of religious diversity in education – and localities eager to secure the “ethnic vote” was established. As the former head of the Commission of Racial Community forcibly puts it:

Historically, multiculturalism as a public policy in Britain has been heavily localised, often made voluntary, and linked essentially to issues of managing diversity in areas of immigrant settlement. The legislative framework on which this policy is based – for example, the Race Relations Act (1965 and 1976) – recognised this contingency, giving additional resources to local authorities as well as new powers to better promote racial and ethnic equality. With these enabling powers, most local authorities with large ethnic minority populations have transformed themselves from initially being the bastions of official racism to being promoters of anti-racism and multiculturalism and with this change the strength of local ethnic communities and coalitions have been instrumental (in Meer 2010: 17).

- 6 The recognition of cultural and religious rights would become a major motive for the mobilisation of ethnic minorities. This, in turn, contributed to significant changes in the local political landscape as exemplified by the rise of left-led Labour councils in areas with large ethnic minority populations. Research into the early mobilisation of ethnic minorities settling in the UK shows their strong involvement in local issues through community-based organisations advocating for rights and fair treatment in the workplace and housing access. The “electoral power” of ethnic minorities, which resulted from the provisions of British citizenship as defined by the 1948 British Nationality Act, enabled them to challenge and bargain with the Labour Party. Under the terms of the British Nationality Act, the status of “Citizen of the UK and colonies” (CUKC) was created, conferring the same civil and legal rights to Commonwealth immigrants as to persons born in Britain. One of these important privileges was the right to vote: The fact that these citizens could vote in local and national elections con-

stituted a decisive tool for mobilisation, encouraging and shaping ethnic minorities' political participation (Garbaye 2005).

## 1.2. Accounting for ethnic minority under-representation in Parliament

- 7 While electoral incentives pushed the Labour Party to commit to advancing racial equality, the party remained hostile to ethnic minorities' demands for political representation and recognition (Shukra 1990). Indeed, the race relations framework militated against participation by construing ethnic minorities as "objects" of policy rather than 'actors' in the decision-making process (Crowley 1993). The responses regarding immigration and race were, at first, "bureaucratized" (Geddes 1998) and captured as one of "mutual relationship between the community leaders, the council and the Labour Party. The community leaders delivered the vote, the councils delivered the money and the Labour Party won a new layer of support" (*New Statesman and Society* quoted in Geddes 1998:165).
- 8 In addition, Asian communities' claims for cultural and religious rights were increasingly perceived by the party as a "problem" (Geddes 1998). Indeed, the party argued that the selection of ethnic minority candidates would provoke a backlash among white voters and, thus, ethnic minority candidates would be de facto vote-losers (Geddes 1998).
- 9 Patronage politics played a major role in controlling party membership and, by extension, parliamentary representation. Geddes emphasises the existence of networks of dependence and support between people in positions of power and authority and their supporters and observes that parliamentary candidate selection is "a jealously guarded local prerogative leading to centralized parties with decentralized selection" (Geddes 1998: 153).
- 10 Therefore, after mass applications to join the Labour Party were made in cities such as Birmingham in the 1980s, Labour feared that such endeavours would compromise established MPs' reselection chances. As Shukra (1990) notes, "The NEC appeared to be concerned about the knock-on effects of successful recruitment drives amongst Asian communities – namely, that they might produce unofficial

Asian block votes in the selection of parliamentary candidates.” This “ethnic entryism,” “where large increases in the number of Asian members were seen as an attempt to rig selection contests in favour of other Asian candidates” (Geddes 2001) was illustrated in 1992 when Gerald Kaufman stood down from his position as Shadow Foreign Secretary and the constituency of Manchester Gorton speculated about the potential selection of an Asian candidate at the next general election, leading to 600 Asian applications to join the Labour Party from the Gorton constituency. Ahmed Shahzad reportedly conducted this political manoeuvre to challenge Kaufman in the reselection contest. After irregularities were found, leading to the rejection of fake applications, Kaufman secured the two-thirds of nominations necessary to prevent a challenge (Geddes 1998:168).

- 11 Interestingly, research and data published by the British Candidate Study of parliamentary selections between 1987 and 1992 found that a higher proportion of ethnic minority Conservatives (2.3%) were shortlisted on the Approved List and 1.3% were selected as parliamentary candidates, whereas in the Labour Party, problems of both “supply and demand” resulted in greater under-representation of ethnic minorities (1.4% of candidates and 1.8% of MPs) despite a greater number of ethnic minority candidates and MPs within the party compared to the ethnic minority share of the Labour vote (estimated at 7.9% in 1992) (Norris, Geddes and Lovenduski 1992).
- 12 Finally, while party membership increased in concentrated ethnic minority areas, such as Bradford or Birmingham, it remained relatively low overall. Research into Labour’s membership showed that 3% of its members were from ethnic minorities in 1992 (Seyd and Whitely 1992). Social inequalities, as well as racism and discrimination, may impede political participation, especially at the national level. While ethnic minorities’ under-representation in the UK Parliament has been persistent, increased visibility has been observed at the local level, with greater numbers of councillors from ethnic minorities (Le Lohé 1998).

### **1.3. Some signs of change**

- 13 A series of developments, however, indicated a progressive shift in the Labour Party’s position on ethnic minority representation. First,

the Labour defeat in the 1979 General Election prompted a renewed interest in the ethnic vote and the Labour Party Race Action Group (LPRAG) and the National Executive Committee report *Labour and the Black Electorate* called for increased ethnic minority participation (Geddes 1998). Second, the national context of the 1980s provided opportunities to accelerate the application of these recommendations. The explosion of anger in urban areas in 1981 that *The Guardian* described as “the most frightening civil disorder ever seen in England” (in Taylor 2002: 2) gave credence to ethnic minorities’ calls for political influence which were refracted through the prism of intra-Labour Party debates at the local and national levels. By the 1980s, a younger generation took up the issue of representation and started to campaign within the Labour Party. They pressed for a Black section<sup>2</sup> to be introduced along with the Women Section – established to promote gender equality – based on the principle of self-organisation with rights of representation and nomination in parliamentary-selection contests. Fierce opposition from the Labour Party led some members – Diane Abbott, Bernie Grant, Paul Boateng, Marc Wadsworth and Sharon Atkin – to establish the unofficial national Labour Party Black Section (LPBS) in 1983, which the Labour Party refused to recognise constitutionally. The unofficial Section’s work, however, enabled the election of four ethnic minority MPs during the 1987 general election. Paul Boateng was selected from an all-black shortlist in Brent South; Diane Abbott and Bernie Grant, who had previously engaged in local politics, were selected for Hackney North and Stoke Newington and Tottenham, respectively. Keith Vaz was selected in Leicester East after strong Asian abstention from the 1983 general election (Shukra 1990:182). All of these candidates were returned in the following 1987 general election, and all substantially increased their vote share. However, Neil Kinnock’s opposition to the rising left-wing rank or “loony left” led Martha Osamor, a community activist from North London, to be vetoed as the official candidate in Vauxhall in 1989, just one year before the Labour Party finally changed its constitution and introduced the Black Socialist Society.

- 14 In 1997, nine ethnic minority MPs were returned at the general elections, all from the Labour Party, and most from areas with high ethnic populations. Of the nine elected MPs, seven represented constituencies with large ethnic populations. Until the end of the 1990s, pat-

terns of ethnic minority political representation laid bare the extent to which the question of representation was racialised and circumscribed within certain geographical areas, leading some academics to suggest a form of 'ghettoization' of minority political representation and a racialisation of politics that made minority representation claims tightly connected to constituencies with large minority populations (Geddes 1998).

- 15 Over the years, the Labour Party has gained ethnic minorities' overwhelming electoral allegiance, but this gain has been seriously challenged by Conservatives, whose strategies to increase the representation of diversity have started to pay off recently. This is the focus of the next section.

## **2. From 'nasty party' to diversity representative: The Conservative Party and ethnic minority representation**

- 16 The Labour Party's monopoly on minority representatives in the House of Commons after 1997 has undoubtedly pressured the Conservatives to tackle this deficit. While the Conservative and Labour parties presented similar numbers of ethnic minority MP candidates in 1997 (13 and 14, respectively), the Conservative Party failed to elect any of these candidates and even lost their sole ethnic minority MP, Nirj Deva, elected in 1992 in the constituency of Brentford. The Conservatives' difficulty with and failed inroads into the ethnic minority electorate have become concerns for Archie Normann, the Conservative Party's vice chairman, who, between 1997 and 1999, raised the issue to rebuild the party's grassroots base and improve the image of a party long seen as an unreasonable option for ethnic minorities (Geddes and Saggar 2000).
- 17 The 2010 general election proved a critical moment for ethnic minorities' parliamentary representation as 27 MPs with ethnic minority backgrounds were elected, compared to 16 in 2005. Of these 27 MPs, 16 were from the Labour Party and 11 from the Conservatives. Ipsos's analysis of ethnic minorities' support for the Conservative Party also

indicated that, in 2016, 30% of respondents expressed support for the party (Ipsos, 2023). This number aligns with the continuous increase in the Conservative Party's parliamentary representation of ethnic minorities; at the last general election, 16 Conservative MPs were elected. In this section, we discuss the shifting Conservative position on the question of diversity representation, from the 'nasty party' to a party with many diverse representatives.

- 18 Concern about ethnic representation in politics was formulated by MP Theresa May, who, in a famous speech as the Conservative chairwoman, explained that the party's base had narrowed to representing "Middle England" and that "as [the] country has become more diverse, [the] party has remained the same" (May 2002). After her engagement to "make Britain a country not for the privileged few, but for every one of us," Theresa May launched an audit of public services across the government, leading to the publication of the Race Disparity Audit (RDA), and published "stop and search data" demonstrating that "people from black and ethnic minority communities were seven times more likely to be stopped and searched than their white counterparts" (Home Office 2024). Although this was a welcome apparent change, the Conservative Party's position on immigration blurred the image it was pursuing among ethnic minorities. The policy of a "hostile environment" for illegal migration that Theresa May instigated as Home Secretary, involved, for example, a campaign in which mobile billboards travelled around London calling for illegal immigrants to go home or face arrest and the Windrush scandal of 2018 – with at least 83 cases of people wrongly deported from the UK by the Home Office – underline the party's complex, ambivalent position on diversity.
- 19 However, this attitude paralleled a substantial increase in the number of Conservative ethnic minority MPs. Since 2010, as a record number of incumbents were retiring, major political parties have seized the opportunity to increase the diversity of their benches (Sobolewska and Shankley 2020). Changes in candidate selection strategies by both Labour and the Conservatives in 2010 enabled substantial gains in ethnic minority representation. The centralisation of the selection process alongside recruitment external to party politics enabled both Labour and the Conservatives to overcome demand-and-supply-side problems in selecting ethnic minority candidates for vacant seats (Sobolewska 2013).

- 20 Sobolewska further notes that the 2010 election brought some significant changes in terms of diverse representation as ethnic minority candidates were selected in constituencies that were usually white seats (where the proportion of ethnic minorities accounts for less than 20% or even 10%). Efforts to increase the number of Conservative ethnic minority MPs were coupled with the selection of ethnic minority candidates in the party's best safe seats, those with predominantly white populations, showing that political parties had started to believe, as they had not before 2010, that ethnic minority MP representation should not be confined to ethnic minority communities (British Future 2024). This significantly changed representation as it ended the "racial ghettoization of ethnic minority MPs", meaning that the selection of ethnic minority candidates was no longer circumscribed to constituencies with high proportions of ethnic minorities. Not only did this shift bring the long-established link between ethnic minorities and the left into question but it also problematised the link between descriptive and substantive representation, "whereby a point of view, or interests are brought into Parliament by the representative who comes from the under-represented group her or himself" (Sobolewska 2013). In so doing, they increased the number of ethnic minority MPs within the party from two in 2005 to 11 in 2011, improving their record in just 5 years, while it took almost two decades for the Labour Party to make comparable gains (from four MPs elected in 1987 to merely 12 in 2001).
- 21 Since 2020, the Conservative Party has been committed to increasing its ethnic minority representation. The appointment of Rishi Sunak as PM gathered the party's momentum, confirming David Cameron's prediction that the Conservatives "are going to be the party of the first black or Asian prime minister" (Cameron 2015). Other prominent MPs acquired major functions in the cabinet, such as Priti Patel, Sajid Javid, Suella Braverman and Nusrat Ghani, to name but a few. However, the increase in the number of Conservative ethnic minority MPs was not accompanied by a shift in the Conservatives' attitude to diversity. Policy projects to combat illegal immigration, such as the Rwanda Bill to deport migrants to Rwanda, which Suella Braverman and Rishi Sunak defended, were harshly criticised by individuals across the political spectrum, as well as charities. In defence of the government policy project, Suella Braverman talked about the "inva-

sion” of the English Southern coast, adopting much stronger words than those of Thatcher herself, who described the country as being “swamped” by immigrants. Before her, Sajid Javid, who had actively campaigned for Brexit, implemented new policies to close Britain’s borders to people classified as unskilled workers and those who could not speak English at a certain level. The Conservative Party’s representation of diversity appears to be no more than a strategy to polish the party’s image and legitimise its restrictive immigration agenda which has been perfectly orchestrated by Home Secretaries from ethnic minority backgrounds. Two arguments have commonly been used: First, that these individuals’ experience demonstrates that the Conservative Party is the party of social mobility, and second, that their ethnic and religious backgrounds show that the Conservative Party is neither racist nor anti-Muslim. An analysis of the profiles of Conservative ethnic minority MPs elected in the 2019 general election shows that, although most of them are children of first- and second-generation immigrants, they share common features: They are predominantly male, work in the bank and finance sector, in mixed marriages that make them strongly assimilated and represent constituencies with large white populations; all qualities consistent with the attributes of the conservative elite of the so-called ‘blue wall’ (Alexandre-Collier 2023). This strategy was, however, stained by Boris Johnson’s anti-Muslim comment about Muslim women wearing burkas looking like “letterboxes” or “bank robbers” and Nusrat Ghani’s allegation that she was fired because of her religion, leading the government to launch an investigation. Baroness Sayeeda Warsi levelled similar accusations after her resignation, as the party moved to the far right, citing “hypocrisy and double standards in its treatment of different communities” (*The Guardian* 2024). High-profile allegations of discrimination within the party were given credence by the 2021 Singh Report, which affirmed the presence of discrimination and anti-Muslim views at the local association and individual levels (Singh 2021).

- 22 Given these observations, one might wonder whether the Conservatives have increased their share of the ethnic minority vote. On this question, there have been some divergent analyses and opinions. After the election results were announced, right-wing newspapers celebrated “how ethnic minorities turned Tory” (*Daily Mail* 2015), and

the think tank British Future estimated that the Conservative Party received 38% of the votes cast by ethnic minorities. However, Martin (2018) offers a more nuanced answer to the question, arguing that the Conservatives only increased their support among Hindus, which aligns with previous work finding that Hindus were more Conservative than other religious groups (Heath et al. 2013).

23 However, the 2017 and 2019 general election results showed that Labour remained the most popular party among ethnic minority voters, receiving 77% of ethnic minority votes in 2017 the election that is often characterised as the “Brexit election” (Martin and Khan 2019). This trend was confirmed at the following general election (Martin and Sobolewska 2023). Although Labour has traditionally secured the majority of votes from ethnic minorities, their support has decreased since 1997, when an estimated 80–90% of ethnic minority voters backed Labour. Among ethnic minority groups, Muslims have historically demonstrated strong support for Labour. However, the 2024 general election campaign revealed signs of erosion in this support, with the party appearing to lose ground among Muslim voters.

### **3. Substantive representation and the ‘Muslim vote’ movement: A critical test for the Labour Party?**

24 The first Muslim MP, Mohammad Sarwar, was elected in 1997, standing for the constituency of Glasgow Govan after he was elected as a Glasgow district councillor in 1992. This electoral success was confirmed the following year by the appointment of the first Muslim Life Peer in the House of Lords, Nazir Ahmed. Since then, Muslim representation has increased and Muslim candidates have traditionally represented safe seats for Labour in constituencies with high concentrations of ethnic minorities (Peace 2013), such as Bethnal Green and Bow in London, Birmingham Hodge Hill or Bradford West. In these constituencies, the Muslim population exceeds 40% of the population. At the 2024 general election, a record number of 25 Muslims were elected as MPs, up from 19 in 2019. Among those, 18 are from the Labour Party (representing almost one-third of the 66 total ethnic minority MPs), four are independents, two are from the Conser-

vative Party and one is from the Liberal Democrats. This election was characterised by a record number of first-time Muslim candidates winning parliamentary seats, such as the election of Labour MP Sadik Al-Hassan over the Conservative Liam Fox in North Somerset, ending Fox's 32-year tenure. Another significant milestone is the number of Muslims standing as independent candidates and being elected (four of five candidates), which illustrates a shift in Muslims' partisanship. This hinges on a new form of mobilisation that is occurring without the mainstream political structure and gaining importance during election campaigns. This is the focus of the final section which also presents some thoughts on how substantive representation matters to Muslims.

- 25 In the past years, relations between Labour and Muslims have been tested. Major developments have made the Labour Party much less attractive to Muslims over the past years and episodically challenged the Muslim vote, which the party has often taken for granted. For example, British foreign policy constitutes a prominent factor in polarisation. Tony Blair's decision to invade Iraq in 2002 nourished significant resentment amongst Muslims. This contributed to politicising a new generation of Muslims in Britain, resulting in the British anti-war movement and the Stop the War coalition. At the time, British foreign policy had serious repercussions in elections. In local elections in 2003, Labour suffered substantial electoral losses nationwide, losing control over Birmingham's local authority due to the "Bagdad backlash" (Peace 2013). Muslims set up the Respect Party in 2004 to defend their interests. This new political structure drastically reduced Labour's support in some areas and gained representation within both local government and the House of Commons. This was an important breakthrough for the Respect Party as minor parties are disadvantaged by the "winner takes all" voting system (Peace 2013: 300). George Galloway joined Respect and, to the surprise of many, was elected as MP for the constituency of Bethnal Green and Bow in 2005 before losing the seat in 2010 after major divisions within the party. The major electoral success achieved by Respect with Galloway's election in the 2012 by-election for the Bradford West constituency, a Labour stronghold, has shown the salience of British foreign policy for Muslims.

- 26 The context of the last general election has raised similar concerns about British foreign policy in terms of the Israeli–Palestinian conflict, which has crystallised tensions between the party and its Muslim electorate. Since Jeremy Corbyn’s leadership, Labour has tried to shift away from anti-Zionist radicalism to regain its credibility with Jews.
- 27 However, Keir Starmer’s handling of the conflict – notable for his failure to call for a cease-fire early on and assertion that Israel “has the right” to withhold power and water from Gaza –has drawn much criticism not only from Muslims but also from many Labour supporters and Britons in general who believe that he handled Labour’s response to the conflict badly (54% and 52%, respectively) (YouGov 2024). In response, various Muslim organisations set up the Muslim Vote movement, which defines itself as “a dynamic coalition of organisations and individuals, each contributing various skills expertise, and capabilities for [their] community” and has adopted the motto “Peace in Palestine. Equality in the UK. We are uniting as a community.” (The Muslim Vote 2024). This movement, according to their website, is ready to challenge political parties long-term and they ‘will no longer tolerate being taken for granted.’ The Muslim Vote has announced that the year 2024 would be a milestone that set the foundation for Muslims’ political future (Muslim Vote 2024).
- 28 Local elections functioned as a critical test for Labour. The party’s support was 8% down from previous elections in wards with Muslim populations of more than 10%. More importantly, the party lost the Oldham council and deputy leader in Manchester. Controversy also arose from his reference to Bangladesh when answering a question about the deportation of illegal migrants, leading to the resignation of the deputy leader of the Labour group on the Tower Hamlets council (BBC 2024). This issue also led to fratricidal strife within the Labour Party. In November 2023, when the Scottish National Party established a motion for a ceasefire in Gaza, despite the Labour Party ordering its MPs not to back it, 56 MPs defied their party’s orders.
- 29 Labour’s losses increased during the general election as the party lost five safe seats to independent candidates. Jonathan Ashworth, a member of Labour’s shadow cabinet, lost his Leicester South seat to independent candidate Shockat Adam, who campaigned on issues re-

lated to Gaza and in his first speech in the Commons, assured his voters that he “would speak for them in these corridors of power [...] and speak about the injustices of the world” (Hansard 2024). In Blackburn, independent candidate Adam Hussein defeated incumbent Labour MP Kate Hollern by securing a narrow majority of 132 votes. Independent candidates also made inroads in Islington North, where the former leader of the Labour Party, Jeremy Corbyn, won against Labour candidate Pratful Nargund. In Birmingham Perry Barr, Ayoub Khan won over Muslim Labour candidate Khalid Mahmood, who had been MP for 21 years, and, finally, independent candidate Iqbal Mohamed won a historic victory in Yorkshire against Labour candidate Heather Iqbal in Dewsbury and Batley.

- 30 In some safe constituencies, Labour suffered a major decline in the vote share. In the 21 constituencies where more than 30% of the population is Muslim, Labour’s share of the vote dropped by 29% from an average of 65% in 2019 to 36% in 2024 (Akhtar 2024). Analysis also reveals a loss of about 300,000 voters in the 43 constituencies with small Muslim communities (between 15% and 30% of the population) (Baston 2024). In Birmingham Ladywood, former Shadow Justice secretary Shabana Mahmood won against independent lawyer candidate Akhmed Yakoob by a majority of only 3,421, down from 32,000 (Baston 2024).
- 31 This major slump did not prevent the Labour Party from winning a landslide victory. However, the election shows a meaningful decrease in Muslim support for Labour, even when the Labour candidate was from an ethnic minority with a Muslim background, as in Birmingham Perry Barr, where the Muslim independent candidate, Ayoub Khan, won against the Muslim Labour candidate, Khalid Mahmood. The theoretical mechanism linking descriptive and substantive representation has well been established by empirical research (Sobolewska, McKee and Campbell, 1998). The election of independent Muslim candidates has tested this linkage. The Labour Party’s political stance on the Israeli–Palestinian conflict has clearly been perceived as inconsistent with Muslims’ cause, bringing Muslim Labour candidates’ ability and willingness to represent Muslim interests into question. One might argue that Khalid Mahmood’s lack of committed position on the Gaza conflict and his loyalty to the Labour political line on this matter has called his Muslimness into question. The conflict has also

raised the concept of “linked fate” (Dawson 1994). This concept posits that an individual’s sense of well-being and social standing is closely tied to the status and outcomes of their broader racial or ethnic group. This shared sense of destiny and collective fate, which encompasses socioeconomic status, among other aspects, influences voting preferences, as individuals feel that what benefits the group overall will, ultimately, benefit them personally. This does not only apply to politicians’ actions at the national level but also at the international level. For example, British Muslims are not only British citizens but also part of a worldwide community called “the umma” that invokes transnational allegiance to a community linked by faith (Archer 2009).

32 The election of independent candidates has shown how determinant the Israeli–Palestinian conflict has been for Muslims, surpassing economic or educational concerns. A survey showed that 44% of Muslim voters ranked the Gaza conflict as one of the five most important issues in the run-up to the election (Pepinster 2024). The election of independent candidates also indicates that a significant proportion of Muslims have withdrawn their loyalty from the Labour Party, whose representatives are seen as unable to defend Muslims’ interests. This breakthrough, achieved in just one general election, could well extend to other constituencies in the future. It constitutes a crucial test for the Labour Party, which cannot take the Muslim vote for granted anymore and would need to tighten the link between representative and substantive representation to preserve its historical legacy.

**Table 1. Number of MPs from ethnic minority groups elected at general elections from 1987 to 2024 by political party**

|      | Labour | Conservative | Lib Dem | SNP | Independent | Total |
|------|--------|--------------|---------|-----|-------------|-------|
| 1987 | 4      | 0            | 0       | 0   |             | 4     |
| 1992 | 5      | 2            | 0       | 0   |             | 7     |
| 1997 | 9      | 0            | 0       | 0   |             | 9     |
| 2001 | 12     | 0            | 0       | 0   |             | 12    |
| 2005 | 13     | 2            | 0       | 0   |             | 15    |
| 2010 | 16     | 11           | 0       | 0   |             | 27    |
| 2015 | 23     | 18           | 0       | 1   |             | 42    |
| 2017 | 32     | 20           | 1       | 0   |             | 53    |
| 2019 | 41     | 23           | 2       | 0   |             | 66    |

|      |    |    |   |   |   |    |
|------|----|----|---|---|---|----|
| 2024 | 66 | 15 | 5 | 0 | 4 | 90 |
|------|----|----|---|---|---|----|

33 Source: House of Commons (2023), British Future (2024)

## Conclusion

34 The 2024 general election marked a significant milestone in the political representation of the UK's ethnic diversity, with the election of 90 MPs from ethnic minority backgrounds—an indication that diversity has become the 'new norm' in British politics (British Future 2024). This development can be attributed to a combination of inter-related mechanisms. While the Labour Party did not initially aim to grant political representation to ethnic minorities, it sought to secure their votes by introducing race and identity politics. By advancing a race and equality agenda, the Labour Party positioned itself as a political home for many ethnic minorities. Furthermore, grassroots mobilisation and increased political participation among ethnic minorities played a crucial role in driving institutional change, resulting in the establishment of the Labour Party Black Section and, ultimately, the Black Socialist Society.

35 However, ethnic minority MPs have predominantly been elected in constituencies with large ethnic minority populations. This pattern of representation has been interpreted as a distinct effect of British race-related politics, although the 2010 election offered some signs of change with the election of ethnic minority candidates to "white" seats.

36 The 2024 general elections also highlighted significant polarisation of Muslim voters on the question of the United Kingdom's foreign policy, resulting in major losses for the Labour Party's vote share and the election of new independent candidates even in constituencies represented by a Muslim Labour MP. Substantive representation represents a determinant factor of Muslims' vote, and foreign policy constitutes an important concern for the Muslim community. The Muslim Vote has offered a new political opportunity for Muslims to challenge the Labour assumption that their vote is secured. Whether this movement will be short-lived like the Respect Party or it will be able to overcome Muslim intracommunity divisions will certainly de-

termine some of its future political performance, which is, for the time being, open to genuine debate.

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1 In her work *The Concept of Representation* published in 1972, Hanna Pitkin distinguishes between descriptive representation "standing for" and substantive representation "acting for". Substantive representation involves representatives "acting for" the interests and concerns of their constituents while descriptive representation refers to representatives "standing for" constituents with whom they share certain characteristics, such as race, gender or socioeconomic status.

2 The word 'black' in 'Black sections' refers to the political dimension and includes 'non-white' people and the experience of racism. The use of the term has been problematic as it makes no distinction between African-Caribbeans and Asians. For further discussion of this aspect, see, for instance, Tariq Modood, "Black, racial equality and Asian identity" in *New Community* 14, 1988, pp. 397-404.

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## English

Over the past decades, the Labour Party has cemented strong popularity and the political allegiance among ethnic minorities. However, since the election of the first four MPs with ethnic minority backgrounds in 1987, ethnic minorities' parliamentary representation has remained well below their share of the UK electorate. The 2024 general election constitutes a significant landmark in nearly redressing this imbalance. This article adopts a historical approach to determining the factors that have enabled ethnic minorities to be proportionally represented in the House of Commons. This article first analyses the dichotomy between, on the one hand, ethnic minorities' strong alignment with the Labour Party and, on the other hand, their persistent under-representation in the House of Commons. It then explores

how the Conservatives have successfully challenged the Labour Party's representation of ethnic diversity, making historic gains since the 2010 general elections. Finally, in light of the 2024 general election results and focusing on the specific case of Muslims, this article questions Muslims' political loyalty to the Labour Party. It shows how alternative forms of political mobilisation, such as the Muslim vote movement, could present a critical test for the Labour Party. Unless it shows more commitment to substantive minority representation, the Labour Party could lose its legacy in future elections.

### **Français**

Au cours des dernières décennies, le Parti travailliste a consolidé une forte popularité et l'allégeance politique des minorités ethniques. Cependant, depuis l'élection des quatre premiers députés issus de minorités ethniques en 1987, la représentation parlementaire des minorités ethniques est restée bien inférieure à leur proportion dans l'électorat britannique. Les élections générales de 2024 marquent un tournant majeur en établissant une représentation quasi-proportionnelle. Selon une approche historique, cet article identifie les facteurs ayant permis aux minorités ethniques d'être représentées de façon proportionnelle à la Chambre des Communes. Il analyse notamment la dichotomie entre, d'une part, l'alignement des minorités ethniques avec le Parti travailliste et, d'autre part, leur sous-représentation persistante à la Chambre des communes. Il explore ensuite la manière dont les Conservateurs ont réussi à concurrencer le Parti travailliste sur la question de la représentation ethnique au Parlement, en réalisant des percées historiques depuis les élections générales de 2010. Enfin, à la lumière des résultats des élections générales de 2024 et en se concentrant sur le cas spécifique des musulmans, cet article interroge leur loyauté politique envers le Parti travailliste. Il souligne que des formes alternatives de mobilisation politique, telles que le mouvement 'vote musulman', pourraient remettre en question le vote acquis des musulmans au Parti travailliste. À moins qu'il ne fasse preuve d'un plus grand engagement en faveur d'une représentation substantielle des minorités ethniques, le Parti travailliste pourrait perdre son monopole lors des prochaines élections.

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### **Mots-clés**

minorités ethniques, représentation, Parlement du Royaume-Uni de Grande-Bretagne et d'Irlande du Nord, Parti travailliste, vote musulman

### **Keywords**

ethnic minorities, representation, Parliament of the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland, Labour Party, Muslim vote

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The 'Muslim Vote' Movement and Parliamentary Representation of Ethnic Minorities in the UK: A Critical Test for the Labour Party?

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