

Electoral Coalitions and Ethnic Voting for the Labour Party: The Case of Birmingham

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Electoral Coalitions and Ethnic Voting for the Labour Party: The Case of Birmingham¹

Recent developments have placed the study of ethnic political participation high on the policy agenda in Britain. These factors include inter-communal conflict, the rise of small party alternatives such as Respect and the People's Justice Party (PJP), and a culture of political participation that is often perceived to differ in key respects from mainstream participation. Such political dynamics often reveal themselves first at local level before they become national issues. One such issue in Britain is the case of ethnic minority support for the Labour Party. A variety of ethnic minorities have over time remained loyal to Labour. However, there are suggestions that this electoral coalition is breaking down, with ethnic minorities said to be increasingly backing other party options in urban areas (Garbaye, 2005). This is important since the decline of such an ethnic electoral coalition for Labour at local level is likely to prefigure a decline of electoral support for the party among ethnic minority populations at national level.

This paper begins the process of examining the extent to which ethnic minority electoral coalitions back the Labour Party in local elections in Britain. To do so, ecological analysis of ethnic voting in local elections in one of Britain's most multi-cultural cities, Birmingham, is undertaken. By analysing ward-level electoral data and census-based ethnicity and class data, relationships between ethnicity, voting behaviour and socio-economic status are examined. Discussion proceeds in six parts. The first section highlights the importance of both community influences and the idea of voting coalitions in ethnic minority voting behaviour. The second section introduces Birmingham, outlines the ethnic and class composition of the city and outlines the city's recent political history in relation to ethnic minority representation. Part three briefly introduces the data and hypotheses being used in this analysis while the fourth and fifth sections move on to analyse the relationships between ward-level ethnicity, class and voting for Labour. The concluding section assesses the implications of these analyses for the Labour Party in both Birmingham and nationally.

Electoral Coalitions, Community Influences and Ethnic Minority Voting

This paper proceeds from two main premises. The first derives from theories of voting behaviour which examine socio-economic cleavages. The argument is that minority social groups have historically been able to do little on their own to expand their influence. Consequently, minority groups have been forced to seek coalitions with other social groups in an attempt to maximise their political influence. This can have an impact upon party strategies. Particularly where first-past-the-post electoral systems operate, parties are unlikely to be able to win a majority without appealing to a wide coalition of voters. Such electoral coalitions are not necessarily stable however. For instance, the Conservative Party's success in the 1980s and 1990s was based on an appeal to 'Middle England'. A combination of perceived party failure in office in the 1990s and the centrist campaigning strategy of the Labour Party saw this coalition break down and Labour elected in 1997. The Conservatives are still struggling to rebuild this coalition.

Three issues have been argued to be crucial to assessing the component elements of electoral coalitions and their contribution to these coalitions (Axelrod, 1972; Carlson and Hamilton, 1978; Manza and Brooks, 1999). The first is the size of the group or groups under consideration as part of the coalition. The second is the relationship between specific groups and their tendency to turnout to vote at elections. The third is variously described as ‘loyalty’ (Axelrod, 1972: 12) or ‘alignment’ (Manza and Brooks, 1999: 371). This equates to the tendency of a particular group to be aligned with, and vote for, a particular party option.

Questions of race and ethnicity have often been central to discussion of electoral coalitions. Axelrod (1972) uses ethnicity and income as two of his main independent variables when discussing electoral coalitions in American presidential elections between 1952-1968. Carlson and Hamilton (1978) similarly discuss ethnicity in their study of state elections, as do Manza and Brooks (1999) in their study of Presidential elections between 1960-1992. In urban elections, Sonenshein and Drayse (2006) forward what they call a ‘theory of minority incorporation’ in their examination of ethnic coalitions in Los Angeles Mayoral Primaries. In this model, winning representation for minorities has two strands: mobilisation of the ethnic group, combined with the patronage and backing of White liberals (Sonenshein and Drayse, 2006: 576). These electoral coalitions lead to ‘blocs’ voting in favour of one or other candidate or party. As they describe it:

For racial and ethnic minorities ... coalitions are especially poignant reminders of the need to multiply their limited political resources. Even as minority groups gain great numbers, they usually require the support of other groups to obtain the political resources needed to win a share of urban power (Sonenshein and Drayse, 2006: 571).

Sonenshein and Drayse (2006: 579-580) outline five potential ethnic coalitions. The first is a ‘coalition of colour’. This assumes that non-white groups have largely common attitudes derived from their experience as ethnic minorities. This is akin to the ‘ethnicity counts’ perspective noted in British studies of ethnic voting (Saggar and Heath, 1999: 102-103; Sobolewska, 2005b: 198-199). The second is an alliance with liberal whites. Here, political attitudes between liberal whites and ethnic minorities are similar and consequently an electoral alliance between both groups voting the same way can be discerned. The third type is ‘independent power politics’. In this model, minorities are numerous enough on their own and have enough mobilisation potential for coalitions with other social groups to be unnecessary. Model four relates to alliances of immigrant communities where, in Los Angeles, Latinos and Asian Americans might find themselves aligned against non-immigrant Whites and African Americans. Finally, a coalition between conservative native whites might exist with immigrant communities who share essentially conservative values.

The second premise is that, although the national level is often most prominent in discussions of electoral coalitions, it is at the local level that changes in these coalitions often first appear (Carlson and Hamilton, 1978: 290). Indeed, community-based explanations are among the key theories of voting behaviour. For instance, in Dunleavy and Husbands’ (1985: 18-20) ‘radical model’, vote choice is determined by community influences and perceptions of group interests derived from perceptions of social inequalities and conflicts of interests. The role of the local community is crucial in ethnic minority participation, not least because ethnic minorities tend to be

geographically concentrated in certain areas (Anwar, 2001: 534-535; Saggar, 1997a: 694; Sonenshein and Drayse, 2006: 577). In Britain, the Electoral Commission (2002: 47-48; also Sobolewska, 2005a) highlight the importance of community influences, particularly in relation to economic, social and political segregation, on voting and non-voting amongst minority populations.

Although comprehensive data is rare, these community influences have had an impact on how ethnic voting behaviour has been researched in Britain. Anwar (2001), for example, surveyed five parliamentary constituencies in his 1997 study.² In an attempt to mitigate the problem of achieving a representative sample of ethnic minorities in a national election study, the 1997 British Election Study (BES) ran an ethnic minority booster sample. This used techniques of ethnic screening in areas of high ethnic concentration, and utilised 'next-door' screening near addresses selected using the first technique (Saggar and Heath, 1999: 123; Sobolewska, 2005: 201-202).³

Four main findings have been evident in ethnic voting studies in Britain. The first is the overwhelming support that the Labour Party has had from minorities. For instance, Saggar (1997b: 26) observes that the proportion of minorities supporting Labour was around four-fifths in each of the general elections between October 1974 and 1997. The notable exception was 1987, in which ethnic minorities' support for Labour fell to 72 per cent, but this increased to 81 per cent in 1992. Messina (1997: 51) details poll-based voting preferences of ethnic minorities between 1983-1997; Afro-Caribbeans consistently supported Labour with between 85-88 per cent indicating their support for the party, while between 67-81 per cent of Asians also indicated a preference for Labour. As Messina (1997: 51) put it 'ethnic minorities are ... a political bloc that is firmly wedded to the Labour Party during good political times and bad'. Moreover, Labour benefits from social structural factors such as the concentrated geography of minorities, particularly in lower class areas (Messina, 1997: 60).

The second finding has been the failure of other parties to be able to tap into the ethnic minority vote. A number of authors investigate the idea that as Asian values are perceived to be relatively conservative, there could be an opportunity for the Conservative Party to attract Asian votes to the party. Saggar (1997a: 699-700) for instance notes that the Conservative Party made a specific appeal to Asian voters in the 1997 general election, which was largely unsuccessful. Similarly, Sobolewska (2005b) points out that social conservatism is no barrier to Labour identification for ethnic minorities. This suggests that the Conservative task of attracting minorities is a Sisyphean-like uphill struggle. While the Liberal Democrats are perceived to have a good record with policies favourable to minorities, Messina (1997: 57-58) notes that the party has suffered from being organisationally weak in the areas where minorities are concentrated. This in turn has meant that the Liberal Democrats have not been able to effectively communicate their record to minority groups that might prove sympathetic. Nevertheless, some continue to hint at the potential for Asian voters to defect from Labour (Anwar, 2001: 538; Saggar and Heath, 1999: 112).

The third set of findings relates to differential participation rates within ethnic minority groups. A number of authors note that black registration, intention to vote and turnout rates are considerably lower than those of Asians (for instance: Anwar, 2001: 535-536; Layton-Henry and Studlar, 1985; Saggar and Heath, 1999: 107). Thus, in the 1997 general election turnout rates for Afro-Caribbean groups were around 10 per cent lower than for Indian and Pakistani groups, and around 6 per cent lower than for Bangladeshis (Saggar and Heath, 1999: 107). Nevertheless, Layton-Henry and Studlar (1985: 311-312) argue that this does not mean that Afro-Caribbean

groups are not interested in politics. Instead they note ‘the paradox that the group least likely to vote (blacks) participate more than whites and Asians in ... other respects’. These include talking about politics with others.

The final set of findings relates to the relationship between voting behaviour and traditional social structural variables such as class, education, and belonging to an ethnic minority. The argument is between those who suggest that ethnicity has an effect on voting independent of other socio-economic and attitudinal variables, dubbed the ‘ethnicity counts’ school, and those who suggest that ethnic political agendas are similar to those of the white population both in terms of socio-economic and attitudinal variables. These arguments are set out in detail in, for instance, Saggar and Heath (1999), Messina (1997) and Sobolewska (2005a; 2005b). The issue is that if ethnicity is more important than traditional social structural and attitudinal variables, then ethnic minorities cannot be said to be fully integrated into the sources of British political difference (Saggar and Heath, 1999: 103). As Sobolewska (2005a: 26) puts it, although the ethnic political agenda may not be separate from the white agenda, nevertheless ‘it seems that race is a dividing line and cannot be reduced to other factors of political choice, in fact it may distort the way traditional cleavages affect party allegiance’. Similar findings have been forwarded by Messina (1997: 49-50) and Saggar and Heath (1999: 113-114) although Saggar and Heath also argue that class seems to divide Black and Asian voters in a similar way as it does whites with Labour voting lower in the salariat and petty bourgeoisie, and around the same in the working class categories.

Birmingham: Community Concentration and Pluri-Ethnic Politics?

Governed by a single authority and as one of Britain’s most multi-cultural cities, Birmingham is ideal for studying urban ethnic minority electoral coalitions. The 2001 census shows that 29.7 per cent of Birmingham’s population comes from a non-white background comprising either mixed, asian, black or other ethnic groups. This compares with a national average for England of 9.1 per cent. Birmingham also derives 13.4 per cent of its population from non-EU countries, compared with 6.9 per cent for England as a whole.⁴

Based on 2001 census data and the post-2004 ward boundaries, table 1 breaks Birmingham’s 40 wards down by the proportion of ethnic minorities found in them. Ethnic minority populations are concentrated in nine inner-city wards: Aston, Bordesley Green; Handsworth Wood; Lozells and East Handsworth; Nechells; Soho; Sparkbrook; Springfield; and Washwood Heath. With only Nechells below 60 per cent, proportions of ethnic minorities are considerably higher than in 1991 (Garbaye, 2005: 99-103). With more than four-fifths of the population coming from ethnic minority groups, Lozells and East Handsworth both tops the list and continues the lengthy history of the Handsworth area and its minority communities. In each of these nine wards, the idea of ethnic groups as minorities is clearly challenged. Although different ethnicities are represented in each, and therefore essentially remain minorities in relation to the total population, the non-white population is a clear majority in each ward. In two wards, Handsworth Wood and Soho, the Indian community represents more than 20 per cent of the population, while in six wards the Black Caribbean community represents more than 10 per cent (Aston, Handsworth Wood, Ladywood, Lozells and East Handsworth, Nechells, and Soho). By contrast, the Pakistani community forms more than half of the population in Bordesley Green and Washwood Heath, and represents more than twenty per cent in Aston, Lozells and

East Handsworth, and Springfield. Extrapolations from current trends suggest that Birmingham will become a ‘majority-minority city’, in other words the majority of citizens will belong to ethnic minority groups, by 2011 (Guardian, 2006).

Table 1: Proportion of ethnic minorities in the ward population, by alphabetical order of wards.⁵

Ward	%	Ward	%	Ward	%
Acocks Green	19.58	Kingstanding	10.06	Soho	73.20
Aston	76.46	Ladywood	39.98	South Yardley	30.30
Bartley Green	9.63	Longbridge	6.86	Sparkbrook	79.86
Billesley	11.87	Lozells & E. Handsworth	82.60	Springfield	66.39
Bordesley Green	71.07	Moseley & Kings Heath	31.17	Stetchford & Yardley	14.69
Bournville	9.92	Nechells	56.47	Stockland Green	24.71
Brandwood	12.65	Northfield	5.51	Sutton Four Oaks	4.85
Edgbaston	31.84	Oscott	9.38	Sutton New Hall	6.56
Erdington	11.03	Perry Bar	28.21	Sutton Trinity	5.03
Hall Green	23.00	Quinton	14.52	Sutton Vesey	6.45
Handsworth Wood	67.36	Selly Oak	16.98	Tyburn	14.41
Harborne	21.98	Shard End	8.12	Washwood Heath	73.22
Hodge Hill	20.82	Sheldon	6.00	Weoley	9.65
Kings Norton	6.64				

Source: Birmingham City Council. Wards with more than 40 per cent are highlighted in bold.

As noted earlier, class is often closely associated with ethnic minority participation since minority populations often move into and are concentrated in some of the more deprived areas in cities. Table 2 indicates that many of Birmingham’s areas of high ethnic concentration are also often those where lower status workers and the unemployed are concentrated. Although twenty-three of the city’s wards have more than 30 per cent of their population either unemployed or falling into the routine or semi-routine occupational category, those wards with high proportions of ethnic minorities tend to have much greater proportions of people falling into these lower class occupations. Indeed, with the exception of Handsworth Wood and Nechells, all these wards have more than 40 per cent with lower class occupations, with more than half of Washwood Heath’s population falling into this category.

Birmingham’s recent political history suggests that ethnic minorities have nevertheless been able to take advantage of geographical concentration (Anwar, 2001; Garbaye, 2005: Ch. 4). Combined with the first-past-the-post electoral system used for local elections and relatively minority-friendly policies, Garbaye (2005: Ch. 4) argues that Birmingham has had a relatively open political opportunity structure through which minority groups could gain representation. During the 1980s, this was supplemented by left-right divisions within the ruling Labour Party, with the right of the party seeking to ‘co-opt’ minorities, who were already sympathetic to the party largely because of their class location, as part of ongoing internal conflict for control of the party. Such a process of ‘co-optation’ helped build a ‘multi-ethnic coalition’ for

Table 2: Proportion of lower class and unemployed in the ward population, by alphabetical order of wards.⁶

Ward	%	Ward	%	Ward	%
Acocks Green	33.65	Kingstanding	38.38	Soho	42.38
Aston	46.03	Ladywood	31.57	South Yardley	37.31
Bartley Green	34.21	Longbridge	33.25	Sparkbrook	47.27
Billesley	31.80	Lozells & E. Handsworth	45.24	Springfield	41.75
Bordesley Green	45.87	Moseley & Kings Heath	21.36	Stetchford & Yardley	33.57
Bournville	23.95	Nechells	39.59	Stockland Green	30.92
Brandwood	28.36	Northfield	29.30	Sutton Four Oaks	12.92
Edgbaston	14.20	Oscott	31.39	Sutton New Hall	16.32
Erdington	29.58	Perry Bar	27.65	Sutton Trinity	18.69
Hall Green	23.34	Quinton	26.12	Sutton Vesey	14.63
Handsworth Wood	30.15	Selly Oak	14.00	Tyburn	36.07
Harborne	16.88	Shard End	38.56	Washwood Heath	50.51
Hodge Hill	35.78	Sheldon	29.97	Weoley	29.93
Kings Norton	32.87				

Source: Birmingham City Council. Wards with more than 40 per cent ethnic minority populations and 30 per cent lower class and unemployed people are highlighted in bold.

Labour and encouraged a process of minority incorporation. For instance, Garbaye (2005: 108) points to there being only two ethnic minority councillors in Birmingham in 1979. This increased steadily through the 1980s and 1990s reaching 14 in 1986, 18 in 1989, 19 in 1991 and 21 in 1993, 21 in 1994, 20 in 1998 and 22 in 2000 (Anwar, 2001: 547). The bulk of these councillors represented Labour. Indeed, Labour's domination of Birmingham City Council from 1984 proceeded in parallel with the expansion of ethnic minority candidates standing for election from 1986 onwards (Garbaye, 2005: 111). Labour reached a high of 85 councillors out of 117 in 1996-7. This has declined steadily giving the party 77 councillors in 2000-1, 68 in 2002, 53 in 2004 and 44 in 2006. Garbaye (2005: 141-142) attributes this both to the Liberal Democrats being able to effectively appeal to ethnic minorities, and to the onset of what he calls the ethnic minority 'community politics' model of participation. This relates to the decreasing degree of patronage from Labour Party elites, and the ability of minorities to exploit resources and opportunities the party and their communities provide. His 'community politics' model therefore refers to minority communities which do not necessarily need the support of any mainstream party to win elections, hence the rise of options such as the PJP. In short, the ethnic minority electoral coalition that maintained Labour in office through the 1980s and 1990s in Birmingham is claimed to be breaking down. If so, this should be a serious concern for party strategists at both local and national level, particularly since the party lost considerable ground nationally in the 2006 local elections (Rallings and Thrasher, 2006a).

Data and Hypotheses

Electoral data from each of Birmingham's 40 council wards are deployed here alongside a range of ward-level socio-economic variables. The ward-level electoral data from 2004 and 2006 local elections includes turnout, the size of the ward electorate, the number of votes and vote share for Labour candidates in each ward. Socio-economic variables are sourced from census 2001 and include all categories of ethnicity, and socio-economic variables such as age structure, housing tenure, national statistics socio-economic classification, and education.⁷ Three potential hypotheses will be tested. These are that:

1. The electoral coalition backing Labour across Birmingham is not a 'coalition of colour', but a coalition of ethnic minorities and white voters;
2. Support for Labour among ethnic minorities is in decline;
3. Relationships between ethnicity and voting Labour remain strongest even when class and other socio-economic variables are introduced.

Ecological analysis runs the risk of being criticised on the grounds of ecological fallacy. In other words, community-level analysis tells researchers nothing about individual voting intentions. Extrapolations from ecological data therefore must be treated with some caution and not interpreted at the individual level. Nevertheless, community explanations for voting remain important and have advantages over individual voter surveys. Sonenshein and Drayse (2006: 582) argue that:

surveys have significant limitations in a city with a large, diverse electorate ... Surveys are subject to statistical problems in inferring group behaviour from individual-level sample data, including sampling errors and the reliability of self-reported data. They are very problematic in trying to understand social phenomena occurring across numerous spatial districts.

By contrast, ward-level data allow the environmental context to be assessed and do not include self-reported recall data. Indeed, in their report on ethnic minority voting and non-voting, the Electoral Commission (2002: 50) note that 'there is a need to do more research on what people do rather than what they say they do'. Along with others (Ranney, 1962; Rallings and Thrasher, 1999: 154), they explicitly point to examining actual election results as a way of doing so. Analysis of such data therefore provides an important additional piece of information to what is currently known about ethnic voting in Britain.

The two elections under discussion differ in one crucial way. The 2004 election was an 'all out' contest where the three seats in each of the 40 wards were contested at the same time. In 2006, the same 40 wards were also contested, but this was an 'election by thirds'. In other words, only one seat was up for election in each ward. This method of local government election is common across England. The two elections are comparable however, since the full registered electorate in each ward was eligible to vote in both sets of elections. Table 3 reports the aggregate electoral picture in Birmingham across the two elections, with the Conservatives, Labour and 'Others' benefiting in 2006 at the expense of the Liberal Democrat, Green and Independent vote.

Table 3: Birmingham City Council Aggregate Local Election Vote Share (Per Cent), 2004-2006.

	2004	2006	+/-
Conservative	23.9	26.1	2.2
Labour	28.5	31.5	3.0
Liberal Democrat	24.2	22.4	-1.8
Green	8.6	4.9	-3.7
Independent	2.7	0.5	-2.2
Other	12.1	14.7	2.6
Turnout	37.8	36.5	-1.3

Sources: Rallings and Thrasher, 2004; 2006b.

Labour Voting: An Ethnic-White Coalition?

The first hypothesis to be examined is whether or not the electoral coalition backing Labour across Birmingham is what Sonenshein and Drayse (2006: 579-580) call a 'coalition of colour', or whether it is comprised of an alliance between white and ethnic minority voters? A second, related area of interest is to what extent different ethnic communities can be said to be voting for Labour.

These questions can begin to be assessed through regression analysis. This establishes the relationship between each ethnic group and Labour voting while also allowing for the relative impact of each group to be controlled for. The method used is ordinary least squares. The dependent variable is the share of the electorate achieved by the Labour Party in each ward in the 2004 and 2006 local elections in Birmingham. Denver and Hands (1997: 276-278) argue that this a more appropriate measure than voteshare. This is because parties are actually trying to maximise their share of the electorate, which includes new voters, previous abstainers, those who have moved to the constituency and so on. Moreover, it also provides a control for turnout; voteshare is dependent on the actual number of people who voted, not those who were eligible to vote. As the 2004 local elections in Birmingham were marked by serious postal vote fraud in the Aston and Bordesley Green wards (Stewart, 2006), data for 2004 are run twice, once with the affected wards included, and a second time with these wards excluded. The independent variables derive from census 2001 ethnicity data and represent the proportion of each ethnic group present in each ward. In order to provide as much detail as possible on different ethnic groups, including many that it has not been possible to include in previous research such as mixed race and Chinese, all non-White categories of ethnicity are entered in their original census categories.⁸ Thus, Asian categories are disaggregated into Indian, Pakistani, Bangladeshi and other, while Black categories include Caribbean, African and other. Following Sonenshein and Drayse (2006: 585), the stability of electoral coalitions is assessed by comparing standardised regression coefficients.

Table 4 presents an initial view of the relationship between Labour voting and ethnicity in the 2004 and 2006 elections across Birmingham. The first thing to observe is that few of the relationships are statistically significant. Based on standard measures of significance of .05 and .01, only the negative relationships between the proportion of the Asian other group in the ward and the Labour share of the electorate in 2004 is statistically significant at the .05 level, while the relationship between the proportion of mixed White/Black African and the Labour share of the electorate is positive and significant at the .01 level when the two wards affected by postal vote

Table 4: Ethnicity and Labour share of the ward electorate in the 2004 and 2006 Birmingham local elections

	2004	2004 (excl. Aston & Bordesley Green)	2006
White British ⁹	1.142	1.495	2.770
Mixed White/Black Caribbean	-.233	.071	.197
Mixed White/Black African	.333*	.521***	.253
Mixed White/Asian	.189	-.167	.019
Mixed Other	-.081	.155	.543
Indian	.518	.885	1.277
Pakistani	1.322	1.731*	2.675*
Bangladeshi	.089	-.211	.403
Asian Other	-.517**	-.509**	-.634*
Black Caribbean	-.525	-.454	.333
Black African	.335	-.444	-.825
Black Other	1.055*	.900	.371
Chinese	-.323	-.106	.141
Other ethnic group	0.49	.534*	.344
R ²	.542	.462	.729

* p<0.10, ** p<0.05, *** p<0.01.

fraud in 2004 are excluded. This lack of statistical significance is to some degree unsurprising since there are only 40 wards in Birmingham. Such a small N means that significance is much harder to achieve than in a study with a large N, such as an election study.

Relaxing the assumptions of statistical significance slightly to .10 underlines the pattern of significance in relation to Pakistani and Asian other groups however. In both the 2004 election with Aston and Bordesley Green excluded and 2006 the relationship between Labour voting and the proportion of Pakistanis in the ward is significant at the .10 level. Similarly, the negative relationship between the Asian other group and Labour voting also remains significant, albeit at the slightly lower level of significance of .10. This notwithstanding, the strength and direction of the coefficients provide the main pointer towards the development of ethnic groups voting for the Labour Party in Birmingham.

Across Birmingham, the data appear to confirm the first hypothesis by pointing to the existence of an electoral coalition between ethnic minority groups and white voters who support Labour. The two strongest sets of relationships are between the proportion of white British and Labour's share of the electorate, and between the proportion of the Pakistani population and the Labour vote. In both cases, the strength of the relationship has strengthened considerably between 2004 and 2006, and this is significant at the .10 level in both the 2004 election with the postal vote fraud wards excluded and in 2006. The relationship between the proportion of Indian people in the ward and Labour voting also strengthened between 2004 and 2006. Similarly, the relationship between proportions of Bangladeshi and Labour voting has increased between the two elections, going from a negative relationship in the 2004 election

with the postal voting fraud wards excluded, to a mid-range positive coefficient in 2006. Where the relationship between Asian populations and Labour voting is weak however is in the Asian Other category; this is a consistently, and increasingly, negative relationship in all three variations of election and is statistically significant in both of the 2004 models and at the .10 level in 2006. It suggests that this is one community that Labour must try harder to attract.

With Black communities, the evidence points in different ways. A negative relationship between Black Caribbean populations and Labour voting in 2004 has strengthened to become a positive relationship in 2006. With both Black African and Black Other populations and Labour voting, the direction of travel is in the opposite direction. The relationship between proportions of Black Africans and Labour voting points in different ways depending on the 2004 election used as the base; with the fraudulent wards included the relationship is positive, while with those wards excluded it is a negative one. Regardless of this, in 2006 the relationship is strongly negative. With Black Other populations, the relationship with Labour voting remains positive but appears to have weakened between the two contests.

Other ethnic groups display different patterns. Although the Mixed White/Black Caribbean and Mixed White Asian categories have relatively weak coefficients, the Mixed White/Black African category is consistently positively related to Labour voting. This is statistically significant at the .01 level in the 2004 election with Aston and Bordesley Green excluded and at the .10 level with these wards included. Similarly the direction of travel between the Mixed Other, Chinese and Other Ethnic Group categories would all seem to be in a positive and strengthening direction.

In relation to the second hypothesis that ethnic minorities are decreasingly voting for Labour, Garbaye's (2005: Ch. 4) argument that the relationship between ethnic minorities and Labour voting is breaking down in Birmingham, particularly with Asian communities, is not wholly supported in the 2004 and 2006 rounds of local elections when solely examining ethnicity and Labour voting. Indeed, the main three Asian categories, Indian, Pakistani and Bangladeshi, exhibit increasingly strong relationships with Labour voting across the 2004 and 2006 local elections. Only with the Asian other category is the relationship consistently negative. By contrast, with Black groups, it is only the Black Caribbean community that have strengthening relationships with Labour, while Black African and Black other communities appear to have weakening relationships. Research by Fieldhouse and Cutts (2005: 83) into the Liberal Democrats in the 2005 general election lends tentative support to this preliminary finding. Echoing Garbaye, they note that the Liberal Democrats hoped to benefit amongst Labour voting Asian and Muslim communities by their anti-war stance. While the Liberal Democrats did make some inroads, this was far from universal however. As Fieldhouse and Cutts (2005: 83) point out the impact of the Muslim vote for the party 'was always likely to be marginal', not least because Labour was, over a long period of time, the dominant party in areas of ethnic minority concentration where loyalties to the party were heavily entrenched.

Ethnic Minority Voting, Class and Socio-Economic Status

As noted above, a major argument in the literature on ethnic minority voting is whether or not ethnicity has an effect independent of the standard socio-economic variables associated with voting behaviour. British national level election surveys such as the BES suggest that it does (for instance, Saggat and Heath, 1999;

Sobolewska, 2005a). What evidence does ward-level data from local elections in Birmingham provide?

Construction of measures which tap socio-economic phenomena is difficult. This is partly because there are few universally accepted definitions of these concepts. It is also because most researchers have little or no influence upon the content of large surveys. They therefore have little choice but to construct measures from data which has been collected by others for different purposes (Heath and Martin, 1997). This applies equally to the socio-economic census categories used here; many differ from measurements found in existing analysis of voting behaviour. Some of the classifications used here are therefore necessarily 'ad hoc' (Sobolweska, 2005a; 2005b). They are nevertheless grounded as much as possible in the existing literature on voting behaviour.

Many attempts to measure class are derived from respondents' occupational status (for discussion see: Evans, 1999: 8-11; Heath et al., 1985, Ch. 2). Census 2001 utilises categories based on the National Statistics socio-economic classification. The categories measure the proportion of people in each ward falling into twelve occupational groups. These are: large employers and higher managerial; higher professional; lower managerial and professional; intermediate; small employers and own account workers; lower supervisory and technical; semi-routine; routine; never worked; long-term unemployed; full-time students; and not classifiable.

A variety of classifications have been used to measure class in the ethnic minority literature. Layton-Henry and Studlar (1985), for instance, deploy the ABC1, C2, DE categorisation of class. More recently, Saggat and Heath (1999) utilise a five-category schema of salariat, routine non-manual, petty bourgeoisie, foremen and skilled manual and semi and unskilled manual. Sobolewska (2005a: 8) uses the similar Goldthorpe-Heath classification of salariat, routine non-manual, petty bourgeoisie, routine manual, skilled/semi-skilled and unskilled workers. One difficulty with such a schema, as Heath et al. (1985: 16) point out, is that in some cases these categories have to be grouped in order to make large enough groups to undertake analysis with.

Bearing this in mind, this paper deploys three categories to measure occupational class. The salariat variable is constructed from the census categories of large employers and higher managerial, higher professional, and lower managerial and professional people in each ward. The intermediate category comprises the intermediate census category, added to the small employers and own account workers and lower supervisory and technical occupations. The routine category is constructed from the semi-routine and routine occupation census categories. These new variables are based on the proportion of people in each category.

With housing tenure, the argument has been between the effect of home ownership and council tenancy on voting behaviour (for instance see: Heath et al. 1985, Ch. 4), with council tenancy thought to be an indicator of Labour voting. By contrast, Saggat and Heath (1999: 117-118) found a close relationship between both council tenants and home owning minority groups and voting Labour. More recently, the decline of council tenancies due to right to buy legislation has necessitated a new category of 'social renters' to tap into those who either rent from the local authority, or from bodies such as housing associations (Denver and Hands, 2004: 531). Census 2001 offers seven categories of housing tenure: owns outright; owns with a mortgage or loan; shared ownership; council rented; housing association/social landlord rented; private landlord; and other. Two categories have been created for this paper. The owner variable includes the proportion who own outright, have a mortgage or loan or

some sort of shared ownership, while the social renter variable comprises council and housing association tenants.¹⁰

Fieldhouse and Cutts (2005: 83) point to the role minority community elders in guiding party loyalties. However, it is conceivable that younger age groups within minorities have become more radical and anti-Labour than their elders. The ethnic minority age cohort within a ward may therefore be an important factor related to Labour voting, with younger groups having a weaker relationship to Labour than older age groups. The proportion of the ward population falling into three age groups is deployed here. The age groups are 18-29, 30-59, and aged 60 plus.

Finally, education is also a key indicator of socio-economic status and voting behaviour (for instance: Heath et al., 1985: Ch. 5). Saggar and Heath (1999: 118) tentatively found a negative relationship between degree level qualifications and ethnic minority Labour voting in the 1997 general election. This paper deploys two educational categories; intermediate comprises census categories of level 1, 2 and 3 qualification, while degree level qualifications relate to those with level 4 and 5 qualifications in the ward.

Table 5: Ethnicity, Socio-economic status and Labour share of the ward electorate in the 2004 and 2006 Birmingham local elections

	2004	2004 (excl. Aston & Bordesley Green)	2006
White British	11.863***	10.910***	8.666*
Mixed White/Black Caribbean	.732*	.830*	.786
Mixed White/Black African	.642***	.651***	.416
Mixed White/Asian	-.330	-.603**	-.486
Mixed Other	1.295***	1.400***	1.232*
Indian	3.812***	3.955***	3.144**
Pakistani	7.147***	6.605***	5.809**
Bangladeshi	2.392***	1.724***	1.735*
Asian Other	-.618**	-.359	-.660
Black Caribbean	.283	.617	.707
Black African	.224	-.807*	-.970
Black Other	1.052**	.660	.317
Chinese	1.153***	1.072**	1.098
Other ethnic group	-.301	.277	.119
Salariat	-3.989***	-4.652***	-2.418
Intermediate Occ.	1.057*	.773	.535
Routine	-.921*	-.573	-.657
18-29	-.562	1.040	.086
30-59	.531	1.561*	.641
60+	.097	.559*	.085
Degree	1.770*	2.654**	.860
Intermediate Quals.	-.884***	-1.014***	-.917
Owner	-.714	1.067	-.272
Social Renter	-2.058	-.348	-1.086
R ²	.738	.710	.853

* p<0.10, ** p<0.05, *** p<0.01.

Table 5 reports the results of an OLS regression of these ethnicity and socio-economic independent variables against the share of the electorate achieved by Labour in Birmingham in the 2004 and 2006 elections. 2004 is again run twice, once with the postal voting fraud wards included, and the second time with them excluded.

The first thing to note is that the model demonstrates a relatively good fit with each election with R^2 values of between .710 for the 2004 election with Aston and Bordesley Green excluded and .853 in 2006. These models of ward-level Labour voting therefore have some explanatory value. The second noteworthy aspect of table 5 is that the pattern of statistical significance is more widespread with socio-economic variables introduced into the analysis. Across the three election models, this is most evident in relation to Asian communities. The relationship between the proportion of both Indian and Pakistani people and Labour voting is positive and significant at the .01 level in both 2004 models and at the .05 level in 2006. Similarly, the proportion of Bangladeshis in the ward is positive and significant at the .01 level in both 2004 elections, although this declines to significance at the lower .10 level in 2006. A similar pattern is apparent for both the White British and the Mixed Other categories across all three election models. The Chinese category also demonstrates significance in the two 2004 models at the .01 and .05 levels respectively, and the strength of the Chinese coefficient remains at broadly the same level in 2006. By contrast, socio-economic variables only achieve significance in the two 2004 election models. The key independent class variable in this respect is salariat. This is strongly negatively related to Labour voting in the two 2004 elections, more so in the model with the fraudulent postal voting wards excluded, and this is significant at the .01 level. Similarly both categories of education exhibit a significant relationship with Labour voting. Degree level qualifications are positively related to Labour voting, with this being significant at the .05 level when the postal vote fraud wards are excluded. The proportion of people with intermediate level qualifications is however negatively related to Labour voting, in both cases at the .01 level.

In relation to strength and direction of the standardised beta coefficients, the socio-economic variables contain a number of insights into the ecology of Labour voting in Birmingham. Both the proportion of the salariat in a ward, and the proportion of routine workers is consistently negatively related to Labour voting, while the relationship between Labour voting and intermediate occupations is consistently positive albeit to a decreasing degree. The 30-59 age category would appear to have a consistently stronger positive relationship across all three models with voting Labour than either of the other two categories. With all categories of age, the relationships are strongest when the electoral fraud wards are excluded. Education is discussed above in relation to 2004. The direction of the coefficients remain the same, positive for degree level qualifications, negative for intermediate qualifications, in 2006 although neither coefficient is significant. Finally, the pattern related to housing tenure and Labour voting is unclear; with the exception of home-owning and the 2004 postal fraud election, both categories demonstrate negative relationships with Labour voting. None of these coefficients are significant however and further research into tenure and voting in local elections will be necessary to establish the dynamics at work here.

The third hypothesis however was that relationships between ethnicity and voting Labour remain strongest even when class and other socio-economic variables are introduced into the analysis. In line with existing analyses of this question (for instance: Saggar and Heath, 1999; Sobolewska, 2005a), the results reported in table 5 suggest that this hypothesis is confirmed by ward-level data in the 2004 and 2006

Birmingham elections. Indeed, particularly with the Indian, Pakistani and Bangladeshi categories, but also with the Mixed Other, Chinese and Mixed White/Black African variables, the coefficients are considerably stronger in this more comprehensive model than they are when only ethnicity and the Labour share of the electorate is considered. Moreover, the other categories of ethnicity, on the whole, display similar strength relationships in this socio-economic and ethnicity model to the earlier ethnicity only model reported in table 4. In other words, the ecological analysis used in this paper has confirmed the findings from earlier studies based on individual-level election study data. Ethnicity does matter in local elections and, with Labour voting in Birmingham in 2004 and 2006, had an effect independent of the standard socio-economic variables used to explain voting behaviour in Britain. Despite bearing in mind that individual level behaviour cannot be inferred from this finding, this is nevertheless important since, as Saggar and Heath (1999: 103) argue,

[i]f the influence of factors such as class, age and education is outstripped by ethnicity, then ... ethnicity continues to be a major cleavage in British electoral behaviour. Members of the ethnic minorities cannot therefore be adequately described as integrated fully into the sources of political difference found in the white population. The theoretical ramifications of such a characterisation are far-reaching and not easily dismissed.

Returning to hypothesis one, what impact has the introduction of socio-economic variables had on the electoral coalition voting Labour in the 2004 and 2006 local elections? Hypothesis one related to whether the electoral coalition backing Labour was solely a 'coalition of colour', or whether it was an electoral alliance with white voters. Table 5 demonstrates that this coalition essentially retains the shape that it did when the ethnicity variables were assessed in table 4. In other words, it remains a coalition between the ethnic minority and white communities, albeit to differing degrees. The proportion of white voters in the ward is strongly related to Labour voting, and these coefficients are significant at the .01 level in both 2004 versions, and at the lower .1 level in 2006. As noted above, the ethnic backbone of this coalition is Asian communities, particularly Indian, Pakistani and Bangladeshi. The exception to this remains the Asian Other category, which remains negatively related to Labour voting. Echoing previous findings (for instance: Anwar, 2001: 535-536; Layton-Henry and Studlar, 1985; Saggar and Heath, 1999: 107), Black communities are less strongly related to Labour voting than Asian communities. Despite this, while the Black African and Black Other categories portray similar patterns to that found in table 4, the Black Caribbean community now has consistently and increasingly strong and positive relationship with the Labour vote in the ward.

Is, as Garbaye (2005: Ch.4) and hypothesis two suggest, Labour voting in decline in ethnic minority communities in Birmingham? Controlling for socio-economic variables would suggest that, although not universal, there are signs of weakening relationships between Labour voting and some ethnic communities. Of the fourteen ethnic independent variables, seven can be argued to have weakened, five appear to be of similar strength in 2006 as they were in 2004, and two demonstrate a strengthening relationship.¹¹ Thus, the mixed White/Black, mixed White/Asian, Indian, Pakistani, Black African and Black Other categories all demonstrate weakening relationships. This is particularly important with the Indian and Pakistani communities; both results are statistically significant at the .01 level in the 2004 models and the .05 level in 2006. This weakening also appears large, if not

statistically significant, in the Black African and Black Other communities. However, it is not just ethnic minorities that the relationship with Labour voting is weakening in. As might befit a coalition between White and minority voters, Labour voting also appears to be in decline amongst White communities between 2004 and 2006. Labour is therefore losing ground amongst a wide range of diverse communities in local elections in Birmingham. While these findings must be somewhat tentative due to the short timespan considered here, since the West Midlands was one of the areas targeted for expansion as part of the mid-1990s ‘New’ Labour project, this ought to be of some concern to party strategists at both local and national levels.

Conclusion

Although the findings in this paper must be tentative because they relate to a relatively short time frame, they nevertheless highlight some implications for the party which has been the main recipient of ethnic minority votes in Britain. They also highlight a need for similar analyses to be carried out in other multi-ethnic cities, and over a longer period of time. The first implication also has policy implications for government. The evidence presented here highlights the fact that ethnicity remains a clear social cleavage which acts independently of traditional socio-economic cleavages. Saggar and Heath (1999: 103) argue that this is a problem of inadequate integration. At a time when the concept of multiculturalism is being questioned from both inside and outside minority communities, this is a serious issue which is beginning to be thought about, albeit not wholly convincingly, in government circles (Brighton, 2007). One tension for Labour as a party is between integration, campaigning and targeting; does the party solicit the ethnic minority vote by targeting its messages to specific minority themes, or use the broad themes developed for white communities in ethnic minority areas? The increasing segmentation and marketing techniques found in Labour electioneering would suggest the former. Moreover, if electoral politics is meant to be about holding elected representatives to account and tackling local issues, addressing issues of concern to minority communities in elections is not necessarily a failure, but an integral element, of integration within representative democracy. Disentangling this is beyond the scope of this paper and clearly an area for further research.

This notwithstanding, the Labour Party has seen signs of a weakening in some categories of ethnicity in Birmingham. Since more categories of ethnicity show a decline between 2004 and 2006, this means that the electoral coalition which has sustained the party in the city is beginning to show signs of breaking down. This is particularly the case with White and Asian communities. In part, this might be due to the length of time the party has been in office nationally. It might also be partly due to the party’s record on foreign affairs which plays particularly badly amongst some, often highly vocal, sections of ethnic minority communities. Alternatively, explanations may lie with the performance of the party at local government level. These issues are also beyond the scope of this paper. Even though the Labour vote increased in Birmingham in 2006, it is clear that Labour cannot afford to take its ethnic minority vote for granted, particularly Asian communities, either nationally or at council level. With the party’s decline both in the polls and nationally in the 2006 local elections (Rallings and Thrasher, 2006a), getting the party’s core electorate out to vote is becoming increasingly important to it. In urban centres such as Birmingham, part of the party’s core vote is ethnic minorities. Party strategists would therefore do well to not only target swing voters in forthcoming local and national

contests, but also to remember that previously loyal ethnic minority groups may not remain so indefinitely.

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² The constituencies were Birmingham Edgbaston, Birmingham Ladywood, Birmingham Sparkbrook and Small Heath, Bradford West and Walthamstow.

³ Ns for the techniques used in the 1997 BES ethnic booster were 106 generated by the main study, 405 by ethnic screening, and 194 generated by next door screening (Saggar and Heath, 1999: 123).

⁴ These figures are based on 2001 census data provided by Birmingham City Council's Census and Population team and is drawn from tables KS05 Country of Birth, KS06 Ethnic Group and KS07 Religion. This 2001 census data is Crown Copyright 2005. All 2001 census data used in this paper is from the Birmingham City Council website. The website can be accessed at: http://www.birmingham.gov.uk/GenerateContent?CONTENT_ITEM_ID=16578&CONTENT_ITEM_TYPE=0&MENU_ID=11859.

⁵ Calculated by subtracting the proportion of British, Irish and Other White categories from the total of 100 per cent.

⁶ Calculated by adding the proportion of semi-routine and routine occupations, and those people who have either never worked or are long-term unemployed. The data is from Table KS14a National Statistics Socio-economic Classification – All people aged 16-74 (percentages) available from the Birmingham City Council Website noted above.

⁷ See endnote 4 for the source of these data. 2001 Census data is Crown Copyright.

⁸ This is a weakness of past research, although it is due to difficulties in obtaining a representative sample, not any desire on the part of analysts to exclude other ethnic groups. Sobolewska (2005a) for instance is only able to address five main categories of ethnicity in her study using 1997 BES data: White, African, Caribbean, Indian and Pakistani.

⁹ White Irish and White Other have been excluded because of difficulties with collinearity. This is not a difficulty for this analysis since both are small proportions in each ward.

¹⁰ Construction of the 'social renter' variable differs from Denver and Hands' (2004: 531) version by not including privately rented properties. This is because council and housing association tenants are renting through what are essentially 'public' organisations, while private tenants rent on the open 'private' market. This public/private distinction underpins earlier debates about home ownership and council tenancy.

¹¹ Measured by taking the 2006 coefficient from the lowest of either of the two 2004 coefficients.