

Electoral participation of Hindu and Sikh communities in England and Wales

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About the study

This summary was produced by Jane Brotchie for Anant M Vyas, Executive Representative, Hindu Council UK, leading on increasing democratic engagement, voter participation and impact with the Ministry of Justice. It is a summary of the full report *Electoral participation of South Asian communities in England and Wales*, funded by the Joseph Rowntree Foundation. The study is based on an analysis of the 2001 Census of Population and electoral registers marked up on polling day. The classification used in this research is based on an analysis of names, so although the South Asian community (not including Muslims) comprises of many other religious groups, the researchers are only able to estimate figures reliably for Hindus and Sikhs. The full report is available to download free of charge from the Joseph Rowntree Foundation website at www.jrf.org.uk/bookshop/details.asp?pubID=861.

Summary points

- This research provides evidence that registered South Asian electors are more likely to turn out to vote than non-South Asian electors, and that Hindus and Sikhs are the most likely to vote.
- However, Hindus and Sikhs, alongside other South Asian adults, are less likely to be *registered* to vote than the rest of the population, partly because a larger proportion is born in countries that are ineligible to vote in UK elections.
- For those who are eligible to vote, the reasons for non-registration are currently poorly understood but this research suggests that unemployment and long term illness are likely to be important factors.
- Factors that are associated with higher numbers of people registering to vote are: the concentration of Hindus and Sikhs that live in an area; the number of older people and the extent of home ownership in the area.
- Hindus and Sikhs (and other South Asian electors) are more likely to vote where they are most geographically concentrated.
- Home ownership and the marginality of the constituency are positively associated with turning out to vote.
- Hindu women are more likely to turn out to vote than men, the figures for Sikhs are harder to ascertain.

Introduction

This summary report explores whether actual turnout and registration among Hindu and Sikh communities was higher or lower than the rest of the population in the 2001 General Election in England and Wales. It presents comparative estimates with other South Asian communities, and with the wider population, and explains how local and contextual factors can affect levels of registration and turnout.

The turnout rate of 59.4 per cent at the 2001 General Election was the lowest since 1918. Electoral participation is regarded as both an indicator of the integration of minority communities and the quality of the democratic system and it has been widely assumed that electors from minority ethnic groups are less likely to vote in general elections than white electors. This report, derived from a larger study of South Asian communities, represents the first large scale, nationally representative, systematic analysis of actual (rather than reported) registration and turnout among Hindu and Sikh communities.

The innovative approach adopted in this research allows the researchers to make the most comprehensive and reliable estimates of Hindu and Sikh electoral participation in England and Wales, and the social and political factors affecting that participation, using:

- electoral registers marked up at polling stations on election day
- election results from the 2001 General Election
- the 2001 Census of Population.

1 Registration of Hindu and Sikh voters: the key issue

Although most policy debate about electoral participation concerns improving turnout, a substantial minority of the adult population never reach as far as the electoral register, let alone the ballot box.

Voter registration

In all western democracies citizens must be registered to vote before they can participate in elections. In some countries (Belgium, Denmark, Netherlands, Spain) this takes the form of a national citizens' register, while others (Australia, France, Germany and the United Kingdom) use a voters' or electoral register. Yet whether a citizen can be on a list of registered voters varies between and within countries. For instance, in Nordic countries (Denmark, Sweden and Norway), any foreign person who has been resident in the country for more than three years has the right to vote, while the figure is five years in the Netherlands. Some countries also require citizens to register by appearing at a registration office (France), while others compile and update registers through a combination of mail, door-to-door registration (Germany) and even the internet (Australia). The majority of countries update voter registration either continuously or annually, although some countries (Italy and Japan) register voters periodically, often just before an election.

Box 1 UK registration: an overview

- UK voter qualification age is 18.
- Registers are compiled by local authorities, which write annually to residents and request the completion of a form.
- The electoral register includes all those in a household who are aged 18 or over, as well as those 17 year olds who will become eligible to vote during the lifetime of the register.
- Under UK electoral law, registration is open to British, Irish or Commonwealth citizens, or members of a European Union state.
- British citizens living abroad can register as an overseas elector and are eligible to vote in UK and European parliamentary elections for up to 15 years after they left the country.
- Rolling registration was introduced at the 2001 General Election. The system allows individuals to update their details during a particular year.
- The register is now updated each month, apart from during the annual canvass period (September, October and November) but although people can register to vote in the weeks before the election, there is a cut-off point once the election has been called.
- For the 2001 General Election on 7 June, new electors were required to register before 5 April. This led to a 1.3 per cent increase in the number eligible to vote in 2001 compared to 1997 (Electoral Commission, 2001).

In the majority of European countries (excluding France and Ireland), registration is compulsory, although the law is implemented to varying degrees. This has been frowned on by some in the United States as an abuse of individual civil liberties. That said, around 10 per cent of French citizens persistently abstain from registering for national elections (Mény, 2002).

Box 2 Why do registration rates vary for minority groups?

- Variations may be dependent on the methods used by electoral registration officers and diverse local authority policies on updating the register (Smith, 1993; LGA, 2000).
- Registration offices have not sufficiently changed their practice to meet the needs of the black, Asian and minority ethnic electorate (Anwar, 1990, 1998).
- Language difficulties and unease about dealing with officialdom.
- Concerns with anonymity and fear of harassment.
- Doubts about residence status affect black, Asian and minority ethnic communities more than the wider population and have contributed to varying levels of non-registration (Anwar, 1990, 1996, 1998). Survey evidence from Bradford found that deliberate non-registration among Asians was much lower than other black and minority ethnic groups (Le Lohe, 1990).

Previous research shows that electoral registration in Britain is unevenly distributed and varies between geographical areas and between different social and demographic groups. Anwar's (1998) face-to-face sample survey across five local authority areas found non-registration levels to be higher among Indians (24 per cent), black Caribbeans (26 per cent) and black Africans (25 per cent) than among whites (18 per cent), Pakistanis (17 per cent) and Bangladeshis (13 per cent). A later study conducted for the Electoral Commission by the Office for National Statistics (Electoral Commission, 2005) suggested that the percentage not registered to vote in South Asian communities was much lower: 6 per cent for Indians and Bangladeshis, and 8 per cent for Pakistanis, compared to 17 per cent for all 'black and minority ethnic' (BME) groups and 6 per cent for whites.

Registration rates in the 2001 General Election

Obtaining reliable registration rates can be difficult, especially for subgroups of the population. Because the 2001 Census of Population was collected within little more than a month of the 2001 General Election, the researchers had a unique opportunity to make accurate estimates of registration. Registration was assessed by comparing the census population with complete sets of marked electoral registers in a sample of 97 electoral wards from the 2001 General Election. These were analysed using name recognition software (Nam Pehchan and SANGRA), which is able to identify names with a South Asian origin (i.e. from the Indian subcontinent).

At constituency level, the lowest registration rates in England and Wales were found exclusively in London (see Table 1), including areas with large South Asian populations (e.g. Brent East). In total, 32 constituencies recorded registration rates below 90 per cent, while six had more than 20 per cent of the voting-age population (VAP) not included on the register. It is possible that these constituencies, particularly in Central London, include a number of adults who are simply not registered to vote or are registered outside the area. Such areas could contain fewer households than the census states (see Dorling, 2007). These constituencies are likely to have an extremely mobile population, making estimates difficult to ascertain.

However, just because Hindu and Sikh communities live in areas where registration is low we cannot assume that they are not registering to vote – their own registration rates may be much higher than their neighbours'. Using further statistical models, the researchers were able to confirm that the Hindu and Sikh communities are indeed less likely to register to vote than non-Asians but the research shows that other

Table 1 **The ten lowest constituency registration rates in 2001**

| Constituency | Voting Age Population | Registered Electorate | Registration Estimate (per cent) |
|--------------------------------|------------------------------|------------------------------|---|
| Kensington & Chelsea | 102392 | 62007 | 60.56 |
| Cities of London & Westminster | 96991 | 71935 | 74.17 |
| Hampstead & Highgate | 83268 | 65309 | 78.43 |
| Hammersmith & Fulham | 100515 | 79302 | 78.90 |
| Brent East | 73031 | 58095 | 79.55 |
| Ealing, Acton & Shepherds Bush | 88814 | 70697 | 79.60 |
| Holborn & St Pancras | 78104 | 62813 | 80.42 |
| Tottenham | 81433 | 65567 | 80.52 |
| Regents Park & Kensington | 93106 | 75886 | 81.50 |
| North Southwark & Bermondsey | 89074 | 73527 | 82.55 |

factors are also important in understanding why registration rates are lower, namely:

- country of birth; and
- the concentration of religious populations.

Lower registration rates linked to ‘country of birth’

Making the assumption that no one born outside the UK, Europe or the Commonwealth was eligible to vote, the researchers produced adjusted registration rates, taking into account country of birth (COB).

Before making any adjustment for country of birth, the lowest rates of registration in the sampled wards are for Muslims (approximately 90 per cent). The next lowest (approximately 91 per cent) are for the category which includes all those of South Asian origin, except for Muslims – in other words, the category which includes Hindus and Sikhs. Both groups

have considerably lower rates than the non-Asian population (98 per cent).

After taking into account where individuals were born, the group that includes Hindus and Sikhs shows a registration rate in the sampled wards of 93 per cent. The Muslim registration rate increases to approximately 97 per cent, after adjusting for country of birth. This can partly be explained by the fact that for the mainly Hindu groups, the impact of country of birth on registration rates is smaller than for Muslims, as Hindus are predominantly either UK or Commonwealth born and are thus eligible to vote.

The researchers used their data to infer national rates of registration for England and Wales, adjusting for country of birth, and report that:

- The national rate of registration to vote for all South Asians is approximately 86 per cent but once country of birth is taken into account, this rises to approximately 93 per cent.
- The national rate of registration for people of South Asian origin, excluding Muslim groups (in other words, the category that includes Hindus and Sikhs) is 88 per cent, rising to approximately 91 per cent once country of birth is accounted for.

Higher registration where religious groups are more densely populated

The researchers demonstrated a relationship between religious composition and registration of Asians. Registration appears to be affected by belonging to a 'religious enclave' – where populations are more concentrated, rates of registration are higher. This is particularly

true of Muslim populations, whatever the social composition of the area. To a lesser extent, this was true for Hindus and Sikhs, where the social profile appears to be more important to whether or not they vote – for example, where Hindus and Sikhs are living in areas where they own their houses.

Further analysis reveals a number of other factors that affect registration rates amongst Hindus and Sikhs:

- People who are more likely to register to vote are those who are older and those who are owner-occupiers. Those living in manufacturing areas are also more likely to register. As we might expect, a stable population also helps to increase rates of registration because when people move there is often a time lag before re-registering at the new address.
- Those who are less likely to register to vote are people who are unemployed and people who have a long-term illness.

2 Turnout of Hindu and Sikh electors

Contrary to received opinion that minority ethnic electors are less likely to vote in general elections than other electors, our research provides evidence that registered British South Asian electors are actually *more* likely to turn out to vote than the rest of the population, and that registered Hindu and Sikh electors are the most likely to vote of all the religious groups common in the South Asian electorate.

Table 2 shows that South Asian turnout was one percentage point higher (approximately 59 per cent) than non-Asians (approximately 58 per cent). When the results are broken down into religious groups, South Asians of Hindu and Sikh heritage had higher rates of participation (approximately 61 per cent and 60 per cent) than Muslims (59 per cent).

Table 2: Turnout rates (excludes postal voters) – corrected to be nationally representative for England and Wales

| Religion | % voted corrected for national turnout |
|-------------------|---|
| Hindu | 61.3 |
| Muslim | 58.5 |
| Sikh | 59.7 |
| Other South Asian | 55.8 |
| All South Asian | 59.4 |
| Non-Asians | 58.3 |
| Total | 58.3 |

Gender of turnout

Previous estimates of turnout (Norris *et al.*, 2004) suggested that minority ethnic women were less likely to participate than men. The evidence of this research contradicts this finding: turnout among South Asian women (65 per cent) was higher than men (58 per cent). Hindu women were the most likely to vote (66 per cent). Unfortunately, the estimates for Sikhs may be less reliable as they are based on a minority of names for which a gender can be assigned. Many Sikh names are common for both men and women, so the majority of identified Sikh voters were placed in the 'gender not determined' category.

Geography of turnout

While South Asians may live in areas where turnout is much lower than elsewhere, their own participation rates are higher. The researchers were also able to demonstrate that where South Asian religious groups are most concentrated, more South Asian people turn out to vote. The reverse is true for non-Asians. So, whilst South Asians may live in areas of lower than average turnout, this is precisely where they are most likely to vote.

These results suggest that, whilst those of Indian heritage have been the most educationally and economically successful over recent years and remain the people most likely to vote in general elections, the role of the extended family and strong community networks may still play a vital role in mobilising Hindu and Sikh voters.

The study also found that the more South Asian electors there are in the ward, the more likely they are to vote. The non-Asian vote, however, is

much lower. By distinguishing further between Hindu, Sikh and Muslim votes the research shows that for each group there is an increase in turnout to vote as the proportion of the ward population made up by that group increases.

Variations in turnout

The size of the religious group is one of the most important factors in enhancing turnout, but what other factors might be significant? The researchers used statistical models to understand some of the variations in turnout. The results show that:

- The household was the most important unit of variation for turnout of all religious groups. In other words, people who lived together were more likely to vote together. However, this effect was slightly weaker for Hindus than for other groups. The research cannot tell us the reason for this – further exploration would be needed to find out why this is the case.
- Home owners in all religious groups were more likely to vote as were those who lived in a marginal constituency.
- Where there were more people of pensionable age in the religious group, the level of turnout was higher among Hindus, Muslims and non-South Asians, but not for Sikhs (though the variable was only marginally insignificant).
- Hindu turnout was lower in wards with a large number of students. This is also true of other groups as students tend to have low participation rates.

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

South Asian electors living within large South Asian communities appear to be more effectively mobilised by political parties or community leaders. This lends support to the hypothesis that Hindu and Sikh communities that are more socially connected communities are more likely to have higher levels of electoral participation.

The research shows that registered Hindu voters are the most likely group to vote, followed by Sikhs and Muslims. All of these groups are more likely to vote than the rest of the non-South Asian population, even after controlling for the characteristics of the areas in which they live. It therefore appears that the differences in turnout were not the product of social structure but genuine differences in people's tendency to vote or other unmeasured effects.

Turnout rates after adjusting for registration

The researchers put together the findings that Hindus and Sikhs (in common with other South Asian adults) are more likely to turn out to vote but are less likely to be *registered* to vote than the rest of the population. In so doing, they developed a more accurate overall picture of electoral participation. They achieved this by recalculating turnout rates, adjusting for registration rates (with and without country of birth

Table 3: Turnout adjusting for registration (all results corrected for national turnout and excludes postal voters)

| Religion | Adjusted percentage voted corrected for national turnout | Turnout after registration (with 'country of birth' adjustment) | Turnout after registration (without 'country of birth' adjustment) |
|-------------------------------------|---|--|---|
| Overall | 58.3 | 58.5 | 57.4 |
| Non South Asian | 58.3 | 58.6 | 57.7 |
| South Asian (not including Muslims) | 60.7 | 55.1 | 53.5 |
| Muslim | 58.5 | 53.5 | 48.0 |
| All South Asian | 59.4 | 55.5 | 51.2 |

Note: The all South Asian rate is higher (with 'country of birth' adjustment) than both the South Asian subgroups due to a larger number of valid census output areas (i.e. the smallest geographical areas for which census figures are available).

adjustments), in other words estimating the turnout as a percentage of the voting eligible population. These adjusted calculations are reported in Table 3.

Recalibrated in this way, the category that includes Hindus and Sikhs (South Asian not including Muslims) shows an overall turnout rate (55 per cent) that is approximately 4 per cent lower than the population as a whole. This suggests that understanding the reasons for non-registration may be equally as important as tackling non-voting amongst Hindu and Sikh communities.

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