

Mind the gap:

*How the ethnic minority vote cost
Theresa May her majority*

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British
Future...

The logo for British Future, featuring a dark blue L-shaped graphic element to the left of the text.

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About British Future:

British Future is an independent, non-partisan thinktank engaging people's hopes and fears about integration and migration, opportunity and identity, so that we share a confident and welcoming Britain, inclusive and fair to all.

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I. Introduction: Mind the gap

Theresa May called the snap General Election of June 2017 intending to increase the Conservative majority in the House of Commons. The plan failed: the Conservatives failed to gain most of the seats that they were targeting in England and Wales, and suffered unexpected losses to the Labour Party. The Conservatives went into the General Election with 330 seats and a working majority of 17 seats; they came out of it with just 318 seats, 8 seats short of a majority at all. They have since been forced to conduct protracted and rather expensive talks with Northern Ireland's DUP in order to secure the confidence and supply deal needed to govern.

There will be much debate this summer and Autumn over what went wrong for the Conservatives, and what might have been done differently. New research from British Future shows one underestimated factor: how the Conservative failure to appeal to ethnic minority voters played a key role in their failure to win a majority. The Conservatives were only half as likely to gain the support of non-white voters compared to their white British fellow citizens, according to Lord Ashcroft's large election day poll. That the Conservatives performed poorly with ethnic minority voters in 2017 is the consistent finding from several pieces of early evidence from different sources.

The British Future research captures how that weakness with ethnic minority voters had a dramatic impact on the shape of the new House of Commons. Had the Conservatives closed the ethnic vote gap, appealing similarly to non-white as to white voters, the party would have won 28 seats that eluded it in 2017. The Conservatives would have held 346 seats, giving it a comfortable majority of 42. The politics of this parliament, the Brexit negotiations and the position of the Prime Minister would be very different indeed in this parallel universe - where the Conservative aspiration to be a One Nation party was reflected in winning a similar share of votes among ethnic minorities and the ethnic majority alike. Bridging that 'ethnic gap' would have seen around 1.2 million ethnic minority voters back the Conservatives, rather than the roughly 600,000 non-white voters who are thought to have given their support to the party.

Strikingly, even halving that ethnic vote gap would have made the difference between a minority and a majority government. In such a scenario, where the Conservatives won 32% of the ethnic minority vote, they would still trail Labour by over 20 points among non-white voters. Yet the British Future projection suggests even that would have been sufficient progress to win 10 additional seats that went to Labour in 2017, taking Theresa May just past the winning post without needing to wheel and deal with minor parties.

The Conservatives did not expect to lose seats to the Labour Party, particularly on such a scale, with 28 seats turning from blue to red. Notably, the British Future research suggests that the ethnic voting gap between the major parties was crucial in most of those seats - in no fewer than 17 of the 28 Labour gains from the

Conservatives, Labour's lead among non-white voters was larger than the overall majority by which they won. The ethnic voting gap was therefore a decisive factor in tipping the balance in these seats. It also enabled Labour to hold off Conservative challenges in seven more Labour-held constituencies.

Though this new British Future research shows that the growing ethnic diversity of the electorate can make a decisive impact on General Election results, there was considerably less political and media attention paid to the ethnic minority vote in the run-up to the 2017 General Election than there had been two years before. This partly reflected the dominant assumption that an election victory was in the bag for the Conservatives: a factor that could be important in a close-fought election was considered much more marginal in a potential landslide scenario. But this was also because the Conservatives in 2017 had a different plan for how to extend their appeal under Theresa May than they had under David Cameron.

David Cameron had placed significant emphasis in his decade as party leader on broadening the party's appeal to centrist voters, ensuring the party did seek to be competitive in London and did not retreat from contesting urban and suburban city seats. Cameron's strategy saw the task of improving the party's historically weak reputation and poor performance with the growing number of ethnic minority voters as essential to securing electoral success. Cameron put a lot of effort and political capital into ensuring his party selected minority candidates and began to pick up a higher share of ethnic minority votes, particularly among the growing, affluent ethnic minority middle-class.

But Theresa May's advisers spotted an opportunity for a realignment strategy elsewhere, setting out to win blue-collar pro-Brexit voters from UKIP and Labour in the North and Midlands. The Conservatives did succeed in converting most of those who voted for Nigel Farage and UKIP in 2015, and did advance with blue-collar, pro-Brexit, culturally conservative voters in the north of England but – with a handful of exceptions – they did not do well enough to gain seats in these areas.

What they underestimated, however, was the extent to which attempting this strategy might repel as well as attract potential Conservative voters. That was not something that only affected ethnic minority voters: Labour also took seats off the Conservatives in southern, Remain-supporting university towns. The Conservatives could have sought a bridging strategy to appeal to a broader cross-section of the electorate (and did indeed make significant progress in Scotland, albeit in a rather different election campaign) but there was little evidence of such a strategy.

The British Future research suggests that any assumption that ethnic minority votes would be marginal to the 2017 General Election outcome was a significant mistake. The decisive role that the ethnic voting gap played in most of the seats lost by the Conservatives suggests that this blindspot could have played a significant role in the Conservative failure to realise, right up until election day itself, that they needed to fight a defensive as well as offensive battle in the 2017 campaign.

For Labour, the 2017 election result shows that its strong reputation and appeal with ethnic minority voters can make a significant contribution to the party's electoral prospects – though only as part of a much broader electoral coalition. Declining partisan allegiance among ethnic minority voters had made the party increasingly aware that the non-white vote will be increasingly up for grabs in future elections. Any sense of complacency or entitlement about ethnic minority support could backfire, especially with younger voters. Those now joining the electorate were not even born when Labour built its historic reputation with ethnic minorities, passing the pioneering anti-discrimination legislation of the 1970s. In 2017, the party showed that it could maintain its appeal, through a combination of its own campaign and the mistakes of its opponents, and encourage an increased number of younger ethnic minority voters to take part in the election. A Labour Party that aspires to govern, however, will need to expand its appeal to a broader coalition of voters, including to middle-class, aspirational ethnic minority voters living outside Britain's biggest cities.

The Conservatives should have the ambition of closing the ethnic minority gap – not only for reasons of electoral self-interest but also because being able to secure support from every section of society is an important test of the aspiration to be a 'One Nation' party that can bring people together. The evidence from 2017 suggests that this will require a deeper, long-term strategy and focus than the party has managed to sustain so far, but also that there would be significant political gains from making some progress. Failing to do so will make the electoral mountain much higher given the growing diversity of the British electorate.

This report should provide a wake-up call to all political parties. Winning support across all colours and creeds looks increasingly necessary for any party that seeks a strong majority. That is the One Nation challenge which any party that wants to govern Britain today needs to meet.

A note on the methodology for this report

The projections in this report are hypothetical. They provide an illustrative “what if?” scenario to illustrate a broad point: that the ethnic minority electorate is of such a size that it must now be treated with importance by any political party seeking a parliamentary majority.

If the Conservative Party had appealed to non-white voters to the same extent that it appealed to white voters, and hence secured the same proportion of their votes, it would have secured an estimated 1.2 million ethnic minority votes, twice as many as the 600,000 who are estimated to have voted for Theresa May’s party in 2017.

In our projections, we have distributed these 600,000 additional votes that the Conservatives would have won solely according to ethnic minority population in each constituency, in most cases⁷ taking these votes from Labour and adding them to the Conservative total. This is, obviously, an oversimplification: ethnic minority voters will behave differently in different constituencies and some hypothetical ‘switchers’ may have come from other parties. It does, however, illustrate a very important point – that broadening its appeal to ethnic minority voters would have secured the Conservatives a sizable number of votes that would have made a significant difference in a close-run General Election.

2. The 2017 General Election: how much is known about the ethnic minority vote?

There is considerably less evidence regarding the voting patterns of ethnic minority voters than exists with regard to the rest of the electorate. But the early data from a range of sources all points in a similar direction: that the Conservatives performed poorly with ethnic minority voters in 2017, slipping back on the progress that the party had begun to make in extending their appeal in 2015.

National opinion polls

There has not yet been any full-scale poll of ethnic minority voters during the campaign or the aftermath. The best information available at this stage comes from poll breaks for ethnic minority voting based on relatively large samples of minority voters. Lord Ashcroft's election day poll, of over 14,000 people who had already cast their vote, had a sample of 843 ethnic minority voters, with a vote share of 65% for Labour and 21% for the Conservatives².

Ipsos-Mori has published demographic analysis of how Britain voted, based on aggregated polls from across the campaign period. Ipsos-Mori gives a Labour ethnic minority vote share of 73% in 2017, with the Conservatives on just 17%. Ipsos-Mori estimates that to be a 6% advance for Labour and a 4% dip for the Conservatives on the 2015 General Election³.

In 2010, the large academic ethnic minority British Election Survey⁴ gave vote shares of Labour 69%, Conservatives 16%, though the survey has a slightly different reference sample.

For the 2015 general Election, all sources suggest some Conservative advance, but differ significantly on whether it was a modest or larger breakthrough: Ipsos MORI had the Conservatives up 7% while Survation noted a more significant advance to secure 33% of the ethnic minority vote.

The pattern of the regional vote

The 2017 General Election was striking for the extent of geographical variation in the votes. One striking feature of the vote is how the Conservative Party performed most strongly in the least diverse nations and regions of Great Britain, and performed poorly in the areas of highest diversity. The party advanced most strongly in the low-diversity North-East and Scotland, with vote share gains of 9.1% and 13.7% respectively; while London, the UK's most diverse region, was the only one in which the Conservative vote share shrank, by 1.7% in 2017. While this reflects a wider range of demographic and sociological patterns in the vote, it reinforces the Conservative challenge with ethnic minority voters.

The results in the most diverse constituencies

The Runnymede Trust has analysed the constituency results in the 75 most ethnically diverse seats⁵, showing Labour winning 65% of all voters in these seats, up 11 per cent on 2015. The Runnymede analysis shows Conservative support flatlining, with a 0.3 per cent fall in votes in the most diverse seats, in contrast to their six per cent advance across the country. These vote share findings are from actual results, rather than from opinion polling, including all voters in these constituencies. So the comparatively weak Conservative performance in these seats includes a struggle to appeal to both ethnic minority and white British voters who live in the most ethnically diverse constituencies.

How the Conservatives have gone backwards in their most diverse constituencies

The Conservatives now hold only five of the 75 most diverse parliamentary constituencies, having held nine in 2015 and 13 in 2010.

In 2017 the Conservatives won 268 (88%) of the 306 seats that they had won in 2010. It is therefore quite striking that the party has lost 8 (53%) of its 15 highest-diversity seats. This suggests that the Conservatives struggle to remain competitive in constituencies once more than one-in-three voters are non-white, despite the notable exception of Harrow East.

Fig.1 The Conservative retreat in their most ethnically diverse seats

Commons diversity ranking out of 650	Current MP	Constituency	Percentage BAME %	2010 party (Majority)	2015 party (Majority)	2017 party (Majority)
13	Bob Blackman	Harrow East	60.7	Conservative 3,403 (7.1%)	Conservative 4,757 (9.7%)	Conservative 1,757 (3.5%)
31	Wes Streeting	Ilford North	47.5	Conservative 5,404 (11.5%)	Labour 589 (1.2%)	Labour 9,639 (18.2%)
35	Matthew Offord	Hendon	45	Conservative 106 (0.2%)	Conservative 3,724 (7.5%)	Conservative 1,072 (2.1%)
42	Ruth Cadbury	Brentford & Isleworth	42.3	Conservative 1,958 (3.6%)	Labour 465 (0.8%)	Labour 12,182 (19.8%)
51	Sarah Jones	Croydon Central	38.5	Conservative 2,969 (5.9%)	Conservative 165 (0.3%)	Labour 5,652 (9.9%)
54	Rupa Huq	Ealing Central & Acton	36.7	Conservative 3,716 (7.9%)	Labour 274 (0.4%)	Labour 13,807 (25%)
57	Eleanor Smith	Wolverhampton South West	35.6	Conservative 691 (1.7%)	Labour 801 (2.0%)	Labour 2,185 (5.2%)
62	Mike Freer	Finchley & Golders Green	33.5	Conservative 5,809 (12.3%)	Conservative 5,662 (11.2%)	Conservative 1,657 (3.2%)
66	Joan Ryan	Enfield North	32.5	Conservative 1,692 (3.8%)	Labour 1,086 (2.4%)	Labour 10,247 (21.1%)
67	Emma Dent Coad	Kensington	32	Conservative 8,616 (24.5%)	Conservative 7,361 (21.1%)	Labour 20 (0.05%)
70	Mark Field	Cities of London & Westminster	30.9	Conservative 11,076 (30%)	Conservative 9,671 (26.7%)	Conservative 3,148 (8.1%)
74	Boris Johnson	Uxbridge & South Ruislip	30.2	Conservative 11,216 (24.9%)	Conservative 10,695 (23.9%)	Conservative 5,034 (10.8%)
75	Bambos Charalambous	Enfield Southgate	30.1	Conservative 7,626 (17.2%)	Conservative 4,753 (10.4%)	Labour 4,355 (9%)
79	Nick Hurd	Ruislip, Northwood and Pinner	29.6	Conservative 19,060 (38.0%)	Conservative 20,224 (39.5%)	Conservative 13,980 (26.2%)
82	Theresa Villiers	Chipping Barnet	28.2	Conservative 11,927 (23.6%)	Conservative 7,656 (14.4%)	Conservative 353 (0.6%)
	Conservative seats			15	10	7

3. How the ethnic vote gap influenced the 2017 General Election outcome

What difference did the ethnic vote gap make to the result of the 2017 General Election?

In the style of an election night swingometer, British Future's alternative election model projects the election result from a parallel universe in which the Conservatives have bridged their 'ethnic vote gap' - so there is no difference between how ethnic minority voters viewed the different political parties and the views of all voters across the UK.

The model therefore looks at the gains which the Conservatives would have made if they had won 42% rather than 21% of the ethnic minority vote. We also examine the more modest, yet still electorally crucial, gains they could have made by getting half-way there, by winning 32% of the ethnic minority vote.

The model is a simplified one for illustrative purposes - similar to the use of universal swing to project the composition of the House of Commons from a national opinion poll. In the absence of any detailed 2017 data on the voting patterns across different constituencies and minority groups, the model simply distributes the ethnic minority vote in each marginal constituency, according to the overall national share of the ethnic minority vote, using the Lord Ashcroft poll as a baseline. It then adjusts the ethnic minority vote by a similar amount in each constituency. Of course, the actual pattern of ethnic minority votes will differ from seat to seat - but the simplified model does illustrate how closing the ethnic minority voting gap would make a dramatic difference in many marginal seats.

The ethnic vote gap made the difference in most of the seats which the Conservatives lost to Labour

The projection suggests that the Conservatives could have held 17 of the 28 seats which were lost to Labour in 2017 if they had closed the ethnic minority voting gap and secured 42% of the ethnic minority vote instead of 21%. (They would also have held ten of these seats just by halving the 2017 ethnic voting gap and securing 32% of the ethnic minority vote).

Fig 2. Labour gains from the Conservatives

	Labour 2017 majority	Labour's estimated 2017 lead with ethnic minority voters	Conservative majority if ethnic gap closed	Ethnic minority electorate %
Kensington	20	5,446	5,178	32%
Crewe and Nantwich	48	872	784	3.6%
Canterbury	187	2,124	1,841	8.5%
Keighley	249	3,755	3,335	16.5%
Peterborough	607	4,747	3,924	22.6%
Stroud	687	814	90	2.9%
Bedford	789	5,440	4,403	25.5%
Ipswich	831	2,633	1,682	11.7%
Stockton South	888	1,587	627	6.7%
Colne Valley	915	3,349	2,283	12.6%
Warwick and Leamington	1,206	3,020	1,678	12.7%
Portsmouth South	1,554	3,098	1,403	15.8%
Derby North	2,015	2,869	724	13.4%
Battersea	2,416	6,420	3,712	26.5%
Reading East	3,749	5,931	1,912	24.4%
Enfield Southgate	4,355	6,400	1,755	30.1%
Croydon Central	5,652	9,671	3,580	38.5%

The Conservative Party could also have taken six target seats in which they fell short of unseating a Labour MP, had they polled better with ethnic minority voters.

Fig 3. Conservative missed opportunities

	Labour 2017 majority	Labour's estimated 2017 lead with ethnic minority voters	Conservative majority if ethnic gap closed	Ethnic minority %
Dudley North	22	2,482	2,348	14.5%
Newcastle-under-Lyme	30	1,215	1,130	6.3%
Wolverhampton South-West	2185	6,633	4,147	35.6%
Dewsbury	3,321	5,374	1,809	21.6%
Dagenham & Rainham	4,652	5,628	720	27.9%
Ilford North	9,639	11,064	923	47.5%

There were five seats which the Conservatives would have gained from other parties by doubling their share of ethnic minority voters.

Fig 4. Lib Dem and SNP seats⁶

	SNP/Lib Dem 2017 majority	Conservative majority if ethnic gap closed	Ethnic minority %
Oxford West & Abingdon	816 (Lib Dem)	1,075	10%
Carshalton & Wallington	1,369 (Lib Dem)	2,052	21.4%
Perth & North Perthshire	21 (SNP)	352	2.3%
Lanark & Hamilton East	266 (SNP)	4	1.7%
Edinburgh South West	1,097 (SNP)	303	9%

While the ethnic minority voting gap looks to have been a decisive factor in most of the Labour gains from the Conservatives, there were 11 out of the 28 Labour gains from the Conservatives where the ethnic vote gap did not make a decisive difference. Labour would have gained these seats without their advantage among ethnic minority voters, though the support of non-white voters did double the size of Labour's majority in the seats gained in Bristol, Bury and Cardiff.

Fig 5. Labour gains where the ethnic minority vote was not decisive

	Labour 2017 majority	Labour's estimated 2017 lead with ethnic minority voters	Ethnic minority %
Lincoln	1,538	922	4.3%
High Peak	2,322	498	2.1%
Vale of Clwyd	2,379	477	2.8%
Warrington South	2,549	1,227	4.5%
Gower	3,269	902	4.5%
Weaver Vale	3,928	513	2.3%
Cardiff North	4,174	2,083	9.1%
Bury North	4,375	2,529	12%
Bristol North-West	4,761	3,141	13.2%
Plymouth Sutton and Devenport	6,002	1,411	6.2%
Brighton Kemptown	9,868	2,079	9.6%

Labour didn't need the ethnic vote to defend most of its London constituencies – because it easily outpolled the Conservatives with both white and ethnic minority voters.

London is easily the most ethnically diverse part of Great Britain, but the British Future projection suggests that the ethnic voting gap made much less difference in London in 2017 than elsewhere in the country. Only a quarter of the 28 seats that would have changed hands if the ethnic vote gap had been closed are in the capital.

The British Future projection suggests that the ethnic voting gap did play a crucial role in the surprise Labour gains in London from the Conservatives - Battersea, Croydon Central, Enfield Southgate and Kensington. It was, however, less important to Labour's successful defence of the marginal seats in London which the Conservatives were targeting and hoped to gain – with the exceptions of Ilford North and Dagenham & Rainham.

There were several London seats which featured high up the Conservative 2017 target seat list, but which were held by Labour with significant increases in the Labour majority. The 2017 outcome in these seats cannot be attributed to the ethnic voting gap – because the Conservatives performed badly with both white British and ethnic minority voters in the capital.

Fig 6. Labour holds in London where ethnic minority vote was not decisive

	Conservative target seat ranking for 2017 election⁷	Labour 2015 majority	Labour 2017 majority	Labour's estimated 2017 lead with ethnic minority voters	Ethnic minority %
Ealing Central and Acton	2	274	13,807	7,484	36.7%
Hampstead and Kilburn	11	1,138	15,560	6,028	34.6%
Brentford and Isleworth	4	465	12,182	9,383	42.3%
Tooting	24	2,842	15,458	7,339	34.2%
Eltham	29	2,693	6,296	3,859	23.5%

It is difficult to see how the Conservatives could return to being competitive in these London 'ex-marginals' without a significant increase in support from ethnic minority voters, but the 2017 results show why this would have to be part of a broader pitch to increase support across the capital more generally. It seems likely that those features of the Conservative campaign and message in 2017 which were unattractive to ethnic minority voters also cost the party support among white British voters in the capital, as reflected in the particularly poor Conservative performance in what had previously been tightly contested marginal seats.

4. Block vote or up for grabs - Are ethnic minority voters becoming floating voters?

Individual citizens cast their votes at the ballot box, using their own personal judgement about the politicians and parties contesting each election. Yet analysis of the patterns of voting in both the EU referendum and the 2017 general election has illuminated important social divisions – across the generations; between social classes; and by region and place across the UK.

Ethnicity was the biggest single predictor of how an individual would vote at the 2017 General Election – compared to gender, age, social class, education or region. That has been the case at most British General Elections over the last thirty years or so. ‘Not being white is the number one predictor of not voting Conservative’ wrote David Cameron’s pollster Andrew Cooper, explaining why improving the party’s performance among the growing number of ethnic minority voters was one key focus of party modernisation efforts.

The persistence of Labour’s strong lead over the Conservatives may, however, lead some sceptical voices to ask whether it is possible to succeed. The ethical case is that any ‘One Nation’ party should be competing for the votes of Britons of every race, creed and colour; yet electoral strategists will be minded to ask more instrumental questions: is there any chance of converting those voters, or would they be better trying their luck somewhere else?

The 2017 General Election saw Labour maintain and increased its very strong advantage with ethnic minority voters. But digging into the reasons why suggests that both major parties would be sensible to reject the idea that demographics are political destiny. The reasons behind Labour’s success and the Conservative failure did not simply reflect partisan allegiance by ethnic background, which is significant but now fading. It was also about how ethnic minority voters responded to the ways in which the parties chose to fight the 2017 contest itself.

The declining loyalty of Labour’s ethnic minority ‘core vote’

British politics has become more volatile over the post-war period. One significant driver of this has been what academics call ‘partisan de-alignment’: voters have become considerably less likely to identify strongly, or to identify at all, with a political party. A larger portion of the electorate now comprises those who think of themselves as ‘floating voters’, ready to shop around to see which

political leader or party seems to have the most convincing offer in any particular election. This has driven a more fragmented vote and more volatile party system since the mid-1970s.

The most striking thing about ethnic minority voters was that they were largely the exception to this general rule. In the 1970s, 1980s and 1990s they were much less likely to take part of this general shift towards a more consumerist voter. Non-white Britons engaged politically in a way that resembled the voters of the 1950s and 1960s, rather than the more consumerist voter of more recent decades. In 1997, three-quarters of ethnic minority voters said that they identified with the Labour party. Almost six out of ten ethnic minority voters (58%) said that they did identify with the Labour party in 2010; about double the level for white British voters. British Election Survey research by Maria Sobolewska suggests, however, that this sense of identification has been dropping fast, falling to a minority of ethnic minority voters by 2015⁸.

It is clear that Labour won a significant long-term reward with ethnic minority voters by being perceived to be strongly on the side of non-white voters in the big public arguments about race and immigration in the 1960s and 1970s. The evidence suggests that this legacy is diminishing. That is a generational ‘integration’ effect. First generation Commonwealth migrants to the UK had strikingly high levels of trust in the British political system. British-born ethnic minorities, however, are more likely than their parents to adopt the prevailing, more sceptical view of political institutions and parties, with perhaps higher expectations of what the parties need to do now to earn their vote, their trust or their loyalty.

Loyalists or up for grabs? The 2017 electorate

That case appears to be reinforced by evidence from a nationwide poll for British Future, with fieldwork immediately after the 2017 General Election. This included asking voters their views of different parties – asking whether they felt they would never vote for that party; whether they felt they would only vote for that party; or whether they had considered or would consider voting for them.

This is a different measure of allegiance than party identification. Those who think they will ‘always’ vote for a party are expressing a strong sense of partisan commitment, while saying that you would ‘never’ vote for a particular party is a much more strongly-held aversion than merely not choosing them at the last election.

Among the electorate as a whole, around one in three voters say they would only vote for their current party. That is evenly balanced between 15% of voters who say they would always vote Labour and 15% who say they would always vote Conservative. In addition, 15% of the 1,000-strong Scottish sample in our ICM

poll say they would always vote SNP. Smaller parties are less likely to have a ‘core vote’ who will stick by them through thick and thin: 2% of respondents said they would only vote LibDem, for example.

Most voters can identify at least one party who they would never vote for. A large minority of voters rule out Labour (32%), the Conservatives (38%) and the LibDems (47%), while most voters (65%) say they would never vote Ukip.

The survey includes 285 ethnic minority respondents. While care should be taken not to over-interpret findings based on a sub-sample of respondents, these indicative results do appear to fit well with the broader longer-term evidence of the similarities and differences between white and non-white voters.

Comparing the ethnic minority responses to the electorate more broadly, several important differences jump out.

Fig 7. Committed partisan – or up for grabs?

	Conservative Party		Labour Party		LibDem Party	
	White	Ethnic minority	White	Ethnic minority	White	Ethnic minority
Would never vote for them	37%	47%	34%	13%	48%	44%
Considered or would consider voting for them	24%	33%	34%	24%	43%	45%
Voted – but might change mind in future	23%	15%	18%	29%	7%	10%
Would only vote for them	17%	5%	13%	33%	2%	2%

(ICM for British Future June 2017, sample of 3340 white voters and 285 non-white voters in the 2017 General Election)

Ethnic minority voters are much more likely to identify as Labour loyalists. While one in seven voters overall say they would always vote Labour, one-third of all ethnic minority respondents in the ICM survey did so. That commitment is stronger than among many other ‘core’ Labour groups: the 33% of ethnic minority respondents who say they would only vote Labour compares to 30% of the under-24s, 21% of DE voters, 20% in Wales and 28% in the North-East who feel similarly strongly.

The Conservatives, by contrast, not only have a problem attracting new ethnic minority supporters but also in retaining those voters they already have. Only around a quarter of ethnic minority voters who voted Conservative would rule out changing

their vote in future, while ethnic minority respondents were three times as likely to say that they voted Conservative in 2017 but might switch in future.

The big difference in overall scores, however, between white and ethnic minority respondents partly reflects the higher Labour share of the ethnic minority vote: 39% of all 2017 Labour voters say they would always vote for the party, while around half of Labour's ethnic minority voters see themselves as always being loyal to the party.

Just 13% of ethnic minority voters say they would never vote Labour, compared with 47% who say they would never vote Conservative. This is one of the lowest 'never' scores for Labour from any section of the electorate. Again, this suggests that Labour's historic role and reputation among ethnic minorities continues to be of value for the party. Even most ethnic minority voters who do not vote Labour would consider doing so.

But the Conservatives should not be too discouraged by the finding that just under half of ethnic minority voters say they would 'never' vote for the party. That does give the Conservatives considerable scope to increase their current share of one-in-five ethnic minority voters: there is a pool of up to one in three ethnic minority voters who say they either considered voting Conservative in 2017 or would consider doing so in future.

While the 'never vote Conservative' score is higher among ethnic minorities (47%) than white respondents (37%), it is a relatively narrow difference. That 47% of ethnic minority respondents is lower than the proportion of Scots (55%) who say they would never vote Conservative and yet the Scottish Conservatives enjoyed considerable electoral success in 2017 by improving their appeal to the large group of non-Conservative voters who were ready to give the party a hearing. That is what the party also needs to emulate with ethnic minority supporters.

The potential Conservative share of the overall electorate could, in principle, rise as high as the 62% of voters who say they voted Conservative, considered doing so or would consider voting Conservative in future. Labour's overall potential electorate appears to be a little broader: 68% of voters voted Labour or considered it, or say they would consider voting Labour in future elections, while 32% cannot imagine ever doing so.

Fig 8. I would never vote for them ...

	Conservative	Labour	LibDem	Ukip
All voters	38%	32%	47%	65%
Male	36%	34%	48%	63%
Female	39%	30%	47%	67%
AB	34%	33%	39%	70%
C1	35%	35%	45%	66%
C2	37%	31%	53%	64%
DE	44%	29%	56%	59%
18-24	57%	10%	39%	76%
25-34	42%	21%	38%	62%
65+	24%	55%	59%	63%
Scotland	55%	39%	50%	77%
London	37%	27%	49%	68%
Leave	25%	42%	61%	45%
Remain	46%	23%	32%	83%
White	37%	34%	48%	64%
Ethnic minority	47%	13%	44%	74%
Conservative	n/a	60%	59%	55%
Labour	67%	n/a	40%	76%
LibDem	43%	30%	n/a	77%
SNP	85%	24%	54%	86%
Ukip	36%	46%	79%	n/a

5. Who are the different ethnic minority voter ‘tribes’?

1. The party loyalists – a significant minority of ethnic minority voters

1.1 Loyal Labour

Around a third of ethnic minority voters see themselves as always voting Labour, compared to one in seven white British voters. Solid allegiance to Labour is commonly found among older voters who were first generation Commonwealth migrants to the UK; among voters who live in solidly Labour areas; and more often among British Muslim and Afro-Caribbean voters than among Indian or Chinese voters. Working-class ethnic minority voters who live in Labour ‘heartland’ seats also appear to have remained much more loyal to the party than their white British working-class counterparts.

However, Labour’s electoral advantage from this strong support is weakened somewhat by the concentration of ethnic minority voters in some of Labour’s safest seats. The Runnymede Trust calculates that half of ethnic minority Britons live in the 75 most diverse seats, where the electorate is one-third minority, while half do not. Most of these seats have fairly large Labour majorities. There are, however, some highly marginal seats, such as Chelsea and Kensington in London, with large ethnic minority populations.

Labour has the potential to try to develop a second flank of core support among younger ethnic minority voters too. Ethnic minorities make up around one-fifth of the first time vote and are as likely or slightly more likely to be university graduates as white Britons. If younger voters, particularly those who go to university and those who hold comparatively liberal political views, were to turn from Labour supporters into Labour loyalists, then the party might develop a next generation core vote among ethnic minority voters. This is the group whom the Conservatives and other parties need to contest in the future if they wish to reduce Labour’s advantage with minority voters.

1.2 Loyal Conservatives

This is a much smaller, 'dissenting,' loyalist tribe. Just 5% of ethnic minority respondents to our poll see themselves as committed Conservative voters – around a quarter of the Conservative ethnic minority vote. This small group of voters see their own values and views best reflected by the Conservatives. They are keen to challenge the assumption that ethnic minorities must be on the left, often seeing this as pigeon-holing or reflecting a sense of 'entitlement' by the Labour party to ethnic minority voters.

It is not surprising that committed Conservative ethnic minority voters are likely to have higher incomes and professional jobs, and to work in the private rather than the public sector. The growing number of ethnic minority Britons who send their children to private schools are also more likely to support the Conservatives. The Conservative success in its most ethnically diverse seat in Harrow East – its only seat where ethnic minority voters make up the constituency majority - is based upon a local sense that there is nothing at all unusual in successful British Asians voting Conservative.

The challenge for the Conservative Party is how they increase their vote share among more affluent, professional middle-class ethnic minorities who may share Conservative views on issues like taxation, spending and the role of the state.

2. The floating voters

Most ethnic minority voters see themselves as open to persuasion – but that depends on feeling that there are credible offers to choose between.

2.1 Leaning left – but open to offers

The median ethnic minority voter is a Labour voter who is interested in hearing how the other parties want to compete for the vote. If there was a sense in 2015 that all parties were going out of their way to compete actively for ethnic minority votes, that was less evident in the 2017 contest.

The ethnic minority vote appears more likely to be up for grabs in the south than the north of England, and in suburban more than inner city seats. The growing ethnic minority population in towns such as Bedford, Crawley, Milton Keynes, Reading and Swindon are both more likely to be floating voters than those in inner city seats in Birmingham or Liverpool, and also of particular interest to the political parties because such suburban seats supply many of the marginal constituencies in which elections are won and lost.

Half of ethnic minority voters say they either considered the Conservative party in 2017 or think they would do so in future. One in three ethnic minority respondents to the poll say they did not vote Conservative in 2017, but could do so in future. A similar proportion (29%) of respondents to the ICM poll say they voted Labour but considered other parties, or would do so in future.

2.2 Voting Conservative, but not necessarily identifying as Tory

The Conservatives did win about one-fifth of the ethnic minority vote in 2017, but ethnic minority Conservative voters appear to see their support for the party as somewhat more contingent than other Tory voters. Some 15% of the electorate, overall, say they would ‘only’ vote Conservative – which is not far under half of the national vote won by the Conservatives in 2015 and 2017. A smaller minority of ethnic minority respondents in the ICM poll were three times as likely to say that they would consider other parties.

This partly reflects the fact that there will have been quite a few first time Conservative voters in both 2010 and 2015. Voters who thought that David Cameron was the better choice for Prime Minister in 2015, and who didn’t want to take a risk with the economic recovery, may have found themselves voting pragmatically for the Conservatives in those particular circumstances, rather than expressing a sense of identification with the party. Some David Cameron voters will have found it harder to vote for Theresa May, yet may also have done so, perhaps more reluctantly, in preference to Jeremy Corbyn.

The Conservatives have a good chance of holding onto voters who did stick with the party, perhaps somewhat reluctantly, in 2017 but cannot take their existing ethnic minority support for granted in the effort to expand it.

2.3 The occasional voters

One other significant question about ethnic minority voters is whether they will use their full share of electoral voice and power.

Ethnic minority Britons are more likely than white British residents to not be registered to vote. In 2010, around one in five ethnic minority Britons were not registered, compared to 7% of white Britons⁵. The reasons for under-registration are complex and partly reflect the demographic profile of ethnic minority Britons, which gives them a greater chance of being in those groups of voters who tend to be under-registered: the under-25s; those who live in private rented accommodation, and who may drop off the register when they move house. There are also more specific reasons: some of those with the right to vote, particularly from the Commonwealth, may not realise that they are eligible, for example.

The evidence suggests that there is a considerably smaller gap between white and ethnic minority Britons in voting, once registered. Here, the challenges in encouraging ethnic minority turnout again reflect broader challenges, for example, of increasing youth vote turnout. The contrast in turnout between the 2015 and 2017 general elections showed that this can have a considerable impact, particularly in close elections.

6. Conclusion: The One Nation challenge

Britain's growing diversity is a demographic and electoral fact that no political party can afford to ignore. An estimated 10% of the 2017 electorate is from an ethnic minority – somewhat lower than the share of the population as a whole (around 14-15%) due to citizenship, voter registration and age effects, but a pool of 3 million votes all the same. What's more, that proportion will increase at every election because Britain's non-white population is young: fewer non-white voters die each year while a greater number reach voting age and join the electorate.

This fact poses an obvious challenge to a Conservative Party that only secured a fifth of these votes in 2017. Yet it also contains a challenge for Labour, too. As more young, 'up for grabs' ethnic minority voters swell the electorate each year, the partisan allegiance to Labour of those older non-white voters, who remember the party as their champion from the landmark equalities acts of the 60s and 70s, is diluted. So Labour's greater appeal to all younger voters serves it well with ethnic minorities too – but it cannot take these votes for granted and should have an offer to those aspirational, middle-class minorities who have moved out of the big cities to less-diverse constituencies, if the party seeks to expand its electoral appeal enough to win a majority.

Politicians of all parties who seek to broaden their appeal to Britain's growing ethnic minority electorate should consider the five key points set out below.

I. Bridge Britain's identity divides, rather than polarising them.

The 2016 referendum illuminated the deep divides in modern Britain – between different generations, between the capital and the regions, and by class, education and ethnicity.

The central reason why Theresa May's 2017 realignment bid failed can be stated simply: she gambled on choosing one side of Britain's growing identity divide, to convert it into a party majority – and lost. The realignment bid failed on two fronts. Northern seats dominated by blue-collar voters proved much more stubborn to the Conservative advance than had been anticipated; and several southern seats, particularly Remain-voting university towns and those with large ethnic minority electorates, also rejected an electoral pitch that was aimed at a very different demographic.

Perhaps one lesson of the 2017 general election is that minor parties – who aspire to secure between 10% to 15% of the national vote – could pick one side of an increasing economic, social and cultural polarisation in British society and seek to mobilise it. Yet parties who want to govern Britain can't afford to do that: they will need a much broader electoral appeal, reaching those who still feel anxious about the pace of change in modern,

multi-ethnic Britain as well as those who welcome the benefits of diversity and migration or are part of those demographic changes themselves.

For Labour, this will mean engaging more fully with an immigration debate that it would rather stay out of. It will mean understanding the concerns of voters – many of them in Labour’s heartland constituencies in the north and midlands - who are anxious about the pressures brought by rapid population increases on housing, schools and hospitals, as well as on blue-collar jobs and wages. And it will mean coming up with sensible proposals, to manage these pressures, that stay true to Labour’s values, which are fair to both migrants and the communities that they come to join.

2. Strike the balance on immigration: recognise the pressures and the gains.

Those whose parents and grandparents were migrants to Britain are more likely to believe that there are both economic and cultural benefits from immigration. Yet they have similar views to other voters about the pressures of immigration too. So Britain’s ethnic minority voters are in many ways natural Eurosceptics – with a strong sense of British identity and a weak sense of European identity. They are sceptical about whether freedom of movement for Europeans is a fair immigration system but they swung for Remain in the 2016 referendum - by about two-to-one among British Asians and three-to-one among black Britons – largely through mistrust of the motives of some of the leading voices for the cause of leaving the European Union, such as Nigel Farage of UKIP.

If politicians get it right, most of Britain’s ethnic minorities could form part of a ‘moderate majority’ coalition for managed migration: open to student and skilled migration from both the EU and beyond it, but concerned about the scale and pace of recent immigration and sceptical about starkly different treatment of European and Commonwealth migrants. During the National Conversation on Immigration, conducted by British Future and Hope Not Hate in towns and cities across the UK, ethnic minority participants have often combined an account of how their own family history reflects how migration has become part of our society, while often also voicing some of the most strongly held views about why a commitment to integration on all sides is an essential part of what makes immigration work well.

So politicians will need to change the way they talk about migration and migrants: to make clear that Britain welcomes those who come to the UK to contribute to our economy and society while also underlining the need for a fair and efficient system to determine who can and who can’t make their home here.

3. Have an integration agenda that is about One Nation, not about ‘them and us’.

Integration should be an important theme for this government. It is an area where there should be significant opportunities to make progress in a hung Parliament. The government’s response to Dame Louise Casey’s recent integration review should form the basis of a national integration strategy, making clear the leadership role that national government will take on integration and the policies it will seek to implement. That should set out how it will seek to increase English language learning, promote contact between people of different backgrounds and promote equality of opportunity.

The publication of the race disparity audit also offers an important opportunity to connect up the integration agenda. The Prime Minister has spoken of the ‘burning injustices’ of racial inequality, and has indicated that there will be some very uncomfortable findings in the review. It is important and welcome to shine a light on inequality and discrimination. Where the government has clear evidence that practice in public services falls short of upholding the principles of equal treatment and equal opportunity, that will necessarily generate pressure for significant change. This also highlights why successful integration must address issues of opportunity and fairness alongside those of identity and belonging. Understanding how class and ethnic disadvantage interact should also help to ensure that tackling racial inequality is located in a broader agenda for equal opportunity and fairness. That should seek to defuse the danger of a ‘competing grievances’ contest which sets tackling racial inequality and class disadvantage against each other, and instead constructs a broader political and social consensus on tackling barriers to equal opportunity.

Government should also take care to talk about integration as an ‘everybody issue’ – not something that only concerns migrants or minorities. There is a strong consensus about what migrants themselves need to do and how broader society needs to respond, in upholding the commitment to fair treatment and equal opportunities, for incomers and their children to become fully integral to our society. But it also feels outdated and alienating for many non-white British citizens whose parents or grandparents came to Britain as migrants if a ‘them and us’ approach to the integration debate not only places all of the emphasis on ethnic minority Britons, but also still sounds like it regards them as part of ‘migrant communities’, finding their place in the society they were born into. That is why the shift to an ‘everybody’ integration agenda, about the common responsibilities of our shared citizenship, is overdue. Integration matters to all of us so it should involve all of us – if it doesn’t do that, it isn’t really integration.

Integration offers scope for considerable cross-party consensus. Labour and Conservative politicians should work together to take forward an ‘everybody’ integration agenda that promotes rights as well as responsibilities and seeks to help heal the divisions in Britain not just by faith or ethnicity but also by class, geography, age and educational achievement.

4. Recognise how playing ‘good minority, bad minority’ might backfire.

A ‘One Nation’ party should aspire to win support from across the society it seeks to govern. Where there is evidence of a party struggling to win any significant level of support from a particular section of a society, it should ask itself why. Both the Conservative party’s historically poor performance with ethnic minorities and Labour’s increasingly mixed reputation and tense relationships with Jewish voters ought to trigger a response: they are both examples where even those who feel like they should be natural supporters of a party feel there could be a significant barrier to voting for it. That should set alarm bells ringing about whether the party in question is doing enough to uphold the inclusive values that it professes.

This report shows how the electoral and ethical case go together given the growing diversity of British society over time. But there can be a tension too. Electoral strategists are interested in votes. They may have increasingly powerful tools with which to take a micro-segmented approach to the electorate, choosing to narrow the focus to particular groups, and perhaps to try to offer quite distinct offers.

The Conservatives know that they are stronger with Hindu and Sikh British Indians than they are with British Muslim voters from a Pakistani or Bangladeshi background. They may have more short-term potential with middle-class black African voters than with Afro-Caribbean and other black British voters. Particular ethnic groups also have distinct age and socio-economic profiles. But parties should also recognise the danger of too narrow a ‘slicing and dicing’ approach to micro-segmenting the ethnic minority electorate.

Being seen to play ‘good minority, bad minority’ may backfire – not just in seeming to treat some groups as ‘out-of-reach’, rather than having a long-term strategy to make progress – but also because it can appear cynical to the target voters themselves, particularly as an approach to overcoming a historical reputational problem. Another lesson for the Conservatives from Zac Goldsmith’s unsuccessful Mayoral bid – criticised for pigeon-holing British Indian voters with messages about the risks to family jewellery, as well as creating controversy in the way it evoked the threat of Islamist extremism in running against Sadiq Khan – was that a party may run reputational risks in the way that it talks about ethnic minorities and integration with some white voters too, not just ethnic minorities. The growing number of young

graduate voters also hold liberal views on identity and integration – and were among those unimpressed by the tone and tenor of the 2016 Mayoral campaign.

The Labour Party also needs to ensure it takes seriously challenges to the way in which it has engaged with ethnic minority voters. That includes the challenge that it has been too dependent on relationships with so-called ‘community leaders’ who can overclaim about their ability to ‘deliver’ ethnic minority votes as though this was a block vote; or turning a blind eye to biraderi networks if those involved are onside. Any party needs to have a credible defence against charges that it engages in unethical or undemocratic practice for short-term votes – or it may suffer significant reputational and electoral damage. Voters from all ethnic backgrounds will want to ensure that a party’s approach to voters is about ‘fairness, not favours’, as London Mayor Sadiq Khan once put it. That should mean a strong commitment to ensuring there is equal opportunity for those from every background – including a stronger push on inclusion and anti-discrimination.

There is a welcome generational shift towards increasing criticism of ‘gatekeeper’ models of engagement from younger ethnic minority voters, itself a product of greater integration in education and society. The lack of opportunities for women from ethnic minority backgrounds has also been a contentious issue, though there has been significant progress towards a stronger share of voice for ethnic minority women in national politics.

5. Make an offer to younger voters

Politicians too often think about the challenge of reaching ethnic minority voters in terms of how often they attend temples, mosques and gurdwaras. That type of symbolic outreach has its place – but it can also feel rather “othering” and patronising, especially to younger British-born voters in their twenties and thirties who aren’t always impressed if politicians seem to see them primarily through the lens of their parents’ country of origin. So one of the most important lessons of the 2017 campaign was that the Conservatives did not slip back with ethnic minority voters for very ‘ethnic specific’ reasons but, rather, fell short with ethnic minority voters for similar reasons to those that repelled other voters. Indeed, the under-24s are more likely, overall, than ethnic minority voters to currently say they would ‘never’ vote Conservative.

The 2017 General Election saw a considerably wider polarisation between the parties by age and by education than in the previous two elections, while narrowing the social class gap between the parties. This was an unintended consequence of the Conservative election pitch: what Theresa May and her team underestimated, while winning over a significant number of Ukip voters and other non-Conservative leavers, was that there are two sides to a polarising coin. The 2017 General Election saw an increased engagement and mobilisation of younger voters.

The generation gap is being much debated in its own right – but it also has a particular importance for any successful Conservative strategy in winning over ethnic minority voters, given that non-white Britain has a considerably younger demography than the nation as a whole. The Conservatives are less likely to make significant progress in shifting the views of a great many older first generation migrants who have been voting Labour for decades. What the party needs to do – strategically – is encourage a greater number of the next generation to shop around politically rather more than their parents and grandparents did. It will struggle to make that pitch with young ethnic minority Britons if it is finding it increasingly difficult to get a hearing from voters until they enter their late 30s and early 40s.

If a party is going backwards with young voters, with graduates, with voters who live in the capital and other big cities – and the Conservatives did so on all of these fronts in 2017 – then it is not going to make progress with its strategy to increase the ethnic minority vote. Parties that want to govern need to appeal across a multi-ethnic society – and whether parties can build a broad appeal that defuses a ‘generation clash’ in politics will have a significant impact on whether they can do so.

Notes

1. See (6) below.
2. *How did this result happen? My post-vote survey*, Lord Ashcroft, 9 June 2017, <http://lordashcroftpolls.com/2017/06/result-happen-post-vote-survey/>
3. *Young voters, class and turnout: how Britain voted in 2017*, Guardian datablog 20 June 2017, <https://www.theguardian.com/politics/datablog/ng-interactive/2017/jun/20/young-voters-class-and-turnout-how-britain-voted-in-2017>
4. Ethnic Minority British Election Survey (EMBES), Heath, A., Sanders, D., Fisher, S., Soblewska, M., Rosenblatt, G. University of Oxford, <https://www.sociology.ox.ac.uk/research/embes-the-ethnic-minority-british-election-study.html>
5. *Labour gets two thirds of the BME vote*, Runnymede Trust, 9 June 2017, <http://www.runnymedetrust.org/blog/labour-gets-two-thirds-of-bme-vote>
6. A slightly different methodology was used to calculate potential swing in seats that the Conservatives could have taken from the SNP or Liberal Democrats. While elsewhere the votes projected to be won by the Conservatives by closing the 'ethnic gap' have all been subtracted from the Labour total, in SNP/ Lib Dem seats we have subtracted them equally from SNP/Lib Dem and Labour.
7. Based on UK Polling Report target seat rankings <http://ukpollingreport.co.uk/2015guide/conservative-targets/>
8. Maria Sobolewska, *Is Labour losing the ethnic minority vote?* New Statesman, 5th January 2015 <http://www.newstatesman.com/politics/uk/2015/01/labour-losing-ethnic-minority-vote>
9. Omar Khan, *Registration and Race: Achieving Equal Political Representation*, in *Race and Elections* (Runnymede Trust, 2015)

About British Future

British Future is an independent, non-partisan thinktank and registered charity engaging people's hopes and fears about integration and immigration, opportunity and identity.

These debates, from EU immigration and refugee protection to integration of people from different faiths and backgrounds, remain noisy and polarised. But since British Future's founding in 2012, we have developed a unique understanding and expertise on public attitudes to these issues in the UK, through in-depth qualitative and quantitative research. We have found that there is a surprising amount of common ground among the public on which they can agree.

Securing political consent for policy change on these issues requires public support and it is possible to build this support with the right approach. That includes:

- Developing messaging that resonates with the 'Anxious Middle', the majority of the British public who are neither wholly pro- nor anti- immigration;
- Working with new messengers to build broad coalitions that reach wider audiences;
- Projecting our findings publicly to inform national debate, contributing to discussions on issues such as EU migration, integration, refugee protection, the status of EU nationals in the UK after Brexit, combating racism and xenophobia, international student migration and English identity.

British Future engages people's legitimate concerns and offers constructive solutions in response. We believe we can build a broad consensus among the public and opinion-formers for reforms to immigration and integration policy that work for everyone.

Our long-term aim is a country where we are no longer 'Them and Us' but rather a confident and welcoming Britain, inclusive and fair to all.

Further publications from British Future, available online, include:

Time to get it right: Finding consensus on Britain's future immigration policy, September 2017

What next after Brexit? August 2016

Britain's immigration offer to Europe, October 2016

Making citizenship matter, February 2016

How to talk about immigration, November 2014

Do mention the war: Will 1914 matter in 2014?, August 2013

British Future...

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