



Ethnicity and electoral fraud in Britain



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ABSTRACT

Several reports have highlighted that, within Britain, allegations of electoral fraud tend to be more common in areas with large Pakistani and Bangladeshi communities. However, the extent of this association has not yet been quantified. Using data at the local authority level, this paper shows that percentage Pakistani and Bangladeshi (logged) is a robust predictor of two measures of electoral fraud allegations: one based on designations by the Electoral Commission, and one based on police enquiries. Indeed, the association persists after controlling for other minority shares, demographic characteristics, socio-economic deprivation, and anti-immigration attitudes. I interpret this finding with reference to the growing literature on consanguinity (cousin marriage) and corruption. Rates of cousin marriage tend to be high in countries such as Pakistan and Bangladesh, which may have fostered norms of nepotism and in-group favoritism that persist over time. To bolster my interpretation, I use individual level survey data to show that, within Europe, migrants from countries with high rates of cousin marriage are more likely to say that family should be one's main priority in life, and are less likely to say it is wrong for a public official to request a bribe.

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1. Introduction

The sorts of offences that constitute electoral fraud in Britain are set out in the *Representation of the People Act 1983* (White and Johnston, 2017). These include: undue influence (pressuring someone into voting or not voting); impersonation; bribery; treating (non-monetary bribery); and supplying false information (e.g., falsely registering on the electoral roll, or submitting fraudulent postal votes). Over the last few years, several official reports have highlighted that allegations of electoral fraud tend to be more common in areas with large Pakistani and Bangladeshi communities (Electoral Commission, 2014; Pickles, 2016; White and Johnston, 2017). In his 2016 review into electoral fraud, Sir Eric Pickles identified a number of incidents involving Britons of Pakistani and Bangladeshi origin.¹ First, he noted (p. 22),

Evidence was presented of pressure being put on vulnerable members of some ethnic minority communities, particularly women and young people, to vote according to the will of the

elders, especially in communities of Pakistani and Bangladeshi background

Second, he noted (p. 28)

The review considered evidence of voters in Pakistani and Bangladeshi communities reporting concerns that the secrecy of the ballot was undermined by party activists' knowledge about their choice to vote by post

Third, he noted (p. 45),

In the Tower Hamlets case, the Election Court heard how a voter was seen crying outside a polling station after allegedly being told by a supporter of Lutfur Rahman that it was “un-Islamic” not to vote for Rahman, and that you were “not a good Muslim” if you did not vote for him. The court found that Muslim clerics had participated in Lutfur Rahman's campaign to persuade Muslim voters that it was their religious duty to vote for him

Indeed, the finding by the Electoral Commission in its 2014 report that allegations of electoral fraud are particularly common in some Pakistani and Bangladeshi communities inspired at least two subsequent academic studies. Gill et al. (2015) carried out qualitative interviews in eight electoral wards with large Pakistani and Bangladeshi communities: four that had been identified as having a

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¹ In addition, Fisher et al. (2014) found that Britons of Pakistani origins were significantly more likely to vote for Pakistani candidates standing for election, yet Britons of Indian and Afro-Caribbean origin were no more likely to vote for Indian or Afro-Caribbean candidates, respectively.

high risk of electoral fraud, and four that had not. They concluded that individuals in these communities were often put under pressure by elders, and sometimes did not understand proper electoral protocol due to low literacy. The authors identified social deprivation, high housing density and close-knit family relations as among the ultimate explanatory factors. Sobolewska et al. (2015) conducted a very similar study: they interviewed political activists of Pakistani and Bangladeshi Asian extraction in four high risk electoral wards and four low risk wards. Their conclusions were very similar to those of Gill et al. (2015), namely that the main factors contributing to the prevalence of electoral fraud in Pakistani and Bangladeshi communities are pressures from elders, language and knowledge barriers, strong kinship networks, and social deprivation.

Both Gill et al. (2015) and Sobolewska et al. (2015) highlighted the importance of *biraderi* within the British Pakistani community and, to a lesser extent, *brath-thitho* within the British Bangladeshi community. *Biraderi* is the name given to the family system that prevails among individuals from the Punjab and Kashmir regions of Pakistan. Each *biraderi* constitutes a clan of extended families that are linked to one another through ancestral ties. These clans are both hierarchical and patriarchal in nature; male community leaders exert strict control over them. Indeed, the term *biraderi* translates literally as *male kin*. They serve a number of key social functions, such as furnishing individuals with a sense of identity, assisting families during the process of migration, and providing new immigrants with an established support network upon arrival. *Brath-thitho* refers to the system of social relations that prevails among individuals from the *Sylhet* region of Bangladesh. These are somewhat looser social structures, based on regional affinities and shared migration experiences, rather than kinship and ancestry. The term *brath-thitho* translates literally as *brotherly relationships*. (For further details, see Gill et al., 2015; Sobolewska et al., 2015; see also Bittles and Small, 2016).

To the author's knowledge, the extent of the association between allegations of electoral fraud and the presence of Pakistani and Bangladeshi communities has not yet been quantified. Using data at the local authority level,² Section 2 confirms that percentage Pakistani and Bangladeshi (logged) is a moderate-to-strong predictor of electoral fraud allegations. Moreover, it shows that the association persists after controlling for a host of local authority characteristics, including the Indian and Afro-Caribbean shares, socio-economic deprivation, and anti-immigration attitudes. In Section 3, this finding is interpreted with reference to the growing literature on consanguinity (cousin marriage) and corruption. Rates of cousin marriage tend to be high in countries such as Pakistan and Bangladesh, which may have fostered norms of nepotism and in-group favoritism that persist over time. Consistent with this interpretation, an analysis of individual level data in Section 4 indicates that, within Europe, immigrants from countries with high rates of cousin marriage are more likely to say family should be one's main priority in life, and are less likely to say it is wrong for a public official to request a bribe. Finally, Section 5 summarizes the paper's argument, and outlines several important limitations.

2. Analysis of ethnicity and electoral fraud in Britain

2.1. Measures and data

Gauging the frequency of electoral fraud within a particular area

is by no means straightforward. Ideally, one would want an objective measure like the number of convictions for electoral offences. However, there are several reasons why relying on convictions is unsatisfactory at the present time. To date, there have been very few convictions for electoral offences relative to the number of allegations, which suggests that many offences may have gone unpunished.³ Indeed, As Sir Eric Pickles's (2016) report notes, both the Electoral Commission (an independent body with the remit of regulating British elections) and the police have been criticized for lack of action. Regarding the Electoral Commission, Pickles (2016, p. 48–50) reports that many of the organizations and individuals whom he liaised with felt that the Commission had not responded with sufficient strength to allegations of electoral fraud. For example, despite years of warnings about misconduct in Tower Hamlets,⁴ the Electoral Commission had assigned the borough's electoral system a gold-star rating. Regarding the Police, Pickles (2016, p. 50–52) reports claims of repeated inaction, and concerns that some police forces had become too closely associated with particular politicians, as well as claims that the police had failed to intervene in order to avoid accusations of discrimination. As Pickles (2016, p. 22) notes,

There were concerns that influence and intimidation within households may not be reported, and that state institutions had turned a blind eye to such behavior because of 'politically correct' over-sensitivities about ethnicity and religion

In its 2016 report, the Electoral Commission identified 18 local authorities where "there has been a history of allegations of electoral fraud and where the risk of further allegations arising is higher". These 18 local authorities were highlighted again in the Parliamentary report on electoral fraud published in January 2017 (White and Johnston, 2017). They are as follows: Birmingham; Blackburn with Darwen; Bradford; Bristol; Burnley; Calderdale; Coventry; Derby; Hyndburn; Kirklees; Luton; Oldham; Pendle; Peterborough; Slough; Tower Hamlets; Walsall; Woking. Thus, the first measure of electoral fraud I utilize is simply a binary variable which takes the value 1 for the 18 high-risk local authorities, and takes the value 0 for all other local authorities. A potential problem with this measure is that the Electoral Commission might have identified high-risk local authorities partly on the basis of their demographic characteristics (although they do not admit to having done so in the report). I therefore utilize another measure of electoral fraud as well.

The other measure I utilize is based on allegations of electoral fraud made to Police between 2010 and 2015, taken from datasets supplied by the Electoral Commission (2017). The utilization of this variable is based on the assumption that allegations of electoral fraud by local residents constitute a reasonable proxy for the actual incidence of electoral fraud. I first summed up the number of distinct cases of alleged electoral fraud in each local authority from 2010 to 2015. The total number of cases over 379 local authorities was 1194. Each case represents an individual police enquiry into an allegation relating to offences under the *Representation of the People Act 1983*. Because the distribution of cases was highly skewed with a large number of 0s and 1s, I took the logarithm of 1 + the number of cases of alleged electoral fraud. The correlation between the measure

² Local authorities are administrative bodies in local government; there are over 400 in the UK, and they contain anywhere from tens of thousands to more than a million people. For further details, see Local Government Information Unit (2015).

³ Though it is of course also consistent with many allegations being false or unprovable.

⁴ In 2015, an election in Tower Hamlets was declared void and had to be re-run after it became evident that a man named Lutfur Rahman and his agent had engaged in a "litany of corrupt and illegal practices". However, no criminal prosecution was brought by the Metropolitan Police (Pickles, 2016, p. 51).

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