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# Think global, act local:

A study of the political choices of British Muslim students  
April 2010



**bmsd**

british muslims for secular democracy

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# Background

British Muslims have come under intense scrutiny post 9/11. This is partly because some are drawn to extremist ideologies and activities, and partly because countless other British citizens (including some people of influence), see all followers of Islam as the enemy within, to watch and fear. Parallels have been drawn with the demonisation of other communities throughout the ages. For example, derogatory press statements about Jews in the late 19th century compelled the Jewish Chronicle to respond, in an edition from 1901: “Ours is a religion of love and peace, not hatred and war.”<sup>1</sup>

The current suspicion of Muslims has led to hyperactive media scrutiny and surveillance by the police and other security professionals. The Mayor of London commissioned a report in November 2007, which found that in one particular week in 2006, over 90% of UK media articles that referred to Islam and Muslims were negative.<sup>2</sup> Young British Muslims’ perception of their identities as citizens and stakeholders in the democratic process is, to some extent, shaped by this intense focus, which generates a deep sense of alienation and separatism in some of them.<sup>3</sup>

At **bmsd** we saw the need to research the perceived democratic deficit in young British Muslims, to inform effective strategies to increase their democratic involvement. Researchers and authors thus far have tended to concentrate either on theology or on specific political ideologies, and less on the democratic participation of British Muslims. As part of our ongoing democracy initiative, we organise democracy workshops with young Muslims in partnership with other organisations. In addition, we conducted this pilot study for a larger research project on factors affecting the voting choices of Muslims in Britain. This pilot focused on young Muslim students throughout England and Wales, and was carried out between November 2009 and March 2010.

In order to gain a more nuanced understanding of the political agency of young Muslims, and assess the range of factors that affect their engagement with the democratic process, **bmsd** conducted a qualitative study asking young Muslims for their thoughts and feelings on the relevant issues. Qualitative research is not concerned with numbers and statistics, but about in-depth conversations on certain subjects. More specifically, the project sought:

- to probe their awareness of active citizenship that crosses ethnic and religious boundaries.
- to explore internal and external barriers to the civic participation of young Muslims.
- to explore effective strategies to increase the democratic involvement of young Muslims, and their sense of civic entitlement and responsibility.

Unjust anti-terrorism laws trigger some of the anger (a frustration shared by non-Muslims too). However, the result of the disproportionate focus on Muslims in a growing number of studies and investigations, coupled with excessive surveillance, is leading to an unstable relationship between the unfairly-maligned citizens and their country. The decrease in trust between them is evident. A pertinent example of how this can happen is the Office for Security and Counter-Terrorism’s Channel programme, described as “a community-based initiative which uses existing partnerships between the police, local authorities and the local community to identify those at risk from violent extremism and to support them, primarily through community-based interventions.”

In its first 18 months of operation, 200 children (some as young as 13) had been identified as “at risk” of extremism, which paved the way for intervention from a range of authority figures. As one youth worker put it, “Badly-behaved young persons who happen to be Muslim or who have

said something in anger then become known to the system as 'at risk.' One hundred per cent of the time so far, there has just been the usual issues with young people, so we refer them to relevant services on issues such as drugs and alcohol, literacy and numeracy, or bereavement."<sup>4</sup>

Various researchers have attempted to explore Muslim identity crises in a number of ways:

- Through the prism of global insecurity.
- In relation to the spread of Wahabism.<sup>5</sup> Roy (2004) suggested that the recruitment of overseas imams is partially responsible for the proliferation of these separatist ideologies.<sup>6</sup>
- General disillusionment and a lack of opportunities for Muslims in Europe.

While all of these are important factors, too often, unconscious prejudice informs the research and some unsustainable generalisations appear, even in very respectable publications. For example, Kepel (2004) argues that Europe is going to be "the battlefield on which the future of global Islam should be decided."<sup>7</sup> Many of these texts do not thoroughly consider the intersectionality between different facets of British Muslims' identities, nor the impact of these upon their political choices.

#### Notes:

- 1 Freedland, J. "We were once the 'maniacs.'" *Jewish Chronicle*, September 2009. <http://www.thejc.com/comment/columnists/we-were-once-maniacs>
- 2 "The search for common ground: Muslims, non-Muslims and the UK media." Greater London Authority, November 2007.
- 3 Ahmed, S. "Seen and Not Heard: Voices of Young British Muslims." Policy Research Centre, September 2009.
- 4 Kundnani, A. "Spooked: How not to prevent violent extremism." Institute of Race Relations, October 2009.
- 5 Wahabism is a literalist denomination in Islam based on the teachings of Muhammed Ibn Abd-al Wahhab (1703 – 1792) in 18th century Saudi Arabia.
- 6 Roy, O. "Globalised Islam: The search for a new Ummah." London: Hurst & Co, 2004.
- 7 Kepel, G. "The war for Muslim minds." Massachusetts: The Belkin Press of Harvard University, 2004.

## Methodology

Face-to-face and telephone interviews were conducted with 24 British Muslims between the ages of 17 and 22, from November 2009 to March 2010. Twenty-three of these were students, while one was a recent graduate.

#### Participant breakdown by gender

Male	15	Female	9
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#### Participant breakdown by ethnic origin

Arab	4
Black African	1
Indian	1
Pakistani	18

#### Participant breakdown by location

Bradford	4
Cardiff	1
Hull	1
Leicester	1
London	11
Slough	4
Surrey	2

# Brief summary of background and research findings

Muslim communities across the UK have become increasingly organised and innovative in their efforts to influence public policy e.g. initiatives like Muslim Vote 2010. This applies to a range of issues such as education, healthcare provision, discrimination in the workplace and public services, and anti-terror legislation. All the students in this survey expressed opinions on these fundamental issues, whether they regarded themselves to be “political” or not. Voting was generally viewed as an important activity, but merely one aspect of a much larger collection of activist “tools.”

The participants who did not strongly align themselves with particular political parties found themselves attracted to other forms of civic engagement, such as attending community groups or debates on specific issues such as the Israel-Palestine conflict. Hotly-debated single-issue campaigns like these provide the impetus for a large amount of political activity, but most of the students we interviewed had also tackled broader policy areas from a pro-active standpoint.

While all the participants identified shortcomings in the British political system, the overwhelming message was one of hope that these problems could be addressed using democratic means.

It is clear that a new generation of Muslim community activists and organisers has emerged, who are proud to be British and Muslim in an era where their loyalties to both of these communities are continually questioned. However, all the participants stated that more work should be done to reduce barriers – both internal and external – that prevent certain elements of the Muslim community from getting involved with the mainstream democratic process.

This is particularly pertinent in regards to engagement with formal structures, such as government agencies.

Under-25s comprise almost half of the UK’s Muslim population.<sup>8</sup> In 2007, the Joseph Rowntree Foundation commissioned a study on electoral participation in the 2001 General Elections. At 59.4%, turnout amongst registered electors of South Asian descent was slightly higher than among non-Asians (58.3%), but South Asians of Hindu and Sikh heritage had higher rates of participation than Muslims. The researchers also found that people across all religious groups were more likely to vote if other members of their household were turning out.<sup>9</sup> Spurred on by the results of this and other research, various civil society organisations have launched campaigns to encourage young Muslims to vote.

## Notes:

- 8 Office for National Statistics, Census 2001. See [www.statistics.gov.uk](http://www.statistics.gov.uk)
- 9 Fieldhouse, E. and Cutts, D. “Electoral Participation of South Asian Communities in England and Wales,” Joseph Rowntree Foundation, February 2007.

# Research questions and answers

## 1) Did you vote at the last General Election?

Of the 24 young Muslims we interviewed, 15 had voted in the last General Election. Four of the nine remaining students explained that they had been unable to vote because they were under the age of 18 at the time.

## 2a) If yes, which factors influenced your decision to vote for a particular party?

When asked about key factors affecting their voting choices, most of the young Muslims said that they considered each party's policies, but no-one admitted to pro-actively reading an entire manifesto. As well as expected topics such as education policy and the invasions of Iraq and Afghanistan, the interviewees based their decisions on some less obvious issues, such as constitutional reform:

**"I am a big fan of the Supreme Court, which was introduced by Labour."**

Female student, Surrey

The students were overwhelmingly concerned with issues of national and international significance, as opposed to local ones. For example, only one female A-Level student from Bradford discussed waiting times at her local GP's surgery. A male student at Queen Mary University stated that his party of choice captured his interest not only because of the policies they espoused, but the broader principles underpinning these policies i.e. the Conservative Party's "spirit of enterprise." Four students admitted that their families influenced their electoral decisions, as this University of Bradford male student summed up:

**"I voted for the Labour Party, as we have been doing since a long time. Factors such as family views on Labour have influenced our decisions."**

**During the Labour Government, a lot of relatives have migrated from Pakistan and have settled here with a good life standard."**

Only one of the young people, who had studied law at Cardiff University, pro-actively characterised themselves as a "loyal" voter who had supported the same party their entire lives.

We found there was an emerging trend: some students are now actively departing from the political choices of their communities. Others made choices independent of their peer group. A UCL student said he had consciously refused to be swayed by his peers when deciding who to vote for:

**"My school was very Tory, but I am pro-socialist. I think it's important to help the poor."**

Some interviewees were drawn to whichever party they perceived had the most "potential to do good." Political parties departing too far from their historical principles put some young Muslim voters off:

**"I look at the multicultural background of a party. I voted Labour last time but not now – they have become more conservative than the Conservatives."**

Female student, BPP Law School

**"I am pro-Labour, but the Socialist Labour Party. New Labour are conservative."**

Male UCL student

## 2b) If you did not vote, can you briefly outline the reasons why not?

Many of the Muslim students who did not vote cited a lack of understanding of specific policy issues as the main reason. One Middlesex University student felt that the terminology in most campaigning literature was not user-friendly:

**“I wasn’t happy with what main parties were offering and don’t think their message is clear for everyone to understand – aiming it towards certain people, not me.”**

This was compounded by a feeling of frustration that even if they had bothered to vote, it would not make any tangible difference to key policy decisions. Several of our interviewees raised concerns about the sincerity of political party candidates:

**“The whole system’s bull; they’re all corrupt.”**

Male student, Slough

**“They say it is democratic but I don’t think it is.”**

Male student, London

**“Do they represent me or their own agenda?”**

Female student, BPP Law School

**“And, even if you do vote for anyone to come into power, what they say, they never do. After a year they don’t end up doing it. I’ll give you a common example: Obama, one of his main aims was to get rid of whatever George Bush did, and one of the main things he said was he was going to get rid of Guantanamo Bay. That hasn’t happened yet, and how long has he been in power?”**

Male student, Slough

Disaffection with the policies of the three largest parties was also a recurring theme, which inspired several young people to seek out other parties that represented their own views more closely:

**“RESPECT, because I agree with what George Galloway stands for.”**

Male student, University of Bradford

Others felt that their electoral input would be dismissed in favour of interest groups that were perceived to be more powerful. As another male student from Slough put it:

**“What’s the point voting? It ain’t gonna make no difference. The whole system is controlled by Zionists.”**

Several organisations have capitalised on this disengagement from the mainstream political process by discouraging young Muslims from voting in any election.<sup>10</sup> They claim that it is an act of disbelief to vote for a political system which is based on man-made laws. Only two of the students who did not vote in the last General Election attributed this decision to their understanding of Islam. The first young male from Slough stated:

**“To be honest, I don’t vote, I heard it’s haraam<sup>11</sup> to vote anyway. That’s what all the imams say, and I got more respect for them than these others; at least those guys know their religion.”**

One student from Bradford cited his interpretation of Islam as the reason why he refused to become politically active, and said that other Muslims should not be encouraged to become activists either:

**“First of all, within the Muslim religion, there is no room for politics. We believe in the law of Allah as outlined and explained by the Qur’an and Sunnah respectively. It is our job to hear and obey, not to say this is what should and shouldn’t happen. Now that this has been said, to be perfectly honest, there is nothing you can do for a Muslim to become politically active unless one is thinking of changing the religion itself, which is impossible. As for those Muslims who are politically active now, they should know that it is not from the religion to speak against our rulers.”**

Notes:

<sup>10</sup> Hizb ut-Tahrir leaflet, April 2010: <http://www.hizb.org.uk/hizb/resources/leaflets/elections-2010-our-strength-is-in-islam-and-unity.html>

<sup>11</sup> “Haraam” means “forbidden.”

A few respondents believed that there was a prohibition on Muslims voting in a secular democracy altogether, and that doing so would compromise one's faith and reputation in the community.

**"With regards to the families or the communities then indeed there is nothing stopping me to vote for any of the political parties, except there may be a sense of pressure by going to a voting poll in the first place, for practicing Muslims should not do this, and so if you are to maintain a 'pious' status within the community or the family itself, one would feel embarrassed to go to such a place."**

Male student, Bradford

Of course, there are many theologians who actively encourage young Muslims to exercise their democratic right to vote, explaining that universal suffrage is one method of fulfilling the Qur'anic injunction to "enjoin what is good and forbid what is evil."<sup>12</sup> Fulfilling civic responsibilities also corresponds with the commandment in the Hadith for Muslims to obey the laws of the nation they live in.<sup>13</sup> Most of the students – whether directly or indirectly – relied on these principles to guide them in their political decision-making.

### 3) Are you politically active in any way other than voting? Please expand further on this.

The participants were asked about their forays into other forms of political activism. Thirteen of the 24 students had been politically active using alternative means. Attending relevant demonstrations and seminars, and writing political blogs, were the most popular. Two students had also canvassed for political candidates:

#### Notes:

<sup>12</sup> Qu'ran Sura 3.110

<sup>13</sup> Sayyiduna Abd Allah ibn Umar narrates that Prophet Mohammed (peace be upon him) said: "It is necessary upon a Muslim to listen to and obey the ruler, as long as one is not ordered to carry out a sin. If he is commanded to commit a sin, then there is no adherence and obedience." (Sahih al-Bukhari, number 2796 & Sunan Tirmizi).

**"We don't look at politics in terms of parties but in terms of issues. I am involved in campaigns. Would I class myself as an activist? I probably would."**

Male student, University of Hull

**"I started concentrating on my volunteering. I did campaigns, knocked on doors, leafleting, telephone canvassing."**

Male student, Cardiff University

The ability to persuade and influence others was highly valued by these students, and the expression of dissenting opinions – as long as they remained civil – was seen as part of a healthy debate. After Baroness Warsi was egged by Al-Muhajiroun in Luton, one female blogger publicly defended her and received criticism for this herself. However, she stuck to her principles and used the blog as a platform to promote non-violent conflict resolution, regardless of one's political background. Several of our interviewees demonstrated tremendous innovation and enterprise in their efforts to get their voices heard:

- A male UCL student had set up his own website showcasing the political writing and poetry of Muslim students across the UK.
- A female A-Level student from Bradford had made a short film on bullying with the charity Leap Confronting Conflict, as well as joining the Citizenship Foundation's Young Muslim Leadership Network.
- A male Queen Mary University student had started a blog with exclusive coverage of Conservative Party events.

Two students thought that economic boycotts were a more effective way of influencing the policies of multinational companies, delivering results in a much shorter timespan than other forms of activism:

“Mainly through boycotting certain anti-Muslim products, like McDonalds, Marks and Spencer’s and Starbucks. They are all run by Zionist groups who kill Palestinians.”

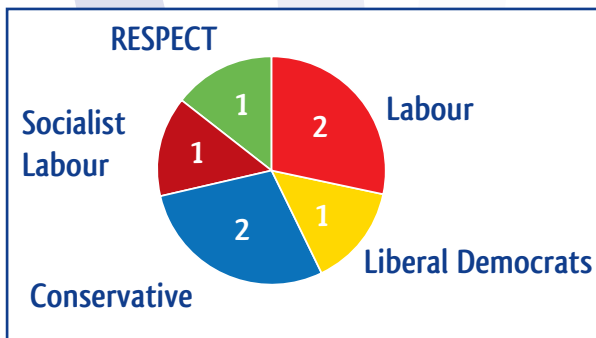
Male student, Slough

“No – I don’t agree with any form of politics. Personally I believe economic policy is the most important thing for a government to control and keep on top of. Politics is not for me, as I believe it is nothing but lies and deceit. Everything is strategically laid out before people to gain votes but in my experiences, promises are hardly ever met.”

Male student, Bradford

Eight of the 24 students stated that they were not politically active in any way other than voting.

Participant breakdown by political affiliation (where disclosed):



Many of the students still participated in non-political forms of civic engagement and held these in high esteem:

“Nah, nothing really. I just help out with the mosque and community centre, politics ain’t my scene.”

Male student, Slough

“No, apart from studying citizenship.”

Female A-Level student, Ealing

4. In your view, what are the main external barriers to the political participation of young Muslims and how could these be overcome? For example racism, fury with foreign policy etc.

In common with many young people across the UK, our participants cited a lack of understanding of the political process as the most significant barrier to political engagement.

“Lack of understanding and time – people prioritise other things.”

Female A-Level student, Ealing

For young Muslims this is exacerbated by the lack of political understanding amongst the elders in their communities. This is attributed to language barriers, and a feeling that these elders do not do enough to integrate with the rest of society.

“Firstly, one, majority of Asians in this country don’t really understand the system to start with, they can’t really speak the language very well, our elders can’t really speak the language, even people coming over. Like I said, people outside London in places like Blackburn and Preston and places like that, they can’t really speak English. None of them are really in touch with society, they are sort of in their own little world.”

Male student, London

The alienation of young Muslims from mainstream society came through:

“Everyone hates Muslims, we have no chance to integrate in this society. We can never be united with them – they have already made their minds up about us.”

Male student, Slough

“We’re different from them; they ain’t gonna respect us anyway. Do you think they respect a woman in hijab?”

Male student, Slough

“I don’t think Muslims are made to feel like they are British citizens. They are British but not seen as such, so feel segregated.”

Male student, Middlesex University

“There’s evidence to show that young people aged 18 do not vote, so I’m not convinced that 16-year-olds would. How to reach out to young Muslims? They feel marginalised and not given the ability to express their opinions as they may want to, and might have to water down their views in public. In a healthy democracy, we should challenge people across the board. We can debate in snooker halls, pool clubs, university campuses, but where are the structured arenas for debate and discussion?”

Male student, University of Hull

However, some of the interviewees devised constructive solutions to overturn what they saw as a perpetual “victim mentality.”

There were respondents who were convinced that religion was used as a defence mechanism to shield the Muslim community from problems they were unable – or unwilling – to address:

“We are led to believe that we are victims. When you think you are powerless, you start to play the role of being powerless, so when you start to empower yourself you realise you can make a difference. I believe, ‘The most powerful person is the person who is the most determined.’ We use our religion constantly to defend ourselves from mistakes in our community. We need to separate religious ideology from our political perspectives because not everyone is Muslim. We do keep to ourselves, which is a problem.”

Female student, London

The apathy of certain students emanated from their belief that voting would not make a tangible difference to policy-making. They cited the conflicts in Iraq and Palestine as examples of the UK Government ignoring mainstream Muslim opinion. Respondents also expressed more generic reasons,

such as the short-term nature of certain manifesto pledges, believing these are more about winning votes than sustaining a consistent policy. Some of them only saw a tenuous link between their own day-to-day activities and the mainstream political process.

“Nah, I got my own worries to worry about. I ain’t got time for politics, it’s all cr\*p anyway – it won’t change anything.”

Male student, Slough

“There needs to be more awareness of world events in school from GCSE level onwards. Anyone younger than that won’t be interested, unless it affects them directly.”

Female student, Surrey

“Lack of trust of politicians.”

Female A-Level student, Ealing

“It doesn’t make any difference. The way this country is, or the way particular countries are, it takes a lot more than marches to change a government or to overthrow a government, if you know what I mean. It takes a lot more than that and to be honest you can have as many marches as you can and the British Government will still do what they want to do, they will still invade Afghanistan, they will still invade Iraq, whatever we say. You know what I mean. There were so many protests when that guy, what’s his name, the Lockerbie bomber, was released, so many protests in Edinburgh, Glasgow and also in London, but he was still released.”

Male student, London

Our participants reported feelings of distrust in BME political candidates, either because they are viewed as selfishly – or even criminally – motivated, or because they are perceived as having “sold-out” to become part of the Establishment. Muslim candidates and elected representatives were therefore not automatically considered to be the best representatives for “Muslim interests.”

Intriguingly, some participants felt that publicly advocating Muslim interests as community activists would tarnish their reputation, and lead to mass stereotyping.

**“There’s a lack of confidence in ethnic minority candidates; they are viewed as drug dealers, gangsters.”**

Male student, University of Bradford

**“They don’t even respect us, so what’s the point getting involved? The ones who are in the system are sell-outs – they don’t represent me.”**

Male student, Slough

**“We’re not in a Muslim country – we are in a democracy. We are lucky to be a part of this democracy. I don’t like the idea that you should get the sympathy vote just because you’re a Muslim. We might elect an MP who is a Muslim but he might be really bad for the Muslim community – how do we know? Just because you’re a Muslim, doesn’t mean you are perfect.”**

Female student, BPP Law School

**“I’d vote for a person whose name ends in Smith rather than Hussain, if Smith can do the job better than Hussain can.”**

Male student, University of Hull

**“Maybe their image will be tainted or maybe they feel like... Well, personally I feel that if I go out protesting, people will start judging me, and going ‘Look, she’s a Muslim and just supporting people who are her kind’ and ‘extremist’ kind of thing. Even if it’s not a really extreme protest, that might be a label put towards you.”**

Female student, London

**“For example, there’s a lot of programmes that come on and yeah, how young guys are getting influenced to do certain things, in fundamentalism and things like that. And it’s things like that that don’t really encourage us to vote, they don’t really encourage us to take part in democracy in this country.”**

Male student, London

The focus of the media on Muslims in the context of foreign policy was found to be a limiting perspective. Several respondents pointed out that they were more interested in domestic policy issues that affected them directly e.g. healthcare and education.

**“Politics is about yourself – it’s the way you live first. There is more to politics than foreign policy.”**

Male student, Queen Mary University

**“It’s about making politics more personal. Take it away from expenses scandals and cash for peerages – it is issues that affect people’s lives, the umbrella of people’s interactions. The person who collects your rubbish to university education; all have political elements.”**

Male student, University of Hull

**5 What are the barriers within families and particular communities? For example, do you vote for candidates approved of by male members of the family or community leaders or Imams?**

Several respondents felt they were encouraged by their families to take an active role in politics and make their own electoral choices, and most felt able to do this. One London-based male student stated:

**“My mum works, my dad works, I work, we are all working in this household, so there’s no barriers with me in the community but there may be for other families. So it varies from family to family, it depends, maybe families who are a bit more, so to speak, old school, may have barriers, but families like mine, not really, no. It’s just personal preference really.”**

A few looked to their elders for guidance and regretted the fact that this was rarely informed guidance; rather, it was often a direction to vote for a Muslim candidate regardless of their policies.

**“The ‘biraderi’ system is a big problem in Bradford. The solution is education. My dad’s quite conservative and says you should always vote for Muslims.”**

Male student, Queen Mary University

Several respondents pointed to the recommendation of candidates by religious and community leaders based purely on their religious affiliation, without regard to their policies. Respondents were keen to hear what the relevant policies were. As two students from Bradford put it: **“Different sects sanction different candidates.”** **“In the local community I live in, locals are called for a meeting in which they are asked to place signs in windows and vote for the Asian candidate of the community, as they will ensure everything gets done within the community.”**

Concern was expressed at a recent election in Bradford, which led to the Muslim vote being split between more than one Muslim candidate, leading to another candidate being elected. This highlighted the importance of candidates being elected for their policies rather than their religion.

The issue of fielding female candidates was raised by a number of respondents. They emphasised the need for women to have a strong political voice, while questioning the level of support that would be given to female candidates by Muslim community leaders.

**“We don’t give women a voice – we always expect the man to be as if he knows best all the time.”**

Female student, London

**“Muslim female candidates? It would be interesting to see how a mosque would support that. I’d like to see this.”**

Male student, University of Hull

**6a) What are the main shortcomings of the British political system and how do you think these problems could be solved?**

There was a consensus that candidates must be held accountable for delivering on their policy promises. One proposed solution was to hold more frequent elections, but this was compounded by the problem that parties may be making policies that are too short-term in nature and could be solely aimed at winning votes.

**“When one looks at the history of the Labour or be it Conservative or even Liberal Democrat policies, one will find there is no consistency and nor is there any decisiveness in them. They are all too ‘sitting on the fence,’ so to speak. They are cleverly devised for short periods of time, which is what gains votes. There is no real long-term planning which will allow one to truly trust the system.”**

Male student, Bradford

Apart from the expenses scandal, broader concerns were raised about politicians misusing their positions:

**“Stuff like that shouldn’t happen, but the more transparency you have, the more trust there will be. A greater effort needs to be made by the Government to correct mistakes and give us policies so we know it won’t happen again.”**

Female student, Surrey

**“If everybody’s in it for themselves, how will this affect wider society? There need to be harsher punishments, financial penalties.”**

Female student, Ealing

**“Try and communicate with everyone. Local MPs should do more to go out in their local areas and get to know people.”**

Male student, Middlesex University

**6b) Can you be angry with national policies and still have faith in the electoral system?**

Not all respondents addressed this, but amongst those that did there was an almost even split between those who thought the entire system was flawed and those that thought it was still possible

to work through the system, even if the policies of the elected parties were flawed. The respondents who answered this question in a more optimistic manner recognised that any particular party was only going to partially reflect one's views:

**"Politics has become a war – there is hatred in there. We don't need malice, we need positive campaigns. It's a dilemma voting for a particular candidate if you don't like their party."**

**"There need to be more independent candidates – sincere, honest and not tied to a particular party."**  
Male student, Queen Mary University

The invasions of Iraq and Afghanistan, and the UK Government's inaction during the siege on Gaza in January 2009, were often cited as evidence that the political process does not work. As many of the respondents pointed out, there were major protests against each of these decisions, yet the Government still went ahead with their plans. The re-election of Labour after the Iraq war, to which a majority of the population were opposed, was cited as further evidence that the process is flawed.

**"To be honest, I don't think so. How do you expect us to get involved in the system when this very system is killing Muslims around the world? That's the way most of us feel, I'm afraid."**

Male student, Slough

The students who still had some degree of faith in the electoral system praised the fact that it was still fairer and more transparent than many governments around the world. They also emphasised the importance of political lobbying, which entailed a greater civic commitment than simple voting. The process of influencing elected representatives was said to be almost more important than the outcome.

**"I have faith in our electoral system – we live in a meritocracy. There is racism that does take place, but we counter it."**

Female student, London

**"I can have faith in the electoral system, obviously there's no kind of, you know, the electoral system here, it's one person's views to vote, not like in Pakistan where, you know, if one person doesn't win, he accuses the other of cheating. So I believe in the electoral system, like the actual voting and how it works, but I don't believe in their politics in general. I don't have any faith in their politics."**

Male student, London

**"There is a greater responsibility to scrutinise and what you do after voting. Do you lobby your MP? Move away from voting and areas of influencing which need to be challenged in the right ways. People think they've voted and that's it – and will complain in cafes like this across the country. I will say, 'Have you lobbied your MP about this?' They say, 'No, we don't know who it is. There are three main parties and we will just vote for any of them.' People must move away from this narrow-minded view. People need to realise that our elected member has a responsibility to us, but we also have a responsibility to follow up what he's saying and what he's doing."**

Male student, University of Hull

7) **To what extent do you think the state should support particular faith groups or people with no religious belief?**

Responses showed that this is a sensitive area. The majority of respondents thought that the state should support all faith groups equally rather than singling out particular groups for special treatment, although only one respondent thought that places of worship should receive state funding. There was strong support for procedural secularism, where the state remains neutral in order to safeguard religious freedom and pluralism for all citizens. As the two female students from Surrey pointed out:

**"The state should encourage good morality but not be involved with any particular religion."**

“They should build mosques, support all faiths and none. Just like Muslims want to marry in a mosque, and if someone does not want to get married in a religious way, they should have the right.”

“All deserve equal levels of respect and coverage. Faith groups all play a massive part in society at a neutral level. There should not be more attention given to one group over another.”

Male student, Queen Mary University

“We should move away from a narrow-minded view of faith to a pluralistic view of faith.”

Male student, University of Hull

“If you are going to support one, you should support everyone. Fund churches and synagogues.”

Male student, Middlesex University

“All political parties should be more involved with various religious groups and open up the platform. Have dialogue, so they don’t feel isolated.”

Male student, Cardiff University

Recognising that faith is an important part of many people’s lives and that we live in a multi-faith society, many respondents were in favour of dialogue between government and religious groups, and the state sponsorship of dialogue between different faith groups. Several respondents highlighted the positive contribution of faith-based values to the political process:

“We should look at how faith can shape communities into becoming better places. But compassion, kindness, tolerance and acceptance are within Islam.”

“There need to be more people of faith in politics as well – it shapes a person’s morals and confidence. Some people in politics lack a moral compass.”

Male student, University of Hull

“If it encourages interfaith dialogue and peaceful messages, the funding should remain.”

“We must recognise our faults, but recognise our value at the same time.”

Female student, BPP Law School

A minority of students pointed to the social deprivation that characterises certain areas with a substantial Muslim population, and felt that more attention should be given to Muslims than other groups for this reason. The need for this special attention was heightened because of the influence of extremist groups such as the recently-banned Al-Muhajiroun. As two of the Slough students stated:

“They should help us more than other groups. Most of us live in run-down areas where life is bleak; they should at least do things like football and other social and educational opportunities.”

“They should be doing summat for Muslims. We ain’t got no chance, bro, especially where I grew up. Proper sh\*t schools, it’s impossible to learn sh\*t. They should improve the schools and that. My school had 90% Pakistanis and proper sh\*te teachers. We need to sort sh\*t like that out first.”

Simultaneously, participants expressed concern that other communities – particularly the white British population – could feel disadvantaged if they felt that Muslims were being singled out for special attention. In order to avoid this problem, certain respondents proposed that the collective community effort against extremism should be bolstered, rather than directing the appropriate resources exclusively towards the Muslim community.

“We Muslims have been behaving like spoilt children, asking for this and that. Because of terrorism, the Government and council gives us what we ask for. We never look at the poor and disadvantaged in other religions, or among whites. Then they hate us and we feel sorry for ourselves. We should learn to live and work with others and funding should not go to one religious group. It is not helping us and makes us a lot of enemies. Why do Muslims now only give to Muslim charity? Why

not charity for all? I am a woman, British, Arab, Muslim and human. Not only a Muslim.”

Female science postgraduate, London

Government ministers’ criticisms of certain religious and cultural practices were interpreted as instigating moral panic in British society, and reinforcing negative stereotypes. Participants remarked that politicians should demonstrate a more nuanced understanding of these practices and the myriad of reasons why people choose to adopt them. This particularly holds true when they decide to make public statements on these issues:

“People are entitled to their own opinions and therefore if they wish to follow another religion than what the majority is (supposedly) upon, then these individuals, or indeed groups, should be respected and should not be interfered with by politics. Take, for example, the hijab. When a practicing Muslim decides to embrace this, they will find that they will get funny stares and looked down to. This is something which has absolutely no support from the Government. Just a couple of years ago, one of the main political faces, Jack Straw, made comments on the veil. Where is the support from Government? I believe this level of disrespect and ignorance towards peoples’ faiths is what is wrong with the Government. How ironic that a woman who covers herself is known to be objectified when the truth is, if a woman doesn’t show a bit of skin in places, then in this country, she is not given a second look.”

Male student, University of Bradford

“Politicians need to show that stereotypes of Muslims are not accurate, and abolish moral panic. Politicians have access to influential networks, so they can do this.”

Female A-Level student, Ealing

“I think all this veiling is making us less welcome. It isn’t the same as a cross and says to British people, ‘We don’t want to belong.’ The Qur’an does not tell us to cover our faces. The French are right to make it illegal. You know, in Muslim

circles we Muslim women are not even allowed to say we hate the veil. That is how closed off we are becoming.”

Female science postgraduate, London

Religious freedoms in the UK were still looked upon favourably when contrasted with other countries in Europe, where the participants felt that significant restrictions had been placed on religious expression:

“The UK is probably the most multi-national country in Europe to be honest, and to be honest I think right now they are very, very. I think that’s one thing I like about this country, they are very open to that. You can have a mosque made anywhere, you can have a temple made anywhere, and so and so forth, but you couldn’t have something like that in Germany or even Switzerland or even France. The fact that they wanted to ban headscarves and things like that even though everyone knows that France has probably got the biggest population of Arabs out of all Europe, but they still ban headscarves. So, in some ways I do like this country, in the fact that it’s got a policy where you can openly practice your religion.”

Male student, London

Regarding state support of citizens who hold non-religious beliefs, one respondent thought that their needs were amply addressed in a secular democracy:

“As for people with no religion, i.e. the atheists, then these people are entitled to their way of life. However, I do maintain that these people again should treat people of faith with the utmost of respect. In fairness, they don’t need much government support as their way of life, given that they don’t believe in a creator, is more laissez-faire and therefore the only power they are answerable to is the law, which if politics is really true in this country and we really do run a democracy, then they have their say through here anyway.”

Male student, University of Bradford

# Conclusion

In common with other young people, Muslim students are all too aware of the flaws in the UK political system, but most of them still placed a high premium on civic engagement (even if they were not always politically active themselves). While some were happy to continue with established family voting choices and practices, there were stellar examples of peer-led democratic innovation and grassroots activism. Pledging one's unquestioning loyalty to a particular political party was generally viewed as unwise; most of our participants had no hesitation over switching their allegiances to whichever party that seemed to have the best record of "enjoining the good."

Most of our students expressed a desire to be treated as individuals, instead of as part of a monolithic bloc of Muslims. They repeatedly emphasised that while their religion was an important part of their identity, it was only one facet.

There was widespread anger about the actions of Muslim politicians who were implicated in the expenses scandal, as well as those who had voted for legislation that would infringe civil liberties. Our participants were disappointed that Muslim communities tended to overlook the misdemeanours of these public figures, purely by virtue of sharing the same religion. They strongly felt that no special treatment should be accorded to Muslim politicians who had been found guilty of misconduct. While they acknowledged the existence of corruption in the UK political landscape, they were generally satisfied with the framework of measures available to counter it. This was in stark contrast with their countries of origin, where effective anti-corruption strategies are rarely implemented.

Many felt frustrated that their autonomy was not respected within families and communities and in the wider society, because politicians had

expected Muslims to deliver bloc votes for so long. We found that the students who voiced concerns about poverty and deprivation in their local areas were also the most likely to be sceptical about further engagement with the political system. There was a strong feeling that these fundamental problems should be addressed before these young people could feel sufficiently empowered to make a contribution to national politics.

There was an overwhelming feeling that politics should be redefined in terms of its relevance to younger people and their concerns, rather than the machinations at Westminster.

There is a growing perception that British Muslims are the repositories of collective blame in British society, with many feeling that their views are only listened to as a form of "tick-box" exercise by statutory sector organisations. It is vital that young British Muslims feel that their views are not only listened to by people in positions of power and responsibility, but that in an advanced democracy, these views can provide a catalyst for change in policy and perceptions. They need to be taken seriously as democratic citizens.

# Recommendations

- Great care must be taken in the methodology used in any further research projects with Muslim students. Where possible, young people should be approached directly to participate, rather than through religious institutions (as this may skew the sample and / or responses given). Academics must pay particular attention to the context and assumptions underpinning some of the young people's attitudes.
- Government and civil society organisations must champion more innovative methods of engagement with these citizens, to build greater mutual understanding between Muslims and non-Muslims. This includes social, cultural and educational initiatives.
- There should be greater accountability mechanisms for initiatives that aim to represent the differing views of British Muslims to policy-makers. They should be able to see the impact of their contributions.
- Political and media professionals – particularly those with a public profile – must conduct thorough research before making public statements about Islam and Muslims.
- Mosques and Muslim community organisations must do more to signpost young Muslims towards different sources of political information, particularly the policies of a multitude of parties.
- More theologians should publicly stress the importance of voting and other forms of civic engagement among Muslims, particularly via social networking websites and other forums which are accessible to young people.
- The citizenship curriculum must be developed further to make it more engaging, and to properly address the barriers to civic engagement faced by young Muslims and other minority communities.
- Young people must take the initiative to scrutinise the actions of their politicians between elections, and develop a greater collective lobbying effort.
- There must be stronger communication between elected representatives and their constituents. Examples of good practice include certain MPs writing blogs and communicating with the electorate on social networking sites.
- There should be greater transparency surrounding parliamentary procedures, and tougher penalties for non-compliance with these e.g. large fines.

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