

Educated, engaged, and critical: Young British Muslims making new claims on citizenship amidst ongoing forms of marginalisation



Drawing on qualitative research with young Muslims in Bradford, [Nathan Manning](#) and [Parveen Akhtar](#) find that most respondents, despite being disillusioned with politics, were politically engaged. In contrast to an older generation who were seen as prioritising local issues and representation much more closely tied to kinship and ethnic identity, respondents also voiced claims for a substantive representation which addressed mainstream and often national political issues.

Young people's relationship with politics is [routinely deemed problematic](#) by a range of [influential actors](#). In a context of concern over disengagement and the potential for radicalisation, the political participation of young Muslims is particularly scrutinised. But how do second and third generation young British Muslims themselves understand their relationship with politics? What issues do they think are important and which levels of politics are they focused on (local, national, international)? In what ways might a broader context of suspicion, securitisation, Islamophobia and racism affect their political engagement?

To help answer these questions [we conducted a mixed-method study](#) which included in-depth interviews with a sample of British-born Muslims aged between 18 and 28 years, living in Bradford. All participants had some tertiary education, with some studying at the time of interview, and others having graduated.

Previous qualitative research in this area has tended to focus on various forms of social-political activism and as such may yield a partial picture of the political engagements and experiences of young British Muslims. In contrast, our sample aimed to capture a broad spectrum of engagement. Some respondents had been involved with university student politics, others had some experience of activist and community groups, and one participant was a local councillor. In general terms, the sample included young people who were interested in politics in various forms and some had experience of extra-parliamentary forms of participation. They typically had high levels of interest in politics, following issues and events through various forms of (digital) media and in discussions with friends and some family, but modest levels of participation.

Critical and disillusioned but still engaged

In contrast to [various popular accounts](#), the young Muslims in this study were politically engaged with the world around them. As noted above, their political involvement covered a range of varied forms of participation. Nonetheless, a dominant theme to emerge from the interviews was strong criticisms of, and feelings of disillusionment toward, politics and politicians. Of course, this is [a common finding amongst young people in general](#), but it is particularly notable here for its presence across the sample and because our respondents are educated, interested, and engaged with various forms of politics. A lack of trust in politicians was widespread as was the view that they were “disconnected” (Halima^[1]) from local communities and the lives of “real people” (Sabir). Others highlighted the socio-economic divide which separates the public from politicians with “affluent backgrounds” who attend “elite universities” (Ifat). For respondents like Ifat, this gulf of privilege meant “they [politicians] don't give a shit about us”.

Representatives for us as well as like us

As already indicated, some interviewees valued [descriptive representation](#) and felt that political representatives should share similar characteristics and life experiences to the citizens they represent. This was also reflected in calls for politics to better reflect the diversity of the British citizenry.

Nonetheless, participants were very clear that descriptive representation wasn't sufficient for the kind of democratic representation they wanted. This view was often articulated in contrast to an older generation who were perceived to favour [candidates with family connections and/or links with Pakistan](#). Numerous participants relayed stories of their parents or other relatives urging them to vote for such candidates with little regard for their policies or track record. In Jamila's words: "[my dad] he was like 'vote for this person, we know this person, he comes to our house', [...] me and my siblings and, you know, whoever was in our house, and I've got a big family, we always used to respond like 'no, we vote for whoever we want to.'"

While participants were critical of this clan or group-based politics, they recognised it wasn't necessarily problematic and [not unique to Muslims](#) or [indeed Pakistani communities](#). Surraya noted from her experience of living in Wales that in some white working class communities "the whole family will vote for that policy or that person [...] I don't think it's about ethnicity, it's about that cultural value of family solidarity."

Several participants perceived their own political claims-making as part of a wider generational shift that other young people were also taking up. They focused on mainstream, national political issues and discussed the importance of adequate funding and standards of public services such as education and healthcare, employment, and forms of inequality. As such, our findings are in contrast to earlier research which found greater focus on issues of British foreign policy and the international struggles of Muslims.

Racism, Islamophobia and politics

Experiences of racism, Islamophobia, and feeling marginalised were commonplace and described by all participants. Respondents like Haroon experienced an ambient sense of scrutiny, suspicion and surveillance which undermined his sense of political inclusion and autonomy: "I think everyday life that you know, that everyone's looking at you [...] all the light and attention is on you as a Muslim".

These feelings of being [constantly monitored and judged](#) had real effects on political participation. Respondents like Umair told us how he had shifted away from his earlier involvement in activism due to his concerns over "police responses" and the risk of arrest, as well as his family's concern he'd be detained in Guantanamo Bay because "They're going to think you're a Jihadi". This context functioned to stifle and control the forms of political participation available for young Muslims.

Several respondents noted [the increase in hate crimes](#) which followed Britain's referendum on membership of the European Union and the way this process gave license to bigots to be [more publically racist and violent](#). Others raised concerns about their personal safety and feeling vulnerable. For many of our participants, the referendum was an acute example of a much wider and longer term experience of racism and marginalisation. Respondents discussed experiences of interpersonal and institutional racism and, as with the Brexit vote, they made links between national and international events (e.g. the November 2015 attacks in Paris) and their local experiences of racism and Islamophobia. These accounts of racism and Islamophobia point beyond individual experiences towards the [racialisation of citizenship](#) and the ways this can be used to undermine the political inclusion of British Muslims and control their forms of political participation.

Our respondents felt Britain was their home and while they maintained various criticisms of the status quo they were also committed to finding ways of making their citizenship count in ways meaningful for them. They wanted a solid claim to the public sphere and, in contrast to older generations, this meant a more thoroughgoing engagement with a national, mainstream politics; a politics which holds the potential to address some of their key political concerns around forms of socio-economic inequality which were part of their lived experience in Bradford. Young Muslims like those in this study are educated, engaged, and critical citizens with a great deal to offer; we deserve a polity that can provide space for them to flourish.

[i] All names are pseudonyms.

Note, the above draws upon the authors published work in the [Journal of Youth Studies](#). Featured image credit: [Arnaud Jaegers](#) on [Unsplash](#).

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