

Despite a degree of accommodation to change, white British citizens remain largely opposed to increased ethnic diversity

By Democratic Audit UK

*Immigration is one of the key political issues that will decide votes at the forthcoming General Elections, with the average British citizen hostile both the level of immigration that has already taken place, and the prospect of more. In a new Demos [report](#), **Eric Kaufmann** and **Gareth Harris** map the 'white' response to immigration: 'voice', 'exit' and 'accommodation'.*



The EDL – the extreme response to immigration (Credit: Chris, CC BY 2.0)

In May 2014, immigration overtook the economy as the leading concern of British voters. The UK Independence Party (UKIP), campaigning on a platform of immigration control, came first in the May European elections with 27.9 per cent of the vote, two and a half points ahead of Labour, four more than the Tories. This was an unprecedented achievement for a third party in British politics. Since 2002, immigration has typically ranked among the electorate's top two priorities. The rise of the British National Party (BNP) in the years to 2009, and of UKIP thereafter, underscores the importance of the issue.

We argue that the dynamics of the ethnic majority – not the nation, and not ethnic minorities – are critical for understanding these trends. During the 2000s, concern over integration and the 'parallel lives' led by minority communities rose to the fore while the fortunes of multicultural approaches waned. This was joined by a great deal of discussion of Britishness: the nature of British national identity. The ethnic majority, or white British, were not entirely overlooked, but the spotlight largely bypassed them. In other words, the key question for many is not 'What does it mean to be British in an increasingly diverse society?' but 'What does it mean to be white British in an increasingly diverse society?' This report tries to rectify previous omissions by concentrating on the ethnic majority. We argue for an explicit, evidence-based focus on the white British of England – what we call the ethnic English, as distinct from the British state-nation, which has hitherto been the focus of attention.

Many, ourselves included, embrace the idea that minorities possess a hyphenated identity, retaining their ethnicity as well as an inclusive British nationality. But alongside this, it has been assumed that the ethnic majority should

relinquish its ethnic identity in favour of the new civic British one. Such an approach, which consigns the majority ethnic group to a future of inevitable decline, assuming it will transfer its affections to civic Britishness, will in our estimation only feed the current malaise. Instead, an attempt must be made to rethink what it means to be of English ethnicity in a period of mass migration. Though immigration reduces the preponderance of the ethnic majority, a narrative of pessimistic decline can be countered with positive news about assimilation. Namely, that the fastest-growing group in England are those of mixed-race who share English descent with the majority, while the direction of identity change among the children of those of European and mixed-race background is also towards majority ethnicity.

The response of the ethnic majority to changes arising from immigration and minority natural increase forms the remit of this report. The central finding is that mass concern over immigration is driven by the rate of change in the nonwhite British population. Government policy, especially in housing and refugee resettlement, should avoid introducing rapid ethnic shifts in locales with little experience of diversity. Gradual, diffuse increases in diversity are preferable. Concern dissipates over time as members of the ethnic majority become used to a larger immigrant presence, and assimilation – notably of the children of Europeans – takes place. Despite UKIP's focus on European free movement, we find it is the rate of ethnic change caused by both immigration and minority natural increase that leads to opposition to immigration and stimulates far-right voting.

We conceive of three potential white British responses to ethnic change, inspired by Albert Hirschman's *Exit, Voice and Loyalty*: flee change, fight it, or accommodate it.¹ 'Voice', or fighting change, is expressed as anti-immigration sentiment, which influences the agenda of mainstream parties and the media and creates fertile soil for right-wing populist parties. 'Exit', or fleeing change, takes the form of white residential flight from minorities. While we find little evidence of 'white flight' in England, there are powerful unconscious forces preventing whites and minorities from becoming residentially integrated. Areas with higher initial white British populations tend to Executive summary attract white residents while those with significant minority shares lose them.

Accommodation, the third potential white British response to ethnic change, is also taking place. We find that white British people who live in diverse areas are less opposed to immigration, and less supportive of far-right parties. This is because they perceive minorities to have a legitimate presence in their locale, and by extension the country. In addition, contact with minorities takes the edge off negative preconceptions. Finally, accommodation takes place through assimilation: a significant share of the children of European immigrants and some of mixed-race background come to identify as white British, melting into the majority.

Despite the accommodation that is taking place, the balance of forces currently favours opposition to ethnic change: 'voice' over accommodation. From our research we argue economic hardship and political mistrust are not the main drivers of majority unease. Instead, we claim the pace of ethnic change has temporarily outstripped mechanisms of accommodation. Minority ethnic population growth has historically stimulated a defensive ethnic nationalism, whether in England, Scotland, Western Europe or North America. This is not an iron law, but exceptions to the nationalist rule stem from integrating shocks such as wars or major ideological shifts, which are not present in contemporary England. In short, rapid ethnic change drives a wedge between the ethnic majority and what they consider to be 'their' nation. Local experiences feed national imaginings. Residents of communities undergoing ethnic change often experience disorientation while those who live in whiter neighbourhoods or outlying areas of diverse cities and local authorities may fear impending change.

At present, political parties are seeking to address majority concerns, especially those of the working-class and lower-middleclass majority, solely by focusing on migration control. But local dynamics are also important: the Government needs to ensure that its housing and refugee dispersal policies do not lead to overly rapid cultural change in settled communities with little prior exposure to diversity. We find a statistically robust link between wards with rapid increases in non-white British populations during 2001–11, such as parts of Barking and Dagenham, heightened white opposition to immigration and support for anti-immigration parties.

Time is a healer, however. Much of this is simple habituation: within a decade, white residents of diverse communities become accustomed to greater diversity. Provided the rate of ethnic change slows, local whites begin to exhibit more toleration for immigration and lower support for the far right than was true prior to the change. Young people, meanwhile, grow up in a more diverse environment and view this as the 'new normal', a

state of affairs in which minorities are a legitimate part of English society, and hence the civic nation. On many levels, minorities and whites come to share an English and British national identity, though the two remain ethnically distinct and view their Englishness and Britishness somewhat differently.

Integration is important, especially the contact and familiarity that comes with residential mixing. Whether minorities are UK or foreign-born, English-speaking or not, employed or on benefits or identify with Britain matters less for white attitudes than whether they are residentially proximal. This is because residential mixing facilitates contact and habituation: local residents of diverse areas meet and observe the newcomers, correcting misconceptions and humanising them. Ethnic majority opposition to immigration in diverse local authorities is lower where minorities are more interspersed among the white British.

This said, the spread of ethnic minorities also introduces change and a sense of threat into adjacent homogeneous communities. Therefore, while residential mixing has effects on white attitudes in an immediate locale, this is difficult to scale up to the national level. Integration makes its imprint nationwide only in the long term, by hastening assimilation. Indeed, engineering high-speed ethnic mixing in particular communities may cause more problems than it solves. Thus diffusing ethnic change is more important than the imperative to integrate populations.

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This post is a section of the Executive Summary of the new [Demos](#) report: '[Changing Places: Mapping the white response to ethnic change](#)'. It represents the views of the author and not those of Democratic Audit or the LSE. Please read our [comments policy](#) before posting.

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Eric Kaufmann is Professor of Politics at Birkbeck College, University of London

Dr Gareth Harris is an Associate Lecturer at Birkbeck in Research Methods