

# **Local Government and Public Services Committee**

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**Title: Committee's Scrutiny Project into Electoral Arrangements in Wales -  
Evidence from the All Wales Ethnic Minority Association (AWEMA)**

**BME Voters at the 2003 National Assembly for Wales Elections**

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The full Report presents the results of a survey of black and minority (BME) voters following the 2003 elections to the National Assembly for Wales. It provides findings on a wide range of political issues and suggests a number of key features of Welsh BME political participation that should be of interest to policy makers and political parties as well as the wider public.

Contents Page of the Full Report

Executive Summary (attachment pages 3-8)

1. Introduction
2. Participation, representation and the political system (Attachment pages 9-13)
3. Attitudes towards the political parties
4. National identity and constitutional preferences
5. Political values, policy issues and political leadership
6. Voting behaviour in the 2003 National Assembly elections
7. Voting behaviour in 2003 in context
8. Attitudes to local government
9. Welsh BMEs: an agenda for debate (Attachment pages 14-20)

Appendix: Party Candidate Selection and the 2003 National Assembly Elections

References

## Executive Summary

### **Participation and Representation**

1. There is a significant problem of electoral non-registration among BMEs which appears to be at least twice the rate of the Welsh electorate as a whole.
2. There is broadly a 2/3 – 1/3 divide between those who are to a reasonable extent interested in politics and those who are not. A significant minority consider that it makes little difference who wins elections.
3. A majority believe that representatives, once they have been elected, lose touch with the public.

### **The Political Parties**

4. The Labour Party remains the party that voters are most likely to identify with, but this represents no more than half of the BME electorate. A third has no identity with any political party.
5. Nearly half of those BME voters who identify with a political party do so only weakly.
6. A clear majority of BME voters see significant differences between the Labour Party and in turn the Conservative Party and Plaid Cymru. Nevertheless, the minorities who do not or who are unsure of party differences remain ¼ to a 1/3 of the BME electorate.

### **National Identity and Constitutional Preferences**

7. A majority of BME voters hold multiple national identities. In the sense that they have taken on a UK identity they are more likely to have taken on a British rather than a Welsh identity.
8. A majority believe the system of government in Wales could be improved significantly. There appears to be at least a marginal majority in favour of further constitutional change, and a Parliament with law making and tax raising powers is clearly the most popular option for constitutional reform.
9. Opinion over British policy on European Union is evenly divided, with a significant minority having no opinion

### **Public Policy and Political Leadership**

10. There is a tendency towards left of centre/rights-based political values on the appropriate level of taxation and the importance of individual rights over state order.
11. A large majority opposed British military action in Iraq. However, a smaller majority would have

backed military action had there been UN backing.

12. Whilst there is a tendency towards opposition to detention centres for asylum seekers, a significant minority support them.

13. There is a general perception that the quality of education in Wales has improved since 1999, while the quality of health services has declined.

14. The recognition level and performance rating for Rhodri Morgan is much higher than any of the other three party leaders in Wales.

### **Voting Behaviour in the 2003 Welsh Election**

15. Turn out in the 2003 election was at approximately the same rate as that for the Welsh electorate as a whole.

16. Approximately 2/3 of those who voted chose the Labour Party on both their first and second votes, while Plaid Cymru and the Liberal Democrats came a distant second and third.

17. Those voting on the basis of who they thought was the best party clearly outnumbered those voting out of habit.

18. Voters tended to vote more on the basis of what was going on in Wales than on the basis of British-wide or international issues. This was particularly true of Labour voters.

19. The most commonly declared reasons for not voting were registration/polling card problems, a lack of interest and work etc problems forbidding participation.

20. Among those who did not vote, the Labour Party appeared slightly less popular giving some potential new support for all of the other main parties were they to vote.

### **Voting Behaviour in 2003 in Context**

21. Recalled behaviour suggests a pattern of BME turn-out in British elections at a higher level than in Welsh Assembly referenda/elections. This appears to be broadly similar to differential turn-out seen in the Welsh electorate as a whole.

22. The ascendancy of the Labour vote appears to have remained constant in British, Welsh and local elections in recent years. There is no clear second place party and the other parties appear to garner a very small proportion of the BME vote each.

23. A vote in a hypothetical 2003 general election suggests that there may have been a reduction in the BME Labour vote to the advantage of the Liberal Democrats and the Conservatives.

## **Local Government**

24. There is no clear consensus on whether the level of local taxation is too high, too low or about right, and as to whether local council services have improved since 1999.

25. A hypothetical vote for Council elections in 2003 suggested some possible reduction of the Labour vote to the advantage of all of the other parties.

26. A majority consider that local government in Wales is in need of significant improvement.

27. There is no consensus over the appropriateness of electoral reform for local government with nearly a half of voters knowing too little about it or unsure of their opinion.

## **Welsh BMEs: an agenda for debate**

28. Electoral non-registration is a distinctive BME issue that needs to be addressed to encourage political participation.

29. Non representation either by a BME MP or AM is one issue that could be addressed if greater faith in elected representatives is to be encouraged (see appendix one on party candidate selection procedures in Wales).

30. A large minority of BME voters feel no identity with a political party and a large proportion of those who do, feel it weakly. This raises questions about how the political parties relate to BME voters on a routine basis.

31. Welshness appears to have worked as an identity which is limited in its ability to be inclusive of BMEs, and it is clearly less inclusive than Britishness. This raises questions about how Welshness is progressed as an identity inclusive of BMEs.

32. Public debate of constitutional reform would find a supportive hearing among BMEs, and may find useful suggestions for development if BME communities were directly engaged.

33. Welsh BMEs would like a greater say in political decisions and essentially support a left of centre/ rights agenda in politics. This raises questions about how BMEs may be more encouraged to participate in the political process and how their values may be reflected in public policy.

34. The particularly low/poor profile of the Welsh leaders of Plaid Cymru, the Conservatives and the

Liberal Democrats appears to be in particular need of addressing as a general contribution to BME engagement with Welsh political debate.

35. The association between the BME vote and the Labour Party, while vulnerable, appears to remain strong in practice. This poses questions regarding how well the other parties are addressing the interests of BME voters in election campaigns, and how the Labour Party might respond were they to face stiffer electoral competition.

36. A number of indicators suggest a strong need for BME voter education on issues to do with the European Union, local government and the Welsh Assembly. On these matters the BME voter is not unusual compared with the Welsh electorate as a whole.

**2. Participation, Representation and the Political System**

A matter of concern in British politics in recent years has been general attitudes towards the very processes of electoral politics. This has been occasioned by evidence of political apathy and disillusionment with politicians. What is the evidence regarding Welsh BMEs. One of the fundamental issues in political participation is electoral registration and thus in practice sustaining the right to vote. The survey produced some disturbing findings on this issue. Table 2.1 indicates perceptions among BME voters on whether they were registered to vote for the 2003 National Assembly Elections. This provides a self-reported figure of 15.6% non-registration. Subjects were asked two further questions regarding whether they received polling cards for the 2001 UK general election and the 2003 Assembly election. The answers reported in tables 2.2 and 2.3 if anything suggest higher levels of non-registration.

Table 2.1: Perceived Inclusion on the Electoral Register

Inclusion on the register?	Percentage	Ns
Yes, at current address	77.2	203
Yes, at another address	6.1	16
Yes, but not sure where	0.4	1
Don't know	0.8	2
Not on the register	15.6	41
	Total: 100	Total: 263

Table 2.2: Recollection of receiving polling card for the 2001 General Election

Polling card received?	Percentage	Ns
Yes	74.5	193
No	24.3	63
Don't know	1.2	3
	Total: 100	Total: 259

Table 2.3: Recollection of receiving polling card for the 2003 National Assembly Election

Polling card received?	Percentage	Ns
Yes	67.4	174
No	29.4	76
Don't know	3.2	8
	Total: 100	Total: 259

We need to be sceptical of these figures. Ideally, one would like to check the sample against the 2003 electoral roll but given variations in address details such an exercise could not be conducted precisely. Nevertheless, existing research would suggest that they have a good deal of plausibility. Anwar's research in Manchester and London (1998) in areas of high BME density found non-registration of over 20%. Sagar's research for 1997 indicated much more moderate non registration figures of 2.6% for Indians, 3.4 % black afro-Caribbeans, 6.5% for Bangladeshis, 9.8% for Pakistanis and 11.9% for black Africans. These are nevertheless quite close to the bottom of the range of possibility suggested by our reported 15.6 figure. Obviously we need to allow for the + or – 6% statistical variation on the representativeness of our figures. Taking this into account it is impossible to assert with any certainty the level of non-registration. Nevertheless, the perceived level of non-registration may be taken as probably at least 10% - at least twice that of the 4.6% non-registration reported in the broader Welsh electorate by the 1999 WNAES. Reporting not receiving polling cards suggests an additional associated problem in itself of major problems in understanding or relating to the registration process among a significant minority of the BME electorate.

What about the broader question of the extent of BME interest in general in what is going on politics? Table 2.4 indicates that roughly 2/3 of the BME electorate is generally engaged in politics to a greater or lesser extent. However, ¼ to 1/3 of the BME electorate are not. This is actually fairly typical of the UK and Welsh electorates as a whole, but no less a matter of concern for being replicated in these figures.

Table 2.4: Interest in what is generally going on in politics

Level of Interest	Percentage	Ns
A great deal	14.2	37
Quite a lot	22.9	60
Some	33.2	87
Not very much	23.7	62
None at all	6.1	16
	Total: 100	Total: 262

A key aspect of the political system is of course party government. Here it is a popular dimension of disillusionment with politics to suggest that it does not matter which party wins elections, things go on pretty much the same. Our BME sample was invited to offer its view on whether they thought that was the case as well. Did they recognise that it mattered who won elections to how government might be conducted, or did they share in a cynical perspective on party government? Tables 2.5 and 2.6 indicate that a very clear majority believe that who wins elections in both the House of Commons and the Welsh Assembly makes at least some difference. Again, however, we have significant minorities who take the cynical view. These appear to be not so numerous as the minorities who have little or no interest in politics, but in broad terms the figures appear to suggest considerable active disillusionment as well. Such figures, nevertheless, are not markedly out of line from those of the Welsh electorate as a whole.

Table 2.5: Views on how much difference it makes who wins elections to the House of Commons

Perception of Difference	Percentage	Ns
A great deal	29.0	75
Quite a lot	27.4	71
Some	21.6	56
Not very much	13.9	36
None	6.6	17
Don't know	1.5	4
	Total: 100	Total: 259

Table 2.6: Views on how much difference it makes who wins elections to the National Assembly for Wales

Perception of Difference	Percentage	Ns
A great deal	20.8	54
Quite a lot	26.3	68
Some	26.3	68
Not very much	15.1	39
None	8.9	23
Don't know	2.7	7
	Total: 100	Total: 259

An issue closer to home that affects attitudes to political participation is the perception of local elected representatives. A common presumption these days is that voters have a rather poor opinion of their elected politicians. We sought to assess BME voters' relationships with their elected representatives in two ways: first through their readiness to use them as representatives; and secondly through their perceptions of relations with voters. Table 2.7 actually indicates quite reasonable levels of contact with all types of elected member. Table 2.8 shows, nevertheless, that general perceptions of the accessibility of elected representatives remain rather negative. Around half of voters actively think that there is a problem, and less than 20% clearly disagree. Does this indicate objectively that elected members are aloof from their voters? Recent evidence on local representation would suggest otherwise. For example, it is clear that many of the new assembly members after 1999 placed an enormous emphasis on serving their constituents, and the response of MPs in many cases was to enhance accessibility in local representation recognising that they now had new competitors for the loyalty of local voters (See Bradbury et al, 2003). Yet this failed to feed through into perceptions of accessibility.

Table 2.7: Contacting Local Representatives

Have you contacted your representative?	MP	Assembly Member	Councillor
Yes (%)	21.7	19.2	24.0
No (%)	78.3	80.8	76.0
Total (%)	100	100	100
Total Ns	263	260	263

Table 2.8: Perceptions of whether elected representatives lose touch with the people

Representatives lose touch with the people pretty quickly? (%)	Assembly Members	Councillors
Strongly Agree	17.3	18.1
Agree	34.6	32.0
Neither agree nor disagree	30.0	32.4
Disagree	12.3	12.0
Strongly disagree	2.3	2.3
Don't know	3.5	3.1
Total (%)	100	100
Total Ns	260	159

Overall, the survey indicated some serious problems of BME engagement in the general electoral process. A number of these were not distinctive from those encountered in the broader electorate, but the issues of non-registration and disenchantment with elected representatives are ones that suggest specific concerns over BME political participation. .

## 9. Welsh BMEs: an agenda for debate

In concluding the report we need to relate the findings back to the broad question of whether Welsh BMEs are experiencing inclusion or are participating in the politics of the newly devolved Wales. What issues for further public debate might these findings raise? In some important ways there is evidence of involvement that is characteristic of the Welsh electorate as a whole. Notably, the evidence on turn-out in all types of election suggest comparable levels of engagement. This is in turn a reflection of the way in which a majority of the Welsh BME electorate is engaged by electoral politics, either through identifying with a political party, holding strong opinions on what political values should be upheld, the justice of governmental decisions, the quality of public services and political leadership, or the party who should form the government either in Westminster or Cardiff Bay. Nevertheless, the findings do suggest significant evidence of non-inclusion or non-participation in the political process. To return to a point made in introducing the survey sample, it is probable that the sample used was notable for its better than average educational composition and if anything under-states the reality of non-inclusion and non-participation. Overall, it would appear that nine issues are worthy of emphasis.

On participation and representation two issues stand out most starkly. First, enrolment in the electoral process is a fundamental dimension of democratic legitimacy. The evidence of a significant degree of at least perceived non-inclusion in the right to vote suggests that such enrolment cannot be taken for granted among BME voters in Wales. Hence, the campaign to improve registration rates among BMEs

remains a politically important one. Secondly, the perception that elected representatives stay in touch with those who elect them is equally vital to the legitimacy of principles of representative democracy. Difficulties here are widespread among the electorate. Yet, it is appropriate to remind ourselves of the lack of any BME MP or AM in Wales and the very low number of BME councillors. Campaigners would remind us that one way of addressing disillusionment with elected members at least among BME voters may be to address the issue of electing an AM or MP with a BME background (see appendix on party candidate selection procedures to see how this issue has been addressed hitherto).

On attitudes to political parties, the finding of a relatively low level of party identification overall raises questions as to how effectively parties are on a routine basis communicating their general interest in political participation, outlining the distinctiveness of their political message and courting the active support of BME voters. For the Labour Party, that for years has been able to count on BME support, the issue may be how to address complacency. For the other parties, the question may be more about how they are able to take advantage of an electorate that to a significant extent has de-aligned from automatic assumptions of Labour identification.

The findings on identity and constitutional reform raise two key issues. First, Welshness appears to have worked as an identity that is limited in its ability to be inclusive, and is clearly less inclusive than Britishness. This raises questions about how Welshness is progressed as an identity inclusive of BMEs. Secondly, the current debate about constitutional reform in Wales is one with which many BME voters would have some sympathy. The Richard Commission Report's advocacy in 2004 of the devolution of primary legislative powers to the National Assembly reflects a view that is the most popular among BMEs. BME interest in participating in the debate over constitutional reform is open to being interpreted rather narrowly as an interest in progressing the introduction of an STV electoral system to bring about elected AMs with BME backgrounds, which was also advocated by the Richard Commission. These findings suggest that public debate of constitutional reform proposals would find a more broadly-based supportive hearing among BMEs, and may stimulate useful suggestions for development if BME communities were directly engaged.

Discussion of policy preferences, political leadership and voting trends raises three further important points. First, Welsh BMEs would clearly like a greater say in political decisions. This raises questions about how BMEs may be more encouraged to participate in the political process and how their values may be reflected in public policy. Secondly, the particularly low/poor profiles of the Welsh leaders of Plaid Cymru, the Conservatives and the Liberal Democrats appear to be in particular need of addressing as a general contribution to BME engagement with Welsh political debate. Thirdly, analysis of trends in voting pose questions regarding how well the other parties are addressing the interests of BME voters, and how the Labour Party might respond were they to face stiffer electoral competition.

Finally, the findings on local government are indicative of a need for political education about the roles of different levels of government and the issues relevant to them. A number of indicators suggest a strong need for BME voter education on issues to do with the European Union, local government and the Welsh Assembly. On these matters the BME voter is not unusual compared with the Welsh electorate as a whole but this does not make the need to address the BME electorate specifically any less

pressing.

The message in these findings is that whilst turnout in elections has held up there are nevertheless significant indicators of non-inclusion or non-participation in the political process. Such a balance in the findings should not surprise us. Recent studies in UK general elections suggest the capacity for a relatively high turn out among BMEs in other parts of the UK. Saggar (1998) reported turnout figures of between 82.4% for Indians and 64.4% for Black Africans at the 1997 General Election. Indeed, Saggar generally found Indian voters to have even higher levels of turnout than white voters. Yet, at the same time, Saggar noted a list of key issues that suggested non-inclusion or non-participation in the political process as well. Such problems reflect the key message of the highly influential Parekh Report (2000) that a 'genuinely multicultural Britain urgently needs to re-imagine itself', a process involving a wide range of cultural as well as political issues. Saggar's and Parekh's findings on Britain as a whole are paralleled in Wales.

The findings in this report and the validity of the issues it raises should be tested further. It should be restated that the survey on which they are based was conducted with a limited resource and the sample produced was relatively small. This disallowed meaningful sub-group analysis. It would be highly desirable to see research council funded research on BME electoral politics throughout the UK, not just Wales, explicitly recognizing the importance of devolution to new forms of politics. Nevertheless, as stated in the introduction, it is much better to have some research than none at all. The findings presented here are robust as broad indicators of the nature of the Welsh BME electorate and it is to be hoped that the report has given insights that will be of interest both for the purposes of electoral research and practical political and policy debate.