

## **The competing influences of party identity and ethnic identity on political perceptions in Britain: a social identity theory of partisan bias**

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*Abstract: Many commentators greeted the 2005 swing to the Liberal Democrats among ethnic minority voters in British General Elections as a critical change in minorities' voting behaviour. The unpopular decision by the Labour government to go to war in Iraq was identified as a cause of this shift; however its importance was significantly over-interpreted when it was heralded as a beginning of a new era in the minorities' political behaviour. This claim was symptomatic of an assumption underlying most of the British conventional wisdom and academic scholarship: that the Labour party is a 'natural' party for minorities, and a resulting conclusion that minorities are part of Labour's core vote. However, this paper argues such sweeping conclusions were unwarranted, and sprang from a one-dimensional understanding of the concept of Labour as a 'natural party of minorities'. This paper identifies two, not one, possible outcomes of Labour being a 'natural party of minorities' and uses the concept of partisan bias to frame and test these outcomes. A measure of partisan bias is proposed on the basis of social identity theory. This is a comparatively novel framework for the understanding and measurement of partisan bias and it is argued that it provides the best test of the two possible outcomes. On the basis of this analysis it becomes clear that it is ethnic identity rather than Labour identity that influences minorities' political perceptions and evaluations. As a result minorities' defection from Labour in 2005 could have easily been conceived of in 1997 and is in keeping with usual patterns of minorities' political choices.*

Ethnic minorities in Britain have almost uniformly supported the Labour party ever since their party choice was first recorded in 1964, on average voting for the party at rates above 80 per cent.,. In the 2005 General Election, when many minority voters switched their support from Labour to Liberal Democrats most commentators announced this deflection from Labour as a major change of heart rather than a short-term protest vote on the issue of the Iraq war. Statements such as: 'Whatever the result on 5 May 2005, one thing is certain: many Muslims in Britain are no longer a captive audience willing merely to put a cross next to the Labour candidate once

every five years.’ (Bouteldja, 2005) implicitly suggest Muslim electorate in Britain was blindly bound to Labour and in 2005 opened their eyes to the wider variety issues and interest (Saggar and Sriskandarajah, 2005). The reason for both the electoral surprise and the announcing of a major breakthrough in minorities’ voting pattern was near universal subscription to a potent stereotype in both academic and popular understanding about British minorities’ political behaviour. This stereotype asserts that the Labour party is the ‘natural party for ethnic minorities’ in Britain. This notion springs from the historical context of British immigration and party politics from the 1950s through to 1980s, but what makes it such a powerful explanatory factor in understanding minorities’ political behaviour is its ambiguity and lack of empirical challenge. This paper therefore aims to deal with both the ambiguity of the phrase ‘natural party for ethnic minorities’ and to test the notion empirically. As a result it casts light on minorities’ behaviour in 2005 and argues this was not a beginning of a new era, but simply a result of the over-riding salience of ethnic identity in their political choices.

Firstly, the notion of the ‘natural’ link between Labour and ethnic minorities in Britain needs to be unpacked. There are two ways to understand this link, each with opposing consequences. The first one is the belief that ethnic minorities have been socialised into taking their cues for political perceptions and opinions from Labour as a result of their long standing alignment with the party. They are therefore left with no alternative political frame of reference and hence are unlikely to defect from Labour. Their persistent attachment to the Labour party makes them vulnerable to the party taking their support for granted (Saggar, 2000; Anwar, 1980, 1986, 1998; Leyton-Henry, 1984). This is a belief held by many who declared a critical change in minorities’ behaviour in 2005: ‘The election results show that no single party can any longer take the Muslim community's votes for granted.’ (The Muslim Council of Britain, 2005). The second understanding of the ‘natural’ link between Labour and ethnic minorities suggests on the other hand that Labour has espoused policies representing minorities and their interests as inherently their own and so minorities’ support for Labour is justified rather than taken for granted (Messina, 1998). Primarily, the outcome of the second understanding is the importance of the active link between Labour’s policies and ethnic interests. It conditions Labour’s support on this party’s continued representation of minorities. From the perspective of the 2005

General Elections the latter understanding seems to be the correct one, however the question is: was it correct before 2005 and therefore was minorities' defection from Labour in 2005 part of the usual process of political choice for ethnic minorities, or was this election truly a critical one?

The two different understandings of what it means for a party to be a 'natural' party for a certain social group differ mainly in what they assume about the link between social group identity and party identity. This boils down to the question: which of the two identities, party or social, is the frame of reference for ethnic minorities' political decisions? In other words, which one is the politically salient identity?

### *Political salience of party identity*

According to the early socio-psychological theory of party identity of the Michigan school, because social groups rarely exist for political reasons, they 'stand at one remove from the political order' (Campbell et al., 1960: 295), and therefore they exercise only an intermittent political influence, being activated only when their interests are at stake in political conflict. Political parties on the other hand, as inherently political structures, are continuously politically salient. This property of parties is responsible for the greater salience of political parties as a political frame of reference. This continuous political salience, according to Campbell et al. (1960), makes party identification difficult to reverse once acquired. Individuals move from an initial understanding of parties as bridges between their social group membership and the world of politics to seeing parties as social groups in their own right. Hence, the psychological mechanism of the reference group is assumed to play the same role in political parties as in social group identification. Since the mechanism is the same and the political salience of parties is greater, there is no reason for party identity to remain contingent on previous group attachments: '[Party loyalties] come to have a force of their own, rather than remaining dependent on forces from the non-political secondary group. And, since the political party can exert unusually intense influence on political motives, this force may turn out to be stronger than any counter-force that the non-political group can bring to bear **in politics** at a later date.' (Campbell et al., 1960: 331, emphasis in original)

Campbell et al. (1960) claim that parties become an independent frame of reference for members of non-political social groups, and by this they mean that the party-group link is perpetuated by socialisation processes that are independent to specific group interests. Since the value of continuing support for the party is rarely examined by groups' members, party supporters cease to have an alternative source of reference. Party attachment in these cases is rarely updated and reviewed. As a result they arrive at a view that party identities once developed are both inherently stable and salient, which is almost entirely congruent with the first understanding of the 'Labour as natural party of minorities' claim, in which once established Labour identity among minorities has become a stable and a politically salient frame of reference.

### *Political salience of ethnic identity*

In the British context the link between a party and a salient social group, rather than the salience of a party identification in its own right, has been underlined. Butler and Stokes (1969) described such a link between social class and the Labour party identity, but applying this model in the context of ethnic minorities is also possible. They do not conceive of parties becoming a reference group itself, but concentrate on how a social group membership influences the support for a particular political party. 'The individual supports a party because he perceives a positive bond between the party and his own class. [...] the bond may be formed of nothing more than the individual's perception that the party is positively valued by his class.' (Butler and Stokes, 1969:88)<sup>i</sup>

It is clear from the quote above that while a party's representation of voters' interests may become obscured, voters must at least remain conscious of this party's normative bond with their social group if they are to remain loyal to it. Such a link is more explicit and therefore in a situation in which the social group would withdraw its endorsement of the party the results would be different from the predictions of the Michigan model (Campbell et al., 1960: 331). Butler and Stokes' (1969) position can be interpreted as proposing that partisan identity remains contingent on the prior membership of a social group that has delegated the representation of its political interests to the party, and therefore that the initial social group remains the primary

frame of reference. A similar position towards the conditionality of party identity on social group identity in America has recently been adopted by Green, Palmquist and Schickler (2002). They contend, although they do not present an explicit empirical test of this claim, that partisan stability is a result of stable links between certain parties and social groups (p.109).

One could extend this logic to the context of ethnic minorities' link with Labour. The claim that Labour is a 'natural party of minorities' may mean that minorities perceive a strong link between their interests or their group and the Labour party. In this case, minorities' loyalty to Labour would be explicitly conditional on their ethnic identity and would be sensitive to the ethnic attitudes and perceptions, i.e. ethnic political cues. Ethnic identity rather than party identity is therefore the politically salient identity. Considering the results of 2005 General Elections, this model of minorities' Labour identity could explain how the Labour party weakened their link with minorities by adopting a policy on Iraq which was heavily criticised by them.

### ***Measuring partisan identity's political salience: partisan bias***

The traditional way to test the salience of partisan identity is through observing its outcomes in terms of individual vote, political opinions, perceptions and evaluations. The mechanism through which partisanship influences individuals' political perspectives is partisan bias, and it is through this mechanism that I propose to test the relative political salience of party identity and ethnic identity. Partisan bias is one of the most intensely contested concepts in political science. The following section will show that that the most appropriate conceptualisation and measurement of partisan bias that responds to most common criticisms can be derived from social identity theory.

Initially, the concept of partisan bias rested strongly on the socio-psychological reference group theory (Weisberg and Greene, 2003). The notion that party loyalty exerts similar forms of influence on identifiers' attitudes and behaviour as other social groups was brought up as early as 1952 in a seminal article by Belknap and Campbell on attitudes towards foreign policy in the USA. They noted that identifiers of the same party not only shared similar political views, which could not be accounted for

by membership of other social categories and groups, but were also aware of such commonality of attitudes, and exhibited in-group solidarity. Furthermore, it was later established that partisan bias varies with the strength of the identity, which is assumed to be a valid proxy of this identity's salience (Jacoby, 1988), as "... the higher the identification of the individual with the group the higher the probability that he will think and behave in ways which distinguish members of this group from non-members." (Campbell et al., 1960: 307). The first criticisms of partisan bias concerned not only the mechanism of perceptual bias, but also the causal role of partisanship itself<sup>ii</sup>.

The two main controversies around **the mechanism** of partisan bias concern partisans' selectivity in the face of new information (biased learning) and the factors which increase susceptibility to biased thinking. These two problems reflect the two main models of partisan bias: biased persuasion and biased projection (Page and Brody, 1972). Persuasion bias takes place when the partisan perceives *his party* to be closer to his own position as a result of his affective attachment to this party<sup>iii</sup>. Biased projection on the other hand takes place when the partisan perceives *his own position* as closer to his own party as a result of his affective partisan attachment. The difference is therefore in whether the position of the *partisan* or the *party* is treated as fixed. The similarity is that both these kinds of bias deal with what Fiorina (1981) calls endogenous evaluations, in which the partisan not only places him- or herself, but also the political parties, in the issue space. Projection bias is independent from information, as it is the result of an affective bond with a party, which leads the partisan to place "his" party closer to his or her own views than he does other parties. In the case of biased perception, on the other hand, the partisan exhibits selectivity in the face of new information, accepting information congruent with their existing perception of the party and the views of this party, and rejecting incongruent information (Campbell et al, 1960). Partisans' selectivity can also be the result of biased sources of new information. In situations when an elite opinion on the issue is polarised, partisans will accept cues from their own party rather than other elite source (as their own party is their frame of reference), and thus receive biased information (Zaller, 1992). Biased persuasion demands a certain level of knowledge and interest, as otherwise partisans could not effectively recognise and therefore discriminate between their own elite and other sources of information. Also,

knowledge and interest are needed to obtain and retain any information at all. Hence, testing the existence of partisan bias in either form must entail measurement of the prior placement of the individual (Gerber and Green, 1999) and also of new information which is discordant, rather than congruent, with individuals' prior placements of their preferred party (Bartels, 2002).

This reveals another controversy surrounding partisan bias: the **causal ordering** of perceptions and choices. Especially in the field of evaluative perceptions of parties (valence issues) the causal link between party identity and positive evaluation of the party is under much debate with a substantial body of research suggesting that prior choices, loyalties and identities may bias the evaluation of parties' performance (Wilcox and Wlezien 1996; Wlezien et al. 1997; Anderson et al. 2004; Evans and Andersen 2004).

All these controversies revolve around the issue of the creation and operation of bias and the unresolved problem of directionality and proximity between of the perceived position of the parties and party identifiers. In addition, the problem of causality haunts them. It is not within the scope of this paper to evaluate these opposing perspectives concerning partisan bias, but it will be instead argued that a model of partisan bias based on the social identity theory eludes most of the difficulties they share.

First of all the social identity theory (SIT) overcomes two problems of the measurement: measuring prior perceptions of self (preference) versus party (evaluation), and measuring relative self and party placement (distance and direction), as it does not include a notion of self placement relative to party placement. Instead SIT concentrates on the perceptual differentiation between the partisan's party and other parties. Social identity theory is based on a concept that an individual describes himself and others in relation to their position within a group- 'us'- or outside of a group- 'them'. The existence of the out-group is vital for formation of the in-group; in fact only through such comparison does the membership of the group become significant to an individual (Tajfel, 1981: 256). The consequences of this process of group differentiation are a set of cognitive and affective mechanisms defined as 'social identity' effects (Tajfel, 1981: 255). These effects form the mechanism of

group bias: the polarisation of the perceived differences between in-group 'us' and the out-group 'them'. This mechanism is independent of one's self placement relatively to in- and out- group, as no actual knowledge of the true positions of in- or out-group is needed for members to perceive these groups as polarised. Hence, no provision is made for the individual's self-placement relatively to their own group, only the placement of their group relatively to the perceived out-group. As it focuses on the size of *perceived* differences between the groups, rather than on *substantive* differences, SIT also overcomes the problem of positive evaluations' priority or endogeneity relative to choices and preferences: no notion of positive or negative evaluation is used.

Additionally, SIT overcomes the problem of selective access to information as the mechanism it proposes is independent from receiving and accepting new information. In fact, group bias was observed in experiments among members of groups that were formed ad hoc and on the basis of criteria such as over- or under-estimating the number of dots on the picture shown to the participants of the experiments<sup>iv</sup> (Tajfel et al, 1972). Because of this ad hoc character, the actual knowledge of the groups can be very low or non-existent. The polarisation does not have to be 'correct' as it is purely an outcome of the tendency of people to differentiate between their in-group and out-group in order to confirm their group identity, regardless of true differences. This differentiation may be based entirely on the affective bias of the individual. This mechanism is therefore independent of factors normally believed to affect exposure to and interpretation of information. As a result, it is also a very conservative test of partisan bias as it proposes that group membership of even very low salience instigates group bias. However, its insensitivity to knowledge and interest (and incidentally also age) is to an extent limited as these factors are strongly correlated with strength of partisan identification itself- which here stands as a proxy of the salience of this identity. Hence some degree of correlation between the hypothesised polarisation mechanism and these factors will be expected, but they certainly should not be the principal drivers of the relationship between strength of partisanship and polarisation of party perceptions.

Even though the minimum salience required for the presence of cognitive polarisation between in and out group is very low, these effects intensify with the strength of

social identification. Like the traditional mechanisms of partisan bias described earlier, strength of identity is also thought to be a proxy for this identification's salience. The stronger the identification with a social group, the more bipolar the views of in-group and out-group will become.

The mechanism of cognitive bias offered by social identity theory can be applied to political parties if one, like Campbell et al (1960) and Green, Palmquist and Schickler (2002), assumes that political parties are social groups in the same or similar sense to other social groups<sup>v</sup>. Some social psychologists (Kelly, 1988 and Greene, 1999) have applied this theory to the study of political parties before and found that party identity fulfils the criteria of social identity. They show that political parties influence their members' perceptions in the same way as social groups: through the amplification of differences between members and non-members (Tajfel, 1981: 255). This paper will therefore apply this model of partisan bias to ethnic minority Labour identifiers in Britain. In the case that the Labour party is a natural party for minorities and as such provides a salient political identity independent of ethnic identity, the Labour party is hypothesised to be a social identity independent from minorities' ethnic identity and so to be the in-group for minorities (the Conservatives are treated as an out-group due to the two-party system in Britain). The partisan bias will be measured by the perception of difference, polarity, between these two parties. Since the self-declared intensity of identity is assumed to be identical with higher saliency, the strength of Labour identity should correlate with the intensity of in-group out-group polarisation of perceptions.

*Hypothesis 1. Labour identity salience model*

*If the Labour party is an independent political frame of reference for minorities, then the cognitive bias among Labour minority identifiers will be universal. The perceptions of the parties will show signs of partisan polarisation that will intensify with the growing strength of Labour identity.*

***Measuring ethnic identity's political salience- racial consciousness***

The concept and measurement of ethnic identity salience is poorly developed in the British context. In the American literature on the other hand it has been subject of

considerable study and debate. The principal problem with the lack of equivalent debate in Britain is that identity alone is not a social phenomenon and as such cannot be used as an explanatory mechanism in social or political contexts. In the United States, various mechanisms through which ethnic identity becomes a politically or socially salient identity that influences political and social outcomes have been proposed. All of these mechanisms rest the notion of salience of ethnic identity on the existence of a consciousness of ethnic status within the wider society. In the sociological literature ethnic awareness is a perception of social distance between one's own minority group and the dominant ethnic group, and perceptions of discrimination against minority groups among the majority population (Portes 1984). In the political literature the focus is on the sense of dissatisfaction with the ethnic in-group's social position, attribution of this position and resulting political orientations (Gurin et al, 1980; Miller et al 1981). Miller et al. (1981:495) observed that whereas identification is a source of an individual's recognition of self-location within a particular social group, consciousness gives an individual a sense of where this particular group falls within the wider social structure and therefore a sense of its political interests. 'Identification refers to the awareness of having ideas, feelings, and interests similar to others who share the same social stratum characteristics. Consciousness refers to a set of political beliefs and action orientations arising out of this awareness of similarity.' (Gurin et al. 1980:30) Either way the sense of social position and status of one's ethnic group is crucial to translating the ethnic identification from a private attitude into a politically salient one.

The individual's sense of their group's position within the wider social structure is therefore dictated by their awareness of racial prejudice and disadvantage. The awareness of discrimination enables individuals to perceive their group's position in society at large, or alternatively, is a result of a group's perception of its position in society at large, which in the case of ethnic minorities would be a position of racial disadvantage. It seems almost a matter of common sense that those individuals who identify as members of an ethnic minority but do not perceive any disadvantage tied with this group's membership would be much less likely to develop a perception of common ethnic interests and political action orientations. Empirical research seems to confirm such an operationalisation, as it has commonly found that among black Americans the feeling of political disempowerment and manipulation is especially

strong and influences political choice particularly robustly (Hurst, 1972, Miller et al., 1981).

The distinction between a politically salient racial consciousness and a private ethnic identification is best portrayed by the relationship they have with political participation and related attitudes such as political trust and efficacy. In this context racial consciousness proved to be a political resource accounting for a higher participation levels among black Americans that would be expected on the basis of their socio-economic position (Verba and Nie 1972, Shingles 1981, Olsen, 1970). Wong et al (2005) analysed the literature on the participation of black Americans and concluded that the more complex concept of consciousness is a better explanatory factor than simple identification, which has a less reliable link with participation.

In the sociological literature ethnic/racial awareness is shown to have a complex link with the assimilation of minorities into mainstream society. This sociological tradition explicitly defines ethnic awareness as the perception of adverse prejudice against one's race and/or ethnicity existing among the dominant majority. The theory of segmented assimilation underlines the importance of this perception as it shows it has a link with economic success and full incorporation within existing labour and educational framework of a host society (Portes and Zhou, 1993; Zhou, 1997). This research challenges the traditional assumption that knowledge of and contact with majority culture and society yields both economic success and greater cultural integration. On the contrary it shows that not only may economic success and contact with majority culture increase one's perception of discrimination and prejudice, but also that keeping oneself to one's own community may in fact bring greater economic returns in the first place. What is of particular interest in this body of research for the purposes of this paper is the evidence that ethnic awareness is based on a mechanism of a frame of reference. Increased contact with dominant majority and relative advancement within the structure of mainstream society result in the replacement of the traditional frame of reference such as country of origin or other immigrants with a new frame of reference: majority society. This new frame will highlight any existing inequality of chances and treatment, suffered on the basis of race and ethnicity and increase the perception of prejudice and disadvantage (Portes et al, 1980; Portes, 1984, 1997). In Britain this mechanism is more and more relevant with a growing

proportion of ethnic minorities being born in this country and hence more likely holding other Britons rather than their co-ethnics up for social comparison. As a result a frame of reference in a social and political context is the balance between an 'in-group' of a racial or ethnic minority and an 'out-group' of a white majority. This provides a good counterbalance as a measure to the party identification operationalised as a source of political reference, also based on the 'in-group' 'out-group' balance.

In sum, racially conscious individuals are expected to perceive politics through the lens of their ethnic group interest and identification. The concept of racial consciousness will therefore form the basis of a hypothesis that ethnic identity will form a political frame of reference and as such a basis of party evaluations and perceptions among ethnic minorities. Therefore, in contrast to hypothesis 1, in which *Labour party identity* was politically salient and therefore shaping the political perceptions and evaluations of ethnic minorities, hypothesis 2 proposes that it is *ethnic identity* which is politically salient and shaping the political perceptions and evaluations of ethnic minorities in Britain. Direct measures of the strength of ethnic identity are not currently available, but the salience of this identity can be proxied by presence of racial consciousness. Political perception will be measured by the perception of party difference, not as a measure of partisan bias as proposed earlier, but as a measure of the link between ethnic minorities and the Labour party, within the second understanding of the expression of Labour being the 'natural' party of minorities.

*Hypothesis 2. Ethnic identity salience model*

*If ethnic identity is politically salient, the Labour party remains a 'natural' party of ethnic minorities because it is perceived as having an existing link with ethnic minorities' interests. The polarisation of political perceptions and evaluations will then be related to perceptions of racial discrimination, which function as a proxy for the political salience of ethnic identity.*

Some possibly confounding factors will be controlled for in the testing of the two hypotheses: interest in politics, political knowledge, age, being born outside of Britain, and the length of residence in Britain. Interest in and knowledge of politics

may influence the degree to which an individual knows, or perceives the parties to have different policies and programmes, and a level to which the information about politics is accessed and internalised. Also, interest and knowledge may underlie the strength of party identity, as some research shows interested and knowledgeable individuals to have a higher intensity of party identification<sup>vi</sup> (Campbell et al., 1960; Green, Palmquist and Schickler, 2002). It is also generally argued that age would increase bias as the party identity is likely to intensify with time (Campbell et al., 1960), or because the young tend to have broader social networks and be therefore exposed to more varied sources of elite information (Huckfeldt and Sprague, 1995). The social identity bias does not make any provisions for these factors influencing group bias; however these factors, as possibly confounding, will be controlled for. Other possibly confounding factors that will be taken into account are: being born outside of Britain and number of years spent in this country, as they can influence the strength of the link between ethnic minority voters and the Labour party, and their understanding of parties' policies.

### **Data and measurement**

The data used here comes from the British Election Study survey from 1997 which contains an Ethnic Minority Booster sample of 705 ethnic minority respondents. The measure of Labour party identification strength comprises three questions, two concerned with party support and one concerned with strength of party affiliation.

The perceptions of the parties' issue positions will be used as a measure of cognitive polarisation. Polarisation is measured by calculating the mean perceived difference between Labour and Conservative positions on a battery of six policy questions<sup>vii</sup>. The policy questions include issues of unemployment, taxation and public spending, government efforts to equalise incomes, nationalisation and privatisation, independence from the EU and finally women's place in the family. The respondents are asked to place the parties on an 11 point scale. The 'don't know' answers were recoded as a middle, ambivalent, answer. This way if a respondent answered 'don't know' to questions on both Conservative and Labour position, they will be classified as not perceiving any difference between parties. However if they have no perception of one party's policies but do of another's then they will justifiably be classified with

those who perceive parties as different (although in most cases respondents who answer ‘don’t know’ do so for both parties).

The mechanism of social identity is only relevant in terms of the absolute difference an individual perceives between two opposing parties, rather than where he or she places the parties relative to where he or she stands. Therefore this paper makes no assumption that stronger partisans actually move closer to the party with which they identify, or further away from the other parties, as the result of a correct reading of the party’s cues. Partisan identifiers therefore do not need to be identifying with the ‘correct’ party, and the position of the partisan relative to the party is unimportant. The causal link assumed is from the strength of partisanship to perceptions of party difference, not from strength of partisanship to proximity to a party’s position. This assumption is made on the basis of the minimum group experiments discussed earlier.

The perceived difference is calculated by subtracting the score given by the respondent to the Labour party from the score given to the Conservatives. The difference is an absolute difference, so it gives no indication of the direction of difference:

$$\text{Perceived Difference} = \text{abs} (\text{Conservative score} - \text{Labour score})$$

As a measure of ethnic identity and a proxy measure for the salience of ethnic identity three variables are used: a binary measure of having British identity; a five-category measure of the importance of British identity relatively to other national identities when respondents indicated having more than one national identity (unfortunately a similar measure of ethnic identity was not available); and a binary measure of the perception of racial discrimination (those who perceive a lot of discrimination coded as 1 and those who perceive a little or hardly any coded as 0). In the case of British identity one variable was constructed with all those who had exclusively British identity or any mixture of British and ethnic identity coded as 1 and those who possessed only an ethnic identity coded as 0 (this simplification was necessary due to small sample size, but the results were not sensitive to including both variables separately). The perception of racial discrimination, as a symptom of racial

consciousness, is a proxy measure of salience of ethnic identity as discussed in an earlier section of this paper.

Age is a continuous variable, interest in politics is measured by a single item with five categories (1= very interested, 5= not interested), and political knowledge is a scale based on a politics quiz of six questions (0=no correct answers, 6= all answers correct).

### **Discussion of results**

Before presenting the results, Table 1 shows briefly a distribution of the strength of Labour party identity among the ethnic groups in the dataset. Ethnic minority respondents are somewhat more likely to declare a strong party identity than white people, especially those of South Asian origin, but this difference is compensated for by more white respondents identifying fairly strongly. The differences between ethnic groups are not significant.

## **Table 1 around here**

To test the two hypotheses proposed, the polarisation of party perceptions will be compared between weak, fairly strong and very strong Labour identifiers. Hypothesis 1 predicts that since the Labour party is a politically salient social identity for ethnic minorities in Britain, Labour identity will be the main source of political cognitive bias, here measured by the polarisation of perceptions of political parties. The more salient this identity, the larger its influence on political perceptions will be. Since the strength of identity is understood to be a good proxy of its salience, strength of Labour identity will increase the perceived differences between Labour as the in-group party and the Conservative party as the out-group. According to the predictions of Hypothesis 2, on the other hand, it is ethnic identity that is politically salient and shapes political perceptions of minorities. Support for Labour in this model will depend on the perceived link between the party and ethnic minorities. Therefore it would be expected that the perception of differences between parties will not be a function of Labour identity. Instead, party perceptions will depend on the political salience of ethnic identity, here measured by consciousness of racial prejudice. First therefore this paper will explore the relationship between the strength of Labour identity and polarisation of political perceptions, then it will test a multivariate model of the polarisation with controls for possible confounding factors, and finally it will test models of the influence of ethnic identity and consciousness on the polarisation of perceptions.

### **Figure 1 around here**

Figures 1 and 2 compare the bivariate relationship between strength of Labour identity and the polarisation of party perceptions for white and ethnic minority partisans respectively. For the white people in the sample we can observe the hypothesised relationship between partisan bias and strength of identification for all policy questions, as shown in Figures 1. Hence, weak identifiers see smaller differences than strong identifiers and in turn fairly strong identifiers see smaller differences than very strong identifiers. All those differences are consistent and statistically significant, which suggests that in the case of white people the pattern predicted by social identity theory does exist and is universal, with people who have strong Labour identity perceiving larger in-group out-group differences than those with weaker identities. Figure 2 shows the contrasting non-linear relationship between polarisation of party perceptions and strength of Labour identification among ethnic minority respondents. Apart from the issue of women's role in the family, there is no increasing differentiation between parties with growing strength of Labour identity, as was predicted by the partisan bias theory. The erratic distribution in the perceptions of the difference between the two parties indicates that ethnic minority identifiers do not show a universal cognitive bias, as measured by the polarisation of perceptions<sup>viii</sup>.

## Figure 2 around here

At first the presence of partisan polarisation on the issue of women's place in the family among ethnic minority identifiers is puzzling. However, looking at ethnic groups separately it becomes clear that this pattern is driven by the presence of polarisation of minorities of South Asian origin, who are a majority of ethnic respondents in this dataset, on this issue. Unsurprisingly this issue is salient among Indian and Pakistani groups, but especially those who are Muslims, for cultural reasons (Norris and Inglehart, 2004). This issue is however not really politically salient in Britain, suggesting that these minorities are not taking the cues of partisan bias from the Labour party, but rather from their cultural identity.

So far, on the basis of this simple analysis it seems that the white Labour partisans exhibit cognitive bias as predicted by the model of the Labour party as a politically salient social identity. In contrast, ethnic minority Labour identifiers did not exhibit the predicted relationship aside from the possibly ethno-cultural related issue of women's place in the family. However, before the multivariate tests, one could raise an objection to this initial finding, as looking at the Figures 1 and 2 the impression may be that ethnic minorities perceive less differences between parties, as the maximum differences perceived are smaller for minorities than for white people. However, at closer inspection when general levels of perceived differences are compared, this disparity proves to be led mostly by ethnic minority strong identifiers, who perceive relatively smaller differences, whereas minority weak identifiers actually see larger gaps than their white counterparts. When general levels of perceived differences are compared, white partisans (at all levels of strength of identity) and ethnic minorities are not consistently different.

In the multivariate models of cognitive partisan bias only the Labour partisans are included. The cognitive bias is measured by an average perceived difference on all issues between the two parties: Labour as an in-group and Conservatives as an out-group for Labour identifiers. The factors usually associated with both political perceptions and strength of party identity such as interest in politics, political knowledge, and age are controlled for. The linear regression models of polarisation in perceptions of the parties are fitted for both white and ethnic minority groups of

respondents, first together and then for minorities only. In Model 3 in Table 2 the interaction terms to establish whether the different influence of strength of Labour identity on white and minority partisans is significant.

First of all, in Model 2 in Table 2, the influence of the strength of Labour identity on perceptual polarisation is confirmed, even with the controls for political knowledge, interest in politics and age. Interestingly, age has a negative coefficient, which is inconsistent with general assumptions of party identity theory; unfortunately any further exploration of this phenomenon must remain outside the scope of this paper. Political knowledge and interest in politics have acted as predicted on polarisation of perceptions.

**Table 2 around here**

Confirming the findings of a simple bivariate analysis presented in Figures 1 and 2, the strength of partisanship interacts with ethnicity. Very strong ethnic minority party identifiers actually perceive smaller polarisation than the reference group of fairly strong identifiers. This confirms that the expected relationship between cognitive bias and polarisation is not present among minorities, and the cognitive polarisation follows the shape of the lines presented in Figure 2, with fairly strong identifiers in many cases perceiving the largest differences between the parties. The interactions between ethnic minority status and political knowledge, interest or age are all statistically insignificant and were subsequently excluded from the final model presented. This supports the general message of this paper that ethnic minorities do not seem to be influenced in their perceptions of the parties by the strength of their identification with Labour, and this phenomenon is not to be accounted for by different levels of knowledge of, interest in politics, or age. Because the existence of such relationship formed the basis of the hypothesis that Labour is a politically salient social identity for minorities, the lack of this relationship leads to the rejection of this hypothesis. Labour therefore is unlikely to be a main and independent source for minorities' political perceptions. This leaves the question whether ethnic identity instead acts as such a source.

Unfortunately, there is no direct measure of strength of ethnic minority identification. Therefore a different measure of the salience of this identity was found on the basis of the concept of racial consciousness: awareness of racial prejudice. Hypothesis two predicted that ethnic identity will be a source of influence on political perceptions. Since the Labour party is hypothesised to be the ‘natural’ party of minorities, not in a sense of being a politically salient form of social identity, but as being linked with the interests of ethnic minorities, minorities who are most aware of the particularity of these interests, those who perceive the most prejudice, are expected to see Labour as more distinct from Conservatives. Minorities who are not aware of prejudice, on the other hand will have a weaker idea of their distinct ethnic interests and therefore for them the link between Labour and such interests will be weaker.

### **Table 3 around here**

To test these propositions, Table 3 presents two regression models of the average difference perceived between parties for ethnic minority Labour identifiers only (hence the small total number of cases). The first of the models includes all minority identifiers, whereas the second only includes the first generation immigrant minorities. Both models show clearly what was to be expected from the results presented in Table 2, for the whole sample, that the ethnic minority Labour identifiers are not influenced in their perception of the parties by strength of their party attachment as predicted by the social identity theory and as is the case for the majority of white Labour identifiers. But more importantly these two models introduce the measure of British identity (set up as a contrast between minorities who declared either both British and ethnic identity or only British identity and those who proclaims only ethnic identity) and perception of racial prejudice to see if they have an impact on minorities’ political perceptions. The British identity measure proves statistically insignificant, however the measure of perceived wide spread racial prejudice does increase the polarisation of perception of the two political parties: Labour and Conservatives. This supports the proposition that ethnic identity is politically salient and is a condition upon which the loyalty to the Labour party is based. Interestingly, being born in Britain has a significant positive effect, as seen in model 1, despite such a small proportion of Labour identifiers in the sample falling into this category. As was said earlier, being born in Britain increases the frame of

reference effects of ethnic awareness by making the white majority the basis of comparison and thus increasing the perception of ethnic inequality among second and third generation minorities. Even more strikingly, a parallel effect can be observed for the length of time minorities not born in Britain resided in the UK. Even after controlling for political knowledge, interest in politics and strength of party attachment, all of which can reasonably be expected to increase with years of residence, length of residence increases the perceived polarisation between the two parties. It is too early to interpret these results fully, but the fact they work in the same direction as the perception of prejudice does suggest they may be a part of the same phenomenon of political salience of ethnic minority membership.

## **Conclusions**

The aim of this paper was to test a potent and common stereotype of research into British ethnic minorities' political behaviour, a vague claim that Labour is a 'natural' party for ethnic minorities. Two understandings, with very different political consequences, of this notion were proposed on the basis of the theories of party identity and then tested with the use of affective and cognitive mechanisms proposed by social identity theory. In the first understanding, it was hypothesised that Labour party identity is an independent politically salient identity that provides political cues for minorities (the 'Labour identity salience' model). Alternatively, it was hypothesised that the ethnic identity was a politically salient identity and therefore a source of political perceptions (the 'ethnic identity salience' model).

The claim that Labour identity has become, for ethnic minorities, independent of their prior social group memberships has been seriously challenged by this paper. The lack of a consistent relationship between strength of Labour identity and the differences seen between Labour and the Conservatives showed that for minorities the Labour party does not take on a role similar to other social groups. It is also clear that Labour identity is not a dominant frame of reference for the political evaluations and perceptions of ethnic minorities. This is quite unlike in the case of the white Labour partisans, who showed a consistent pattern of partisan bias. This undermines the popular notion that Labour is a default party identity for black and Asian electorates,

as Labour party identity is not functioning as an independent source of their political perceptions.

These findings contradict the notion that minorities have no political choice as it shows that minority support for Labour is instead strictly linked to this party's efforts to maintain the image of being minority-friendly. During the 2005 General Elections this link was called into question after the Labour government made the decision to join America in its war in Iraq, which was unpopular and heavily criticised by British minority groups. In the light of this paper, ethnic minorities' swing away from Labour in these Elections is unsurprising. Not least it was also because the parties that managed to persuade minorities' of its ability to defend the interest of minorities and to respect their protest over the war was the Liberal Democrats and the Respect party. They were the main benefactors of the ethnic minorities' swing in 2005, but it does not make it more likely that Liberal Democrats or Respect may provide a viable alternative to Labour in the long run. Partly, it is because the British electoral system does not support the vote for the 'third' party, and most of the time minorities would find themselves in a strategic-voting situation where their choice would be limited to Labour or Conservatives. But more importantly, this paper shows that the minorities that abandoned Labour in 2005 may find their way back if Labour revives its traditional appeal to ethnic interests, its record on anti-discrimination legislation and representation of minorities. As many commentators quoted at the start of this article, 2005 election may have been a warning sign Labour cannot take its ethnic electorate for granted, but, unlike the commentators thought, this is not a critical change but a logical outcome of an existing minorities' conscious link between Labour's policies and their interests. The Labour party was never a 'natural' party of minorities in a sense that its support amongst minorities was a social identity, a reflex caused by years of socialisation and lack of other choices. The Labour party was however, a 'natural' party of minorities as they perceive Labour's policies in the light of their ethnic political identity. This always meant that the Labour vote among minorities is conditional, as the 1997 data analysed here shows there were never a 'captive audience', even if it emerged in practise only in 2005. So why was 2005 such a surprise to most? The major reason behind minorities' stable political choice was a combination of minorities' rather left wing agenda well matched to Labour's position and lack of saliency of ethnic representation and ethno-cultural issues on the main

national parties' agenda prior to 2005 (XXX, 2005). This last condition has changed in this election, especially in the case of Muslim minorities, but it remains to be seen whether the next election will bring a more even contest for minorities' vote between all political parties, or Labour will revert to its link with minority interests. Generally however, the primacy of ethnic identity as a political frame of reference over a party identity, gives all parties an incentive to appeal to this ever growing electorate or its parts. This certainly can only be a good outcome for minorities' interests and representation.

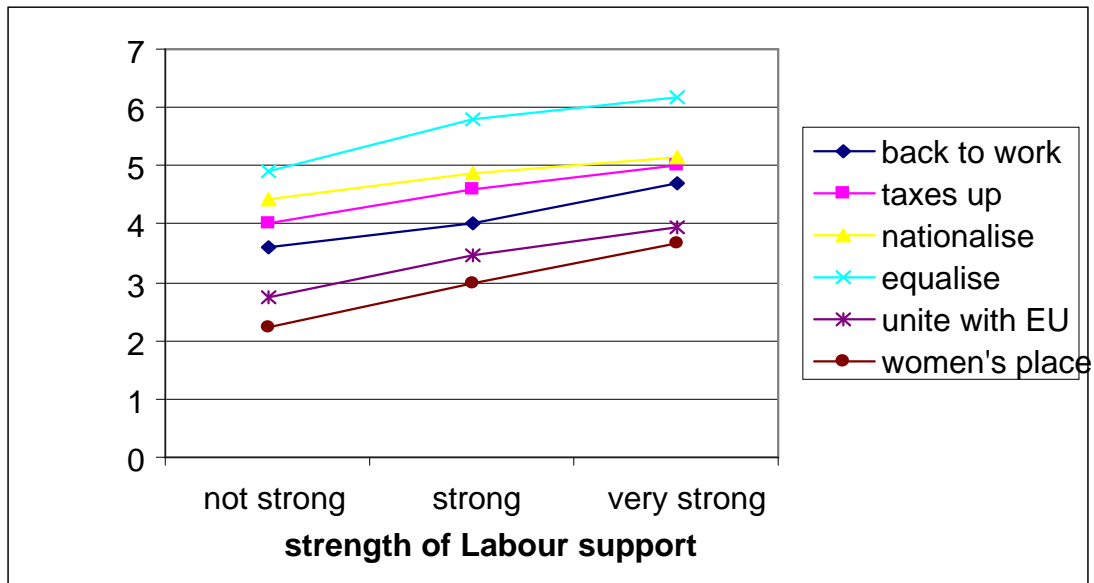
## Tables and Figures

**Table 1 Strength of party identity among Labour party identifiers: percentages**

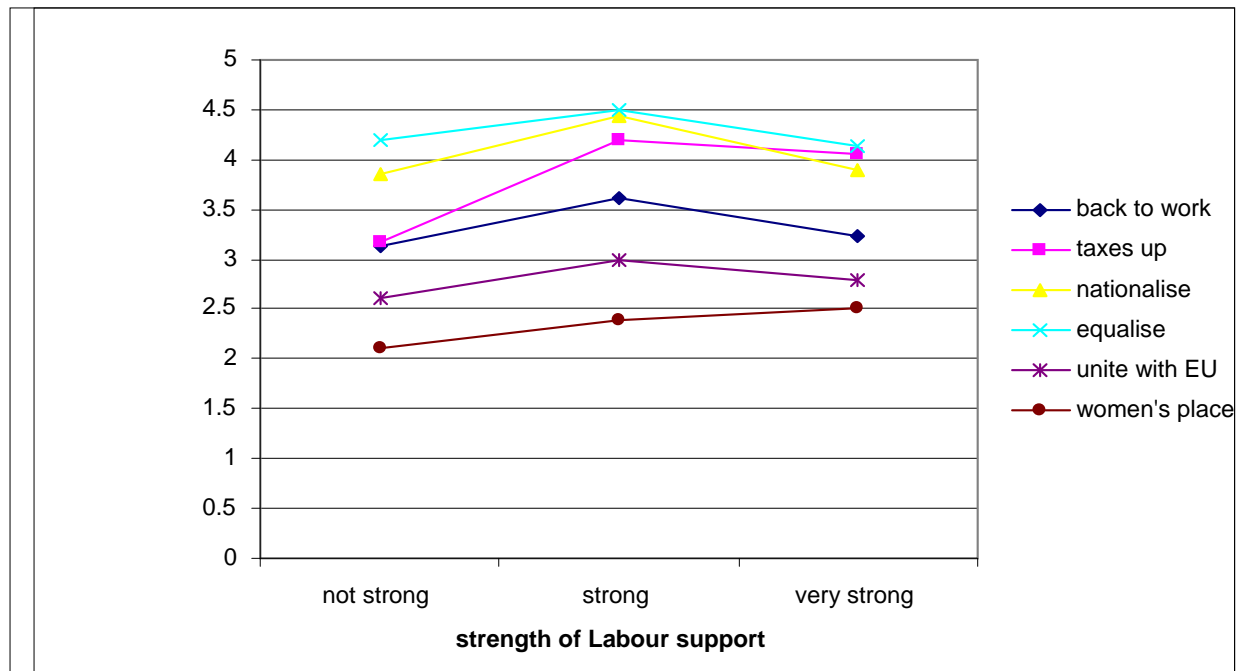
	African	Caribbean	Indian	Pakistani	Ethnic minorities	White
Weak Labour ID	32.9	28.9	30.2	30.9	30.5	31.4
Strong Labour ID	42.5	46.5	43.6	40.2	43.5	46.4
Very Strong Labour ID	23.3	24.6	26.2	28.9	25.6	22.2
Don't know	1.4				0.3	0.1
<i>N</i>	73	114	172	97	456	1525

*Note: category "other ethnic origin" excluded*

**Figure 1 Mean perceived difference on policy questions between the Labour and Conservative parties by strength of Labour identity - white respondents**



**Figure 2 Mean perceived difference on policy questions between the Labour and Conservative parties by strength of Labour identity - ethnic minority respondents pooled**



**Table 2 OLS: perceived difference between parties for the whole sample**

	Average perceived difference on issue position*		
	Model 1	Model 2	Model 3
Ethnic minority	<b>-.58 (.10)</b>	<b>-.65 (.10)</b>	<b>-.40 (.13)</b>
Knowledge		<b>.21 (.02)</b>	<b>.22 (.02)</b>
Interest		<b>.39 (.04)</b>	<b>.38 (.04)</b>
Age		<b>-.009 (.002)</b>	<b>-.01 (.002)</b>
Labour identification			
Weak Labour id		<b>-.34 (.11)</b>	-.06 (.23)
Very strong Labour id (Ref. fairly strong L. id)		<b>.98 (.12)</b>	.18 (.24)
<i>Interactions with ethnicity</i>			
Weak id*ethnic min.			-.33 (.26)
Very strong id*ethnic min.			<b>-1.07 (.28)</b>
<i>Model fit R sq</i>	<b>.007</b>	<b>.088</b>	<b>.091</b>
<i>Base</i>	1981		

*Significance: significant coefficients (p < .05) printed in bold*

*\*The perceived difference between Labour and Conservatives on a scale of issues is an average of all the questions*

**Table 3 OLS: perceived difference between parties for ethnic minority sample only**

Average perceived difference on issue position*		
	Model 1	Model 2
Knowledge	.13 (.08)	<b>.17 (.08)</b>
Interest	<b>.45 (.12)</b>	<b>.34 (.12)</b>
Age	.01 (.01)	-.02 (.01)
Labour Identification		
Weak Labour id	-.29 (30)	.07 (32)
Very strong Labour id (Ref. fairly strong L. id)	-.29 (30)	.10 (.35)
Born in Britain	<b>.69 (.32)</b>	-
British identity	.05 (.29)	-.02 (.30)
Awareness of race prejudice	<b>.56 (.25)</b>	<b>.59 (.26)</b>
Length of residence in Britain (years)	-	<b>.03 (.01)</b>
<i>Model fit R sq</i>	<b>.05</b>	<b>.05</b>
<i>Base</i>	456	441

*Significance: significant coefficients ( $p < .05$ ) printed in bold*

*\*The perceived difference between Labour and Conservatives on a scale of issues is an average of all the questions*

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<sup>i</sup> They recognise three different ways in which members of the working class form their identification with the Labour party, which they relate to levels of cognitive perception: the awareness of conflicting class interests represented by competing political parties; the consciousness of class interests and their representation by a political party; and the recognition of a link between a social class and a political party, without the understanding of class interests but simply as an element of class culture and norms. Similarly, Campbell et al. (1960) find an equivalent to Butler and Stokes' norm-based cognitive partisan-class link in the form of group-benefit conceptualisation of party evaluations by American voters. They stipulate that the conceptualisation used to evaluate political parties by voters depends on their level of sophistication, with the group-benefit conceptualisation being characteristic of less sophisticated voters.

<sup>ii</sup> As an alternative to the socio-psychological school, the so-called revisionists, building up on the economic models of voting (Downs 1957), proposed a rational choice interpretation of party identity. Fiorina (1981) has argued that partisanship is a constantly updated tally of political experiences and party evaluations. Achen (1992, 2002) sees it is a perceptual shortcut used as a time- and effort-saving mechanism for placing oneself on an issue preference continuum and optimising one's decision-making processes. The partisan screen therefore becomes a cognitive shortcut for easy access to stored political preferences and experiences rather than a perceptual bias, and the process of party choice becomes a calculation of costs and benefits rather than a psychological attachment and group identity.

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<sup>iii</sup> Page and Brody (1972) actually argue voters who are ‘persuaded’ in this way by a party are issue voters, i.e. rational voters. However, such persuasion can be biased, which as Bartels (2002) notes does not preclude it from being rational.

<sup>iv</sup> This experiment is known as a minimal group experiment.

<sup>v</sup> The one weakness of the social identity theory is the poorly understood motivation for the observed polarisation mechanisms. Tajfel (1980) theorises that they are a result of individuals maximising their self-esteem and wellbeing by identifying all things positive with their own group. This explanation is difficult to test empirically and hence considered rather weak, which prevents some authors considering it when they speak of party identification as a social identity. However, the problem of motivation should not obscure the fact that proposed mechanisms of polarisation are empirically robust. Some related theories, such as social categorisation theory, does not talk about motivation at all, but sees the mechanism of differentiation as a result of people’s natural tendency to categorise themselves and the world around them (Turner et al., 1987; Sherman, Hamilton, Lewis, 1999; Josefsen, 2000). These explanations are beyond the scope of this paper, as this paper is based on an empirically observed mechanism well suited to the measurement of group bias and, as has been argued here, specifically partisan bias.

<sup>vi</sup> The causality could also run the other way: more intense partisans may have an incentive to learn more about politics, and are liable to be more interested in it.

<sup>vii</sup> The questions used to derive this variable come from the self-completion questionnaire, which has about 10% non-response. Therefore these missing values were imputed with the EM algorithm.

<sup>viii</sup> This lack of pattern is also visible when ethnic groups are analysed separately.