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British Muslims Can Swing the U.K. Election, But Only If They Get Out and Vote



Men pray at the Suleymaniye Mosque in East London on March 1, 2019 in London, England Dan Kitwood—Getty Images



BY **MUSHARRAF HUSSAIN** NOVEMBER 18, 2019 3:14 AM EST

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In December's U.K. election, British Muslims represent a swing vote that few are paying attention to. The 2 million eligible Muslim voters in the U.K. have the ability to swing the result, one way or the other. As an imam, I'm encouraging my congregation to get out and vote, and not let Muslims be excluded from the British political conversation any longer.

In previous elections, the Muslim turnout has been relatively low. A [parliamentary report](#) last month found that voter registration amongst BAME communities was only half that of the general population. It may be even lower amongst some Muslim communities.

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Yet if Muslims do get out to vote, their impact could be transformative in many parts of the U.K. Research just released by the [Muslim Council of Britain](#), a non-partisan umbrella body, shows that both the major parties – the ruling Conservatives and the opposition Labour party – as well as niche parties like

the pro-Scottish independence SNP could lose or gain seats through the Muslim vote.

There are 31 marginal seats where the Muslim electorate outnumbered the sitting member of parliament's (MP's) majority. In Conservative-held Hendon, for example, the ruling party's majority is just 1,072. This is in a constituency with an estimated 8,395 eligible Muslim voters. On the other side of the political divide, Labour holds Glasgow North East by just 242 votes. If just a quarter of the 1010 eligible Muslim voters were to swing to the SNP, the Scottish Nationalists would have another seat in Westminster.

But this depends on Muslims registering to vote, something that is not a given in all communities. On Nov.22, organisations like the **Muslim Council of Britain** are staging the U.K.'s first ever National Muslim Voter Registration Day to encourage members of our community to exercise their democratic rights.

Many Muslims still feel excluded from the political process, which is hardly a surprise as the major parties have all but ignored the Muslim vote at the national level. This is systemic, but most notable with regards to the Conservative Party and its ongoing Islamophobia scandal. The Tories are accused of turning a blind eye to anti-Muslim hatred within the party's ranks, and are **refusing to hold** an independent enquiry into it.

This mirrors how the Jewish community feels anti-Semitism isn't being taken seriously by the Labour Party, leading to similar alienation. Both parties have been proven to have members, candidates and even office holders who have made allegedly Islamophobic or anti-Semitic comments online and in print. In the Conservative Party, this even includes Prime Minister Boris Johnson who has, for example, compared veiled Muslim women to letterboxes – a statement that is deeply hurtful to many Muslim women who want their choice of modest

dress to be understood by their fellow Brits.

It's true that in some Muslim communities voting is seen as clan politics, driven by familial loyalties rather than personal choice. A number of Muslim communities come from rural parts of Pakistan and Kashmir where extended families act as cohesive units and take collective decisions about many things, including voting.

Yet this trend has been exacerbated by lazy campaigning by political parties. Second and third generation British Muslims are typically far more independent of the "clan" than many political strategists think, posing a challenge for political parties, who all too often indulged these clan politics, and ultimately harmed our democracy.

This new generation of Muslims is different. Unlike the first-generation immigrants, 50% of young Muslims are graduates, with their own political priorities. Far from being seduced by the politics of apathy or pointless protest, they know that the stakes are simply too high – for them and for the country – to not engage. They know it's their civic duty as Brits, and their religious duty as believers, to vote.

Crucially for Westminster, the Muslim swing vote could be in either direction. Rather than being ideologically committed to one party, many Muslims are value voters – looking at all parties and candidates and asking themselves who represents them most closely. For many Muslims, this isn't just a "Brexit election" – particularly because they have mixed feelings about the Leave campaign. Whilst incidents of xenophobia are clearly concerning, many Muslims have family in the Commonwealth and are open to Britain pivoting away from Europe and perhaps towards their countries of heritage.

Beyond Brexit, issues like family values are a big part of Muslim culture. Many

Beyond Brexit, issues like family values are a big part of Muslim culture. Many Muslims grow up in extended families in one neighbourhood or even under one roof. This doesn't mean, however, that the state doesn't have a role to play and differing cultural attitudes mean that elderly Muslims sometimes do not access the same care as others.

Other issues like social justice are hardwired into Islam at the theological level. Whilst working on my [translation of the Quran](#), I was amazed at how regularly social justice is mentioned, coming up 31 times. Many Muslims want to live in a society where working class and vulnerable people are protected. It is no coincidence that Muslims are typically the most philanthropic faith community, who give generously to everything from disaster relief to food banks.

Many Muslims are also business owners. In my congregation there are self-employed Uber drivers, takeaway chefs and directors of multi-million pound companies. At the same time as being committed to social justice, they want a strong economy and a tax system that gives incentives for hard work.

Muslim values include democracy, justice, fairness, and tolerance; not only are they the same as our British values, but they are a mix of centre-left and centre-right ideals. With such a wide-ranging political heritage, Muslims can vote for whoever they feel best represents them. In the Dec. 12 election, it is imperative that they do so — to make their voices heard, and move beyond the tribal clan politics that have silenced some in our community in the past.

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