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### **Biraderi, bloc votes and Bradford: investigating the Respect Party's campaign strategy**

#### **Abstract**

In March 2012, the Respect Party won an unexpected by-election in the British city of Bradford, previously regarded as a safe Labour seat. This paper examines the party's campaign strategy and in particular how it courted South Asian Muslim voters. A dominant feature of South Asian Muslim politics in the UK has been community bloc voting along lines of kinship (biraderi). The use of kinship networks for political gain effectively disenfranchised many young people and women. We demonstrate how Respect used their experience of campaigning in constituencies with significant numbers of South Asian Muslim voters to achieve an unlikely victory in Bradford. A key strategy was to mobilise otherwise politically marginalized sections of the South Asian Muslim community by offering an alternative to the culture of patronage in Bradford whilst at the same time utilising certain community structures in order to gain their own bloc votes.

#### **Introduction**

The surprise victory of George Galloway in the 2012 Bradford West by-election and the subsequent success of the Respect party in the local elections later that year in the same city re-focused attention on the voting habits of South Asian Muslim communities in the UK. In particular, there was heightened interest in electoral mobilisation within these communities and the use of kinship networks or 'biraderi' for political gain.<sup>1</sup> For many years, community leaders, who were often biraderi elders, were incentivised by local politicians to make

ethnicity-based claims for their communities and in return biraderi leaders endorsed those politicians who supported them, providing in effect a bloc community vote. This is known as ‘biraderi politicking’ (Akhtar, 2013) and the use of kinship networks for electoral gain has been in operation in Britain for many years. The principle of patronage underlying this arrangement was supported by both the Conservative and Labour parties who recognised it as their winning ticket into South Asian Muslim communities. It has been suggested that the support for Respect in the 2012 Bradford West by-election was, in large part, the manifestation of young South Asian-origin voters’ disillusionment from mainstream politics due to this patronage system, and more specifically, the relationship between biraderi elders and the local Labour Party (Baston 2013). This article investigates these claims and the campaign strategy of Respect, in particular, how it managed to simultaneously circumvent and harness the traditional community structures which have delivered bloc votes. We also assesses the extent to which Respect has relied on South Asian Muslim voters for its electoral successes.

In this article, we draw upon our separate work on Muslim political participation in Europe, and specifically, South Asian Muslim political activism in the UK, to show that kinship and other religious/cultural networks were still key to Respect’s victory in the 2012 Bradford West by-election, even though the party openly criticised the use of such tactics by their Labour rivals. Since the 1970s, politicians in towns and cities across the UK with significant numbers of South Asians have drawn on the use of networks within the South Asian community to safeguard a bloc community vote. In recent years this has been criticised as a highly exclusionary practice as it values the decisions of mostly older men within the minority community and marginalises the voices of women and young people. In Bradford, as in many urban localities across the UK, British born South Asians were often frustrated by their exclusion from the political process, and George Galloway’s Respect

campaign in 2012 appealed to this generation of politically excluded young people. The Respect party offered an alternative to patronage within Bradford politics, giving voice to this disenfranchised section of the community whilst savvily utilising biraderi and other community networks to gain bloc votes. It was also able to appeal to a much wider constituency albeit by focusing on different issues. Recent research has shown the importance of well-directed local campaigning in the UK context (Johnston and Pattie 2003, Pattie and Johnston 2010). We demonstrate how Respect used their experience of campaigning in constituencies with significant numbers of South Asian Muslim voters to overturn the odds on one of the most unlikely UK by-election victories in recent years.

### **Methodology**

The paper utilises qualitative data from semi-structured interviews with political activists and city councillors in Bradford, Birmingham and Tower Hamlets in East London. A total of 12 research interviews were undertaken in 2013 with Respect and Labour Party activists which focused on the Bradford West by-election. A wider archive of research relating to British South Asian political attitudes and behaviour has also been used. This includes primary interviews and participant observation material collected over a seven year period (2005-2012).<sup>2</sup> Such an archive of data over an extensive timeframe allows the authors to contextualise the Bradford West by-election in the wider trends of British South Asian political organisation and influence. We believe this offers a more nuanced understanding of the results in Bradford West by explaining the political and cultural context within which the election took place. We recognise that the use of biraderi mobilisation in the political process is highly contentious and, as such, there is the possibility that interviewees may have been reluctant to mention instances of themselves or party members engaging in the practice. For this reason anonymity was promised to interviewees who are not identified by name. Also, it

should be pointed out that one of the authors is from the Pakistani community, has grown up in one of the areas of research (Birmingham) and had been embedded as a researcher there since 2005, which meant there was sufficient time to build trust with respondents and to triangulate interview data with participant observation, thereby improving the robustness of the findings. Further analysis is provided with election results and data on ethnicity and religion from the 2011 census. We start by examining the concept of biraderi and its significance in the British political process.

### **Kinship networks and voting in the UK**

Biraderis are networks of individuals and families that share a common ancestry. They function as hierarchical systems of social organisation and support, with land-owning biraderis such as the *Rajputs* and *Jats* at the top of the social order and the artisans such as the *Mochi* at the bottom of the scale. Biraderi broadly translates as patrial lineage or descendants of the same blood line. In practice however, biraderis do include non-blood relatives through relatively porous boundaries of inclusion. This is especially true in the diaspora context where members of the same village in Pakistan, for example, may refer to each other in the new country context as being of the same biraderi. In the UK context, patterns of kin-based reciprocity amongst members of patrilineal descent groups have been an important feature of many South Asian communities. Biraderis have historically performed the function of facilitating processes of migration and settlement. Within the economic sphere, such networks have helped with upward mobility through, for example, the provision of interest free loans to biraderi members starting up new businesses or buying a house.

In this article we focus on the realm of politics, and in particular, explore to what extent instrumental patronage through kinship networks has been, and how far it continues to

be, important in South Asian Muslim political processes in Britain, and how this has in turn influenced the Respect Party strategy in places like Birmingham and Bradford. It is important to note that political patronage amongst immigrant communities is not specific to the British Pakistani community. There is a long history of such communities pooling together resources through diaspora networks to gain representation in the host country's political system. The most emblematic case being the Tammany Hall political organisation used by Irish immigrants in nineteenth century New York to secure political influence in their adoptive country (McDonald, 1994). Indeed, even amongst the majority community, political mobilisation and support is employed from different forms of social networks which can be construed as bloc voting, for example, amongst families, party lists, Trade Unions and lobby groups.

By the 1970s, many of Britain's industrial heartlands had significant numbers of ethnic minority communities, many from former colonial countries. They had a legal right to participate fully in UK politics, including the right to vote and to be candidates in local, national and European parliamentary elections (Anwar, 1994).<sup>3</sup> The major political parties were attracted to ethnic minority voters because of their perceived electoral potential. The First Past the Post electoral system employed in the UK favours those parties whose support is geographically concentrated (Boucek 1998). This is particularly true at the local level, where councillors are elected to specific wards which may have a concentration of voters from a particular social or ethnic background. The persistent allegiance of ethnic minorities to Labour highlights the disappointing record of its rivals in attracting ethnic-minority support (Saggar, 2003, Heath *et al* 2013, Holloway 2013). There is clear agreement amongst these voters when surveyed that Labour is 'much more concerned with ethnic minority interests than are the Conservatives' (Heath *et al* 2013: 94). However, equally important was the

institutionalisation of the relationship between key South Asian community leaders and local Labour politicians.

Local politicians in areas with significant South Asian communities formed close relationships with biraderi elders or community representatives viewing them as intermediaries between the state and the community (Akhtar, 2012). Biraderi leaders were keen to be community representatives for a number of reasons, including the prestige within the South Asian population. Local politicians were keen to cultivate relationships with biraderi leaders because they were seen as gatekeepers to a potential South Asian bloc vote. In local constituencies, as the demographic changed and South Asians became numerically significant, it became clear that courting the minority vote was not only politically savvy but in some cases politically necessary.

These politicians took the role of patrons of biraderi leaders, who in turn, were the clients promising to deliver community votes, what Lewis Baston has termed ‘manipulated clan politics’ (Baston, 2013: 10). By the 1990s, community leaders were not content with merely delivering votes to politicians; they began to stand for office themselves at local elections. For example, in 1996 there were 12 Muslim councillors on Birmingham City Council and 11 on Bradford City Council (Purdham 2000). The exploitation of kinship networks has dominated the political landscape of British South Asian communities. Whilst not the sole preserve of the Labour Party, Labour has been most successful at this. Roy Hattersley, the former Labour Party cabinet member and MP for the constituency of Sparkbrook in Birmingham, noted in 2005 that his party took the South Asian vote for granted.<sup>4</sup>

Biraderi networks can be useful for election campaigns where funds are short and campaigners are scarce. Having a network of friends and relatives to support and spread the party message can be an incredibly effective and inexpensive way of electioneering on a

‘shoestring’. However, certain campaigning techniques led to the exclusion from the political process of already marginalised voices within South Asian communities. As witnessed in participant observation during a local election campaign in Birmingham in 2007, Pakistani candidates, whilst campaigning door-to-door, would speak only to male heads of the house on the assumption that it was they who would decide how the rest of the household would be voting (Akhtar 2013). Similar findings have been described in a report by the Metropolitan Police Authority which stated that: ‘some practices that are seen as acceptable outside the UK have been adopted in respect of UK elections – for example, the head of an extended family instructing family members to vote for a particular party or candidate’ (MPA 2006). Across the country and across political parties, biraderi politicking guaranteed a vote en masse through relationships with biraderi leaders. These ‘gatekeepers’ (often older men) to the South Asian communities effectively disenfranchised young people and women from the political process. Former Respect leader Salma Yaqoob for example, noted:

“Politics in large parts of South Asian communities is overwhelmingly a male preserve, from candidates to campaigners...This grip is reinforced by the way in which members of tight family and clan networks are encouraged to vote as a bloc. In this way the male head of the household can often control dozens, and sometimes hundreds, of votes, which are used to exercise political leverage. This ultimately has quite a corrupting influence on politics because the determining factor in exercising such influence becomes less about political conviction and more about which candidate will be indebted to you” (Yaqoob 2008a).

This is an issue that Yaqoob consistently campaigned on, knowing full well that it would be impossible to beat the Labour Party unless this system was undermined. Recent qualitative research suggests that there has been a shift away from this practice amongst younger politically motivated South Asians who are critical of the use of biraderi networks in the political sphere (Baston 2013, Akhtar 2013). Such claims are, of course, hard to substantiate empirically. In her research on young British Pakistanis in Birmingham, Akhtar found that

many were unhappy to be co-opted into relationships of patronage by the political elite and want to hold politicians accountable on a range of issues from schools to street lights (Akhtar, 2012). Family and kinship networks, for these voters, are less important than a politician's record on local governance.

The main concern over the political use of biraderi networks is in relation to electoral fraud. Pressure has been put on members of the South Asian community to deliver votes to candidates from their biraderi for local and even national elections. This problem was exacerbated from 2000 onwards with the introduction of postal voting on demand. Practices of electoral fraud were subsequently highlighted amongst South Asian communities in relation to local elections in Oldham (2000), Blackburn (2002) and Burnley (2004). Amongst political circles it was known that during election time, in high density South Asian constituencies, hundreds and thousands of ballot papers would be collected from people's homes and filled out by a small group of individuals in order to rig the election as described by one activist in Bradford:

“Thousands of people are registered as postal voters in Bradford West, but it's only supposed to be for people who are sick or infirm. They were registered by other people a few years in advance so the candidates think they already have those votes in the bag. People go to a house with a form and say they're going to register you and explain that you don't need to do anything as they will come and collect the votes so you can just relax. Many people don't understand the importance of their vote so when these people turn up at the door they hand the postal vote over. They pick up the blank ballot papers and then take them somewhere and put these little rubber things on their fingers so there's no fingerprints and use different coloured pens and different handwriting. It's very sophisticated.”<sup>5</sup>

Reports published by the Joseph Rowntree Foundation (Wilks-Heeg 2008), the House of Commons Library (White 2012) and most recently the Electoral Commission (2014) have all postulated a link between electoral fraud and the use of biraderi networks by some political candidates. Whilst the report from the Electoral Commission points to evidence from police data and prosecutions to highlight that people accused of electoral fraud come from a wide



range of backgrounds and that it would ‘be a mistake to suggest that electoral fraud only takes place within specific South Asian communities’, it does nonetheless, continue to raise the concern about ‘the extent to which electoral fraud affects or originate from within specific communities’ (Electoral Commission, 2014: 17). Indeed, the 16 local authorities singled out as being at greatest risk of electoral fraud are all areas with a high proportion of South Asians including Birmingham, Bradford and Tower Hamlets. Such concerns have been picked up by politicians and have received national level media attention. In an interview with *The Telegraph* published in November 2013, Dominic Grieve, the Conservative MP and attorney general, warned politicians that they needed to ‘wake up’ to ethnic corruption, specifically within electoral politics. Some south Asian communities, in particular Pakistani communities, he argued, came from societies in which corruption was endemic and where ‘they had been brought up to believe you can only get things done through a favour culture’.<sup>6</sup> Whilst Grieve did not provide any concrete evidence for his assertions, the coverage of the interview did illustrate the public interest in the matter and points to the need for more research.

### **Respect’s electoral strategy**

The shift in political consciousness amongst the second and third generation of South Asians in the UK was a significant factor in the Respect party’s early electoral successes in Birmingham and similar issues were also at stake among the Bengali community in East London where Respect made significant inroads in 2005-2008. A part of the Respect Party’s strategy in Bradford in 2012 was to rely on such disillusioned young South Asian voters, who in the past had either voted Labour, willingly or otherwise, or who had abstained (Baston, 2013). Comparing the Respect Party with the British National Party (BNP), Clark *et al.*

(2008: 530) conclude that both parties are ‘populist in nature and these tendencies have manifested themselves in forms of community politics’. However, it is our claim that the Respect party’s attempt to *distance* itself from patronage-based community politics was part of its appeal amongst young South Asian Muslims. The Respect Party has enjoyed some memorable election victories, and these cannot simply be attributed to George Galloway who is noted for his emotive style of rhetoric and performance style of oratory (Crines 2013). Rather, Respect has been successful at orchestrating several campaigns with various candidates. As Brady *et al* (2006: 18) remind us, campaigns ‘affect what voters know, whether they will vote, whom they will vote for, and why they will vote for that person. Ultimately, campaigns can affect who wins the election. Thus, the strategic decisions of candidates are not merely empty exercises in collective war-room intellect. Both the inputs and outputs of campaign processes can be consequential’.

Respect’s anti-war message has always formed the core of its appeal and this was particularly important in the early years of its existence. Muslim voters were particularly sensitive to this message and played a leading role in the anti-war movement which led to the creation of the party (Peace 2013a). By extension, then, it is no surprise that Respect’s biggest election victories have been in UK parliamentary constituencies with large numbers of Muslim residents such as Bethnal Green and Bow and Bradford West. The strategy of Respect therefore appears relatively simple: appeal to Muslim voters through an anti-war message and they will vote *en masse* for the party which best represents their concerns. It is hard to deny that such a calculation did take place but it also obscures the fact that Respect has done very poorly in many places in the country which have notable Muslim populations. This included Bradford where, until the shock by-election victory of 2012, Respect had not polled very well.

Such poor results have nothing to do with either a lack of Muslim voters or an absence of anti-war sentiment. Part of the answer lies in the fact that Respect was barely present on the ground during such contests as it committed its resources to trying to win in the two areas of the country where it had a semblance of local implantation – East London and Birmingham. This points to the importance of the local campaign strategy employed by Respect in these strongholds. Brady *et al* (2006) highlight three pieces to the ‘intensity puzzle’ when studying campaign effects: voters, candidates and the media. By observing the tactics used by Respect relating to these elements in previous elections we can understand how Galloway managed to pull off such a spectacular victory in Bradford in 2012, even if the scale of his win could not have been foreseen by anyone. Birmingham provides the most similar comparison to the Bradford case as both cities are home to a sizeable South Asian community with a majority from the Mirpur region of Kashmir for whom biraderi-politicking has featured prominently in the political landscape. Respect was openly critical of this process in Birmingham as it has traditionally benefitted the Labour Party which was their main rival.

Birmingham was also the scene of a notorious case of postal vote fraud in 2004, the first time that the darker side of kinship voting was exposed to the wider public. Within days of the local elections, Liberal Democrat councillors announced they would legally challenge the results. Petitions were eventually lodged against six Labour councillors and a special election court later found all of them guilty. Election Commissioner Richard Mawrey QC said there was evidence of "massive, systematic and organised fraud".<sup>7</sup> He also pointed to the exploitation – by some South Asian community leaders – of the respect for authority which exists in the community (Mawrey, 2005). This judgment was delivered on the day that the 2005 general election was called by the Prime Minister and led to increased media interest in the potential for corruption with postal voting (Rallings *et al* 2010). Coming just one month

before the election, the verdict of the court galvanised Respect activists in Birmingham who could rally against both a corrupt Labour Party and the exploitation of kinship ties. Salma Yaqoob was particularly critical of postal voting and in various interviews criticised it as a means of disenfranchising women from the electoral process:

“For many Muslim women this effectively removed the secret ballot. In the secrecy of the voting booth it was possible to resist the pressure from the family 'leaders' who had promised your vote to someone. This became impossible when your vote could be filled at home, more often than not with somebody literally standing over your shoulder to persuade you to vote according to their preferences.” (Yaqoob 2008a).

Criticism of both postal voting and the existing order of biraderi-politicking was key to the Respect strategy in Birmingham in 2005. Their focus on the anti-war message was also a sure vote winner among Muslim voters. Indeed, it has been suggested that the fear of losing votes because of the War in Iraq led to the electoral fraud in 2004 as real votes cast against Labour needed to be replaced with bogus votes in favour (Stewart 2006).

In terms of candidates, the contrast in 2005 between Labour trade union veteran Roger Godsiff and Respect founder Yaqoob could not have been more stark. According to 2001 census figures, the constituency of Birmingham Sparkbrook and Small Heath had a Muslim population of 57,354 which accounted for 48% of the total. Although a significant number of these people would have been under 18 and therefore ineligible to vote, this was still easily the ‘most Muslim’ of all parliamentary constituencies in 2005 (unsurprisingly the boundaries were subsequently redrawn). Godsiff, who had held the seat since 1992, had been drawn into the controversy over vote-rigging in the 2004 local elections after writing to the judge sitting at the High Court hearing exploring the allegations. This had led to much criticism from local Labour activists, some of whom lobbied hard for him not to be re-selected. He had also been criticised for saying that Britain was full and could take no more economic migrants.<sup>8</sup> Incidentally, Godsiff had not voted for the war in Iraq. This, however,

did not stop the Respect Party from producing leaflets entitled ‘Godsiff’s shame’ with photos of Iraqi orphans and detainees in Abu Ghraib prison. Election material also talked up Yaqoob’s credentials claiming that she was endorsed by Muslim scholars.<sup>9</sup> Even more crucially though, electors were encouraged not to abstain and also discard the traditional method of voting according to family ties:

Not using the vote simply reinforces the hands of oppressive rulers and their unjust policies. It is the duty of every Muslim to support those people who stand for truth and justice –whoever they are. We urge the community to break away from the tradition of simply supporting those they have personal links with – representation and competency are the real issues.<sup>10</sup>

The Respect strategy was therefore concentrated on increasing turnout, particularly amongst young and female voters – many of whom may had never voted before. The same tactic was to serve them well in Bradford seven years later.

In both Birmingham and East London, young people were overwhelmingly critical of the Blair government’s decision to invade Iraq. One survey of teenagers carried out in the Sparkbrook and Small Heath constituency suggested that they were in fact ‘united in their opposition to the Government’ (Naqvi 2005). Many of these teenagers were ineligible to cast their own ballot but Respect mobilised them to get out the vote amongst those who were 18 and over. Many of these young Respect activists had previously been involved in the anti-war movement and this was seen as an extension of that activism (O’Toole and Gale 2010). The arrival of Respect was crucial in politicising the youth in the London Borough of Tower Hamlets, home to a large Bengali population, and pointing out some of the shortcomings in local democracy.<sup>11</sup> This was not limited to Bengali origin youths, although they in particular were frustrated at the kind of ethnic politics that dominated in their borough. Although the Bengali community does not share the concept of Biraderi, there is still a tendency to support candidates in local elections who have links to certain villages back in Bangladesh. This had

been most successfully exploited by the Labour Party, the vehicle through which Bengalis had managed to achieve a level of representation for their community (Eade 1989). Since the 1980s, Bengalis started joining the Labour Party in large numbers and a system emerged whereby community leaders inside the party were expected to deliver bloc votes. The task of Respect was to break down this system, if necessary by dividing the Bengali community. Yet it could not win by merely opposing the existing order, so a parallel strategy was adopted which reflected the ‘village politics’ approach so successfully employed by Labour. This dual strategy was again later adapted in Bradford.

It is in this context that we can understand why in 2005 George Galloway was advised to canvass in Bangladesh in order to increase his chances of election in Bethnal Green and Bow.<sup>12</sup> The purpose of such a visit was twofold. First, by visiting Bangladesh, and in particular the Sylhet region from where the majority of British Bengalis hail, Galloway could create a sense of affinity between himself and the homeland, despite not being Bengali himself. People he visited in Sylhet and local dignitaries were encouraged to call relatives living in London to persuade them to vote for him.<sup>13</sup> Secondly, it was necessary for Galloway to meet with members of political parties in Bangladesh as they were also key power brokers for what happened in Tower Hamlets. This is explained by one of the key members of the Galloway campaign in 2005 who was later elected for Respect in the Tower Hamlets council:

“We needed to divide the votes as soon as possible because we also have the Bangladeshi politics to deal with too. This meant trying to make friends with all the political parties over there, giving them hope and aspiration, providing neutrality as an MP and to serve the interests of Bangladesh. This helped to neutralise the political parties who would normally have affiliated themselves with the Labour Party. The majority of the local Bengali politicians here [in Tower Hamlets] have some sort of political affiliation with parties over there, that’s how they built their political capital, so it’s important for us to put a wedge in those traditional structures”<sup>14</sup>

This tactic of dividing voters was combined with traditional appeals to family and kinship loyalty. This was not possible for Galloway himself but his supporters emphasised the fact that he had promised to stand for only one term as MP for Bethnal Green and Bow. The Labour candidate Oona King had held the seat since 1997 but many Bengalis were eager for an MP from their own community and voting for Galloway increased this chance as he promised to make way for a Bengali candidate in 2010.<sup>15</sup>

Galloway's charisma on the campaign trail was clearly an asset and the local and national media took a lot of interest in this battle. This was fortunate for him and no doubt helped to achieve the 26% swing against Labour which secured his victory. However, he only won by a wafer thin margin of 823 votes from a total turnout of 44,000. This demonstrates that the Labour Party vote did not completely collapse despite the very public campaign to unseat Oona King. The same was true in Birmingham Sparkbrook and Small Heath where, despite a 24% swing against Labour, Roger Godsiff held on to the seat. For Salma Yaqoob to achieve 28% of the vote as a political novice was quite remarkable. Nevertheless, a large number of Muslim voters had maintained their support for Labour. Indeed, she believed that victory had been denied to her because of continuing problems with electoral malpractice. Yaqoob lodged a petition with the High Court alleging that widespread fraud took place including people at polling stations being turned away because someone had applied for and used a postal vote in their name. The demand for a by-election was not met but Respect made a point of continuing to campaign against postal voting and biraderi politicking.

This bore fruit one year later in the 2006 local elections where Respect achieved unprecedented success for such a small party. In Tower Hamlets they elected 12 councillors and became the second largest party. Many of the existing Labour councillors were perceived, in the words of one young woman, to be 'a powerful network of middle-aged Bengali men whose petty politics disgusted many of her generation' and these politicians had

become ‘figures of fun for the politics class at Tower Hamlets College, where some students argued that they were only interested in a good name and staying in power.’<sup>16</sup> Respect exploited this discontent with the political class by promising renewal and putting forward many young candidates including women. In Birmingham, Salma Yaqoob was elected in 2006 as councillor for Sparkbrook with 49% of the vote. 59% of the people in this ward had identified themselves as Muslim in the 2001 census and it is interesting to note that other wards with a high percentage of Muslim residents elected councillors for Respect in the 2006 local elections including Shadwell in Tower Hamlets (52% Muslim) and Green Street West in the London borough of Newham (47%). It is hard to deny the ‘Muslim bias’ both in the vote for Respect and their candidates who were elected. Despite putting forward a diverse range of candidates, non-Muslims always fared poorly.

Pragmatic concerns led Respect to increasingly put forward only Muslim candidates in areas they thought they might win. Indeed, the party has been accused in the past of exploiting the very structures of kinship networks it had professed to dismantle.<sup>17</sup> This angered those members who were affiliated with the Socialist Workers Party (SWP) who felt that candidates were being selected based on their standing in the community, therefore replicating the tactics of the mainstream parties. The late Chris Harman, one of the leading lights in the SWP, described a selection meeting for King’s Heath ward in Birmingham:

“Salma Yaqoob had previously suggested that Helen Salmon [SWP] should be the candidate. But in the week prior to the selection meeting about 50 people were recruited to Respect in the ward (at a time when there were only about 70 paid-up Respect members in the whole of south Birmingham). An Asian Muslim recruitment consultant was put forward as an alternative candidate at the last minute, and he was selected by 30 votes to 20. The overall outcome of the argument in Birmingham was a complete change in the character of Respect’s list of candidates in 2007 compared to the year before. There was now a slate made up of entirely men from South Asian backgrounds” (Harman 2008).<sup>18</sup>



Respect did indeed put forward 7 male candidates of South Asian origin, although only Mohammed Ishtiaq managed to win a seat. So Biraderi considerations were still important even for Respect despite public pronouncements repudiating the use of local clan politics. Respect's use of biraderi connections was confirmed in interviews conducted in both Birmingham and Bradford even though Yaqoob was keen to highlight that she had opposed biraderi based selection:

“In Birmingham Sparkbrook we came under pressure when we selected a candidate whose family were originally from the same village in Pakistan as the sitting Lib Dem councillor. It was alleged we were splitting the biraderi vote. And that we could not win by so doing. We resisted those pressures, just as we resisted pressures when the same people said we could never win by standing a woman candidate” (Yaqoob 2008b: 114).

Respect certainly employed a dual strategy of both criticising ethnic politics and appealing to disaffected youths while at the same time keeping older members of the community happy by selecting candidates who could guarantee a certain number of votes. All the tactics honed in Respect's early years would again be put to use in the campaigns in Bradford in 2012.

### **The 2012 elections in Bradford**

Bradford had many similarities with Birmingham with a huge amount of frustration at the state of local politics which had been dominated by certain biraderi clans to the exclusion of all others. In his report on the events leading up to Galloway's by-election victory in March 2012, Lewis Baston (2013: 9) described the campaign as 'a catalyst for a popular movement against a particularly decrepit local political order in Bradford West'. Recent elections in Bradford had also been mired in electoral fraud. In November 2009 four Conservative Party supporters were put on trial and subsequently jailed for fraudulent postal vote applications to rig the poll in Bradford West in the 2005 general election. Respect had not even bothered to

stand a candidate in Bradford West in that election as the Labour MP Marsha Singh, who had held the seat since 1997, was well respected and hadn't voted for the war in Iraq. Umit Yildiz was selected for the Bradford North constituency but gained just 474 votes (1.4%) and in 2010 Respect put forward Arshad Ali in Bradford West but he fared little better by picking up 3.1% of the vote. The resignation of Marsha Singh which forced the by-election created a golden opportunity for Respect. According to the 2011 census, the Bradford local authority has a Muslim population of 129,041 which is a quarter of the total. However, the constituency of Bradford West has a Muslim population of 58,872, up from 38,483 in 2001, which accounts for just over half of the total. This makes it currently the only Muslim majority parliamentary constituency and possibly the only place where Galloway could have pulled off such a spectacular victory.

It is argued here that the tactics used by the Respect campaign in Bradford West were merely a reflection of their previous experiences in Birmingham and East London. There was nothing particularly novel about the campaign itself and the massive swing to Respect cannot be explained by some secret campaigning weapon. The campaign was, however, very effective and combined the key issues of voters, candidates and [social] media, to such an extent that it managed to gain huge momentum in the space of just three weeks. The first step was to hire a savvy campaign manager, a factor which had played a key role in Galloway's victory in Bethnal Green and Bow back in 2005. The man chosen for this in Bradford was Naweed Hussain who had previously worked for Marsha Singh and knew the constituency inside out.<sup>19</sup> He was one of several Labour Party activists who left the party in disgust after Imran Hussain was selected as the party's candidate for the by-election, a process that was described as 'a coronation rather than a selection meeting'.<sup>20</sup> Indeed it was disappointment with the Labour candidate, and the manner in which he was selected because of biraderi ties, that was equally as important as the attraction to George Galloway as an alternative.

However, it would be wrong to claim that Respect did not also benefit from bloc votes and traditional methods of campaigning amongst South Asian communities. When questioned on this issue, Respect activists in Bradford admitted receiving bloc votes but as a result of people coming to them rather than specifically campaigning for this. This was the case for some of the minority religious communities:

“To win elections in Bradford you need some bloc votes. The Bohra Ismailis came to support Respect, as did the Aga Khan strand and the Twelver Shias. Non-religious organisations also came to say they would support Respect.”<sup>21</sup>

Such was the anger with the Labour candidate selection process, people were willing to help the Respect campaign in order simply to defeat Imran Hussain:

“I got a lot of phone calls from key people of all parties saying ‘Don’t say this in public, but if George is standing we will support him in any way we can.’”

*Interviewer:* So did that imply bringing in bloc votes?

“Yes and that happened. I had private meetings with people who promised 500-600 votes. They spoke to their people and also made sure that the postal votes weren’t handed over to the usual people.”<sup>22</sup>

It was important to convince younger Bradfordians to vote for Respect and also be part of the campaign and canvass for Galloway. He and Salma Yaqoob had managed to recruit an army of volunteers for their campaigns in Tower Hamlets and Birmingham (Taylor 2005, O’Toole and Gale 2010). The scale of volunteering in Bradford far outweighed that of the other parties and by polling day ‘the Respect campaign team had enough volunteers to provide a full-scale telling operation with relays of people at all the polling stations in every ward of the constituency. They estimate that about 500 people were involved by the end of the campaign’ (Baston 2013: 37). This included Respect supporters from outside Bradford and their particular skills were put to good use. For example, Bengali Respect supporters from Tower Hamlets were sent to canvass among the Bengali minority in Bradford.<sup>23</sup> The

contribution of Muslim women in particular was identified by those who covered the campaign as a crucial factor. The journalist Helen Pidd even suggested that it was women such as her who had in fact won the election for Galloway.<sup>24</sup> This may have been a slight exaggeration as Galloway achieved support from across various communities and from both male and female Voters. Using women as a key part of the campaign was a strategy originally pioneered by Yaqoob in Birmingham who realised that women would be more likely to rebel against the status quo and being told who to vote for.<sup>25</sup> Female Respect activists in Bradford were encouraged to canvass amongst Muslim women in the absence of husbands or fathers who may have otherwise persuaded them to vote Labour. Voting for Respect was therefore not only a protest vote against the mainstream parties but also against a system which had disenfranchised female voters.

By the end of the campaign, the Respect team had achieved so much momentum that, locally at least, people believed that Galloway could win. This increased subsequent local media coverage and a buzz on social media platforms such as Facebook and Twitter.<sup>26</sup> This conferred viability onto Respect therefore proving the observation that ‘the more likely it seems that a candidate will win, the more voters gravitate to that candidate’ (Brady et al 2006: 6). One of the leaders of the Bradford Palestine Solidarity Campaign was also a leading activist for Respect. Abu-bakr Rauf was a founding member of the party in 2004 and had stood in the Heaton ward in the 2010 Bradford Council elections. His sudden death as he was campaigning for Galloway just one week before the by-election in 2012 helped to galvanise support for Respect in the Muslim community as his widow insisted on carrying on the campaign as a tribute to him, a call which went viral on social media.<sup>27</sup>

In the Bradford West by-election, Respect’s anti-war theme was still prominent and election material suggested that ‘we need to get our boys back from Afghanistan.’<sup>28</sup> This was one of Galloway’s five key pledges and the phrasing was no doubt chosen to evoke the

soldiers from the Yorkshire regiment who lost their lives just weeks before the election. This more compassionate approach to the war issue would also have been more appealing to white voters. The same leaflet claimed that ‘I am real Labour not New Labour’ which would have also resonated with voters who felt abandoned irrespective of ethnicity or religion. Respect’s left-wing appeal must, in fact, not be forgotten or minimised. Just as in East London they had focused on the local issue of council housing (Peace 2013b), in Bradford they spoke about cuts to public services and increased tuition fees which Labour was seen as silent on. In fact, turnout was higher in the least affluent areas of the constituency which reversed the usual trend and Respect won in every ward even taking votes from Conservative voters (Baston 2013). Galloway took 56% of the total vote and a massive 85% share in the city ward which, as he pointed out, proved he had support of people from various communities including all races and religions.<sup>29</sup> Both the Coalition parties fared poorly, with a combined percentage of votes cast at 13%, and indeed, percentage-wise the Conservatives lost a greater proportion of the vote than Labour. This is unsurprising given that by-elections often produce results that go against the party in power (Butler, 1997: 8). What is noteworthy about the Bradford-West by-election however, was that it was the opposition party, Labour, the favourites to win the election, that suffered from the protest vote.

The importance of Respect’s campaigning strategy was made even more apparent during the subsequent city council elections of May 2012. While some commentators may have been able to write off the result in March as a classic by-election protest vote, it is harder to make the same argument for the local elections. Indeed, because turnout is often low in these second order elections, the importance of getting out the vote is increased. As shown in the table below, Respect stood 12 candidates and picked up five seats in the wards of City (56.1%), Heaton (39.6%), Manningham (57.5%), Bradford Manor (42.1%) and Little Horton (47.8%). This last seat was taken at the expense of the Labour leader of the council

Ian Greenwood, widely seen as complicit in the use of biraderi politics.<sup>30</sup> However, Respect took seats off all three of the mainstream parties which demonstrates that they were not only picking up votes from disaffected Labourites. Eight of the Respect candidates were from South Asian backgrounds and four were white (one of whom is a Muslim convert). The results reflected the experience of Birmingham and Tower Hamlets where only South Asian candidates have been elected (with the notable exception of Galloway himself).<sup>31</sup> The following table illustrates the results of the Respect candidates against the percentage of Muslim residents and those selecting Pakistani ethnicity in the 2011 census.<sup>32</sup>

**Table 1. Respect candidates in the May 2012 local elections in Bradford**

Ward	Candidate name	Result	Number of votes and %	Number of Muslims and %	Number of Pakistanis and %
<b>Bolton and Undercliffe</b>	Tazeem Sawaiz	3 <sup>rd</sup>	529 (13.7%)	3,226 (19.7%)	2,237 (13.7%)
<b>Bowling and Barkerend</b>	Mohammad Asif	2 <sup>nd</sup>	1535 (34.1%)	9,449 (45.8%)	6,785 (32.9%)
<b>Bradford Moor</b>	Faisal Khan	1 <sup>st</sup>	2,720 (42.1%)	15,435 (72.8%)	13,553 (63.9%)
<b>City</b>	Ruqayyah Collector	1 <sup>st</sup>	2,570 (56.1%)	13,450 (57.3%)	10,037 (42.7%)
<b>Clayton and Fairweather Green</b>	Dawud Islam	3 <sup>rd</sup>	762 (21%)	3,480 (20.5%)	2,789 (16.4%)
<b>Great Horton</b>	Salim Jelani	2 <sup>nd</sup>	1,542 (32.4%)	7,565 (42.8%)	6,429 (36.4%)
<b>Heaton</b>	Mohammad Shabbir	1 <sup>st</sup>	2,036 (39.6%)	9,573 (55.9%)	8,516 (49.7%)
<b>Little Horton</b>	Alyas Karmani	1 <sup>st</sup>	2,191 (47.8%)	12,488 (58%)	10,447 (48.5%)
<b>Manningham</b>	Ishtiaq Ahmed	1 <sup>st</sup>	3,265 (57.5%)	14,982 (75%)	12,058 (60.3%)
<b>Thornton and Allerton</b>	Patrick Mulligan	3 <sup>rd</sup>	648 (18%)	2,238 (13%)	1,859 (10.8%)
<b>Tong</b>	Sarah Cartin	2 <sup>nd</sup>	385 (16%)	1,004 (4.9%)	657 (3.2%)
<b>Wyke</b>	James Clayton	4 <sup>th</sup>	292 (9%)	460 (3.1%)	374 (2.5%)

Lewis Baston (2013) notes that Respect's support is closely correlated with the proportion of the population reporting their ethnicity as Pakistani.<sup>33</sup> However, while this observation holds true for wards such as Bolton and Undercliffe and Little Horton, it

becomes more tenuous in many other areas. In fact, in wards such as City and Clayton and Fairweather Green, it is the Muslim population as a whole which is a much stronger predictor for Respect support. Yet by noting such a correlation, we are making assumptions which do not reflect levels of turnout or eligibility to vote. The average turnout for these elections was 37% and of course a significant number of those who selected Muslim and/or Pakistani for the census would be under the age of 18. Therefore it is a little too simplistic to speak of exact correlations between these factors and the Respect vote. What is undeniable, however, is that Respect certainly fares better in wards which have a higher percentage of Muslim voters. It is notable that in the wards of Manningham and Bradford Moor where three quarters of the population are Muslim, the Respect candidate won the contest quite easily. That said, the Labour vote was still strong indicating that many Muslim voters did stay loyal to the party and suggesting, perhaps, the continued persistence of a biraderi vote.

## **Conclusion**

Respect has had spectacular electoral successes for such a small party, most notably winning two Westminster seats in 2005 and 2012. Nevertheless, there has been no appeal in constituencies in which it has not campaigned. There are a number of reasons why this appeal has been limited. Firstly, although not only Muslims have supported and voted for Respect, it has been South Asian Muslim voters in particular who formed the backbone of its support. Secondly, its electoral success amongst these voters has been based on protest. In the early years of the party's existence, many Muslims were against the War in Iraq and voting for Respect was a clear manifestation of their anti-war stance. Respect was also an attractive option for many young people because it represented 'a voice for the voiceless.'<sup>34</sup> At the same time, many wanted to show their anger towards the Labour Party and send the

government of the time a clear message that their votes should not be taken for granted. In 2012, Respect's successes in Bradford were again a protest vote, though this time based on more localised issues and in particular, the perceived dominance of biraderi politicking. In Bradford and Birmingham, as in other cities across the UK with significant concentrations of South Asian communities, local level electoral politics was often viewed by young people as, 'off-putting'.<sup>35</sup> Patronage based relationships, which had developed in the 1970s and 80s between community elders and local politicians, continued to influence the character of the political landscape. Biraderi elders convinced the male heads of families from within their biraderis to vote for particular politicians. The male heads of families, in turn, effectively decided which political party to vote for on behalf of the entire household, so that, young people and women were often disenfranchised from the electoral sphere.

The strength and success of the Respect party campaign in the Bradford 2012 by-election and the subsequent local elections later that same year lay in its strategy to present itself as the anti-establishment party. In Bradford, this took the form of being anti-biraderi-politicking. Galloway, a well-recognised face in national politics, a seasoned campaigner and charismatic speaker, was able to mobilise the young disillusioned South Asians voters and at the same time appeal to a much wider audience. Focusing specifically on the two constituencies of voters who had been traditionally marginalised by biraderi politics – young people and women - Respect activists campaigned on offering a local politics based less on patronage but policies, thus appealing to South Asians who felt disenfranchised by biraderi-politicking. At the same time, when bloc votes were offered, Respect was willing to receive them in order to beat the Labour Party machine. This was the Respect Party's greatest achievement. On the one hand, it projected an image of being the anti-biraderi party, and, on the other hand, it accepted bloc votes through traditional community structures. Outside of local politics, Galloway was also able to draw upon on his own public image as being 'on the



side of Muslims' through his activism against the Wars in Iraq and Afghanistan and his stance on other issues in the Middle East. This too appealed to young South Asians who saw Galloway as a politician with a backbone (Akhtar, 2012).

In the aftermath of the by-election victory in Bradford West and the subsequent success of a handful of councillors, the Respect party has been under considerable pressure. Salma Yaqoob, who along with George Galloway was the public face of Respect, resigned from the party in September 2012. This was in protest over comments made by Galloway on the allegations of rape against Julian Assange, leading to speculation that the party was 'imploding'.<sup>36</sup> The following year, in October 2013, all five Respect councillors resigned from the party en masse after relations between them and Galloway became fraught, with the councillors accusing him of defamation and a lack of transparency.<sup>37</sup> Reflecting the personality of its only MP, the Respect party's recent past has been colourful and volatile. Whatever happens in its future, the party's electoral successes have at least illustrated an important point made recently by Heath *et al* (2013: 168): "if active attempts are made to win over Muslim voters, then substantial inroads can be made." This is a fact of which all parties are now aware and we are likely to see increased efforts by them to capture a 'Muslim vote', irrespective of whether such a voting bloc actually exists or not.

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<sup>1</sup> For a detailed analysis of biraderis and biraderi-politicking see Akhtar (2013)

<sup>2</sup> This includes over 50 semi-structured interviews with politicians, activists and young people stemming from the doctoral work of the two authors. Research took place during political campaigns, door-to-door canvassing, and gatherings outside of polling stations as well as case study work with South Asian community organisations.

<sup>3</sup> Since virtually all New Commonwealth migrants entered the UK with full political rights, there was no significant debate over whether they should be allowed to vote; a debate that was common across other European countries of immigration (Saggar 2003).

<sup>4</sup> 'I took the Muslim vote for granted - but that has all changed' *The Guardian* 8 April 2005. <http://www.theguardian.com/politics/2005/apr/08/uk.religion>

<sup>5</sup> Interview with Bradford Respect activist, May 2013.

<sup>6</sup> 'Dominic Grieve: we're a changing nation, but I'm an optimist' *The Telegraph*, 22 November 2013

<sup>7</sup> 'Judge upholds vote-rigging claims', *BBC News* 4 April 2005 [http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/england/west\\_midlands/4406575.stm](http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/england/west_midlands/4406575.stm)

<sup>8</sup> 'Birmingham MPs face reselection votes', *The Guardian*, 31 March 2005 <http://www.theguardian.com/politics/2005/mar/31/uk.election2005>

<sup>9</sup> These flyers have been reproduced in Peace (2013b: 314).

<sup>10</sup> Quote taken from the same flyer mentioned above.

<sup>11</sup> Interview with Shamiul, London, August 2008.

<sup>12</sup> While there is nothing new about campaigning overseas, traditionally this kind of activity by British political parties has focussed on British nationals eligible to vote who live abroad (Pattie *et al* 1996). In this case, the point is not to convince British voters living in Bangladesh, but rather gain the approval of family members who live there who will encourage those living in Britain to make the 'right choice'.

<sup>13</sup> Interview with Respect councillor in Tower Hamlets, August 2008. The scale of this telephone canvassing from Bangladesh is unknown, however in such a tight contest its impact could not have been negligible.

<sup>14</sup> Interview with Respect councillor in Tower Hamlets, August 2008.

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- <sup>15</sup> It is therefore not surprising that during the 2010 general election all the parliamentary candidates from the major parties were of Bengali origin. Labour's Rushanara Ali became the first MP of Bengali heritage.
- <sup>16</sup> These quotes are cited in Glynn (2008)
- <sup>17</sup> Interview with Clive, Birmingham Labour activist, December, 2012
- <sup>18</sup> These allegations came at the time when Respect was splitting into two rival factions (Peace 2013a).
- <sup>19</sup> The journalist David Goodhart, who had spent time with Hussain (of Punjabi origin) one year before the election, described him as 'an angry and thwarted man; angry not so much about joblessness or discrimination (though he did complain about a "brown ceiling" at the council and university) but about the control of minority representation in the Labour party by people from the Jats and Bains clans from the Mirpur region of Kashmir' (Goodhart 2012).
- <sup>20</sup> Interview with Respect councillor in Bradford, May 2013.
- <sup>21</sup> Interview with Bradford Respect activist, May 2013.
- <sup>22</sup> Interview with Bradford Respect activist, May 2013.
- <sup>23</sup> Interview with Bradford Respect activist, May 2013.
- <sup>24</sup> 'How women won it for George Galloway' *The Guardian*, 4 April 2012
- <sup>25</sup> Yaqoob developed close relationships with local women's organisations in Birmingham, including Saheli, an organisation which works to empower women to take part in civic and political action. For more information on this group, see Akhtar (2013).
- <sup>26</sup> A Facebook group was created called 'Lets Elect George Galloway in the Bradford West By Election' as well as a dedicated twitter account for the campaign @GGalloway4Bfd. An app was also created for smartphones called the GallowayApp which included links to various videos of Galloway.
- <sup>27</sup> 'Respect supporter Abu-bakr Rauf collapses and dies while on Bradford West campaign' *Telegraph and Argus*, 21 March 2012  
[http://www.thetelegraphandargus.co.uk/news/9601675.Respect\\_supporter\\_Abu\\_bakr\\_Rauf\\_collapses\\_and\\_dies\\_while\\_on\\_Bradford\\_West\\_campaign/](http://www.thetelegraphandargus.co.uk/news/9601675.Respect_supporter_Abu_bakr_Rauf_collapses_and_dies_while_on_Bradford_West_campaign/) The importance of his death was also confirmed in interviews with Respect councillors in Bradford. A number of tribute videos can be seen on this youtube website  
<http://www.youtube.com/user/GallowaysVids>
- <sup>28</sup> Respect election flyer 'Vote George Galloway: Battling for Bradford'. Published and promoted by Arshad Ali, on behalf of George Galloway.
- <sup>29</sup> 'Labour "failed to connect with Asians in Bradford"' *BBC News*, 1 April 2012  
<http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-politics-17576752> The City ward is 57.3% Muslim and 42.7% Pakistani according to the 2011 census.
- <sup>30</sup> Interviews with Labour and Respect Councillors, Bradford, May 2013.
- <sup>31</sup> Other white candidates have been elected for Respect in the past including Michael Lavalette in Preston and Ray Holmes in Bolsover Shirebrook
- <sup>32</sup> Census results are taken from <http://www.neighbourhood.statistics.gov.uk> and Council election results from <http://www.bradford.gov.uk/asp/elections/resultsOverallL.asp?eid=7>
- <sup>33</sup> It should be noted that Baston used the 2001 census data so his figures will be different from those we are using.
- <sup>34</sup> Interview with Salman, Birmingham, August, 2005
- <sup>35</sup> Interview with Rizwan, Birmingham, August 2005
- <sup>36</sup> 'Respect's Salma Yaqoob: 'Why I quit', *The Guardian*, 22 September 2012.
- <sup>37</sup> 'Respect Councillors in Bradford resign en masse', *The Guardian* 25 October 2013