

Getting better, slowly. Ethnicity, gender and party in London's local government

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Abstract:

This article reports Black and Asian descriptive representation in London's elected local government. In both absolute and relative terms, the levels of descriptive representation are higher than previously, and London's Asian population is now represented proportionately, although Black Londoners remain under-represented. Such aggregate levels of representation however mask considerable disparities between the two groups in many instances. The same is true of gender representation, with overall figures hiding the fact that Asian men are overrepresented (and White women broadly proportionately represented) while Black men are the least represented category analysed.

Key words: London, local government, ethnicity, gender, representation

Much of the discussion of political representation focusses on national institutions and considers local government only occasionally. Yet aside from mattering in its own right as an important tier of government, local government serves as an important pathway to national office.¹ It is especially important when it comes to the representation of Britain's black and minority ethnic (BAME) population. As Adolino argued "the most important debates around the construction of ethnic minority-related political agendas... have taken place within the confines of local government".² In the initial legislative responses to immigration in the 1960s and 1970s, for example, much of the responsibility for tackling racism was passed to local government and thus the local political arena became an important locus for Asian and Afro-Caribbean political activity.³

This article reports Black and Asian (BA) descriptive representation in London's elected local government. We examine London partly because it is the capital, but mostly because it has a significant BA population – one that was three times the national average at the last census – and

¹ For example, P. Allen, 'Gendered Candidate Emergence in Britain: Why are More Women Councillors Not Becoming MPs?' *Politics*, (2013) 33 (3), 147–159.

² J. R. Adolino, 'Integration within the British Political Parties: Perceptions of Ethnic Minority Councillors', in S. Sagar (ed.) *Race and British Electoral Politics* (London: Routledge, 1998), p. 178.

³ A. Geddes, 'Asian and Afro-Caribbean Representation in Elected Local Government in England and Wales', *Journal of Ethnic and Migration Studies*, 20 (1), pp. 45-46.

one which is not uniformly distributed.⁴ The Greater London Authority (GLA) estimates the BA population of London at around 32% by 2018, but figures range from 9.1% of the population in Richmond to 62.1% in Newham. Existing studies of ethnic representation in London are now at least 20 years old, during which time the non-white population of London has grown significantly and the debates around representation have intensified.⁵ We focus on BA representation rather than the general BAME category, mostly because this enables comparability with previous studies and because – as we note below – these two groups in practice make up the vast majority of London’s BAME local representatives.

London council elections take place on a quadrennial cycle, with all seats contested every four years. We report newly gathered data for the ethnicity of councillors in both the 2018 and 2014 London elections. We show a clear increase in BA representation since previous studies. Overall, BA Londoners remain under-represented, although this is now largely a result of Black under-representation (and white over-representation), with Asian Londoners being present in local government in broadly similar proportions as in the population. Moreover, we show important intersections with gender: while women as a whole remain under-represented, this is no longer true of White women. Asian and Black women, along with Black men, remain unrepresented. We also show important inter-party differences, with almost all of the representational heavy lifting being carried out by Labour.

Results

Data on the ethnicity of councillors (or council candidates) is not officially gathered. The data reported in this article were collected by analysing the faces and names of all the councillors elected in both 2014 and 2018. This is an imperfect method, albeit one widely used in previous studies where official data, and especially data on self-identification, is missing.

Based on this method, more than a quarter (26%) of London councillors after the 2018 election can be classified as Black or Asian. (Throughout this article, we report data from the 32 boroughs, and exclude the idiosyncratic City of London). This figure is noticeably up on the levels of representation reported in earlier studies. In 1993 Geddes reported a figure of 9.4%, based on data from the Association of London Authorities. The 2004 *National Census of Local Authority Councillors in England* – based on a sample survey, with a response rate in London of below 33% – put overall BAME representation in London councils at 14.2%.⁶ The equivalent 2013 *Census* put this number at 15.7%.⁷ Looking only at the 25 boroughs with a white population of under 90% at the time, Le Lohé’s 1998 study found an average of 13.5%; the equivalent figure for those same 25 boroughs in 2018 was 28.7%. Whichever baseline we use, then, levels of Black and Asian representation have clearly increased significantly over the last few decades.

Since the 1991 census, however, the Black and Asian population of London has also grown from 17.5% to 31.8%. While some of the growth in the number of Black and Asian councillors can be

⁴ Similarly, see P. Allen and D. Cutts, ‘Aspirant candidate behaviour and progressive political ambition’, *Research & Politics* (2017).

⁵ In addition to Geddes ‘Asian and Afro-Caribbean Representation’, also see M. Le Lohé, ‘Ethnic Minority Participation and Representation in the British Electoral System’, in S.Saggar (ed.) *Race and British Electoral Politics* (London: Routledge, 1998), pp. 73-95.

⁶ See *National Census of Local Authority Councillors in England 2004* (London: I&DEA; Employers Organisation, 2005)

⁷ See K. Kettlewell, and L. Phillips, *Census of Local Authority Councillors 2013*, LGA Research Report (Slough: NFER, 2014).

attributed to population growth the relative scale of representation in councils has been rising faster still, indicating that London has become somewhat more descriptively representative over this period, although in 2018 as in the 1990s, the overall level of representation still remains lower than the population size.

Table 1 shows the ethnicity of councillors in London after the 2018 election, reporting Black and Asian representation separately. It also shows the change since 2014. The four years produced a very marginal increase in the percentage of Black councillors (+0.5 percentage points) with a close to three percentage point rise in Asian councillors. The increase in Black and Asian representation between 2014 and 2018 was again greater than the rise in the equivalent population in those four years (up by 0.7 percentage points).

The final column compares the ethnicity of councillors to the wider London population, based on GLA estimates. It shows – unsurprisingly – that White councillors are present in disproportionate numbers, over-represented by more than 15 percentage points. Asian councillors are however now present in London local government in roughly the same proportions as in the city’s population as a whole. (Indeed, given that councillors can only be drawn from the adult population yet population estimates include those under the age of majority, and that BAME populations are disproportionately young, Asian adults are now probably slightly over-represented). Black council representation however remains at almost six percentage points below the wider population – and in relative terms only slightly above half of what might be expected if the group was proportionately represented.

It is worth noting that the total for the three categories of population in Table 1 sum to less than 100%. In part, this is caused by groups – such as the Chinese – who are present in non-trivial numbers in the wider population (1.7% of Londoners) but are almost entirely absent from council chambers. The difference is made up by a Mixed/Other category, which accounts for around 11.3% of the London population, but just 1.7% of councillors. In part, this disparity may be caused by those who might self-identify to the census as Mixed, Arab, or Other but who are likely to have been categorised here as either Black or Asian. We suspect, for example, that some of the 1.5% who the census identifies as Arab are here being identified as Asian and we are therefore possibly slightly inflating the number of Black or Asian councillors, at the expense of those who might self-identify as one of the other non-white ethnic groups, but this is unfortunately unavoidable given the lack of any official data.

In their study of local government, Thrasher et al used name-recognition software to assign election candidates to their most likely ethno-cultural origins.⁸ This method has some obvious advantages: it is a far quicker method than manual identification, allowing much larger datasets to be analysed, and by aggregating ethnicity not merely by broad ethnic categories but by area of origin, it facilitates more detailed analysis. However, it has a particular weakness with certain types of names. For example, it struggles to identify Caribbean candidates, the large majority of whom have Anglo-Saxon names. It also may incorrectly classify married women who have adopted surnames from outside their own ethnicity or culture. To test the two methods against each other, we compared the data we had gathered for 2014 with equivalent data generated by name recognition software (and kindly supplied by Michael Thrasher). The result for name recognition alone was a figure for Black and Asian councillors around five percentage points below that which we had generated (that is, 22.5%, compared to 17.8% using name recognition software). As expected, almost all of this difference was

⁸ M Thrasher et al. ‘BAME Candidates in Local Elections in Britain’, *Parliamentary Affairs* (2013) 66 (2), pp. 286-304.

due to a change in the figure for Black councillors (7.2%, compared to 3.2%); the figure for Asian councillors was much more similar (15.3%, compared to 14.6%). While in absolute terms, a five percentage point difference may not be massive, in relative terms this downgraded Black and Asian representation by around a fifth, and Black representation specifically by more than half. For this reason, we report below only data using visual identification.

Ethnic representation in London varies enormously by borough. Figure 1a shows the overall percentage of BA councillors in all 32 boroughs. This ranges from 3.3% in Bromley to 63.3% in Newham, with BA councillors constituting a majority in five London boroughs. Much of this difference is accounted for by the varying demographic compositions of the boroughs, with overall a very good relationship between the percentage size of the Black and Asian population in a borough and the percentage level of representation on the council (the two correlate at 0.88).

Such aggregate data, however, masks the very large differences between Black and Asian representation in the different boroughs, as is shown in Figure 1b. In 21 out of the 32 boroughs, the number of Asian councillors is higher than the number of black councillors. In two cases (Hounslow and Tower Hamlets) Asian councillors make up more than half of the elected body of representatives. Black levels of representation are much more modest, and the highest proportion of black councillors in any one borough is around 25% (Barking and Dagenham). Given that the Asian population in London overall is larger than the Black population, we might expect to see this trend and our analysis shows that, despite lower percentages of Black councillors, levels of representation are still highly responsive to the percentage of the black population: the proportion of Black councillors in boroughs correlates with the size of the Black population in those boroughs at 0.80. For Asians, the correlation is higher at 0.90.

Yet when compared with boroughs' demographic make-up, it becomes evident that levels of descriptive representation for Blacks and Asians remain inadequate across most of London. Figure 2a shows the *relative* Black and Asian representation by borough – that is, the percentage of councillors minus the percentage of residents.⁹ Black and Asian people as a whole are under-represented in the majority of London boroughs (most heavily in Enfield and Lewisham) and only in seven boroughs does the percentage of BA councillors reach at least the level it does in the borough's population – Hounslow and Tower Hamlets are particularly notable for their overrepresentation.

Figure 2b shows similar data, again disaggregated into Black and Asian. Black descriptive representation is considerably poorer than Asian representation. The least representative borough for black Londoners is Enfield, with Merton being least representative for Asians. In 21 boroughs, Asians see more proportionate levels of descriptive representation than their black counterparts. The opposite is true in just nine cases. There are also significant disparities between black and Asian representation in a number of cases. For instance, the disparity in Hounslow is 29 percentage points; Tower Hamlets and Ealing follow closely with disparities of 25 and 23 points, respectively. In all three cases, there is both Asian over-representation and black underrepresentation. Asian overrepresentation can be found in nine further boroughs, although in the majority of these cases this is by less than 5 percentage points. On the other hand, there is black overrepresentation in four boroughs, with Brent seeing higher levels of black councillors compared to its population than any other borough. Brent is also one of two councils – the other being Barking and Dagenham – where

⁹ For the population estimates, we use the Greater London Authority's projections, from 'Ethnic Group Projections (Housing-Led)' (2017). The results are substantively the same using ONS data from the 2011 census.

both Black and Asian councillors are present in greater numbers than we might expect given their population.

Comparing these data with those in previously published work, in absolute terms almost all councils now have more Black and Asian councillors than in 1994 (just five have fewer), although in relative terms, 13 councils now have worse relative levels of representation. Lewisham is especially noteworthy. Le Lohe's 1994 study, based on the 1991 census, found Black and Asian residents were over-represented in the borough (with a population of 19.4% and 22.4% BA councillors, making a net representation figure of +3); by 2018 the equivalent figure was -15.5. This is even more curious given that by 2018 the council consisted solely of Labour councillors, with – as noted below – the party having a much better record on Black and Asian representation in the rest of London.

Gender

In total, 58.9% of London councillors elected in 2018 were male. This is down by 3.3 points since 2014. The *National Census of Local Authority Councillors* previously gave us one of the few indicators of gender representation in London councils for comparison. According to their report on the 2004 local elections, 69% of London councillors elected were male (and by the 2013 survey that figure was 63%). Our 2018 figure therefore suggests a ten point increase in the proportion of female councillors over the intervening 14 years.

Male over-representation in representative institutions will not come as a surprise. However, as Table 2 shows, there is a clear intersection between gender and ethnicity. White men are certainly over-represented (by 15 percentage points), but so too are Asian men (by 2.2 points). Geddes previously noted that Asian men were the best represented BAME grouping, albeit then still under-represented overall.¹⁰ The former observation remains true, the latter does not.

White women are almost perfectly represented in London councils (a mere +0.1 difference). The three under-represented groups are Black men (-3.3), Black women (-2.3), and Asian women (-2.2). It is also notable that within the Black population of London, it is women who are relatively better represented (if still under-represented overall); indeed, despite the overall growth in BAME representation in London local government the number of Black male councillors actually fell very slightly between 2014 and 2018.

Party

Previous work had also identified clear inter-party differences in BAME representation. Geddes found that more than eight out of ten black and Asian councillors belonged to Labour, with nearly half of this group being Asian men.¹¹ The councillors' *Census* of 2004 found that a continuing Labour bias, albeit down slightly to over 65% of BAME councillors in London.

Similar inter-party differences remained following the 2018 elections, as is clear in Table 3, which shows the ethnic breakdown of the three main parties. Some 90% of Conservative councillors are white, as are 87% of Lib Dem councillors. For Labour, the figure is 61%.

Also striking is the clear differences within the BA category. In all three main parties, there are more Asian councillors than Black, but whereas Labour councillors are (roughly) twice as likely to be Asian than Black, Liberal Democrat councillors are eight times more likely to be Asian than Black and for Conservatives the difference is ten-fold. In the whole of London in 2018 there were just four Black

¹⁰ Geddes 'Asian and Afro-Caribbean Representation', p. 51.

¹¹ Geddes 'Asian and Afro-Caribbean Representation', p. 54.

Conservative councillors. The Labour trend is a break from that reported by Geddes (1993), where Labour councillors were roughly as likely to be black as Asian.

Both 2014 and 2018 were elections in which Labour did very well in London. By 2018, the few councils that the Conservatives (or Lib Dems) controlled were in the parts of London with relatively small BAME communities. Both parties had relatively little representation in other parts of London. Moreover, BAME Londoners disproportionately vote Labour. One poll of London voters immediately prior to the council elections found that 75% of BAME respondents were going to vote Labour, compared to just 13% who would vote Conservative and 6% Lib Dem. Of white voters, by contrast, Labour led by just two points (39% to 37%).¹² In other words, given that by 2018 Labour had representation in the more BAME parts of London, and that, throughout London, it draws support disproportionately from BAME voters, we might therefore expect more of its councillors to be non-white. It may well be that in areas where the Conservatives (and Lib Dems) failed to win, they were indeed putting forward BAME candidates (a possibility that is beyond the scope of this article).

However, this is clearly not all of the story. Even if we take just the six boroughs controlled by the Conservatives after 2018, we find that Labour still has a higher percentage of Black and Asian councillors. In all six, the percentage of Labour BAME councillors is higher than the percentage of Conservative BAME councillors. Moreover, even in these boroughs, the Conservatives have fewer BAME councillors than would be expected given the wider population. Only in Kensington is the percentage of Asian councillors higher than would be expected given the borough's population, and the Conservatives have no Black councillors at all in any of these six boroughs. For Labour, the percentage of black councillors is higher than the population in two of the six cases, and the percentage of Asian councillors in four. The Conservatives have made great efforts to improve the ethnic diversity at a national level.¹³ There appears to be no similar success at a local level, even in cities as diverse as London.

Conclusion

There has been a clear advance in Black and Asian representation across London since the early 1990s. In both absolute and relative terms, the levels of descriptive representation are higher than before, and London's Asian population is now represented proportionately, although Black Londoners remain under-represented. Yet aggregated levels of representation across London hide considerable representational disparities between the two groups in many instances. The same is true of gender representation, with overall figures hiding the fact that Asian men are overrepresented while Black men are the least represented category we analysed.

¹² Polling by QMUL/YouGov, 20-24 April 2018. Reported in Joe Murphy, 'May local election polls: Tories trail Labour by 22 points in London', *Evening Standard*, 26 April 2018.

¹³ As argued, for example, in M. Sobolewska 'Party Strategies and the Descriptive Representation of Ethnic Minorities: The 2010 British General Election', *West European Politics* (2013) 36 (3), 615-633.

Table 1. Ethnic representation in London local government, 2018

Ethnicity	% councillors in 2018 (with change on 2014)	% of London population (relative to councillors)
Black	7.8 (+0.5)	13.4 (-5.7)
Asian	18.3 (+2.9)	18.5 (-0.2)
White	72.2 (-4.1)	57.0 (+15.2)

Table 2. Sex and ethnic representation in London local government, 2018

		% councillors in 2018	% London population (relative to councillors)
Men	White	43.6	28.6 (+15.2)
	Black	3.0	6.3 (-3.3)
	Asian	11.6	9.4 (+2.2)
Female	White	28.4	28.3 (+0.1)
	Black	4.8	7.1 (-2.3)
	Asian	6.8	9.0 (-2.2)

Table 3. Ethnic Composition of three main parties, 2018 (Percentage)

	Labour	Conservative	Lib Dem
White	60.9	90.2	86.5
Black/Asian	36.6	9.4	11.6
Asian	24.4	8.6	10.3
Black	12.2	0.8	1.3
Other	2.4	0.4	1.9

Figure 1a.

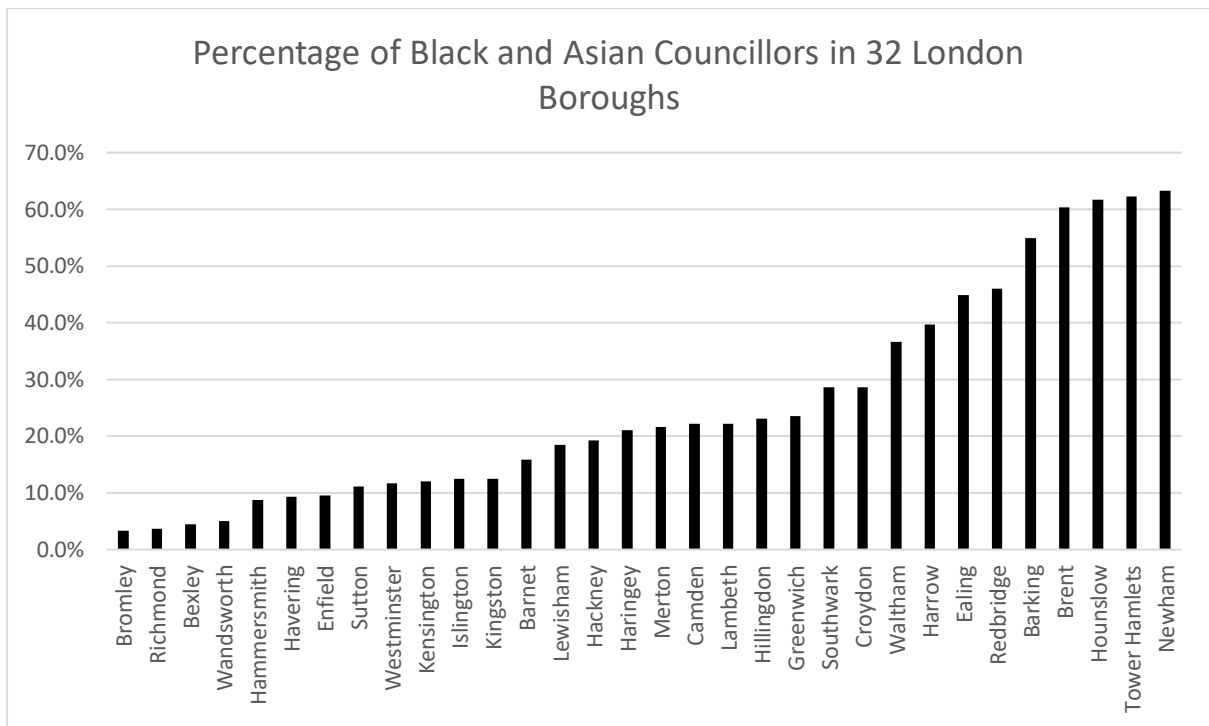


Figure 1b.

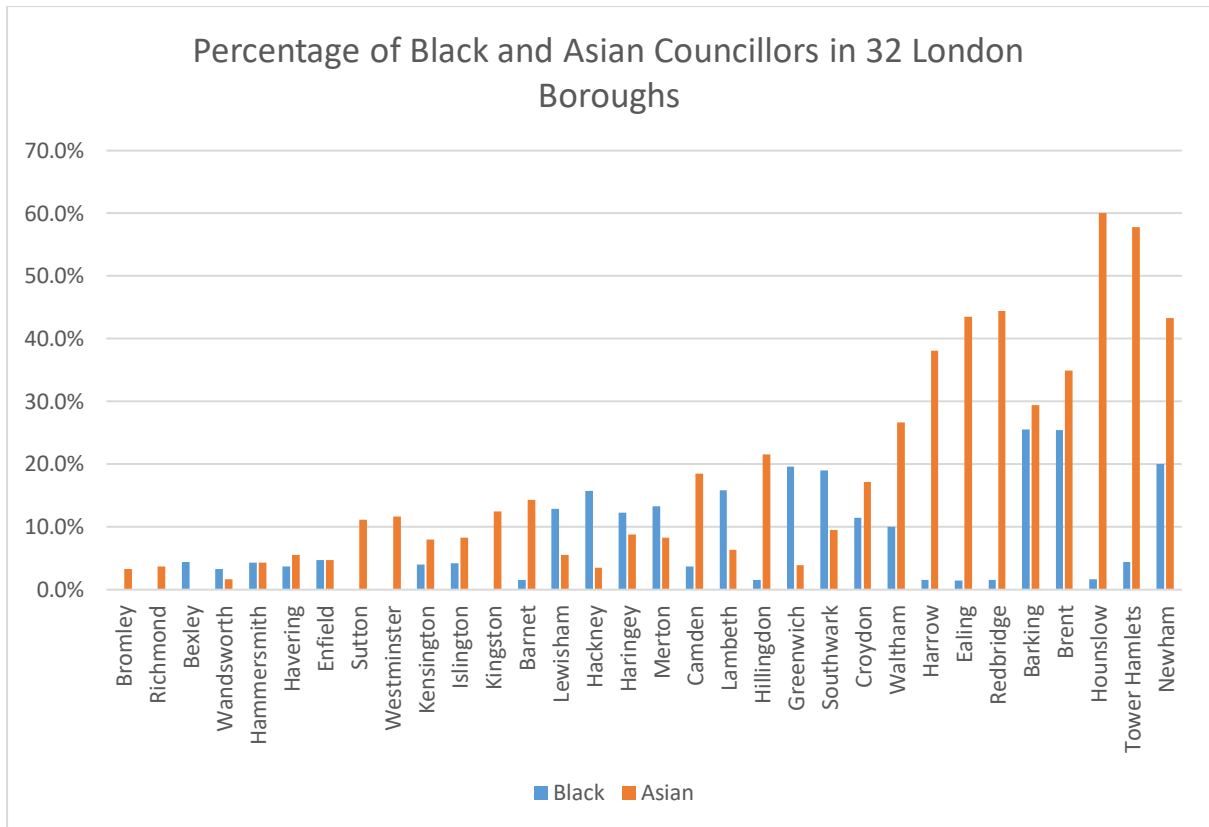


Figure 2a.

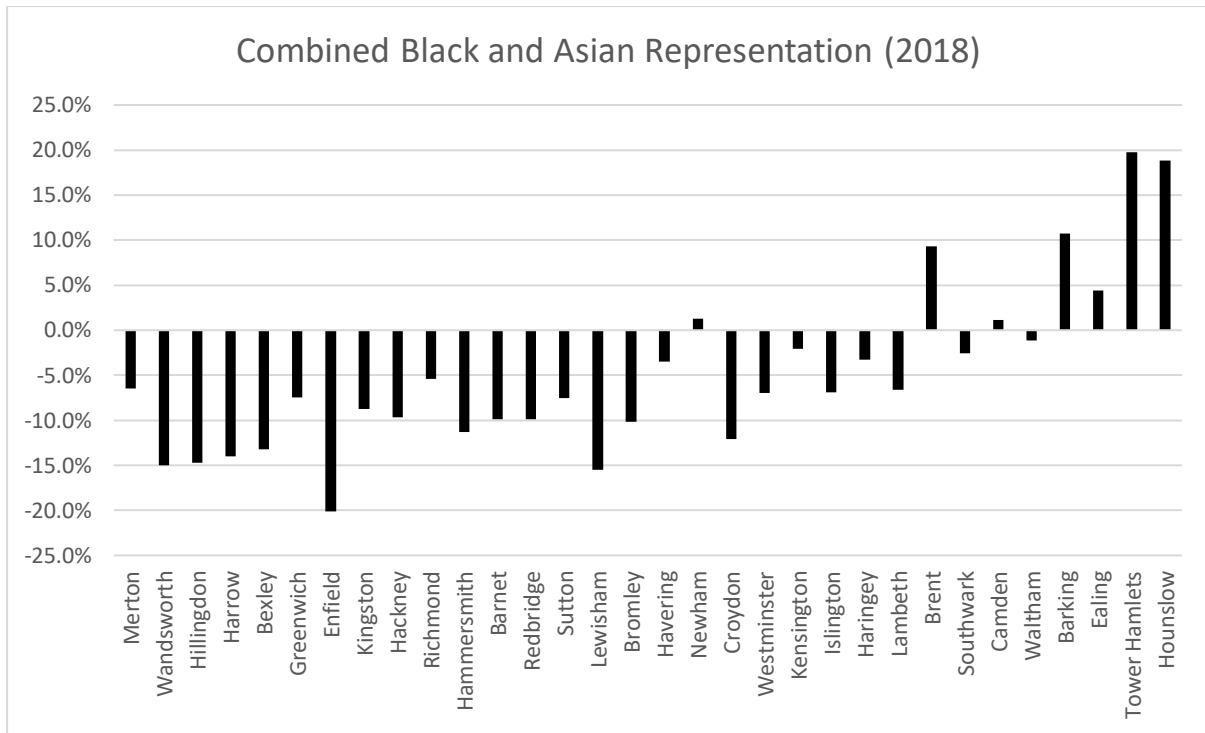


Figure 2b.

