

# Minority-Ethnic MPs and the Substantive Representation of Minority Interests in the House of Commons, 2005–2011

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Black, Asian and minority-ethnic (BAME) citizens are under-represented in the House of Commons. Nevertheless, the Chamber's ethnic composition has become more reflective of the general population as a result of the 2005 and 2010 parliamentary elections. The article seeks to map and explain variations in the extent to which BAME Members of Parliament (MPs) use the Chamber to articulate issues relevant to minority constituents. We compare the content of all parliamentary questions for written answer asked by BAME MPs between May 2005 and December 2011 to the questions asked by a matching sample of non-minority legislators. We find that BAME MPs ask more questions relating to the problems and rights of ethnic minorities in, and immigration to, the UK. However, we also find that all British MPs are responsive to the interests of minority constituents where these are geographically concentrated. Building on theoretical predictions derived from (1) models focusing on MPs' political socialisation and (2) on the electoral incentives they are facing, we discover that the MPs in our sample respond systematically to electoral incentives, especially in the politically salient area of immigration policy. While these findings are in line with an 'electoral-incentives model', a 'socialisation model' is better suited to explain the larger number of questions on the interests of ethnic minorities asked by Labour MPs.

The numerical underrepresentation of Members of Parliament (MPs) from Black, Asian and minority ethnic (BAME) backgrounds in the House of Commons has led to political concerns that, as a result of highly selective political recruitment processes, MPs are increasingly divorced from the life experiences of their constituents (*House of Commons*, 2010, p. 19). In academia, too, a great deal of research has focused on barriers to proportional 'descriptive representation' and the 'structure of political opportunities' facing potential candidates from

minority backgrounds in the political parties and the electoral arena (Norris and Lovenduski, 1995; Geddes, 1998; Banducci *et al.*, 2004; Kittilson and Tate, 2004; Sobolewska, unpublished paper). The *parliamentary behaviour* of BAME MPs, in contrast, their responsiveness to concerns of ethnic-minority voters ('substantive representation'), has been neglected so far. This is surprising because many normative arguments, especially amongst deliberative democrats, are based on the premise that substantive representation in a parliament will benefit from more descriptive representation (Mansbridge, 1999) as increased diversity in a parliament is believed to increase the diversity of experiences and perspectives articulated in the Chamber. The present article seeks to help closing this gap. The main questions are, firstly, does the descriptive representation of minorities in the Chamber make a significant difference to the Chamber's agenda, or are new minority MPs smoothly co-opted into the parliamentary parties' organisations and the parliamentary machinery? Secondly, are there differences between minority and non-minority MPs? Thirdly, are there significant differences amongst minority MPs? Finally, and most importantly, what mechanisms might help to explain these differences?

## 1. Research puzzle

In the normative debate about representation, there is often an implicit or explicit presumption that adequate substantive representation requires more proportional descriptive representation (e.g. Phillips, 1995; Mansbridge, 1999). Yet, it is debatable whether there is a necessary link between descriptive and substantive representation. On a theoretical level, Rehfeld (2009) argues that all representatives (whatever their backgrounds) can perform their duties in various ways, depending whose judgement they rely on for good policy (their own or someone else's); whether their goals are directed towards the nation as a whole or a specific group; or whether they are more or less responsive to constituent or group pressure. Empirical research on representative behaviour in the USA suggests that only some minority legislators appear to highlight issues of ethnicity in their political work. Many others pursue deliberate strategies of 'deracialising' their political signals (McCormick and Jones, 1993)—or adopting sophisticated strategies of 'togglng' between 'racialised' and 'deracialised' signals in different arenas and contexts (Collett, 2008).

Although the conditions for representative behaviour in the British House of Commons are clearly different from the USA, a study of institutional incentives lead to similarly ambivalent predictions: on the one hand, a number of institutional features of UK politics work strongly against a representative strategy emphasising personal factors such as ethnicity: all MPs, irrespective of their ethnic backgrounds, are first and foremost candidates of their parties and need

a plurality of votes in their constituencies to be (re-)elected. The British electoral system for Westminster provides only minimal incentives to cultivate a ‘personal vote’ (Carey and Shugart, 1995). Even where minority ethnic groups form a majority of the voters in a constituency, they are unlikely to have homogenous preferences. The best strategy for vote-seeking candidates may, therefore, be to de-emphasise ethnicity in the ‘long campaign’ in the Chamber and in the media as well as in the ‘short campaigns’ prior to a general election.<sup>1</sup> On the other hand, at least two strands of empirical research suggest that there may be circumstances where MPs are accepted as, or even encouraged to act as, ‘ambassadors’ (Rehfeld, 2009, p. 223) of minority groups. Firstly, sociological research on backbench roles in the House of Commons (Searing, 1994) suggests that an emphasis on ethnic group interests in parliamentary activities could be legitimately linked to widely accepted backbench roles such as ‘policy advocate’ (specialising in a particular policy area and scrutinising government policy in that area) or ‘constituency member’ (seeking to promote the welfare of his or her constituents by influencing policy-making and implementation). Secondly, the organisational history and culture of the Labour Party, the party that has historically been most successful in attracting activists and voters from ethnic minorities, has legitimised the representation of group interests at least since its internal struggles during the 1980s: ‘... the concept of the representation of a plurality of groups in the party has always been present. ... It ... encouraged the formulation of claims related to ethnic and racial difference’ (Garbaye, 2005, p. 123).

The empirical record for the UK reflects this theoretical ambivalence. In her study of role perceptions among ethnic-minority MPs during the 1990s, Nixon (1998, pp. 207–8) found that some minority MPs did seek to act as advocates of minority interests. Others emphatically rejected this role preferring the role of a ‘Burkean trustee’ or a ‘Madisonian lawmaker’ in Rehfeld’s (2009, p. 223) terminology. Nixon’s explanation had to be based on a handful of interviews and remained largely at the level of individual preferences. Our own analyses underscore Nixon’s empirical findings of diversity within the group of minority MPs, which has grown considerably since Nixon’s study was conducted. Table 1 provides some descriptive information on the number of parliamentary questions (PQs) for written answer each MP in our sample of 90 legislators asked between 2005 and 2011. For the purposes of this study, we counted, for each MP in our sample, the annual number of PQs explicitly referring (1) either to the problems and rights of ethnic minorities in the UK or (2) to problems arising from immigration (see below). The main statistic in Table 1 is the arithmetic mean of the number of such PQs asked by each MP in our

<sup>1</sup>The terms ‘long’ and ‘short’ campaign are very aptly used by Clarke *et al.* (2009, p. 53).

**Table 1** Parliamentary questioning by type of question and ethnic groups in the British House of Commons, 2005–2011: descriptive statistics

	Observations	Mean number	Std. Dev.	Minimum	Maximum
All MPs in the sample					
All PQs on immigration or the rights of ethnic minorities	438	2.79	8.01	0	94
PQs on the rights of ethnic minorities	438	0.93	4.43	0	59
PQs on immigration	438	1.85	4.88	0	37
MPs without migratory history					
All PQs on immigration or the rights of ethnic minorities	227	1.95	4.37	0	26
PQs on the rights of ethnic minorities	227	0.38	1.43	0	12
PQs on immigration	227	1.56	3.75	0	26
MPs of European ethnic origin with migratory history					
All PQs on immigration or the rights of ethnic minorities	65	1.31	3.10	0	16
PQs on the rights of ethnic minorities	65	0.29	0.90	0	5
PQs on immigration	65	1.02	2.87	0	15
BAME MPs					
All PQs on immigration or the rights of ethnic minorities	146	4.75	12.38	0	94
PQs on the rights of ethnic minorities	146	2.07	7.32	0	59
PQs on immigration	146	2.68	6.72	0	37

Note: unit of analysis is the number of questions per MP and calendar year (May 2005 to December 2011).  
Source: Authors' own.

sample *in each calendar year*. Thus, the table is based on 438 'MP-years' with multiple annual counts for most MPs (depending on their length of service). On average, MPs submitted approximately one question per annum about the problems and rights of ethnic minorities and just under two on immigration and its risks. BAME MPs asked considerably more questions on both varieties than the two control groups in our sample.<sup>2</sup> However, there is considerable variability amongst minority MPs. Whether or not a BAME MP asks any questions about minorities and immigration seems to depend on the context. Our main goal is to establish key properties of this context, reducing the reliance on idiosyncratic arguments.

<sup>2</sup>We conducted an analysis of variance and various further tests demonstrating a statistically significant (at the 1% level) means difference between BAME MPs on the one hand and the two control groups on the other.

## 2. Mechanisms and theoretical predictions

Hedström and Swedberg (1998, p. 7) argue that valid explanations in the social sciences should go beyond the search for systematic covariation between variables or events. Unlike so-called ‘black-box explanations’, mechanism-based research seeks ‘to specify the social “cogs and wheels” . . . that have brought the relationship into existence’ (ibid.). These mechanisms are usually unobserved theoretical constructs. In the past decades, discussions amongst legislative scholars interested in the micro foundations of institutional explanations have revolved around two classes of testable models that specify such mechanisms: firstly, models based on sociological institutionalism, which focused on processes of selection and socialisation as crucial mechanisms; and secondly models rooted in rational-choice frameworks, which often focused on the incentives assumed to drive the behaviour of reelection-seeking politicians.

We will seek to specify key elements of both types of mechanisms. It should be emphasised that we do not seek to maximise the explained variance of the dependent variable in this case. Rather we pursue a strategy akin to Weber’s use of an ‘ideal type’, which could be defined as an analytic device that ‘is formed by the one-sided accentuation of one or more points of view’ according to which ‘concrete individual phenomena . . . are arranged into a unified analytical construct’ (Weber, 1949, p. 58). In Weber’s view, the validity of ideal types does not depend on their correspondence with an observed reality, but has to be ascertained in terms of adequacy. More recently, a related (if otherwise different) approach has been used by scholars involved in the construction of ‘models’. Laver and Shepsle (1996, p. 7), for example, justify their own use of models as follows: ‘the reason why we abstract from certain details *by design* is to allow us to formulate generalisations about a world in which we cannot conduct carefully controlled experiments’. Applying such an approach to minority MPs, our aim is to develop some interesting and non-obvious insights into their representational behaviour. Although we are testing highly reductionist models, our approach should thus not be misunderstood as an attempt to pit a highly stylised sociological model against an equally stylised and over-simplified rational-choice model. It is highly likely that both types of mechanisms may be useful to explain concrete behaviour. Because we are interested in ideal-typical mechanisms, we have also resisted the temptation to estimate a synthetic model combining elements of both approaches.

The analytic mechanism underpinning accounts of representative and legislative behaviour focusing on electoral incentives is a cognitive process in which instrumentally rational actors evaluate the expected utilities of alternative political strategies in relation to their overriding goal of re-election—and to their competitors’ anticipated moves. Comparative research shows that MPs often use PQs to

enhance their individual reputation and ostensibly ‘show concern for the interests of constituents’ (Russo and Wiberg, 2010, pp. 217–218, *verbatim* quote 218). Is there any evidence that PQs (especially those for written answer, which constitutes the vast majority of all PQs) can actually be seen as individual signals to voters in the UK context? Franklin and Norton (1993) surveyed MPs about their use of PQs. When asked why they used PQs for written answer, 91% said they used them to make ministers aware of points of concern to constituents, and 88% claimed they used them to defend or promote constituency interests. Eighty-two per cent sent the answers to their PQs for written answer to their local newspapers (Franklin and Norton, 1993, p. 109, 121, 117). More recently, MPs have begun to account for their parliamentary activities on their personal websites. This frequently includes a list of the PQs tabled by them, and the answers received. Hence, we are persuaded that PQs for written answer can legitimately be seen as a valid indicator not just of parliamentary activity in the Chamber but also as part of MPs’ individual communication with their constituents over and above the signals emitted by their parties. This tallies with the empirical observation that individual constituency work has become a more important focus for MPs since the 1980s, partially as a result of growing real or perceived electoral vulnerability (Norton and Wood, 1993, p. 21).

Although our analysis focuses on individual MPs, it would be wrong to assume a necessary discrepancy between individual MPs’ motivations and their parties’ long-term campaign strategies. In the context of USA electoral campaigning, individual candidate characteristics such as gender or ethnicity have been claimed to have become more important cues for voters in ‘low-information elections’, helping them to establish the policy differences between the parties (for the USA see McDermott, 1998). This is certainly not the case in the UK. As party identification has decreased markedly since the 1960s and the number of ‘late deciders’ at general elections has increased, long-term campaign strategies have become more important in shaping voter choices (Fisher *et al.*, 2011, pp. 816–817). In Clarke *et al.*’s (2009, p. 53) words, ‘the continuing long-term battle for the hearts and minds of voters resumes almost as soon as an election is over . . . Voters react by making judgements about parties, candidates and leaders on a continuing basis, that is, during the official “short” campaigns in the month preceding a general election . . . as well as over the course of the inter-election cycle as a whole’. In this context, variations in questioning patterns in Parliament may, in fact, be a result of differences in party strategies in the ‘long campaign’ as parties increasingly target specific voter groups (Strömbäck, 2009), amongst others by offering popular and/or credible candidates. The Conservative Party’s widely publicised attempt to ensure a stronger representation of BAME candidates on their ‘A list’ of candidates in the run-up to the 2010 general election is a strong indication of its leader’s attempt to present party as being an open, modern

and diverse organisation that is attractive for a variety of voters (Sobolewska, unpublished paper).

If PQs are a valid indicator of substantive representation of voter interests or signals to voter groups, what expectations would be derived from electoral-incentives framework in the context of the present paper? There should be at least five observable implications:

- (1) An MPs' use of PQs can be expected to be responsive to the socio-demographic composition of their constituencies. We would expect all MPs representing constituencies with a high share of minority residents to be more likely to articulate the interests of minorities.
- (2) An MP's responsiveness to minority interests can be expected to be more pronounced, if the MP representing a constituency with a high percentage of BAME residents additionally holds a marginal seat, which is vulnerable to a weak or moderate swing to another party at the next general election.
- (3) The behaviour of vote-seeking MPs should also vary across the electoral cycle. We would expect MPs to focus on activities in the constituency and outside the Chamber in the run-up to a general election. There should be generally fewer questions (including those relating to minority-related issues) in this period.
- (4) We would expect government MPs to ask fewer questions than opposition MPs. Government MPs generally have relatively strong incentives (and good chances) to focus on office and policy goals. Therefore, they will tend to focus on broad, national issues rather than relatively narrow group-specific policy problems. In opposition, there should be more scope for individualised representation.
- (5) The electoral incentives crucial for the electoral-incentives model should apply quite independently of the MP's own ethnic background and of the political party the MP represents. For example, non-minority MPs representing districts with a high share of BAME voters would be expected to be equally sensitive and responsive to associated policy issues as minority MPs as both major UK parties compete for the vote of ethnic minorities.

The causal mechanisms characteristic of *sociological institutionalism* are typically based on the assumption that actors following a 'logic of appropriateness' rather than a 'logic of consequences' (as rational-choice models do). Rather than comparing the expected utility of different strategies, actors in sociological accounts 'seek to fulfil the obligations encapsulated in a role, an identity, a membership in a political community or group, and the ethos, practices and expectations of its institutions. Embedded in a social collectivity, they do what they see as appropriate for themselves in a specific type of situation' (March and Olsen, 2004, p. 3). The notion of social 'role' has always been an important

component of sociological theories of representative behaviour (see [Blomgren and Rozenberg, 2012](#)). ‘Roles’ could be defined as ‘a set of norms (obligations or expectations) attached to an individual’s social position, occupation or relationship status’ ([Weber, 1995](#), p. 1134). For the British House of Commons, [Searing \(1994\)](#) inductively develops an empirically rich typology of legislative norms. He distinguishes between institutionally constrained ‘positional’ or ‘leadership’ roles, and so-called ‘preference roles’ which backbench MPs may choose to adopt. The most important of these preference roles are:

... checking the executive (Policy Advocates); monitoring institutional structures (Parliament Men); making ministers (Ministerial Aspirants); and redressing grievances (Constituency Members). Backbenchers make their roles with a view to making themselves useful in the established framework of rules that they find at Westminster. They pass over some of these roles, adopt others, and then interpret and modify them to suit their preferences. They certainly do make their own roles, but they make them in and for Westminster’s world ([Searing, 1994](#), p. 16).

The mechanism by which these roles and ‘the established framework of rules’ at Westminster (and other parliaments) is transmitted is typically conceptualised as ‘socialisation’. Legislative socialisation could be defined as ‘the process by which newly elected members of a legislature become acquainted with the institution’s rules and norms of behaviour. This process may, to a significant degree, shape their attitudes towards the legislature and their role and behaviour in it ...’ ([Rush and Giddings, 2011](#), p. 56). It involves ‘learning the rules and procedures of the legislature’ and consciously or unconsciously adapting their attitudes and behaviour to legislative norms and their roles as a member (*ibid.*). While these definitions would still be compatible with a rational-utilitarian response to incentives and possible sanctions, the notion of political socialisation, comprehensively understood, goes beyond the compliance with certain rules. It includes the ‘degree to which people interpret the conditions of their milieu in terms of distant political processes, the ideas of social causation with which they interpret such distant processes, and the interpretation of specific political events and structures of their country’ ([Stinchcombe, 1968](#), p. 506). In sociological institutionalism, role orientations are not instrumental. Non-compliance with roles is largely seen to be the result of role conflicts where individuals belong to a variety of social groups with different norms. Whereas authors in the rational choice tradition also use the notion of ‘role’, they tend to use it in the sense of routine responses to incentives. [Strøm’s \(1997, p. 158\)](#) definition of roles as endogenous behavioural patterns chosen by actors may serve as an illustration of the difference between sociological and the rationalist views of roles: ‘Parliamentary roles ... are routines, driven by reasons (preferences), and constrained



by rules'. Since, from a sociological perspective, socialisation is largely perceived to be a process involving the gradual internalisation of social norms, it is not surprising that the length of institutional membership is often considered as the most appropriate operationalisation of legislative socialisation (Mughan *et al.*, 1997). A socialisation-based framework would explicitly allow for an 'ethnic effect' as ethnic differences between MPs could be the result of different interpretations of the situation stemming from different group memberships and experiences.

In applying a socialisation model to the number of PQs on the problems and rights of ethnic minorities and on immigration, we would expect MPs:

- (1) To be particularly active, if they have acquired the role of 'policy advocate' or 'constituency member' in Searing's (1994) terminology.
- (2) 'Ministerial aspirants' or MPs in 'position roles' are generally more constrained and considerably less likely to ask any questions in the Chamber. This applies to all MPs irrespective of their ethnicity;
- (3) In such a model BAME status could plausibly be hypothesised to be a significant factor shaping representational behaviour, as it is likely to influence MPs' pre-election socialisation. The personal experience of being an immigrant, or a descendant of recent (especially non-European) immigrants, may shape the way the rules of institutionalised politics are perceived.
- (4) This effect should be strongest amongst MPs who are immigrants themselves ('first generation'). MPs whose parents or grandparents were the first immigrant generation can be expected to share more social, educational and political experiences with non-minority MPs.
- (5) Pre-election socialisation is also shaped by the norms prevalent in, and advocated by, political parties. Historically, the Labour Party has offered BAME immigrants and their descendants more opportunities to organise and get selected for leadership positions than the other British parties. Therefore, we would expect BAME MPs belonging to the Parliamentary Labour Party (PLP) to be more active and visible in promoting the rights of immigrants and minorities than MPs from other parties.
- (6) The more experienced a backbench MP is, the more likely he or she should be to adopt one of the preference roles identified by Searing. Newly elected MPs can be expected to be in an institutional learning process. If they stay on (or return to) the backbenches as their legislative career progresses, they should be more and more likely to articulate the interests of minorities, if they adopt the roles of policy advocates or constituency members.

### 3. Research design and data

The present study is based on a quasi-experimental design. The sample consists of data on all 34 BAME MPs who belonged to either of the two Parliaments elected in 2005 and 2010. The representative behaviour of these MPs is compared with an equal number of non-minority MPs. The latter were selected randomly, although the sample was stratified in such a way that the non-minority MPs drawn matched the BAME MPs in terms of party membership and the share of 'non-white' residents in their constituencies. In addition, we collected data on 10 European immigrants and the immediate descendants of such immigrants. They were also matched with an appropriate number of autochthonous non-minority MPs following a similar strategy. This led to a total sample of 90 MPs. As mentioned above, data were collected on each MP and each year he or she belonged to the Commons between 2005 and 2011.<sup>3</sup> Thus, the time variables used in this study do not reflect the parliamentary cycle traditionally starting with the Queen's speech but calendar years.<sup>4</sup> As a result, the data set includes a total of 438 records ('MP-years') for the 90 MPs, with 146 records (33.3%) capturing the questions and time-varying contextual variables for the 34 BAME MPs between May 2005 and December 2011, 65 records (14.8%) for non-minority MPs with a migratory history and 227 records (51.8%) for the contrast group of non-minority autochthonous MPs.<sup>5</sup> This allows us to compare minority and non-minority MPs while holding immigration-related constituency characteristics and party membership constant.

Our dependent variable, substantive representation, was operationalised as the number of questions for written answer each selected MP submitted. Earlier studies used a variety of alternative indicators (e.g. select-committee membership or voting), but revealed that PQs are a more valid indicator available for empirical study in the UK (Saalfeld and Kyriakopoulou, 2010). First analyses of questions (Saalfeld, 2011) also showed that MPs typically ask two types of questions with slightly different connotations: (1) questions on the problems and rights of ethnic minorities in the UK and (2) questions about immigration and the social and political risks associated with it. A fairly typical example of the first type of question is:

<sup>3</sup>A total of 34 BAME MPs and 10 MPs with a European migratory history (i.e. the MPs themselves or at least one of their parents were immigrant to the UK) were initially matched with 44 (34 + 10) autochthonous MPs. A few by-elections affecting our sample eventually increased the total sample to 90.

<sup>4</sup>The reason for not starting with the Queens speech is the data structure of the 2005–2010 data set.

<sup>5</sup>The deviation from a ratio of 50:50 arose from relevant by-elections and a number of BAME members that died or resigned during a Parliament, or were elected in by-elections.

To ask the Minister for Women and Equality what steps the Government are taking to address inequalities faced by ethnic minority women in the workplace; and if she will make a statement. (Diane Abbott MP, HC Deb, 18 June 2007, c1448W)

Questions regarding the problems and rights of ethnic minorities predominantly scrutinise the government's record in promoting and safeguarding equal opportunities. Questions on immigration, in contrast, are frequently critical of the risks perceived to be associated with immigration. The following question should suffice as an example:

To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department what plans the Government have to increase the number of UK ports which are manned by immigration staff 24 hours a day. (Adam Afriyie MP, HC Deb, 7 December 2005, c1365W)

We compiled a data set containing the texts of *all* PQs (irrespective of content) tabled by the 90 sampled MPs between May 2005 and December 2011. The number of questions asked by these MPs was 16,361 for the 2005–10 Parliament and 10,041 for the Parliament elected in May 2010 (until December 2011).

For each question a dummy variable was created registering whether the question explicitly referred to ethnic minorities in, or immigration to, the UK. In order to assure reliability of our coding, we searched all questions using specific key words and subsequently checked the context in which these have been asked. These keywords are listed in Table A.1 (Appendix). The dummy variables were aggregated for each calendar year the MP belonged to the House of Commons (with the year 2005 truncated as our window of observation started in May 2005). These data provide the basis for a pooled analysis with the unit of analysis being an MP per calendar year.

This design allows us to capture theoretically meaningful time-varying effects such as an MP's increasing parliamentary socialisation or variations in parliamentary activity across the electoral cycle.<sup>6</sup> Both indicators measuring the dependent variables in our models (both types of PQs) constitute overdispersed count variables. For data of this type, a negative binomial regression model is the most appropriate specification to estimate the covariation with explanatory variables. Because the annual counts for each MP are likely to be correlated ('intra-class correlation'), we calculated clustered robust standard errors for each parameter estimate. In modelling the behaviour of BAME and non-minority MPs, we first fitted a 'basic model' consisting of a dummy variable registering the MP's BAME status: the variable has the value one, if the MP has a minority

<sup>6</sup>In future work, we will conduct a more comprehensive analysis of age, cohort and period effects.

background and zero if he or she does not. In addition, the baseline model (like all other models) includes two control variables, which are statistically important but theoretically trivial. The first control variable is a dummy variable with a value of one, if an MP held ministerial office in the relevant year. Since ministers do not ask PQs, this effect needs to be controlled for. We decided not to exclude ministers altogether, because a number of them were only in office for a part of our window of observation (5 May 2005 to 31 December 2011). In addition, we added a statistical control for the Parliament elected on 6 May 2010. Subsequently, we added variables to the baseline model that capture important elements of a socialisation and electoral-incentives perspectives (see below).

#### 4. Modelling substantive representation

In line with the design outlined above, Table 2 presents the estimates for three models using the number of PQs on the problems and rights of ethnic minorities as the dependent variable. The first model constitutes our 'baseline model'. We are testing for the hypothesis that BAME MPs will ask more questions on the rights and problems of ethnic minorities than non-minority MPs, holding certain background variables (see above) constant without specifying any social mechanism underpinning this expectation. The estimated regression coefficients were transformed into incidence rate ratios, which allow a relatively intuitive interpretation. Controlling for the variable 'ministerial position' and a period effect for the 2010 Parliament, Model 1a shows that the number of questions a BAME MP is predicted to ask on the rights and problems of ethnic minorities in the UK was nearly six (5.91) times higher than the number predicted for an MP from the (White) ethnic majority (the clustered standard error of 3.21 is reported in parentheses). This effect is statistically significant at the 1% level. Thus, our hypothesis based purely on the MP's ethnic background cannot be rejected at this stage. The control variables work in the expected causal direction: If the MP switched from a backbench to a ministerial role in a given year, the number of questions he or she asks would decrease by a factor of 0.03 (in other words, it would decrease by 97% and be close to 0<sup>7</sup>). If the annual count of PQs on the problems and rights of ethnic minorities is conducted for the first two years of the 2010 Parliament, the number would be estimated to decrease by a factor of more than one-third (0.3). The effect of both control variables is statistically significant at the 1% level. As suggested above, these two effects are not substantively interesting for this article, but need to be held constant.

<sup>7</sup>The ratio is not exactly equal to zero, because some MPs were backbench MPs for part of the year and therefore asked at least a few questions before they were promoted to ministerial positions, or after they returned to the backbenches.

**Table 2** Negative binomial regression for the number of minority-related questions of 90 MPs (2005–11): incidence rate ratios (standard errors in brackets)

<b>Dependent variable: number of PQs relating to the problems and rights of ethnic minorities</b>	<b>Baseline model (Model 1a)</b>	<b>Socialisation model (Model 2a)</b>	<b>Electoral-incentives model (Model 3a)</b>
BAME MP	5.91 (3.21)***	1.96 (1.38)	2.85 (1.44)**
MP is an immigrant (irrespective of ethnicity)	—	1.66 (1.34)	—
MP's parents or grandparents were immigrants	—	3.10 (2.36)	—
Labour MP	—	5.85 (2.99)***	—
Years of parliamentary experience	—	0.97 (0.03)	—
Number of questions not related to immigration or minorities	—	1.01 (0.00)***	—
Interaction experience × number of other questions	—	1.00 (0.00)	—
Percentage of 'non-whites' in MP's constituency	—	—	1.03 (0.01)**
MP holds marginal seat	—	—	0.41 (0.34)
Interaction 'non-whites' × marginality	—	—	1.01 (0.04)
Interaction BAME MP × marginality	—	—	2.97 (3.13)
MP member of an opposition party	—	—	0.51 (0.17)*
Electoral cycle: election year after election (May–December)	—	—	0.48 (0.13)**
Electoral cycle: second post-electoral year	—	—	0.40 (0.11)***
Electoral cycle: third post-electoral year	—	—	1.17 (0.57)
Electoral cycle: pre-electoral year	—	—	0.25 (0.10)***
Electoral cycle: election year prior to election (Jan–May)	—	—	0.17 (0.09)***
Ministerial position	0.03 (0.04)***	0.06 (0.07)**	0.02 (0.03)***
Control for 2010 Parliament	0.30 (0.12)***	0.41 (0.15)**	0.31 (0.13)***
Constant	0.57 (0.22)	0.04 (0.03)***	0.81 (0.43)
Log pseudo-likelihood	−378.85	−336.78	−363.05
n (MP-years)	436	436	436

Notes: standard errors are clustered robust standard errors. Reference category for variables on the stage in the electoral cycle: first post-election year.

\*\*\* $P < 0.01$ ; \*\* $P < 0.05$ ; \* $P < 0.1$  (two-tailed).

The second and third models in Table 2 examine whether the strong positive and statistically significant effect of an MP's BAME status is retained, if socio-logical and strategic contextual factors are added. A *socialisation model* of substantive representation of minority-ethnic interests is specified in Table 2 (Model 2a). In order to analyse the effect of pre-election socialisation a dummy variable registers a value of one, if the MP himself or herself is an

immigrant (this includes all immigrants, including those which are ethnically 'White'), a dummy variable taking a value of one, if the MP's parents or grandparents were immigrants and a dummy variable registering a value of one, if the MP belongs to the PLP. Post-election socialisation was captured by three further variables: the first independent variable measures the length of an MP's parliamentary experience in the relevant years. The second independent variable measures the number of questions without reference to ethnic minorities or immigration asked by the MP in a calendar year. This indicator seeks to capture parliamentary roles that are particularly likely to lead to a large number of PQs asked: the roles of 'constituency MP' and 'policy advocate'. The third independent variable represents an interaction of the length of parliamentary service (in years) and the number of PQs not relating to minorities and immigration asked by an MP in a given calendar year. This is to test for the hypothesis that the effect of backbench roles associated with large numbers of PQs should become stronger as the length of parliamentary service increases.

The incidence rate ratios estimated for Model 2a do not correspond to all of our expectations. Holding all other independent variables constant, BAME MPs are still estimated to ask almost twice (1.96) as many questions as non-minority MPs, but this effect is statistically not significant at conventional levels. Similar observations can be made for the dummy variables capturing 'immigrant generation'. There is also no effect resulting from longer post-election socialisation: Neither the years of parliamentary service nor the interaction between parliamentary experience and number of questions asked in other policy areas have a significant effect. The strongest impact on the number of questions relating to the rights of ethnic minorities in this model can be observed for the dummy variable 'Labour Party membership'. If an MP belongs to the PLP, the number of questions on the problems and rights of ethnic minorities is estimated to be almost six times (5.85) as high as the number asked by a Conservative or Liberal Democrat on such matters. The number of PQs *not* relating to minority-related issues is a significant predictor of the number of questions on such rights. In short, if we hold an MP's party and the number of questions he or she asks in general context, BAME status does not make a significant difference for the number of questions asked on the problems and rights of ethnic minorities. If socialisation matters for PQs in this area, it is related to the norms of the Labour Party as an organisation and the general parliamentary preference roles chosen by backbenchers (e.g. policy advocate or constituency member). Especially, the effect of the Labour Party variable supports the socialisation argument. Since the 1960s and 1970s the Labour Party has been seen as the party for immigrants with a commitment to improve the social and political condition of ethnic minorities. 'These commitments have included the enactment of several race relations acts, the creation and empowerment of a national race relations

regulatory watchdog, and the adoption of proactive procedures for selecting ethnic minority parliamentary candidates' (Messina, 2007, p. 209). Not only has this contributed to the continuing dominance of the Labour Party amongst ethnic-minority voters (Heath *et al.*, 2011), but has also shaped the party's internal culture at the grassroots level: 'The combination of the ward system [in local elections], ethnic segregation, low turnout among voters and ward-level selection of candidates tends to encourage, if not ethnic minority representation, at least some sort of racialisation of politics' (Garbaye, 2005, p. 123).

Contrary to theoretical expectations, the *electoral-incentives model* does not eliminate the statistical effect of an MP's BAME status completely. The estimates for Model 3a confirm that *all* UK MPs in the sample were relatively responsive to the ethnic composition of their constituencies: with each additional per cent of 'non-White' residents in the MP's constituency, the number of questions relating to the rights of ethnic minorities is estimated to increase by a factor of 1.03 (holding BAME status constant). This effect is statistically significant at the 5% level. The insignificant estimates for the variables capturing seat marginality (operationalised as a dummy variable registering one, if the MP's electoral majority was less than 10% in the previous election) and the interaction effects of BAME status and seat marginality as well as ethnic composition of the constituency and seat marginality underline the robustness of this effect. The variables capturing the timing of questions in the electoral cycle generally have a statistically significant effect. The reference year for these estimates is the first post-election year (in our window of observation, these are the calendar years 2006 and 2011). Compared with the first post-election year, the number of questions on the rights of ethnic minorities is significantly lower in the election years 2005 and 2010 (which is trivial, because election years are shorter) but the ratio of 0.25 in the year prior to a general election suggests that MPs switch the focus of their parliamentary activities to the campaign. These estimates will become more meaningful in future investigations as more observations will be added to the data set. Opposition status has an unexpected negative effect (significant at the 10% level) on the number of questions. If PQs are a 'weapon' of the opposition in its attempts to challenge the government, opposition status should have increased the number of questions asked. This is not the case, which may be an effect of the fact that our sample includes only 20 months of the 2010 Parliament. In the 2005–2010 Parliament, the Conservative Party (with only two BAME MPs in their ranks) was on the opposition benches.

The second set of estimates (Table 3) relates to the dependent variable 'number of PQs on the risks of immigration'. These estimates are clearly different from those on the problems and rights of ethnic minorities, corroborating the need for this distinction. The two models do not provide clear-cut predictions for the number of questions on the risks of immigration that BAME MPs are

**Table 3** Negative binomial regression for the number of immigration-related questions of 90 MPs (2005–11): incidence rate ratios (standard errors in brackets)

<b>Dependent variable: number of PQs relating to immigration and its risks</b>	<b>Baseline model (Model 1b)</b>	<b>Socialisation model (Model 2b)</b>	<b>Electoral-incentives model (Model 3b)</b>
BAME MP	2.13 (0.90)*	3.84 (2.38)**	1.53 (0.57)
MP is an immigrant (irrespective of ethnicity)	—	0.20 (0.14)**	—
MP's parents or grandparents were immigrants	—	0.61 (0.41)	—
Labour MP	—	0.97 (0.38)	—
Years of parliamentary experience	—	1.01 (0.02)	—
Number of questions not related to immigration or minorities	—	1.01 (0.00)***	—
Interaction experience × number of other questions	—	1.00 (0.00)	—
Percentage of 'non-whites' in MP's constituency	—	—	1.02 (0.01)
MP holds marginal seat	—	—	1.79 (1.42)
Interaction 'non-whites' × marginality	—	—	0.89 (0.04)***
Interaction BAME MP × marginality	—	—	6.94 (8.19)
MP member of an opposition party	—	—	1.22 (0.37)
Electoral cycle: election year following general election	—	—	0.39 (0.09)***
Electoral cycle: second post-electoral year	—	—	0.68 (0.18)
Electoral cycle: third post-electoral year	—	—	0.64 (0.17)*
Electoral cycle: pre-electoral year	—	—	0.51 (0.10)***
Electoral cycle: election year prior to general election	—	—	0.09 (0.03)***
Ministerial position	0.01 (0.01)***	0.03 (0.02)***	0.01 (0.01)***
Control for 2010 Parliament	0.29 (0.09)***	0.25 (0.08)***	0.25 (0.08)***
Constant	2.21 (0.60)***	0.86 (0.45)	3.09 (1.47)**
Log pseudo-likelihood	−587.00	−552.46	−566.737
n (MP-years)	436	436	436

Notes: standard errors are clustered robust standard errors. Reference category for variables on the stage in the electoral cycle: first post-election year.

\*\*\* $P < 0.01$ ; \*\* $P < 0.05$ ; \* $P < 0.1$  (two-tailed).

expected to ask. The *baseline model* (Model 1b) suggests that BAME status is not influencing the number of questions in this area as strongly as in the case of questions relating to the rights and problems of ethnic minorities. The incidence rate ratio is much smaller and only significant at the 10% level. A comparison of the baseline models (Models 1a and 1b) in Tables 2 and 3 suggests that BAME MPs are more likely than non-minority MPs to ask questions about both aspects, but

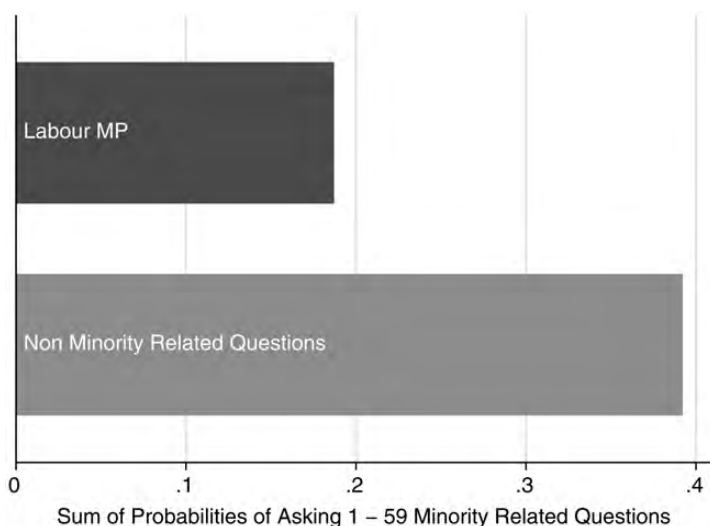


they are more concerned with the situation and rights of ethnic minorities in the country than with questions of immigration.

Model 2b specifies a *socialisation model* and demonstrates, firstly, that BAME status increases the probability of MPs asking questions about the risks of immigration almost by a factor of 4. However, secondly, being a first-generation immigrant decreases the estimated number of questions on immigration significantly by a factor of 0.20. This is consistent with the mechanisms described in socialisation theory as the pre-election socialisation of immigrants differs from experiences made by the descendants of immigrants. Thirdly, MPs who generally ask many questions—in other words, MPs that have adopted the backbench roles of ‘policy advocate’ or ‘constituency member’—will also ask more questions on the risks of immigration. Fourthly, unlike the models estimating the effect of socialisation on the number of PQs relating to the rights of ethnic minorities, PLP membership is not a significant predictor for the number of questions on immigration. In sum, therefore, the estimates for the socialisation model are different from those for PQs on ethnic minorities (Table 2) but largely in line with theoretical expectations.

In the *electoral-incentives model* (Model 3b), BAME status is not a statistically significant factor in explaining variations in the number of questions on immigration. In other words, holding the other variables in this model constant reduces the effect of minority status to such an extent that it appears spurious. If the percentage of ‘non-Whites’ is high and the seat is marginal, MPs seem to be more reluctant to raise questions about immigration in the Chamber than under different circumstances. With every percentage point the share of ‘non-whites’ in a marginal seat increases, the number of questions on immigration decreases by a factor of 0.89. Again, this demonstrates that all MPs—irrespective of ethnic or party background—are responsive to the perceived electoral risks of highlighting problems of immigration. The estimates for the timing of questions in the electoral cycle are also in line with expectations. While the ratios for the election year (January to May and May to December) can be expected to be low for trivial reasons, the number of questions relating to immigration is highest in the first year after an election (reference category) and declines steadily thereafter. Although these data need to be treated with great caution, one interpretation may be that immigration is a contentious issue that MPs are less and less likely to raise as the general election approaches. In sum, therefore, both the electoral-incentives (Model 3b) and the socialisation model (Model 2b) are supported more convincingly by the data when applied to PQs on the problems of immigration, than the models dealing with the rights and problems of ethnic minorities (Models 2a and 3a, respectively). Thus, with regard to PQs on immigration and its risks, both strategic and socialisation-based mechanisms seem to be at work.

Figures 1–3 visualise our main findings from regression analyses above. The bars show the relative impact of the statistically significant predictor variables.

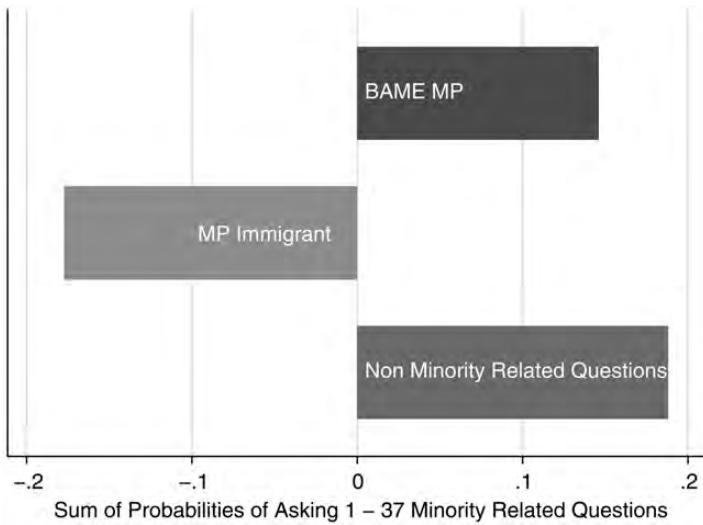


**Figure 1** Predictions for the statistically significant effects of the socialisation model: (dependent variable: annual number of questions on the problems and rights of ethnic minorities)

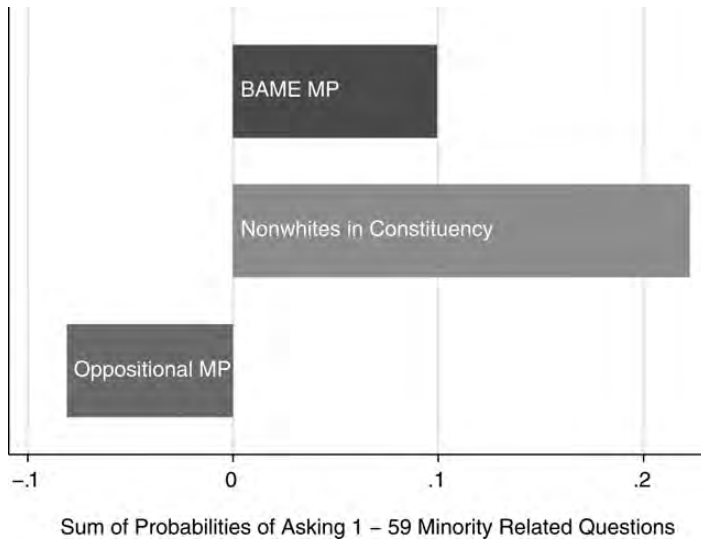
Based on the regression estimates in Tables 2 and 3, we employed Clarify to simulate the effects on the probability of an MP asking at least one<sup>8</sup> PQ about (1) the problems and rights of ethnic minorities and (2) the risks of immigration of increasing a given statistically significant predictor from its minimum to its maximum value while keeping the remaining variables constant at their means.<sup>9</sup> Figures 1 and 2 represent predictions for the *socialisation models* explaining variations in the number of PQs asked about the problems and rights of ethnic minorities (Figure 1) and about immigration and its risks (Figure 2). The bars represent the effect of the statistically significant independent variables (omitting all control variables). If all other independent variables in the model are held constant at the mean, PLP membership increases the probability of an MP asking at least one question on minorities by nearly 20% (compared with membership of the Conservative Party or of the Liberal Democrats). If the annual number of other PQs (not relating to minorities and immigration) is increased from its minimum in the data set (zero) to its maximum (568 in this case), the number of PQs on ethnic minorities rises by almost 40%. Following an analogous logic, Figure 2 plots predictions for questions about immigration and its risks based on the sociological model (Model 2b in Table 3). MPs who are

<sup>8</sup>We specified a range from one PQ to the largest number of PQs in the sample.

<sup>9</sup>We used the Clarify software downloadable from Gary King's website (<http://GKing.Harvard.Edu>) to simulate the impact of these predictors (see Tomz *et al.*, 2003).



**Figure 2** Predictions for the statistically significant effects of the socialisation model (dependent variable: annual number of questions on the risks and problems of immigration)



**Figure 3** Predictions for the statistically significant effects of the electoral-incentives model (dependent variable: annual number of questions on the problems and rights of ethnic minorities)

immigrants themselves (including European immigrants) are clearly less likely to ask at least one question in this area, whereas BAME MPs overall (i.e. all BAME MPs whether or not born in the UK) are more likely to do so. Again, the

parliamentary role—operationalised as the number of PQs not relating to immigration and minorities—has a strong effect.

Figure 3 visualises the results for one of the *electoral-incentives* models for PQs, namely about the rights and problems of ethnic minorities (Model 3a in Table 2). In this model, the percentage of non-Whites residing in an MP's constituency is a strong predictor. The negative effect of an MP's status as member of an opposition party is likely to be the result of our sample with a preponderance of MP-years in which the Conservatives were in opposition (2005–2010). The diagram also underlines the observation that BAME background has a strong and positive effect, which is not predicted by the rational-choice model formulated above. In the model on the problems of immigration (Model 3b in Table 3), there is, with the exception of a number of control variables, only one significant effect: the interaction term of constituency demographic composition and marginality. A graphic comparison of the likely strength of effects is therefore redundant. Immigration seems to be a salient political issue that appears to encourage clear responsiveness to electoral incentives, especially to the percentage of 'non-white' residents in marginal seats: If an MP represents a marginal seat, an increasing share of 'non-whites' reduces the probability of asking one PQ more strongly than any other predictor variable in our models.

## 5. Conclusions and implications

The main questions pursued in this article were whether the increasing descriptive representation of ethnic minorities in the House of Commons matters for the substantive representation of BAME interests and, if so, whether standard mechanisms fundamental to sociological and rationalist institutionalism help to explain the variance observed. We used PQs for written answer as an indicator to capture variations in substantive representation. Based on the content analysis of over 26,000 PQs tabled in the 2005–10 Parliament and the Parliament elected in May 2010 we found that, generally speaking, BAME MPs in the Commons tend to ask more PQs about (1) the rights of ethnic minorities in the UK and (2) immigration issues than a matching sample of non-minority Members. This corroborates the findings of earlier studies that drew on a smaller sample of questions (Saalfeld, 2011). Hence, there are reasons to believe that measures to boost the proportionality of descriptive representation (such as the measures proposed by the Speaker's Conference on Parliamentary Representation 2010) will make a difference for the way minority interests are articulated in Parliament. In the broader normative discussion about democratic representation, the results lend qualified support to the advocates of more proportional descriptive representation (e.g. Phillips, 1995; Mansbridge, 1999). Our analyses also demonstrate that the electoral incentives at the heart of our electoral-incentives model (the

strong constituency link characteristic of the single-member plurality electoral system) encourage *all* UK MPs (irrespective of ethnicity) to articulate issues concerning the rights and problems of ethnic minorities, if they represent constituencies with a high share of minority residents—and to avoid the more salient and polarising issue of immigration, especially if they represent marginal constituencies with a large share of minority residents. Whether or not this strong responsiveness is unique to a first-past-the-post system coupled with a geographically concentrated minority population needs to be clarified in comparative cross-national studies.

One further purpose of this article was to explore the mechanisms that help understand variations within the heterogeneous group of BAME MPs. We started by estimating two baseline models, regressing the number of PQs related to the problems and rights of ethnic minorities in the UK (Model 1a) and about the risks of immigration (Model 1b) on BAME status. Holding a few control variables constant, we found that BAME MPs do tend to ask more questions in both areas. Nonetheless, this effect is stronger and statistically more robust for questions on the problems and rights of ethnic minorities.

If electoral incentives drove questioning behaviour, we could have expected the variables in Model 3a to reduce the effect of BAME status to statistical insignificance. After all, electoral incentives apply to all MPs irrespective of their ethnic backgrounds. This prediction was largely confirmed for PQs on immigration, but it has to be rejected for questions on ethnic minorities where BAME MPs ask more questions than others, even if electoral incentives are held constant.

If questioning behaviour was driven by MPs' socialisation, one could have expected BAME status to increase particularly the predicted number of PQs on the problems and rights of ethnic minorities, even if other elements of pre-election and post-election socialisation are held constant. We found that Labour Party membership (party membership being an important element of pre-election socialisation), in particular, reduces the strong bivariate effect of ethnicity on the number of questions on the rights and problems of ethnic minorities. In other words, BAME MPs asked more questions on such issues than their non-minority colleagues, because they were overwhelmingly members of the Labour Party during our window of observation. However, especially the powerful effect of the 'party' variable demonstrates the problems that have traditionally bedevilled empirical investigations of the effects of socialisation. It remains unclear whether Labour MPs with a BAME background were socialised to articulate emancipatory Labour values—or whether they chose to join the Labour Party because it provides a sympathetic environment for minority politics. The estimates for the number of PQs on immigration confirm the need for a qualitative differentiation between this policy area and the concerns of ethnic minorities. Generally, BAME MPs do not shy away from asking critical

questions about immigration. Nevertheless (and in line with our socialisation model), first-generation immigrants tend to express concern about immigration less frequently than the descendants of immigrants or MPs from the autochthonous population.

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## Appendix

**Table A1** Search terms used to identify immigration-related and minority-related questions

<b>Problems and rights of ethnic minorities in the UK</b>	<b>Immigration and its perceived risks</b>
ethnic	asylum
minorit*	illegal immigra*
diversity	UK border
Asian	extradit*
Black	repatriat*
racial	removal
race	remove
integration	deport*
community cohesion	detention centre
Islam	migra*
Muslim	terror* (if explicitly linked to minorities and post 9/11 terrorism in the UK; excluding IRA but including far right)
Hindu	foreign
Sikh	refugee

Note: \*Indicates that the authors truncated a word stem in the search.