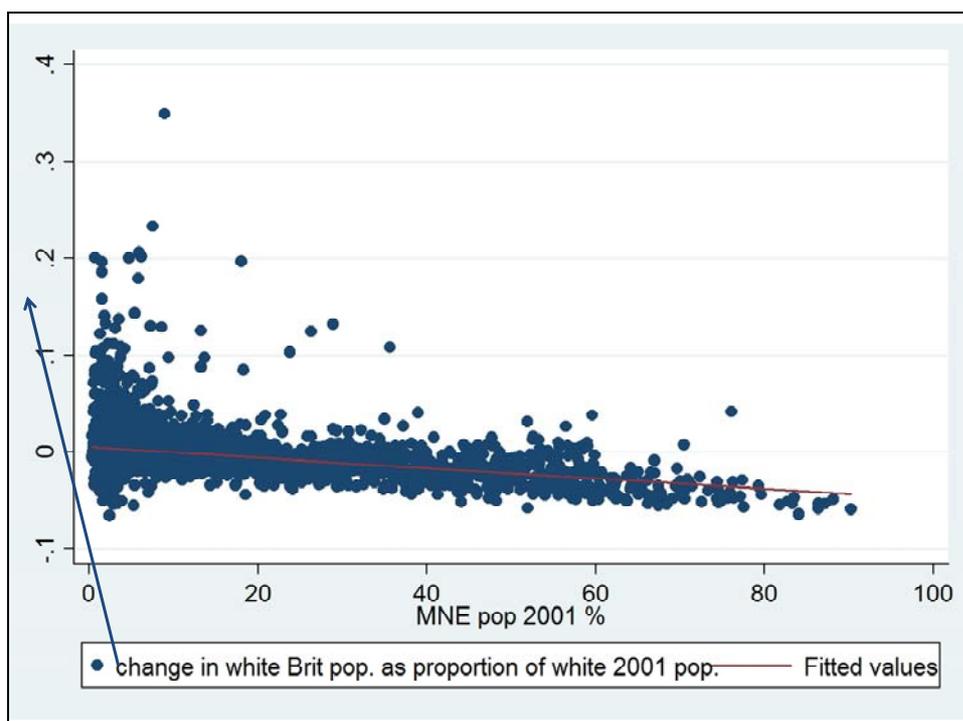


'White Flight' and White Nationalism: Is There a Connection?

The release of the 2011 census results earlier this year showed that London lost 620,000 white British people from its population in the ten years between 2001 and 2011, reducing the ethnic majority share from 58 to 45 percent. Widely reported, articles by writers across the political spectrum - often referring to the term 'white flight' - received hundreds, or in some cases thousands of comments in a short space of time. This highlights the strong emotions evoked by the issue. Meanwhile, immigration continues to rank among the top concerns of the British public, often running second only to the economy, with some 75-80 percent favouring lower levels. Anti-immigration parties such as UKIP or the BNP have enjoyed considerable success at the polls in recent times.

But is there a relationship between the 'white flight' of the ethnic majority from diverse areas and a white English nationalism which seeks to reduce immigration and slow down the rate of ethnic change? One might expect this: after all, as political theorist Michael Walzer writes, communities cannot exist without boundaries and if these are not maintained at the level of the nation-state they will appear below, at the sub-state level of the local community. In this sense, white flight may be the response of an ethnic majority that seeks to re-create an imagined homogeneous English nation at the local level - a homogeneity it cannot achieve nationally due to immigration.

One way to test this argument is to look at the population movement of white British people in England. The chart below plots all wards (population about 10-30,000) in England and Wales by their share of ethnic minority population in 2001 (horizontal axis) and the percentage change in white British population over 2001-11 (vertical axis). Note that wards with less than 20 percent minorities ('MNE pop') in 2001 tended to gain white British population while those with more than this share tended to lose them. Wards with less than 10 percent minorities gained a great deal of white British population, producing a wave shape.



White Avoidance, not White Flight

It turns out this wave shape can be found in other countries: American, Dutch and Swedish data tell the same story, suggesting a western pattern. Why is this? It could be because whites leave minority areas, i.e. 'white flight', or it could be for other reasons. First, white wards in 2001 may be the more desirable ones - better off and leafy places where homes are bigger and amenities better. This would explain why whites are attracted to them, and would also explain why minorities tend to be attracted to the same areas, which they are.

But this is only part of the story. If we drill down to the 1% sample census records of the ONS Longitudinal Study, a highly valuable government-funded survey which tracks individuals over time at each census¹, we get at a more granular answer. Comparing a white British and an ethnic minority person who have the same education, age, marital status and tenure (owner, renter, social housing), the white British person is only slightly more likely to leave a white-minority ward (i.e. in Newham) than a minority living there and only slightly less likely to leave a heavily white one (i.e. in Norfolk) than a minority living in the same (i.e. Norfolk) ward. However, once someone decides to move, the white British person tends to move to a much whiter area - even controlling for the urbanity and affluence of the origin and destination wards - than an ethnic minority person. Whites of non-British ancestry (i.e. Irish, East Europeans) are more similar to ethnic minorities than white British in this respect. In short, **ethnicity does not determine whether, but where** people move. The pattern is therefore one of **white avoidance** rather than white flight. This also explains why diverse inner city areas can 'tip' to become 'majority minority'. We can use a bathtub analogy with two taps, one white British and one minority, and one drain for both groups. Everyone moves out when they can, but once the white inflow slows, the composition of the tub can change rapidly. When we think of population shifts in Outer London places such as Redbridge or Croydon over the past ten years, white avoidance rather than white flight is the better metaphor. Again, similar results have been found in the Netherlands and Sweden.

This raises a second question: are whites who leave diverse areas more anti-immigration than those who move to diverse areas? Here our work with the BHPS/Understanding Society survey reveals a surprising finding: whites who leave diverse areas are only slightly more conservative in attitude than those who move to them. A bigger difference is between stayers and movers, with movers more tolerant. Much of this has to do with the fact that movers are younger, better educated, often single, and wealthier than stayers. Whether a white person moves to a white area or a diverse one, the act of moving seems to make them adopt a more liberal world view and voting pattern.

Contact With Minorities? Diverse areas provide more opportunities to meet ethnic minorities. Meanwhile the Citizenship Surveys tell us that whites in diverse areas are as much as 20 percent less opposed to immigration than whites in the majority of English wards (where the population is over 90 percent white). Yet contact with minorities is only part of the picture - transience also explains the tolerant views of whites who live in these diverse areas. Urban areas, especially diverse wards,

¹ Office for National Statistics. 2001. ONS Longitudinal Study. The permission of the Office for National Statistics to use the Longitudinal Study is gratefully acknowledged, as is the help provided by staff of the Centre for Longitudinal Study Information & User Support (CeLSIUS). CeLSIUS is supported by the ESRC Census of Population Programme (Award Ref: RES-348-25-0004) clearance # 30131.

have several times more population turnover than ethnically homogeneous ones. The relatively liberal views of transient whites seem to rub off on the white residents of such places, making them less opposed to immigration. Whites in areas with *more UK-born minorities* are more supportive of immigration but those living in areas with *more immigrants* who have arrived in the past ten years are more opposed to immigration than others. In addition, areas where the share of minorities has increased the fastest tend to be more opposed to immigration - especially if the increase occurs in a very white area. Similar results have been found in American research.

The White Working-Class Exception

Our work thus far shows few connections between white flight and white hostility to immigration. But there is one bridge between these concepts: the white working class. White working-class movers tend to relocate to whiter areas than white middle-class movers when we take into account their income, education, age, tenure and marital status. The working class is also more opposed to immigration and more likely to vote for the BNP, UKIP and other anti-immigration parties. Finally, white working-class people living in heavily diverse wards do not liberalise their views to anywhere near the extent that white middle class people do. All told, it seems the white working-class has more invested in its English ethnic identity than the credentialed middle classes and this could explain their divergence in terms of both residential behaviour and attitudes.

Policy directions

Local ethnic contexts affect white British residential choices, immigration attitudes and voting behaviour. Increased diversity is likely to produce a further retreat of whites from diverse areas through white avoidance even as minorities are leaving their areas of concentration. Thus, even as diverse areas become less dominated by single ethnic minorities and become more mixed-minority, they are becoming less white. This may reduce immigrants' contact with ethnic majority employment networks, which may impair their upward mobility. Housing policy may help limit the white exodus, though a move from a needs-based to a family-based housing allocation system is highly contentious.

In terms of attitudes, the direction is unclear. On the one hand, whites in places such as the South East (outside London) will encounter a larger minority presence. This may familiarise them with diversity and lower hostility to immigration, but only if minority growth rates are modest. If the rate of minority increase is sharp, or is composed of many new immigrants, this could lead to a rise in anti-immigration sentiment and far-right support. Broadly speaking, if the aim is to contain anti-immigrant sentiment, the optimal geographic spread for immigrants is *toward* existing concentrations of ethnic minorities (i.e. London) while the optimal shift of resident minorities is a gradual spread from concentrations into adjacent areas rather than England-wide. Minority shifts are largely in line with this, though perhaps overly rapid in some areas (i.e. Barking). On the other hand, East European immigration, which is England-wide, appears to carry more potential for introducing the kinds of rapid changes into settled white British communities which is associated with hostility to immigration. It is a free country, and economic incentives will draw immigrants to where they are needed. This said, government policy should not seek to settle immigrants or incentivise minority populations to move to lily-white areas as this may result in heightened local opposition to immigration.