

Institution: London School of Economics and Political Science		
Unit of Assessment: 19 – Politics and International Studies		
Title of case study: Optimising the voter experience		
Period when the underpinning research was undertaken: 2009-2020		
Details of staff conducting the underpinning research from the submitting unit:		
Name(s):	Role(s) (e.g. job title):	Period(s) employed by submitting HEI:
Michael Bruter	Professor of Political Science and European Politics	2001 to present
Sarah Harrison	Assistant Professorial Research Fellow	2010 to present
Period when the claimed impact occurred: 2014-2020		
Is this case study continued from a case study submitted in 2014? No		
1. Summary of the impact (indicative maximum 100 words)		
<p>Research by the Electoral Psychology Observatory has been used to improve election processes around the world and enhance the electoral experience for citizens, notably disabled and first-time voters. The research has led to changes in ballot paper design and polling station organisation in the Palestinian Territories, underpinned [text removed for publication] decision to shelve electoral reforms that would have increased inequality in access to the vote for minority groups, contributed expert evidence to a landmark Irish Supreme Court case on the influence of government communications on voters' perceptions, improved Opinium's political polling methodology to deliver more accurate election forecasts, helped to shape best practice among election management bodies and establish new initiatives recognising excellence in electoral affairs, and influenced the writing and production of a new Apple Television series.</p>		
2. Underpinning research (indicative maximum 500 words)		
<p>Since 2011, the Electoral Psychology Observatory (EPO, previously ECREP) has conducted research on electoral psychology and electoral ergonomics. It is led by Professor Michael Bruter and Dr Sarah Harrison. The work of the EPO represents a shift in approach to electoral research, making it truly "voter-centric". Fundamentally, this involves refocusing electoral research on the voter's point of view; who people vote for is less important than understanding how elections affect citizens' happiness or emotions, or under what circumstances they will bring them a sense of closure and resolution. This shift has tremendous implications for how we approach elections as an object and voters as actors, the questions we ask, the methods we use (over 90% of political behaviour is, in fact, subconscious), and our understanding of the interface between voters' psychology and electoral organisation (what we label "electoral ergonomics").</p> <p>The impacts described here are underpinned by research insights in six key areas: 1) on voters' psychology and the nature and implications of their electoral experiences; 2) on the interface between voters' psychology and election design (electoral ergonomics); 3) on the nature and importance of the first electoral experience (first-time voters); 4) on the electoral experience of vulnerable categories (disabled voters, illiterate voters, minorities, etc); 5) on the consequences of electoral psychology and experience of fractures with potential to split societies (electoral hostility); and 6) on how new variables and methods can be adapted to everyday stakeholders' practice, from electoral observation and polling to culture (conceptual and methodological toolbox).</p> <p>EPO research combines innovative methodologies (visual electoral experiments, electoral family focus groups, panel election diaries) with classic approaches (e.g. panel study surveys of up to five years, physiological experiments, field experiments, interviews, etc.). Key findings include:</p>		
On voter psychology		
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • <i>The atmosphere of elections changes in the last week:</i> 20-30% of voters change their minds within a week of a typical major election, half of them on Election Day [1]. • <i>First times matter:</i> participating in one of the first two elections of a citizen's life will likely make them chronic participants whilst abstaining from both will likely lead to chronic abstention [4]. 		

- *Elections are emotional*: 25% of Americans have cried because of an election and 63% say that election night makes them feel emotional; 34% of British voters had tears in their eyes in relation to the EU Membership referendum, including 49% of 18-25-year-olds [1].
- *Elections are positive experiences*: 63% of voters say that they feel happy in the polling booth, 60% feel excited, 74% proud, and 79% say that it is an important moment for them. Moreover, excitement is a bigger driver of turnout than duty to vote, especially amongst young people [1].

On electoral ergonomics

- *People vote differently when they vote remotely*: 18-25-year-old British postal-voters were twice as likely to vote for the extreme right than those who went to a polling station [3].
- *In-station voting makes voters happier and more sociotropic*: in-station voters tend to feel more efficacious, more positive about democracy, and relate to other citizens more than remote voters. Young voters are notably less positive when voting from home (by post/email) [2].
- *Not all remote voting options were created equal*: in US elections, “advance” voting leads to more sociotropic voting than “absentee” voting, and voters describe their electoral experience as happier and more exciting, and are more likely to vote at the next election [1].
- *Ballot design affects thinking time*: when voting electronically, voters think for an average of 20 seconds before casting their vote, compared to 30 seconds with a UK paper ballot, and one minute with French paper ballots. Machine voting leads to more negative emotions [1].

3. References to the research (indicative maximum of six references)

[1] Bruter, M. and Harrison, S. (2020). *Inside the Mind of a Voter*. Princeton University Press. ISBN: 9780691182896.

[2] Bruter, M. and Harrison, S. (2017). Understanding the Emotional Act of Voting. *Nature Human Behaviour*, 1(0024). DOI: 10.1038/s41562-016-0024.

[3] Harrison, S. (Ed.) (2020). *Electoral Psychology*. Special issue of *Societies*. Notably Harrison, S. What is electoral psychology? DOI: 10.3390/soc10010020. And Bruter, M. Electoral ergonomics: three empirical examples of the interaction between electoral psychology and design. DOI: 10.3390/soc9040082.

[4] Harrison, S. (2020). A vote of frustration? Young voters in the UK General Election 2019. *Parliamentary Affairs*, 73(1), pp. 259-271. DOI: 10.1093/pa/gsaa032.

This research has been funded by competitive, peer-reviewed grant awards from the European Research Council and the Economic and Social Research Council. Research for [1] received the Market Research Society award for Best International Research (2013).

4. Details of the impact (indicative maximum 750 words)

The impacts described here are the result of the EPO's sustained engagement with diverse groups of electoral stakeholders throughout the REF assessment period. This includes electoral commissions, governments, polling agencies, electoral observers, and the High Court. The research has been used to make concrete changes to the running of elections (e.g. to polling station organisation and ballot paper design), developed the skills and capacities of those working on elections, informed changes to polling methodologies, and shaped and encouraged the recognition of best practice among electoral practitioners. These changes have contributed to an improved experience of elections, notably among disabled, first-time, and minority voters, and to greater accuracy in election polling. Details of these impacts are described below.

Optimising electoral procedures for voters in the Palestinian Territories

In May 2015, Bruter and Harrison led a two-day training session for senior staff of the Central Electoral Commission (CEC) of the Palestinian Territories [A]. This session was funded by the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) to strengthen democracy in the Palestinian Territories and built upon earlier engagement with the CEC that also included a smaller capacity-building event in London in 2015. This particular session addressed a variety of electoral psychology issues identified as important to the Palestinian context - including social divisions, gender inequalities, and civic education - and considered how these interact with, and might precipitate a change in approach to, electoral management [1] [3] [4]. The CEO of the CEC credits this session - allied to other insights from EPO research on electoral ergonomics - with having

prompted a shift in the CEC's role "*from mere implementer of elections processes to more open and proactive roles promoting [the] democratic process in full partnership with the community it serves*", particularly evident in a changed "*approach to address first-time voters and [introduction of] a new design of the polling stations to respond to the needs of people with disabilities*" [A].

Subsequently, electoral reforms enacted in 2016 have introduced new laws on candidate eligibility, allowing greater gender representation and lowering the minimum age requirement, both initiatives intended to promote greater feelings of inclusion and identification among women and younger voters. Technical changes have led to the redesign of ballot papers and polling stations to better accommodate the needs of disabled voters. And the establishment of a new Electoral Awareness Fund and outreach initiatives led by civil society organisations form part of a drive to increase participation in the forthcoming 2021 municipal elections.

Addressing these various initiatives, the CEC CEO has said: "*We at the CEC firmly believe that using insights from the Bruter and Harrison research [has] contributed to better understanding [of] the way we serve voters in elections regardless of age, gender or disabilities, and will lead to a better experience and participation of the Palestinian citizens in the coming years*". These benefits extend to 2.2 million voters in the municipal elections [A].

Ensuring equitable elections and effective access to the vote for all [text removed for publication] citizens

At the request of [text removed for publication], Bruter and Harrison provided expert advice to [text removed for publication] on proposed reforms of the country's electoral system. Their submitted report [B] convinced the government to limit its planned reforms on the basis that they would increase inequality in access to the vote for some minorities and be psychologically unacceptable to parts of the population, resulting in a compromise reform in December 2014.

The government's proposal put forward two alternative plans based on a mixture of plurality and best-loser system, with a top up proportional allocation based on an "unreturned votes elect" system. Bruter and Harrison designed six institutional tests and six psychological tests that should be met by any viable electoral system reform and simulated the impact of the two electoral system reforms under consideration. Following the collection of electoral psychology data, Bruter and Harrison's analysis, firmly grounded in the underpinning research [1] [2], showed that the proposed reforms could increase unfairness, negatively affect the representation of some of the country's minorities, entrench gender inequality, and be viewed negatively by - and lack the acceptance of - [text removed for publication] [B]. The original reform plan was consequently shelved by the Prime Minister and replaced by cross-party discussions.

Providing expert witness advice in an Irish constitutional referendum case

Bruter served as Expert Witness in cases tried by the Irish High Court and the Irish Supreme Court on the impact of the Irish Government's framing of the Referendum on Children's Rights on voters' behaviour. (This referendum was held to approve an amendment to the Constitution of Ireland which inserted clauses relating to children's rights and the right and duty of the state to take child protection measures.) The government's campaign was accused of being biased in favour of a "Yes" vote (i.e. approval of the amendment) and the Courts were asked to judge whether the campaign was, in fact, neutral and thereby constitutional (first case), and also whether it could have materially affected the outcome (second case). The government lost the first case in a landmark judgment but won the second (i.e. the referendum result was not overturned) in a final Supreme Court judgment of 24 April 2015. Bruter's evidence [2] [3] figured prominently in proceedings, as noted in the judgment delivered by Mr. Justice John MacMenamin: "*the appellant sought to base a substantial part of her case on Dr Bruter's conclusions, reached following his analysis of the raw data*" [C, para. 48]. Bruter's expert evidence is referenced extensively throughout the judgment [C, paras. 40-61].

Improving political polling methodologies to more accurately forecast election results

The EPO has worked regularly and extensively with Opinium, the political polling agency, throughout the current REF assessment period. They have worked together on numerous international electoral survey studies, with the EPO providing research input on the design of sample frames, the scripts for questionnaires, and on the deployment of surveys to nationally representative samples of citizens of various countries, at various points in the election cycle [D]. Meetings with the Opinium electoral forecasting team were held to discuss weighting variations

based on EPO findings on electoral psychology, including developing new measures identifying which voters are most likely to change their minds in the run up to an election, and controlling for registration before applying weightings to avoid over-estimating youth abstention [1] [3].

The Chief Executive of Opinium considers the learnings from this collaboration to have been key to the Opinium political polling team having been the most accurate research agency at the 2019 General Election and one of just two agencies to have accurately predicted the outcome of the EU referendum in 2016: *"Without a doubt, credit must be given to the inspiration and learnings we have gained from the EPO which has undoubtedly influenced how we as an agency look to understand the voting psychology of the British voters. For example, insights from EPO's research have been critical in taking into account psychological variables in panel and sample design. Conversely, their work on question phrasing has helped us optimise variables that we use in political polling and barometer studies. Most importantly the importance of personality and emotion, both of which now have a place in our own methodology"* [D]. Opinium carry out frequent election surveys in the UK and the US and provide regular political polling for national and international media, notably *The Observer*.

Influencing best practice in electoral management

EPO research has also been used by electoral stakeholders who work internationally to improve the practices and processes of elections [1] [3]. For example, the Delian Project is a non-governmental organisation dedicated to helping jurisdictions implement positive change in the democratic voting process. Managing Director, Dr Allan Best describes how engagement with the EPO has prompted the Delian Project to place greater emphasis on electoral psychology in the course of its work: *"one of the biggest ways that [Bruter] and [Harrison]'s research has really opened the eyes of senior individuals in election management bodies is the fact that in EMBs we tend to look more at the logistics of an election as opposed to the science and emotion of an election. This is critical. The fact that they have been able to bring analytical and critical-based research, atmospherics that actually let us understand what is the target audience, what are they looking to glean from an election, how do we increase voter turnout, and more importantly how do we make a successful election that actually is relevant to the voter in a way that is human, that is emotive, that is actually something that caters to them as opposed to something that is an exercise in logistics"* [E].

Influence on electoral observation practices in the Falkland Islands

This work has also had an effect on electoral observation missions. It was put into practice when the Delian Project served as an election observer for the independence referendum in the Falkland Islands. Using questions developed by the EPO [1] [2], the Delian Project was able to gain insights into the unique emotion of an independence referendum, even among a very small population of 1,600. Best has since said that the answers to those questions on voters' electoral experience were *"very useful to us to understand that we have to be very cognisant of emotions"* [E].

Establishment of new awards fostering and rewarding best practice

Bruter and Harrison have shared best practice in election processes [1] [2] with election management bodies (EMBs) through the International Centre for Parliamentary Studies (ICPS), which promotes effective policymaking and good governance through capacity-building and specialises in electoral affairs [E]. Arvind Venkataramana, former CEO of the ICPS, has attested to the usefulness of the underpinning research in helping EMBs to improve voter satisfaction specifically. According to Venkataramana, *"where [Bruter and Harrison] make a significant impact is to improve the overall voter experience, which, in turn, results in greater voter turnout, which is a success for election management bodies."* EMBs have found the research *"very useful to implement strategies that they've been wanting to implement for a while, especially to attract first-time voters, to improve access for disabled voters, adapt new technologies in their regions, and also they've used their insights to design ballot papers more innovatively"* [E].

After Bruter presented findings on electoral psychology and electoral ergonomics at their annual international conferences, the ICPS created four new categories in its Electoral Stakeholder Awards, to better recognise outstanding work by EMBs. The new award categories were in Electoral Ergonomics, Citizens Engagement, First-Time Voters, and Accessibility. These have been bestowed every year since December 2013, encouraging greater innovation among EMBs in trying to improve the overall voter experience. Venkataramana has identified the Electoral

Ergonomics category, in particular, as being among those to receive the most - and most creative - nominations [E]. Bruter served on the awards committee until 2019.

Influence on the production of a new television series

Findings from the EPO research [2] [4] have also informed the writing of a new Apple Television spy series. *Life Undercover*, starring Brie Larson, dramatises a fictional French election, set against the background of an extremist threat and electoral disruption. A production team research assistant discovered the Bruter and Harrison research and invited them to a meeting in Los Angeles. Briefing the team of nine writers and producers, Bruter and Harrison offered expert input on the dramatic scenario, including insights on voter psychology. Megan Martin, the lead writer, says: "[Bruter] and [Harrison]'s insights into the transmission of extremist ideology, and the psychology of voters were invaluable...As the writers continued to shape story lines, [Bruter] and [Harrison]'s time with us grounded the narrative in ways that continued to surprise and impress me" [F]. Production has been halted due to the Covid-19 pandemic.

Helping to give first-time voters and cognitively disabled voters a voice in the UK, South Africa, and Australia

EPO research has also been used in the course of initiatives intended to give first-time voters and those with learning and cognitive disabilities a greater voice in electoral processes in the UK, South Africa, and Australia [1] [3]. Since 2019, Bruter and Harrison have worked on the All-Party Parliamentary Group on Votes at 16 to help it build a case for the extension of the voting franchise to 16 and 17-year-olds, with a first report published in 2019. Similarly, since 2016, Bruter and Harrison have been working with the South African Independent Electoral Commission (IEC) to test pilot measures intended to make the electoral experience of first-time voters feel rewarding and more likely to motivate sustained electoral engagement [G]. The work involved collaboration with South African youth organisations and one of the IEC Commissioners. The IEC subsequently began running pilot information campaigns in a selection of electoral wards in August 2016.

In parallel, EPO organised two policy labs (in 2018 and 2019) in collaboration with the Australian Electoral Commission (AEC) and the state-level commissions of South Australia and the Australian Capital Territory. Here, research findings focusing on the experience of voters with mental health issues were shared with commissioners and a team of 20+ divisional heads at the AEC. EPO and AEC organised a joint observation of the 2019 Federal Election, focused on the experience of disabled and special-needs voters, in particular. Bruter and Harrison worked with staff in polling stations dedicated to accommodating disabled voters [H].

5. Sources to corroborate the impact (indicative maximum of 10 references)

[A] Supporting statement from Chief Executive Officer, Central Elections Commission – Palestine, 9 November 2020.

[B] Pre-report on electoral reform in [text removed for publication] by Michael Bruter and Sarah Harrison, submitted to [text removed for publication]. Strictly confidential.

[C] [Re: Referendum Act & re: Jordan and Jordan v Minister for Children and Youth Affairs](#), Supreme Court of Ireland, 24 April 2015.

[D] Supporting statement from Chief Executive, Opinium Research, November 2020.

[E] "Demonstrating Impact", by the Electoral Psychology Observatory, 13 November 2020. Features interviews with Managing Director, the Delian Project and former CEO of the International Centre for Parliamentary Studies. Available at: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=5-kIREI6wJg>.

[F] Supporting statement from Lead Writer, *Life Undercover*, Apple Television, 12 November 2020.

[G] Letter from the Office of the Chief Electoral Officer, South African Independent Electoral Commission, 5 May 2016.

[H] "Making Elections Work for Citizens: Optimising Electoral Ergonomics and Engaging First Time Voters" policy labs, 9 and 13 May 2019; and Australian Electoral Commission, Observation and Research Itinerary, 15-17 May 2019.