

Section A		
Institution: The University of Manchester		
Unit of Assessment: 19 (Politics and International Studies)		
Title of case study: Informing British Democracy: The Impact of the British Election Study on the Media, Polling, and Political Party Decision-making		
Period when the underpinning research was undertaken: 2013 – 2020		
Details of staff conducting the underpinning research from the submitting unit:		
Name:	Role(s) (e.g. job title):	Period(s) employed by submitting HEI:
Prof. Edward Fieldhouse	Professor of Social and Political Science	1993 – present
Prof. Jane Green	Professor of Political Science	2006 – 2018
Dr Chris Prosser	Presidential Fellow	2015 – 2020
Dr Jonathan Mellon	Hallsworth Fellow	2017 – present
Period when the claimed impact occurred: 2014 – 2020		
Is this case study continued from a case study submitted in 2014? No		
Section B		
1. Summary of the impact		
<p>The University of Manchester (UoM) has led the British Election Study (BES) since 2013. In so doing, it has supported the functioning of British democracy by: (1) improving media coverage of elections, putting academic analysis at its heart; (2) embedding research into political polling, thereby placing political polling on a firmer methodological footing and facilitating methodological improvements to polling; and (3) shaping the behaviour of key political actors, enabling better-informed political decisions through the provision of reliable data to the two main political parties in the UK.</p>		
2. Underpinning research		
<p>The Economic and Social Research Council (ESRC)-funded British Election Study has been run at every British election since 1964. Its remit is twofold: first, to gather high-quality data on British political attitudes and electoral behaviour to facilitate academic and non-academic political research; second, to conduct and publish original research into British political attitudes and behaviour. The University of Manchester was awarded the British Election Study in 2013 (i) and again in 2019 (ii). Three research contributions underpin the impact reported in this case study:</p>		
1. Collecting gold-standard data on British voting behaviour and political attitudes		
<p>The 2014 - 2020 period has been one of the most tumultuous in British history, with three general elections, two high-stakes referendums, and many other important electoral events. The British Election Study leadership team (2014 – 2020) has designed, implemented, and disseminated data [1] consisting of: (1) Random probability face-to-face surveys covering the 2015, 2017, and 2019 elections; and (2) a 20-wave internet-panel survey – the largest of its kind ever collected in the UK – covering the 2015, 2017, and 2019 general elections, the Scottish independence referendum, the EU referendum, the 2014 and 2019 European Parliament elections, and local and devolved (combined authority) elections. Through a rigorous theoretical approach and careful methodological design, the BES team has delivered a uniquely valuable data resource for researchers within and beyond academia, which has been and continues to be more widely used than ever before.</p>		
2. Making sense of British politics in flux		
<p>The general elections of 2015, 2017, and 2019 were among the most volatile in British electoral history. The Manchester BES team's research has sought to understand why British politics and the British party system has become destabilised [2, 3, 4]. Key findings demonstrate how long-term, gradual changes in voter volatility and the impact of electoral shocks have combined to radically transform the political landscape. The research shows</p>		

that increased voter volatility is driven, in part, by a weakening of voters' partisan attachments – a process known as partisan dealignment – together with the growth of smaller parties (which has led to 'party system fragmentation').

Partisan dealignment alone does not explain the results of recent elections. Voters might be more likely to switch parties than in the past but that does not tell us which voters are switching to which parties, and why they are doing so. The team's findings suggest that to properly understand political change, we need to consider the electoral shocks that have acted as catalysts for large scale vote-switching in particular directions; specifically, the Global Financial Crisis, recent immigration patterns, the Conservative-Liberal Democrat coalition, and the Scottish independence and EU referendums. In the main book arising from the BES team's work [2], this evidence is set out and a novel theoretical perspective on the study of elections and electoral behaviour is introduced.

3. Diagnosing polling errors

While British voting behaviour was in flux, the 2015 polling miss (in which the pre-election polls proved inaccurate) undermined public confidence in the accuracy of survey research. The BES team, as part of the British Polling Council inquiry into the polling miss, diagnosed the problems with the polls in 2015 and offered potential solutions to fix them [5, 6]. The team's research found limited evidence of systematic voter intention misreporting, late swings, systematically different preferences among the 'don't knows', and differential turnout of parties' supporters [5, 6]. By comparing the BES face-to-face probability sample and BES Internet panel [A], findings demonstrate that the online survey's polling error was primarily caused by under-sampling non-voters, and then weighting respondents to represent the general population. Consequently, demographic groups with a low probability of voting were overweighted within the voter subsample.

3. References to the research

- [1] **Fieldhouse, E., Green, J.,** Evans, G., Schmitt, H., van der Eijk, C., **Mellon, J.** and **Prosser, C.**, (2019). British Election Study 2014-20 Data Collection. <https://www.britishelectionstudy.com/data/>
- [2] **Fieldhouse, E.,** Green, J., Evans, G., **Mellon, J., Prosser, C.**, Schmitt, H., van der Eijk, C., (2019). *Electoral Shocks: Understanding the Volatile Voter in a Turbulent World*. Oxford University Press.
- [3] **Mellon, J.,** Evans, G., **Fieldhouse, E., Green, J.** and **Prosser, C.** (2018). "Brexit or Corbyn? Campaign and Inter-Election Vote Switching in the 2017 UK General Election", *Parliamentary Affairs*, 71:4, 719–37. <https://doi.org/10.1093/pa/gsy001>
- [4] **Prosser, C., Fieldhouse, E.,** Green, J., **Mellon, J.,** and Evans, G. (2020). "Tremors But No Youthquake: Measuring Changes in the Age and Turnout Gradients at the 2015 and 2017 British General Elections", *Electoral Studies*, 64. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.electstud.2020.102129>
- [5] **Mellon, J.** and **Prosser, C.**, (2017). "Missing Nonvoters and Misweighted Samples: Explaining the 2015 Great British Polling Miss", *Public Opinion Quarterly*, 81:3, 661–87. <https://doi.org/10.1093/poq/nfx015>
- [6] Sturgis, P., Kuha, J., Baker, N., Callegaro, M., Fisher, S., **Green, J.,** Jennings, W., Lauderdale, B. E. and Smith, P., (2017). "An Assessment of the Causes of the Errors in the 2015 UK General Election Opinion Polls", *Journal of the Royal Statistical Society: Series A (Statistics in Society)*, 181:3, 757–81. <http://doi.org/10.1111/rssa.12329>

Related grants:

- (i) **Fieldhouse, E.** (PI), Evans, G. (University of Oxford), **Green, J.,** Schmitt, H. (Mannheim), van der Eijk, C. (Nottingham), 'Votes in Context: The British Election Study 2015', ESRC, (October 2013 – September 2017), GBP1,251,114.

- (ii) **Fieldhouse, E.** (PI), Evans, G., **Green, J., Mellon, J., Prosser, C.**, 'Voters and the British Political System in the Context of Brexit: The British Election Study 2019 – 2023', ESRC, (March 2019 – August 2023), GBP2,010,922.
- (iii) **Fieldhouse, E.** (PI), Evans, G., **Green, J.**, Schmitt, H., van der Eijk, C., 'The Scottish Independence Referendum and the British Voter: An Enhancement to the British Election Study Internet Panel'. ESRC, (August 2013 - November 2017), GBP532,000.

Evidence of research quality: In addition to the peer-reviewed journal articles listed above, the British Election Study data has given rise to over 50 publications by members of the research team in leading academic journals, and hundreds more by BES users.

4. Details of the impact

A well-functioning democracy requires well-informed citizens and responsive political parties. The BES team worked to improve media coverage of elections by integrating academic analysis into ITV's election coverage, engaging with parliamentarians and the wider media. Its input into the British Polling Council's inquiry into the 2015 polling miss, directly contributed to changes in polling methodologies used by pollsters, and key figures from both main political parties have attested to the impact the BES research has had in supporting the health of British democracy.

1. Improving media coverage of elections by putting academic analysis at its heart

Central to the BES team's role in making a better informed democracy was the collaboration with ITV news, led by Green (University of Manchester until 2018) and Prosser. Drawing on the extensive research into British voting behaviour [1-4], Green and Prosser actively shaped ITV's coverage of the 2015, 2017, and 2019 General Elections, and the 2016 EU Referendum, by putting the research results and analysis at their heart. Traditional television coverage of elections has relied solely on analysis of aggregate level data which can lead to false inferences about the behaviour of individual voters and groups. Green and Prosser introduced a new approach, using survey data collected before and during the election campaign [1] to better inform ITV's audience about voter's opinions and motivations. Summarising what the BES teams input and data brought to ITV's elections coverage (which was nominated for Royal Television Society and BAFTA awards) the ITV News Editor wrote that this *"has been central to our election and referendum programmes and provided unique benefits to viewers - informing them earliest of results - and crucially, playing a fundamental role in ITV's coverage in explaining results in a clear, compelling and rigorous way and bringing clarity to the most complex issues of our time for viewers around the UK"* [A].

The UoM team placed the BES research as a principal voice in understanding the 2015 – 2019 elections and the 2016 referendum through extensive work with a wide range of media channels – informing the public about British elections and public opinion with high-quality survey data and analysis [A, B, C, D] that went beyond the headline polling numbers that dominate media coverage. The team engaged in events before and after the 2015 General Election, the 2016 EU referendum, the 2017 General Election, and the 2019 General Election (e.g. BES journalist events, Political Studies Association media briefings, the All-Party Parliamentary Group for Social Science and Policy, three major BBC Parliament events, one-to-one meetings with key broadcasters), and wrote commissioned articles for newspapers and the BBC online (related to the research in [2-4]). According to Factiva, in the six years since the Manchester team took over the BES, there was a greater than ten-fold increase in print media articles mentioning the BES (2014-2020) compared to the previous 6 years [B].

2. Putting political polling on a firmer methodological footing

Political polling plays a central role in modern democracy by informing political actors, the media, and citizens about voters' preferences and opinions. Just as political events cry out for reliable data and greater public understanding, polling misses have undermined public

confidence in survey research. BES research led the way in diagnosing the problems with polls in 2015 and identifying methodological improvements [5, 6]. As the Secretary of the British Polling Council wrote: *“At a time when the whole concept of sample surveys was called into doubt, the ability of the BES to show that well-designed and well-conducted surveys can still represent the population with a high degree of accuracy helped polling organisations both by helping them understand what might have gone wrong and how to avoid similar problems in future”* [C].

Drawing on the face-to-face survey data, research by Mellon and Prosser [5] was the first to suggest that unrepresentative samples were the cause of the 2015 polling miss [D], a conclusion later supported by the British Polling Council inquiry into the polling miss [6], in which Green took part, and accepted by the polling industry as a whole [B, C]. The Manchester team actively sought to inform the public and pollsters as to the reasons for the polling miss. Mellon and Prosser wrote a series of blog posts on the BES website and the influential *Monkey Cage* (*Washington Post*) and actively promoted their findings in the media (BBC Newsnight, *The Guardian*, *The Independent*, *Huffington Post*). They presented at industry and academic conferences, and engaged directly with the heads of research at prominent polling firms, including Pew, YouGov, ICM, TNS, and GQR.

The Manchester-based research has caused leading pollsters to change their methodology. The importance of BES data in underpinning improvements to political polling is visible in its use in providing weighting targets for many polling companies [E]. The Head of Methods at Kantar Public wrote, *“The single most important contribution for us was the suggestion of “turnout weighting” in Mellon and Prosser’s paper “Missing Non-Voters and Misweighted Samples: Explaining the 2015 Great British Polling Miss [5]”* [F]. BES data also plays a key role in new polling innovations, such as YouGov’s MRP (Multi-level Regression and Post-stratification) model which (almost alone amongst its competitors) accurately predicted the outcome of the 2017 election, in part by using BES data to estimate the likely turnout pattern [G]. The Secretary of the British Polling Council wrote *“Individual BPC members have also made extensive use of the BES in conducting their own internal investigations into how they might avoid similar polling errors in future... the BPC as an umbrella body is happy to speak for its members and say that many have found the BES very useful in their own work”* [C].

The research and engagement undertaken by the Manchester BES team has been recognised for its role in understanding the polling miss leading to more accurate polling methods adopted by leading pollsters. The BES was a finalist for the 2017 ESRC Celebrating Impact Prize, in the Outstanding Impact in Society category [H].

3. Supporting the health of British democracy through reliable data

BES research has impacted on British democracy by providing high-quality data [1] that informs the decision making of key political actors. Prosser and Mellon submitted written evidence to the House of Lords Select Committee on Political Polling and Digital Media, and Green gave oral evidence, and co-authored the World Association for Public Opinion Research (WAPOR) submission to the same inquiry. The behaviour of the two main political parties in the UK, the Conservatives and Labour, has been shaped by their use of BES data and analysis to understand voter movements, resource allocation during campaigns, and inform post-election analyses presented to stakeholders.

[Text removed for publication] [I].

Likewise, the General Secretary of the Labour Party, Jennie Formby, wrote, *“Since the current BES scientific leadership group assumed management of the project, we have used BES information in planning and preparing for both the last two general elections”* [J]. Specifically, she states that the BES research *“has been used to inform Labour’s approach, strategy, and resource allocation in our campaigns... in particular, it has been used: to underpin targeting decisions, drive resource allocation, inform subsequent post-*

election reviews, and enrich understanding and discussions of political attitudes, trends and patterns in British elections” [J]. Summarising the importance of the BES, she wrote that the BES “has an impact, far beyond the university sector, in ensuring that our democracy is healthy and well-served by political party activities which reflect the concerns and priorities of the British electorate” [J]. After the 2019 election the Labour Together Review commissioners wrote that BES data, “was incredibly helpful as our review aimed to understand Labour’s decline in support over a longer period.... Although they were hard to face, our conclusions were evidence-based and accepted across the party. We are certain that the deep respect for the work of the British Election Study from people across Labour’s political sphere helped us to achieve this” [K].

5. Sources to corroborate the impact

- [A] Letter from Editor, ITV News. Received 29 November 2016.
- [B] Factiva search results for ‘British Election Study’ (October 2020)
- [C] Letter from Secretary/Treasurer, British Polling Council. Received 28 November 2016.
- [D] Timothy Martyn Hill, ‘Forecast error: what’s happened to the polls since the 2015 UK election?’ *Significance*, the magazine of the Royal Statistical Society (RSS) and the American Statistical Association (ASA), <https://bit.ly/34UBGHw> (May 2017)
- [E] British Polling Council Press Release, ‘How Have the Polls Changed Since 2015?’, <https://bit.ly/36Y63PY> (May 2017)
- [F] Letter from Head of Methods, Kantar Public UK. Received 27 February 2017.
- [G] Lauderdale et al. (2020). “Model-Based Pre-Election Polling for National and Sub-National Outcomes in the US and UK”, *International Journal of Forecasting*, 36:2, 399-413.
- [H] ESRC Celebrating Impact Prize list of Finalists <http://bit.ly/2NcBM8B>; ESRC case study <https://bit.ly/3diOqLH> (June 2017)
- [I] [Text removed for publication]
- [J] Letter from General Secretary, The Labour Party. Received 22 October 2018.
- [K] Letter from Labour Together Election Review Commissioners. Received 29 June 2020.