

Section A		
Institution: The University of Manchester		
Unit of Assessment: 19 (Politics and International Studies)		
Title of case study: Improving the Quality of British Elections: Balancing Access with Integrity		
Period when the underpinning research was undertaken: August 2010 – December 2014		
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. Maria Sobolewska	Professor of Political Science	October 2010 – 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>Professor Sobolewska's research into electoral inequalities and electoral fraud among ethnic minority populations has had national-level impact on policy-making and services:</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Shaping Electoral Commission guidance to political activists during election campaigns and the national campaign on preventing electoral fraud with Crimestoppers; 2. Informing Members of Parliament and Members of the Lords, who used the research in their interventions in the House of Commons to raise awareness of electoral integrity, in the legislative scrutiny of the 2013 Electoral Registration and Administration Act by the House of Lords, and in amendments to the 2020 Parliamentary Constituency Bill proposed in the House of Lords; 3. Influencing the grant-making practices of charitable organisations, aiming to increase electoral registration and turnout of ethnic minorities in Britain. 		
2. Underpinning research		
<p>Sobolewska's research on ethnic minorities' political integration and participation spans more than a decade. Her work revealed that electoral registration was a particular obstacle to participation for minorities and documented a huge electoral registration gap between minority and white Britons [1, 2], exacerbated by relatively less contact from political parties [3].</p> <p>This University of Manchester-based research, funded by the award in 2010 of an Economic and Social Research Council (ESRC) grant to a team led by Professor Anthony Heath (Sobolewska was a Co-I) [4], (i) established Sobolewska as the national authority in this field and an expert in ethnic minorities' electoral behaviour. This was recognised by the Electoral Commission, who, in 2014, commissioned Sobolewska and Dr Wilks-Heeg to conduct original research into fraud vulnerabilities to fill the evidence gap about the causes of fraud in a small number of local authorities with high concentrations of South Asian voters (ii). This was a potentially sensitive area of research, due to the majority of documented cases of electoral fraud victimising ethnic minority voters. The research explored the extent to which causes of fraud were location specific or signalled a potential for fraud elsewhere. For the first time, the research included comparable areas with no known allegations of fraud. Previous, scant research on electoral fraud either measured prevalence only and did not offer any understanding of underlying mechanisms, or concentrated on single case studies, which made it impossible to see whether the findings generalised beyond the small geographical areas encompassed by the work. The resulting report was the first national and comprehensive report of its kind, with eight separate</p>		

locations throughout England investigated [5]. It was ground-breaking in identifying generalisable patterns, such as family pressures and language barriers, especially among South Asian origin communities, but potentially also present in other groups as a result of particular patterns of party competition and the prevalence of postal voting [5, 6].

In addition, the research undertaken for the Electoral Commission identified ethnic minority women and young people as particularly vulnerable to electoral fraud and made a strong link between these social groups' already with high rates of political exclusion in the electoral system, and their further disenfranchisement through fraud [5, 6]. This combined evidence of vulnerability to being victims of electoral fraud, and of under-registration among ethnic minority groups [1, 2], underpins the impact of Sobolewska's work aiming to increase the integrity of the UK electoral system and achieve greater equality of voter access to the ballot.

3. References to the research

- [1] Heath, A. F., Fisher, S. D., Rosenblatt, G., Sanders, D., and **Sobolewska, M.** (2013). *The Political Integration of Ethnic Minorities in Britain*, Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- [2] Heath, A. F., Fisher, S. D., Sanders, D., and **Sobolewska, M.** (2011). 'Ethnic Heterogeneity in the Social Bases of Voting at the 2010 British General Election' *Journal of Elections, Public Opinion and Parties*, 21(2), 255-277.
<https://doi.org/10.1080/17457289.2011.562611>
- [3] **Sobolewska, M.**, Fieldhouse, E. and Cutts, D. (2013). 'Taking Minorities for Granted? Ethnic Density, Party Campaigning and Targeting Minority Voters in 2010 British General Elections', *Parliamentary Affairs*, 66(2), 329-44.
<https://doi.org/10.1093/pa/gss088>
- [4] Heath, A. F., Fisher, S. D., Sanders, D., Sobolewska, M. and Rosenblatt, G. (2010). Ethnic Minorities British Election Study, (survey available in UK Data Archive - <https://beta.ukdataservice.ac.uk/datacatalogue/series/series?id=200003>).
- [5] **Sobolewska, M.**, Wilks-Heeg, S., Hill, E., and Borkowska, M. (2015). Understanding electoral Fraud Vulnerability in Pakistani and Bangladeshi origin Communities in England, London: The Electoral Commission.
https://www.electoralcommission.org.uk/sites/default/files/pdf_file/Understanding-Electoral-Fraud-Jan-2015.pdf
- [6] Hill, E., **Sobolewska, M.**, Wilks-Heeg, S. and Borkowska, M. (2017). 'Explaining Electoral Fraud in an Advanced Democracy: Fraud Vulnerabilities, Opportunities and Facilitating Mechanisms in British Elections', *British Journal of Politics and International Relations*, 19(4), 772-789.
<https://doi.org/10.1177%2F1369148117715222>

Related grants:

- (i) ESRC Ethnic Minority British Election Survey project (PI Anthony Heath), conducted 2010 - 2011, GBP1,250,000.
- (ii) Electoral Commission award (PI Maria Sobolewska), conducted April - December 2014, GBP20,000.

4. Details of the impact

1. *Shaping Electoral Commission guidance to political activists during election campaigns and the national campaign on preventing electoral fraud with Crimestoppers*

Prior to the Electoral Commission (EC) report authored by Sobolewska, policy on electoral integrity relied predominantly on very few court convictions of electoral offences and a

small number of policy reports, which under-estimated the prevalence of the problem as electoral offences are extremely difficult to prove. The EC's previous report on electoral fraud had only one academic study to back up its proposals for tightening postal vote handling guidance and voter ID recommendations. Before the publication of Sobolewska's report in 2015, she had been feeding into the EC's work, providing substantial evidence that many of the vulnerabilities to fraud are present beyond the few locations already known to be at risk. The Head of Research at the EC states that the, "*research was ... important in demonstrating that, although individual instances of fraud are rare, because of the activities of some activists and campaigners there is a need for an ongoing commitment of resource from the Commission to help to prevent fraud and to support voters in safely casting their vote*" [A]. The EC subsequently introduced a recommendation in its Code of Conduct, published a month before the official publication of Sobolewska's report, for political activists during elections not to assist in filling out the ballot part of the postal vote pack, and not to collect large numbers of postal votes [A, B].

As a result of findings concerning voters' fear of reporting fraud, and especially the vulnerability of women voters, who might not speak English very well [6], the EC started its nationwide Crimestoppers campaign "Your Vote is Yours Alone" encouraging anonymous reporting of fraud, in multiple languages, which has now been running during every election since 2018. A campaign announcement from the EC directly references Sobolewska's research in identifying women as the most vulnerable victims of fraud, the most likely offenders as candidates and campaigners, and including messages in multiple languages to reach the ethnic minority communities encompassed by her research [A, C, D].

2. Informing Members of Parliament and Members of the Lords, who used the research in their interventions in the House of Commons to raise awareness of electoral integrity, in the legislative scrutiny of the 2013 Electoral Registration and Administration Act by the House of Lords, and in amendments to the 2020 Parliamentary Constituency Bill proposed in the House of Lords

Mirroring the findings of the EC's work on electoral fraud, Members of Parliament have too often relied on their local knowledge, and a couple of high profile, but unrepresentative legal judgements. Sobolewska's report was therefore welcomed by Parliamentarians. It was referred to by MPs in Parliamentary debates [E], included in the House of Commons report on electoral fraud [F], and informed the review of electoral integrity by Lord Eric Pickles [G]. Gary Streeter MP referred to the report in a Parliamentary debate as an "*important report..., which is the first of its kind*" and Stuart Jackson MP, in another House of Commons debate, called it an "*excellent, compelling and detailed qualitative stud[y]*" [E].

In 2016, Lord Eric Pickles published a report into 'tackling electoral fraud', which adopted many of Sobolewska's recommendations from the EC report, in particular, tackling postal vote handling and intimidation. Lord Eric Pickles' own report has 50 recommendations, 10 of which build on the insights of Sobolewska's work, echoing her findings and recommendations [G]. Sobolewska submitted written evidence to this review, and the Electoral Commission's evidence to this review also drew strongly on her work (one out of the five sections, apart from the introduction, were exclusively drawn from her report [H]). Sobolewska also participated in an invitation-only expert roundtable workshop at the Cabinet Office in December 2015. Subsequently, her recommendations became manifesto promises in the 2017 and 2019 election manifestos and appeared in the Queens Speech 2019 [I]. Lord Eric Pickles' report was influential, receiving a very positive response from the Government [G]. In Lord Pickles' own words "*I relied on [the research report by Sobolewska] as a starting point and one that made other views more accessible*" [G].

Finally, and most recently, Sobolewska's research was used to assist the scrutiny of legislation and inform amendments to bills. The research on registration inequalities led to Sobolewska being appointed as a Specialist Adviser to the House of Lords Select Committee on the 2013 Electoral Registration and Administration Act, enabling her to influence the work of the committee [J]. Her research helped to focus the work of the Committee on the issue of completeness of registers and is cited throughout the Committee's report [J]. Sobolewska's existing relationships with civil society organisations [H] also shaped the Committee's inquiry; she drew on her networks to bring in witnesses who then highlighted issues pertaining to registration inequalities [J]. The recommendations of the Committee relating to completeness of registers formed the basis for a House of Lords amendment to the Constituency Boundaries Bill, proposed by the Chair of the Committee, Lord Shutt, first to oblige the government to improve completeness of the registers, and then assess the feasibility of automating registration of 16-17 year olds to this end [J]. This amendment was passed by the House of Lords on the 8 October 2020. The Committee Clerk writes, "*We particularly benefited from the breadth of [Sobolewska's] expertise on registration, participation and incidences of electoral fraud, all of which were key to the findings and recommendations of the report. Had we not had the benefit of her knowledge and research, we may have lacked the ability to identify the most salient proposals for reform or to draw on the most robust evidence base to support the Committee's proposals. This would have compromised the quality of the Committee's report and lessened its impact*" [J].

3. Influencing the grant-making practices of charitable organisations, aiming to increase electoral registration and turnout of ethnic minorities in Britain.

Sobolewska has also worked closely with the UK wing of Unbound Philanthropy, a US-based charity aiming to improve democratic participation. Unbound invited Sobolewska to speak to a selection of funders and activist organisations at an information session. At this event she presented her findings on under-registration of ethnic minorities, increasing the momentum of fundraisers' efforts to secure support for work in this area [K]. In particular Hope not Hate and Democracy Club turned their attention to registration, and received funds from Unbound to undertake this work. Sobolewska worked with these organisations directly on a project, in the run up to the 2018 local London elections, which sought to increase the number of registered voters from ethnic minority groups. The Director of UK Unbound states there is a direct "*throughline*" from Sobolewska's research on under-registration, and including electoral registration as one of the strategic aims for a major civil society initiative, the Democracy Fund (raising over £1 million) hosted by the Joseph Rowntree Reform Trust (JRRT) [K]. Sobolewska worked with this Fund from its inception, and her research influenced subsequent grant-making in this area, by charities such as Runnymede Trust and Voice4Change England, including the funding of a Randomised Control Trial [H]. The Head of the UK Democracy Fund, JRRT, states that in the development of "*the evidence base that would underpin the Fund's decision-making*", they found Sobolewska's "*publications on political inequality – particularly as they relate to the representation and participation of ethnic minority voters – very important for strengthening our understanding*". They also state that her research and engagement were "*an invaluable input in our development of the Fund's strategy and in practical questions of implementation*" [H].

5. Sources to corroborate the impact

[A] Testimonial from Head of Research, Electoral Commission. Received October 2020.

[B] Electoral Commission (2015), Code of Conduct for Campaigners

http://www.electoralcommission.org.uk/_data/assets/pdf_file/0011/179741/Code-of-conduct-for-campaigners-2015.pdf

- [C] Crimestoppers Campaign Announcement, 2 March 2018
<https://www.electoralcommission.org.uk/your-vote-yours-alone-new-campaign-launched-ahead-may-elections-help-prevent-electoral-fraud>
- [D] Blog post by Tom Hawthorn, Head of Electoral Policy at the Electoral Commission
<https://www.democraticaudit.com/2015/01/28/plans-to-detect-and-prevent-electoral-fraud-are-under-way-ahead-of-this-mays-general-election/>
- [E] Parliamentary Debates: Citation of the Research by Stewart Jackson MP in a Westminster Hall debate
<https://publications.parliament.uk/pa/cm201516/cmhansrd/cm151209/halltext/151209h0002.htm>, From Column 401WH; Citation of the report by Gary Streeter MP and Philip Davies MP <https://hansard.parliament.uk/commons/2015-01-29/debates/15012949000039/ElectoralFraud>, 29 January 2015, Volume 591
- [F] House of Commons Library's Briefing Paper on Electoral Fraud Since 2010 (published 11 January 2017)
<http://researchbriefings.parliament.uk/ResearchBriefing/Summary/SN06255>
- [G] Pickles Report (2016) on Electoral Fraud, 'Securing the Ballot'
<https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/securing-the-ballot-review-into-electoral-fraud>; Government response to report
https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/580514/government-response-sir-eric-pickles-review-electoral-fraud.pdf;
Email from Lord Eric Pickles
- [H] Testimonial from Head of UK Democracy Fund, Joseph Rowntree Reform Trust. Received September 2020.
- [I] Queens Speech (December 2019).
- [J] Testimonial from Clerk to the House of Lords Select Committee on the Electoral Registration and Administration Act 2013. Received October 2020.
- [K] Testimonial from UK Director, Unbound Philanthropy. Received October 2020.