

Institution: The University of Liverpool		
Unit of Assessment: UoA 19 Politics		
Title of case study: Strengthening Electoral Integrity in the UK via New Electoral Fraud Safeguards and Electoral Registration Reforms.		
Period when the underpinning research was undertaken: 2007-2020		
Details of staff conducting the underpinning research from the submitting unit:		
Name(s): Dr Stuart Wilks-Heeg	Role(s) (e.g. job title): Reader in Politics	Period(s) employed by submitting HEI: 2002 to current
Period when the claimed impact occurred: 1 August 2013-31 December 2020		
Is this case study continued from a case study submitted in 2014? N		
1. Summary of the impact (indicative maximum 100 words)		
<p>Concerns about the integrity of UK elections have grown over the past 15 years. The research examined the incidence and dynamics of electoral fraud, the state of the electoral registers and the efficacy of legal mechanisms for challenging election results. It informed the Electoral Commission's development of electoral fraud awareness campaigns in partnership with Crimestoppers UK. It was used by parliamentarians and in official inquiries to underpin recommendations for electoral fraud safeguards that were ultimately adopted by government. Finally, it informed all stages of the post-legislative scrutiny of recent electoral law undertaken by a House of Lords committee, resulting in the passage of a Lords amendment designed to improve the completeness of the electoral registers.</p>		
2. Underpinning research (indicative maximum 500 words)		
<p>The underpinning research comprised a series of linked projects undertaken by Dr Wilks-Heeg as either the sole investigator or in collaboration with others. These were as follows:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • A synoptic assessment of the integrity of UK elections, for which Dr Wilks-Heeg was the sole investigator, funded by the Joseph Rowntree Reform Trust (2007-2008; outputs 3.1, 3.2). • An ESRC-funded Placement Fellowship at the Electoral Commission, during which Dr Wilks-Heeg undertook research into the state of the electoral registers alongside the Commission's research team (2009-2010; 3.3). A further piece of work from this project was produced for the Cabinet Office's Electoral Registration Transformation Programme and published in conjunction with the UK government's formal response to pre-legislative scrutiny and the public consultation on the draft Electoral Registration Bill in 2012. • Research into electoral fraud vulnerabilities in Pakistani and Bangladeshi origin communities in England, conducted by Dr Wilks-Heeg and Prof Maria Sobolewska (University of Manchester) and funded by the Electoral Commission (2014-2015; 3.4, 3.5). • Archival research on the content and outcomes of UK election petitions from 1900-2016, conducted by Dr Wilks-Heeg and Dr Caroline Morris (Queen Mary, University of London) and partially funded by the Society of Legal Scholars (2014-2018; 3.6). <p>The six research outputs listed in section 3 comprise three academic journal articles and three high-profile research reports, including fully peer-reviewed papers in The British Journal of Politics and International Relations and the Election Law Journal. Each of the three research reports was covered in the national media, cited in parliamentary debates and in briefings and research notes published by the House of Commons Library. As such, these reports have been subject to considerable expert scrutiny in their own right.</p> <p>There were four key sets of findings from the research that translated into impact. First, it was shown that reforms to voting practices in the early 2000s had created new electoral fraud vulnerabilities and that these were particularly evident with respect to postal and proxy voting.</p>		

While incidents of large-scale electoral fraud were restricted to a small number of locations, these vulnerabilities were especially apparent in localities where British political parties had sought to mobilise BAME communities as a 'block vote', giving rise to significant concerns about women and younger voters in these communities being disenfranchised as a result. Second, the research pointed to a long-term decline in the completeness and accuracy of the electoral registers, with registration levels falling particularly among young people, members of ethnic minority groups and private renters. Third, the successful introduction of electoral reforms in Northern Ireland in 2002, notably individual electoral registration, the use of photographic ID at polling stations and restrictions on postal votes, provided evidence to support the adoption of similar measures to address the subsequent emergence of electoral integrity concerns in Great Britain. Fourth, the use of election petitions to challenge election results has been underestimated, largely because of the absence of official records. Detailed research into the use of the petition mechanism revealed their principal purpose to have become one of correcting often basic counting errors at local elections. Meanwhile the enormous legal and financial barriers to lodging election petitions has limited their use in cases alleging electoral fraud. The research advocates far-reaching reform of the petition mechanism in light of these findings.

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

3.1 Wilks-Heeg, S. (2008) *Purity of Elections in the UK: Causes for Concern*, York: Joseph Rowntree Reform Trust. ISBN: 0-9548902-3-X. <https://livrepository.liverpool.ac.uk/3112835/>

3.2 Wilks-Heeg, S. (2009) 'Treating voters as an afterthought? The legacies of a decade of electoral modernisation in the United Kingdom', *The Political Quarterly*, 80 (1), DOI: 10.1111/j.1467-923X.2009.01958.x. <https://livrepository.liverpool.ac.uk/3112837/>

3.3 Wilks-Heeg, S. et al (2010) *Completeness and Accuracy of Electoral Registers in Great Britain*. London: The Electoral Commission. <https://livrepository.liverpool.ac.uk/3112836/>

3.4 Sobolewska, M., Wilks-Heeg, S., Hill, E., & Borkowska, M. (2015) *Understanding electoral fraud vulnerability in Pakistani and Bangladeshi origin communities in England*, London: The Electoral Commission. <https://livrepository.liverpool.ac.uk/2006259/>

3.5 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', *The British Journal of Politics and International Relations*, 19 (4), pp.772-789. DOI: 1369148117715222. <https://livrepository.liverpool.ac.uk/3012379/>

3.6 Morris, C. and Wilks-Heeg, S. (2019) "Reports of My Death Have Been Greatly Exaggerated": The continuing role and relevance of election petitions in challenging election results in the UK', *Election Law Journal*, 18 (1), DOI: [10.1089/elj.2018.0510](https://doi.org/10.1089/elj.2018.0510) (Open Access).

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

Impact was realised in three sequential phases of UK electoral policy decision-making. First, the research informed changes to the Electoral Commission's approach to tackling electoral fraud, including its decision to run annual campaigns on the issue with Crimestoppers. Second, it was used by parliamentarians and in official inquiries to highlight issues of concern with respect to electoral fraud and electoral law and to underpin recommendations for change that were ultimately adopted by government. Third, the research was central to all stages of a House of Lords Select Committee inquiry into electoral registration and administration, resulting directly in a successful cross-party House of Lords amendment to the Parliamentary Constituencies Bill 2019-2021 (subsequently reversed by the House of Commons).

i) Impact on the Electoral Commission's approach to electoral fraud vulnerabilities, resulting in new official guidance, public awareness campaigns with Crimestoppers UK and development of the Commission's policies on postal voting and voter ID.

Policy decisions made by the Electoral Commission (EC) were directly informed by Wilks-Heeg's research on electoral fraud vulnerabilities in Pakistani and Bangladeshi-origin communities (3.4, 3.5). Undertaken as part of the EC's strategic review of electoral fraud vulnerabilities, the research was published alongside a 17 page EC briefing note (5.1) setting out what the research found and what actions were being taken as a result. The note lists a series of immediate institutional responses to the research, in advance of the 2015 General Election, including: new guidance for voters, clarifying acceptable and unacceptable behaviour by campaigners; new materials for use by police forces to enable them to raise awareness about such issues; and a revised and strengthened Code of Conduct for Campaigners, reinforcing these messages (5.1).

The research also led to the EC working more closely with Crimestoppers UK "to ensure voters had a clear channel for reporting instances of fraud" (5.2). The Commission's Head of Electoral Policy, Tom Hawthorn, noted that "the research (...) emphasises the need for anyone who has evidence of electoral fraud to report it immediately: directly to the police or anonymously via Crimestoppers. We will be producing some simple messages in a range of different languages to help people explain what is and isn't acceptable behaviour during election time and how to report fraud" (5.1). This 'Don't Stand for Electoral Fraud' campaign was repeated in 2016 and 2017, with Crimestoppers reporting substantial reach. In 2016, an educational video created for the campaign was viewed over 50,000 times and, in 2017, a combined campaign reach of 1.3 million was reported across all digital platforms (5.3).

In addition to these immediate measures, the EC's Head of Research, Phil Thompson, indicates that "the research evidence also informed subsequent policy development in relation to postal voting and voter identification at polling stations" (5.2). He also highlights how a further public awareness campaign, 'Your Vote Is Yours Alone', again developed with Crimestoppers and launched ahead of the 2018 elections, "drew directly on the research to identify the types of fraudulent activity that were particularly important to highlight to voters" (5.2). Citation of the research in the EC's press release launching the 2018 campaign confirms this assessment. The press release noted the role of the research in highlighting factors such as language barriers in intensifying vulnerabilities to electoral fraud, particularly among some women in specific communities. It adds that "the Commission is committed to overcoming this and to helping women, from all communities, to understand that it is their vote and their vote only. As part of this effort, posters and the leaflet have been translated in Punjabi, Urdu and Bengali" (5.4). In its 2019/2020 annual report, the EC noted the significance of the 'Your Vote is Yours Alone' campaign to its efforts to tackle electoral fraud, citing its role in driving "more than 10,000 visits to the Crimestoppers website" and that "Crimestoppers passed on 30 pieces of actionable information to the police" (5.4)

ii) Impact on parliamentary debate, official inquiries and government policy concerning electoral fraud and electoral law.

In the October 2019 Queen's Speech, the UK government set out legislative proposals for new voting safeguards, including restrictions on campaigners handling postal votes and requirements for voter ID at polling stations. These proposals were reiterated in the manifesto on which the Conservative Party won the December 2019 General Election. The research played a consistent and influential role in the political debate and policy deliberations from 2015 onwards which led to these legislative plans. On 29 January 2015, Philip Davies MP cited the research (3.4) in the House of Commons when asking Gary Streeter MP, representing the Speaker's Committee on the Electoral Commission, whether the recommendation for identification at polling stations would be taken up (5.5, p.1). On 9 December 2015, Stewart Jackson MP secured a Westminster Hall debate on electoral fraud, at which he cited the research (3.1, 3.4) at length and echoed its policy recommendations, including the introduction of postal voting safeguards and voter ID. Responding for the government, John Penrose MP, Minister for Constitutional Reform, stressed that these measures were under active consideration via the electoral fraud review being conducted by Sir Eric Pickles in his role as the Prime Minister's Anti-Corruption Champion (5.5).

The Pickles report, *Securing the Ballot*, was published in August 2016 and further demonstrated the influence of the research on policy-making (5.6). In email correspondence, Lord Pickles confirmed that “When I was asked, by the government, to look at the security of our voting system my task was made easier by the quality of your research. I relied on it as a starting point and one that made other views more accessible” (5.7). Written evidence submitted by Wilks-Heeg to the review (drawing on research contained in outputs 3.4, 3.5, 3.6) was cited in support of the report’s conclusions relating to postal votes and electoral fraud vulnerabilities in Pakistani and Bangladeshi-origin communities (5.6, paras 71, 193, 208), and to patterns of electoral offences and the role of election petitions (5.6, paras 146, 177). In turn, this analysis supported several of the report’s key recommendations, notably those advocating greater security around polling stations (R1), a ban on campaigners handling completed postal ballots (Rs 7 and 19), and the need to reform election petitions (Rs 30-36). All of these recommendations directly reflect those advocated in the underpinning research (3.4, 3.5, 3.6).

iii) Impact on the House of Lords Select Committee on the Electoral Registration and Administration Act 2013 and a subsequent House of Lords amendment to the Parliamentary Constituencies Bill 2019-2021.

The research helped shape all stages of a House of Lords Select Committee’s post-legislative scrutiny of the Electoral Registration and Administration Act 2013, including the inquiry’s topics, the questions put to witnesses and the recommendations made in the final report, published in July 2020. This impact was realised via Wilks-Heeg’s appointment, via a competitive process, as a specialist adviser to the Committee, which reviewed the impact of the most significant electoral law reforms introduced over the last decade (5.8). In this capacity, Dr Wilks-Heeg’s research (outputs, 3.1-3.6) was used by the committee to help define the focus of the inquiry and the topics it would explore, informed the questions put to witnesses, and provided a key part of the research base for the committee’s analysis and recommendations. The testimonial provided by committee clerk, Simon Keal, notes that “the Committee (...) frequently drew upon his research to help inform work programmes, briefings, public evidence sessions, Committee visits, and development of themes and recommendations for the report”. In addition, Keal highlights how “Dr Wilks-Heeg’s research and advice directly informed a number of the Committee’s recommendations, including that more focus needs to be placed on ensuring completeness and accuracy of electoral registers; that more effort needs to be made to ensure registration among harder-to-reach demographic groups; and that procedures for investigating and prosecuting electoral fraud need further reform” (5.8). The committee’s report (5.9), published on 8 July 2020, “received a highly favourable reception from stakeholders including the Association of Electoral Administrators and the Electoral Commission and received positive media coverage” (5.8). Following publication of the report, Wilks-Heeg continued to advise members of the committee on the drafting of an amendment to the Parliamentary Constituencies Bill 2019-21, seeking to implement two of the committee’s key recommendations, relating to improving the completeness of the electoral registers ahead of boundary reviews and automating the registration of attainders (16-17 year olds) via the issuing of National Insurance Numbers. This amendment was moved by the committee’s Chair, Lord Shutt, with support from Labour, Conservative and crossbench members of the committee. It was accepted by the House of Lords on 8 October 2020 by 293 votes to 215, representing a government defeat (5.10) although the amendment was subsequently reversed by the House of Commons.

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

5.1 The Electoral Commission, ‘Plans for tackling electoral fraud ahead of the May 2015 elections – briefing’, 27 January 2015; Blog post by Tom Hawthorn, Head of Electoral Policy at the Electoral Commission, 28 January 2015. *(Both sources set out the Electoral Commission’s immediate institutional responses to the electoral fraud research; output 3.4).*

5.2 Testimonial from Phil Thompson, Head of Research, The Electoral Commission. *(Provides a longer-term account of the impact of the electoral fraud research on the Electoral Commission’s work and its partnership with Crimestoppers; outputs 3.4 and 3.5).*

5.3. News report on Crimestoppers' 2016 electoral fraud awareness campaign; Article in Crimestoppers' Connect magazine, Winter 2017 (page 8). *(Both sources provide quantitative indicators of the reach of the campaigns run by Crimestoppers in partnership with the Electoral Commission as a result of the research; output 3.4).*

5.4 Electoral Commission press release for Your Vote Is Yours Alone, 2 March 2018; Electoral Commission's Annual Report, 2019/20. *(These sources provide further evidence of the long-term impact of the research on the Electoral Commission's partnership with Crimestoppers and further quantitative measures of the reach of their joint campaigns; outputs 3.4 and 3.5).*

5.5 House of Commons, Hansard, vol 591, 29 January 2015, oral answers to questions, Electoral Commission Committee; House of Commons, Hansard, Westminster Hall Debates, c397WH-c412WH, 15 December 2016. *(These demonstrate how the research was used by parliamentarians to highlight issues of concern to government; outputs 3.1 and 3.4).*

5.6 Securing the ballot: Report of Sir Eric Pickles' review into electoral fraud, Cabinet Office, 12 August 2016. *(Influential report which informed changes in government policy and which cites evidence arising from the research in support of its recommendation; outputs 3.1, 3.4 and 3.6).*

5.7 Email correspondence with Lord Pickles, 16 October 2020. *(Confirmation from the author of the above report that the research was drawn upon).*

5.8 Testimonial from Simon Keal, Committee Clerk, House of Lords. *(Provides confirmation of Dr Wilks-Heeg's appointment to the Select Committee on the Electoral Registration and Administration Act 2013 and of the role his research played in its work; outputs 3.1-3.6)*

5.9 Select Committee on the Electoral Registration and Administration Act 2013, An electoral system fit for today? More to be done, HL Paper 83, 8 July 2020. *(Report of the Committee to which Dr Wilks-Heeg acted as a specialist adviser. His role is acknowledged on page 11; outputs 3.1-3.6).*

5.10 Government Defeat in Lords on Parliamentary Constituencies Bill, 8 October 2020; Lords Hansard record of the debate on the amendment, columns 790-803, 8 October 2020. *(Details of the House of Lords amendment to this Bill, moved by members of Select Committee on the Electoral Registration and Administration Act 2013 in seeking to implement one of the Committee's key recommendations; outputs 3.1-3.6).*