

Institution: Plymouth University
Unit of Assessment: C17 (Geography, Environmental Studies and Archaeology)
Title of case study: British Local Elections Database: informing policy and ‘illuminating democracy’
<p>1. Summary of the impact (indicative maximum 100 words)</p> <p>The British Local Elections Database and accompanying research output comprise a unique national resource through which political parties, media organisations, official statistical sources, central and local government, and public affairs companies have been able to report on and analyse electoral trends. This has informed and impacted on political debate and policy-making, and in turn has led to an increased public understanding and awareness of how to benchmark and interpret election outcomes. The impact of the research peaked in reach and significance at the time of the 2010 general election, but is also apparent at the annual local elections and in the constant tracking of patterns of behaviour at local by-elections.</p>
<p>2. Underpinning research (indicative maximum 500 words)</p> <p>The British Local Elections Database was initiated at Plymouth University in 1985 and has subsequently been developed and updated annually through to 2013 with funding support in excess of £350,000 from, inter alia, the ESRC, the AHRC, the Electoral Commission, and EMAP plc. A fully searchable and downloadable version of the database has been deposited with the UK Data Archive (study number 5319).</p> <p>Colin Rallings and Michael Thrasher have been involved with this research from the beginning as Professors and co-Directors of the Elections Centre at Plymouth University, and as grant holders. Dr Galina Borisyuk, Lecturer in Advanced Quantitative Methods at Plymouth, has been a core member of the team since 1999. Dr Lawrence Ware (now Head of Management Information Systems at Hartpury College) played a key role in designing and refining the database structure during his time as a PhD student at Plymouth (1998-2002) and subsequently as a researcher on the 2003-5 ESRC project (RES-023-25-001). He left Plymouth University in 2008. Data for Scotland, which is included in the database, was compiled by Professor David Denver who retired from Lancaster University in 2010 but has continued to compile and share information.</p> <p>The aim of the research was to establish a relational database of all principal council local elections (and by-elections) in Britain for as many years as information could be located. Because there is no central record of election results, and in order to keep the database current, such information is collected by post, email and telephone from all local authorities with elections in any given year.</p> <p>The structure of the British Local Elections Database reflects the structure of local government elections in Britain. Users may produce ‘reports’ that give detailed results for chosen elections in a form equivalent to that used in the reporting of general election constituency results. These may include spatial and administrative details as well as votes, turnout, and indicators of the sex of candidates and whether or not they are incumbent councillors. An annual <i>Local Elections Handbook</i> containing all results for that year is published, and bespoke spread sheets and/or derived tables from each year are made available to bona fide researchers. Additional information relating in particular to absent voting and spoilt ballot papers has been compiled on behalf of the Electoral Commission since 2004 and used to inform its statutory reporting. The British Local Elections Database and associated documentation was submitted as an output from Plymouth University to 2008 RAE UoA32.</p> <p>The availability of detailed local election results has been pivotal in establishing an original and distinctive sub-field within electoral studies. The historical data have been used in facilitating new scholarly analyses both by us (see section 3), our collaborators including Professor Ron Johnston (Bristol) and Dr Scott Orford (Cardiff), as well as other researchers; contemporary data have been used for the improved forecasting, benchmarking, and analysis of election outcomes. It is the latter activity that underpins the impact of this research. A Political Studies Association of the UK award in 2007 acknowledged the Centre’s ‘crucial work on elections over a sustained period of time’ and combination of ‘academically rigorous study with rare communicative skills which allow the public to make sense of</p>

Impact case study (REF3b)

electoral change’.

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

Colin Rallings and Michael Thrasher, *Local Elections in Britain*, Routledge, 1997. ISBN 0 415 05953 4. Political Studies Association review: ‘A genuinely path-breaking book - the first ever comprehensive book-length study of local elections in Britain’.

Evaluations of end-of-award report for ESRC grant to Colin Rallings and Michael Thrasher, RES-023-25-001 2003-5, *Updating Local Elections Database*. Reviewer A: ‘amongst the most useful and competently produced of all ESRC-funded research that I have evaluated and read’; Reviewer B: ‘The researchers are world-renowned experts in their field and this report reflects the usual high standards of their work’.

Colin Rallings and Michael Thrasher, ‘Forecasting Vote and Seat Shares’ in David Farrell et al (eds.), *British Elections and Parties Yearbook 1996* (Frank Cass, 1996). ISBN 0 7146 4770 5. Fully peer-reviewed annual predecessor of *Journal of Elections, Public Opinion and Parties*.

Colin Rallings and Michael Thrasher, Local votes, national forecasts – using local government by-elections in Britain to estimate party support, *International Journal of Forecasting*, 15, 2, 1999, pp.153-162. Peer reviewed journal, 5 year impact factor (Thomson Reuters) 2.450

Colin Rallings, Michael Thrasher, Galina Borisyuk, and Elena Long, Forecasting the 2010 general election using aggregate local election data, *Electoral Studies*, 30, 2, 2010, pp.269-77. International, peer-reviewed journal. 5 year impact factor (Thomson Reuters) 1.470

Colin Rallings, Ron Johnston, and Michael Thrasher, Changing the Boundaries but Keeping the Disproportionality: The Electoral Impact of the Fifth Periodical Reviews by the Parliamentary Boundary Commissions for England and Wales, *Political Quarterly*, 79, 1, 2008, pp.80-90. Peer-reviewed journal aimed at both academics and practitioners. Impact Factor: 0.605 ISI Journal Citation Reports Ranking, 2012, 84/157 (Political Science).

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

The British Local Elections Database, its continual updating, and the ability to trace trends over time has been pivotal in enhancing media coverage and public discussion of both national and local elections, and in influencing policy on electoral matters.

The availability of the data was first flagged in monthly articles written by *Rallings* and *Thrasher* in *Local Government Chronicle* from 1984 onwards. These discussed individual local election results and their wider significance. The potential of such data in contributing to the national level benchmarking and forecasting of the annual local elections was recognised, inter alia, by the *Sunday Times*, which began commissioning election commentary from *Rallings* and *Thrasher* in 1986.

As part of this commentary the database was used by us to devise an exclusive measure of what any given local election result implies for the overall popularity of the various political parties. This ‘national equivalent vote’ is effectively an estimate of the national vote share, but based on real election results rather than the expressed views of opinion poll respondents. ‘These forecasts have proved their accuracy over a period of more than twenty years and *The Sunday Times* has been delighted to be able to give its readers this unique insight which complements its conventional opinion poll-based election coverage.’ (Reference 2)

The ‘national equivalent vote’ has become a standard way of reporting on and interpreting local election results. It is widely quoted across the media and acts as a marker against which commentators and the public can measure and judge the claims and ambitions of the political parties. In 2011, 2012 and 2013 Rallings and Thrasher’s local projections were covered in the *Daily Telegraph*, the *Independent*, *Evening Standard*, *Daily Mirror*, and the *Sun* as well as by the *Sunday Times* and formed the basis of well-attended briefings for journalists organised by the Political Studies Association at the Institute of Government. (Reference 6)

Post-election the ‘national equivalent vote’ calculation is widely featured in assessments of how the

Impact case study (REF3b)

parties have performed and is used by the House of Commons Library as a quasi-official summary indicator of each year's election outcome. 'The Elections Centre at Plymouth University provides unique analyses of local elections which we use in connection with our work for Members of Parliament...There is great value in having the up to date and consistent time series'. (References 3 and 7)

At a more micro-level the database and forecasting research provides the raw material for and underpins both the BBC's and Sky News' election night results programmes. 'It allows us to bring viewers and listeners early and authoritative estimates of the outcome of the elections even when only a few results are to hand.' (References 1 and 8)

For the new parliamentary boundaries which came into force at both the 1997 and 2010 general elections, the Centre used a specially devised formula based on ward level local election data drawn from the database to calculate the likely partisan consequences of boundary changes for a media consortium comprising the BBC, ITN, Sky News and the Press Association. These were accepted as the 'official' notional results and used and cited in general election coverage across five continents. Without such notional results 'we would not be able to sustain election night programmes in those instances with anything like the content viewers have come to expect.' (References 1 and 7)

The British Local Elections Database has also contributed to public policy on elections and election reform. Since 2001 it has been a key source of information for the Electoral Commission. 'The Commission highly values the data gathered and methodology developed by the Elections Centre at Plymouth University which has been crucial in enabling it to build a record of election outcomes for use in its own policy and best practice work. For example, our understanding of patterns of turnout, the increase in and use of absent votes, and the variance in practice among local authorities relies heavily on research undertaken by the Elections Centre.' (References 5 and 10)

Similarly for the Local Government Association, 'the unique set of local election results data from the Elections Centre, as well as their guidance, is crucial for managing the LGA board structure in a way that properly reflects how votes were cast by the electorate...This provides a valuable service to councils' (Reference 4).

The overall impact of the Centre's work in recent years was summarised in an editorial in *The Guardian* in May 2013 entitled "In praise of *Rallings* and *Thrasher*". It describes how 'the duo's meticulous year-round tracking of ward byelections...is the only way in which the polls that so obsess Westminster can be checked against real votes. By faithfully mapping wards for so long, they can interpret what boundary changes mean for national elections too, a mix of art and science in which they have a distinguished record...(and which has) done more than most to illuminate British democracy' (Reference 9).

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

1. **Statement from Editor, Political Research, BBC. January 2013.** Refers to the pivotal role played by data from the Elections Centre in the BBC's annual local elections programming, and by calculations of notional results in new constituencies for general election coverage following parliamentary boundary changes.
2. **Statement from Assistant Editor, Sunday Times. January 2013.** Comments on The Sunday Times' use of the Centre's forecasts over a period of twenty years to offer readers unique snapshots of patterns of political support at both local and general elections.
3. **Head of Social and General Statistics, House of Commons Library. January 2013.** Attests to the Centre's unique data collection and analyses in providing information for MPs, and in informing the production of HoC Library briefing papers publicly available to download. See also reference 7.
4. **Research and Information Manager, Local Government Association. January 2013.** Refers to the role of the Centre's data and guidance in deciding the party political distribution of LGA Board and committee places, and to the Centre's data on election turnout being made available to councils through the LGA's own website.
5. **Research and Evaluation Manager, Electoral Commission. February 2013.** Highlights the Commission's reliance on the Centre's work for understanding and developing policy in areas such as absent voting and the variance in practice among local authorities.
6. <http://www.independent.co.uk/news/uk/politics/labour-told-gain-1000-seats-in-council-elections-or-youve-failed-2266946.html> Discussion by the Independent's Political Editor of benchmarking

Impact case study (REF3b)

- of each party's potential gains and losses in 2011 as outlined by the Plymouth Elections Centre.
7. <http://www.parliament.uk/briefing-papers/RP12-27>. <http://www.parliament.uk/briefing-papers/SN05280> References to Centre's work as authoritative source for both 'national equivalent vote' series and local election results, and uses Centre's notional results to explain the psephological background to the 2010 general election.
 8. <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-politics-22109690> Explains the role of the Centre as 'acknowledged experts in this field' in providing notional results for wards where boundary changes have taken place to enable the accurate calculation of gains and losses in 2013.
 9. <http://www.guardian.co.uk/commentisfree/2013/may/01/in-praise-rallings-thrasher> Editorial on value of work of Elections Centre over a 30-year period.
 10. http://www.electoralcommission.org.uk/_data/assets/pdf_file/0003/81678/Postal-vote-verification-and-rejection-in-Great-Britain.pdf Report commissioned in 2009 to analyse and discuss impact of Electoral Administration Act 2006 on the verification and rejection of postal votes.