

Impact case study (REF3b)

Institution: University of Reading
Unit of Assessment: 21 Politics and International Studies
Title of case study: Improving Public Understanding and Debate about Democratic Reform
1. Summary of the impact
<p>Dr Alan Renwick's research has had a distinctive, timely, and invaluable impact on the development of British constitutional debate in recent years. It has improved the quality of public discussion of key electoral and other democratic reforms and strengthened evidence-based decision-making in parliament and government. The underpinning research on the causes and consequences of democratic reforms was conducted at the University of Reading and disseminated both to policy-makers and direct to the public. It helped frame the debates around the electoral reform referendum of 2011 and the Lords reform proposals of 2011–12. As the UK Political Studies Association has recognized, it is a model of what Politics departments should be striving to do.</p>
2. Underpinning research
<p>Renwick's research analyses the causes and consequences of democratic reforms around the world. Its distinctive contribution is to offer a rich comparative perspective upon how democratic reforms take place (or are blocked) and what effects they can be expected to have. His first book, <i>The Politics of Electoral Reform: Changing the Rules of Democracy</i>, was published by Cambridge University Press in 2010 and concentrated on the question of when and how electoral reforms take place. Using comparative case study methodology and focusing on reform episodes in France, Italy, Japan, and New Zealand, it shows, contrary to the dominant prior view in political science, that public opinion – and therefore the character of public debate – can strongly influence democratic reform processes. But public opinion can have such effects only through specific mechanisms, which politicians, activists, and others must understand if they are to engage with ongoing reform processes intelligently. Subsequent research, published in journals such as <i>Electoral Studies</i>, <i>Government & Opposition</i>, and <i>West European Politics</i>, has extended the analysis to over two dozen additional countries, including the UK, and has corroborated and further developed the initial findings. Importantly, it shows that scope for public debates to shape outcomes has increased in recent decades: as political identities have become more fluid and faith in politics has declined, politicians have increasingly sought to court public opinion through reformist rhetoric.</p> <p>Renwick's second book, <i>A Citizen's Guide to Electoral Reform</i>, was published by Biteback in January 2011, four months before the UK's referendum on adopting the Alternative Vote electoral system. It analyses the effects that a variety of possible electoral reforms could be expected to have if implemented in the UK. It includes possible alternatives to the current First Past the Post system, such as the Alternative Vote and various forms of proportional representation, as well as other options prominent on the contemporary UK reform agenda, such as the recall of MPs and greater use of primaries in candidate selection. It identifies six core criteria for the evaluation of different systems and then uses both quantitative and qualitative evidence from 36 democracies in order systematically to weigh the various reform options against these criteria. In the months preceding the referendum, Renwick was commissioned by the UK Political Studies Association (PSA) to conduct further research specifically on the comparison between First Past the Post and the Alternative Vote. This was conducted in consultation with many of the world's leading elections experts and was published by the PSA as a 25-page briefing paper in March 2011.</p> <p>Renwick's research extends beyond the electoral system to include other democratic reforms and putative reforms. Notably, in the wake of the publication of the government's white paper and draft bill on reform of the House of Lords in May 2011, he was commissioned, again by the PSA, to complete a detailed study of the government's proposals and their likely effects. As in his previous work, Renwick used a comparative method, drawing insights from 36 bicameral democracies around the world, in order to ground conclusions upon solid evidence rather than speculation. This research was published by the PSA as a 96-page briefing paper.</p>

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Renwick joined the Unit in 2007.

3. References to the research

Publications by Dr Alan Renwick:

- *The Politics of Electoral Reform: Changing the Rules of Democracy*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010. 312 pp. ISBN: 978-0-521-76530-5. Peer reviewed at CUP. It has since received positive reviews in several of the top politics journals. Included in REF outputs submission.
- "Electoral Reform in Europe since 1945", *West European Politics* 34, no. 3 (May 2011), pp. 456–77. Extensively internally peer-reviewed and included in REF output submission.
- "How Likely Is Proportional Representation in the House of Commons? Lessons from International Experience", *Government & Opposition* 44, no. 4 (October 2009), pp. 366–384; DOI: 10.1111/j.1477-7053.2009.01293.x. Extensively internally peer-reviewed and included in REF outputs submission.
- *A Citizen's Guide to Electoral Reform*. London: Biteback, January 2011. 201 pp. ISBN: 978-1-84954-076-6.
- *The Alternative Vote: A Briefing Paper*. London: Political Studies Association, 2011. 25 pp. ISBN: 978-0-95696-611-7. Written in close consultation with an advisory board which included many of the top researchers in the world focusing on electoral systems.
- *House of Lords Reform: A Briefing Paper*. London: Political Studies Association, 2011. 96 pp. ISBN: 978-0-95696-613-1.

These publications have been internally assessed as of at least 2* quality.

4. Details of the impact

The impacts achieved have centred in three areas: improving the quality of debate surrounding the Alternative Vote referendum in May 2011; shaping policy and improving debate in relation to a number of other items on the UK democratic reform agenda; and influencing reform processes elsewhere, most notably in Jersey. Across these areas, Renwick's research has promoted discussion and decision-making based upon rigorous engagement with evidence. This section outlines the nature and extent of the impact in each area in turn.

Improving the quality of debate around the Alternative Vote referendum

During the Alternative Vote referendum campaign of 2011, Renwick's research was the key source for impartial, expert verdicts on the claims being made by both sides. As those claims were often either false or greatly exaggerated, the debate required a trusted and authoritative voice to whom journalists and voters could turn for guidance. This is a truly important impact: without well informed public debate, we do not have genuine democracy; this is especially so during a referendum campaign.

Dissemination of Renwick's research through *A Citizen's Guide to Electoral Reform* and the PSA's *Alternative Vote* briefing paper led to his being used frequently by the BBC as an impartial expert: he appeared multiple times during the campaign on BBC Radios 4 and 5 Live and the BBC News channel and he wrote an article for the BBC News website. The research was also used by many other journalists: for example, Channel 4's *FactCheck* blog strand used it four times and it was cited in *The Times*, *Guardian*, *Independent*, and *Sunday Express*. The Minister of State at the Ministry for Justice, Lord McNally, referred to it in the House of Lords on 3 May 2011. Perhaps the clearest indication of the degree to which Renwick's research was seen as impartially authoritative is that both referendum campaign organizations cited it in their own campaign materials to lend credence to their claims. The impact extended beyond a narrow elite to reach a much broader educated public: the PSA briefing paper was downloaded over 22,000 times in the course of the five-week referendum campaign.

In all of these forums, Renwick's research was used to hold the campaign organizations to account for their misrepresentations and to explain what was genuinely at stake in the referendum. Participants in the debates have attested to the value of Renwick's work. Sam Coates of *The Times*, for example, wrote to the Chief Executive of the Political Studies Association on 2 May 2011:

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Just to say – in case you hadn't spotted it – just how excellent and useful your PSA / AV briefing has been. I've used it for the third time in a month this morning, to provide academic rigour to some of the nonsense AV debates.

Stuart Wilks-Heeg, Executive Director of Democratic Audit, wrote on Democratic Audit's blog on 4 July 2011 (<http://www.democraticaudit.com/?p=288>):

One of the few prominent voices during the referendum to offer a balanced, evidence-based assessment of the pros and cons of adopting the Alternative Vote was that of Dr Alan Renwick, a Lecturer in Politics at the University of Reading. Dr Renwick's excellent book, *A Citizen's Guide to Electoral Reform*, published by Biteback in early 2011 was highly effective in translating extensive academic knowledge about electoral systems, including his own comparative study of electoral reform published by Cambridge University Press in 2010, into an accessible and 'user friendly' text for the general reader.

Professor Vicky Randall, who was PSA Chair in 2011, has written:

British politics scholars regularly develop mutually useful links and dialogues with politicians and the news media. The Political Studies Association has done much to cultivate such links and to demonstrate the immediate relevance of its expertise for making sense of British politics, perhaps the most impressive recent example being its widely cited briefing paper on the Alternative Vote (Renwick, 2011). ("Studying British Politics: The Best of Intentions Not Always Realised", *British Politics* 7, no. 1 (April 2012), 17–29.)

Shaping policy and improving debate around UK democratic reform

Beyond the referendum, Renwick's work has shaped debates surrounding other mooted reforms too, notably Lords reform and the recall of MPs. He has contributed to both the quality of public debates and the processes of policy-making in Westminster and Whitehall. He has been asked to appear four times before parliamentary select committees investigating Lords reform (31 October and 19 December 2011), the recall of MPs (19 January 2012), and the possibility of a constitutional convention (24 May 2012). He has been commissioned to prepare papers – in two cases in conjunction with Professor Iain McLean of the University of Oxford – by the Cabinet Office and Parliament's Joint Select Committee on the Draft House of Lords Reform Bill. He met Cabinet Office officials to discuss Lords reform on 6 July 2012.

Debates over Lords reform have often been poorly grounded, proceeding with little understanding of the relevant comparative evidence. Renwick's work has successfully brought such material to the fore. His written and oral evidence to the Lords Reform Committee was cited more than twenty times in the Committee's final report of 26 March 2012 and shaped the Committee's final recommendations on the electoral system appropriate for an elected second chamber. The government's response to this proposal followed Renwick and McLean's advice to the Cabinet Office.

Similarly, the evidence given by Renwick to the Political and Constitutional Reform Committee's inquiry into the government's proposals for recall of MPs was repeatedly cited in the Committee's final report of 21 June 2012. The key message of that evidence was that recall would sit uneasily with the parliamentary form of democracy: recall of a senior minister by constituents in one part of the country for policies enacted for the whole country would be undemocratic. This conclusion was reflected in the Committee's recommendations.

Influencing reform processes beyond the UK

Renwick's impact also extends outside the UK. His dissemination activities include a seminar that he gave to the Foreign Office and DfID in April 2012 regarding electoral system choice in new democracies, focusing particularly on lessons for institutional design in the wake of the 'Arab Spring'. In 2012–13, he served as the main expert consultant for the Jersey Electoral Commission, which was appointed to review the island's electoral system in 2012. His recommendations had a major impact on the electoral system that the Commission proposed. They also shaped the form of the referendum that it advocated to decide the fate of those proposals: in April 2013, on Renwick's recommendation, Jersey became only the second jurisdiction in the world to employ a

multi-option referendum with preferential voting. The referendum was a success: fears that many ballot papers would be spoilt through confusion were not realized. Reform discussions are ongoing and Renwick gave a public talk about electoral reform options and spoke to members of Jersey's parliament on 10 and 11 September 2013.

In each of these three contexts, Renwick has achieved one of the core goals that Political Science departments should aspire to: he has strengthened the quality of our democracy. This important work continues. Major referendums are approaching on Scottish independence and – possibly – the UK's membership of the European Union. Renwick has begun detailed research into the factors that promote or inhibit high-quality debate during referendum campaigns and the coming referendums will create further opportunities both to disseminate these findings and to extend the research further. Renwick has thus developed an ongoing, dynamic exchange between research and impact which promises further to strengthen our democratic society in the future.

5. Sources to corroborate the impact

Corroborative documents:

- House of Lords and House of Commons Joint Committee on the Draft House of Lords Reform Bill, *Draft House of Lords Reform Bill: Report*, Session 2010-12 HL 284-1 and HC 1313-1, 26 March 2012.
- House of Commons Political and Constitutional Reform Committee, *Recall of MPs*, First Report of Session 2012–13, HC 373, 21 June 2012.
- States of Jersey Electoral Commission, *Electoral Commission Final Report*, January 2013.
- Stratton, Allegra, "AV: The main arguments, yes and no, stress-tested", *Guardian*, 3 May 2011. URL: <http://www.theguardian.com/politics/2011/may/03/av-yes-no-referendum-vote>
- Wilks-Heeg, Stuart, "Talking sense on Lords reform: why the PSA's new Briefing fills a crucial gap", Democratic Audit blog (www.democraticaudit.com), 4 July 2011.

Corroborative individuals:

- Chief Executive Officer, Political Studies Association (on Renwick's work for the PSA and its reception)
- Lords Clerk to the Joint Committee on the Draft House of Lords Reform Bill, House of Lords (on Renwick's work informing debates on Lords reform)
- Clerk to the House of Commons Political and Constitutional Reform Committee (on the impact of Renwick's evidence to the Political and Constitutional Reform Committee)
- Greffier of the States of Jersey (on Renwick's impact in Jersey)
- Editor, BBC Radio 4 *Westminster Hour* (on Renwick's broadcasts on Westminster Hour)