

<p>Institution: University of Liverpool</p>
<p>Unit of Assessment: 22 - Social Work and Social Policy</p>
<p>Title of case study: The Integrity of UK elections: electoral malpractice and the state of the electoral registers</p>
<p>1. Summary of the impact</p> <p>The impact arises from research on electoral malpractice and electoral registration in the UK, carried out by Dr Stuart Wilks-Heeg, and which made a clear and identifiable contribution to public and parliamentary debate and to policy development. The research was published in the period April 2008 - March 2012 and the impact is identifiable from April 2008 onwards. The impact has been manifested in the influence of the research on national political debate, campaigning by a leading democracy pressure group in the UK, the work of the Electoral Commission and, ultimately in its contribution to bringing about legislative change.</p>
<p>2. Underpinning research</p> <p>The research was carried out by Dr Stuart Wilks-Heeg and arose from two separate research grants (see section 3 for details). The published outputs arising from the first grant (Wilks-Heeg, 2008, 2009) examined the ‘modernisation’ of UK electoral processes under Labour, including the introduction of postal voting on demand (PVOD), and the subsequent impact on electoral integrity, electoral administration, voter turnout and public confidence in elections. The second grant, awarded by the ESRC was for a Placement Fellowship at the Electoral Commission and supported research into the state of the electoral registers, carried out in conjunction with the Electoral Commission’s research team. The outputs from this grant were a high-profile report on the completeness and accuracy of the electoral registers in Great Britain (Wilks-Heeg et al, 2010) and a literature review for the Cabinet Office, published in conjunction with the UK government’s formal response to pre-legislative scrutiny and the public consultation on the draft Electoral Registration Bill (Wilks-Heeg, 2012).</p> <p>It is widely recognised that, prior to the publication of Wilks-Heeg’s (2008, 2009) work on electoral integrity, there had effectively been no contemporary academic research on the incidence of electoral fraud in the UK. The research demonstrated that:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The actual incidence of electoral fraud was almost certainly greater than had previously been recognised; • Actual convictions for electoral offences were at least double that reported in government estimates; • There were widespread concerns about the vulnerability of UK elections to fraud, about the state of UK electoral registers, and about the intense pressures on electoral administrators. <p>Pursuant to this work, Wilks-Heeg et al. (2010) undertook the first major study of electoral registration in Britain for five years. This study established that:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • There had been a long-term decline in the completeness and accuracy of the electoral registers nationally, including a potentially dramatic decline in registration levels during the 2000s; • Local case studies, which found individual electoral registers to be between 73 and 94 per cent complete, reinforced these conclusions about likely under-registration levels; • Registration levels among young people, members of ethnic minority groups and private renters were particularly low and highlighted the need for targeted campaigns to improve registration rates. <p>During the period when the research was carried out, Dr Wilks-Heeg was Lecturer, and then Senior Lecturer, in Social Policy at the University of Liverpool. He was seconded part-time (0.5 FTE) to the Electoral Commission during 2009-10 and also served as the Director of Democratic</p>

Audit from 2009-12.

3. References to the research

The research which underpins this case study was undertaken with grant assistance from two sources. Dr Wilks-Heeg was the principal investigator in both cases.

- Joseph Rowntree Reform Trust (JRRT) 'Purity of Elections in the UK' (£9,995; 2007-08);
- Economic and Social Research Council 'The State of the Electoral Registers' (£35,000: 2009-10).

The primary published outputs arising from these two research grants were as follows:

- S. Wilks-Heeg (2008) [Purity of Elections in the UK: Causes for Concern](#) (York: Joseph Rowntree Reform Trust) ISBN: 0-9548902-3-X
- S. Wilks-Heeg (2009) [Treating voters as an afterthought? The legacies of a decade of electoral modernisation in the United Kingdom](#), *The Political Quarterly*, volume 80, issue 1. DOI: 10.1111/j.1467-923X.2009.01958.x
- S. Wilks-Heeg et al (2010) [Completeness and Accuracy of Electoral Registers in Great Britain](#). London: The Electoral Commission.
- S. Wilks-Heeg (2012) [Electoral registration in the United Kingdom: A literature review for the Cabinet Office Electoral Registration Transformation Programme, London](#): The Cabinet Office.

While the three reports were not peer-reviewed by academics, they were subject to extensive scrutiny following their publications, most notably in Parliament. Material in the Rowntree report formed the basis for Wilks-Heeg's 2009 article in *Political Quarterly*, a peer-reviewed ISI-ranked journal. The literature review undertaken by Dr Wilks-Heeg as part of the research for the Electoral Commission report was published separately, in a revised and updated form, by the Cabinet Office in February 2012. Publication of this latter report required the formal consent of Mr Mark Harper MP, then Minister for Constitutional Reform. The research programme on electoral registration undertaken with the Electoral Commission was guided by an internal project board, chaired by the EC's Director of Electoral Administration, and received specialist input from an External Reference Group made up of a mix of interested practitioners and academics, chaired by the EC's Deputy Chief Executive.

4. Details of the impact

Process through which research led to impact: A clear 'pathway' from the publication of the research through to impact can be identified. This sequencing may be summarised as follows:

Electoral fraud (JRRT grant)

- Extensive media coverage of the research findings, including front-page headline in *The Times*, live interview on the Today Programme, and citation of the work on Newsnight.
- Discussion of the findings in Parliament and in a House of Commons Select Committee (2008-09), including numerous questions to Ministers;
- A 'Stamp out Voting Fraud' campaign launched by the pressure group, Unlock Democracy, highlighting the concerns raised in Dr Wilks-Heeg's work and pressing for reforms based on his recommendations (2008-10);
- An Early Day Motion in the House of Commons, signed by 96 MPs from 6 different political parties, citing the research and urging the government to take action (2008);
- Invitations, arising from the Unlock Democracy campaign, for Dr Wilks-Heeg to attend a meeting with the Minister of State responsible for electoral matters (2008) and to present his findings to MPs and Peers (2009) ;
- Legislative change which initiated reforms of electoral registration in Great Britain (2009) via a late government amendment to the Political Parties and Elections Bill (2009);

Electoral registration (ESRC grant)

- Extensive media coverage of the research findings (2010), including coverage in all the broadsheets, on the Today programme and the BBC Daily Politics;
- Numerous discussions and citations of the findings in Parliament (2010-12);
- A highly-successful campaign, led by the Electoral Commission, to promote electoral registration among key target groups in the run-up to the 2010 General Election (2010);
- An invitation to Dr Wilks-Heeg to give evidence on electoral registration at House of Commons Select Committee sessions in September 2010 and September 2011;
- Media appearances by Dr Wilks-Heeg discussing the coalition's legislative proposals for electoral registration: Channel 4 News (29/09/2011); extended interview on BBC Radio 4's 'The Westminster Hour' (16/10/2011); article for Guardian ('Comment is Free') website (14/12/2011).
- An invitation to Dr Wilks-Heeg to speak at a British Academy Policy Forum event on individual electoral registration in December 2011 (alongside Mark Harper, Minister for Constitutional Reform, Jenny Watson, Chair of the Electoral Commission and others);
- Publication by the Cabinet Office in February 2012 of a revised version of a literature review originally completed by Dr Wilks-Heeg while working on this funded project (separate to the main research report published by the Electoral Commission).

Beneficiaries: Both the research on electoral fraud and electoral registration were taken up by others. As detailed above, the JRRT report led directly to a campaign led by Unlock Democracy. The electoral registration research, undertaken jointly with the Electoral Commission, resulted in the Commission's own campaigns team leading a successful campaign to promote electoral registration among under-registered groups (local authorities reported unprecedented additional registrations before the 2010 election, including Islington [+19,000], Leeds [+18,000] and Manchester [+7,000] – see: ["Remarkable" rise in number of people registering to vote](#), *The Independent*, 30 April 2010).

A range of key stakeholders commended the electoral registration research, including Michael Wills MP, Minister of State and John Bercow, Speaker of the House of Commons (letters to the Electoral Commission's Chair, Jenny Watson available on request). Dr Wilks-Heeg's research also informed the work of the Cabinet Office's Electoral Registration Transformation Programme and was cited by the Minister for Constitutional Reform in oral evidence to the Commons Political and Constitutional Reform Committee. Dr Wilks-Heeg provided written and oral evidence on electoral registration to the same select committee on two occasions.

Nature and evidence of impact: The research findings shaped policy development, ultimately contributing to legislative change. Electoral registration reforms initiated by the Labour government in 2009 came within a year of the publication of Dr Wilks-Heeg's initial findings. While others, most notably the Electoral Commission, had made the case for reforms since 2004, the government had previously been resistant to change and, given the timeline summarised above, it is evident that Wilks-Heeg's work had a clear, independent impact. Evidence of impact includes: the number of MPs who signed an Early Day Motion citing the research; the number of references to the research in Parliamentary debates, particularly during the passage of the Political Parties and Elections Act; and the knowledge of the relevant Minister of State about the contents of the report. Similarly, the citation of Dr Wilks-Heeg's subsequent work on electoral registration in the media, in parliament, in select committee reports and by government ministers are indicators of impact, particularly during the passage of the Electoral Registration and Administration Bill (now Act) through parliament in 2011-13.

5. Sources to corroborate the impact

1. On 29 April 2008, responding to a series of questions making direct reference to the JRRT-funded research (Wilks-Heeg, 2008), Michael Wills, Minister of State, Ministry of Justice said: "The integrity of our elections is paramount. I do not recognise the descriptions that you have just given. The Joseph Rowntree Foundation (sic) report is more balanced in all the detail than

the representations we have just heard. Of course there are issues (...) We are looking at the question of individual voter registration. We are not resisting it, but we have to be sure that any changes we make do not worsen the problem in another area" (cited in [Public Administration Select Committee, 2008](#)).

2. Citations of Dr Wilks-Heeg's research in Parliament, including extensive quotation of key conclusions, include *among others*: Peter Viggers MP, [Hansard, 8 May 2008, column 829](#); response of Bridget Prentice MP, Secretary of State for Justice, to question from David Crausby MP, [Hansard, 10 June 2008, column 221W](#); exchange between Lord Tyler and Lord Hunt (Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State, Ministry of Justice), [Lords Hansard, 25 June 2008, columns 1431-1433](#); exchange between Eleanor Laing MP, Jonathan Djanogly MP and Michael Wills MP, [Hansard, 19 November 2008, columns 317-19](#); Lord Bach, [Lords Hansard, 18 March 2009, column 289](#); David Evernet MP, [Hansard 16 January 2012, column 517](#); Mark Harper MP, Minister for Constitutional Reform, [9 February 2012, column 38ws](#).
3. [Early Day Motion \(EDM\) 199](#), 2008/09 Parliamentary session, tabled 9 December 2008, called on the government to introduce measures to tackle electoral fraud in Great Britain. The EDM cites "the recent report entitled *Purity of Elections in the UK: Causes for Concern*, published by the Joseph Rowntree Reform Trust Ltd which highlights how vulnerable the electoral system is to electoral fraud." It was signed by 96 MPs, including representatives of all three main parties as well as Plaid Cymru, the DUP, Respect and Independent MPs.
4. Both the House of Commons Library's Standard Note SN/PC/3667 on [Postal Voting and Electoral Fraud](#) (2011, pp.14-15) and the House of Commons Library's Research Paper on [The Electoral Registration and Administration Bill](#) (2012, pages 8, 13 and 24) make extensive reference to Dr Wilks-Heeg's work.
5. Dr Wilks-Heeg's evidence to the Political and Constitutional Reform Select Committee of the House of Commons on 9 September 2010 was cited in the committee's report of [7 October 2010](#) (Paragraphs 63, 104-6, 108-9, 112; Ev 42-48) and his evidence to the same committee on 8 September 2011 was cited in the committee's subsequent report of [4 November 2011](#) (Paragraph 47; Ev 1-12 and Ev 69-74).
6. The foreword to the [government's response to pre-legislative scrutiny on the Electoral Registration Bill](#), signed by Mark Harper, Minister for Constitutional Reform and Nick Clegg, Deputy Prime Minister, states: "We commissioned a literature review of research in this area from Dr Stuart Wilks-Heeg, a respected academic, which (...) adds further to the evidence base which informs our decisions"
7. Corroborating statement from the Director of Unlock Democracy outlining why and how the organisation took up the issues raised by Dr Wilks-Heeg's work on electoral fraud and campaigned for the recommendations made in his (2008) report for JRRT.
8. Corroborating statement from the Chair of the Electoral Commission describing the impact of the electoral registration research (Wilks-Heeg et al, 2010) on the Electoral Commission's public awareness and performance standards work, and noting its impact on parliamentary debate.
9. The Chair of the Political and Constitutional Reform Select Committee of the House of Commons can be contacted to confirm the relevance of the research outputs to inquiries undertaken by the Select Committee, including written and oral evidence provided by Dr Wilks-Heeg during 2010 and 2011.
10. The Chief Executive of the Association of Electoral Administrators can be contacted to confirm the influence of the research outputs in shaping debates about reforming electoral registration in Great Britain and on the work of electoral administrators.