



Economic
and Social
Research Council

Review of ESRC's Elections Portfolio Action Plan

Economic and Social Research Council

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Preface

ESRC funds five independent, academic studies of politics, elections and voting behaviour:

- the British Election Study (BES)
- the Welsh Election Study (WES)
- the Scottish Election Study (SES)
- the Northern Ireland Assembly Election Study (NIAES)
- the Northern Ireland General Election Study (NIES)

These studies have historically been funded through a mix of strategic and responsive funding mechanisms: the BES has been budgeted and planned for within ESRC, whereas the other studies have been funded on an ad hoc basis through ESRC's responsive mode funding. ESRC recognised that this unstructured support may have been negatively impacting the benefit of the studies. For example, it may have placed artificial constraints on the funding support. It may also have increased uncertainty related to unexpected electoral events and limiting coordination between studies.

ESRC conducted the Election Portfolio review to understand the strategic value and purpose of the studies to inform its future funding decisions and the development of an improved funding strategy and approach for this portfolio.

The review explored the distinct value and potential of election study data to research and policy over the long-term, and where it can enable significant impact. The core determinants of the value of academic election study data are:

- High quality: collected at scale according to robust methodologies
- Political independence: the measures are objective, and are widely perceived as such
- Consistency over time: a time series of core measures that detect long-term patterns
- Focused purpose and subject matter: detailed measures of many influences on political behaviour
- Alignment with UK political structures: data collection is tailored to the local context, in terms of content, how it is framed and the alignment of data collection with elections dates

These factors distinguish academic election study data from other data in the UK that are politically relevant, most notably polling data and data from other academic surveys. Academic election study data is particularly valuable to many groups with an interest in understanding, shaping, and influencing political systems, politics and democracy. Such groups include academics (domestic and international), the media, political parties, policymakers, polling agencies, lobby groups and charities.

Approach

The objectives of the review were to:

- 1) understand the strategic value and clarify the purpose of election study data
- 2) identify strengths and weaknesses of the existing ad hoc funding model
- 3) optimise investment in the election studies

To address these, ESRC engaged with leads of the ESRC-funded election studies, carried out 44 interviews with 47 other stakeholders across the key stakeholder groups for elections data, and conducted desk-based research. The review started in 2023 and continued to December 2025. Commissioning for the Scottish and Welsh election studies ran in parallel to this review (autumn 2024-summer 2025). Further details on the process and evidence gathered are outlined in the Key Findings from ESRC's Elections Portfolio Review.

The review identified several opportunities which have been categorised into

- priority actions, which informs immediate and short-term ESRC spending, and;
- longer-term considerations, which informs future ESRC spending and resourcing rounds.

The future activity in all proposed priority and longer-term considerations is subject to budget allocations and resourcing.

Priority actions

The ESRC will prioritise the following priority actions when shaping its future investment.

Improving foundational support for the Elections Portfolio

1. ESRC will continue support, through targeted commissioning, for the election studies to collect high quality, politically independent, time series data at scale, and ensure the studies remain well-integrated with and tailored to their local electoral context.

ESRC has found clear evidence for continued funding of these studies based on their value to the research community and society more widely. ESRC support remains critical for ensuring there is robust, open data collected on voting behaviour that is widely agreed to be politically independent and collected in the public interest, which supports understanding long-term societal changes. Having election studies situated within their study context was seen as highly valuable, particularly by non-academic stakeholders.

2. ESRC will endeavour to make dedicated funding available for data collection in the event of early elections, bearing and managing the financial and procedural risks, within the constraints of its budget allocation.

Early elections, especially those called at short notice, are a significant challenge for election study teams and ESRC. At each such event it is unclear whether funding will be available and, if so, whether and how that funding could be awarded in time to deliver associated data collection. This increases the risk of missing data collection on key electoral events due to administrative rather than strategic factors, impacting key stakeholders and reducing the academic value of the time-series. This commitment will minimise this risk and ensure election study teams can plan and engage with ESRC effectively.

3. ESRC will manage election studies as a strategic portfolio of data collections infrastructure and improve consistency in how they are funded to strengthen capacity building, innovation, research utility and long-term planning.

This includes:

- a) appointing study teams through an open competition for a period equivalent to two full electoral terms for their primary election, with funding for the second subject to ongoing performance and peer-review of updated plans
- b) creating a single Northern Ireland election study by combining the Northern Ireland Assembly and General election studies

The elections studies deliver comparable capabilities, have similar benefits and face many common challenges. There is significant potential to enhance and widen the use of the studies individually and collectively through managing them as a coherent strategic portfolio. Increasing consistency better reflects ESRC's position as a UK-wide research funder and helps to address acute challenges of uncertainty and capacity of the studies on elections in Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland.

The review demonstrated the clear value of stability in the studies and their teams, whilst recognising the importance of occasional changes in leadership to support innovation and capacity building. Providing fixed terms to study teams covering at least two elections will provide stability for long-term planning whilst maintaining opportunities for innovation and for the next generation of researchers to lead these studies.

Northern Ireland is not captured in BES due to its highly distinctive political context compared to the rest of the UK. ESRC currently supports two Northern Ireland studies: one examining elections to the assembly and the other, funded through the ESRC's responsive mode, focusing on the UK general election. Through creating a single study, ESRC hopes to improve efficiency, awareness of elections data in Northern Ireland and consistency with the Scottish and Welsh studies which collect some data at general elections at a more limited scale to complement BES.

Mitigating capacity challenges

4. ESRC will encourage election study teams to explore options to increase flexibility in both staff composition and recruitment by ensuring studies are open to recruiting and developing staff with expertise in other political systems, other areas of social science or non-researchers who have relevant technical skills.

Some of the devolved studies found it challenging to recruit and retain staff, leading to concerns about their sustainability despite their high value to non-academic partners. Part of the challenge is funding uncertainty which will be reduced through strategic and long-term investment (see priority actions 2 and 3). This is the model that has been successfully used for the BES for many decades. Contributors also suggested that challenges could be alleviated by increased openness to recruiting and developing individuals with expertise in other political systems, other areas of social science or other relevant skills. This could include recruiting people who may not be researchers but have relevant technical expertise to specialist roles, e.g. in fieldwork data collection, project or data management, communications. Studies will continue to need strong leadership and build teams that collectively have deep research expertise across the breadth of study activity and in their political system. Increasing flexibility about the requirements of individual team members - particularly in junior roles where developing staff is strongly encouraged - will expand the pool of potential staff, offering alternative paths to sustaining capacity and reducing reliance on traditional routes.

Improving the impact and use of Election Studies

5. ESRC will increase the impact of elections data by strengthening the facilitation and promotion of non-academic use of the data, as well as broadening its use across the academic community.

This will include requiring (prospective) study teams to:

- a) describe how they will support use of the data by the range of academic and non-academic stakeholders in bids to run the studies
- b) develop tailored engagement plans for the key non-academic stakeholder groups, covering informing study design and promoting study data and research based on it
- c) develop and clearly publicise schedules for data release with stakeholders
- d) adopt approaches for accelerating impact in the period following elections through, for instance, early data releases, initial findings, that maintain the actual and perceived rigour of the final data
- e) ensure there are tailored election data access routes and formats targeted at non-academic audiences

The review found that the election studies have a diverse and distinctive user base. Non-academic stakeholders, including polling organisations, political parties and the media, are

important users of both the data and the outputs from them. Compared to academic users, these users have different needs for the data and outputs and face different barriers to using them. They can make better use of the data and findings when:

- the data is current, i.e. released in a timely manner
- users are aware of when data will be published in advance
- alternative data access routes to academic data services are available, including study websites, due to various barriers such as awareness and time

The [ESRC Future Data Services review](#) highlighted that further engagement is needed between data services and users to support data discovery and access. Further work could be done to investigate these barriers and explore whether data services need to be engaging with these different user types. However, in the meantime, tailored election data access routes and formats should be maintained.

6. ESRC will grow the influence of the election studies on UK-level politics and policy.

This includes:

- a) ensuring the devolved studies sufficiently prioritise enabling research on UK-level issues such as devolution and the integrity of the UK
- b) increasing election studies' structured and proactive engagement with the UK-level political system to inform politics and policy development
- c) specifically capturing the impact and engagement of studies at UK-level through ongoing investment management

The review highlighted strong, structured non-academic engagement by the devolved studies within their nations. However, stakeholder interviews indicated that there is a lower awareness of the devolved studies across the UK as a whole. This is partly due to their focus on their nation, and partly due to factors beyond their control such as fiercer competition and wider interests at the UK-level. As the studies in devolved settings are being adopted as data infrastructures, ESRC seeks to broaden their use by academic stakeholders. There is an opportunity to increase the impact of the devolved studies by more effectively enabling research on topics such as UK devolution and the integrity of the UK.

BES has demonstrated some notable examples of impact, but stakeholders suggested there may be opportunities to increase its influence on UK politics and policymaking. Whilst recognising the profoundly different scale and nature of the political systems, all election studies may benefit from reflecting on whether aspects of the structured approach the devolved studies take to engagement could also be extended to the UK-level.

7. ESRC will require regular reporting of data usage statistics across all data access routes.

Data use statistics were obtained directly from UKDS for this review. However, with alternative data access routes for the studies available, the data presented is not a true reflection of use. To better understand the use of the studies within the community, improved data use statistics are needed.

8. ESRC will ask that election studies review data collection on social media consumption, exposure and its impact on political behaviour as part of upcoming funding processes.

Data on social media consumption, exposure and its impact on political behaviour featured frequently in stakeholder interviews as an area which would benefit from increased focus. The 2024 BES general election data collection included questions focused on social media. Initial findings suggested that the impact of social media on voting behaviour is less significant than expected. Therefore, an evaluation should be undertaken to assess the value of these recent additions and the wider body of social media data already collected. This would help ensure that the most important impacts of social media are captured proportionately.

Methods and delivery

9. ESRC will convene a task and finish group to examine the effectiveness of online panels and data collection between elections across the election study portfolio and consider appropriate models for maximising robust and efficient data collection.

The use of online panels for data collection has been increasing amongst election studies, driven by a growth in data collection across the election cycle. This has significant benefits that are highly valued by stakeholders, including improving data capturing the electorate's views in between elections and on other events such as local elections. However, there are also challenges. Some stakeholders highlighted methodological challenges of online panels. Several studies rely on a single online panel provider. While this may be justified, it could compound methodological challenges and may not represent the most efficient use of ESRC resources. The task and finish group will consider these issues and advise ESRC on how it may best balance the benefits and risks moving forward.

Longer-term considerations

Further to the priority actions, the review also identified a number of longer-term considerations for prioritisation as part of future ESRC spending and resourcing rounds.

Data

10. ESRC's primary strategic priorities for investment in new elections-related data will be:

- a) improving our understanding of missing voters and non-voters**
- b) supporting research on English devolution, in particular mayoral and other strategic authorities as these are established by the government**

All stakeholder groups identified the need to better understand missing and non-voters. However, stakeholders recognised that election studies may not be the most effective mechanism for studying this group. Other social surveys, such as Understanding Society, may be better placed to address this evidence gap.

Devolution within England has grown and is being [accelerated by the current government](#). Further power will be devolved to Strategic Authorities, many of which have comparable or greater populations than Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland. Understanding voting behaviour in Mayoral elections will become increasingly critical as power is devolved, both for understanding the impact of these reforms and enabling Strategic Authorities to deliver the intended benefits.

11. ESRC to consider commissioning further methodological work on the effective inclusion of ethnic minority groups in survey data collection.

There have been several targeted attempts to improve data collection on ethnic minorities in the elections space. However, they have faced significant challenges, and none has sufficiently secured continued support. Collecting data from ethnic minority populations is a common challenge across social surveys. Response rates are often lower among those groups, and their sample sizes may often be too small in general population surveys to support robust subgroup analysis. It may be more effective and provide greater value for money to investigate this issue across the ESRC data collections portfolio or through wider collaboration. As ethnic minorities are highly diverse, further work is also needed to identify key subgroups for understanding elections and political behaviour.

12. ESRC to consider how its broader work on qualitative data is applied to the elections portfolio.

ESRC is currently conducting wider work on supporting the collection, accessibility and use of qualitative data. ESRC will progress this work further before reflecting on how to evolve qualitative data collection in specific areas of the portfolio, including on elections.

Services: training and enabling use

13. Broaden and deepen the use of the data by supporting stakeholders with an interest in elections, independent of sector.

This includes:

- a) providing access to a service that collates, catalogues, and synthesises outputs from the election studies and subsequent research
- b) signposting and, if needed, establishing suitable training opportunities to enable them to use the data

The review identified various barriers to stakeholders using study outputs. The most common was insufficient skills for quantitative analysis to make effective use of the data. It is not within the remit of the election studies to provide quantitative training to the community, but a wider need across social science, which is best served by dedicated service investments. Signposting to relevant training would support greater awareness of these existing investments. The election studies will continue to provide some guidance and documentation to enable users to utilise the data.

Stakeholders also highlighted that the discovery of the data and related outputs could be improved. The distinctive user base, particularly non-academic users may benefit from a service that collates, catalogues and synthesises election study outputs and research. Should this be prioritised, the preference is to adapt an existing service rather than establish a new one. A recommendation to adapt an existing service aligns with the recommendations from the [ESRC Future Data Services review](#), which found that a proliferation of data discovery platforms had led to confusion within the research community. Adapting an existing service would provide greater value for money and reduce proliferation.