



Economic
and Social
Research Council

Review of ESRC's Elections Portfolio Key Findings

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Introduction

The UKRI Economic and Social Research Council (ESRC) funds five independent, academic studies of politics, elections and voting behaviour:

- **The British Election Study (BES):** BES collects data in England, Scotland and Wales and since 1964 has collected data immediately after every general election, whilst also collecting continuous data via their internet panel.
- **The Welsh Election Study (WES):** WES collects data on the devolved elections in Wales, referendums as well as more recently collecting data on the general elections in Wales.
- **The Scottish Election Study (SES):** SES collects data on the devolved elections in Scotland, referendums as well as on the general elections in Scotland, whilst also collecting more continuous data via online surveys.
- **The Northern Ireland Assembly Election Study (NIAES):** NIAES collects data on the Northern Ireland Assembly elections in Northern Ireland.
- **The Northern Ireland General Election Study (NIES):** NIES collects data on the general election in Northern Ireland.

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 funding mode. 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 could also have increased uncertainty related to unexpected electoral events and limiting coordination between studies.

ESRC therefore identified a need to review the election studies to better understand their strategic value and purpose. This review will inform future funding decisions and the development of an improved funding strategy and approach for ESRC's portfolio of election studies in the UK.

The objectives of the review were to:

- 1) **Understand the strategic value and clarify the purpose of election study data:** Explore the distinct value and potential of election study data to research and policy over the long term, and where it can enable significant impact, with a view to enable ESRC to specify the collective purpose of its investments in election studies and what they are funded to achieve.
- 2) **Identify strengths and weaknesses of the existing ad hoc funding model:** Understand the main challenges to realising the strategic value of the studies under the current model, and the key strengths any changes should seek to maintain.
- 3) **Optimise investment in the election studies:** Examine how ESRC should utilise its resources to best deliver the distinct benefits of elections data over the long term, including how ESRC should structure its funding for:
 - a) **Data collection:** what data should be collected, from whom and when.
 - b) **Methodological innovation:** for example, around new electoral events, to better capture target groups or alternative data collection approaches.

- c) **People:** improving capacity and capability for electoral research and running the election studies themselves, and in time enhancing the inclusivity and diversity of users and study teams.
- d) **Increasing utilisation and impact:** widening the user base for elections data within academia (notably outside pure elections research) and in other sectors.
- e) **Enabling coordination and collaboration:** ensuring the elections studies are able to work together where that could bring significant additional value.

The key questions associated with each objective can be found in [Annex 1](#).

ESRC has engaged with the current leads of the ESRC-funded election studies, and carried out 44 interviews with 47 other stakeholders across the key stakeholder groups. Desk-based research has also taken place. 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).

The ESRC review team would like to thank all contributors, whose support and engagement with the project has led to useful findings and recommendations for ESRC.

Key Findings

This section of the report summarises the learning broadly aligned with each review objective.

1. Understanding the distinct strategic value and purpose of election study data

The core determinants of the value of academic election study data are:

- a) **High quality:** collected at scale according to robust methodologies
- b) **Political independence:** the measures are objective, and are widely perceived as such
- c) **Consistency over time:** a time series of core measures that detect long-term patterns
- d) **Focused purpose and subject matter:** detailed measures of many influences on political behaviour
- e) **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 significant politically relevant data in the UK, most notably polling data and data from other academic surveys. Polling data is diverse but often more targeted. Data is collected with a more specific use in mind, so measures can be less wide ranging. Furthermore, as it is focused on shorter term needs, it may limit long-term consistency. Depending on who commissioned the polling and why, polls can also be less politically independent and of lower quality. This limits their utility for academic research and for retrospective analysis by wider stakeholder groups. Robust polling approaches also rely on election study data, as outlined in the next section.

Other academic surveys, such as the ESRC longitudinal studies or British Social Attitudes (BSA), have a broader focus in terms of both subject matter and geography. Consequently, the broader focus limits their ability to be designed for political research, particularly on elections of devolved parliamentary systems. Importantly, they are not set up to consistently align their primary data collection with election dates, which are sometimes unpredictable. In contrast, prioritising data collection at the time of the relevant elections enables ESRC-funded election studies to more reliably capture the reasons behind voting behaviour, close to when those decisions are made. These other surveys can complement data from election studies. For instance, longitudinal studies offer the capability for more robust causal analysis on a wider array of variables, and BSA captures many influences on political behaviour from a large sample annually, between elections.

There are also other, typically smaller, politically focused surveys distinct from election studies. These include surveys of party members, candidates or election agent surveys.

Academic election study data is valuable to many groups with an interest in understanding, shaping, and influencing political systems, politics and democracy. In the next section and throughout the report, we highlight use of the existing data by academics within and outside UK, the media, political parties, policymakers, polling agencies, lobby groups and charities.

2. Identifying the strengths and weaknesses of existing elections data support

Existing use and impact

There is strong evidence of impactful uses of the existing election studies across the expected stakeholder groups. The below table describes a selection of ways in which different stakeholder groups have used the data and research based upon it.

Stakeholder group	Their use of UK election data and research based on it
Academics (domestic)	- Understanding how social backgrounds shape voting patterns, such as the diminishing influence of class - Examining once in a generation realignment in how people vote, such as before and after the referendum on EU membership
Academics (international)	- As high-quality benchmarks for developing election studies in other countries, and for international comparison - Research into the effectiveness of and impact of devolution
Polling industry	- Identifying the causes of polls going wrong, and how to improve. - Baseline data when starting up new polling agencies - As a robust source of data to underpin more accurate polls, such as multilevel regression with poststratification (MRP) polls
The media	- As a source of news stories to improve public discourse and understanding of electoral events - As a source of baseline data for calculating notional election results when constituencies change - Identifying the salience of different political issues - Informing and shaping elections-related coverage
Political parties	- Identifying the key reasons for election losses - Supporting understanding of key issues for the electorate and the electoral landscape and informing design of policies to addressing them - Providing robust evidence on the level of support for constitutional change
Policymakers	- As evidence of public opinion in policy debates, particularly in devolved settings with more limited polling - Understanding the reasons behind low voter turnout
Lobby groups and charities	As evidence in campaigns to influence changes to the electoral system
Educators	Teaching students about voting behaviours

These and other uses have led to a variety of impacts aimed at improving the health and effectiveness of the UK democratic system, such as;

- political parties' better understanding of why people voted the way they did and consequently how they should evolve
- more accurate up-to-date reads of public opinion through better polling
- improved public discourse and understanding of electoral events.

There is also strong potential for positive economic impact through the use of the data by the polling industry, which may merit further specific analysis. Further details on specific uses and impacts achieved are outlined below.

Similarities and differences between the studies and untapped potential

The Scottish, Welsh and Northern Ireland election studies frequently collaborate, enabling mutual learning and enhancing data comparability across devolved administrations and elections. They typically maintain regular, structured engagement with a wide range of non-academic stakeholders, and both the data they provide, and the research outputs derived from them are highly valued by these groups. However, whilst supporting wider academic research is considered a priority for the teams, use by UK academics is lower in comparison with British Election Study (BES). Yet, there is some international use for research, especially into devolution and nationalism.

In contrast, BES is primarily oriented towards academic use. It is a key international resource for benchmarking, and has substantial use by the UK academic community. There are some notable ad hoc examples of its use by non-academics, but structured engagement with and use by these groups appears more limited than is the case with the devolved election studies. It is unclear whether, or to what extent, this reflects approaches taken by the study team, or differences in the political system, such as the greater breadth and depth of information available at the UK level, wider geographic coverage, and competing priorities, which ESRC recognises as potential barriers.

Conversely, use of the devolved studies by non-academic stakeholders at the UK level remains limited, despite the relevance of these data to issues such as devolution and the integrity of the UK. This suggests there may be opportunities across all election studies to refine approaches for UK-level stakeholder engagement and promote wider use of their data. Building connections, relationships and networks at this level is essential.

Each study makes its data openly available at least via the UK Data Service. BES, SES and NIAES also provide data through their own websites and/or GitHub. The openness and ease of access are key factors enhancing use of the data. In the case of BES, it also provides a [data playground](#), aiming to facilitate less technical use of the data. There is significant opportunity for this learning on data accessibility to be more effectively shared across election studies.

BES and SES also include supplementary data collection that takes place continuously or more regularly between elections. In the case of BES, this allows researchers to study changes within individuals over time. These data collections are typically secured from the same single supplier in the UK. This has led some stakeholders to question whether such data collection is efficient and sufficiently robust, particularly because, with the current model, there could be overlap in samples between election studies.

The Scottish and Welsh election studies also capture information on general elections. This is not the case for the Northern Ireland Assembly Election Study, as ESRC has funded the Northern Ireland General Election Study independent of the British Election Study due to its highly distinctive politics compared to the rest of the UK. Combining funding for the assembly and general election study data in Northern Ireland would bring the approach slightly closer to Scotland and Wales.

A further area of untapped potential across all studies was on the influence of social media use on voting. This may involve reflecting on the appropriate balance of questions focused on use of social media and traditional media. However, progress is being made in this area, with recent changes to the British Election Study questionnaire content.

Challenges and barriers to running election studies effectively

The most significant challenge raised by some study teams, particularly acute for the devolved studies, is capacity to deliver election studies. It is increasingly unclear where the future leaders of these infrastructures may come from. Some teams indicated the supply of early career research professionals and PhD students is constrained, a concern that was also highlighted by some stakeholders. However, wider engagement undertaken as part of this review suggests that the UK has a substantial pool of quantitative and election researchers overall, although expertise is unevenly distributed geographically.

Another challenge is the difficulty of planning studies around elections when their dates are uncertain, even though these studies often last several years. The current approach means that teams are uncertain whether there will be funding available if additional elections occur or if they occur early, risking missing a key data collection point. This uncertainty can also exacerbate challenges around retaining staff on the projects.

3. Opportunities for optimisation of and step changes in election study

Data collection

There was strong support across all stakeholder groups for improving data on non-voters and missing voters (people missing from and disengaged with elections), with the aim of strengthening democracy and encouraging participation.

Stakeholders, particularly in academia and the polling industry, identified ethnic minorities as key groups for whom more robust election study data is needed. Although several efforts have been made to improve data availability on ethnic minority populations, these initiatives have not been sustained. Collecting effective data from ethnic minority populations is a common challenge with social surveys, both in terms of lower response rates among this group as well as the challenge of small groups in general population surveys enabling sub-group analysis.

Further data on electoral events related to English devolution, such as mayoral and local elections, was identified as a future priority, most notably by non-academic stakeholders. More localised data collections across the four nations beyond English devolution was also highlighted, whilst there has been some limited data collection on local elections by existing investments based on their interactions with national politics. As [mayoral and other strategic authorities with significant new powers are established by the government](#), understanding and enabling effective democracy at that level is increasing in strategic importance. This would contribute to the government's mission to kickstart economic growth through devolution of power across England.

Linking elections data to smart data, primarily from social media, was suggested, as online interactions are increasingly critical for understanding voting choices and political behaviour. This is likely to be challenging given the difficulties accessing social media data for research in general.

Qualitative data and its value to enhance quantitative election study data was also raised by some stakeholders.

Methodological innovation

Those engaged in the review suggested that innovation would be most effectively promoted through open competition to run the election studies. While there was broad support for methodological innovation, limited views were provided on how data collection methods should evolve in practice. Although further investigation is required, this may indicate that ESRC should not directly specify what methodological approach is used for a particular study and leave this to the applicants, and the panel to determine the best approach. Nonetheless, methodological rigour and innovation should remain important parts of the election studies and study teams should be encouraged to learn from one another and the wider community.

People

Study teams identified stability of funding and support, both direct and indirect, for PhD students and early careers staff as key to addressing capacity to deliver election studies. Stakeholders more generally suggested that additional flexibility in how researchers and professional staff can be involved would be beneficial. They also highlighted the value of making appropriate use of specialist staff, such as data managers, to support data management activities and enable academic staff to focus on questionnaire design, analysis and dissemination. In addition, stakeholders emphasised the importance of extending opportunities for early-career researchers to lead election study awards and participate in their governance.

There is clear support for ensuring the capacity is distributed across each electoral system in the UK. To deliver meaningful research data for the key stakeholders in each system, election study teams need to have a high degree of knowledge and understanding of their relevant electoral context. This is usually, though not exclusively, strongly facilitated by some or all the team being embedded in the relevant geographic area. This also supports engagement with localised stakeholders.

Increasing utilisation and impact

Stakeholder engagement plans should be developed for the distinct non-academic audiences and examined as part of the assessment of election study proposals. These should account for acute, bespoke needs from each group. Common needs include clear communication of data release schedules and ensuring accessible routes for non-academic users to obtain data, such as through the study website as well as the UK Data Service (UKDS). Additionally, initial findings should be communicated through a range of outputs that meet the needs and skills of different user groups.

Further impact could be achieved through improving the discoverability of election study outputs and enabling users with limited academic training to access and use the data effectively. This could be facilitated with tools such as the BES data playground, and by providing upskilling opportunities.

The period in the weeks following an election, but not immediately after it, was identified as one where election studies may be able to provide more information at a critical time for understanding the results of elections. The Scottish Election Study 2021, for example,

created an election report shortly after the election along with infographics for journalists and teachers.

Enabling coordination and collaboration

There is scope to increase the degree to which the election studies coordinate on content, whether via common themes, questions and standards. As demonstrated by collaboration between the devolved election studies, this enhances the utility of the studies collectively. Such coordination should be targeted at areas where comparative research would be of particularly high value, as retaining sufficient flexibility to tailor each study to its electoral context is also critical.

There is also significant scope to build collaboration and pool resources to tackle shared challenges and opportunities, including capacity building and effective stakeholder engagement.

1. Background

Since 2021, the Data Strategy and Infrastructure programme at Economic and Social Research Council (ESRC) have identified a need for an in-depth ESRC election studies portfolio review to improve the investment structure and funding model of its election studies portfolio, and to consider interactions and alignment between the studies in this portfolio. The team have identified several challenges and opportunities in how these studies are currently run, including for example how to manage uncertainty associated with researching elections due to the risk of snap elections and how to support electoral research considering changes in the UK's electoral landscape.

This review has been conducted by colleagues at the Data Strategy and Infrastructure programme and aims to understand the strategic value and purpose of this data to inform our future funding and in turn the development of an improved funding strategy and approach for the ESRC's portfolio of election studies in the UK. This review aims to provide evidence and recommendations for ESRC to consider in its way forward.

1.1. The ESRC election studies portfolio

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

- **The British Election Study (BES):** BES is one of the longest running election studies in the UK and also world-wide. Since the first study in 1964, BES surveys have taken place immediately after every general election, and between elections since 2014. BES collects data in England, Wales and Scotland, but not in Northern Ireland.
- **The Welsh Election Study (WES):** Welsh Election Studies have examined voting and attitudes at every devolved election since 1999, including the 1979, 1997 and 2011 referendums, and the 2019 and 2024 UK General Elections.
- **The Scottish Election Study (SES):** The SES has run in-depth surveys at every devolved election in Scotland since 2007, including the 1997 Scottish devolution referendum and the 2014 Scottish Independence Referendum, as well as the 2017, 2019 and 2024 UK General Elections. In 1999 and 2003 elections, questions were asked as a module on the Scottish Social Attitudes Survey.
- **The Northern Ireland Assembly Election Study (NIAES):** Studies following the Northern Ireland Assembly elections have been conducted since 1998.
- **The Northern Ireland General Election Study (NIES):** Post-general election surveys have been conducted since 2010.

The surveys take place after elections and include a core set of questions asked at each election.

British Election Study (BES) has received continuous funding from ESRC for over 60 years. It sits within the Data Strategy and Infrastructure programme, and has therefore benefited from strategic funding, with its funding for the study consistently built into ESRC's budgetary decision-making.

In contrast, the devolved election studies have traditionally been supported through ESRC's highly competitive responsive mode funding. This means that there is no guarantee of either

an application being submitted in time or of it being successful, making funding for these studies more ad hoc and piecemeal. The devolved election studies compete against a wide range of alternative activities including standard research grants. However, direct competition, whereby applicants compete to deliver the same activity, is more effective in allowing alternative delivery approaches to be compared, and the strongest proposal to be selected for funding.

The below table shows the timeline of data collection from the five studies in line with elections since 1997. It does not include information around continuous data collection activities outside of elections, such as the BES Internet Panel, or the SES Scoop Monitor.

	1997	1998	1999	2001	2003	2005	2007	2010	2011	2014	2015	2016	2017	2019	2021	2022	2024
BES																	
SES			*		*												
WES																	
NIAES																	
NIES																	

	Indicates data collection for a UK General Election
	Indicates data collection for a devolved election
	Indicates data collection for a referendum

* Data collected via Scottish Social Attitudes Survey

1.2. Other elections data

Whilst the focus of our review are the election studies within ESRC's portfolio, there are other data sources available to the community.

Official data

The key source for official data, particularly within England and Wales, is the House of Commons Library, which makes research, briefings, and data available to the public for free via the government website. Whilst the focus of this data is elections results, detailed data is also collected on candidates and parties.

Alongside the House of Commons Library, the devolved governments also make data available on election results via their websites, with a range of breakdowns. The electoral register is also available to be accessed at different levels for a fee, which can create a barrier for certain user groups.

Polls

Polls have become commonplace within our elections, providing the public and political parties with public opinion at that time. They are widely used by politicians, the media and the public. Whilst there is considerable polling data available to the public, most polls are commissioned by private organisations, groups and individuals. This can create disparity in data availability and perceptions of bias. Furthermore, whilst opinion polls are an important

tool, the full details on the methodological processes underpinning them are not always publicly available. It is therefore not uncommon for polls to be challenged on the robustness of their data collection approach. Each of these factors limit the quality, reliability, and trustworthiness of polling for academic research purposes. Lastly, it would be beneficial for the providers of academic and polling data to maintain awareness of each other's work to avoid duplication as far as possible.

Other surveys and resources

The election studies are not the only structured resources available to study elections and political behaviour. Other resources include:

- **Ethnic Minority British Election Study:** Representative survey, which was previously funded by ESRC, dedicated to understanding political and social attitudes of ethnic minorities.
- **The Representative Audit of Britain:** It brings together information on parliamentary candidates. It was previously funded by ESRC.
- **[The Elections Centre](#):** It has a comprehensive database of local election results. It has received some ESRC funding in the past.
- **[Electoral Integrity Project](#):** It collects data on the quality of elections and compares elections worldwide.
- **[The Qualitative Election Study of Britain](#):** Longitudinal qualitative dataset covering multiple elections and referendums, which has received various funding.

Other social surveys, such as Understanding Society, the UK birth cohorts, the European Social Survey, World Values Survey, British and Scottish Social Attitudes Surveys, and Northern Ireland Life and Times Survey, collect data relevant to elections and understanding political behaviour. These are more general social surveys on a wider variety of topics and are conducted at set intervals, irrespective of the timing of elections. Nonetheless, these surveys do provide a robust understanding of the attitudes, values and beliefs of the UK or its constituent nations.

Some of these resources also support longitudinal analysis. For instance, Understanding Society and the UK birth cohorts support longitudinal analysis of political and social attitudes and behaviour. Understanding Society collects data on diverse topics including political and social attitudes and behaviours, including voter turnout and choice, party support, and political trust. The UK birth cohorts collect data on political interest, participation, trust and vote choice.

There is a substantial volume of data and information that could support research and policymaking. It includes social media adverts, complaints, electoral boundaries data, and campaign expenditure. However, these types of data are currently often unstructured, limiting their use by the research community. Whilst this falls outside the scope of this review, it is important to note the considerable untapped potential of these resources. For further information on this see [The UK's Electoral Data Democratic Deficit report](#).

1.3. Approach and methods

This review started in 2023, and has since gathered evidence through a range of stakeholder interviews and desk-based research. Internal ESRC colleagues and the ESRC's advisory group for data infrastructure and methods have also contributed to the design of the review.

Stakeholder interviews were conducted between May 2024 and December 2025. Stakeholder engagement took place prior to and after the 2024 UK General Election. Commissioning for the Scottish and Welsh election studies ran in parallel to this review (Autumn 2024-Summer 2025).

Stakeholder engagement through interviews was conducted to gather in-depth insights, perspectives and concerns from the current election study teams, users of the studies and their data, and the wider community. It provided a detailed understanding of needs, expectations and issues. The interviews have also enabled the review team to explore opportunities for improvement and gather feedback and suggestions from relevant stakeholders.

The stakeholder engagement has included regular discussions with the current leads of the ESRC-funded election studies, as well as a total of 44 interviews with 47 other stakeholders in the academic and non-academic sectors. 75 stakeholders in total were contacted for contribution. The stakeholders contributing to this review span the UK and include representatives of academia, media, political parties, policymakers, polling agencies, lobby groups and charities, international academic input was also sought. A breakdown of stakeholders can be found in Annex 2.

The desk-based research focused on information-gathering on the UK's electoral and political data landscape as well as evidence-gathering regarding the use of the ESRC-funded election studies. Additionally, international equivalents of the UK's election studies have been researched to learn how election studies are funded and used internationally. This review also considers findings from any relevant reviews conducted previously, including a review of the British Election Study commissioned by ESRC in 2006 and the British Election Study 2021 mid-term review.

2. Value, impact and use of ESRC-funded election studies

The first section of this report covers the status quo relating to the ESRC-funded election studies. Through this review, ESRC wanted to understand what the current value of the election studies is, including aspects to be maintained in future ESRC commissioning. ESRC also sought to develop a comprehensive understanding of how the election studies are currently used, and what impact is being achieved through its election portfolio. Finally, this first section investigates whether there are any barriers preventing more comprehensive use of election study data and how the studies are currently performing against community needs.

2.1. Value and contributions of election studies

This review sought to understand the value of the ESRC-funded election studies, especially the added value that funding these studies provides beyond the existence of other sources of data, particularly polling. The review has found clear evidence of the value of the election studies. Many interviewees use the term ‘gold standard’ when referring to them, reflecting the high value placed on their use of randomised survey methods to collect data on elections and political attitudes.

What sets the election studies apart from other data sources is the quality, robustness and reliability of the data. The election studies are seen as independent and authoritative and are often used as a benchmark for other sources of data. The election studies are unique in their scale, including the size of their samples, the number and depth of questions asked. Stakeholders also emphasised the value of the time series data, enabling change over time to be tracked. This is particularly valuable during times of change and volatility. The studies are also valuable due to their ease of use and accessibility as open source.

Moreover, stakeholders highlighted the importance of having specific studies within each of the UK nations. Each nation has their own specific governance, policy and issues, and consequently, require questions and topics built for its own context. Having a study team who understand and are usually situated in the specific context also supports this. Having election studies dedicated to data collection in each of these nations is important to understand not only these nations but also the UK as a whole. On the other hand, many interviewees highlighted lower levels of data availability, or too small a sample size for the data to be useable, in Northern Ireland, Wales and Scotland.

Academic and research value

The key added value of the ESRC-funded election studies lies in the continuity of their core questions and themes. Whilst these may evolve to reflect changing contexts, the election studies data enables research across time and analysis of long-term trends over time. The election studies are uniquely able to provide this consistency, enabling researchers to explore changes in voting behaviour and what may have driven it. Other data providers, notably polling companies, need to focus more on topical issues and the creation of headline news, as funding can depend on the amount of reach.

More general social surveys, such as Understanding Society and the British Social Attitudes survey, cover a wide variety of topics. Data collected on voting behaviour as part of those surveys is limited compared to the election studies. Importantly, stakeholders have noted

that election study data provides much broader insights beyond just voting behaviour, bringing value to a much wider community of scholars.

Value for the polling industry

BES data is particularly valuable to the polling industry, as BES data is at the foundation of polling models and approaches for many companies, and widely used as a benchmark or baseline. In the polling industry, there is clear evidence of the real economic impact arising from BES. This review has found that, through access to BES data, new companies are able to set up polling functions which they would not be able to do without free access to such data. Users of polling data, such as the civil society, are also indirect beneficiaries. Through its use in the polling industry, BES supports a wider ecosystem.

Value for media, policy and political stakeholders

The election studies help journalists better understand the salience of different issues and the views of the electorate. Through access to election studies data, decisions as to what to report can be informed by evidence.

Similarly, data from the election studies informs policy and the understanding of key issues. Access to data about voters is essential as a starting point for discussions in policy, and more widely in the public sphere. This is especially true in Wales where the Welsh Parliament may not always feature prominently in national media coverage or public discourse. Stakeholders described data from the Welsh Election Study as vital for understanding public attitudes and informing debate on issues affecting Wales. More broadly, the election studies provide devolved institutions with evidence that can support more effective public engagement and communication.

Finally, smaller political parties with less resources often need to use freely available data. The election studies provide these parties with valuable sources of information to enable a better, broader understanding of the electoral landscape and potentially inform their decisions and actions. Notably, we also find evidence of larger political parties using election study data.

International

Data from the election studies is used internationally. First, large studies such as BES are used as a benchmark on methods. Second, a long-standing funding commitment has not only helped ensure the provision of high-quality data, but also establish BES as a highly regarded survey in the UK and internationally, attracting use from other countries. It has even attracted researchers from other countries to move to the UK to join a team leading the election studies. Lastly, there is considerable value in having dedicated devolved data collection for international comparative research, as the UK provides an interesting case for territorial and devolved politics.

Societal value

Many interviewees highlighted the broad societal impact of the election studies. While there are a variety of polls available, there is a distinct need for independent, publicly funded, and high-quality data about voters. Overall, data of this kind is important for democracy where a country should be informed of its electorate. The BES plays a particularly important role in

this regard, as a face-to-face data collection using a random probability sample can provide a uniquely robust source of evidence on voter turnout and electoral participation.

Summary

The election studies provide independent, publicly funded and internationally recognised 'gold standard' data that support research, polling, journalism, policymaking and public debate. Their long-term continuity enables robust analysis of political and electoral change over time, while their open-access approach ensures that the benefits of these data extend beyond academia. By providing high-quality evidence on elections, voters and democratic processes, including within the UK's devolved political systems, the studies play a unique role in supporting democratic understanding and informed decision-making.

2.2. Current use of the data

The election studies are distinctive amongst ESRC data infrastructures for their strong focus on a particular topic - elections. Consequently, their user community is more concentrated than that of many other data infrastructures, comprising researchers, policymakers, journalists and others with an interest in elections and public opinion. This user community can broadly be divided into academic and non-academic users.

Academic use

The primary academic user base for the elections studies is the [Elections, Public Opinion and Parties \(EPOP\)](#) community. EPOP is a specialist group within the Political Studies Association (PSA) and has over 250 members, making it one of the largest groups within the PSA. It is made up of both academics and non-academic members. There is also notable use of this data in other academic fields beyond the EPOP community including psychology, economics, geography, history and sociology.

The election studies are mainly used within academia to understand voting and political behaviour including political participation. They are also used to understand nationalism and identities, devolution, territorial politics, political and social attitudes, political party support and key electoral events such as the UK exit from the European Union and the Scottish Independence referendum.

Interviews suggested that the data and findings from the devolved studies are predominantly used within their study setting. It also indicated that they could be better harnessed to address wider issues across the UK, such as the integrity of the UK. Data downloads from the UKDS, however, demonstrate that the data is being used across the UK and internationally. International interviewees highlighted that the data from devolved election studies are particularly in use in international discussions on devolution and territorial politics, such as studies of Quebec, Flanders and Catalonia. One stakeholder highlighted how the data from Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland provide good examples of balancing the distinct but interrelated politics of the devolved administrations, whilst recognising the relationship with one another and the wider UK.

Additionally, the election studies data is used to support training and capacity building within universities. The data are featured on both substantive and methodological academic courses.

Academic stakeholders are much more likely to use the raw data outputs from the studies, as well as making use of academic research based on the data.

Non-academic use

The election studies have diverse and unique engagement with non-academic stakeholders. As part of this review, we identified five distinct groups as outlined below. Each of these groups uses these resources differently.

- Polling companies
- Media
- Policymakers and government
- Politicians
- Lobby organisation and think tanks

Polling companies

During stakeholder discussions, BES was the main study referenced for use in polling, whilst data from Northern Ireland was also referenced. Polling is a highly visible part of our electoral process, and election studies have an important part in supporting this.

In particular, BES has a clear use and impact in the commercial polling sector. Polling companies predominately use the raw data outputs to support their work as a benchmark for data quality. This includes supporting weighting schemes, sampling targets, and validating turnout. An example of the use of BES data is through Multilevel Regression and Post-stratification polling, whereby polling companies combine their data with other large scale data sources to make estimates about specific groups¹. Additionally, one relatively young organisation referenced how BES data was vital for them to set up their polling function from scratch. This demonstrates that BES data is not only vital as a benchmark for data quality but also vital to support the set-up of new organisations.

SES has also been mentioned as useful to understand likely voting intentions.

Media

The election studies attract significant media attention, and study teams are highly engaged with the media both directly and indirectly. Stakeholders in the media indicated that these studies and their teams are highly valuable resources, with their research and data providing evidence and support to their work as well as enabling deeper dives into long-term trends and changes.

Data journalists are a common user within this group, often using the raw data. Outputs from the election studies can both be stories on their own, but they also provide further context and support to ongoing discussions. The election study data was highlighted as a trusted source of information with rigorous methodology. BES data make a significant contribution to election coverage, and insights from the data are used by major UK broadcasters including ITV. The ITV News Editor wrote that BES contributions were “central to our election and referendum programmes, and provided unique benefits to viewers - informing them earliest of results - and crucially, playing a fundamental role in ITV's coverage in explaining results in a clear, compelling and rigorous way and bringing clarity to

¹ <https://ukandeu.ac.uk/the-facts/what-is-an-mrp-poll/>

the most complex issues of our time for viewers around the UK"². More generally, it was suggested that, whilst studies may not be directly referenced, the data have often indirectly influenced content produced by the media.

In Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland, media coverage is often produced at the devolved level, tailored to the distinct political and policy contexts of each nation. The devolved study teams have close relationships to relevant media communities covering devolved politics, and are widely respected within the communities. In contrast, at the UK level media, BES is better known and more frequently used than the other election studies. There may be opportunities to increase the visibility and use of the devolved studies within UK-wide media. However, there are challenges with gaining traction at the UK level, including greater competition and a wider range of issues competing for media interest.

Media stakeholders reported drawing on a range of resources, including raw data, the BES Data Playground, and outputs produced by study teams and the wider academic community. The resources used often depended on the analytical skills and capacity available. Stakeholders also highly valued opportunities to engage directly with study teams.

Policyholders and government

The review found stronger evidence of engagement with election study data among policy and government practitioners in the devolved governments than in the UK Government. There was evidence that the devolved governments have used both the raw data and other outputs from their respective studies. The study teams have also built strong relationships with policymakers and government, with direct engagement between these groups seen as highly valuable.

At the UK Government level, however, limited use was identified in this review. Stakeholders generally considered this to be an accurate reflection of current levels of engagement. However, there is evidence of some use by some smaller parties and by the House of Commons Library, which use BES data in briefings and to respond to queries from MPs.

Politicians

Politicians typically rely on information provided by their own teams, which may draw on raw election study data, outputs from the studies, or research based on these resources. These studies can give politicians and their parties a better understanding of what happens in elections and informing their decision-making and actions.

It was reported that BES research has been used by the Labour party to inform their strategy and understanding, campaign resource allocation and post-election reviews. The 2019 Labour Together Review used BES to understand Labour's decline in support. For further details, please see the [University of Manchester REF21 submission](#). Various other examples are found throughout the review exercise, demonstrating direct use and engagement. Some of these are explored in the following section.

More evidence of use was found among smaller political parties, whilst ESRC recognises the significant effort made especially by the devolved studies to engage with all parties. There is potential for greater use of election study outputs by politicians, particularly given unequal

² [Impact case study: Results and submissions : REF 2021](#)

access to data and analytical resources across parties, as well as the growing importance of data-driven campaigning³.

Lobby organisation and think tanks

Long-running data from the election studies is important for lobby organisations and think tanks. These organisations have used election study data and other outputs to support their work, including efforts to influence policymakers and public debates. The data have also been used as evidence on consultations for other organisations. The election study data has a role in setting policy conversations, through analysis provided by the study teams and the wider academic community.

Due to the time required to release findings from the election studies, these organisations may rely on polling companies or conduct their own polling when rapid statistics are needed. Some organisations have their own local offices to consider different political contexts. For them, the devolved studies are particularly valuable. In addition to raw data and the BES data playground, these stakeholders found academic analysis and outputs from the election studies to be useful resources. Their direct engagement with the study teams appeared more limited than other stakeholder groups.

Insights from UKDS data on downloads

As part of the review, ESRC obtained data on the number of data downloads from the UKDS for each of the election studies, covering the period from 2002 to 2024. The requested data include all datasets available through the UK Data Service (UKDS), as identified from study websites, UKDS holdings, and discussions with current study teams. A list of study references included are found in Annex 3. Records on open data received from UKDS were not included in the analysis due to no information on users and projects being available. Additionally, data was not available on WES 2016 at the time of the analysis. The information obtained is summarised in the table below.

Table 1: Number of unique users and projects across the UK election studies from UKDS downloads (2002-2024).

Study	Unique users	Unique projects
BES	2699	2934
NIAES	72	74
NIES	180	189
SES	628	686
WES	180	206

UKDS is only one route through which users access election study data. Many users download the data directly from elections study websites or access it directly from study teams. For example, BES report, in their most recent investment monitoring to ESRC, that 9,156 data downloads from their website between 1 October 2024 and 1 April 2025 - far exceeding the UKDS download number. In their 2021 mid-term review, they reported 30,000 downloads of BES data files from 1 April 2019. This means that the UKDS data on the

³ https://eprints.lse.ac.uk/72066/1/Anstead_Data-driven%20campaigning_2017.pdf

election study data download is likely to be a significant undercount. For this reason, this review mainly focuses on overarching patterns and findings regarding data access and use.

BES has the greatest number of unique users and projects followed by SES. BES post-election face-to-face surveys are the most used. Yet, there is considerable use of the regular panel study data, reinforcing stakeholder comments on the value of more continuous data collection.

Whilst the number of projects and users for the devolved studies appears relatively low, these studies have historically been funded as research projects rather than infrastructure investments. Consequently, award sizes have often been smaller than those associated with research infrastructure, limiting the resources available for engagement and activities to promote use. Furthermore, the absence of long-term funding certainty may have made it more difficult to maintain the continuity of user-facing resources, such as study websites, and to build sustained awareness among potential users. Importantly, compared with the BES, the potential user base within Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland is smaller, reflecting their smaller populations and research communities.

Based on the data provided by UKDS, the majority of users are in higher education across the election studies, including academic staff, postgraduate and undergraduate students. However, there is also evidence of use by central government, non-governmental and non-profit organisations, as well as schoolteachers and school students. Use by postgraduate and undergraduate students highlights the role which these studies play in capacity building, and suggests that the data are also used in research methods training. Furthermore, there is evidence of BES data being used within the commercial sector.

There is also good geographic spread of projects across the UK, although use appears concentrated in several hotspots including the host institutions. Notably, there is clear evidence of the devolved studies being used extensively beyond their respective nation. However, data from Northern Ireland appears used less frequently than those from the other election studies. Whilst the UK accounts for the majority of use across the studies, there is also strong international use. Notable hotspots include Japan, Canada, Netherlands, Spain, USA and France.

The studies are used most in politics and international studies, but other common disciplines identified include sociology, economics, psychology, geography, statistics, social policy and administration, and history. This demonstrates that, even though the election studies are heavily based within politics, they also serve social science more widely.

Access routes

Both academic and non-academic stakeholders use raw data from the studies, although this is more commonly done by academic users. Raw data is still important for non-academic users, but they are more likely to face barriers to using it, which will be discussed further in [Section 2.4](#). Various routes for obtaining this data were identified: through UKDS, study websites, and direct requests to study teams. Some interviewees noted easier access through the BES website in comparison to UKDS. This was especially the case for non-academic users, but some academic users also preferred to access data through the BES website as opposed to UKDS.

Other outputs from the study teams and the wider community who use raw data are important for all users, such as initial findings, academic reports and briefings. Non-academic stakeholders also noted direct engagement with the study teams for data access.

2.3. Impacts of the data

Before we outline the impacts of the election studies, it is important to clarify what is meant by impact in this review. We draw on the [ESRC's definition of impact](#), which states:

The Economic and Social Research Council (ESRC) defines research impact as the demonstrable contribution that excellent research makes to society and the economy.

This can include both:

- academic impact, which is the demonstrable contribution that excellent social and economic research makes in shifting understanding and advancing scientific method, theory and application across and within disciplines
- economic and societal impact, which is the demonstrable contribution that excellent social and economic research has on society and the economy, and its benefits to individuals, organisations or nations.

The impact of research can include:

- instrumental impact – influencing the development of policy, practice or services, shaping legislation and changing behaviour
- conceptual impact – contributing to the understanding of policy issues and reframing debates
- capacity building through technical and personal skill development.

It is important to recognise that not all impact will follow the same pathways, and can occur over different timescales. Measuring impact is particularly challenging for data infrastructures such as the election studies, as impacts may often be indirect, and arise through multiple users and outputs. It is therefore difficult to attribute outcomes to any individual study or to measure the full extent of its contribution.

For the election studies, the starting point for impact is the production of the data. Ultimately, it will achieve an impact by improving understanding of political behaviour, and supporting a more informed democratic system.

Despite the challenges of identifying and attributing impact, throughout this review, we have been able to identify examples of different types of impact originating from the election's portfolio.

Instrumental impact

Polling reform

BES data has been used to improve polling within the UK, providing greater confidence in the data and in turn greater public understanding.

BES research played an important role in understanding the causes of the 2015 British General Election polling miss. BES research contributed to the British Polling Council inquiry Official

and wider efforts to diagnose the sources of polling error. The findings informed methodological changes across the polling industry, including improvements to weighting approaches, and contributed to the development of more accurate polling methods. For further details see the [University of Manchester REF2021 submission](#).

This review highlighted the importance of BES to the wider polling ecosystem. There are other examples of BES data being used by polling companies within the UK, which are outlined in [Section 2.2](#).

Senedd reform

WES data has been used to inform research on reform of the Senedd, leading to votes for 16- and 17-year-olds and laying the groundwork for further substantial reforms to the Senedd's size and electoral arrangements.

[Research conducted using the 2016 Wales Election Study](#) provided evidence on the size and shape of the Senedd utilised by the Silk Commission and Expert Panel on Assembly Electoral Reform. The team at Cardiff, who was leading the Welsh Election Study at that time, provided further evidence to the Expert Panel through updated modelling of different electoral systems based on the 2016 Wales Election Study.

As a result of the Expert Panel report, various recommendations were made, which included increasing the size of the Senedd and reducing the minimum voting age for Assembly elections. This report resulted in the Senedd and Elections (Wales) Act 2020, enabling 16- and 17-year-olds to vote. Although no decision was reached on increasing the size of the Senedd at that stage, further work has been done in this area, and it has been agreed the Senedd will increase to 96 members.

For more information, please see the [Cardiff University report](#) and the [REF21 impact case study](#).

Good Friday/Belfast agreement

The election studies in Northern Ireland have been an invaluable resource for our understanding of the Good Friday Agreement, its application and effectiveness. Not only has research fed into the Northern Ireland Affairs Committee inquiry into the effectiveness of the Good Friday agreement, but it has influenced practice. Jonathan Tonge, Principal Investigator of NIES, was asked by the Labour party to write a training programme for members. This programme outlined the significance of this agreement, its history and current relevance, using election study data to demonstrate continued support for the devolved Executive Assembly and further attitudes.

For more information, please see the [REF21 impact case study](#).

International influence

Data from the Scottish Election Study on 16-year-olds has been included in a report to the Belgian Interior Minister, on lowering the voting age. Belgium now allows 16- and 17-year-olds to vote in European elections. This demonstrates how these studies not only influence the practices within the UK, but also provide learning internationally.

Conceptual impact

Academic impact

These studies are funded as a public resource, and therefore, they provide free access to their data, enabling further research by the wider research community. Since the BES study team moved to the University of Manchester in 2014, its data have underpinned more than 300 scientific publications, many of which have been published in world-leading journals. Further discussion of the academic use of these data is provided in Section 2.2. This body of research has made an important contribution to evidence-based policymaking and understanding of democratic processes.

Public understanding

Each of the election studies contributes to our public understanding of elections and political behaviour through the direct and indirect use of the studies. Each study is active in engaging with the media, and the data has been cited in news reports across the four nations of the UK. Media engagement includes, BBC, Sky, The Guardian, The Economist, ITV, Daily Telegraph, and Irish Times.

Not only are the studies used in written media reports, but also in TV broadcasts. For example, [BES data has been used in BAFTA award-nominated TV broadcasts on the ITV 2019 general election night special and ITV special marking Britain's departure from the EU.](#)

The review also found evidence for BES data being used for forecasting models in the media. While public interest in politics and elections often peaks during election periods, the use of election study data extends well beyond these events. For example, WES data was used in the 2022 [BBC One Wales documentary 'Wales: Who do we think we are?'](#). SES data has been cited in newspaper articles more than 500 times since 2021, whilst members of the project team provided over 24 hours of live television coverage across more than 20 appearances around the election period. This included Election Night coverage on BBC Scotland for the 2021 Scottish Election, with over 1.95 million viewers reached over a two-day period.

Direct government engagement

Election study teams, particularly the devolved, have built strong relationships with government. Engaging government stakeholders as an active part of dissemination and engagement activities has helped demonstrate the value of these studies for understanding political behaviour and democracy. For example, NIAES has provided briefings to political leaders including the Prime Minister and Deputy Prime-Minister of The Republic of Ireland. There is also evidence that research using their data was cited in various committees and commissions, such as the House of Commons Northern Ireland Affairs Committee Report, ['The effectiveness of the institutions of the Belfast/Good Friday Agreement'](#), as discussed above.

Studies also actively engage with political parties, supporting their understanding of voters. For example, [NIES data has influenced Sinn Féin's approach to unionist identities.](#) Statements from party leaders indicated that this research improved their understanding of attitudes and cultural complexities in Northern Ireland, and informed their strategies and leadership.

In addition to regular engagement with elected representatives, the SES team presented to SNP special advisers and party staff on findings from the UK General Election and subsequent political developments, whilst also considering their implications for the 2026 devolved elections. The Scottish Government also used SES data for a series of talks on Scottish public opinion, which were delivered to ministers and civil servants.

Understanding democracy

Interviewees regularly highlighted the important role of election studies in supporting democracy. By improving our understanding of elections and political behaviour, the studies help improve understanding of democratic processes in the UK. For example, BES has worked with the Electoral Commission to assess turnout to understand patterns of who votes and who does not, informing efforts to broaden democratic participation across society.

Capacity building

Skills and capacity for data use is one of the five pillars of the [ESRC Data Infrastructure Strategy](#). Whilst this is not an explicit objective for any of the election studies in our portfolio, they have made considerable contributions in this area.

Resource for teaching and skills development

Election study data is used as a resource at universities for both substantive teaching modules and methodological training modules. As accessible datasets, they are an excellent resource for not only academics, but undergraduate and postgraduate students, supporting their training and capacity building. Notably, BES and SES make datasets specifically for teaching. SES has also provided wider [teaching resources](#) for students and teaching professionals at all levels, including briefings, posters, teaching packs and teaching datasets.

SES has also run essay competitions on Scottish politics for undergraduate and secondary school students. The aim of this was to encourage high-quality engagement with electoral data and rigorous investigation of the data.

Building a pipeline of future leaders

Within study teams themselves, there has also been considerable capacity building. Many early-career researchers have joined the study teams and developed the skills needed to lead these studies in the future. This has created a strong pipeline of expertise, with many current team members and leaders having progressed through the studies in different roles over time. Whilst such a pipeline of researchers has been raised as a concern, particularly within the devolved studies, which will be discussed further in [Section 3.1](#), it is clear that the studies demonstrate their capability to support and develop the next generation of leaders.

International leaders

As noted, many interviewees described the election studies, particularly BES, as the 'gold standard' in the relevant field. BES has become a key resource for the international community on how to conduct similar studies, acting as a benchmark for both methods and data quality. Evidence was also found for the devolved studies being used internationally to study devolution and territorial politics, where they are valued as authoritative sources of time-series data. The election studies have influenced not only understanding of UK politics, but also the development of election research and data collection practices internationally.

Recognition of this impact

The election studies have been widely recognised for their impact. For instance:

- In 2017, BES was a finalist for the outstanding impact in society prize at the ESRC Celebrating Impact awards for their work on polling methods.
- In 2023, SES won the Best Impact from a Data-led Project prize from the University of Edinburgh Centre for Data, Culture and Society, for their influence on political parties, broadcaster and the public and increasing understanding of politics.
- In 2023, BES won the Pippa Norris Prize, awarded by the Political Studies Association, for their outstanding contribution to advancing knowledge in political science. SES also won the same prize in 2025.

2.4. Barriers to use

Many interviewees agree that data from the election studies is easy to access. Access to most of the data requires registration, but it is not seen to be difficult and does not constitute an obstacle for most users. Once registered, data is found to be easily downloadable and includes thorough documentation, which helps users in identifying whether the data is suitable for their purposes. As previously noted, data is also available via study websites and GitHub. One stakeholder did note challenges in identifying and accessing the most recent data collection for some of the studies, due to the website not being up to date and not being clear about data access.

Most interviewees find that users need strong quantitative skills to make use the data. The size and complexity of the datasets can present challenges, particularly for qualitative researchers and some policy users. Many interviewees agree that it can take time to develop the expertise required to analyse the data. Combined with registration requirements and extensive documentation attached to the data, this can pose significant barriers to new or less experienced users.

The datasets are typically large, which can make them difficult to work with when it comes to downloading and transforming data. The BES Data Playground helps address this by allowing users to create graphs and explore the data through a user-friendly interface. However, interviewees reported that the platform can be slow and is not always intuitive to use, limiting the extent to which some users can meet their analytical needs. Nevertheless, the Data Playground is considered an important resource and should be maintained to support a wider range of users.

2.5. Current performance of the studies against community needs

Overall, the ESRC-funded election studies portfolio is seen as an important resource for the user communities. The election studies, especially BES, are recognised as convenors of the election survey research communities. Each study has built strong connections with several core user groups. This is highly valued and should be maintained. Stakeholders also value the ability to input into questionnaire design, and in particular, the ability to apply to add their own survey items to BES and SES data collection.

The studies are also considered to achieve significant impact and broad use across academic, policy and wider stakeholder communities, although compared to the devolved

studies, BES is seen as more of an academic project, and it does not achieve the same levels of engagement with the government. The devolved studies are generally less known outside of their nations. Increasing the visibility of the devolved studies across the UK community should be encouraged. Their relatively low profile outside of their nations may have potentially contributed to lower levels of use identified in this review. In terms of the methodology, however, it was generally agreed that it is comparable across the studies.

Access to the data is generally viewed positively. However, the complexity of the datasets can create barriers for less experienced users, potentially limiting accessibility for some groups.

A small number of interviewees questioned whether the devolved studies represented good value given the size of their user communities and perceived focus on nation-specific issues. However, there was a strong consensus that their close connection to the specific contexts of Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland is a key strength. Being embedded within these contexts enables the studies to develop specialist expertise, and address issues that are specific to each nation. Interviewees report the importance of the devolved studies, particularly WES, for stimulating discourse, research and the polling and media sectors, and their proactive communications to date were highly valued. There is also a broader societal purpose that the devolved studies serve in supporting the quality of devolved democracy. Moreover, stakeholders frequently highlighted the need for a multi-study approach that reflects the UK's multi-national state.

Some stakeholders identify that the devolved studies are valuable both at their national level and at the UK level. They particularly emphasised the contribution these studies can make to research on devolution and territorial politics. Whilst there is a noticeable international community studying devolution and nationalism utilising data from the UK's devolved studies, there appears to be less use of these data to evaluate the effectiveness of devolution within the UK itself. It was highlighted that it is important for the devolved studies to not only address local concerns, but also collaborate on wider issues, such as the integrity of the UK, and find common questions. Whilst differences in devolution arrangements across the UK may limit direct comparisons, they also provide opportunities to understand the effects of different structures.

3. Optimising investment in the ESRC-funded election studies

This section considers future ESRC investment in the election studies. The section discusses:

- the current challenges and barriers in how the election studies portfolio is funded
- how the utilisation and impact of the studies and access to the data could be improved
- stakeholder needs related to data collection and methodological innovation
- extent and distribution of capacity for the development, delivery and use of these studies
- opportunities to improve coordination and collaboration in the portfolio

3.1. Challenges in current funding of the election studies portfolio

ESRC has identified several challenges, predominantly arising from discussions with the current teams, affecting its election studies portfolio.

Capacity and future leaders

The main challenge highlighted by some current study teams is capacity in delivering the election studies and developing future leaders of the studies. This was particularly prominent among the Scottish and Welsh teams, whereas no direct concerns were raised by the BES team. Due to low numbers of early-career research professionals and students working on devolved elections, the pipeline of people capable of delivering these studies is limited, making succession planning difficult. For example, SES colleagues reported periods in which there were no PhD students studying Scottish voting behaviour in Scotland, and other stakeholders highlighted a broader lack of doctoral training in this area.

Whilst political science as a whole is well supported by ESRC's Doctoral Training Partnerships, the election studies are not necessarily connected to this wider talent development mechanism. In addition, the ESRC Data Infrastructure Programme budget is unable to support PhD studentships.

At the same time, from this review exercise, it is evident that the UK has a substantial community of quantitative election researchers. However, this expertise is geographically unevenly distributed, and concentrated in a small number of locations. This suggests that the challenge may be less about the overall supply of expertise, and more about ensuring its distribution across the UK. Stakeholders also noted that some skilled early-career researchers have moved from the devolved studies into UK-wide or British-focused projects. Therefore, interviewees emphasised the importance of creating leadership opportunities and supporting early career researchers to develop the skills to run these studies in the future.

Funding model

The devolved studies have secured funding through ESRC's highly competitive responsive funding route, and no dedicated funding opportunity or budget allocation has been provided, except for the 2014 Scottish Independence Referendum study. This has created uncertainty around funding, as decisions through responsive funding routes can be lengthy and may not align well with the fixed deadlines associated with election-related data collection. This is particularly challenging in the case of snap elections, where advance planning and funding

applications may not be feasible, leaving limited time for fieldwork procurement, tendering and ethics approval processes.

This also constrains collaboration and innovation, with limited resources available beyond core study delivery. The current £1 million cap on ESRC responsive mode funding can further exacerbate these pressures. The project time allocated to team members is not always sufficient for core delivery, leaving limited capacity for impact activities and collaboration.

Funding uncertainty also has implications for recruitment and retention, as some staff are required to seek opportunities outside the election studies despite an interest in remaining in the field.

Resilience to electoral shocks

Another challenge with the current funding model is the limited resilience of the studies against electoral shocks, such as snap elections. The studies are currently funded to conduct data collection at elections anticipated at the time of the application. However, elections in the UK can be called at short notice. As the devolved studies have so far been funded through responsive mode funding, an unexpected election may occur when funding for a study is not in place or when there is no funding to conduct data collection related to the election in question. This creates a risk that important electoral events will not be captured. The risk is particularly acute for UK Parliament and Northern Ireland Assembly elections, whilst constitutional provisions also allow for early or extraordinary elections in Scotland and Wales under certain circumstances.

Cohesion and collaboration within the portfolio

As discussed, the studies in the election portfolio have been funded through different means, with the majority through ESRC's responsive funding routes. The Welsh and Scottish election studies cover data collection both for the devolved and General Elections, whilst in Northern Ireland, two separate studies cover the Assembly and General Elections. Cooperation between all the studies in the portfolio currently relies on the initiative and goodwill of the academics involved, and is not facilitated by structures. There is also a balance to be struck between centralisation and cooperation on one hand, and the benefits of a local and embedded approach of the devolved studies on the other.

Balance between stability and innovation

Interviewees noted that some stability in leadership is valuable to provide strategic consistency, as a core value of the election studies is understanding the evolution of political systems over time. However, there is also significant support for enabling innovation and building capacity through direct competition, whereby applicants propose approaches to delivering a study, and ESRC funds the application that best delivers its objectives based on the advice of expert assessors. This is the model that has been successfully used for the BES for many decades. Open direct competition means that studies may move to new institutions. Whilst this needs to be appropriately managed, it has been achieved successfully previously. In the US, open competitions are occasionally conducted to run the American National Election Studies (ANES), and any study must include due attention to innovation and input from the user community, such as a call for proposals for innovative ideas. Alternative approaches could also include requirements for

multi-institutional bids or new partnerships to ensure knowledge and innovation is shared. A balance is needed where consistency is provided over meaningful periods in electoral contexts, with occasional opportunities to change direction.

3.2. Increasing utilisation and impact

[Sections 2.2](#) and [2.3](#) of this report outline the current use of the data and the impacts arising from the election studies. This section discusses opportunities for ESRC and its election studies portfolio to facilitate easier access to and use of election study data, increasing impact. In the US, ANES seems to attract a very interdisciplinary user community, and ESRC would like to understand if there is scope for more diverse use in the UK.

Awareness and impact of the studies

Some interviewees stated that the election studies could be more dynamic and ambitious, playing a wider role in supporting democracy and setting the narrative around elections. Whilst the pre-election period and the period immediately following the general election are relatively well served by data, there may be opportunities for greater engagement in the weeks that follow, when election outcomes and their implications are being interpreted and assessed,

The academic think tank, UK in a Changing Europe (UKICE), was often highlighted as an example of the type of dissemination and engagement that the election studies could enable the wider research community to deliver, including accessible outputs such as blog posts and podcasts. As ESRC funds the studies as research infrastructures, rather than as research projects, its primary role is to provide data for wider use. Collaboration with other funders and research entities may provide alternative paths to enhancing its dissemination and engagement. Election study teams should, for example, share their learning on effective engagement with different user groups, especially government and political parties.

Findings related to specific user groups are outlined below.

Academia

In academia, the user base of the election studies has grown over time and is reasonably diverse. There is overall good academic awareness of the studies within their context. A large part of academic use occurs through members of the Political Studies Association's largest specialist group called 'Elections, Public Opinion and Parties' (EPOP). However, there is scope for further use of the election studies outside of the core EPOP community and across disciplines.

Media

There seems to be scope for further use of election studies in the media, with growing interest in reporting long-term trends rather than insights from one-off polling. Furthermore, understanding changes may become more valuable as the next General Election approaches. Further collaborations between academics and journalists would be beneficial.

Media stakeholders would value more timely release of data or information based on the study, such as draft or initial findings, so long as this does not overly compromise its rigour. Clearly communicated, publicly available timelines for data release would also increase utilisation by this group so content can be planned in advance, as evidenced by SES. The

importance of reproducible data visualisations and accessible data formats was also highlighted.

Policy

Considering the success of the devolved studies in engaging with the devolved parliaments, there appears to be further scope for the election studies portfolio as a whole to increase its engagement at the UK level. However, the inclusion of too many policy-related questions could jeopardise the key value of continuity, as well as the relevance of the studies for other users and impact on the political independence of these studies. A process for assessing utility of certain policy questions would be beneficial alongside assessing any potential trade-offs.

Some interviewees indicated that there is further scope for the BES to conduct more structured engagement with government to inform policy development. For example, it was suggested that the BES could provide evidence on voting behaviour, public attitudes and the implications of these findings for policy. However, to strengthen its contribution to policymaking, BES data and insights would need to be more prominent in debates on topical issues. ESRC could consider requesting a plan for policy engagement as part of the future commissioning of the BES. Building and maintaining relationships, networks and connections with policymakers would be essential to achieving this.

As with the media, clear communication of timely data releases would also aid utilisation with this stakeholder group. Study teams should, for example, produce and share clear descriptive initial findings to secure early interest and engagement from different stakeholders. A clear example of this is the work done by the [World Values Survey in the UK](#).

Politicians

The studies currently appear to have a lower profile among politicians compared to other stakeholder groups. Whilst this review could not engage with representatives from the larger parties, it is possible that they may rely on their own data collection and the private sector for polls. However, there is evidence that all election studies engages with politicians and political parties, and that the data are used among larger parties. Further understanding is needed to support more structured engagement in this area. In relation to smaller parties, there seems to be scope for additional outreach activities to increase use.

General public

There was consensus that the election studies play an important role in informing public understanding of elections and politics. However, this role is often indirect. Whilst the studies frequently inform media commentary during election periods, they are not well known among the general public. As discussed above, the societal value of the election studies is significant. Although the studies are primarily a specialist resource for a specialist audience, these users draw on the data to inform public debate and media coverage.

The elections data landscape, especially around general elections, is already well served. Whilst other sources, such as polling companies, are able to release data more quickly, election studies are generally regarded as providing higher-quality evidence. Their data often inform media coverage and public debate, although the studies are not always acknowledged as the source and readers may not realise that commentary draws on election study data. Nevertheless, this indirect route may enable the studies to reach a much wider audience than would be possible through direct engagement alone.

Facilitating data access and use

Stakeholders indicated the provision of raw data from the election studies is important not only for academic but also non-academic users. Whilst accessibility of the data was highlighted a particular strength, the review also found that skills and time requirements can present barriers to making effective use of the raw data.

Contributors made a series of suggestions to support direct users of the data:

- Maintaining data access via the election study websites alongside UKDS, which is particularly valued by non-academic stakeholders
- Standardising archiving processes and documentation at least between different editions of one study and potentially between different election studies
- Creating different versions (e.g. pre-selected variables) and formats (e.g. Excel, CSV, SPSS) of the data for users with differing abilities
- Optimised grouping of questions and variables to facilitate increased ease of searching, especially by users with less experience in analysing quantitative datasets
- Further guidance and tips on accessing and using the data, such as how to deal with missing data

Outputs, analysis and engagement by direct data users, including the study teams themselves, is highly valued particularly by groups which are not able to conduct analyses themselves. This points to an importance of expanding the direct user base of the data. Further support for programmes of research aligned with data collection, or incentives for host organisations to prioritise such activity, may also be beneficial.

Discovery of existing outputs could also be better supported through, for instance, a centralised service collating, sharing and promoting research based on the studies. Tools enabling users to engage with data without coding skills, like the BES data playground, could be expanded. A variety of outputs, which are simple enough for the wider community to understand, is vital to support engagement. Blogs was noted by various stakeholders as an accessible tool, which is currently used.

Interviewees in the media space specifically indicated that direct contact, demonstrations or training could help engage colleagues who currently have lower data knowledge. Opportunities for training and outreach should be signposted and, where necessary, created to support users with different capabilities.

Trust was also highlighted as an important factor in facilitating data access and use, and building reputation as an impartial source of information is vital. Evidence gathered through this review suggests that the election studies are widely regarded as a trusted source of information across the community. Stakeholders also highlighted the skills of the election study teams in supporting engagement and building strong relationships with a range of stakeholders, helping to translate academic research into practice.

3.3. Scientific, policy and practice needs from elections data

This section presents findings regarding the current and likely future scientific, policy and practice needs for elections data, whilst currently, the ESRC-funded election studies focus on general elections and the Scottish Parliament, Welsh Parliament and Northern Ireland

Assembly elections. This review sought input from the community specifically on the groups and populations that elections data should enable research on and the elections and political events that data should be collected on.

Groups and populations

Numerous population groups and communities are important for understanding political behaviour and democracy in the UK. Whilst there are likely other groups who are missing or underrepresented, this review identified two core groups where sufficient data is currently not available.

The election study teams have given considerable thought and actions to ensure inclusiveness of the communities they cover. For example, the WES has made considerable efforts to ensure the inclusion of linguistic minorities, as stakeholders consistently highlighted the importance of capturing data on and understanding these communities.

Ethnic minorities

Several interviewees stressed that a lack of ethnic minority data is a significant problem for elections research. In addition to academic users, political and policy stakeholders would also welcome the provision of ethnic minority data.

The lack of detail on ethnic minorities in elections data is a historic problem. Election studies and the polling industry are struggling to capture the increasingly diverse population in the UK. Gaps in these data can have implications for understanding democratic representation, political participation and engagement with the electoral system. Collecting data on ethnic minority groups is particularly important for the election studies, as they are the only academic data collections conducted specifically around elections to understand electoral behaviour. Reflections on recent elections have also highlighted the importance of understanding differences in political attitudes and voting behaviour across ethnic groups.

Many interviewees agreed that boosted recruitment of ethnic minority groups should be supported through additional funding. This was a recurring finding from a review of the British Election Study commissioned by ESRC in 2006. There have been several targeted attempts to improve data collection on ethnic minorities in the elections space, including the ESRC-funded British Election Study Ethnic Minority Surveys in 1997, 2010, and an [Ethnic Minority British Election Study pilot](#) in 2020-21. However, each faced significant challenges, and none has secured continued support. For example, the Ethnic Minority British Election Study pilot struggled to recruit an ethnic minority sample online. An alternative approach could involve recruiting participants face-to-face, potentially with the use of incentives, while conducting the survey itself online. More broadly, interviewees acknowledged that collecting data from ethnic minority populations is challenging due to difficulties in reaching respondents, second-language considerations, and the associated costs.

Challenges for the devolved studies

In terms of ethnic minority data collection outside England, ethnic minority populations are smaller both in absolute numbers and as a proportion of the population, posing a greater methodological challenge. Some stakeholders stated that these low population sizes mean this need not be a priority at present, although it may become increasingly relevant in the future, particularly in Scotland. On the other hand, others highlighted migrants as a key group, including individuals who move to Scotland from elsewhere in the UK.

Considering the representation of ethnic minorities in the election studies, some interviewees questioned whether the BES as a large-scale election study is the most appropriate mechanism to study ethnic minorities, and whether the current expertise, structure and level of agility are best suited to tackle the issue. However, most interviewees believe that BES is uniquely placed to provide a sufficiently detailed sample to produce information about ethnic minorities. Additional questions relating to these populations would also be beneficial.

Clarifying the definition and priority groups

Additionally, there is a need for greater clarity on which specific groups within the broad category of "ethnic minorities" are currently underrepresented in election studies. While ethnic minority populations were consistently highlighted by stakeholders as a key gap in the existing data, limited detail was provided on which groups are most in need of additional data collection. As ethnic minorities are highly diverse, further work is also needed to better target the key subgroups for understanding elections and political behaviour. Before further action is taken, analysis is needed to identify which populations are missing from the existing data, and why these gaps matter for understanding political behaviour and democracy in the UK. This would enable recruitment and data collection approaches to be tailored more effectively to the needs and lived experiences of different groups, drawing on lessons from qualitative research and other sources.

Recruiting and collecting data from ethnic minority populations is a challenge not only for the election studies, but for social surveys more broadly. Stakeholders highlighted the high costs associated with ethnic minority sampling. Given the shared nature of this issue, where possible, the election studies should be encouraged to share learning and seek input from other projects to support data collection from these populations. It is also worth considering a cross-portfolio approach across ESRC-funded data collection infrastructure investments, or wider collaboration across the social survey landscape, as it may offer a more effective and cost-efficient means of addressing the challenge.

Missing and non-voters

Many interviewees emphasised that the issue of missing voters, meaning those who are disengaged from elections, is growing in importance in the context of declining turnout and policy changes such as voter ID. Increasingly, voters and non-voters have distinct demographic profiles. Interviewees frequently highlighted this as an area where further research is needed, both because the exclusion of non-voters can affect the validity of findings and because a better understanding of non-participation could help inform efforts to improve turnout.

In 2019, the [Cabinet Office published their Areas of Research Interest](#) (ARI), of which 'Electoral registration and electoral systems' section is particularly relevant. One of its aim was to support electoral systems which are more inclusive. Their research questions highlighted the need for a better understanding of political participation, and how engagement in democratic processes can be encouraged. Understanding non-voters and other groups disengaged from electoral participation is essential to achieve this.

Although the importance of understanding non-voters is a clear finding of this review, it is also recognised that accurately representing this group in election studies is challenging. Surveys for the election studies surveys usually attract respondents who are interested in elections, which can limit understanding of those who do not participate including non-

voters. However, other social surveys, such as Understanding Society, may be better placed to capture some of these populations. Given their potential to complement the election studies in developing a fuller understanding of non-voters, further work could be done to support other surveys to capture relevant information on missing and non-voters alongside election studies. In addition, data collection methods can affect the ability to capture non-voters, with face-to-face surveys generally considered more effective than online surveys in reaching these groups.

Elections and political events beyond national elections

Some interviewees, especially non-academic stakeholders, agreed that it would be beneficial to make more data available for a wider range of elections, such as local, mayoral and Police Crime Commissioner elections. With increasing policy attention on devolution within England to support growth, trust in politics and satisfaction with public services⁴, the importance of understanding local contexts, regional variation and the effectiveness of devolved decision-making is increasing. Reflecting this, expertise and resource around local elections is needed.

Some interviewees also suggested that mayoral elections and parish town councils could also grow in importance, particularly with the addition of 2 new Mayors since July 2024⁴ and the increasing importance these roles have. Internationally, local election studies have been conducted. For example, in Norway, local election studies have been funded since 1995, and these studies are very well used including in media.

Data on local and mayoral elections are currently limited, making detailed analysis on these challenging. Interviewees highlighted the scarcity of data in this area, although somewhat more information is available for London mayoral elections. It was suggested that this may potentially contribute to a self-reinforcing cycle in which local and mayoral elections are less researched because of the lack of available data.

Despite this, many interviewees emphasised the importance of collecting data on local elections, both in their own right and because they can provide valuable insights into voting behaviour at general elections. However, collecting such data presents practical challenges. Local elections take place at different times across the UK, particularly in England, making it difficult and costly to coordinate multiple surveys.

The current design of the BES Internet Panel partially addresses this issue, as survey waves often coincide with English local and mayoral elections in May, and include questions on voting in these elections. A continuous study taking place every May through the BES Internet Panel could provide a means to capture local election data. In Scotland, the SES already conducts data collection between elections, which can be used to gather information on local elections.

Local election data collection infrastructure: the Elections Centre

More generally, the UK lacks a central database of local election results and candidate information, whilst such resources are common in many other countries. In the absence of a central database, aggregate data on local election results and candidate information has been provided by [The Elections Centre](#), currently hosted at the University of Exeter.

⁴ [English Devolution White Paper – GOV.UK](#)

Established by Professors Colin Rallings and Michael Thrasher in 1985, the Elections Centre was associated with the University of Plymouth until 2018, then temporarily with Nuffield College, University of Oxford, before moving to Exeter in 2023.

The Election Centre is a valued resource for academics, civil service and local government. However, the continuation of this work currently relies heavily on researchers at the Elections Centre. Whilst it has temporarily been supported by ESRC funding and commissions, it has not had any stable funding arrangement. Commercialisation of the Centre is currently vital for its continuation. Therefore, whilst some of their data is available through the UK Data Service, other data can be accessed via the Elections Centre team for a fee.

Many interviewees argued that data collection in this area is vital, and without funding and the initiative of the academics involved, gaps in the availability of local election data could widen. Ensuring the continuation of this aggregate data collection was therefore seen as an important priority by many interviewees.

However, there are challenges in supporting the Elections Centre through current ESRC funding mechanisms, as ESRC's existing open funding opportunities are constrained by limited funding periods, and therefore do not align well with the Centre's funding needs. This lack of long-term funding may affect the Centre's ability to maintain a sustainable operating model, particularly as ESRC's open data policy limits charging for access to data. As a result, any ESRC support for the Centre would likely require a longer-term and more stable funding arrangement.

Some stakeholders also identified opportunities for closer collaboration between the Elections Centre and the election studies, as it could help strengthen the wider elections data ecosystem. Further engagement between the Elections Centre, ESRC and the wider community is needed to explore options for sustaining aggregate local election data collection.

Future importance of local and regional Data

Regarding mayoral elections, there is currently no comprehensive data collection nor data related to these elections accessible in one place. Nonetheless, the recent [English Devolution White Paper](#) outlines the need for better data and its use, particularly data at the right geographical level. The report also highlights making local data a priority. More localised data will become increasingly important as more power is devolved to ensure this change can be evaluated. Furthermore, to empower regional innovation and decision making, more regional funding and collaborations need to be improved or developed, highlighting the need for more localised funding and engagement.

Other election related data needs

There are several other gaps in elections data that are highlighted by interviewees. One interviewee suggested that BES could consider making greater use of its large sample size to capture a wider range of parties in the future.

Stakeholders also highlighted the growing importance of understanding social media consumption, exposure and its influence on political behaviour. It was argued that questionnaires should place greater emphasis on these topics across different age groups, alongside existing measures relating to traditional media such as newspaper readership.

However, the complexity of the current media landscape present significant measurement challenges. One potential solution suggested by interviewees was the use of open-ended questions.

Understanding the impact of online mis- and disinformation on democratic processes, including elections, was also identified as an [Areas of Research Interest by Department of Science, Innovation and Technology \(DSIT\) in 2024](#). The BES Internet Panel provides opportunities to further research these issues, including through the linkage of social media data to survey respondents. Some data is already available in this area, including self-reported social media use within BES surveys, and linked social media data as part of the 2015 BES campaign study. Additional questions were introduced for the 2024 General Election survey to reflect emerging social media platforms, and discussions on further data linkage are ongoing.

This review also identified a lack of data at the micro or constituency level, despite some existing data provision in this area. For instance, the House of Commons Library provides [parliamentary election results](#) both at the national and constituency level, and the [Democracy Club](#) collects information on candidates, focusing on local elections. Democracy Club also aims to expand its coverage to include information on elected representatives and campaign leaflets in the future. A constituency-level campaign study within ESRC's election studies portfolio could help improve understanding of the geographic distribution of vote.

More data is also needed on representatives through a candidate survey. ESRC has previously funded previous such surveys, and some interviewees suggested that ESRC should consider resuming investment in this area. Party membership and selection processes, as well as campaign effects and the role of digital campaigning, would also warrant further data collection and research.

Finally, further funding could be made to collect data to help understand the mechanics and fairness of elections, including voter registration and voter ID, and digitising geographic boundaries of electoral areas.

Overall, interviewees argued that, with potential significant policy changes, such as votes at 16 and automatic voter registration, as well as other changes such as the Welsh Parliament reform, the continued collection of data by the election studies will be key in the future.

Furthermore, whilst not specific to the election space, trust and misinformation was identified as a key area for investment through wider ESRC engagement work. This includes how change in trust and use of misinformation can result in behaviour change.

3.4. Data collection

The main data collection by the ESRC-funded election studies currently focuses on the period before and after relevant elections. Through this review, ESRC aimed to understand when and how frequently election-related data collection is needed, and which data collection types would best deliver the strategic benefits of election study data.

Data collection types

This review found that one of the key strengths of the ESRC-funded election studies is the provision of long-standing data with continuity in questions and themes. Such time series

data allows for analysis and comparison of responses over time, as well as the study of turnout and validation of vote.

The studies currently employ a mixture of cross-sectional surveys and online panels. A few interviewees noted challenges related to the online panel methodology. Currently, there is a perceived reliance on a YouGov product, creating path dependency. While there are arguments for continuity, some suggested that other methods for running online panels should be explored, such as running an open competition for a provider, or considering in-house provision with appropriate resources.

A few interviewees highlighted the value of qualitative data in understanding the feelings and motivations that underpin voting behaviour, alongside identifying shifts in voting patterns. While the election studies currently focus primarily on quantitative data, qualitative evidence could provide a useful complement. [The Qualitative Election Study of Britain](#) has collected qualitative data at multiple elections and referendums through focus groups and interviews, using a pre- and post-election design, to provide a deeper understanding of electoral behaviour. Recent work conducted in the Northern Ireland General Election Study through focus groups has highlighted the value of qualitative data collection methodology in highlighting and discussing key issues which may not arise through quantitative means. There is growing potential for greater collaboration between quantitative and qualitative methodologies to support understanding of elections and voting behaviour, particularly as technological advances improve the accessibility and discoverability of qualitative data.

The value of international collaboration was also discussed, as there is scope to enable comparative research and learn from best practice by including common survey questions across countries. However, it was stressed that international comparability should not come at the expense of the core election studies, and that the core data must remain consistent for over time comparison to be possible. An example of successful international collaboration is the involvement of BES in the [Comparative Study of Electoral Systems \(CSES\)](#). CSES is an established project that does not impose restrictions on the BES time series. Involvement in the project has therefore offered opportunities for comparing election data internationally without compromising the quality of BES. Another example cited was the [Making Electoral Democracy Work Research Project](#). Importantly, it is worth noting that the UK election studies also play an important role within the wider international research landscape, by providing valuable evidence for research on multi-level governance, devolution and territorial politics.

Finally, the potential for linking elections data with other data, such as social media data, was also mentioned by a few interviewees.

Frequency and timing

Many interviewees highlighted the benefits associated with more continuous data collection, or data collection between elections. The factors influencing voting behaviour are often affected by events outside of election times. Continuous data collection enables the tracking of dynamic change over time, and support better understanding of political events, which can inform political debates and increase public awareness of politics. Continuous data collection also provides an opportunity to include new and more niche questions, including those proposed by users, outside the core election survey time series, where space for additional questions is often limited. The ability for users to contribute to the studies was

highlighted as an important means of engaging the wider community and supporting researcher development.

Continuous data collection also provides flexibility and resilience for the studies to respond to changing or unexpected political circumstances and snap elections, and in the case of BES, local elections. It was also suggested that politicians may be interested in opinion poll-style data collected over time, to better understand and track changes in the public attitudes. The '[Report of the Inquiry into the 2015 British general election opinion polls](#)' recommended that ESRC fund a pre- and post-election random probability survey due to the public, commercial and political interest in pre-election polls. Whilst not done via random probability surveys, BES does collect data pre-campaign, during campaign and post-election via the BESIP.

The [Scottish Opinion Monitor \(Scoop\)](#) run by SES is regarded positively as it ensures that data users do not miss changes in voting patterns. This also cuts down on wait times for the next instalment of data. More frequent data collection was highlighted as being valuable for understanding devolution and territorial politics. There has been no similar data collection between elections in Wales, however an interviewee suggested that data collection at least once halfway through the election cycle would benefit users, due to scarcity of data in Wales. However, the value for money for continuous data collection should always be justified and remain distinctive from opinion polling.

3.5. Methodological innovation

Many social surveys are moving away from face-to-face data collection, the traditional 'gold standard'. During the COVID-19 pandemic, social scientists had to find alternative ways to collect data since face-to-face data collection was prohibited. However, even before COVID-19, a shift away from face-to-face data collection was taking place as fieldwork costs rose and response rates declined. Declining response rates is a threat to social surveys as a significant factor influencing the robustness of findings using the data. This has resulted in many social surveys innovating in their data collections, to reduce costs to stay within constrained budgets and increase response rates whilst maintaining high data quality.

As methodological change becomes more prominent in the social survey landscape, this review considered on the data collection methods of the election studies. It also sought advice on whether and how these should evolve moving forward without losing the key continuity and comparability of the data. Finally, it explored how ESRC can best support methodological innovation in collecting election study data.

Data collection methods

Across the ESRC elections portfolio, a combination of different data collection methods is used. The current, or most recent approach taken by each of the studies are:

- BES uses both face-to-face data collection and online data collection; the post-election data collection is conducted face-to-face, whereas the panel study is conducted online via YouGov
- WES and SES currently collect their data online via the YouGov panel
- NIAES and NIES conduct data collection via face-to-face surveys

ESRC does not currently have a formal position on the best data collection methodology for the election studies. Methodological approach is left to the applicants and the commissioning panel to determine the best approach.

As discussed above, face-to-face data collection is becoming increasingly difficult. Face-to-face data collection is costly, and not all the studies have the resources to undertake data collection in this way. High fieldwork costs can also constrain funding available for other aspects of the project. In addition, stakeholders noted concerns about the perceived quality of data collected face-to-face, as well as growing difficulty of recruiting representative samples through this method.

Despite these challenges, interviewees highlighted the continued value of maintaining a face-to-face element to support representative samples, given concerns around the representativeness of online panels and trained respondents. Additionally, moving away from face-to-face data collection may make it even harder to recruit and capture ethnic minorities, as evidenced by the [Ethnic Minority British Election Study pilot](#) on push-to-web methods.

However, not all stakeholders regarded the online or push-to-web methods as a significant concern, except for non-voters who are more easily reached through face-to-face surveys. Across the survey landscape, there are various examples of survey methods transitioning away from face-to-face data collection, such as the British Social Attitudes Survey. Within the elections portfolio, WES and SES have demonstrated that online data collection is feasible and can be used to generate important findings for academic and policy audiences. Moreover, the BES Internet Panel is highly used by the community further supporting the value of this data.

Overall, stakeholders were open to the evolution of data collection methodologies and the consideration of alternative approaches. However, they emphasised that any changes should be informed by evidence and lessons from comparable studies such as the European Social Survey. Random probability sampling was frequently highlighted as an important aspect to maintain for BES. Stakeholders also stressed the importance of representative samples, and explore innovative approaches to address emerging challenges.

No clear consensus emerged on how the data collection methods used by the election studies should evolve. ESRC should therefore continue to discuss this with election study teams to ensure data continues to meet the needs of the community, whilst being feasible in terms of value for money, resources and context.

Innovation in data collection

Given the community's openness to innovation in data collection methods, this review also explored what ESRC could do to best support this.

Firstly, interviewees suggested that election study teams should think about alternative data collection methods and consider the potential role of AI. Stakeholders also suggested ESRC should ensure the funding covers sufficient resource and budget for the teams to explore different survey modes or other experimental work where different techniques and questionnaire design are piloted. For instance, it was suggested that BES could conduct face-to-face data collection and self-completion in parallel. A similar experiment is currently being conducted by the European Social Survey to understand the comparability of data

collected through different modes. It was also indicated that different recruitment methods could be piloted for less heard groups.

However, there was also a view that large-scale social surveys such as BES may not be the most appropriate setting for methodological innovation. Given their scale, complexity and the importance of maintaining consistent data, there is limited flexibility to test approaches that carry a higher risk. Instead, it was suggested that innovation could be supported through a range of projects outside of the election studies, with successful approaches subsequently adopted where appropriate.

To encourage innovation, stakeholders recommended that ESRC should award funding for the election studies through direct competition between teams wishing to run each study, and funding awarded to the team judged to have the best approach. This creates opportunities for new members of the community to propose alternative approaches.

To support longer-term strategic planning, teams should be granted exclusive responsibility for a set period or number of elections, after which the studies would be recomputed. However, interviewees emphasised the importance of retaining some continuity between funding cycles through, for instance, having previous team members advising new teams. Encouraging movement and collaboration between UK election studies, as well as with international studies, was also proposed as a way to support learning and methodological innovation. Such collaboration has already been identified by both the studies and the wider community as a key strength of the current landscape. Furthermore, interviewees suggested that teams should include embedded survey methods and research expertise to support ongoing methodological development.

ESRC and the social science community has invested considerable resources into understanding the advantages and disadvantages of different data collection methods and methodological innovation. Investments such as [Survey Futures](#) offer learning and examples of dealing with issues associated with certain data collection methods. The election studies should engage with findings from them. Election studies should also look at international reform and best practice to support innovation.

3.6. People

As discussed above, there are some concerns around the available pipeline of researchers to work on and lead the election studies in the future, especially in Scotland and Wales. This review therefore explored how ESRC can help maintain and develop the skills, expertise and leadership to develop and deliver the election studies. It also examined the overall capacity to use election study data and its implications for the election studies portfolio. Finally, it considered how this expertise can be distributed for optimal outcomes. However, it is important to recognise that capacity building is not only the responsibility of ESRC but the studies themselves, their host institutions and the wider research community.

Capacity for development and delivery of studies

It is essential to support early career staff to work and progress within elections research and associated infrastructure. The following suggestions and insights were raised during our stakeholder engagement:

- More stable, strategic long-term funding for the election studies would enable research organisations to offer longer-term contracts for early career staff
- PhD studentships and inclusion of early career researchers would help build a pipeline of future expertise
- Legacy planning would benefit from additional investment in talent and skills, as well as leadership management
- Buying out more time for senior academics would support them to be more involved in the development of early career colleagues

Other strategies to increase capacity include:

- Allowing researchers to be involved at different capacities, supporting their continued engagement with the election studies while pursuing other career opportunities
- Making more effective use of other skills, such as those provided by data managers, to free up researcher time
- Encouraging applicants from abroad to diversify and expand teams
- Encouraging movement of staff between election study teams
- Encouraging study teams to diversify recruitment to include alternative quantitative social scientists
- Extending opportunities to more researchers to lead grants to develop skills across the community, whilst project leads of previous grants could remain as advisors of successive projects to ensure continuity
- Using a management board or coordination group to allow a wider and more diverse set of social scientists to be involved in running the studies, modelling election studies abroad

Capacity to use the data

Related to capacity to use election study data, greater diversity among those engaged with the research infrastructure could help widen the user base, and increase use from a wider range of audiences. Outputs, such as events, webinars and blog posts, play an important role in making findings more accessible for those less experienced in data analysis. Interviewees also highlighted the importance of election study teams to actively engage with the wider community to identify emerging topics and invite suggestions for new survey questions, as it can help develop the expertise to design questionnaires across the community including early career researchers. However, some stakeholders noted a challenge in including new questions from the community in the surveys due to limited space within a questionnaire.

Distribution of capacity

A few interviewees suggested a hub-and-spoke model for the election studies that brings together a broad range of institutions, industries and individuals. Such a structure could promote interdisciplinarity and provide access to a variety of skills and expertise. It could also encourage diversity. The review of BES commissioned by ESRC in 2006 also recommended a hub-and-spoke approach, with BES acting as the hub, and other projects operating as spokes or satellites.

However, many interviewees noted that political dynamics can differ significantly across the UK, and that important nuances may be lost if the studies are primarily framed within a UK-wide context. Localised data collection is highly valued by political and policy stakeholders, supporting local engagement, while the provision of data on emerging local issues is also academically important. Therefore, stakeholders noted that the devolved studies benefit from the leading team's advanced knowledge and understanding of the electoral context. This is often strongly facilitated by having some or all members of the team based within the relevant nation. Whilst it is possible to boost the BES sample size to study general elections in each devolved administration, rather than running separate studies, some interviewees suggested that Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland can be analysed only superficially using BES data, and that the utility of the data would be limited.

3.7. Coordination and collaboration among the portfolio

The studies are currently collaborating in limited ways as there are no formal structures in place to facilitate this. There is a need for more formal coordination and integration across the election studies. However, stakeholders noted how the studies and wider community do actively come together, supporting a healthy research ecosystem. To increase efficiency and support effective delivery, it is important to minimise unnecessary duplication across the election studies portfolio. For instance, currently, three of the election studies use YouGov, likely resulting in some overlap in respondents. This potentially presents a methodological issue as it could skew samples towards more politically engaged individuals, whilst they may also start to avoid answering several surveys. However, it also presents opportunities. For example, different studies could collect data from the same individuals and allow the datasets to be used together.

The funding structure should enable opportunities for communication so the election studies could engage more with one another to help reduce unnecessary duplication of work. One way to achieve this could be through setting up sub-teams involving members from different election studies. A two-tier system is also suggested, where the studies have their separate activities but also joint activities in relevant areas, such as innovation or common questionnaire standard, as learning could be more efficiently shared across the studies.

Collaboration, particularly among the devolved studies, was consistently identified as a strength of the portfolio. ESRC should therefore ensure that funding arrangements support and sustain such collaboration, rather than relying solely on existing relationships between study teams.

However, interviewees also recognised the challenges associated with closer integration. For example, one of the key strengths of the election studies is the continuity of their time series. Transition to a model with an introduction of common questions may require changes to existing questionnaires, and could affect continuity within the existing time-series data.

More broadly, there is value in strengthening collaborating between election studies and other data infrastructure and across research landscape. Sharing learning could help improve practice within the election studies portfolio. Examples highlighted included closer collaboration with the Elections Centre on local election data, engagement with Survey Futures on the survey methodology, and learning from other social surveys such as



Understanding Society and the European Social Survey, which either collect data on political attitudes and elections, or could potentially contribute to this area with appropriate support.

Annex 1: List of key questions

Below is a list of key questions for this review. The section where each question is addressed in this report is also given.

- 1) To understand the strategic value and clarify the purpose of elections data:
 - Why is election study data valuable? How does election study data make a unique contribution? Who is election study data particularly valuable to? ([section 4.1: Value and contributions of election studies](#))
 - What is the added value of elections studies compared to other sources of data, such as polling and other ESRC-funded surveys? ([section 4.1: Value and contributions of election studies](#) and [section 3.2: Other elections data](#))
 - What are the current and likely future scientific, policy and practice needs for elections data? ([section 5.3: Scientific, policy and practice needs for elections data](#))
 - What impacts should ESRC expect from election study data? ([section 5.2: Awareness and impact of the studies](#))
- 2) To identify strengths and weaknesses of the existing uncoordinated funding model:
 - How well used is existing election study data? ([section 4.2: Current use of the data](#))
 - Who is using the data and research findings? How and for what purpose? ([section 4.2: Current use of the data](#))
 - What are the areas of untapped potential use for election study data? Are there groups who could benefit from using election study data, but aren't? ([section 5.2: Awareness and impact of the studies](#))
 - What are the barriers to using election study data? Are the (potential) user community's needs met? Are there questions the current elections studies do not help answer, but could with modifications? ([section 4.4: Barriers to use](#) and [section 4.5: Current performance of the studies against community needs](#))
 - What impact has been achieved using election study data? ([section 4.3: Impacts of the data](#))
 - What are the individual strengths and weaknesses of each existing study? (*throughout report, but especially* [section 4.5: Current performance of the studies against community needs](#))
 - What are the challenges and barriers to running elections studies effectively, now and in the future? ([section 5.1: Challenges in current funding of the election studies portfolio](#))
 - How are election studies funded and used internationally, and what can the UK learn from this? (*throughout report, but especially* [section 5.1: Challenges in current funding of the election studies portfolio](#))
- 3) To optimise investment in the election studies:

[Data collection]

 - Which elections and political events should data be collected on? (for example, referenda, elections at different levels (general, devolved, mayoral, local etc.) ([section 5.3: Elections and political events](#))
 - Which groups or populations data can, and should, elections data enable research on? (i.e. which groups should ESRC aim to ensure researchers can

make research statements about, based on robust statistics or qualitative information?) ([section 5.3: Groups and populations](#))

- What types of data collection would best deliver the strategic benefits of elections data? ([section 5.4: Data collection types](#))
- When and how frequently is data collection needed in relations to elections? ([section 5.4: Frequency and timing](#))

[Methodological innovation]

- How should the data collection methods be evolved moving forward? What are the advantages and disadvantages of different data collection methods? ([section 5.5: Data collection methods](#) and [section 5.5: Innovation in data collection](#))
- How can ESRC best support methodological innovation in collecting election study data? ([section 5.5: Innovation in data collection](#))

[People]

- Who else could be using the data and research findings, and why aren't they? ([section 5.2: Increasing utilisation and impact](#))
- How can ESRC help maintain and (if necessary) grow capacity for the development, delivery and use of elections studies? ([section 5.6: Capacity for development, delivery and use of studies](#))
- How does this capacity need to be distributed for optimal outcomes? ([section 5.6: Distribution of capacity](#))

[Increasing utilisation and impact]

- How could we raise awareness of the studies? ([section 5.2: Awareness and impact of the studies](#) and [5.2: Facilitating data access and use](#))
- How is the data currently accessed? How can ESRC make it easier to access and use election study data? What are the barriers? Which tools would make it easier? ([section 4.2: Current use of the data](#), [section 4.4: Barriers to use](#), and [section 5.2: Facilitating data access and use](#))
- How can ESRC ensure that elections data benefits society, taking into account inclusion of less heard groups? ([section 5.2: Awareness and impact of the studies](#) and [section 5.3: Groups and populations](#))

[Enabling coordination and collaboration]

- Where would greater consistency between election studies add value, or increase efficient and effective delivery? ([section 5.7: Coordination and collaboration among the portfolio](#))
- How could ESRC improve coordination and collaboration between the studies? ([section 5.7: Coordination and collaboration among the portfolio](#) and [section 5.1: Challenges in current funding of the election studies portfolio](#))

Annex 2: Stakeholders

44 interviews were conducted with 47 people consulted. This annex lists the total number of individual external stakeholders interviewed by ESRC. Engagement with the existing study teams, internal stakeholders and other stakeholders consulted has been omitted from the figures. Some stakeholders from different areas of the UK and international stakeholders were able to comment on other areas from where they are located where their expertise remained applicable.

Stakeholder Group	Number of stakeholders engaged
Academic	26
Polling Companies	3
Media	6
Policy/Government	5
Politicians	2
Lobby organisations/think tanks	5
Total	47

Location of stakeholders institution	Number of stakeholders
England	25
Scotland	10
Wales	6
Northern Ireland	3
International	3
Total	47

Annex 3: Study references included in the data download analysis

British Election Study

- Cross sectional:
 - British Election Study, 2019: Post-Election Random Probability Survey: **SN 8875**
 - British Election Study, 2017: Face-to-Face Post-Election Survey **SN 8418**
 - British Election Study, 2015: Face-to-Face Post-Election Survey **SN 7972**
 - British Election Study, 2010: Face-to-Face Survey **SN 7529**
 - British Election Study, 2005: Face-to-Face Survey: **SN 5494**
 - British General Election Study, 2001; Cross-Section Survey: **SN 4619**
 - British General Election Study, 1997; Cross-Section Survey: **SN 3887**
 - British General Election Study, 1992; Cross-Section Survey: **SN 2981**
 - British General Election Study, 1987; Cross-Section Survey: **SN 2568**
 - British General Election Study, 1983; Cross-Section Survey: **SN 2005**
 - British Election Study, May 1979; Cross-Section Survey: **SN 1533**
 - British Election Study, October 1974; Scottish Cross-Section Sample: **SN 681**
 - British Election Study, February 1974; Cross-Section Survey: **SN 359**
 - POLITICAL CHANGE IN BRITAIN, 1963-1970: **SN 44**
- Legacy
 - British Election Study Internet Panel **SN802**
- Linked data
 - British Election Study, 2005: Comparative Study of Electoral Systems **SN5495**
- Panel study data
 - BESIP Wave 1-29 **SN 8202**
 - British Election Study, 2010: Campaign Internet Data **SN 7530**
 - British Election Study Nine-Wave Panel Survey, 2005-2010 – **SN 6607**
 - British Election Panel Study, 1997-2001 – **SN 4028**
 - British Election Panel Study, 2001: Waves 1-2 – **SN 4620**
 - 2001 BES Campaign Panel – **SN 4621**
 - British Election Panel Study 1992-1997 – **SN 3888**
 - British General Election Study, 1997: Campaign Panel – **SN 3890**
 - British General Election Panel Study, 1987-1992- **SN 2983**
 - British Election Panel Study, 1983, 1986 and 1987 – **SN 4000**
 - POLITICAL CHANGE IN BRITAIN, 1963-1970 – **SN 44**

Welsh Election Study

- Scottish and Welsh Referendum Studies, 1997- **SN 3952**
- Welsh Assembly Election Study, 1999 – **SN 4180**
- Welsh Election Study (Wales Life and Times Study), 2001- **SN 4546**
- Wales Life and Times Study (Welsh Assembly Election Study), 2003- **SN 5052**
- Welsh Life and Times Study (Welsh Assembly Election Study), 2007 – **SN 6293**
- Welsh Referendum Study, 2011- **SN 7780**
- Welsh Election Study, 2011 – **SN 7779**
- Welsh Election Study, 2019 – **SN 8774**
- Welsh Election Study, 2021 – **SN 9063**

Scottish Election Study

- 1999 Scottish Social Attitudes Survey – **SN 4346**
- 2003 Scottish Social Attitudes Survey – **SN 5076**
- 2007 Scottish Election Study – **SN 6026**
- 2011 Scottish Election Study – **SN 8012**
- 2014 Scottish Referendum Study – **SN 8402**
- 2016 Scottish Election Study – **SN 8728**
- Scottish Election Study 2021 – **SN 9062**

Norther Ireland Assembly Election Study

- Northern Ireland Assembly Election Study, 2022 – **SN 9096**
- Northern Ireland Assembly Election Study, 2016 – **SN 8293**
- Northern Ireland Assembly Election Study, 2003 – **SN 5394**
- Northern Ireland Referendum and Election Survey, 1998 – **SN 5442**

Northern Ireland General Election Study

- Northern Ireland General Election Survey, 2019 – **SN 8619**
- Northern Ireland General Election Survey, 2017 – **SN 8234**
- Northern Ireland General Election Survey, 2015 – **SN 2015**
- Northern Ireland General Election Attitudes Survey, 2010 - **SN 6553**
- General Election in Northern Ireland, 2001 – **SN 4622**
- Northern Ireland General Election and Political Attitudes Survey, 1992 – **SN 3720**