

Scientific realism, academic research and policy change: The case of electoral registration reform in Britain

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Abstract

Pressures put upon social scientists to prove their economic, cultural and social value has meant that many now seek to bring about policy change based on their research. This is especially the case in electoral studies. As the recent American Political Science Association Presidential Task Force on *Electoral Rules and Democratic Governance* describes it, psephologists have sought to use their “science” as “engineers” to ‘design institutions in aspiring democracies and reform rules in established ones’ (Htun and Powell 2013b). But they have often had mixed results. This paper explains why political scientists will often struggle to bring about legal change using a realist conception of science. Firstly, it argues that our knowledge is socially produced and might change as it becomes known by agents in the real world. Behavioural regularities can be undone by reflective agents because subjects and objects are entwined in social relations. It thereby criticises the dominant behaviouralist assumptions that overstate the similarities between the social and natural sciences. Secondly, it argues that these social relations are asymmetric and that academics are often weakly resourced within policy networks to bring about policy change. Thirdly, drawing from the author's own experience of trying to improve electoral administration in Britain, it offers strategies for how social scientists can seek to address this problem by working through civil society. Finally, it discusses the implications for how universities and the higher education sector should evaluate impact.

Paper for the Politics and International Studies Impact Conference, 22nd to 23rd November 2016, Conference Centre, Scarman House, University of Warwick, UK.

Key words: higher education, policy change, electoral integrity, electoral registration

Biography

Dr. Toby S. James is a Senior Lecturer in British and Comparative Politics at the University of East Anglia. He has published widely on electoral administration and management in journals such as *Electoral Studies*, *Election Law Journal* and *Parliamentary Affairs*. He is the author of *Elite Statecraft and Election Administration* (Palgrave, 2012) and is currently working on a book titled *Comparative Electoral Management: Performance, Networks and Instruments* (Routledge, forthcoming). He has used this research to try to achieve policy change by advising civil society groups, giving written and invited oral evidence to parliamentary select committees, serving as an advisor to the Law Commission (2013-2017), Fellow to the All Party Parliamentary Group on Democratic Participation (2015-present).

1. Introduction

In 1845 Karl Marx famously wrote that ‘the philosophers have only interpreted the world, in various ways. The point, however, is to change it’ (Marx 1845). Fast forward to 2016 and social scientists, few of which would consider themselves Marxists, seem to be in agreement with Marx’s desire to use academic scholarship to bring about social change. Academics worldwide are now falling over themselves to come out of their ‘ivory towers’ and relate their research to the real world. They have increasingly sought to reach out to policy makers through blogs, writing policy reports, media appearances and more.

There are many reasons for this new surge. Universities and academics have needed to prove their social, cultural and economic value in an age where many governments world-wide are engaged in austerity agendas. This has trickled down into changing management structures within higher education. ‘Impact’ has become a metric by which government agencies assess universities and award resources. Individual academics are being incentivised to undertake impact projects through promotion criteria and research councils are increasingly judging applications by criteria other than the academic merit. There is of course another reason: a genuine desire from academics to use their accumulated expertise to improve the world.

The *APSA Presidential Task Force on Electoral Rules and Democratic Governance* (Htun and Powell 2013b) documented one area in which political scientists have been active in trying to shape the real world in the field of electoral institutions. The Task Force sought to examine ‘the relationship between political science and electoral institutions’ (p.1). It reflected on the collective accomplishments of scholars on electoral system design and the broader domain of electoral integrity. Thanks to the efforts of hundreds of scholars dedicating themselves to identifying the effects of electoral institutions, write Htun and Powell, a scientific field had been established by the 1980s and 1990s that could forewarn the effects of electoral system change. A further generation of scholarship extended and redeveloped these theories to account for the different contexts dealt by democracies that had been born as part of the third wave of democratisation (Htun and Powell 2013a, 809). Most importantly for this paper, the Task Force showed how political scientists had used this knowledge to advise those making real-world policy decisions. Carey et al (2013) provided data from surveys of political scientists on how they had acted as ‘electoral reform consultants’ over many decades. They had written reports and briefs, given presentations, undertaken country missions, trained staff and provided ‘on the spot’ policy advice.

Carey et al. noted that despite these achievements:

‘We lack systematic evidence that political science knowledge compelled actors to choose courses of action they would not have taken otherwise. In fact, some of our evidence reveals the opposite: actors on the ground picked and chose among the scientific findings that were most useful to their purposes’ (Carey et al. 2013, 830).

Practitioners have also expressed concern that academics have not provided the research that is needed. Chad Vickery, of the influential electoral organisation IFES, expressed his concerns to scholars of electoral integrity at a Harvard workshop in 2013:

‘I think that it is interesting to listen to the discussion of causality in trying to explain historical events, but for practitioners in the field we need models that are predictive. Explaining what happened five years ago is very interesting, but when I am on the ground and there is an election happening I need to know where there will be pockets of violence so that we can react to it. So I think that models that are more predictive are needed rather than explaining historical events for me, and that is a difficult task, I know.’

Meanwhile, the recent failure of academics to predict the outcomes of elections, despite much greater sophistication in their models, has become a major public concern (Sturgis et al. 2016).

Why have such significant academic achievements not converted into real-world change? This paper argues that the problems can be better understood if we re-conceptualise the nature of the knowledge that social scientists claim to generate. Firstly, it argues that our knowledge is socially produced and might change as it becomes known by agents in the real world. Behavioural regularities can be undone by reflective agents because subjects and objects are entwined in social relations. It thereby criticises the dominant behaviouralist assumptions that overstate the similarities between the social and natural sciences. Secondly, it argues that these social relations are asymmetric and that academics are often weakly resourced within policy networks to bring about policy change. Thirdly, drawing from the author's own experience of trying to improve electoral administration in Britain, it offers strategies for how social scientists can seek to address this problem by working through civil society. Finally, it discusses the implications for how universities and the higher education sector should evaluate the contribution of research to the ‘real world’. The empirical focus of the paper is predominantly on electoral institutions but the lessons will go beyond this.

2. Behaviouralism, social science and knowledge

The commonly held assumptions about the nature of the knowledge that social research produce, despite some attempts to establish a contrary approach (Monroe 2005), are closely modelled on modernist behaviouralism. These philosophical assumptions are the basis of

‘leading’ political science research methods courses, the core assumption of ‘leading’ journals and the expectation of practitioners looking for expertise.

Behaviouralism was not always dominant. Its emergence was born from a historical frustration with the existing condition of political science. From the turn of the twentieth century until the 1950s, the study of politics was divided into two core camps: the study of institutions and political philosophy (Leftwich 1984, 16). These approaches, however, were cast aside as being insufficiently ‘scientific’. The study of political institutions (‘old’ institutionalism) merely described ‘constitutions, legal systems and government structures, and their comparison over time and across countries’ (Lowndes, 2002: 90). It lacked the ‘grand theorising’ that the accumulation of knowledge could generate, thought behaviouralists. Developing theory and routinely testing it against empirical datasets was therefore essential to identify the iron laws of human behaviour. As David Truman put it: ‘a major reason for any inquiry into political behaviour is to discover uniformities, and through discovering them to be better able to indicate the consequences of such patterns’ (Truman 1951, cited in Dahl, 1961: 767). Meanwhile, the moralising of political philosophy was also to be avoided because the values of ‘how men ought to act is not a concern of research in political behaviour’ (Truman 1951, cited in Dahl, 1961: 768).

Behaviouralists instead began from a positivist epistemology and ontology. They followed Karl Popper who argued that any theoretical approach should be ‘falsifiable’ (Popper 1959); that is, a theory should be testable against empirical evidence. Researchers should therefore focus on the collection of data from *observable* political phenomena – whether it was at the level of the individual or the aggregate. As Sanders notes, for both positivists and behaviouralists, a good theory must be (a) internally consistent, (b) be consistent with other theories and (c) must be capable of generating empirical predictions that can be tested against observation.

The methodological tools of choice would be large n quantitative studies, with a logic of causal inference based in statistics and probability theory. As Goertz and Mahoney (2010; 2012) suggests, Gary King et al.’s (1994) *Designing Social Enquiry* provided the exemplar approach. Scholars should identify the dependent and independent variables of interest, and using regression analysis, seek to identify the average effect of one on the other. By collecting data on a massive scale, large n studies could allow statistically significant patterns in political behaviour to be identified. With statistical significance comes ‘rigour.’ Qualitative research, by contrast, is discouraged on the basis that it lacks a sufficient number of observations to generate reliably generalizable results. It can therefore only ‘promote descriptive

generalizations and prepare the way for causal inference’ (King, Keohane, and Verba 1994, 227-28, cited in Mahoney, 2010: 123).

3. Scientific Realism and the Social Nature of Knowledge

Scientific (or ‘critical’) realism¹ offers an alternative approach to understanding the knowledge produced by social research. This is a methodological orientation, built from the philosophy of the social sciences, which ‘steers a path between empiricist and constructivist accounts of scientific explanation’ (Pawson 2006, 17). It is an approach most commonly associated with Roy Bhaskar (2008; 1989), Margaret Archer (1995, 1998) and Andrew Sayer (2000, 2010).² It is now becoming established as an alternative approach to political science in the UK (Buller and James 2015; Jessop 2005; Savigny 2007; Marsh and Smith 2000; Buller 1999), although it has had only limited use in the study of elections (James 2012a).³

Scientific realism stresses the limits of pure empiricism associated with behaviouralism. The world exists independent of our knowledge of it but that world is ‘differentiated and stratified, consisting not only of events, but objects, including structures, which have powers and liabilities capable of generating events’ (Sayer 2000, 5-6). There are therefore three distinct domains of reality. The *empirical domain* consists of the observable experiences that can be observed and recorded. The *actual domain* consists of events, which may often be unobservable to the researcher. The *real domain*, meanwhile, consists of the generative mechanisms and causal structures that influence events and experiences but may not be observable themselves. The problem with positivist empiricism is that it focuses only on the directly empirical domain of reality and not the actual or the real. As Marsh and Furlong put it: ‘...not all social phenomena and relationships are directly observable. There are deep structures that cannot be observed and what can be observed may offer a false picture of those phenomena/structures and their effects’ (Marsh and Furlong 2002). Often these ‘deep structures’ are the processes of capitalism, class, race or gender politics stressed by neo-Marxists or feminists. However, building on points made by James (2012a, 76-9) there are likely to be generative mechanisms in the real domain of reality which are unobservable within electoral

¹ Within the broad camp of ‘scientific realism’ there remains debate and diversity. Pawson (2006: 18:-9) argues that ‘critical realism,’ associated with the work of Margaret Archer and Roy Bhaskar, stressed that in an open system there are near limitless explanatory possibilities. It followed that social scientists can simply provide a highly normative and critical narrative to mistaken and popularly held accounts of the world. By contrast, ‘scientific’ realism (also using the label ‘empirical realism,’ ‘emergent realism,’ ‘analytical realism’) are more optimistic about the ability of the researcher to judge between different causal explanations in open systems. The term scientific realism is used throughout this paper.

² Also see: Collier (1994) and Putnam and Conant (1990).

³ There are other post positivist alternatives to behaviouralism such as interpretivism. See for example, (Kirkland and Wood 2016).

institutions too. One generative mechanism in the real domain is the desire for personal or political gain by actors. Senior politicians are strategic actors who are motivated by a desire to win office either for self-interest or out of necessity to achieve wider goals. Decision-making is therefore usually secretive and taken behind closed-doors. Researchers therefore often use alternative research methods to surveys, cross-national quantitative analysis and experiments. Instead, historiography, process tracing, semi-structured interviewing and ethnography are more commonly used.

Scientific realists conceptualise knowledge differently. As Sayer sets out in detail (2010, 12-44), there are a number of misconceptions that the realist approach seeks to redress. These are:

1. that knowledge is gained purely through contemplation or observation of the world;
2. that what we know can be reduced to what we say
3. that knowledge can be safely regarded as a thing or a product, which can be evaluated independently of any consideration of its production and use in social activity
4. that science can simply be *assumed* to be the highest form of knowledge and that other types are dispensable or displaceable by science’ (Sayer 2010, 13),

Gaining knowledge is a practical task, like other kinds of work or activity, which involves interacting with the world. It cannot be undertaken in isolation. Behaviouralists have an over-simplistic model of their relationship with what they are researching, or put another way, the subject-object relationship. Behaviouralists assume that the impartial scientist are entirely separate from the phenomenon that they study. Sayer portrays the behaviouralist approach as the ‘simple model,’ mapped out in Figure 1. This conceives the research process as involving an observer, researcher or investigator who is referred to as the subject (‘S’) and the focus of the investigation, which is referred to as the object (‘O’). The role of S is to document information about O, and develop explanatory models and predictive forecasts of their behaviour (Sayer 2010, 24). These models can be tested and adjusted through repeated observations.



Figure 1: Subject and object 1

Subjects and objects are bound together in more complex relationships, however. Firstly, subjects have relationships with other subjects. They can only attempt to gain knowledge of the object with the cognitive and conceptual resources available in the language communities (as Sayer puts it) or

academic concepts and frameworks (as we may more commonly think of it). Their ability to gain understanding of the object is therefore bounded. Academics use concepts and frameworks in a more heuristic way that they might realise, as ‘rules of thumb.’ Figure 2 therefore illustrates a more complex relationship in which there are a variety of other subjects ($S_1, S_2, \dots S_n$) in the boundary of the language community.

The relationships are complicated further by the fact that objects have relationships with other objects. When non-social objects are studied by those in the natural sciences, they are unaware of the meaning that other subjects attach to them. A non-social object cannot attach meaning to another non-social object. Social objects, however, are different. They will be involved in a process of repeated sense-making with other objects. Figure 2 is therefore adopted to recognise the relationship that O will have with $O_1, O_2, \dots O_n$.⁴

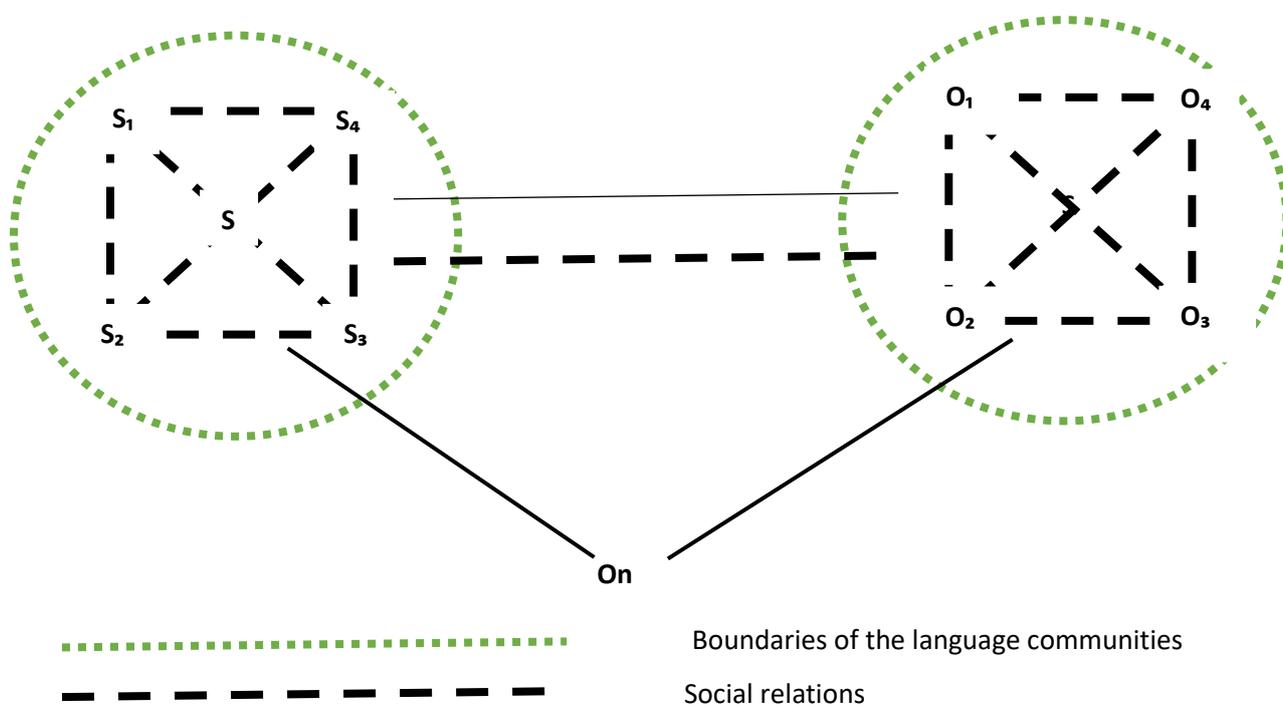


Figure 2: Subject and objects. Source: Sayer (2010, 28)

⁴ While a realist approach is concerned with understanding that meanings that subjects and objects hold in their language communities, it does not hold an anti-foundational ontology and epistemology that interpretivists or post modernists do (Bevir and Rhodes 2006). The ideation all domain is closely linked to the material environment. Ideas and ideologies respond to the physical and material distribution of resources and vice versa. Figure 2 therefore recognises this with lines to O_n .

3.1 Researcher and object as social relations

Although not explicitly stated by Sayer, the learning relationship between the subject and the object is not unidirectional, but multidirectional and iterative. This is because both subject and object are entwined in social relations during the research and dissemination process. Objects may become aware of the meanings that subjects are attaching to their actions and change them. Or objects might learn important information from subjects about themselves and their environment which might facilitate strategic learning. As a result of this, the object might change. Two processes can be identified.

- **The fieldwork process.** In order to gather information, researchers interact with the subject. Let’s take the example of the process of organising an interview with a government official. The researcher does not simply take notes from an interview with an electoral official in a hypothetical context. They interact with them. They write to/email them, giving information about themselves they think the respondent will need to know and may encourage them to reply. They make a decision about how to dress, the questions to ask, the tone of the interview. The interviewee decides whether to respond, makes up a judgement about the researcher, tailors their response to questions, perhaps decides to leave information out or in. Following the email or the interview, the interviewee may read-up further about what the researcher was asking about and begin to change their practices. In short, they may change their view of the world or change their actions as a result of the research process. This is often thought of as a Hawthorne effect. Social research does not take place in a hermetically sealed environment, however. The consequence can go beyond the experiment into the real world.
- **The dissemination process.** Upon dissemination of the results, objects, which are autonomous agents may change their behaviour. The subject and object are therefore linked by social relations, even if the researcher does not interact with the object. There are plenty of obvious examples from the field of elections. An analysis and publication of polling data may make citizens rethink their world and alter their behaviour. They might think that a particular party will win, for example, and change their vote and encourage others to also vote tactically. An electoral administrator may undertake further training for her team, after learning that they will be studied. If researchers identify the strategies that rulers use to attempt to rig an election, rulers may change their tactics.

There are two important consequences of identifying these social relations. First, researchers need to reflect on their own positionality when trying to achieve policy change – especially if they are then documenting that change and when providing policy histories. They are not impartial observers, but immediately become actors within their own plays. Second, behavioural regularities can be undone by human agency. For example, governing parties may find particular tactics for electoral fraud successful in influencing electoral outcomes. However, as soon as researchers document the tactics that are used, they may decide to change their tactics to avoid being caught (Sjoberg 2014). The public and political parties may alter their behaviour in response to polling forecasts, thereby undermining the forecast.

3.2 Unequal Social Relations

Scientific realism says more about the nature of subject-object social relations. All knowledge is deeply political in so far as it can be used to affect the distribution of resources, the reform of policy or public opinion to some extent. In the natural sciences, for example, the publication of research on more climate change can cause people to be more (or less) convinced in ‘climate science,’ affect profits for businesses affected by climate change and alter government positions. Developing a new chemical technology for measuring pH, for example, has led to new commercial products in oil field applications.⁵ There are therefore commercial gains by the sale of the research technology, but also efficiencies in commercial activity with many side-effects for shareholders, customers, citizens and the environment.

Within social science, the topic of research, however, likely to be *deeply* political. The research on electoral systems and electoral laws, the focus of the Task Force on *Electoral Rules and Democratic Governance*, provides an archetypical example. Electoral laws directly affect who wins office, who can vote and who does not. The consumers of this knowledge will therefore not just be students and other academics, but it would also include those in power with the opportunity to act on the research and make legislative changes. Yet those same people in power, may not be the beneficiaries of research-based recommendations. In fact, they could be the direct causalities. Changing from a majoritarian to a proportional electoral system might increase female representation and voter turnout (Blais 2006; Paxton, Hughes, and Painter 2010), but it might reduce the seat share of incumbent governments who benefit from first-past-the-post. Enfranchising 16 and 17 year olds may generate a turnout boost among the young (Zeglovits and Aichholzer 2014), but it might have adverse

⁵ <https://www.uea.ac.uk/chemistry/research/impact>

effects for an incumbent government who have an electoral strategy based around winning older voters. Making voting more convenient may increase turnout (Wolfinger and Rosenstone 1980), but an incumbent government may benefit from lower turnout among those less likely to vote as a result (James 2012a; Piven, Minnite, and Groarke 2009; Piven and Cloward 1988).

This is not to say that politicians are entirely driven by partisan motive on the issue of electoral law or other issues (Renwick, Hanretty, and Hine 2009). Elsewhere, it has been showed that politicians’ interest in electoral law waxes and wanes over time and it can be dependent on the broader policy cycle (James 2011c). The motives of actors are not pre-determined since they are reflective agents. However, they can be structured how institutions distribute material and strategic resources.

The job of the researcher, wishing to use their research to undertake impact work, is made more difficult by the fact that power relations are asymmetric. In broad terms, academics are often weakly resourced to bring about policy change. Indeed, a common theme from work on scientific realism is that power relations are asymmetric because of the relationships between structures and agents. The agents under study (whether they are rulers, politicians, administrators or voters) are constrained by the structural context in which they find themselves, but retain some autonomy and free-will. There are a variety of competing ways to describe this structure and agency relationship within scientific realism. The strategic relational approach (SRA) developed by Bob Jessop (Jessop 1990) but also used by Colin Hay (2002, 115-34; Hay 1996) focuses on ‘how a given structure may privilege some actors, some identities, some strategies, some spatial and temporal horizons, some actions over others’ (Jessop 2001, 1223). Actors find themselves in strategically selective environments that favour certain strategies over others as a means to realise a given set of intentions or preferences. There is no level playing field. Strategically selective environments, however, do not determine outcomes because agents are reflexive actors capable of strategic learning. As Jessop put it, they can:

‘orient their strategies and tactics in the light of their understanding of the current conjuncture and their “feel for the game”’ (Jessop 2001, 1224).

The resources that actors have vary enormously, however, and this can create power relations that are very unequal (Marsh, Smith, and Richards 2003). Academics are resourced by their knowledge and reputation for providing independent advice. However, only governments or legislatures can enact legislation to change electoral law. They are also aware that public interest in electoral law does not last long.

4. The Case of voter registration reform in Britain 2011-2016

This paper now draws from the author's own practical experience of trying to improve electoral integrity in Britain using his research to illustrate the difficulties that researchers face when trying to achieve policy change. It aims to also identify some strategies that social scientists can use by working through civil society.

5.1 Background Government proposals to reform voter registration

The empirical focus of the remainder of the paper is electoral administration. This refers to the methods used to compile the electoral register, the process of casting votes, counting processes and the management systems in place to organise elections. In Britain, these systems had long been unreformed until the New Labour governments undertook a programme of electoral modernisation from 1997 onwards. This was motivated by a stated desire to make the electoral process more convenient for voters, often by using technology. Internet voting, mobile phone voting and extended voting hours were among the pilots trailed by the Blair administrations. Permanent reforms included the introduction of postal voting on demand and continuous electoral registration. An Electoral Commission was also established to provide guidance on the running of elections and keep electoral law under review. The incoming Coalition government announced a departure in focus from 2010 with a premium on reducing opportunities electoral fraud, following high-profile cases of electoral malpractice. This is not to say that the Labour government did not introduce measures to tackle electoral fraud themselves. The Electoral Administration Act 2006 tightened up the security processes for postal votes and the Political Parties Act 2009 introduced individual Registration (IER) on a voluntary basis (James 2010, 2011a, 2012a).

However, the Deputy Prime Minister (2011) published a government white paper in 2011 that would:

- Fast track the introduction of IER and making it compulsory. Prior to this, most citizens in England, Wales and Scotland registered to vote via the annual canvass, whereby a form is sent to the ‘head of the household’ at each known property. Only one person was required to complete the registration form on behalf of all people living at that property. IER would require each citizen to complete their own form.
- Requiring citizens to provide their national insurance number and date of birth as personal identifiers. These personal identifiers would be used by electoral registration officers to check the eligibility of the elector against the Department for Work and Pensions (DWP) or HM Revenue and Customs (HMRC) data sets. Prior to this, no

personal identifiers are currently required at the registration process, except for citizens seeking to vote via a postal vote.

- Enabling online and telephone registration of new registrants. Prior to this new registrants had to complete hard copy forms.
- Providing an ‘opt-out’ box so that citizens can choose to not to be on the register.
- Providing for a power to end the annual canvass as a method of compiling the register.

5.2 Research findings

Following the publication of the IER draft bill, the author interviewed 74 senior elections staff across 41 organisations in England, Wales and Scotland about the likely effects of the proposed reforms on their organisation. A thematic analysis, a method compatible with realist research , was undertaken on the interviews and the analysis suggested that there would be a reduction in the opportunities for electoral fraud, but also four less desirable consequences: declining levels of electoral registration (especially among young people), higher administration and staff costs, data management problems and other miscellaneous side-effects (James 2014b, forthcoming). There was also a follow up evaluation of the final reform through semi-structured interviews and a survey in February of 2016. This found that opportunities for fraud had been reduced as expected; and that there were significantly higher administration and staffing costs as expected. It also found that there were negative effects on workplace conditions but that the decline on levels of electoral registration was not as dramatic as initially forecast (James forthcoming).

Implementing IER was the major policy development from 2011-2016 and therefore the focus of the attempts to influence policy debate. However, this research was located within a wider body which was also used. One category of research provided diagnosis tools for identifying the type of problems that occur in running elections. For example, a poll worker survey in 2015 found that unregistered citizens were regularly turned away from the polls, but electoral fraud was rare. A second category identified mechanisms for electoral administration and management by measures such as boosting voter turnout, developing learning mechanisms and improving cost efficiencies. A final category provided analyses of the drivers and obstacles of policy change. An argument running through them was that the political interests of the government are crucial. Table 1 summarises some of the key research.

Research focus	Research finding	Bibliographical reference
Individual Electoral Registration	The likely effects of implementing IER was established by undertaking interviews with electoral officials prior to implementation. This would be increased accuracy in the electoral register but a decline in registration levels and increased costs.	James (forthcoming, 2014b)
	A post-implementation evaluation of IER, based on a survey of electoral officials in February 2016. This revealed increases accuracy, some evidence of a decline and	James (forthcoming)
Problem diagnosis analysis	A survey of poll workers at the 2015 general election found the election to be well organised, with very few concerns about fraud. Voters were turned away from polling stations, however, for being unregistered.	Clark and James (2016)
	A survey of middle managers at the 2016 EU referendum found it to be well run, but that there were problems with resourcing electoral officials and voters turned away from polling stations.	Clark and James (2016)
	Interviews with electoral officials identified the key challenges that they faced in delivering well run elections.	James (2014a)
Tools for improving electoral administration and management	A heuristic framework of methods was compiled for compiling the electoral register or casting votes according to whether they increase voter turnout or otherwise.	James (2012a)
	An evaluation of the Electoral Commission’s performance schemes.	James (2013)
	An evaluation of the Electoral Commission’s use of central directions in the referendums of 2011	James (2016)
	An evaluation of the New Labour pilots designed to increase voter turnout.	James (2011a)
The drivers and obstacles to policy change	An analysis of how the policy network involved in delivering challenges changed during the twentieth century up to 2015.	James (2015, forthcoming)
	A historiographical analysis of the drivers of policy change in Britain, identifying partisan statecraft and political expediency on the behalf of the government as a key driver.	James (2012a, 2010)

5.3 The ‘impact strategy’ in action

The author’s first attempts at influencing policy makers came with a submission of written evidence to the Political and Constitutional Reform Select Committee (PCRSC) in 2011, which was giving the IER white paper pre-legislative scrutiny. The evidence outlined concerns about the impact of IER on voter turnout based on 33 of the interviews that had been undertaken at the time of submitting the

evidence (James 2011b). Blog posts were written to further disseminate the research (James 2011d). Following this I was invited to meetings with the Electoral Reform Society and a British Academy seminar with the Minister in 2011. I proposed measures that could be introduced to offset a decline in electoral registration such as allowing citizens to register when they interact with other government services, online registration, ensuring the long-term funding for electoral registration and making election-day registration a long term goal (James 2012b)

The Political and Constitutional Reform Select Committee (PCRSC) launched a new inquiry in 2014 into the broader topic of voter engagement. Evidence was again submitted about the impact of IER alongside other research (James 2014c). This time the author was invited to give oral evidence to the committee and a second submission was made. The PCRSC’s report heavily cited the evidence and proposed using public sources of information to make registration automatic. These conclusions heavily influence the 2015 Labour Party manifesto which ‘[d]rawing on the work of the Political and Constitutional Reform Committee’, promised to:

‘to take steps to ensure that the move to individual electoral registration does not leave millions unregistered... This will include block registration by universities and care homes, extending Northern Ireland’s successful Schools Initiative, and exploring the scope for an automatic system of registration.’ (Labour Party 2015, 63).

The Conservative Party won the general election in 2015, however. Rather than adopting the recommendations of the PCRSC, it abolished it (Blick 2015). An important cross-party venue in which civil society could voice concerns, discuss policy and disseminate academic research was therefore closed. The party’s manifesto instead committed it to focus efforts on improving voter registration rates among the specific group of the ‘five million Britons who live abroad’ and introduce voter ID requirements (Conservative Party 2015, 49).

Movements to implement this programme began with David Cameron asking Eric Pickles to head up an independent enquiry into electoral fraud in August 2015 (Cabinet Office 2015b). I co-submitted evidence with Alistair Clark, stressing that new research revealed that electoral fraud was rare, but problems with electoral registration more common. We were both invited to a seminar, organised by Michael Pinto-Duschinsky, formerly a Senior Consultant to the right-wing think tank Policy Exchange, on behalf of Eric Pickles. Unlike the Parliamentary committee system, the seminar operated under ‘Chatham House rules.’ Submissions of evidence were not publically available and were denied when I requested them under the Freedom of Information Act because Sir Eric Pickles’ inquiry was operating in a personal capacity.

Having previously met Bite the Ballot when giving evidence at the PCRSC, I proposed the setting up of a new All Party Parliamentary Group on Democratic Participation in the Autumn of 2015, aware of the previous success that the group had had, when I conducted research on an earlier paper (James 2015). The group was formed and held an AGM in November 2015. Bite the Ballot would act as the secretariat, the former Conservative minister responsible for implementing IER, Chloe Smith MP, was elected as the Chair. Co-Chairs were appointed representing all parties within Parliament. The group would have three areas of focus. Electoral Modernisation was one and I assumed the title of Lead Fellow for this area. An open meeting took place in March 2016 to gather ideas for improving voter registration rates, given concerns about under-registration, with representatives from civil society and the APPG. These were consolidated into a report, that I co-authored with Bite the Ballot, detailing 25 proposed short and long term reforms, called *The Missing Millions* (James, Bite the Ballot, and ClearView Research 2016). The whole APPG discussed this at a meeting in April 2015, suggesting amendments, before the report was published on behalf of the APPG. To promote the report open letters were written by myself and Oliver Sidorczuk from Bite the Ballot, and published in national broadsheets such as *The Times*⁶ and *The Telegraph*⁷ urging the government to take urgent action. Co-signatures were recruited and ranged on the political spectrum from Nigel Farage to Jeremy Corbyn. The June 2016 letter received signatures from over 80 Parliamentarians. Parliamentary questions were raised by members of the APPG based on the report (e.g. Hansard 2016d, 2016c) and one co-Chair of the group organised a debate in the House of Commons on automatic voter registration on 26th June 2016 (Hansard 2016a).

Meanwhile, Bite the Ballot also organised registration drives to boost registration levels. Media work was undertaken collaboratively. For example, in co-ordination with the BBC a series of pieces were run on the day of registration deadline encouraging young people to vote. For my own part, I appeared on BBC News at 10, just an over an hour before the deadline passed.

5.4 Research informed policy change?

Were there any meaningful real-world consequences of the research? It could be argued that the researcher is not best placed to evaluate this because of the obvious narcissistic and career incentives to make grandiose claims and penalties for modesty. A realist approach suggests that by ‘being there’

⁶ The Times, 8th February 2016, reprinted on the Political Studies Association Blog: <https://www.psa.ac.uk/insight-plus/blog/silent-growing-crisis-voter-registration>

⁷ The Telegraph, 9th June 2016 <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/opinion/2016/06/09/letters-the-failure-of-david-camerons-renegotiations-poisoned-an/>

the researcher can provide a unique perspective having personally interacted with many of the key stakeholders, however.

A case could be made that the early dissemination of research on IER affected the way in which it was implemented. The first PCRC report cited the early research as evidence, alongside others, (Political and Constitutional Reform Committee 2011, 12) and warned about a potential decline in levels of electoral registration as a result of IER. The concurrent reforms of online registration and additional funding were simultaneously introduced by the government to address this decline. The impact here is difficult to ascertain. Causation was probably ‘overdetermined’ because some of the reforms were part of the government’s original plans and groups from civil society and parliamentarians raised concerns anyway. The research would therefore have been one piece of evidence, albeit the only academic one, among many.

The research featured much more prominently in the PCRSC’s report on *Voter Engagement*, with 15 separate citations (Clark and James 2016). The government abolished the PCRSC and did not expressly acknowledge any influence to the report on *Voter Engagement*. But it did push forward by introducing a form of some of the key reforms that were proposed. In October 2015, John Penrose, as minister, announced an interest in automatic re-registration (Penrose 2015). This would involve the use of public records to keep citizens on the register automatically so that money could be saved, and efforts could be focussed on those that were missing. A draft order was then laid before Parliament in May 2016 to allow these pilots to take place (Parliament 2016) and a further 18 pilots were announced in November 2016 (Cabinet Office 2016). The government stated in Parliament that the *Missing Millions* report was ‘helping inform our plans for a programme of work aimed at realising this vision’ (Hansard 2016b). The Minister of State addressed the APPG at a meeting on 12th September 2016, praising the report and said that it ‘would forever be a landmark moment, focussing attention on the completeness of the electoral register’. The report received acclaim within Parliament and was heavily cited in debates with the government.

The research helped engagement campaigns to increase encourage voter registration. Bite the Ballot organised campaigns including National Voter Registration Day in February 2016 and #TurnUp for the EU Referendum. There were over 2 million additional registrations between December 2015 and June 2016. There were clearly there were many causes for this increase and Bite the Ballot’s work initially took place independently of the APPG and research. However, correspondence with the BBC suggests

that news stories on the eve of the registration deadline for the EU referendum led to spikes with the voter registration website.⁸

There is very strong evidence that the research helped to focus parliamentarians, civil society and the public on the problem of levels of registration. The research and report directly appeared in blogs and news stories across the media including: *Financial Times*,⁹ *The Metro*, *BBC News*,¹⁰ *Democratic Audit*,¹¹ *Radio 4 Today Programme*,¹² *Huffington Post*,¹³ *Open Democracy*,¹⁴ *Eastminster*¹⁵ and many other outlets. Moreover, connections were built between civil society groups and Parliamentarians. The APPG was established because I perceived a weakness in the policy network infrastructure from perspective of civil society. It provides a unique forum within parliament involving civil society and academics which can hold the government to account, which is important given that electoral registration is a topic that can drop down the register very quickly. The *Missing Missions* report and the work of the APPG was recognised by the Electoral Commission in its own report evaluating IER and looking to the future (Electoral Commission 2016, 2).

Yet there was evidence that policy was made in spite of the research. There was significant policy progress towards Voter ID being introduced. Eric Pickles’ report was published in August 2016 outlining 50 measures to tackle electoral fraud and argued that the government ‘should consider the options for electors to have to produce personal identification before voting at polling stations’ (Pickles 2016, 4). The poll worker survey was cited (p.12) as evidence that existing provisions may be sufficient to deter fraud, but the recommendation went against this.

6 Conclusions

This paper began with the puzzle of why political “scientists” often have mixed success in their attempt to also be “engineers” and bring about social change. The argument was that political scientists often do not fully think through the nature of the knowledge that they produce and the relationship between themselves, their knowledge and the world. Using a realist concept of science it has argued that all three are intrinsically linked by social relations. Researchers need to be aware of their own positionality and the consequences of the research in a way that

⁸ Correspondence with BBC journalist.

⁹ <https://www.ft.com/content/181415b0-dafb-11e5-98fd-06d75973fe09>

¹⁰ <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-politics-eu-referendum-36332411>

¹¹ <http://www.democraticaudit.com/2016/06/03/lets-stop-the-last-minute-registration-rush-its-time-for-a-complete-and-inclusive-electoral-register-for-britain/>

¹² Radio 4 Today, 14th October 2015.

¹³ http://www.huffingtonpost.co.uk/oliver-sidorczuk/voter-registration_b_9318304.html

¹⁴ <https://www.opendemocracy.net/toby-james-and-oliver-sidorczuk/millions-are-missing-from-uk-s-electoral-registers>

¹⁵ <http://www.ueapolitics.org/category/topics/election-law/>

goes beyond completing an ethics form. A realist approach helps to identify four core dilemmas in the case study of voter registration reform in Britain.

First, the case illustrates the social nature of the research. The initial research on IER forecast a decline in levels of electoral registration, but this did not fully transpire. The research was therefore implicitly criticised for ‘scaremongering’ by one election law expert (Pack 2016). The government replied in Parliament that the forecasts from the research were wrong. I am entirely open to the possibility that the research was erroneous in some way, of course. The publication and dissemination of the research, however, *may have prevented* its predicted consequences. Theoretically, if the research did encourage the government to undertake other work to boost the completeness of the electoral register, inspire voter registration drives and give me a platform to forewarn of the potential problems, then the value of the research should not be undermined. Instead, it just needs to be accepted that research is socially produced and the nature of that knowledge changes in time.

Secondly, the strategy of other actors can shape whether research has impact or not. In the domain of electoral law it is often claimed that a government will maintain laws that will benefit them and leave those that don’t (Benoit 2004; Renwick 2010). A more altruistic reading of their motives is that they are influenced by ideology and will make value based decisions between whether to prioritise strategies to reduce fraud or wider participation – which are often in complete conflict. In this case study, had Labour been elected in 2015 there would have been much greater policy change in the direction proposed by the research. It is therefore important that academic research is not evaluated in terms of simple policy change. To do so is deeply problematic in many policy domains because it inserts an inbuilt bias in favour of the research and researchers that supports government policy and/or ideology. In a free, democratic society, academics should have the freedom and responsibility to criticise government when and where appropriate. Universities and university sectors worldwide should build management systems that do not have perverse incentive structures to deviate from that.

Thirdly, given that elite policy making on issues that are politically sensitive takes place in secret – i.e. in the *actual* domain of reality. Researchers may not ever know whether their research had any impact or not. Elite decision makers (and even pressure groups) may not (understandably) be willing to publicly acknowledge influence of others for fear of it not being ‘their own idea.’ The acknowledgement that they provide may be sensitive to political relations. When asking for verification that my co-authored research (Clark and James 2017) had been of use to the UK government an email reply was that:

‘it is not usual practice for the department to write to people concerning the influence they have had on a consultation or call for evidence. We will be unable to attribute any particular recommendations to individual pieces of evidence. We are happy to acknowledge that you submitted evidence to the review, for which we are grateful. This is being taken into consideration along with the other evidence provided’ (Cabinet Office 2015a)

Meanwhile, as noted above, a Minister did acknowledge the influence of the *Missing Millions* report in Parliament, which contained similar findings, but which had the backing of Senior MPs as APPG Co-chairs from many parties and pressure groups that politicians were keen to be seen with. As a result, we should treat endorsements from actors carefully.

Lastly, while trying to change the world, as Marx preached, is difficult, academics should not shrug the task. There are tactics that can be used and academics need to act strategically. Research needs to be disseminated early, often before publication, at a time that is relevant for the policy cycle because the publication process in academia is usually too slow. Academics need to team up with supportive pressure groups who have the expertise, kudos and infrastructure in lobbying and dissemination. Finally, parliaments are not impenetrable fortresses for academic. In most legislatures it requires only one parliamentarian to raise a question to a minister, introduce an amendment to a bill or even set up informal working groups of colleagues. These can be invaluable venues for academics to disseminate research.

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