

The Higher Education Impact Agenda, Scientific Realism and Policy Change: the Case of Electoral Integrity in Britain

Toby S. James

University of East Anglia

www.tobysjames.com

t.s.james@uea.ac.uk

Abstract: Pressures have increasingly been put upon social scientists to prove their economic, cultural and social value through ‘impact agendas’ in higher education. There has been little conceptual and empirical discussion of the challenges involved in achieving impact and the dangers of evaluating it, however. This article argues that a critical realist approach to social science can help to identify some of these key challenges and the institutional incompatibilities between impact regimes and university research in free societies. These incompatibilities are brought out through an autobiographical ‘insider-account’ of trying to achieve impact in the field of electoral integrity in Britain. The article argues that there is a more complex relationship between research and the real world which means that the nature of knowledge might change as it becomes known by reflexive agents. Secondly, the researchers are joined into social relations with a variety of actors, including those who might be the object of study in their research. Researchers are often weakly positioned in these relations. Some forms of impact, such as achieving policy change, are therefore exceptionally difficult as they are dependent on other actors. Strategies for trying to achieve impact are drawn out such as collaborating with civil society groups and parliamentarians to lobby for policy change.

Key words: critical realism, policy change, electoral integrity, electoral registration, electoral studies, impact, higher education

This is a pre-print of an article due for publication in the journal [British Politics](#). Please cite and quote from the final version of the article.

Introduction

Many academics around the globe, driven by a desire to use their accumulated expertise to improve the world, have long sought to achieve what is now known within higher education management as 'impact'. A new surge of activity, however, has arguably been unleashed in some countries in recent years. Universities and academics have been pressured to prove their social, cultural and economic value in an age where many governments world-wide are engaged in austerity agendas. This has fed into changing management structures within higher education. In 2014, 'impact' became a metric by which the UK government assessed universities and awarded resources. Australia plans to do the same (Australian Research Council 2017). More countries may follow. Academics in such countries are therefore being encouraged to undertake impact projects by their universities and research councils are increasingly judging research funding applications by criteria other than academic merit.

It is still to be established, however, whether and how research from the social sciences, rather than the natural sciences, yet alone the discipline of politics and international relations, can have impact. Many academics have long-warned that the goal of evidence-based policy is naïve because ideas and knowledge can be 'used and abused' by actors for political expediency. This article argues that impact is both possible and socially desirable. It is difficult to achieve, however, and the reasons for this become clearer if we think more deeply about the nature of the knowledge that social scientists generate, and their positionality with the object of their research. The argument is pursued by focussing on a case study of one research stream in political science: the study of electoral institutions and electoral integrity. However, the arguments developed may have a general resonance across many policy and subject areas. Part one of the article reviews the existing claims that political science¹ research can generate impact and zooms in on concerns recently raised in the field of electoral studies. The second part argues that it is important to assess the type of knowledge that social scientists generate. Drawing from scientific realism, it argues that the 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. The consequences of this are mapped for the study of electoral institutions and electoral integrity. It also argues that these social relations are asymmetric and that academics are often weakly resourced within policy networks to bring about policy change. The third part draws from the author's own experience of trying to improve electoral administration in Britain,² it offers an autobiographical 'insider account' of trying to

¹ The terms political science, political scientist and social scientist are used in this article for the sake of simplicity, with apologies to those who prefer the terms political studies, political theorists and social studies.

² James, T.S. Forthcoming. *Comparative Electoral Management: Performance, Networks and Instruments*. London and New York: Routledge

trigger policy change to illustrate these challenges. Strategies for how social scientists can seek to address this problem are drawn out such as working through civil society and with parliamentarians.

The contribution of the article is therefore threefold. First, it grounds the higher education impact agenda debate, both in the UK and overseas, into broader debates about the philosophy of the social sciences and public policy. Second, it draws out challenges and dangers with impact agendas which those in higher education management should be aware of. Third, it offers tools (and encouragement) for future scholars seeking to improve the world.

Has political science had 'impact'?

Has the discipline of political science and international relations had impact? And is 'impact' anyway? For the first ever evaluation of the effect of research on positive social change, the UK's HECFE defined it as: 'an effect on, change or benefit to the economy, society, culture, public policy or services, health, the environment or quality of life, beyond academia.' (HEFCE et al. 2011, 48). This could include, 'but is not limited to, an effect on, change or benefit to:... the activity, attitude, awareness, behaviour, capacity, opportunity, performance, policy, practice, process or understanding... of an audience, beneficiary, community, constituency, organisation or individuals' (HEFCE et al. 2011, 48). The Australian Research Council subsequently used a similar definition, defining it as 'the contribution that research makes to the economy, society, environment or culture, beyond the contribution to academic research' (Australian Research Council 2017, 5). The UK REF panel on Politics and International Relations thought that impact had been achieved. It rated 40 per cent of submitted work as 4* ('world leading') and 44 per cent as 3* ('internationally excellent') (HEFCE 2015, 76). In its summary report it concluded that 'many staff in the field of Politics and International Studies were also substantially involved in policy making circles and the critical scrutiny of public policy of all types both in the UK and in other countries over the course of the assessment period' (HEFCE 2015, 80).

There are few independent academic assessments of the impact that social science researchers have had on public policy, outside of internal university documents. It is certainly not universally accepted that political science research leads to positive social change, even if researchers do seek to achieve this. This article focuses on the study of electoral integrity and electoral institutions, where an initial study was undertaken into the influence of social scientists and made for gloomier reading. The *APSA Presidential Task Force on Electoral Rules and Democratic Governance* (Htun and Powell 2013b) sought to document how political scientists have been active in trying to shape the real world in the field of electoral institutions. It reflected highly on the collective scholarly accomplishments of researchers 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, wrote

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 article, 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, however, 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).

Meanwhile, failures to predict outcomes of elections, such as Brexit or Donald Trump's election as President in the USA, despite much greater sophistication in their models, has become made how scholars within electoral studies interact with their object of study a major concern (Sturgis et al. 2016).

Behaviouralism, social science and knowledge

Understandings of why such significant academic achievements have not converted into perceptions of real-world policy change would benefit from deeper thinking about the nature of the knowledge that social scientists create. The commonly held assumptions about the type of knowledge generated is are closely modelled on modernist behaviouralism. Behaviouralism criticised earlier traditions for a lack of the 'grand theorising' that the accumulation of knowledge could generate. 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). A positivist epistemology and ontology are used. Following Karl Popper, 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 at individual or the aggregate level. The methodological tools of choice tend to be large n quantitative studies, with a logic of causal inference based in statistics and probability theory. As Goertz and Mahoney (2012; 2010) 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.

It is well known that this philosophical grounding underwrites what are perceived to be 'leading' political science journals and research methods courses, despite some attempts to establish a contrary approach (Monroe 2005). With the power of established scientific laws, through mass observation, prediction should become possible and future behaviour is therefore identifiable in. The likely effects of changes in laws, interventions and treatments can be mapped through statistical models. This type of knowledge therefore becomes a highly useful tool and can be sought after by practitioners looking for expertise. Chad Vickery of the influential electoral organisation IFES expressed his concerns to scholars of electoral integrity at a Harvard University 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.'

Scientific Realism and the Social Nature of Knowledge

Scientific (or 'critical') realism³ 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 (1989; 2008), Margaret Archer (1995, 1998) and Andrew Sayer (2000, 2010).⁴ It is now becoming established as an alternative approach to political science in the UK (McAnulla 2006), although it has had only limited use in the study of elections (James 2012a).⁵

³ 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.

⁴ Also see: Collier (1994) and Putnam and Conant (1990).

⁵ There are other post positivist alternatives to behaviouralism such as interpretivism. See for example, (Kirkland and Wood 2016).

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.

More importantly for the argument developed in this article, behaviouralists are criticised for having an over-simplistic model of the relationship between the researcher with what they are researching. Sayer (2010) conceptualises this as subject-object relationship. Behaviouralists assume that the impartial scientist is entirely separate from the phenomenon that they study. The role of the subject (the researcher) is to document information about the object (the phenomenon under study), and develop explanatory models and predictive forecasts of their behaviour (Sayer 2010, 24). These models can be tested and adjusted through repeated observations. Sayer argues that 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.' Secondly, 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.⁶

Researcher and object as social relations

It is therefore argued here that we should conceive the learning relationship between the subject and the object not as 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. It is suggested here that 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. The relationship is social. They write to/email them, giving information about themselves they think the respondent will need to know and may encourage them to reply. They decide 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 directly interact with the object or know of this changed behaviour. 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, such as ballot stuffing, rulers may change their tactics to adopt other methods (Sjoberg 2014).

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. The public and political parties may alter their behaviour in response to polling forecasts, thereby undermining the forecast.

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.⁷ 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, is 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 (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 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 (Piven and Cloward 1988).

⁷ This example was taken from my own University: University of East Anglia (2017) 'Our research impacts business, policy and the public', url: <https://www.uea.ac.uk/chemistry/research/impact>, date accessed, 25th May 2017.

This is not to say that politicians are entirely driven by partisan motives 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. 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 (2001) but also used by Colin Hay (2002, 115-34) 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 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 (James 2015, forthcoming). Academics are usually among many other sources of information that governments can use to develop and justify policy and rarely have a direct invite into decision-making circles. Routine teaching, administration and research commitments mean that they often lack the time to follow policy developments in Parliaments.

The case of voter registration reform in Britain 2011-2017

This article now provides an auto-biographical account of some of the author's own practical experience of trying to improve electoral integrity in Britain using his research, in order 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. As already noted, scientific realism stresses that the object is inseparable from the subject of study so self-reflection on the positionality of the research and researcher can allow inferences to be drawn.

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 New Labour 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 make it compulsory. Prior to this, registration was on a household basis in England, Wales and Scotland registered. 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.
- Require 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.

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

Underlying research

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).

This research was located within a wider body which was also used to try influence the policy debate (Table 1). 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 (2014b, forthcoming)
	A post-implementation evaluation of IER, based on a survey of electoral officials in February 2016. This revealed increased accuracy, some evidence of a decline in completeness, but significant effects on the budgets and staff of local authorities.	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 (2017)
	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 (2017)
	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 2018.	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 (2010, 2012a)

Table 1: Underlying research used for impact

The 'impact strategy' in action

Table 2 details some of the core strategies used to generate impact. The initial primary method for achieving impact was the *submission of evidence to existing parliamentary committees and enquiries*. This began 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). 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 I 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 influenced 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).

Submissions of evidence were reinforced with *regular blog posts* to further disseminate the research (James 2011d). This opened-up opportunities such as being invited to meetings with the Electoral Reform Society to advise on policy and participating in British Academy seminar with the Minister in 2011.

The Conservative Party won the general election in 2015, however. Rather than adopting the recommendations of the PCRSC, it abolished it. 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 our research revealed that electoral fraud was rare, but problems with electoral registration more common. We were both invited to a seminar, organised by a former 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 publicly 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, independent of government. This made it difficult for participants to be aware of the evidence submitted by others, and for the author to share his own findings with other key stakeholders.

A second strategy was therefore to try to *open up new venues for participation*. Having previously met Mike Sani and Oliver Sidorczuk of Bite the Ballot when giving evidence at the PCRSC, and then interviewed them for future research, 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 recruited by Bite the Ballot to ensure that all parties within Parliament were represented – the only all-party group at the time.⁸ 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*⁹ and *The Telegraph*¹⁰ 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 2016c; Hansard 2016d) 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). Co-authored blogs were subsequently written with Parliamentarians to keep items on the agenda and to support amendments to bills that APPG parliamentarians proposed or supported.

⁸ Co-chairs in the first year were: Lord Blunkett (Labour), Owen Thompson (SNP), Lord Rennard (Lib Dem), Gavin Robinson (DUP), Liz Saville Roberts (Plaid Cymru), Mark Durkan (SDLP), Danny Kinahan (UUP) Caroline Lucas, (Green) Baroness Grey-Thompson (Crossbench).

⁹ 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>

¹⁰ The Telegraph, 9th June 2016 <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/opinion/2016/06/09/letters-the-failure-of-david-camerons-renegotiations-poisoned-an/>

Meanwhile, Bite the Ballot also organised registration drives to boost registration levels. Media work was sometimes 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.

Throughout, informal correspondence with Parliamentarians was vital. Requests for meetings were (to my surprise) usually accepted. Quick replies to emails asking ‘is there any research on....’ helped to build relationships. Co-authoring blogs helped add clout to my otherwise overlooked voice.

Ten strategies for achieving policy impact
Submissions to Parliamentary Select Committee Inquiries
Setting up informal Parliamentary Groups
Writing policy reports with recommendations
Asking Parliamentarians to ask questions in Parliament
Providing Parliamentarians with briefings during legislative debates
Blogging and media work, ideally in collaboration/co-written with politicians and pressure groups
Informal briefings with ministers, civil servants, parliamentarians and pressure groups
Speaking at practitioner conferences and event
Writing for practitioner magazines and newsletters
Writing open letters in newsletters and organising co-signatures

Table 2: Strategies for bringing about policy change

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 incentives to make grandiose claims and the penalties for modesty. It is perhaps impossible to know the impact because I am no longer an objective observer and many decisions are made in secret. A critical realist approach suggests that by ‘being there’ 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 may have been '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. 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). A further 18 pilots were announced in November 2016 (Cabinet Office 2016) and more in April 2017 (Hansard 2017). 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.

During the passage of the Higher Education and Research Bill members of the Lords supported an amendment that would require universities to play a role in registering students to vote, a key proposal from the *Missing Millions* report. Bite the Ballot played a key role in discussing the proposal with parliamentarians and blogs were published to provide support. This was eventually included in legislation when the Commons passed the bill on the last day of Parliament before it closed for the snap 2017 general election (James, Rennard, and Dell 2017).

The research helped engagement campaigns to increase encourage voter registration. During a National Voter Registration day in 2015, Bite the Ballot claimed to have registered, 441,696 people, which they claimed was a per capita record for a voting registration drive. There was a further drive in February 2016 and a #TurnUp campaign 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.¹¹

There is very strong evidence that the research helped to forge interest among 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*,¹² *The Metro*¹³, *BBC News*,¹⁴ *Democratic Audit*,¹⁵ *Radio 4 Today Programme*,¹⁶ *Huffington Post*,¹⁷ *Open Democracy*,¹⁸ *Eastminster*¹⁹ 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 provided 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) and was informally cited by the government when it launched its own Democratic Engagement Strategy in December 2017.²⁰

Yet there was evidence that policy was made despite 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. The government responded to

¹¹ Correspondence with BBC journalist.

¹² Financial Times (2014) 'Reform sees 1.4m people leave electoral register'
<https://www.ft.com/content/181415b0-dafb-11e5-98fd-06d75973fe09>

¹³ The Metro (2016) 'Millions could miss out on EU referendum vote – don't be one of them, register by this deadline' <http://metro.co.uk/2016/05/25/millions-could-miss-out-on-eu-referendum-vote-dont-be-one-of-them-5904647/>

¹⁴ BBC (2016) 'EU referendum: Millions 'could miss out on vote', 25th May 2016
<http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-politics-eu-referendum-36332411>

¹⁵ Toby S. James, Oliver Sidorck and Lord Rennard (2016) 'Let's stop the last minute rush: its time for a complete and inclusive electoral register for Britain' Democratic Audit
<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/>

¹⁶ Radio 4 Today, 14th October 2015.

¹⁷ http://www.huffingtonpost.co.uk/oliver-sidorczuk/voter-registration_b_9318304.html

¹⁸ Caroline Lucas and Toby James (2017) Why isn't the full electoral registration process online?, Open Democracy, March 2017, <https://www.opendemocracy.net/uk/caroline-lucas-toby-james/why-isnt-full-electoral-registration-process-online>

¹⁹ <http://www.ueapolitics.org/category/topics/election-law/>

²⁰ Personal correspondence.

the Pickles report by proposing to pilot voter ID in May 2018 and then included a commitment to introduce it in their 2017 general election manifesto.

Conclusions

Impact agendas in higher education seem to be on a forward wave with universities evaluated in terms of the effects of their research on the real world. There has been little conceptual and empirical discussion of the challenges involved in achieving impact and the dangers of evaluating it, however. Taking a realist approach to social science, and by adopting an autobiographical 'insider account' four core dilemmas are raised.

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' (Pack 2016). The government replied in Parliament that the forecasts from the research were wrong and my subsequent research found that the impact was less than anticipated. 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*, at least initially. 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, assessments of research impact need recognise non-linear and complex pathways to change.

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. 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 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 (James 2012a). Researchers may not ever know the full extent of their impact. Elite decision makers, political parties and pressure groups may not (understandably) be willing to publicly acknowledge or can downplay the influence of others for fear of it not being ‘their own idea.’ Staff turnaround at civil society organisations is high and institutional memories of where ideas come from are quickly lost. Then there are denials. When I asked the government for verification that some co-authored research had been of used to inform policy, the UK government replied 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).

As noted above, a Minister did acknowledge the influence of the research vis-à-vis the *Missing Millions* report in Parliament. This was no doubt because it had the backing of cross-party senior MPs and pressure groups that politicians were keen to be associated with. Endorsements of research impact are therefore highly political in nature.

Trying to achieve impact is difficult, but academics should not shrug the task, however. Tactics 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. My research impact was indebted to the skill and hard work of new friends at Bite the Ballot. Parliaments are not impenetrable fortresses for academics. 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, lobby for change and hold governments to account.

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