

Institution: Newcastle University		
Unit of Assessment: 19 Politics and International Studies		
Title of case study: Supporting Improvements in Electoral Integrity in Britain		
Period when the underpinning research was undertaken: 2011-19		
Details of staff conducting the underpinning research from the submitting unit:		
Name(s): Dr Alistair Clark	Role(s) (e.g. job title): Reader in Politics	Period(s) employed by submitting HEI: 2011-present
Period when the claimed impact occurred: 2015-20		
Is this case study continued from a case study submitted in 2014? N		
1. Summary of the impact		
<p>Recently there has been considerable concern about electoral integrity worldwide resulting in highly politicised debates, including in Britain. Alistair Clark's research has systematically examined the drivers of high-quality electoral administration and he has conducted the first major surveys of polling station workers in the UK. Significantly, his research has influenced the methodology used by the Electoral Commission in evaluating voter identification pilots, informed the recommendations of two major reports on the 2016 EU referendum, enabled parliamentary committees and individual parliamentarians to hold government accountable for the funding of electoral administration, and contributed to political debate on voter registration and electoral fraud.</p>		
2. Underpinning research		
<p>Clark is one of the UK's leading scholars researching the integrity of electoral processes. He has introduced new methods to election management research in the UK. First, working with T. S. James (UEA), he has conducted original surveys with election administrators, including polling station workers and counting officers. Second, he has conducted extensive quantitative analysis of administrative data to provide a national overview of performance in electoral administration, and identify the drivers of higher performance.</p> <p>There are approximately 100,000 polling station workers in UK general elections. Clark and James developed an original survey of poll workers for the 2015 UK general election (n=1321) (GRANT2). They repeated this in the 2018 and 2019 local elections (n2018=2149). Analysis of the 2015 survey was the first to provide an account of the background, motivation and experience of polling station workers (PUB 1). Most importantly, it discovered that:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Less than 1% of poll workers surveyed suspected any cases of electoral fraud at their polling station in the 2015 election. Moreover, only 6% of poll workers had people 'ask to vote whose identity they were unsure of'. • 69% of poll workers reported that at least one person was turned away from their polling station because they were not registered. The modal response (at 39%) was 2-5 people who asked to vote but were not registered. <p>Clark and James concluded that problems with the registration of voters were more significant than problems with electoral fraud or impersonation (PUB 1).</p> <p>On the basis of their expertise in electoral administration and the success of their poll worker survey, Clark and James were commissioned by the UK Electoral Commission to evaluate electoral administration at the 2016 EU Referendum (PUB 2; GRANT1). This included a national</p>		

survey of counting officers and senior election administrators (n=254) and a series of qualitative interviews (n=25). Their research found:

- The EU Referendum was well managed by the Chief Counting Officer with few incidents on the day.
- Low levels of concern about electoral fraud and intimidation but 'further evidence that some citizens are turned away from polling stations thinking that they are registered but having found that they are not' (PUB 2, p. 23).
- Nearly half of local authorities claimed that they have insufficient funds to maintain the electoral register.

This research supported the findings of the 2015 polling station workers' survey regarding electoral fraud and voter registration. The evidence on funding issues was also consistent with findings from the second strand of Clark's research on electoral administration.

Clark's second major contribution has been to conduct analysis of administrative data on returning officers' performance standards from the UK Electoral Commission and election funding data from the UK Electoral Commission and the UK Government's Cabinet Office. These data were integrated with census 2011 and other socio-economic and electoral data. This analysis provided the first quantitative research on the drivers of higher performance in electoral administration in the UK. The major findings included:

- Evidence of variation in electoral administrative performance across mainland Britain (PUBs 3, 4, 5).
- Measured in different ways (total spending, registration spending, £ per elector) and in different elections (2009 EP, 2010GE, 2014 EP) spending on election administration led to improved performance in running elections (PUBs 3, 5, 6).
- Other administrative issues also impacted upon election quality. Running multiple constituencies led to higher performance; running different levels of elections concurrently led to lower performance (PUB 5).

Clark concluded that resources matter for the quality of electoral administration. Moreover, additional changes in the organisation and timing of elections could improve the quality of electoral administration.

3. References to the research

PUB1. Clark, A. and James, T. S. (2017) 'Poll Workers', in P. Norris & A. Nai (eds.) *Election Watchdogs: Transparency, Accountability and Integrity*, New York: Oxford University Press, pp144-164. DOI:10.1093/acprof:oso/9780190677800.003.0008.

PUB2. Clark, A. and James. T. (2016) [An Evaluation of Electoral Administration at the EU Referendum](#), London: Electoral Commission.

PUB3. Clark, A. (2014) 'Investing in Electoral Management' in P. Norris, R. Frank & F. Martinez I Coma (eds.) *Advancing Electoral Integrity*, New York: Oxford University Press, pp165-188. DOI:10.1093/acprof:oso/9780199368709.003.0009.

PUB4. Clark, A. (2015) 'Public Administration and the Integrity of the Electoral Process in British Elections', *Public Administration*, 93, (1), pp86-102. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1111/padm.12106>.

PUB5. Clark, A. (2017) 'Identifying the Determinants of Electoral Integrity and Administration in Advanced Democracies: The Case of Britain', *European Political Science Review*, 9, (3), pp471-492. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1017/S1755773916000060>.

PUB6. Clark, A. (2019) 'The Cost of Democracy: The Determinants of Spending on the Public Administration of Elections', *International Political Science Review*,_40, (3), pp354-369. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1177/0192512118824787>.

Note on quality: Clark's research on electoral administration and management has been published in leading international peer-reviewed political science journals (PUBs 4-6), and major international research collections edited by one of the most prominent global political science scholars (PUBs 1, 3). Clark's contribution to the co-authored publications (PUB 1, 2) is material and distinct in advancing the conceptualisation of electoral integrity and developing an innovative methodological approach to assessing electoral integrity.

Grants

	Grant Title	Funder	Period	Amount
Clark (co-PI with James, UEA) GRANT1	EU Referendum Electoral Process Evaluation	Electoral Commission	May 2016 - August 2016	GBP12,000
Clark (Co-I; PI James, UEA) GRANT2	Election Integrity on the Frontline: Poll Workers and the Electoral Process in Britain' SG140099	British Academy/Leverhulme Trust Small Grant	January 2015 - June 2016	GBP9,297

4. Details of the impact

The main beneficiaries of Clark's research have been the UK Electoral Commission, parliamentary committees, and parliamentarians reviewing and arguing for improved electoral administration.

Voting is a central right and duty of citizenship. Upwards of 40 million people registered to vote in the 2019 general election, while 26.8 million voted. Ensuring oversight of electoral administration are vital responsibilities of the Electoral Commission and parliamentarians. Research contributions to their evaluations, like Clark's, are crucial in identifying best practice. This ensures that citizens entitled to vote can do so securely with government held accountable for failures in conducting elections, and informed of any necessary improvements. The significance of Clark's research means that he is regularly invited to give in-person evidence to key committees. Such evidence informed the 2019 House of Commons Public Administration and Constitutional Affairs Committee (PACAC) report on electoral law (IMP5), which cites findings from Clark and James's research on poll workers in relation to voter ID and electoral law.

Equipping the Electoral Commission with Tools to Evaluate Voter ID Pilots

In 2018, the Electoral Commission conducted evaluations of controversial voter identification pilots in five local authority areas. Polling station workers' surveys were central to these evaluations. The Commission's survey method and survey instrument was 'developed from' Clark and James' 2015 survey of polling station workers (IMP1, p. 3, note 1). The Electoral Commission's researchers met with Clark and James several times during 2017 and 2018 to seek their 'input in adjusting it for the 2018 local elections' (IMP1, p. 3, note 1). The Commission adopted Clark and James' recommendation to use hard copies of the survey (as they had done in 2015) to maximise the completion rate. They also adopted several questions directly from Clark and James' 2015 survey.

Informing Major Reports on EU and Scottish Referendums

Clark and James' 2016 national evaluation of the electoral administration of the EU Referendum (PUB2) was commissioned by the Electoral Commission. At the time, there was widespread concern about electoral fraud and intimidation. Clark and James' evaluation provided one important evidential basis for the Electoral Commission's own report on the referendum (IMP2). The Commission's report draws heavily on Clark and James' evaluation (in Section 4) and summarises key findings from their counting officers' survey (Sub-sections 4.156-4.166). Three recommendations (7, 8 and 9) on improving voter registration are adapted from Clark and James' recommendations. Clark and James' evaluation was also cited in the PACAC report into *Lessons Learned from the EU Referendum* (IMP3). PACAC noted that the independent evaluation found that 'the Chief Counting Officer, the Electoral Commission and electoral officials across the UK managed the referendum very well' (IMP3, p. 38). PACAC also reported Clark and James' concerns about voter registration and difficulties with the online voter registration system (IMP3, p. 38). The Committee also adopted Clark and James' recommendation that voters be allowed to check online whether they are registered to vote (IMP3, pp. 58-9)

Based on his expertise, Clark was appointed advisor to the Scottish Parliament's Finance and Constitution Committee for its 2019 report on the Referendums (Scotland) Bill (IMP6). The Committee Convenor, publicly praised Clark's 'excellent advice' in the plenary debate on the bill (IMP9, Col. 56). Clark's advice that a referendum should not be held concurrently with other elections (PUB 5) forms one of the Committee's recommendations (p.16), as does his advice that accredited electoral observers be explicitly allowed to attend polling stations, postal vote proceedings and the count (pp.19-20). The Scottish government's response agreed that referendums should be standalone events (IMP7, p.3), something MSPs subsequently amended the Bill to include in Section 3A (1), while an Electoral Commission Code of Practice for Observers would make clear to observers which referendum events they could attend (IMP7, p.5).

Helping parliamentarians hold government accountable for funding electoral administration

Clark's research on funding election administration has been used by parliamentarians to hold government accountable. Clark's finding from his 2016 survey of counting officers that nearly half of local authorities claimed to have insufficient funds to maintain the electoral register (PUB2) was directly quoted in a parliamentary question by one of the MPs (IMP4) and elicited a detailed response from the Parliamentary Secretary, Cabinet Office. Citing the 2016 finding and Clark's evidence that electoral services teams were small, and their capacity to deliver high quality electoral administration dependent upon staffing and resources, a strongly-worded recommendation from the House of Lords Committee examining the 2013 Electoral Registration and Administration Act urged the Government 'to undertake a thorough review of existing funding provisions and arrangements for both electoral registration and delivery of elections. The review must ensure adequate funding is provided' (IMP8, p.27). The Scottish parliament's Finance and Constitution Committee report on the Referendums (Scotland) Bill (IMP6) asks the Scottish government to respond to Clark's advice that cost estimates need to take account of inflation and international best practice (p.34). The Scottish government's response 'notes the comments of the Committee's advisor... The Scottish government will undertake further work to identify alternative approaches to referendum costs' (IMP7, p.10) Clark's recommendation to PACAC's Coronavirus Act Inquiry that the resourcing of COVID-19 mitigations for elections be investigated, led to PACAC calling directly for evidence on this (IMP10, pp.27-28).

Clark's underpinning research and continuous engagement with the Electoral Commission, and relevant parliamentary committees both in Edinburgh and Westminster, have helped to ensure that robust evidence regarding the integrity of British electoral systems has been taken into account and used by parliamentarians in the highly politicised debate around electoral integrity, and has had an impact on the outcomes of these debates.

5. Sources to corroborate the impact

IMP1. The Electoral Commission, [Bromley May 2018 Voter Identification Pilot Evaluation](#). London: Electoral Commission.

IMP2. The Electoral Commission (2016) [The EU Referendum: Report on the 23 June 2016 Referendum on the UK's Membership of the European Union](#), London: Electoral Commission.

IMP3. Public Administration and Constitutional Affairs Committee (2017) [Lessons Learned from the EU Referendum](#), London: House of Commons.

IMP4. [Hansard, 22 March 2017](#), Col. 850.

IMP5. Public Administration and Constitutional Affairs Committee (2019) [Electoral Law: The Urgent Need for Review](#) (HC 244), London, House of Commons.

IMP6. Scottish Parliament Finance and Constitution Committee (2019) [Stage 1 report on the Referendums \(Scotland\) Bill](#), Edinburgh: Scottish Parliament.

IMP7. Scottish Government (2019) Response to FCC Stage 1 Report on the Referendums (Scotland) Bill – Letter from the Cabinet Secretary to the FCC Convenor, Edinburgh: Scottish Government.

IMP8. Select Committee on the Electoral Registration and Administration Act 2013 (2020) [An Electoral System Fit for Today? More to be Done](#), London: House of Lords, HL Paper 83.

IMP9. Scottish Parliament (2019) *Official Report: Meeting of the Parliament Thursday 7th November 2019*, Edinburgh: Scottish Parliament.

IMP10. Public Administration and Constitutional Affairs Committee (2020) [Parliamentary Scrutiny of the Government's handling of Covid-19](#) (HC 377), London: House of Commons.