

# Managing Elections in a Monitory Democracy: UK Election Management in Comparative Perspective

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## Introduction

This paper seeks to broaden the conception of election management beyond the study of formal election management bodies to include a broader range of institutions identified in John Keane's (2009) notion of 'monitory democracy'. The first half of the paper charts recent developments in the study of election management and electoral integrity and highlights growing attention to the role of the media and the wider politics of election management in such accounts. The case of the UK is used to illustrate how the concept of monitory democracy could be used to theorise this shift and study such developments empirically. In the second half of the paper, this discussion is used to frame initial findings drawn from a database of English-language media coverage of electoral irregularities captured via Google News alerts from 2015-17. After presenting details of the methods used to compile the data and summary statistics of its coverage, the cases of the UK and the USA are looked at in detail. Significant contrasts are found in the nature of media coverage of electoral fraud in the two countries, particularly with respect to the extent to which media coverage confirms or contradicts official, legal and academic analysis of electoral irregularities. These differences point to the unique character of monitory democracy in each country and have important implications for both public and expert perceptions of electoral integrity.

## Studying electoral institutions: from public administration to monitory democracy

Academic interest in electoral integrity and election management has grown rapidly in recent years (James, 2012; Norris, 2014a). Writing as recently as 2012, Toby James noted that, aside from a growing body of work in the USA, the issue of how elections are run had been mostly ignored in the vast international literature in electoral studies. While there was an early body of work on election administration (see for example, Mackenzie (1958) and Butler (1963) on the UK), the approach to the topic had been overwhelmingly descriptive. As political science developed as a discipline, this early attention to election administration fell away. The primary reason for this blind spot is well captured in one of the earliest books on the subject: in countries which held competitive elections, i.e. western democracies, "electoral administration is very careful and precise, and controversy about this sort of electoral corruption is almost extinct" (MacKenzie, 1958, p.145). Given such assumptions, that there was, in effect, 'nothing to see here', there would have appeared to be little either to theorise or to study empirically in the management of elections.

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This view of electoral administration changed radically after the 2000 US presidential election, when the closeness of the contest meant that evident shortcomings in the electoral processes in Florida were exposed for all the world to see. Whereas attention had previously mostly been paid to flawed elections in electoral autocracies, the possibility of elections in established democracies being critically undermined by maladministration or malpractice had now been demonstrated. While it remains perhaps the most serious recent case in a western democracy, Florida in 2000 has not been an isolated controversy. As Norris (2014a) notes, other cases have arisen in Canada, Spain, France, Germany and, the primary focus of this paper, the UK. Indeed, a variety of mostly localised concerns have dogged UK elections since the mid-late 2000s, including proven cases of electoral fraud, failures of electronic counting systems, poor ballot paper design, the inaccuracy and incompleteness of the electoral register (Wilks-Heeg, 2008, 2009). Since 2010, there have also been problems with electors being denied a vote after election staff were unable to deal with queues before the close of polls and the new online system for applying to register to vote, which crashed just before the registration deadline for the 2016 referendum on EU membership.

After emerging initially in the USA, which still dominates the field, a distinctive academic literature on election management and electoral integrity has taken shape. As the field has grown, much greater clarity has been achieved in relation to core definitions and concepts, theoretical approaches have been developed, there has been rapid methodological innovation, and new datasets have been created. There is also a growing body of comparative work on electoral management, facilitated by the availability of these new datasets, notably the expert surveys undertaken by the Electoral Integrity Project (i Coma and Frank, 2014) and the inclusion of questions on electoral integrity in the World Values Survey (Norris, 2014b). Critically, a link has been established between issues of electoral integrity and wider concerns about declining political participation, the loss of faith in democratic institutions and the rise of anti-politics (Norris, 2014a). As such, election management not merely a technical issue but one which underpins some of the most basic democratic concerns and which even established democracies need to address, as Pippa Norris notes:

“In long-standing democracies such as the United States, Britain and Canada, it is commonly believed that malpractices and irregularities are likely to erode citizens’ trust in the electoral process and confidence in democracy, depress voter turnout and civic engagement, and thereby distort political representation” (Norris, 2014a, p.6)

As the field has developed, approaches derived from public administration and comparative public policy have been particularly influential. The contribution of both of these approaches is captured well by the volume edited by Norris et al. (2014), which offers a useful ‘state of the art’ overview of current research. The ‘public administration turn’ (c.f. James, 2012) is especially notable in the studies of individual countries contained in the volume. Two chapters on the UK, for instance, focus on the governance issues raised by the country’s highly decentralised election management arrangements. Clark (2014) examines the impact of differential levels of funding on the performance of electoral management at a local level. James (2014) focuses on the risks of failures in the management of elections drawing on the views of local election officials as ‘street level bureaucrats’. Meanwhile, the comparative politics approach is evident in contributions such as Madonado and Seligson’s (2014), which examines levels of citizens’ trust in elections across Latin America and the Caribbean, finding that the long-established gap between how winners and losers perceive electoral integrity is narrowest where levels of democracy are highest.

### *The fallacy of electoralism?*

One criticism that has been made of this growing literature on electoral integrity is that it risks reducing the study of democracy to a narrow focus on adherence to international electoral norms. As Norris (2014) notes, there is certainly a risk that studies of electoral integrity engage in the ‘fallacy of electoralism’, failing to recognise that ‘free and fair’ elections are a necessary, but by no means sufficient, basis for democratic politics. A functioning democracy demands a wider range of deeply-embedded democratic institutions, structures and practices. With respect to elections specifically, it has also been argued that a narrow focus on electoral integrity can be misleading. In some accounts, the regularity of elections is a more important indicator of the success of democratisation than the quality of those electoral contests; frequent elections matter more than fair elections (Lindberg, 2006).

While they have some validity, these criticisms of scholarship on electoral integrity are arguably missing the point. While democracy has undoubtedly moved far beyond thin Schumpeterian notions, elections remain at the very heart of the democratic process and for all the diversification of political participation, are still the primary form of mass political participation. Moreover, all available evidence suggests that as democracy deepens, electoral remains a critical variable in the overall quality of democracy. The growth in the number of democracies over time and the increased frequency of elections worldwide underlines their significance, including in authoritarian states which hold them as a means of claiming legitimacy. If doubts are growing about the integrity of elections, including in established democracies, the implications are potentially profound (Norris et al., 2014).

Nonetheless, it is important to recognise that much work on electoral integrity has, to date, operated within a fairly narrow frame of reference, in which wider aspects of democratic politics are largely overlooked. While there are some notable exceptions, which I discuss in more detail below, much of the literature implicitly adopts a fairly traditional conception of electoral politics and its functions within representative democracy. This focus is understandable, not least because of the need to establish the relevance of the study of electoral integrity to other core concepts in political science such as power and legitimacy. Yet, there is a risk that these necessary efforts to ‘retro-fit’ the study of representative democracy with an understanding of the importance of electoral integrity is occurring at a time when the very nature of democracy is undergoing a profound transition. One influential account, in particular, highlights the extent to which the traditional democratic mechanisms of elections, parties and representation have been supplemented by the emergence of a complex web of ‘monitory’ structures (Keane, 2009).

### *Monitory democracy and election management*

In his magnum opus on the history of democracy, Keane (2009) argues that a profound transition has taken place in democracy in the period since the middle of the twentieth century. In common with other accounts, such as Crouch (2004), he highlights the greatly heightened scrutiny of elected politicians, and the pivotal role played by the media. Portraying this shift as a form of ‘post representative democracy’, Keane points to what he describes as the emergence of ‘monitory democracy’, in which elections continue to take place but the principal interlocutors for elected politicians are no longer voters, or even fellow party members, but a wide range of extra-parliamentary organisations which he categorises as various forms of ‘watchdogs’, ‘guide dogs’ and ‘barking dogs’. In addition to media outlets, these organisations include a vast array of think tanks, independent regulatory bodies and human rights organisations. Keane also cites the role of a variety of a variety of short-term arrangements, ranging from citizens’ juries to deliberative polls, which

deploy the sophisticated techniques to ascertain and respond to public attitudes. His account suggests that these new forms of democracy “champion not the Rule of the People (...) but the rule that nobody should rule” (Keane, 2009, p.867). The outcome, as portrayed by Keane, is that monitory democracy puts:

“politicians, parties and elected governments permanently on their toes, they complicate their lives, question their authority and forces them to change their agendas – and sometimes smother them in disgrace” (Keane, 2009, p.689)

Keane seems to celebrate what monitory democracy represents. He lauds it as “the deepest and widest system of democracy ever known” (p.698) which is serving to spread democratic culture deep into civil society, democratising family life and employment and ensuring that principles such as equality, openness and transparency are respected across a great range of organisations and institutions. It is portrayed as a means of fragmenting power so that it is “everywhere subject to checks and balances, such that nobody is entitled to rule without the content of the governed, or their representatives” (p.706) . Without presenting it as any kind of panacea for political inequality, Keane regards monitory democracy as fulfilling what he sees as democracy’s ultimate purpose, which is namely ‘to stop people getting screwed’ and act as a “weapon for publicly exposing corruption and arrogance, false beliefs and blind spots, bad decisions and hurtful acts” (Keane, pp. 867-8). To Keane, monitory democracy provides the best means of taming power and of holding the powerful to account, including economic elites.

There is certainly evidence to support the contention that there has been an institutional thickening of democracy and even that democratic norms become deeply embedded across a range of institutions and practices. At the same time, however, there are strong grounds to dispute many of Keane’s claims about the dynamics of monitory democracy, particularly with respect to the structuring of power. In many ways, this returns us to a familiar debate in political science, since there are obvious commonalities between monitory democracy and pluralist accounts of the state. In particular, both emphasise limits on elite power, the counter-balancing of organised interests, and the tendency for outcomes to serve the interests of the many. However, we might also see monitory democracy is a sort of 'super-pluralism' or 'pluralism on steroids'. Leading pluralists, such as Dahl, recognised the limits of pluralism, hence his preference for the term *polyarchy* ('rule of the many') rather than *democracy* ('rule of the people'). Under polyarchy, the elite is internally fragmented and cannot govern in its own interests alone, but power is still seen as being unevenly distributed. When Dahl asked 'who governs?' he thus pointed to a diversity of interests who held elites in check. In Keane's version, a recognisable elite remains, but it is a vulnerable and precarious one. As such, while an elite may be in power but they do not possess power. In effect, nobody governs.

What is critically missing from Keane’s account is any clear recognition that at least some of monitory bodies he points to could be serving the interests of the elite rather than holding that elite to account. He assumes that the monitory infrastructure is spawned by a deep democratic impulse and overlooks the possibility that media outlets or democratic campaign groups could be operating towards any other ends. In part, this is perhaps because Keane's thesis is presented at a high level of generality. He is pointing to a long-run tendency in the development of democracy and does not seek to provide detailed case studies of individual countries or comparative international analysis of the varying forms which monitory democracy takes in practice.

However, it is clearly possible to adopt Keane's framework for this purpose. In particular, three features of Keane's conception of monitory democracy make it particularly suitable for application to the empirical study of contemporary democratic systems. First, his account suggests a clear trend,

namely the 'thickening' of monitory structures over time, which is relatively straightforward to examine empirically. Second, Keane posits a clear typology of monitory organisation, making it possible to test the extent to which such bodies can be classified in the way he suggests. Third, his presentation of monitory democracy implies particular tendencies with respect to outcomes. Keane argues that, while messy, the overall outcome is a system characterised by sophisticated checks and balances that provides for high levels of accountability, popular control and responsiveness.

Given the complexity of 'monitory democracy', which Keane claims has spawned 'nearly one hundred new types of power-scrutinising institutions', mapping out its application to an entire polity would be a gargantuan task. Nonetheless, there is obvious scope to apply the concept to specific facets of democracy. Moreover, if we accept Keane's basic thesis, electoral management clearly occupies a particularly intriguing position in the transition from representative democracy to monitory democracy. While elections continue to play an important role in Keane's conception of contemporary democracy, they are inevitably subject to intense monitory activity. Indeed, the rise of election monitoring missions is perhaps the most literal example of monitory democracy in action. Similarly, the growth of attention to electoral integrity in established democracies, from academics, from the media and from organisations like International IDEA, is itself an indicator of the influence of monitory democracy on the study of elections.

What would election management in a monitory democracy be typified by? In line with the transition to monitory democracy, we would expect to observe that the management of elections has moved beyond a narrow public administration framework, in which the only relevant actors are election officials and representatives of the criminal justice system, to one in which election management is subject to intervention, scrutiny and challenge from a far broader range of perspectives and interests. Most obviously, we would expect the media to be critical to this reframing of electoral management under monitory democracy, particularly in its role as a 'barking dog'. In addition, Keane's account would lead us to expect the emergence of various types of monitory organisations with an interest in electoral integrity issues, whether as 'watchdogs', 'guide dogs' or other types of 'barking dog'.

#### *Monitory democracy and elections in the UK*

A brief consideration of the UK case provides some initial pointers to how using the lens of monitory democracy may help us study election management theoretically, conceptually and empirically. The UK has in many ways undergone a delayed conversion to monitory democracy. Prior to the 1990s, the UK constitution was a largely unreformed Westminster model of government in which monitory bodies were clearly subservient to the traditional organs of representative democracy. Unlike the great bulk of other democracies that had adopted or reformed their constitutions after 1945, the UK did not have any formal, embedded definition of human rights in its governing structures. Consequently, the UK did not spawn the range of human rights based instruments and organisations witnessed in other democracies. Moreover, the unwritten UK constitution, with its emphasis on parliamentary sovereignty as the core constitutional doctrine, acted as a bulwark against the kinds of reforms that would have acted as a catalyst for monitory bodies to emerge.

Yet, in recent decades, a series of radical policy shifts have served to accelerate the emergence of monitory institutions in the UK. Marketisation and privatisation of public services prompted the creation of an array of new regulatory bodies. The transfer of welfare state functions, such as housing, from elected local councils to 'third sector' bodies spawned the growth of new types of representative and participatory structures. Meanwhile, a series of political constitutional reforms, many of them driven by episodic scandals, prompted the growth of a far more extensive monitory infrastructure. This dynamic was particularly evident from the early 1990s onwards. Beginning with

the establishment of the Committee on Standards in Public Life under John Major's Conservative government and then accelerating rapidly after the election of Tony Blair's first Labour administration in 1997, a distinctive set of monitory structures emerged in the UK. These included a large number of independent watchdogs, such as the Electoral Commission (2000), the Standards Board for Local Government (2000), and the Equality and Human Rights Commission (2006). The end result has been a patchwork quilt of monitory structures, comprising a mixture of non-statutory codes, voluntary and self-regulatory mechanisms and independent statutory regulation. However, a common feature of these structures in the UK has been that much faith has been placed in the mechanism of transparency as a means of ensuring accountability.

**Table 1: The role of scandals in the emergence of monitory democracy in the UK**

<b>Year est.</b>	<b>Monitory institution or mechanism</b>	<b>Key trigger(s) for creation</b>
1974	Code of Conduct for Local Government.	Poulson affair.
1974	House of Commons Register of Members' Interests.	Poulson affair.
1991	Press Complaints Commission.	Press intrusion.
1994	Committee on Standards in Public Life.	'Sleaze'.
2004	Independent Police Complaints Commission.	Stephen Lawrence Inquiry.
2009	Independent Parliamentary Standards Authority.	MPs' expenses crisis.
2013	Financial Conduct Authority.	Credit crunch.
2014	Independent Press Standards Organisation.	Phone-hacking.

These broad patterns of change are evident in the specific context of election management. Prior to 2000, virtually all aspects of electoral administration were in the hands of local authorities, with a degree of oversight from the UK Home Office. Reflecting the constitutional conservatism of the UK up until that point, these arrangements had been virtually unchanged for almost 100 years and the body of law governing elections was mostly older still. However, the period since the late 1990s has witnessed the functions of election management become more considerably more complex, owing to a series of changes in electoral law and reforms designed to modernise UK electoral administration. The creation of the Electoral Commission in 2000 represented a major step-change, not least because of the responsibilities it was given for overseeing new rules relating to the declaration of donations to political parties, the regulation of the spending of political parties at general elections, and the administration of national referendum campaigns.

After a comprehensive review of its role in the mid-2000s, the Commission's functions cohered around a set of regulatory roles for elections, with these giving rise to distinctive new sets of relationships with other bodies. Importantly, these relationships vary by function. For instance, with respect to electoral registration, where the Commission's task is to maximise the completeness and accuracy of the registers, it not only works closely with local authorities, who are responsible for maintaining the registers, but also with a range of groups that are well placed to assist in registration

drives, such as the National Union of Student. In relation to the reporting and prevention of electoral fraud, the Commission's cooperation with UK police forces is supplemented by partnerships with organisations such as Crimestoppers, 'an independent crime-fighting charitable organisation'. Meanwhile, new monitory functions associated with party funding and campaign spending has made the registers maintained by the Commission a point of considerable interest for campaigners and journalists. Significantly, none of these interactions existed 20 years ago.

### *Politics and media in election management*

To my knowledge, there has not been any systematic attempt, to date, to work through the implications of monitory democracy for the study of electoral integrity. However, there are a number of existing accounts which touch on at least some of the issues which it raises. A first body of work focuses on the politics of election administration. James (2012) stresses the need for scholars to recognise the role of political dynamics shaping change in electoral administration. While his focus is on elite manipulation of electoral administration for political advantage, as a form of 'statecraft', James's account touches on the significance of a range of wider pressure groups. With reference to the United States, in particular, James highlights the role of organisations such the Human Service Employees Registration and Voter Education Fund (Human SERVE) and the Association of Community Organizations for Reform Now (ACORN) in voter registration drives.

More recently, James (2014) has sketched out how electoral administration in the UK has been shaped by wider dynamics of political and social change over time, suggesting that it now operates in a 'post-industrial' framework. James highlights the implications of developments such as 24/7 news coverage and social media, new technologies and networked governance, as well as greater partisanship, for the way elections are managed. While he does not use the term, many of the resultant dynamics are useful examples of 'monitory democracy' in action. James notes that failures of electoral administration have become more newsworthy, thus receiving greater attention, even though the problems being experienced are not necessarily any greater than in previous decades. He also points to the growing complexity of the policy networks involved in administering elections, brought about, in part, by the outsourcing of specific tasks.

A second body of relevant work considers the role of the media in relation to election management and electoral integrity. At the most basic level, media reporting has been used as a source of evidence about overall levels, and individual cases, of electoral fraud, or as an indicator of the extent to which electoral fraud has become an issue over time and in which places. Clearly, there are issues with using media coverage to assess levels of fraud, but it is certainly significant that press reporting of electoral fraud has risen globally, albeit with fluctuations, since 1990 (Norris et al., 2014). Other studies have highlighted the impact of unfair media coverage of individual parties or politicians during election campaigns on electoral integrity. Unfair media coverage can operate as a discrete form of potential malpractice in elections, particularly where the media is under some degree of state control (Fortin-Rittberger, 2014). Even in countries such as the UK, where there are high levels of media freedom, systematic media bias can impact on levels of electoral integrity relative to other established democracies (Norris, 2015).

Finally, a small number of studies examine how media coverage and consumption shapes political debate about, and public perceptions of, electoral integrity. Kerr and Lührmann (2016) illustrate the contrasting effects of the autonomy of election management bodies and levels of media freedom on public trust in elections. In particular, their study illustrates the 'paradox of media freedom', which is essential to deterring electoral fraud but which also tends to reduce citizens' confidence in elections by exposing and discussing such issues. To some extent, this conclusion is qualified by Coffé's (2016)

finding that greater use of traditional media sources leads voters to have a 'more accurate' perception of levels of electoral fraud in their country, providing there are high levels of media freedom. (By 'accurate', Coffé essentially means the extent to which they are in line with expert opinion in those countries). Coffé (2016, p.293) concludes that "a complex pattern of media effects exists" and that "different types of media have different effects on the likelihood of arriving at correct judgements about electoral integrity and the effects are conditional upon the restrictiveness of the media environment".

However, media coverage is not merely important with respect to what it may tell us about the level of attention to electoral integrity issues or how it shapes public opinion. Media reporting is also an essential component of the political struggles over how elections are administered. An important illustration of this dynamic is provided by Alvarez and Hall's (2008) account of debates surrounding the adoption of electronic voting in the USA. As a key part of their study, Alvarez and Hall identify the role played by the media in opening up an essentially technical debate about how Americans should vote to a wider set of interests and issues. Specifically, they analyse media coverage to show how the e-voting debate shifted from a frame focussed on the opportunities for enfranchisement to one in which the dominant issues were the potential for fraud, error and disenfranchisement.

Alvarez and Hall's analysis of media coverage adopts the concept of framing, which "allows various interests to shape the way in which a given policy is viewed" (2008, pp.53-4). Following Baumgarten and Jones (1993), they focus on two dimensions of media coverage: the attention given to the issue (i.e. the volume of reporting) and the tone of the coverage (i.e. the way in which the issues is framed). Using the 'major newspapers' section of LexisNexis, Alvarez and Hall document how the volume of media coverage grew from 2000-04, but particularly during 2004, and how the ratio between news and comment changed, with a growing share of articles in the latter category. They also find there were very dramatic shifts in the subjects addressed in the coverage. Whereas 56.8% of reports in 2000 focused on e-voting's potential for enfranchisement, only 8.3% did so in 2004. Conversely, while e-voting security was a concern in only 5.4% of articles published in 2000, 69.3% addressed this subject by 2004. Over the same period, the coverage became more negative in its view of e-voting, as measured by tone of the opening quote in each article.

While Alvarez and Hall are clearly frustrated by the manner in which the relative merits, risks and shortcomings of e-voting were discussed, their account demonstrates how election management is shaped by a democratic infrastructure that extends beyond political parties and public bodies. A central claim in Alvarez and Hall's study is that media coverage provided for powerful amplification effects, enabling specific groups to shift the frame of the debate within a short time period. Alvarez and Hall pinpoint the reframing of the debate took place during 2003 and highlight the significance of the establishment of VerifiedVoting.org that year in bringing about this shift in emphasis. In doing so, they emphasise that a key role of the media was to "amplify the risk concerns that were being expressed by some computer scientists, as well as by advocates such as VerifiedVoting.org" (Alvarez and Hall 2008, p.70). They also touch on the entry of MoveOn.org into the debate, noting that this group successfully politicised the issue by mobilising opposition to e-voting of the grounds that it could be used to steal the 2004 election for Bush. Yet, beyond highlighting the role of such groups, Alvarez and Hall do not elaborate in any detail on the role they played, including how they came into being or how they connected to the political debate, other than via media reporting.

## **Monitory democracy, the media and electoral fraud: an exploratory dataset**

In this half of the paper, I present new data on media reporting on electoral fraud, framed in the context of the discussion of monitory democracy above. The approach taken adopts a similar sets of techniques to Alvarez and Hall (2008), albeit with some important distinctions and caveats. First, the focus here is on providing for a comparative international analysis of debates about election management and electoral integrity, rather than on charting how the media frames these debates within single countries over time. Second, in undertaking such comparative analysis, this paper specifically seeks to identify the particular character of monitory democracy, as it relates to the management of elections, in the UK and the USA. Third, the nature of this data is relatively experimental and the findings presented here are very much an initial attempt to make use of it for the purposes of assessing what the commonalities and contrasts in media coverage of electoral fraud in the UK and USA reveals about the operation of monitory democracy in these two counties.

### *Methods and data*

The data presented here relates to global news coverage of electoral fraud in the English language and has been assembled from Google News Alerts, collected over a period of just under 2 years, from 20 June 2015 to 7 June 2017. This period included a large number of significant electoral events internationally, including several watched closely as indicators of the populist surge in western democracies (USA, UK, Netherlands, France) and others known to be marred by allegations of fraud (including Myanmar, the Philippines, Russia an Turkey). A combination of terms were used to trigger the alerts, reflecting the diverse terminology used in the media to report cases and allegations of fraud at elections. In addition to daily alerts using the term "election fraud", weekly alerts were generated using "vote fraud", "voter fraud" and "electoral fraud". The emails containing these alerts were then converted to an Excel spreadsheet using code written in Python (with many thanks to Felix Simkovic) to produce fields for: the date of the alert, title of piece, name of outlet, the line of text the alert provided from it and the URL for the report. The dataset initially contained 12,540 items, although the use of 4 separate terms for the alerts inevitably had generated a significant number of duplicates. With the assistance of Kenn Rushworth, these duplicates were removed using a range of semi-automated and manual techniques. After this process, a total of 10,529 items remained.

Due to the manner in which Google News Alerts are presented, even this huge volume of coverage is very likely to represent the 'tip of the iceberg' with respect to major news stories about electoral fraud. Where specific incidents or stories are covered simultaneously by multiple outlets, Google News Alerts list one headline piece of coverage and a maximum up to three additional linked items. In cases where there are more than 4 outlets covering a story, a link is also provided to 'Full Coverage' on a dedicated web page. If a story has been the subject of global media attention, this full list of coverage can run to hundreds of items in a single day. For instance, on 4 August 2017, the "election fraud" alert delivered two main items on allegations of large-scale vote tampering in Venezuela, with 3 linked items for each. However, the link for the full coverage listed 118 items in the previous 24 hours. While such cases are relatively rare, reflecting very significant cases, in the construction of the database it was only the details of the headline reports that were recorded. The number of linked items was registered (up to 3), but not further details, such as the outlet, title and URL. Most importantly, cases which generated more than 3 linked stories in a day were not identified at all. As such, the database provides a more accurate reflection of the continuity and regularity of coverage of election fraud (in English) than it does of the absolute volume of coverage.

In contrast to previous studies which have made use of media reporting, the data presented here is not restricted to reporting in high quality outlets. For example, Norris et al. (2014) use the 'Major

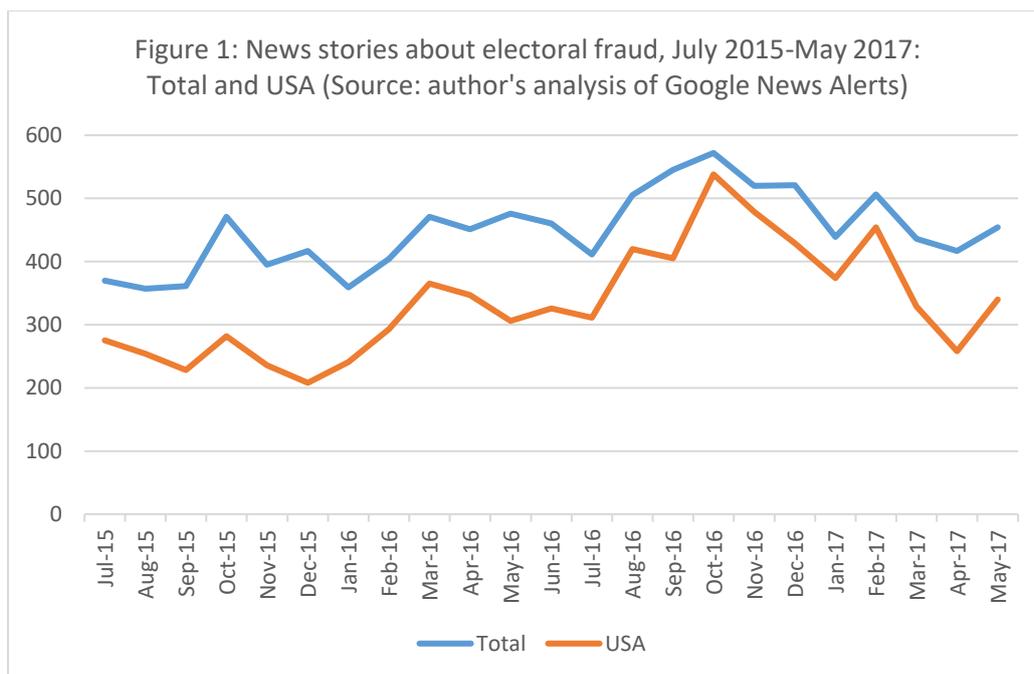
World Publications' category in Lexis Nexus, stressing that these are 'held in high esteem' and are 'relied upon for the accuracy and integrity of their reporting'. There are good reasons for relaxing this criteria for which media reports are captured. Claims about 'fake news' in relation to electoral fraud underline not only that journalistic standards are increasingly contested but that outlets which make no attempt to adhere to such standards nonetheless have considerable reach. Google Alerts enable us to go beyond coverage in traditional newspaper and magazines to capture a selection of radio and television reports as well as the 'new media' of news and comment websites, news aggregator websites and blogs. Consequently, the volume of coverage captured is much larger. Whereas the peak in the global news reporting of electoral fraud cited by Norris et al. (2014) is 1,200 stories in 2008, there are 5,694 items for 2016 in the data I have gathered from Google Alerts.

A number of additional fields were added to the Google Alerts data: the country the report was about; the country the media outlet is based in; the type of outlet; and assessments of the outlet's level of factual reporting and direction of bias. At the time of writing, the only additional field completed for all items was the country the report related to. For all reports on the UK only, the country of origin and the outlet type were completed. Assessments of factual reporting and bias were taken from Media Bias/Fact Check (MBFC News) and were necessarily limited by the methodology and coverage of this source. It was not possible to code about half of the reports with respect to the factual reporting and bias of their outlets and for the UK outlets we were most familiar with, we had some slight reservations about the MBFC assessments. Despite these obvious shortcomings, almost all US media sources with a national and international reach, as well as many with audiences at the level of individual States or large metropolitan areas, could be coded for factual reporting and bias from this single source, which we believe to be the most comprehensive available.

Analysis of the data so far has been conditioned by the nature of the data and constrained by the gaps in the dataset and a lack of available time. However, it has been possible to produce a range of descriptive statistics for the dataset as a whole while also completing an initial content sampling of coverage relating to the UK and the USA. On this basis, it is possible to present a range of initial findings about how the issue of electoral fraud has been framed in these two countries. This sampling took two distinct forms. First, small random sample were selected of both the US and UK coverage and were used to evaluate the overall framing of the discussion of electoral fraud specifically and electoral integrity more generally. Given the large number of isolated reports in the database from a large array of local newspapers or radio outlets, this sampling is highly unlikely to be representative of the media coverage consumed either by US citizens or by US political elites. The random sampling was therefore counterbalanced by a second process of purposive sampling, which focuses on a small number of outlets with high levels of coverage of electoral fraud.

### *Patterns of global reporting about electoral fraud*

Figure 1 shows the total number of news stories for each full month contained in the dataset as well as the number of reports which related to the USA. The total volume of media reports captured monthly fluctuated throughout the period, but was always within the range of 380-580 per month. As the chart shows, there is a very strong association between the fluctuations in the total number of reports and the number of reports relating to the USA specifically, with the volume of coverage peaking in both instances in October 2016, just before the US presidential election. The proportion of coverage originating from the United States in any given month never falls below 50% of the total and, in October 2016, comprises 92% of all reports about electoral fraud.



While it is not surprising that the United States should account for the majority of items in English-language news coverage, the sheer volume of monthly reports about electoral fraud in the USA is nonetheless striking. As Table 2 shows, a total of 7,841 reports related to the USA, with the next largest number making references to the UK (506). Only another 5 countries registered more than 100 reports: Haiti (191), Nigeria (177), Canada (160), the Philippines (160) and Australia (100). With the exceptions of Nigeria and Thailand, the countries with the largest number of reports all had national elections during the period covered by the data. In addition to the large Anglo-American democracies, the most frequently cited countries in the dataset are those which held elections in the period which were marred by fraud allegations or in which elections are regularly beset by such problems.

**Table 2: Top 10 Countries Most Frequently Appearing in the Dataset**

Country	No. reports	% of all reports	National election in period	Date of election
USA	7841	74.5	Yes	11/8/2016
UK	506	4.8	Yes	6/23/2016
Haiti	191	1.8	Yes	10/25/2015
Nigeria	177	1.7	No	---
Canada	160	1.5	Yes	10/19/2015
Philippines	160	1.5	Yes	5/9/2016
Australia	100	0.9	Yes	7/2/2016
Turkey	83	0.8	Yes	11/1/2015
Thailand	66	0.6	No	---
Russia	65	0.6	Yes	9/18/2016

As these figures suggest, English-speaking countries dominate the captured media coverage. A total of 82% of the items in the dataset originate from just 4 English-speaking countries (the USA, UK, Canada and Australia). Nonetheless, the international coverage of elections is extensive, with reports relating to 124 countries or territories. The range of outlets, including international publications, broadcasters and press agencies means that significant cases or allegations of electoral fraud are consistently reported via Google Alerts. By way of illustration, at the time of writing (4 August 2017), alerts have arrived daily for stories about the Venezuelan constitutional assembly election since the vote took place on 30 July 2017 (although, as noted above, the email alerts capture only a small fraction of the total coverage in this case). It is more than possible that in some cases, such as countries where domestic media freedom is very restricted, there may be more coverage by international media in English than by domestic outlets.

The relative presence or absence of a non-English speaking country in the dataset is therefore a potentially useful indicator of levels of concern about electoral fraud, especially if a national electoral event was held in the period covered by the data. A total of 14 European countries ranked as 'very high/high' on the Perceptions of Electoral Integrity Index 5.0 held national electoral events during the period covered by the database. Five of these were the subject of zero news stories about electoral fraud in the period covered by the data (Iceland, Lithuania, Slovakia, Portugal, Cyprus), while seven were the subject of between 2 and 4 stories over the 22 month period (Netherlands, Switzerland, Lithuania, Poland, Ireland, Spain, Greece, Croatia). There were two notable exceptions. Twenty reports related to Austria, where the 2016 presidential election was re-run after the Freedom Party successfully challenged the result in the Constitutional Court on the grounds that postal votes had been opened too early in 94 districts. The second exception was the UK, which was the subject of 506 reports, and is the lowest ranked country in Western Europe on the index. Excluding the UK, the mean number of electoral fraud news stories relating to these countries was 3. A very different pattern is evident among the 15 European countries which the Perceptions of Electoral Integrity Index ranks as either 'moderate' or 'low/very low'. Four of these countries were the subject of 10-19 news reports (Georgia, Romania, Serbia, Belarus), while three more were the subject of 33-65 (Macedonia, Russia, Armenia). The mean number of electoral fraud stories in these European countries with lower scores on the index was 15.

### *Content analysis*

At the time of writing, it has only been possible to complete analysis of small samples of the reports relating to the UK and the USA (evaluating significantly larger samples would require automated computer coding or grant funding). For the UK, a random sample of 25 reports was used, representing 5 per cent of all reports coded as being about the UK. For the USA, a random sample of 57 reports was analysed, comprising 0.75 per cent of reports identified as being about the US. Additional analysis was undertaken to evaluate the representativeness of the outlets appearing in the sample (compared to the dataset as a whole). In addition, I examined the frequency with which the names of people, organisations and other terms appearing in the samples were repeated in the dataset as a whole. Nonetheless, it is clear that some caution is required at this stage when drawing conclusions from these samples and the results should, at this stage, be regarded as indicative rather than conclusive. Despite these reservations, a number of discernible patterns were evident from the UK and US reporting, particularly when the two were compared directly.

First, in both the UK and the USA, mainstream media reporting dominates and the number of reports originating from genuinely fringe media sources is relatively limited. A relatively high proportion of items in both samples comprise no more than straight reporting of news and developments, with a substantial share of these reports being published by local media outlets and

relating to police investigations or court hearings concerning cases in that locality. In the UK sample, just over a third of reports (9/25) were of this character, including local newspapers reporting on issues in the London Borough of Tower Hamlets and in Northern Ireland, both localities where there have been longstanding concerns about electoral fraud. This proportion of localised reporting is very much in line with the dataset as a whole. Of the total of 506 UK reports, 190 (38%) are from specifically local media sources, overwhelmingly long-established local newspapers. More generally, the general dominance of mainstream media reporting is clear in the case of the UK. Approximately two-thirds of all UK reports originated from either the national press, mainstream national broadcasters or regional or local newspapers.

The US sample was more diverse with respect to the nature of the media outlets represented, reflecting the far more pluralistic and fragmented character of the US media landscape, including a large array of national online news outlets as well as a myriad of local newspapers, television and radio networks and news websites. Even so, one-fifth (11/57) of reports in the sample originated from local newspapers, broadcasters or digital news outlets and comprised largely factual reporting on specific local cases. In addition, regardless of the geographical reach of individual outlets, almost half of all US reports analysed (25/57) related to developments in a single State, and were frequently about particular districts within that State. Although it is harder to compare these patterns against the total of 7,841 US media reports, it is possible to estimate from the data that around one-third of all US reports were from regional or local newspapers. In addition, the relative dominance of mainstream media coverage is underlined by analysis of the volume of US reporting found in outlets which could be coded with respect to levels of factual reporting and political bias. A total of 4,414 reports appeared in outlets which could be coded in this way. Of these, 3,295 (75%) of reports were in outlets classified as providing either 'very high' or 'high' levels of factual reporting, while 2,949 (67%) were in outlets clustered around the centre-ground of political bias (either 'left-centre', 'right-centre' or 'least biased').

Second, while the clear majority of reporting is found in mainstream, traditional outlets, it would be dangerous to underestimate the role of newer, 'disruptive' media outlets, several of which reach very large audiences. While these outlets are themselves highly diverse, it is within this subset that we find those sources most frequently accused of disseminating 'fake news'. New media outlets in the dataset are also characterised by much greater political polarisation than traditional media, with a tendency for such outlets to distinguish themselves from the mainstream by advancing a distinctively right- or left-wing position. The comparative role of such outlets is usefully captured below in Table 3, which provides rankings of the 'Top 10' outlets for reports on electoral fraud in the UK and the USA during the period covered by the data set. In the UK, mainstream national outlets clearly dominate, with 7 of the 8 outlets with the highest number of reports in the database comprising the main national broadcaster plus 6 national daily newspapers. Nonetheless, it is striking that a number of non-traditional outlets are included in the Top 10. The Canary, a radical left-wing political news blog with a mission to 'disrupt the status quo of the UK and international journalism' had the 6<sup>th</sup> highest level of coverage, while Breitbart News, very much the Canary's mirror-image on the right of the political spectrum, was the 9<sup>th</sup> most frequent source. The joint 10<sup>th</sup> ranking of three very different outlets is also revealing: Conservative Home is a political blog with close links closely to the Conservative Party, Russia Today is the English-language blah and the East London Advertiser is a local newspaper primarily serving the London Boroughs of Tower Hamlets.

**Table 3: Top 10 outlets for reporting on electoral fraud, UK and USA, June 2015-June 2017**

UK			USA		
Rank	Outlet	No. of reports	Rank	Outlet	No. of reports
1	BBC News	27	1	Washington Post	107
2=	The Independent	26	2	Election Law blog	101
2=	Daily Mirror	26	3	Huffington Post	100
4	Daily Telegraph	16	4	Washington Times	81
5	The Guardian	15	5	Breitbart News	75
6	The Canary	14	6	The Inquisitr	62
7	Daily Express	13	7	New York Times	57
8	Daily Mail	12	8=	The Daily Kos	55
9	Breitbart News	9	8=	Salon	55
10=	Conservative Home; Russia Today; East London Advertiser	8	10	Los Angeles Times	52
TOTAL (% of all reports)		166 (33%)	TOTAL (% of all report)		745 (10%)

The mix of traditional and new outlets reporting on electoral fraud is, however, even more apparent in the US coverage. Here, 3 very large circulation national newspapers (the Washington Post, the New York Times and the Los Angeles Times) and a regional newspaper (the Washington Times) vie with 6 diverse outlets, ranging from a specialist academic blog run by Prof Richard Hasen to a number of competing and politically polarised news media sites. These outlets reach very different audiences, both in terms of total volume and with respect to political persuasion, as Table 2 highlights. While consistent figures about reach are difficult to obtain, it is evident that the monthly audiences for these outlets range from tens of thousands for the Election Law Blog to tens of millions for newspapers like the Washington Post. Similarly, their Twitter followers are in a range from 27,000 (Election Law Blog) to 38 million (New York Times). While the divide between the established press and new media outlets is not particularly pronounced with respect to their volume of reporting or reach, the distinctions in levels of factual reporting and political bias are far more evident. All 4 newspapers are classified as providing consistently high levels of factual reporting and cluster around the centre with respect to political bias. However, 4 of the new media outlets are defined as exhibiting either a clear left or right political bias, while 3 are coded as providing ‘mixed’ levels of factual reporting. Overall, outlets with a left-centre or left political bias very clearly dominant and, to a letter, these are sceptical about claims that voter fraud is widespread. Conversely, the two outlets classified as right-centre or right portray fraud as a concern, particularly in the case of Breitbart News. The positioning of Breitbart within this news hierarchy, as the sole outlet publishing regularly on electoral fraud, alleging it to be widespread, and reaching a large audience, is therefore significant. I briefly return to consider the role of Breitbart and other organisations below.

**Table 2: Top 10 Outlets for Reporting on Election Fraud in the US: Indicators of Reach, Reporting Quality, Bias and Perspective**

Rank	Outlet	Type of outlets	Estimated Reach	Twitter Followers	Factual Reporting	Political Bias	View of Electoral Fraud
1	Washington Post	National newspaper	20 million per month	10.8 million	High	Left-centre	Very sceptical that fraud is widespread.
2	Election Law blog	Academic blog	21,000 per month	26,800	n/a	n/a	Sceptical that fraud is widespread.
3	Huffington Post	Online news aggregator and blog	63 <sup>rd</sup> most visited site in the USA	10.5 million	High	Left	Sceptical that fraud is widespread.
4	Washington Times	Regional newspaper	6 million per month	322,000	High	Right-centre	Views fraud as a concern but less common than Trump administration claims.
5	Breitbart News	News & opinion website	69 <sup>th</sup> most visited site in the USA	755,000	Mixed	Right	Suggests that fraud is widespread.
6	The Inquisitr	Online news aggregator	1588 <sup>th</sup> most visited site in the USA	57,200	Mixed	Left-centre	Tends to be sceptical of mass voter fraud.
7	New York Times	National newspaper	31 <sup>st</sup> most visited site in the USA	38.8 million	High	Left-centre	Sceptical that fraud is widespread.
8=	The Daily Kos	Political Blog	649 <sup>th</sup> most visited in the USA	264,000	Mixed	Left	Highly sceptical that fraud is widespread.
8=	Salon	News website	5 million per month in the USA	993,000	High	Left	Sceptical that fraud is widespread.
10	Los Angeles Times	National newspaper	12 million per month in the USA	3.0 million	High	Left-centre	Sceptical that fraud is widespread.

Third, there is a particularly clear tendency in the UK for ‘election fraud’ to be associated with almost any allegations or cases of political actors seeking to manipulate the electoral process, whether legally or illegally and with reference to issues which go beyond the process of casting or counting ballots. In the UK sample, just over half of the reports (13/25) actually referred to topics other than fraud in voting practices. The vast majority of these 13 reports were concerned with journalistic and police investigations into a number of Conservative candidates and agents potentially breaching the laws on constituency election spending limits at the 2015 General Election, an issue popularly referred to as #ToryElectionFraud on Twitter by the party’s opponents. By contrast, the reports in the US sample were consistently about issues connected with the registration of voters, the casting of ballot and the counting of votes.

Fourth, the US sample pointed both to the involvement of a far greater range of actors in debates about election management and electoral integrity and to role of particular non-state organisations as providing authority on the topic. Analysis of the US sample suggested that debate about electoral fraud there makes more reference to ‘evidence’ than in the UK but that it is also far more polarised in discussion of that evidence. The UK reporting suggested that there is a broad consensus that fraud is limited nationally and tends to be locally concentrated. The major point of disagreement is whether this pattern highlights that the UK’s trust-based systems are too exposed to vulnerabilities to continue without additional safeguards. Within the sample coverage, Electoral Commission statistics relating to fraud allegations and convictions for electoral fraud were the only source of evidence referred to, and their validity was not disputed.

In the US, however, the picture is very different. Very contrasting versions of ‘evidence’ and ‘experts’ are in play, most notably in the contrast between academic research, such as that carried out by the Brennan Center at New York University, and the reports produced by the Heritage Foundation, an independent think-tank. Five of the 57 sampled reports about the US made reference to the research of the Heritage Foundation, a leading right-wing think-tank, into electoral fraud, generally with reference to its lead author on the issue, Hans von Spakovsky. Meanwhile, three of the sampled reports cite at least one piece of significant academic research, notably those produced by Prof Justin Levitt (Loyola Law School), the Brennan Center (New York University) and the Arizona State University News 21 ‘Voter Wars’ project. This pattern is reflected in the dataset as a whole. Within the report titles and very short segments of text captured from the Google Alerts, there are 21 references to the Heritage Foundation and 32 to the Brennan Center. The most frequently named individual authorities are Hans von Spakovsky (9), Justin Levitt (8) and Prof Lorraine Minnite (8), another leading academic authority. Clearly, these searches of the full dataset greatly underestimate the coverage given to these competing sources of evidence, but in combination with the full text sampling, they suggest near parity in coverage between the Heritage Foundation and academic expertise.

Fifth, it is when the coverage portraying fraud as minimal is compared to that seeing it as widespread that the divide between old and new media becomes most evident and the relationship between specific media outlets and other organisations becomes clearer. Accounts which portray fraud as widespread in US are mostly found in online news and comment websites with a clear right-wing bias, while those presenting it as rare are in news sources evaluated as the most factual and less subject to bias. This pattern is evident in the UK to a far lesser degree, although the well-established partisan divisions in the national press echo the tendency for right-of-centre outlets to stress concerns about fraud and for left-of-centre outlets to downplay them. Preliminary analysis suggests that a number of the online outlets which have made the strongest claims about the widespread nature of electoral fraud in the US are directly supported by the multi-billionaire Koch

Brothers, who are also widely-held to provide large-scale financial support to the Heritage Foundation.

## **Conclusion**

This paper has highlighted the emergence of election management and electoral integrity as a significant topic in political science research. It has suggested the adoption of Keane's concept of monitory democracy as a means of further advancing our understanding of this area and presented initial findings from new data on media coverage of electoral fraud. While the work remains at an early stage, the analysis conducted so far suggests significant potential, particularly with respect to the scope to document the mechanisms through which competing accounts of electoral fraud are propagated.

The preliminary findings presented in this paper appear to add weight to existing evidence about the significance of media coverage of electoral fraud to political legitimacy. Coffé (2016) has shown that citizens with a higher usage of traditional media are closer to experts in their evaluations of electoral integrity. However, while she is able to distinguish between levels of traditional and new media use among citizens, she also underlines that her conclusions are not based on any analysis of what media reporting about electoral fraud citizens have actually consumed. The approach taken here may go some way to filling that gap, in that it has been able to identify very clear distinctions in the content of traditional and new media reporting on electoral fraud.

The volume and frequency of news coverage of election fraud in the USA is striking, not least because of its highly polarised interpretation of the scale of the problem and the clearly partisan nature of this divide. Surveys have suggested that the United States exhibits unusually low levels of public confidence in elections compared to other established democracies and even before the most recent political events, it was suggested that there was a genuine risk of electoral integrity concerns triggering a crisis of legitimacy (Hasen, 2012). Academic evidence, which continues to suggest that electoral fraud in the USA is rare, is widely highlighted and discussed in the liberal, mainstream media. Yet, a starkly different interpretation of the evidence, based on the work of the Heritage Foundation in particular, which argues that fraud is widespread, is almost as widely cited. Importantly, this view that electoral integrity is under severe threat in the US is propagated primarily via a range of new media, notably news and opinion websites, such as Breitbart.

These tendencies are echoed to a far lesser degree in the UK. While the extent to which electoral fraud is a concern is also a point of controversy in the UK, there is also much greater acceptance of a common body of evidence. Moreover, while new media outlets have a growing role in the UK, it is the traditional partisan divide in the mainstream national press that most obviously structures the debate. Nonetheless, the sheer quantity of reporting of 'electoral fraud' in the UK is very notable, not least because much of it is about a far broader set of electoral integrity issues than the process of casting or counting votes. Again, the possibility that reporting of this character may have a negative impact on public confidence in elections should not be dismissed lightly.

The findings highlighted in this paper raise important issues for the concept of monitory democracy. The patterns of media reporting and organisational engagement with election management issues certainly undermine the level of attention paid to the issue by monitory bodies. However, the analysis so far also suggests that it would be highly misleading to characterise the entirety of this activity as being designed to provide for enhanced democratic accountability. Indeed, the US case suggests that it is more than possible for particular elite interests to effectively create a parallel infrastructure of monitory organisations, including think-tanks, campaign groups and media outlets,

to advance a specific political agenda. In the case of election management, that agenda seriously risks undermining democracy rather than deepening it.

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