

Addressing Future Election Challenges

Professor Justin Fisher

Policy Context: The Electoral Integrity Programme aims to ensure UK elections remain secure, fair, modern, and transparent. The Political Parties Elections & Referendums Act (PPERA) establishes key principles of political finance.

Research: Recent changes pose opportunities and threats for electoral integrity and participation: significant willingness to vote online; growing numbers of registered UK overseas voters, who can donate to political parties; increasing levels of non-party campaigning; and lower real-terms party spending limits.

Advice: Consider resuming online voting trials, banning overseas UK voters from donating, reducing spending limits for non-party campaigners, and increasing party campaign spending limits.

Key research findings

- > **There is a significant level of willingness to consider remote online voting.** In a [2022 study](#), mean voter willingness was 6.6, on a scale of 0-10. Voters were 6% more willing if online voting was administered by an independent public body rather than even a well-regarded private sector tech company.
- > **The number of registered UK overseas voters has grown significantly and will continue to do so.** This figure increased by over 8 times between 2014 and 2017, to 285,000. Until the Elections Act 2022, overseas citizens were only eligible to register to vote for up to 15 years after they left the UK. A [2023 study](#) shows that the Act's removal of the 15-year limit could result in 692,000 registered UK overseas voters, if there was the same rate of registration as in 2017.
- > **Campaign spending by non-party campaigners has more than tripled since 2015, making party spending limits less meaningful.** Similarly, registered campaigners at the 2016 EU referendum spent around 5% more than the designated campaigns (analogous to political parties in elections). Unlike those standing for election, non-party campaigners are not accountable to the electorate. Also, there is no mechanism for ensuring non-party campaign spending is not disproportionately negative towards one party.
- > **Party spending limits are now about 50% lower than when they were introduced in 2000, in real terms, since they have not been adjusted for inflation.** This presents a challenge to the ability of parties to campaign effectively, or possibly to their ability to comply with spending limits.

Policy advice

- > **Resume trials of remote online voting to offer secure convenient voting and reflect the digitisation of citizens' lives.** Voting online can be more secure than by post. Also, the postponement of elections in 2020 showed the need to prepare for holding pandemic-safe elections in the future. Individual registration is now in place, which the Electoral Commission recommended should be a precondition for further trials. The Central Digital and Data Office (CDDO) could link these trials with the individual digital verification processes that the government is already using. Trials could be administered by an independent public body to increase voter willingness.
- > **Improve the regulation of donations from UK citizens resident overseas, to avoid foreign money inappropriately influencing UK politics.** The growth in registered UK overseas voters, who are entitled to donate to political parties, amplifies the risk of foreign money influencing UK politics. It is unclear whether this will become a problem, but there is the potential for it to evolve into a major issue. Consider restricting eligibility for donating to citizens who are registered to vote and resident in the UK, in line with PPERA's principle of restricting foreign money. Alternatively, the published register of donors could indicate whether the citizen is resident overseas, in line with PPERA's principle of transparency.
- > **Reduce the spending limits for non-party campaigners, relative to political parties, to protect the primacy of those standing for election.** According to PPERA principles, parties and candidates should be the principal actors in electoral contests, manifested by non-party campaigners having significantly lower spending limits. Reducing these limits is a more workable approach than recent reforms targeting coordination between non-party campaigners to reduce spending limit evasion, since they were too complex to follow.
- > **Raise national party spending limits in line with inflation, but do so in a phased manner to avoid disproportionately advantaging the most popular party at the time.** A single restorative increase risks undue advantage if, at the point of restoration, a party was particularly popular and able to raise significant sums. A phased approach helps mitigate this possibility.

Work with me

Professor Justin Fisher has been analysing political finance and its regulation for over 35 years. His research also focuses on the factors that influence citizens' willingness to consider voting online.

Contact him at justin.fisher@brunel.ac.uk if you would like to learn more about his research, invite him to speak at your event, or collaborate with him to improve or evaluate electoral policy and administration.