

# Who are the victims of electoral fraud in Great Britain?

## Evidence from Survey Research

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### Abstract

Interest in electoral integrity and the validity and accuracy of election results has come to the fore as a topic of concern both amongst politicians and academic researchers in the last twenty years. The literature has identified a number of key variables and processes associated with electoral fraud, and lower levels of integrity. However, one deficiency with this research is that it has relied on the *perceptions* of fraud and malpractice, rather than first-hand data on the extent of such behaviour. In this paper we report on the results of a novel small-scale survey of people in Britain in which respondents reported some of their direct experiences of electoral fraud in recent national elections. The results indicate that the rates of electoral fraud are currently around six to eight per cent, but that this rises for members of some ethnic minority groups. We end by raising another question: if we can identify victims of electoral fraud, how are we to redress this victimisation?

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### Introduction

This paper uses new survey evidence to examine which social groups are most likely to report being victims of two specific forms of electoral fraud in Great Britain: undue influence (where a voter is coerced into voting for a particular candidate or party) and personation (where a voter's identity is used by someone, other than their designated proxy, to cast a vote). Despite growing academic interest in electoral fraud, as part of an expanding body of international scholarship on electoral integrity, victim-centred analyses of the incidence of electoral fraud are exceptionally rare. To some extent, the lack of research on this subject in established democracies could simply be explained by the absence of electoral fraud victims. The clear consensus from recent US and UK research has

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been that cases of electoral fraud are extremely infrequent (Mebane, 2008; Minnite, 2010; Hasen, 2012; Hill et al, 2017; James and Clark, 2020). Yet, survey evidence from the USA and the UK also suggests a sizeable proportion of the electorate *believe* that electoral fraud occurs, sometimes on a scale that could affect election outcomes (Ansolabehre and Persily, 2008; Stewart III et al., 2016; Fisher and Sällberg, 2020). A key focus of recent research, in the USA particularly, has been to try explain this gulf between expert and public assessments (Wolak, 2014; Ahlquist, 2014; Udani et al., 2018). However, in examining the UK case, we take a different approach. We concur that public perceptions of electoral fraud are highly exaggerated, but also argue that they are not entirely baseless. While very rare, some electoral fraud clearly *does* take place in the UK. As such, there are victims of electoral fraud, even if they represent a very small proportion of the electorate.

There are strong empirical, theoretical and policy-relevant justifications for seeking to identify the scale of electoral fraud victimisation and its socio-demographic correlates. By asking electors not only about their perceptions of electoral fraud but also their *experience(s)* of it, as victims, we are able to form more accurate estimates of its prevalence. Evidence of such victimisation may therefore shed further light on the factors responsible for the enormous gap between expert and popular estimations of the frequency of electoral fraud. Examining electoral fraud from a victimological perspective also highlights potential issues of concern about democratic participation and legitimacy. Even if instances of victimisation are infrequent, and have no discernible impact on election results, they nonetheless represent cases where individual electors have been disenfranchised. If disenfranchisement arising from electoral fraud is concentrated within particular social groups or geographical communities, the democratic implications arising from a victim-centred analysis are all the greater. All of these considerations have a particular significance to contemporary UK policy debate, with the current Conservative government set to introduce legislation to provide stronger safeguards against electoral fraud including, among others, photographic ID at polling stations, new legal definitions of the offence of undue influence, and restrictions on the handling of postal votes by party representatives (Kelly, 2021).

In this paper we provide the first concerted attempt to measure the extent of electoral fraud victimisation in the UK and to assess which social groups are at greatest risk of it. The paper is presented in three main sections. In the first section, we situate our research in the broader body of recent work on electoral integrity, drawing insights from, as well as identifying some limitations in, existing research on electoral fraud. In the second section, we propose a methodological innovation drawn from studies of criminal victimisation (namely, self-reported data on first-hand experiences of criminal offences) and in line with this approach, outline the current legal definitions of electoral fraud offences in the UK. We also report on our methodology, including its limitations, and summarise our expected findings. In the third main section, we present our findings on the extent and nature of electoral fraud in the UK, as basic frequencies and using both bivariate and multivariate analyses. Finally, we provide a conclusion and offer some ways forward for research in this area.

## **Studying Electoral Fraud: Approaches and Evidence**

In recent years, the study of electoral integrity has developed from a marginal area of interest in political science to one of its most dynamic sub-fields (Norris, 2014, 2018). A key contribution of this recent scholarship has been to develop a normative framing of electoral integrity, rooted in internationally agreed definitions of human rights, against which all stages of the electoral cycle can

be evaluated (Norris, 2018). Alongside a substantial literature on the integrity of US elections (Alvarez et al, 2008; Ansolabehre and Persily, 2008; Beaulieu, 2014; Wolak, 2014; Levy, 2020), and a growing number of comparative international studies (Birch, 2008; Fortin-Rittberger, 2014; Kerr and Lührmann, 2016; Coffé 2016; Dawson, 2020), a distinctive body of literature on UK electoral integrity has also emerged (Wilks-Heeg, 2009; Clark, 2015, Fisher and Sällberg, 2020; James and Clark, 2020).

Recent academic interest also reflects the politicisation of electoral integrity issues in some established democracies. Partisan disputes about electoral malpractice in the US, particularly those centred on ballot-rigging allegations, have provided a notable catalyst for research. One distinctive body of work, known as ‘election forensics’, has sought to develop techniques which pinpoint cases where election data deviate from normally observed statistical patterns, as a potential indicator of manipulation (Mebane, 2008; Hicken and Mebane, 2017). However, election forensics remains an embryonic field, its development frustrated by ongoing controversy about the most suitable methods and inconsistent availability of disaggregated election data (Deckert et al., 2011; Mebane, 2011; Hicken and Mebane, 2017). Meanwhile, a second, more extensive body of US scholarship has focused on using survey evidence to examine what factors explain variations in perceptions of electoral fraud and wider issues impacting on electoral integrity. Generally motivated by a concern to explain the persistence of the ‘myth of voter fraud’ (Minnite, 2010), such work has examined which sections of the US population are more likely to perceive fraud and why (Ansolabehre and Persily, 2008; Beaulieu, 2014; Wolak, 2014; Udani et al, 2018) as well as the potential consequences of these social and partisan divides for notions of democratic legitimacy (Sances and Stewart, 2015).

In the absence of research into electoral fraud victimisation, this research examining public *perceptions* of electoral fraud provides a helpful starting point for our discussion. Following Fisher and Sällberg (2020), we can usefully distinguish between two main strands in this body of work. The first examines the importance of socio-demographic characteristics and partisanship as key predictors of individual concern about electoral fraud. The second comprises studies that have highlighted the significance of electoral competition and election outcomes to how voters (and candidates and agents) perceive fraud.

A wide range of socio-demographic variables have been considered as explanatory factors for variations in individual level perceptions of electoral fraud. There is consistent evidence that perceptions of electoral fraud are negatively correlated with higher levels of education (Ansolabehre and Persily, 2008; Beaulieu, 2014; Wolak, 2014, Karp et al., 2018). While some differences have also been found with respect to gender and ethnicity, only education remains statistically significant once other variables are added as controls. Karp et al. (2018) find a similarly strong, and independent, effect associated with levels of political knowledge. In addition to these personal characteristics, researchers have identified clear effects associated with partisanship. Multiple studies have found that in the USA, Republicans are far more likely than Democrats to believe that electoral fraud is commonplace (Ansolabehre and Persily, 2008; Beaulieu 2014; Edelson et al, 2017) and this finding was replicated for right-wing voters in Australia (Karp et al., 2018). Setting aside debate about the extent to which this association reflects partisan alignment rather than ideological positioning (Ansolabehre and Persily, 2008; Beaulieu, 2014), there is clear agreement that voters’ perceptions of electoral fraud are, at least in part, the product of partisan cues (Fisher and Sällberg, 2020).

The second set of factors that have been found to explain perceptions of electoral fraud relate to electoral outcomes and electoral competition. Perhaps the most universal tendency to emerge from the literature is the ‘sore loser’ effect (Wolak, 2014; Beaulieu, 2014; Sances and Stewart, 2015; Sinclair et al., 2019; Levy, 2020). Put simply, those who find themselves on the losing side at an election are more likely to allege that fraud took place or to express doubts about the integrity of election officials. Logically, winner effects work in the opposite direction. Levy (2020) examines polling data on public confidence in election outcomes from before and after the 2016 US presidential election, finding that Republican voters were significantly more positive about electoral integrity *after* the election than they were *before* it. How the closeness of the election mediates such perspectives among winners and losers is less clear, however. Examining 109 presidential elections internationally, Dawson (2020) finds that the anticipated closeness of an election (based on opinion polls) increases the perceived incidence of fraud (as reported in expert assessments). Conversely, Wolak (2014) concludes that electoral competition in the US moderates loser effects: the more competitive the election, the greater the expressed trust in the outcome.

While multivariate analysis has enabled significant progress to be made in identifying what balance of socio-demographic and political-electoral variables best explain variations in *perceptions* of electoral fraud in the US, very few studies ask about *direct experiences* of fraud. The main exception, provided by Ahlquist et al (2014), provides an indication of why such survey research is not more widely attempted – the presumption is that electoral fraud is so rare that surveys would struggle to detect any. These authors used survey list experiments conducted after the 2012 elections to test the extent to which respondents were prepared to admit to voter fraud compared to other misdemeanours or events. They found that the “proportion of the population reporting voter impersonation is indistinguishable from that reporting abduction by extra-terrestrials” (Ahlquist et al, 2014:460). It is worth noting, however, that surveys of the general population typically find very low levels of offending behaviours and this study only asked if people had committed electoral fraud – it did not seek to ascertain whether respondents were victims of it. In addition, only a single form of electoral fraud was asked about, that of voter impersonation (“I cast a ballot under a name that was not my own”).

While the polarising effects of electoral fraud claims in the US are without parallel among established democracies, less intensive controversies about electoral integrity have emerged elsewhere (Norris, 2014). Notably, electoral fraud allegations have been a subject of UK political debate, and a limited body of academic work has emerged in response (Stewart, 2006; Wilks-Heeg, 2009; Hill et al., 2017; Carl, 2017; Fisher and Sällberg, 2020; James and Clark, 2020). Studies of electoral fraud in the UK exhibit notable differences to those in the US. Attempts at election forensics have been entirely absent from the UK literature and academic work on public perceptions of electoral fraud has been extremely limited (although relevant survey research has been carried out by the Electoral Commission, as we note below). Instead, attempts to evaluate the incidence and significance of electoral fraud in the UK have variously drawn on surveys of polling station staff (James and Clark, 2020) or election agents (Fisher and Sällberg, 2020), qualitative interviews with election candidates and campaigners (Hill et al., 2017), police data on electoral fraud allegations (Carl, 2017), and records of election petitions used to challenge election results (Morris and Wilks-Heeg, 2019). Unsurprisingly, these contrasting approaches produce sharply divergent assessments of

the extent of electoral fraud. For instance, while 6-7% of election agents in England said they *suspected* fraud in their constituencies at the 2015 and 2017 general elections, 35-38% of electors reported that they held the same suspicions (Fisher and Sällberg, 2020).

Regular surveys asking about *perceptions* of electoral fraud have been conducted on behalf of the Electoral Commission for over 15 years, in its annual 'Winter Tracker' surveys and in post-election polling (e.g. BMG Research, 2019). An extended battery of electoral fraud questions, asking respondents about their perceptions and experiences of electoral fraud, are now included in the Winter Tracker. Analysis has typically been restricted to simple 'top line' results from these surveys with only limited attempts made to identify how and why perceptions vary between different social groups. These surveys show a consistent tendency for about 40% of the electorate to agree with the statement that "There could be enough electoral fraud in some areas to affect the election result". However, the proportion agreeing that "electoral fraud is very common where I live" tends to be much lower (7-12%, depending on whether "Don't Know" is excluded as a response category). In the 2018 and 2019 Winter Tracker surveys (BMG Research, 2019) 15-18% said they had *heard about* electoral fraud offences being committed where they lived, and 11-12% said they had *personally witnessed* such events. Since 2013, respondents have also been asked if they agree that "I felt like I had little or no choice about who to vote for because of pressure from people I know". Prior to 2018, around 5% typically did so. However, with "Don't Know" excluded as an option in 2018 and 2019, this rose to 15%. These responses are of particular interest to us, since they provide a proxy for one form of electoral fraud victimisation ('undue influence'), as we discuss in more detail below.

As in the US, there is a clear academic consensus that electoral fraud is rare in the UK. However, a handful of cases of large-scale fraud in English local elections, sufficient to change the result, have also been documented as a result of court cases since the late-1990s (Stewart, 2006; Wilks-Heeg, 2009; Morris and Wilks-Heeg, 2019). Consideration of these cases has led to a particular focus on socio-geographical factors in UK research into electoral fraud, especially since the Electoral Commission's (2014) initial identification of 16 areas at risk of electoral fraud (Fisher and Sällberg, 2020). Based on criminal justice data and qualitative evidence from political parties and campaigners, the Electoral Commission noted that these areas had a "previous history of allegations of electoral fraud" and were typically "densely populated with a transient population, a high number of multiple occupancy houses (and) (...) also often home to communities with a diverse range of nationalities and ethnic backgrounds" (Electoral Commission, 2014:16). As Fisher and Sällberg (2020) note, these observations are consistent with other research findings internationally which have identified a link between electoral fraud and either population density or concentration of ethnic minority groups.

A more controversial feature of the UK literature is that it has highlighted specific electoral fraud vulnerabilities in some areas with large Pakistani or Bangladeshi communities (Peace and Akhtar 2015; Hill et al., 2017). The particular role of 'biraderi', or kinship, networks in some British Muslim communities has been highlighted in a number of qualitative studies. Researchers have stressed the beneficial roles of this form of social organisation in promoting community cohesion and mutual aid in communities suffering socio-economic deprivation and structural racism. But they also note that biraderi networks have been utilised by political campaigners to mobilise voters, sometimes involving undue influence, ballot tampering and vote theft (Wilks-Heeg, 2008; Akhtar, 2013; NatCen Social Research, 2015; Hill et al., 2017). A consistent concern raised in these accounts is that biraderi

networks tend to be hierarchal and patriarchal, and that women and younger voters are at particular risk of disenfranchisement (Akhtar, 2013).

Two recent studies have sought to examine whether these qualitative findings can be generalised through quantitative assessment of the relationship between electoral fraud and Pakistani and Bangladeshi populations (Carl, 2017, James and Clark, 2020). Carl (2017) finds a moderate to strong statistical association at a local authority level between electoral fraud allegations reported to the police and the proportion of residents with Pakistani or Bangladeshi origins. While this finding is broadly in line with those highlighted above, Carl's explanations for the relationship are at odds with those advanced by qualitative researchers. Carl foregrounds high rates of cousin marriage among these communities and uses European Social Survey data to assert a link between cousin marriage and tolerance of bribery. We regard this approach as somewhat problematic, both in the way it 'jumps scale' from geographically-concentrated migrant communities in Britain to European-wide survey data and for its conflation of bribery with electoral fraud. Yet, we also have reservations about the approach taken by James and Clark (2020), who reach the opposite conclusion to Carl, finding no statistical correlation at a local authority level between polling station staff reporting suspected cases of personation and the size of the local Pakistani or Bangladeshi population. In this case, James and Clark examined only reports of suspected personation at polling stations, which are extremely rare. Yet, virtually all recently documented cases of large-scale electoral fraud in Britain have centred on postal votes (Morris and Wilks-Heeg, 2019). Moreover, using local authorities at the unit of analysis is likely to obscure the clear tendency for cases of large-scale electoral fraud to centre on one or two wards within a council district (Hill et al, 2017). Given the limitations of both of these studies, we suggest there is a clear need for alternative approaches to quantifying electoral fraud in Great Britain and any socio-demographic factors associated with it. To this end, we propose a survey-based approach rooted in criminological conceptions of victimisation.

### **Re-imagining Electoral Fraud as 'Victimisation': Conceptual Grounding and Methodology**

As our review establishes, existing studies of electoral fraud rely on either the *perceptions* of those engaged in the electoral process (as voters, candidates, agents or poll workers), or on *allegations* of election fraud reported to the police and any subsequent cautions and convictions. For an author team such as our own, comprised of criminologists as well as a political scientist and a survey researcher, these data sources are incomplete and do not allow for an estimate of electoral fraud activity. Perceptions of events (even if the rapporteur is well-placed, such as an election agent) may not reflect actual events (since the rapporteur may misperceive events or wilfully distort their reply). Perceptions of electors are subject to various biases and may be distorted by media attention or the outcome/closeness of election results. Reports to the police may also be motivated by attempts to discredit the opposition or may relate to matters which, whilst a breach of electoral law, do not represent major attempts to influence the result (such as failing to provide the name of the election agent on a candidate's election literature). Such measurement problems are well-known in criminological research, where police-recorded data is treated with some caution, and perceptions of events are known to be distinct from their actual incidence. Indeed, perceptions of the extent to which crime was rising or falling were at odds with recorded crime data for some twenty or so years (Home Office, 2010). Notably, respondents in national crime surveys have reported high levels of

perceived crime, many years after official and self-report victimisation rates have declined (Jansson, 2008).

There are other reasons for drawing on criminologists' insights. By conceptualising electoral fraud as a form of victimisation, we can apply practices developed by criminologists (both academic and in government) to measuring electoral fraud activity. For example, the British Crime Survey (now known as the Crime Survey for England & Wales) designers sought to develop questions which measured actual experiences in a way that could be directly compared with offences prescribed in criminal law. The conventional principles for designing victimisation questions are

- i) that the question needs to refer to something which is unambiguously a crime;
- ii) is likely to have been detected by the respondent as having happened to themselves;
- iii) is sufficiently broad for a wide population of respondents to have experienced, and
- iv) is worded to enable enumeration (i.e. an estimation of the frequency of such events).

Typically, such questions refer to victimisation in the past year (so as to enable comparison with recorded crime data). There are exceptions, of course. Domestic violence and coercive control – which may be so pervasive as to defy counting – being one (Walby et al, 2017). Nevertheless, criminologists have fielded questions on a wide-range of victimisations, including, burglary, theft, physical assault, sexual and 'hate crimes' (e.g. racist, religious or homophobic violence). Given that the British laws relating to electoral fraud (which we outline in more detail below) are constructed as 'observable deeds' (or victimisations) – such as 'inducing or threatening' individuals to vote in a particular way; 'impersonating' them at the voting station or via postal votes etc. – this approach works at the individual-level. Of course what is at stake democratically goes beyond the individual; in theory, if one fraudulent vote changes which party controls an elected body, then *all* electors are defrauded (of the correct outcome). However, such outcomes, while possible, are exceptionally rare. Our primary task here is to assess the extent to which conceiving of electoral fraud as victimisation is empirically valid.

Translating principles from criminological studies of victimisation to the study of electoral fraud requires fresh survey approaches. Previously employed survey questions have tended to be vague about what constitutes electoral fraud, rather than designed in line with the relevant legal definitions. To some extent this approach is understandable. Most UK electoral offences were defined in the Victorian era and terms such as 'personation', 'undue influence' and 'treating' carry little or no meaning for most electors. On the rare occasions where surveys have asked respondents about their direct experience of an electoral offence, plain English versions have been used. As noted above, whilst questions asking whether respondents have been made to feel that they had little or no choice about who to vote for constitute a proxy for undue influence, it is also possible that affirmative answers to this question reflect generalised frustration about a lack of choices on the ballot paper (rather than a scenario that would be recognised in law as undue influence by a candidate, campaigner or elector). Our approach to exploring the extent of electoral fraud victimisation relates to two specific forms of electoral fraud activity, as defined in the Representation of the People Act 1983. As we explain below, the two forms of electoral fraud we examine – personation and undue influence – are also those where the lens of victimisation is arguably most appropriate.

### *The Legal Framework Relating to Electoral Fraud in Britain*

Unusually for the UK (in which there are three main criminal justice systems, covering England & Wales, Scotland and Northern Ireland, each of which has its own legal code) the laws relating to electoral fraud cover all four countries and their three legal systems. In the UK, there are five offences which electors, election agents or candidates could commit which specifically relate to elections (White and Johnson, 2017). These are:

1: Undue influence (Section 115, Representation of the Peoples Act, 1983)

This covers directly or indirectly making use of, or threats to make use of, force, violence or restraint or inflicting, or threatening to inflict, injury or damage or harm, in order to induce a voter to vote a particular way or to refrain from voting.

2: Personation (Section 60, Representation of the Peoples Act, 1983)

This covers voting for someone else (either in person, by proxy or via a postal vote) and covers either living, dead or fictitious people.

3: Bribery (Section 113 Representation of the Peoples Act, 1983)

This covers directly or indirectly giving money or office to anyone in order that they vote a particular way or refrain from voting.

4: Treating (Section 114, Representation of the Peoples Act, 1983)

This covers (before, during or after) an election directly or indirectly giving or paying for (either wholly or in part) food, drink, entertainment or other provision in return for voting in a particular way or for refraining from voting.

5: Other offences (Electoral Administration Act, 2006)

This covers giving false information when applying for a proxy or postal vote with the intention of redirecting their vote to another candidate.

We developed and fielded a series of survey questions based specifically on perceptions and personal experiences of the first two of the above (undue influence and personation). The wording of these items is set out below. In line with the approach taken in mainstream victimisation studies, our definition of electoral fraud is, therefore, a primarily legalistic one and based on UK electoral law. In addition, we have chosen offences where instances of being personally affected would unambiguously constitute victimisation. In cases of treating or bribery, by contrast, an elector would be extracting some form of personal gain in exchange for their vote. Available evidence also suggests that cases of undue influence and personation, while rare, are more common than bribery or treating. No proven cases of electoral fraud since 2000 have involved either of the latter two offences.

### *Methodology*



Our data comes from an online omnibus survey fielded by BMG Research in early-February 2020. The survey relied on soft targets for gender, age, region of Britain, socio-economic group and index of multiple deprivation to ensure a representative sample was produced (although this was not a quota sample). This approach worked well in that the estimates generated after weighting was applied were extremely similar to those derived from the raw data. Invites were sent to members of online panels using BMG's 'panel blend' approach which uses simultaneous survey invitations across multiple panels to spread fieldwork.<sup>5</sup> This method improves sample representativeness by hedging against the risk of selecting a single panel provider. To ensure maximum accessibility, in addition to desktop and laptop PCs, respondents were able to complete the survey on tablet and mobile devices. The fieldwork was conducted between 4th and 7th February 2020. A small pilot ('soft launch') was conducted on the evening of the 4th of February. This consisted of 85 completes, with the responses also used to allow checks that data was being captured correctly and that the script was working as intended. No issues were identified following this, and the survey was launched fully on 5th February, with pilot completes included in the final dataset.

Following established victimisation survey methodology, our questions focused on identifying behaviours that would reflect illegal practices and could be counted. The questions on undue influence started with asking about the frequency of such offences generally. This was worded as follows: "When we vote in elections, some people might be forced into voting for a candidate by a family member or someone else in a position of power over them. This includes through use of violence, or threats of violence. How often, if at all, would you say this happens at elections in your constituency?" (1 = Very often, Fairly often, From time to time, Fairly rarely, 5 = Very rarely, including a 'Don't know' option). This was followed by a question which sought to assess knowledge of specific instances of this ("Are you aware of any specific cases of this happening in this constituency at the last general election held in December of last year?", with the answer codes 'I am aware of specific cases', 'I am not aware of specific cases' and 'Prefer not to say'. Respondents were then asked a question about their own victimisation, which was worded: "Have you ever been seriously threatened to vote a way that you didn't want to by anyone? This could include being forced to vote for a particular party or candidate, or not voting at all. Remember, all responses will remain entirely confidential", with the following answer codes offered: 'Yes – at the 2019 General Election (held in December last year)', 'Yes – in an election prior to the 2019 General Election', 'No', 'Prefer not to say'. (Respondents could tick both of the first two options if they so wished to). This strategy and question structure was also employed for questions relating to personation ("some people might vote or register to vote by pretending to be someone else. This could include either registering to vote or voting, and could include voting in person, by post, or by proxy"). Questions were rotated to avoid order effects.

### *Limitations of Research Design*

Whilst our approach has some significant strengths (such as the collection of data relating to *first-hand accounts* of electoral fraud, rather than *perceptions* or the thoughts of electoral agents or reports to the police) it also has some limitations. The first is that with only 1,503 cases and exploring a relatively rare event, our estimates of the extent of this form of victimisation have to remain tentative. Additionally, we cannot rule out the possibility that a larger sample would have

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<sup>5</sup> Readers should note that a similar methodology was deployed by BMG for the Electoral Commission's 2018 Winter Tracker: <https://www.electoralcommission.org.uk/sites/default/files/2019-07/Winter%20Tracker%202019%20Topline.pdf>

produced slightly different estimates in terms of the associated variables or prevalence rates. Further, because this was designed as a representative sample, there was no attempt at oversampling key groups (such as ethnic minority groups) and our estimates for these groups may have been different with a larger sample. As this was an online survey, households without access to the internet will have been excluded from the sampling frame.<sup>6</sup> However, we believe that the advantages of web-based surveys, notably access to a geographically wide sample, the convenience and privacy afforded to respondents by completing it at their own pace and the absence of interviewer-specific bias (Callegaro et al., 2015), outweighed this drawback. Because we focus on victimisation, we are unable to say anything about the perpetrators of electoral fraud. Finally, for the sake of brevity, we opted to ask about only two types of electoral fraud (rather than all five offence types as outlined above).

### *Anticipated Results*

Based on our review of the literature, we expected to find the following:

- Relatively few respondents (we estimated around 10%, based on past surveys for the Electoral Commission using similar questions), will *perceive* either undue influence or personation to occur either ‘very often’ or ‘fairly often’ in their constituency.
- A slightly smaller proportion than those perceiving electoral fraud to be common will report either *personal knowledge*, or *victimisation* relating to, undue influence or personation (we estimated 5-8%, based on the responses to past Electoral Commission surveys and our use of a tighter legal definition than that used by the Commission).
- Electoral fraud victimisation rates will be *greater* among those with lower levels of formal education and among supporters of right-wing parties, as we assume that factors identified in the literature as influencing variations in perceptions of electoral fraud are likely to be reflected in reported experiences of it.
- Reports of electoral fraud victimisation will be *greater* among those who were on the losing side at the 2019 General Election. We anticipate this result as a result of the ‘sore loser’ effect identified in the literature rather than based on an assumption that the 2019 election was rigged.
- In line with past academic and Electoral Commission research, we expect that reports of electoral fraud victimisation will be *greater* among younger voters, among Asian voters and among those living in areas with higher levels of ethnic diversity.

### **Results: Perceptions and Experiences of Electoral Fraud in UK**

Table One reports the basic frequencies for the item asking respondents to give their *perceived* assessment of the occurrence of undue influence in recent British elections. Very few said that they believed it was common, in keeping with our expectations (7.2% said that they thought that it was ‘very’ or ‘fairly common’). Almost a quarter thought it was ‘very rare’, whilst the largest single response code was ‘don’t know’ (at almost 43%).

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<sup>6</sup> Of all households in Great Britain, 93% had access to the internet in 2019 according to the ONS (2019).

**Table One: Undue Influence (Number Assessing Its Occurrence)**

Response	Number	Percentage
Very often	36	2.4
Fairly often	72	4.8
From time to time	197	13.1
Fairly rarely	204	13.6
Very rarely	352	23.4
Don't know	642	42.7
TOTAL	1503	100.0

The data has been weighted for Index of Multiple Deprivation and Household income. The weighted data were identical to the unweighted data.

Let us now look at the reported experiences of undue influence victimisation. Table Two reports that the overwhelming responses were of no experience (92% when weighted). Some 2% had directly experienced undue influence prior to the 2019 General Election, with a further 4% reporting it during that election,<sup>7</sup> and 0.3% report experiencing this offence both prior and during the 2019 General Election. There were a small number of respondents (3%) who preferred not to answer. Generally, however, these findings are in keeping with our expectations based on the existing literature.

**Table Two: Personal Experiences of Undue Influence (Number saying they were Victimised)**

Response	Number		Percentage	
	Raw	Weighted	Raw	Weighted
No	1362	1375	91	92
Prior to 2019 General Election	49	29	3	2
During 2019 General Election	47	54	3	4
Both of the Above	3	4	<.5	<.5
Prefer not to answer	42	41	3	3
TOTAL	1503	1503	100	100

The data has been weighted for Index of Multiple Deprivation and Household income. Due to rounding the percentages may not sum to 100.

Turning to the items on personation (Table Three), these again suggest very low levels of assessments of its occurrence. Only 9% think that it happens 'very' or 'fairly' often. There is again a very high 'don't know' assessment (43%).

**Table Three: Personation (Number Assessing Its Occurrence)**

Response	Number	Percentage
Very often	39	2.6
Fairly often	96	6.4
From time to time	210	14.0
Fairly rarely	189	12.6
Very rarely	318	21.2
Don't know	650	43.2
TOTAL	1503	100.0

<sup>7</sup> The higher figure for the more recent general election (in 2019) may be the result of recall biases which operate such that more recent or more salient events are more easily recalled, rather than evidence of a higher rate of undue influence during that particular election.

The data has been weighted for Index of Multiple Deprivation and Household income. The weighted data were identical to the unweighted data.

When asked about their own experience of specific instances of personation victimisation (Table Four), 120 respondents (7%) said that they had been victimised. In all, 38 respondents said that this was prior to the 2019 General Election, with 53 saying it happening during the 2019 General Election (respectively 3% and 4%), and nine respondents (<1%) saying that they had experienced it both at the 2019 General Election and prior to that too. Some 48 (3%) preferred not to answer the question. In terms of personal experiences of personation, these were again very low (see Table Four). Again, about 90% of the respondents had had no direct experiences of this themselves.

**Table Four: Personal Experiences of Personation (Number saying they were Victimised)**

Response	Number		Percentage	
	Raw	Weighted	Raw	Weighted
No	1355	1355	90	90
Prior to 2019 General Election	38	38	3	3
During 2019 General Election	53	53	4	4
Both of the Above	9	9	1	1
Prefer not to answer	48	48	3	3
TOTAL	1503	1503	100	100

The data has been weighted for Index of Multiple Deprivation and Household income. Due to rounding the percentages may not sum to 100.

#### *Who Reports being a Victim of Electoral Fraud?*

By combining answers to the questions on specific instances of either of the two forms of electoral fraud described above (Tables Two and Four), we were able to ascertain which social groups were more likely to have experienced electoral fraud. In all, 136 (9%) of the sample reported instances of one or more incidences of electoral fraud. The data allowed us to assess the degree of victimisation for the following socio-demographic variables:

- Age
- Gender
- Educational qualification
- Household income
- Ethnicity
- Housing tenure
- Socio-economic group
- Region of Britain they were living in
- Output Area Classification
- If they voted at the 2016 EU Referendum
- Which way they voted at the 2016 EU Referendum
- If they voted at the 2019 General Election
- Which sort of party (pro- or anti-Brexit) they voted for at the 2019 General Election.

Using Chi-Square tests, we found that younger people were more likely than older people to have experienced these forms of electoral fraud (for those aged 18-24, 20% had been victimised, dropping in a more or less linear fashion to less than 1% for those aged >75,  $p = <.000$ ). Males were more likely than females to have experienced electoral fraud (6% vs 13%,  $p = <.000$ ), whilst those with degrees were more likely report experiencing such victimisation (13% vs. 9% for the population as a

whole,  $p = .002$ ). The data on household income suggested a U-distribution, with the lowest income households (<£24,999 p.a.) having the greatest levels of victimisation (12%), whilst 10% of those in households of >£50,000 and 7% of those in households earning £25,000 to £49,999 were similarly victimised ( $p = .016$ ).

Ethnic identity presented some contrasting experiences, with 25% of Asian people reporting experience of electoral fraud, dropping to 17% for Chinese (including other Asians), 13% for Black respondents, 8% for white British people and 6% for dual heritage respondents ( $p = .001$ ). There were no statistically significant differences for housing tenure (9% of owners, 10% of private renters, 8% of those in social housing and 9% of those in other tenure types had experienced electoral fraud). When socio-economic group was examined, it was C2s who reported the highest level of election fraud victimisation (16%), followed by the Ds (11%), and the As (11%), with the remainder generally much lower (the C1s were 9%, the Es were 5% and the Bs were 5%,  $p = <.000$ ). Region of residence also suggested some intriguing differences with Yorkshire and the Humber being the highest (17%), followed by the East of England (12%), Scotland (12%), The South West (10%), East Midlands (9%), North East (8%), North West, West Midlands and London (all 7%), and then Wales and South East England, both 5%,  $p = .026$ ). The Output Area Classifications suggested that those living in Cosmopolitan Areas (30%) were by far those most likely to report victimisation, with the next highest (respectively 12% and 11%) being those living in Multicultural Metropolitan areas and those in Ethnicity Central. (All of these areas are marked out for being densely populated urban areas with a high ethnic integration and a younger age-profile of residents, ONS, 2015). Other groups tended to be below the national average of 9% and ranged from 5.6% to 7.3%,  $p = <.000$ ). There were no statistically significant differences by tenure (owners = 9%; private renters = 10%; social housing = 8% and other groups = 9%,  $p = .859$ ).

Those who did *not* vote at the EU Referendum were around twice as likely to experience electoral fraud as those who did not (12% vs. 6%,  $p = <.000$ ). There were no statistically significant differences in terms of experiences of fraud when voting to leave or remain in the EU was examined. Voting or not voting in the 2019 General Election was also not related to experiences of fraud, but of those who did vote, those who voted for left-leaning parties (Labour, the LibDems, PC, the SNP and the Greens) were more likely to have experienced electoral fraud than those who voted for right-leaning parties (such as The Conservatives or Brexit Party, 10% vs 6%,  $p = .018$ ).

### *Multivariate Modelling of Electoral Fraud Victimisation*

To assess the relative role of these socio-demographic characteristics we ran a series of logistic regressions to measure which of these individual and neighbourhood level variables were more likely to have experienced both forms of electoral fraud combined (undue influence and personation). The dependent variable was dichotomously coded 0 and 1 for victimisation of electoral fraud or not. In Table Five, statistically significant variables have been highlighted. These analyses confirm that men were more likely than females to report incidences of electoral fraud, as were younger people (aged 18-24) compared to those >45. In these analyses, ethnicity did *not* prove to be a significant predictor, while we identified those classified as B to be less likely to report experience of electoral fraud compared to those in the A category, in line with the preliminary bivariate statistics. The variable with the largest odds ratio in this model (6.6) came from those who resided in Cosmopolitan Areas, who were over six times more likely to claim that they had been victimised compared to rural residents. Meanwhile, private renters and those who lived in 'other' forms of tenure at the time of interview were found to be less likely than home-owners to have

known of recent examples of electoral fraud. Finally, confirming the results above, this model found those who voted in the 2016 EU Referendum were *less* likely to report knowledge of electoral fraud than those who did not. Conversely, those who voted in the general election of 2019 were *more* likely to state that they knew of specific instances of fraud. These results indicate that recent voting behaviour has a varied and contrary impact on experience of electoral fraud. The core reason for is likely to multifaceted, however.

**Table Five: Logistic Regression Analysis of Reported Incidences of Electoral Fraud by Social Demographic Characteristics.**

	<b>Sig.</b>	<b>Exp(B)</b>
Sex (Male =0, Female=1)	***	0.407
Age Group 18-24	***	
Age Group 25-34	n.s	0.835
Age Group 35-44	n.s	0.630
Age Group 45-54	*	0.247
Age Group 55-64	***	0.047
Age Group 65-74	**	0.122
Age Group 75+	*	0.029
Ethnicity: White	n.s	
Dual heritage	n.s	0.408
Asian	n.s	0.817
Chinese	n.s	0.707
Black	n.s	1.192
Highest Educational Qualification: Degree or higher	n.s	
A-levels/ Highers	n.s	0.745
GCSEs/ O-levels/ CSEs	n.s	0.843
No qualification	n.s	0.277
Social Economic Grade: A	***	
SEG: B	*	0.364
SEG: C1	n.s	0.472
SEG: C2	n.s	2.071
SEG: D	n.s	1.456
SEG: E	n.s	0.687
OAC: Rural Residents	**	
OAC: Cosmopolitans	*	6.611
OAC: Ethnicity Central	n.s	1.997
OAC: Multicultural Metropolitans	n.s	2.382
OAC: Urbanites	n.s	1.637
OAC: Suburbanites	n.s	1.101
OAC: Constrained City Dwellers	n.s	1.144
OAC: Hard Pressed Living	n.s	1.174
Tenure: Own with Mortgage	*	
Tenure: Private Renters	*	0.366
Tenure: Social/ Local Authority Housing	n.s	0.806
Tenure: Other	*	0.228
Voted in 2019 General Election? (did not vote=0, voted =1)	*	1.913
Voted in 2016 EU Referendum? (did not vote=0, voted =1)	*	0.449
Nagelkerke R Square: .289		
Log likelihood: 558.508		

Constant: 0.473		
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*n=1386 \*p < 0.05, \*\*p < 0.01, \*\*\*p < 0.001*

## Conclusion

We set out to a) field a new style of survey question on electoral fraud, which approached it as a form of victimisation, b) establish rates of electoral fraud victimisation in Britain and c) to explore a series of expectations derived from earlier work in this field. Certainly, there was nothing to suggest that the strategy of approaching electoral fraud as if it was a victimisation produced unreliable or ill-defined data. The percentage reporting first-hand experience of two forms of electoral fraud was below the percentage perceiving it as 'common', which was in keeping with our expectations. Very few respondents declined to answer the question on electoral fraud (3%). Nevertheless, the data analyses do suggest that the correlates of these new questions may be different from the data generated by perceptual questions (in that the results generated differed from our expectations). In terms of the global rate (i.e. the 'ever' victimised), this is around 6-8% (or lower, at about 3-4% for the most recent general election in 2019, Tables Two and Four). Specifically, in terms of the expectations, we set out above, we found:

- Relatively few respondents will regard electoral fraud as common. As noted above, this was supported by the data at hand.
- Even fewer will have had direct knowledge or experience of electoral fraud. This too was supported.
- Experiences of electoral fraud will be greater among those with lower levels of formal education and among supporters of right-wing parties. We found that it was those with higher (not lower) levels of education who reported the most experience of electoral fraud in the bivariate analyses, although not the regression model. This was also the case for party identification, such that those voting for right-wing parties reported less electoral fraud, meaning that both of these expectations were unsupported. These findings are consistent with the new measurement approach uncovering different relationships.
- Perceptions of electoral fraud will be greater among those who were on the losing side at the 2019 General Election. This was also unsupported in a statistical test which found that the mean score on perceptions of electoral fraud (produced by summing the data reported in Tables One and Three) for those who voted for the Conservatives or other Brexit-backing parties was 7.1401, whilst for those who voted for other parties (namely, Labour, The LibDems, SNP, Greens or PC) the mean score was almost identical at 7.1935 ( $p = .762$ ). Again, this finding is consistent with a new measurement strategy that approaches electoral fraud as an act of victimisation.
- Reports of electoral fraud victimisation will be greater among youngest voters (18-24); this was clearly confirmed by both the bivariate and multivariate analyses. Men were also statistically more likely to report explicit episodes of electoral fraud than women.

Those living in neighbourhoods geo-demographically classified as 'cosmopolitan' were the most likely to report specific incidences of electoral fraud.

- The bivariate analyses suggested that the consistent predictors of experiencing electoral fraud related to sex (male), age (18-24yr-olds), neighbourhood profile, and recent voting behaviour (in the 2019 election). Some additional results also presented themselves in this

model, although the tests of significance and odds ratios were substantively less noteworthy. However, this example represents the early findings of a currently untrodden and intriguing avenue of research, of which future research may build on.

- The logistic regression modelling confirmed much of the above, albeit with some changes in the importance of some variables (such as the output area classifications). However, overall these analyses suggest that those who live in urban areas characterised by higher levels of poverty and concentrated levels of ethnicity minority groups are amongst those who are most likely to report having been the victim of these two types of electoral fraud.

In sum, drawing from both the bivariate analyses and regression modelling, and bearing in mind the caveats we raised about the sample size of the survey and the absence of an ethnic minority booster sample, the 'typical' victim of electoral fraud in Britain is: male; aged 18–24; of Asian descent; living in a household with an income of below £24,999 p.a.; in SEG group C2; in the Yorkshire and Humberside area; in communities the ONS have classified as Cosmopolitan, Ethnicity Central or Multicultural Metropolitan; and who voted for a left-leaning party at the 2019 general election.

What are the next steps for research in this field? Asking respondents in large scale surveys about their victimisation experiences (relating to burglary or violent crime) is common in survey vehicles such as the Crime Survey for England & Wales, and we would suggest that this approach could be adopted with regards to electoral fraud. Only by asking respondents about their first-hand experiences of electoral fraud will we learn more about its incidence and prevalence – and with that resolve some of the debates around electorate fraud which have littered discussions about the electoral process in the UK and further afield of late. However, by re-conceptualising electoral fraud as a form of victimisation, this approach also raises questions about recompense for these (and similar) wrongs. That may prove to be an even harder task to resolve.



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