

Full Fact briefing on the Elections Bill:

An opportunity to safeguard democracy against misinformation and disinformation, strengthen the integrity of elections and restore public trust in politics

Misinformation and disinformation are serious and growing threats to democracy – but the UK's laws are not fit for purpose in tackling the harms. The upcoming Elections Bill is an opportunity to address the risks, strengthen the foundations of our democracy and help restore public trust in politics.

This briefing explains why the current legal framework does not effectively tackle misinformation and disinformation in our democratic processes, and sets out the measures that are needed in the Elections Bill.

Misinformation and disinformation in the UK's democratic processes

In 2024, the World Economic Forum identified misinformation and disinformation as the most severe risks facing the world.¹ A 2024 review by the UN found that they are currently the highest global risk and *"a risk for which the international community is deeply underprepared"*.² The Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development described misinformation and disinformation as *"some of the biggest threats to democracy in the 21st century."*³

The UK is particularly exposed. Concerns have been raised by the Electoral Commission, parliamentarians, civil society⁴ and academia⁵ about the vulnerability of our democratic processes to misinformation and disinformation.

- In May 2024, the Joint Committee on the National Security Strategy (JCNSS) flagged the risk of hostile actors, both foreign and domestic, influencing the information landscape with deepfakes, fuelling conspiracy theories, sowing division and undermining trust in UK leaders and institutions.⁶
- The Science, Innovation and Technology (SIT) Committee's inquiry on misinformation has shone a light on how platforms' systems can proliferate the spread of false information.⁷
- The Electoral Commission has highlighted how algorithms can promote and rapidly amplify misleading content, which risks undermining democratic participation and confidence in the democratic process.⁸
- The Speaker's Conference on the security of MPs, candidates and elections called in 2025 for the government to review electoral law to address disinformation that can fuel abuse and intimidation.⁹

There is also significant public concern: an Electoral Commission survey in 2024 found that misinformation and disinformation are the second highest concern in elections (70%) after media bias (74%).¹⁰

A survey by Ofcom in the same year points towards a driver of this concern. 60% of respondents saw false or misleading material about the election at least once in the previous week. 56% expressed concern about the impact of deepfakes on the election – but almost half (46%) were not sure whether they had seen one.¹¹

The World Economic Forum identified that the difficulty differentiating AI from human-generated false or misleading content, the automation and expansion of disinformation campaigns, and the growing volume of misinformation and disinformation make it increasingly hard to know where to turn for true information.¹² This corrodes our information environment, undermining trust in credible sources and informed political debate.¹³

There is a corresponding crisis of trust in our political system. The proportion of people who trusted politicians to tell the truth in 2023 was the lowest since the Ipsos Veracity Index began in 1983.¹⁴ This undermines the government's ability to deliver its mandate with legitimacy. As Labour's 2024 manifesto highlighted, the deterioration of trust has led to *"a crisis of confidence in our political system's ability to deliver any change."*¹⁵

With the lowering of the voting age – and younger people reporting alarmingly high levels of dissatisfaction with democracy¹⁶ – there has never been a more critical time to take action.

The current legislative framework is inadequate

Despite misinformation being the most encountered type of harm online,¹⁷ repeated warnings from experts about the risks of disinformation from hostile actors, and the growing crisis of public trust, the UK's laws do little to protect our democracy from the harms of misinformation and disinformation.

- In March 2021, the then Prime Minister said the Online Safety Act (OSA) would tackle collective online harms, including threats to democracy.¹⁸ The previous government noted *"that misinformation and disinformation surrounding elections are a risk to democracy and it is vital to address this issue."*¹⁹ But the OSA failed to address the harms that misinformation and disinformation can cause to democracy.
- The National Security Act 2023 included a new 'foreign interference' offence but there are practical challenges to enforcement,²⁰ and the law did not combat domestic political deepfakes.²¹
- The Elections Act 2022 did not tackle misinformation and disinformation in politics or address the harms they cause to democracy, and amendments relating to disinformation were rejected.²²

An Electoral Commission survey in 2024 found that three quarters (76%) of people do not think enough is being done to tackle misinformation and disinformation in elections, and only 5% think sufficient action is being taken.²³ It is essential that the government introduces robust measures to address the challenges of misinformation and disinformation in elections and historically low levels of public trust in democracy.

The measures set out below would support some of the government's priorities for the Bill, including preventing foreign influence in political finance, tackling harassment and intimidation of MPs and candidates, and facilitating higher levels of engagement in elections for new younger voters.

Full Fact's recommendations for the Elections Bill

Full Fact is calling for the Elections Bill to include measures in the following areas:

1. An upgraded Online Safety Act that safeguards the UK's democracy.
2. Stronger rules and regulations to deal with political deepfakes.
3. A comprehensive, centralised publicly accessible library of political adverts.
4. A regulatory framework to prevent misinformation and disinformation in political advertising.
5. Transparent and accountable systems for dealing with electoral information incidents.
6. Increased investigative and enforcement powers for the Electoral Commission.

1. An upgraded Online Safety Act that safeguards the UK's democracy

In 2020, the Committee on Democracy and Digital Technology recommended that platforms' duty of care should extend to actions which undermine democracy. This would have meant a duty of care that *"extends to preventing generic harm to our democracy as well as against specific harm to an individual."*²⁴ Ultimately, as noted above, the OSA failed to cover this sort of harm and left our democracy exposed.

In their December 2021 report on the Draft Online Safety Bill, a Parliamentary Committee called for various offences to be made illegal content in the OSA – which would require platforms to assess and mitigate the risk of harm – including election material that is disinformation about the administration of an election.²⁵ In response, the previous government said this would not be included as a priority offence in the OSA.²⁶

Ofcom has the power to obtain information from service providers, including about how their algorithms operate, in order to exercise its functions under the OSA.²⁷ An extension of platforms' risk assessment obligations, as recommended below, should be accompanied by a corresponding extension of Ofcom's transparency powers, focusing in particular on the harms that algorithmic bias can cause to democracy.

The EU's framework for platforms to manage risks is much broader than the OSA.²⁸ Article 34 of the Digital Services Act (DSA) requires very large platforms and search engines to include *"any actual or foreseeable negative effects on civic discourse and electoral processes, and public security"* in risk assessments.²⁹ Article 35 requires them to implement reasonable, proportionate and effective mitigation measures. The European Commission published guidelines in March 2024 on measures very large platforms and search engines could take to mitigate systemic risks to integrity of elections, like adapting their recommender systems.³⁰

Recommendation

The Elections Bill should add the following priority offences to Schedule 7 of the OSA, requiring regulated services to identify the risk of it appearing on their platforms, assess the risk of harm, identify and implement measures to reduce the risk of harm, and report on their risk assessments.³¹

- the offence of making or publishing a false statement of fact about a candidate before or during an election for the purpose of affecting their return (section 106 of the RPA), expanded to expressly include deepfakes as set out further below,³² and
- the offence of undue influence, which includes forcing a person to vote in a particular way or not vote at all (section 114A of the RPA), as previously recommended by the Joint Committee on the Online Safety Bill; and undue influence in Scottish Parliament and Senedd Cymru elections.

More broadly, the Elections Bill should incorporate into the OSA the systemic risk measures in Article 34(1)(c) of the DSA, and the mitigation measures in Article 35.³³ This would require the largest (Category 1) service providers to identify, analyse and assess any actual or foreseeable negative effects on civic discourse, electoral processes and public security that stem from their services; and to put in place reasonable, proportionate and effective mitigation measures tailored to the systemic risks identified.

This should be underpinned by a code of practice, setting out how companies can fulfill their duties.

The Elections Bill should also expand Schedule 8 of the OSA, to enable Ofcom to require regulated services to provide information related to these additional priority offences and systemic risks.

2. Stronger rules and regulations to deal with political deepfakes

In December 2023, David Lammy referred to *“...the widespread use of disinformation, misinformation and malinformation to undermine our democracy...”* and said *“Labour has committed to urgently introducing binding regulation of companies developing the most powerful frontier AI, which could be used to disrupt elections.”*³⁴ This regulation remains to be seen.

In their letter to the then Prime Minister in 2024, the JCNSS called for any future government to consider making it illegal to create a harmful political deepfake.³⁵ The OSA created new offences that prohibit sharing and threatening to share sexually explicit deepfakes, but it did not criminalise the creation of those images without consent, or cover political deepfakes.³⁶ The Data (Use and Access) Act 2025 introduced a new offence which means that people can be charged for creating and sharing sexually explicit deepfakes.³⁷

In April 2025, the Electoral Commission called for the offence of making or publishing a false statement of fact about a candidate to be updated, to expressly cover digitally manipulated false statements.³⁸ In May 2025, the Speaker’s Conference recommended reviewing how to make the offence more enforceable and able to keep pace with technology, and to consider expanding it beyond personal character or conduct.³⁹

Electoral Commission guidance in June 2024 called for generative AI material to be labelled.⁴⁰ In their January 2025 evidence to the SIT Committee’s inquiry on misinformation, the Commission suggested that social media platforms should require labelling of AI-modified content during election periods.⁴¹

Recommendation

The Elections Bill should update the offence of making or publishing a false statement of fact about a candidate to affect their return (section 106 of the Representation of the People Act 1983, the RPA), as recommended by the Electoral Commission and Speaker’s Conference, to expressly include deepfakes.

The Elections Bill should require certain political campaigners to include a clear transparency marker – with the name of the promoter and the person and political party on whose behalf they are promoting – in any material where the voice or image of certain categories of political individuals has been manipulated, to expressly include deepfakes. Non-compliance should result in civil sanctions.

If the manipulated material constitutes a false statement of fact about a candidate’s character or conduct, and was done for the purpose of affecting the return of a candidate at an election, it may also amount to an offence under the updated provisions in section 106 of the RPA.

3. A comprehensive, centralised publicly accessible library of political adverts

Access to comprehensive libraries of political adverts would enable journalists, researchers and the public to scrutinise political campaigns and identify misinformation and disinformation. The Electoral

Commission,⁴² Committee on Standards in Public Life (CSPL)⁴³ and the Committee on Democracy and Digital Technology⁴⁴ have highlighted that the voluntary libraries some platforms publish are inconsistent, and some are inaccurate.

Full Fact has been calling for a detailed public library of political adverts since 2020.⁴⁵ Regulators, other civil society organisations and Parliamentary committees have also called for this:

- In their February 2019 report on disinformation and fake news, the Culture, Media and Sport Committee called for political advertising to be publicly accessible in an independent, searchable repository, with details of who paid, who sponsored the ads, and who was targeted.⁴⁶
- In their June 2020 report, the Committee on Democracy and Digital Technologies called platforms to provide a comprehensive, real-time, publicly accessible database of adverts.⁴⁷
- In their July 2021 report, CSPL recommended that the government legislate to require social media platforms to create advert libraries that include prescribed categories of information.⁴⁸
- The Electoral Commission has called for detailed, accurate political advert libraries since 2018.⁴⁹ In their January 2025 evidence to the SIT's inquiry on misinformation, the Commission said comprehensive social media advert libraries have the potential to deliver transparency to voters.⁵⁰

Some jurisdictions have political advert libraries. Canada's Elections Modernisation Act 2018 requires large platforms that sell political advertising to publish certain information in a registry.⁵¹ The European Parliament adopted Regulations in 2024⁵² which impose labelling and transparency requirements on providers of political advertising, and provide that the European Commission will establish a repository of political adverts.⁵³

In 2018, the Electoral Commission highlighted that the rules do not explicitly ban anyone outside the UK from paying for digital adverts to target UK voters.⁵⁴ In 2021, CSPL called for a ban on foreign organisations or individuals from buying campaign adverts in the UK.⁵⁵ The government rejected an amendment to the previous Elections Bill that sought to address this,⁵⁶ on the basis that the Bill reduced the scope for spending by foreign third-party campaigners to £700. However, this restriction, which was inserted into the Political Parties, Elections and Referendums Act 2000 (PPERA), only covers the regulated period before an election.⁵⁷

Recommendation

The Elections Bill should establish a public repository for all electronic material that meets the conditions in the Elections Act as paid-for political adverts, modelled on the provisions in the EU Regulations. Very large online platforms and search engines should be required to make the following information available in the repository in as close to real-time as possible, and no later than 72 hours after the advert is published:

- content of the advert,
- amount spent on the advert,
- electoral process it is linked to, where applicable,
- details of who paid and, where applicable, the entity ultimately controlling them,
- intended target audience,
- methods and tools for the targeting, including ad-delivery techniques, and
- where possible, the number of views and engagements.

Ofcom should be given sufficient resources to build and maintain the public repository, and should consult the Electoral Commission, Information Commissioner's Office (ICO), civil society and academia on the design and scope of transparency notices.

This electronic material should be transferred to and made available in the National Archives. Platforms have removed content from their advert libraries after fixed periods.⁵⁸ It should be made available for voters and researchers to understand what happened in previous election campaigns and be able to hold political parties and platforms to account, without barriers to historic transparency.

Platforms should be obliged to comply with the transparency requirements as a condition if they are going to provide any commercial advertising in the UK. Failure to comply should be an offence with sanctions that are effective, proportionate and sufficient to act as a meaningful deterrent for non-compliance.

The Elections Bill should also amend section 89A(1) of PPERA to remove the words *"during a reserved regulated period"* (and remove the corresponding definition of 'reserved regulated period' in section 89A(7)) so that foreign individuals and organisations are restricted from paying for political advertising and other controlled expenditure in the UK, above a threshold of £700, at any time.

4. A regulatory framework to prevent misinformation and disinformation in political advertising

Following the 1997 general election, the Committee of Advertising Practice decided to exclude political advertising from the Advertising Standards Agency's (ASA) remit.⁵⁹ CSPL considered the issue and decided in 1998 that political parties should adopt a new code of practice.⁶⁰ After a consultation in 2003, the Electoral Commission concluded that the ASA should not regulate political advertising.⁶¹

As a result, *"non-broadcast political advertising which principally aims to influence voters in local, regional, national or international elections or referendums is ... not regulated by the ASA."*⁶² Full Fact has previously called for political advertising to be regulated.⁶³ Regulation for factual claims in political adverts has precedent elsewhere, including in New Zealand, South Australia and the Australian Capital Territory.

In June 2020, the Chief Executive of the ASA called for political advertising to be regulated and suggested that *"Experts from several appropriate regulators could take on the task."*⁶⁴ In the same month, the Committee on Democracy and Digital Technologies echoed this call, recommending that experts from the ASA, Electoral Commission, Ofcom and the UK Statistics Authority *"should co-operate through a regulatory committee on political advertising"* and that parties should work with them to develop a code of practice *"that restricts fundamentally inaccurate advertising during a parliamentary or mayoral election, or referendum."*⁶⁵

This reflected evidence to the Committee by the campaign group, Reform Political Advertising.⁶⁶ Opinion research, commissioned by the group in 2024, found that more than half (56%) of people would trust political adverts more if they knew they were regulated.⁶⁷

Recommendation

The Elections Bill should establish a regulatory committee on political advertising, comprising relevant experts from the ASA, Electoral Commission, Ofcom, the UK Statistics Authority and the ICO, with powers to adjudicate breaches of a new code of practice. The ASA exercises a range of sanctioning powers that could be given to the Committee.⁶⁸

The regulators should work with political parties to develop a code of practice on political adverts. This should cover clearly misleading statements of fact in all political advertising, not just commercial marketing material, to reflect the wider regulatory framework for advertising – as well as egregious misstatements of fact about an electoral process, like false claims about polling stations being closed.

The regulatory committee should be chaired by someone appointed through a process that guarantees a high level of independence from government. The committee would need sufficient resources to adjudicate on claims at speed during campaign periods.

5. Transparent and accountable systems for dealing with electoral information incidents

The UK is an outlier among some of its key allies – including the Five Eyes: US,⁶⁹ New Zealand,⁷⁰ Australia,⁷¹ and Canada⁷² – by failing to publish protocols for electoral information incidents. Full Fact has called for a critical election incident public protocol based on the model in Canada since 2022.⁷³ In January 2025, a minister confirmed there were no plans to introduce a Canadian-style protocol given the processes in place.⁷⁴

Limited information about those processes can be gleaned from Parliamentary enquiries:

- The National Security Online Information Team (NSOIT) *“undertakes work to understand the extent, scope and the reach of misinformation and disinformation.”*⁷⁵ The NSOIT focuses on risks to national security and public safety.⁷⁶ Among other things, it *“analyses attempts by foreign states to artificially manipulate the online environment”*⁷⁷ and responds to periods of acute disinformation risk, including during UK elections.⁷⁸
- The Joint Election Security Preparedness Unit (JESP) *“...coordinate[s] election security and preparedness activity within government and externally.”*⁷⁹ JESP stands up the Election Cell ahead of major democratic events, which brings together departments, intelligence agencies and external partners, including the Electoral Commission,⁸⁰ to monitor and respond to emerging issues, including information incidents.⁸¹ The Cell has coordinated teams to respond to AI-generated disinformation.⁸²
- The Defending Democracy Taskforce (DDT) was set up in 2022 *“To coordinate and drive progress on the Government’s work to protect UK democratic processes, institutions and society.”*⁸³ The DDT is coordinated by a *“small dedicated Secretariat.”*⁸⁴ It bridges gaps between the national security establishment and non-traditional partners, including large tech companies.⁸⁵

There is little public information about the DDT.⁸⁶ In December 2023, a minister said there were no plans to publish a report on its work.⁸⁷ The DDT was due to be complemented by *“...an engagement forum of elected representatives, including counterparts from opposition parties”* but the previous government stated that

“there is no single engagement forum.”⁸⁸ In December 2023, a Member of the House of Lords observed that the DDT was introduced “as a government initiative without engaging much with the opposition parties.”⁸⁹

As a group of academics specialising in intelligence and security identified in March 2024, the disparate organisations involved pose problems for coordination and the DDT’s aim of ensuring public confidence in the electoral system; and the structure, funding and activities of the Defending Democracy programme are unclear.⁹⁰ They noted that this lack of information poses serious issues for public trust.

The goal of the Defending Democracy programme is to *“ensure the integrity of the UK’s democratic processes and sustain public confidence in them.”⁹¹ To deliver on this aim, the government should be more transparent about its electoral security infrastructure. In particular, it is not clear whether, in what circumstances, or by whom the public would be notified about an incident that threatens the fairness of an election during a campaign, nor how that decision can be taken independently of the government which may be conflicted.*

Recommendation

The Elections Bill should establish a critical election incident public protocol, based on the model in Canada. This would ensure that any decision to inform the public about an information incident (or accumulation of incidents) during an election campaign, that could impact the UK’s ability to have a free and fair election, is taken independently of the government.

In establishing the protocol, the government should be transparent about the bodies (including DDT, JESP, the Election Cell and the NSOIT) working on electoral security. This should include a web page to inform public understanding and build public trust, with details of: the bodies’ objectives, their roles and work in relation to misinformation and disinformation and other threats, resourcing, and information about how they work with each other, regulators, elected representatives and external experts.

The activities of these bodies need to reflect the fact that misinformation and disinformation are ongoing threats, and information incidents that harm the UK’s democracy can happen at any time. They should be part of a wider, transparent framework for identifying and responding to information incidents – in addition to the protocol covering election periods – based on a model previously published by Full Fact.⁹²

This electoral security infrastructure should help to ensure that factual public information is quickly and effectively communicated, to identify, analyse and counter electoral influence operations, like the Psychological Defence authority announced in Sweden in 2018.⁹³ It should also support Ofcom, the Electoral Commission and other actors on media literacy initiatives, considered further below.

6. Increased investigative and enforcement powers for the Electoral Commission

The Electoral Commission, CSPL, select committees and civil society broadly agree on the measures needed to enhance the Electoral Commission. This includes the power to obtain information outside of a formal investigation, specific powers to share information with other bodies, and increased fining powers.⁹⁴

- In evidence to the Culture, Media and Sport Committee's 2019 inquiry on fake news, the Electoral Commission called for powers to obtain information beyond those it regulates, such as information about the source of an online campaign from social media companies.⁹⁵ The Committee reflected this in their report.⁹⁶ The Commission reiterated their call for an information sharing gateway in 2025.⁹⁷
- In their June 2020 report, the House of Lords Committee on Democracy and Digital Technologies also specifically recommended that the Commission should have the power to acquire information from external parties, such as social networks, outside of a formal investigation.⁹⁸
- CSPL recommended in 2021 that the Commission's powers to compel the provision of documents, information and explanation outside of an investigation should be extended.⁹⁹

The Electoral Commission worked on a joint campaign to help first-time and younger voters identify and address political misinformation and disinformation ahead of the 2024 general election.¹⁰⁰ In the run up to the election, the Commission's voter information hub was viewed 5.1 million times, and they responded to 8,500 queries from the public.¹⁰¹ In their submission to Curriculum and Assessment Review, the Electoral Commission outlined their efforts to enhance the citizenship curriculum in anticipation of votes at 16. Among other things, they recommended strengthening the curriculum with content on media literacy, misinformation and disinformation.¹⁰²

MHCLG identified as one of its research priorities in March 2025, *"How does susceptibility to mis- and disinformation, and its impact (if any) on voting behaviour, vary by age? What impact could extending the franchise to 16 and 17 year olds have on this?"*¹⁰³ It is essential that the risks are properly understood and addressed through effective media literacy initiatives for people of all ages.

Recommendation

The Elections Bill should give the Electoral Commission the powers:

- To obtain information from any person or organisation outside of a formal investigation, including from the online platforms they do not regulate. This would enable it to better monitor and enforce the rules about how campaigners spend money to influence voters – which might include analysing bots, adverts paid for by overseas actors, and content that is being sponsored and boosted.
- To share information with the police or other regulators. This would lead to faster and more straightforward collaboration with partner agencies, including Ofcom and the ICO.
- To impose fines of £500,000 per offence or 4% of a campaign's total spend, whichever is higher.

The Commission should be given sufficient resources to research and deploy effective public information campaigns about deepfakes and misinformation and disinformation during election periods. It should also be resourced to help raise media literacy and counter misinformation and disinformation – particularly but not exclusively for new younger voters – alongside Ofcom, civil society, grassroots organisations, educational institutions and others.

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- ⁷⁹ Department for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities (5 February 2024) [Parliamentary question: Elections: National Security](#)
- ⁸⁰ Electoral commission (30 October 2019) [Commissioner Day notes](#)
- ⁸¹ Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government (22 January 2025) [Parliamentary question: Joint Election Security Preparedness Unit](#)
- ⁸² Dan Jarvis MBE MP (18 December 2024) [Letter to Joint Committee on the National Security](#)
- ⁸³ Suella Braverman KC MP (27 March 2023) [Letter to Home Affairs Committee](#)
- ⁸⁴ Home Office (21 January 2025) [Parliamentary question: Defending Democracy Taskforce: Finance](#)
- ⁸⁵ HM Government (March 2023) [Integrated Review Refresh 2023](#)
- ⁸⁶ Spotlight on Corruption (March 2024) [Submission to Joint Committee on the National Security Strategy inquiry on defending democracy](#)
- ⁸⁷ Home Office (12 December 2023) [Parliamentary question: Defending Democracy Taskforce](#)
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- ⁸⁹ Hansard (11 December 2023) [Cyber Democratic Influence](#)
- ⁹⁰ Dr Hugo Drochon, Dr Dan Lomas, Prof Rory Cormac (March 2024) [Evidence to the JCNSS inquiry on Defending Democracy](#)
- ⁹¹ HM Government (March 2021) [The Integrated Review of Security, Defence, Development and Foreign Policy](#)
- ⁹² Full Fact (2020) [Framework for Information Incidents](#)
- ⁹³ The Local (15 January 2018) [Sweden to create new authority tasked with countering disinformation](#)
- ⁹⁴ Spotlight on Corruption et al (20 May 2024) [Protecting the UK's Democracy: Key Electoral Reforms Recommended by Independent Experts](#)
- ⁹⁵ Electoral Commission (2019) [Written evidence to CMS Committee inquiry on fake news](#)
- ⁹⁶ Culture, Media and Sport Committee (14 February 2019) [Disinformation and 'fake news': Final Report](#)
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- ¹⁰¹ Full Fact (May 2025) [Full Fact Report 2025](#)
- ¹⁰² Electoral Commission (12 December 2024) [Evidence to the Curriculum and Assessment Review](#)
- ¹⁰³ Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government (5 March 2025) [MHCLG areas of research interest](#)