

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 government has recognised the threat but its proposed legislative reforms do not adequately address it, and risk being a missed opportunity.

This briefing sets out how the upcoming Elections Bill could strengthen the foundations of our democracy, tackle misinformation and disinformation, and help to restore trust in politics.

Misinformation and disinformation in UK democracy

In 2024, both the World Economic Forum¹ and the United Nations² identified misinformation and disinformation as the biggest risks facing the world. The Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development described them as *"some of the biggest threats to democracy in the 21st century."*³

Concerns have been raised in recent years by Parliament, the Electoral Commission, civil society⁴ and academia⁵ about the vulnerability of UK democratic processes to misinformation and disinformation.

- The Joint Committee on the National Security Strategy (JCNSS) flagged the risk of hostile actors using deepfakes, fuelling conspiracies, sowing division and undermining trust in UK leaders and institutions.⁶
- The Science, Innovation and Technology Committee's inquiry on misinformation has shone a light on how platforms' systems can proliferate the spread of false information, and the limits of the law.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 has called for the government to review electoral law to address disinformation that can fuel abuse and intimidation.⁹
- The Public Administration and Constitutional Affairs Committee has highlighted that electoral law and policy *"has struggled to keep pace"* with the rise of misinformation and disinformation.¹⁰

There is also significant public concern. An Electoral Commission survey last year found that misinformation and disinformation are the second biggest concern in elections (70%) after media bias (74%).¹¹ In the same year, Ofcom found that 60% of people 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 if they had seen one.¹² The difficulty differentiating false or misleading AI content, and the growing volume of misinformation, make it increasingly hard to know where to turn for true information.¹³

There is a corresponding crisis of trust in our political system and politicians.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 very high levels of dissatisfaction with UK democracy,¹⁶ there has never been a more critical time for the government to tackle the problem.

The current legislative framework does not tackle the risks

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 misinformation and disinformation can cause to democracy.²⁰
- The National Security Act 2023 included a new ‘foreign interference’ offence but there are practical challenges to enforcement,²¹ and the law did not combat domestic political deepfakes.²²
- 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.²³

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.²⁴ A robust framework is needed to tackle the issue and to reassure the public.

Proposals for the Elections Bill do not go far enough

The government's ‘elections strategy’, published in July 2025, recognised that *“Our own democracy is being threatened by misinformation”* and committed to restore faith in politics.²⁵ Days later, Sir Keir Starmer told a Parliamentary committee that *“I was very worried at the last election about misinformation, and I am very worried about the potential for misinformation in future elections in this country.”*²⁶

However, the strategy includes only limited proposals to address misinformation and disinformation in elections, which are set out below. These are a starting point, but more ambition is needed if the government wants to deliver on their objectives of restoring trust in politics and protecting our democracy.

- **Misleading campaigns:** the government will consult on a code of conduct to give the public *“more confidence that campaigns are being conducted with honesty and integrity and are not intentionally attempting to mislead the public.”*
- **Political finance:** increasing transparency and closing key loopholes in the political finance regime will help to prevent illegal foreign money being channelled into political campaigns.
- **Enforcement powers:** the Electoral Commission’s maximum fine will increase from £20,000 to £500,000; and the Commission will be given powers to share information with certain authorities.
- **Campaign transparency:** unregistered third-party campaigners will be required to include digital imprints in ‘organic’ digital campaign material, to make it clear who is promoting the material.
- **Imprint rules:** campaign material promoted by or on behalf of political entities will need to include details of the affiliated party, to address the risk of campaign material designed to mislead.

Full Fact’s recommendations for the Elections Bill

Full Fact is calling for the Elections Bill to include the following package of measures. These would support some of the government's priorities, including preventing foreign influence in political finance, tackling harassment and intimidation of MPs and candidates, and facilitating engagement among new younger voters.

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

The elections strategy highlights the need to *“guard newly enfranchised young people against the potential effects of online mis- and disinformation”* and notes that the OSA requires online companies to take action against illegal misinformation and disinformation. But this is the tip of the iceberg: the Act does not cover most misinformation and disinformation.²⁷ As the Science, Innovation and Technology Committee recently concluded, the OSA *“cannot keep the UK public safe as it was not designed to tackle misinformation.”*²⁸

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.”*²⁹ Ultimately, as noted above, the OSA failed to cover this sort of harm and left our democracy exposed.³⁰

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.³¹ In response, the previous government said this would not be included as a priority offence in the OSA.³²

In the EU, very large platforms and search engines are required to include *“any actual or foreseeable negative effects on civic discourse and electoral processes, and public security”* in risk assessments;³³ and to implement reasonable, proportionate and effective mitigation measures. Guidelines set out measures they could take to mitigate systemic risks to integrity of elections, like adapting their recommender systems.³⁴

Recommendation

The Elections Bill should add the following priority offences to Schedule 7 of the OSA, which would require online companies to identify the risk of it appearing, assess and reduce the risk of harm, report on their risk assessments, and manage the risk of their services being used for the commission of the offences:³⁵

- 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 Representation of the People Act (the RPA)), expanded to expressly include deepfakes as set out further below;³⁶ 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; as well as undue influence in Scottish Parliament and Senedd Cymru elections.

More broadly, the Elections Bill should update the OSA to tackle collective harms to democracy. This would require the largest online companies to identify – and put in place reasonable, proportionate and effective measures to mitigate – any actual or foreseeable negative effects on civic discourse, electoral processes and public security that stem from their services. This should be underpinned by a code of practice.

Ofcom has the power to obtain information from online companies, including about how their algorithms operate.³⁷ The Elections Bill should expand Schedule 8 of the OSA, to enable Ofcom to require those companies to provide information related to the 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."*³⁸ This regulation appears to have stalled. The elections strategy notes the efforts of the Defending Democracy Taskforce to tackle harassment and intimidation of those involved in public life, including identifying gaps in the law, but there are no measures to deal with the threat of harmful political deepfakes.

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.³⁹ 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, nor did it cover political deepfakes.⁴⁰ 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.⁴¹

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.⁴² 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.⁴³ The Conference noted *"that addressing disinformation is a necessary step for reducing abuse and intimidation against MPs and candidates, as many cases are triggered by disinformation about the victim."*

Electoral Commission guidance in June 2024 called for generative AI material to be labelled.⁴⁴ 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.⁴⁵

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

The strategy proposes extending the digital imprint rules (which make clear who is responsible for an advert) to help voters *"better understand the origin and intent of the material they see, enabling them to make political choices with greater confidence."* But more transparent labelling is only part of the solution.

Access to comprehensive libraries of political adverts would enable voters, researchers and others to scrutinise political campaigns and identify misinformation and disinformation. The Electoral Commission,⁴⁶ the Committee on Standards in Public Life (CSPL)⁴⁷ and the Committee on Democracy and Digital Technology⁴⁸ have highlighted that some platforms' voluntary libraries are inconsistent, and some are inaccurate.

Full Fact has been calling for a detailed public library of political adverts since 2020.⁴⁹ 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.⁵⁰
- 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.⁵¹
- 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.⁵²
- The Electoral Commission has called for detailed, accurate political advert libraries since 2018.⁵³ 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.⁵⁴

Some large online companies have stopped hosting political adverts in some jurisdictions – including Canada⁵⁵ and the EU⁵⁶ – when they were required to publish ad information in public libraries.⁵⁷ This led to criticism from one expert that *“that the firms are not, collectively, living up to their stated objectives (to wider society) of uplifting people's free speech rights in a way that promotes transparency and accountability for all.”*⁵⁸

This material is of significant interest to voters and researchers, now and in the future. But platforms have deleted it after arbitrary fixed periods and the EU repository will only retain it for seven years after each advert is published.⁵⁹ The leading academic Dr Claire Wardle has highlighted more broadly that *“The precarious nature of the storage and accessibility of digital information is having serious consequences for fact checkers, journalists and policy-makers today, but also how historians will make sense of this period.”*⁶⁰

A related issue concerns overseas spending on UK political adverts. In 2021, CSPL called for a ban on foreign organisations or individuals buying campaign adverts in the UK.⁶¹ The government rejected an amendment to the previous Elections Bill that sought to address this,⁶² on the basis that the Bill reduced the scope for spending by foreign third-party campaigners to £700. However, this restriction, inserted into the Political Parties, Elections and Referendums Act 2000 (PPERA), only covers the regulated period before an election.⁶³

Recommendation

The Elections Bill should establish a public repository for all electronic material that meets the conditions in the Elections Act 2022 as paid-for political adverts. Very large online platforms and search engines should be required to make prescribed information available in the repository in as close to real-time as possible, and no later than 72 hours after the advert is published. This should include: the content of the advert; amount spent; relevant electoral process, where applicable; who paid and, where applicable, their controlling entity; intended target audience; methods and tools for 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 framework and the scope of transparency notices.

The electronic material should be transferred to the National Archives and made publicly available. This would enable voters, researchers and others to understand what happened in election campaigns, and to 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"* 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 adverts**

Following the 1997 general election, the Committee of Advertising Practice decided to exclude political advertising from the Advertising Standards Authority's (ASA) remit.⁶⁴ CSPL considered the issue and decided in 1998 that political parties should adopt a new code of practice.⁶⁵ After a consultation in 2003, the Electoral Commission concluded that the ASA should not regulate political advertising.⁶⁶

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."*⁶⁷ Groups including Full Fact⁶⁸ and the campaign organisation Reform Political Advertising have previously called for political advertising to be regulated.⁶⁹ Opinion research, commissioned by Reform Political Advertising in 2024, found that more than half (56%) of people would trust political adverts more if they knew they were regulated.⁷⁰

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."*⁷¹ 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."*⁷²

In 2025, the Speaker's Conference called for a code of conduct for all candidates, MPs and parties *"that defines a collectively agreed set of principles to guide behaviours and language when campaigning."*⁷³ The government welcomed this, emphasising in their elections strategy that campaigners must be accountable for their conduct *"to ensure political debate is honest, transparent and remains civil and safe for all."* The government will be consulting with political parties on a code to give the public *"confidence that campaigns are being conducted with honesty and integrity and are not intentionally attempting to mislead the public."*

The details of this proposal remain to be seen, including the body responsible for ensuring compliance, their level of independence, resourcing and powers, including in cases of non-compliance with the code.

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.⁷⁴

The regulators should work with political parties to develop a code of practice on political adverts, which may form part of the code of conduct for campaigning. This should cover clearly misleading statements of fact in all political advertising, not just commercial marketing, to reflect the wider regulatory framework for advertising – as well as egregious misstatements of fact about an electoral process.

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

Despite its focus on *“futureproofing our democracy”* the elections strategy does not include much-needed measures to deal with information incidents that could threaten the fairness of a UK election. Nor does it increase the transparency and accountability of the government bodies involved in electoral security.

The UK is an outlier among some of its key allies – including the Five Eyes: US,⁷⁵ New Zealand,⁷⁶ Australia,⁷⁷ and Canada⁷⁸ – 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 2022.⁷⁹ In January 2025, a minister confirmed there were no plans to introduce a Canadian-style protocol given the processes in place.⁸⁰

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.”*⁸¹ Among other things, NSOIT *“analyses attempts by foreign states to artificially manipulate the online environment”*⁸² and responds to periods of acute disinformation risk, including during UK elections.⁸³
- The Joint Election Security Preparedness Unit (JESP) *“...coordinate[s] election security and preparedness activity within government and externally.”*⁸⁴ JESP stands up the Election Cell ahead of major democratic events, which brings together departments, intelligence agencies and external partners, including the Electoral Commission,⁸⁵ to monitor and respond to emerging issues, including information incidents.⁸⁶ The Cell has coordinated teams to respond to AI-generated disinformation.⁸⁷
- 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.”*⁸⁸ It bridges gaps between the national security establishment and others, including large tech companies.⁸⁹

There is little public information about the DDT.⁹⁰ In December 2023, a minister said there were no plans to publish a report on its work.⁹¹ 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.”⁹² 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.”⁹³

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.⁹⁴ 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.”⁹⁵ 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 more 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, accountability, resourcing, and information about how they work with each other, regulators and elected representatives.

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.⁹⁶

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 2018.⁹⁷ It should also support Ofcom, the Electoral Commission and other actors on media literacy initiatives, considered further below.

6. Increased investigative powers for the Electoral Commission

The elections strategy includes measures to increase the Electoral Commission’s enforcement and investigative powers – measures which Full Fact and others have called for.⁹⁸ In particular, increasing the maximum fine for an offence from £20,000 to £500,000; and express powers to share information with certain regulators and enforcement authorities, in particular circumstances.

But the strategy leaves a gap. Unlike the Information Commissioner, the Electoral Commission does not have the power to obtain information outside of a formal investigation. This means they cannot find out from a

social media company, in real-time during an election period, who is behind an online campaign. The Commission has previously expressed concern about the impact this has on their ability to act quickly.⁹⁹

- The Electoral Commission has called for this power, including in 2018 and again in 2020, to enable it to assess allegations more quickly and determine whether an investigation is necessary.¹⁰⁰
- In 2020, the Lords Democracy and Digital Committee called for the Commission to have the power to acquire information from external parties, such as social networks, outside of a formal investigation.¹⁰¹
- CSPL recommended in 2021 that the Electoral Commission's powers to compel the provision of documents, information and explanation outside of an investigation should be extended.¹⁰²

The elections strategy refers to plans to help engage new younger voters but does not set out a plan to increase political and media literacy to tackle misinformation. People aged 18-24 report seeing more misinformation about UK elections than older groups.¹⁰³ With the Elections Bill due to lower the voting age to 16, young people need effective methods to separate the reliable and evidence-based from the false and misleading. As Shout Out UK and the All-Party Parliamentary Group on Political and Media Literacy highlighted, *"the success of this franchise extension is inextricably linked to the robust implementation of Political and Media Literacy education."*¹⁰⁴

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.¹⁰⁵ 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.¹⁰⁶ In their submission to Curriculum and Assessment Review, the Electoral Commission recommended strengthening the national curriculum with content on media literacy, misinformation and disinformation.¹⁰⁷

Recommendation

The Elections Bill should give the Electoral Commission the power to obtain information outside of a formal investigation, including from online platforms. 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 by campaigners.

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, schools and others, as part of a wider increase in government spending on media literacy initiatives.

More broadly, media literacy should be integrated into the national curriculum, with critical thinking skills embedded across multiple disciplines. Large online platforms should be given a statutory duty to provide and promote effective media literacy programmes which meet users' needs. And a cross-departmental taskforce should be established to centralise accountability and ownership of media literacy.

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