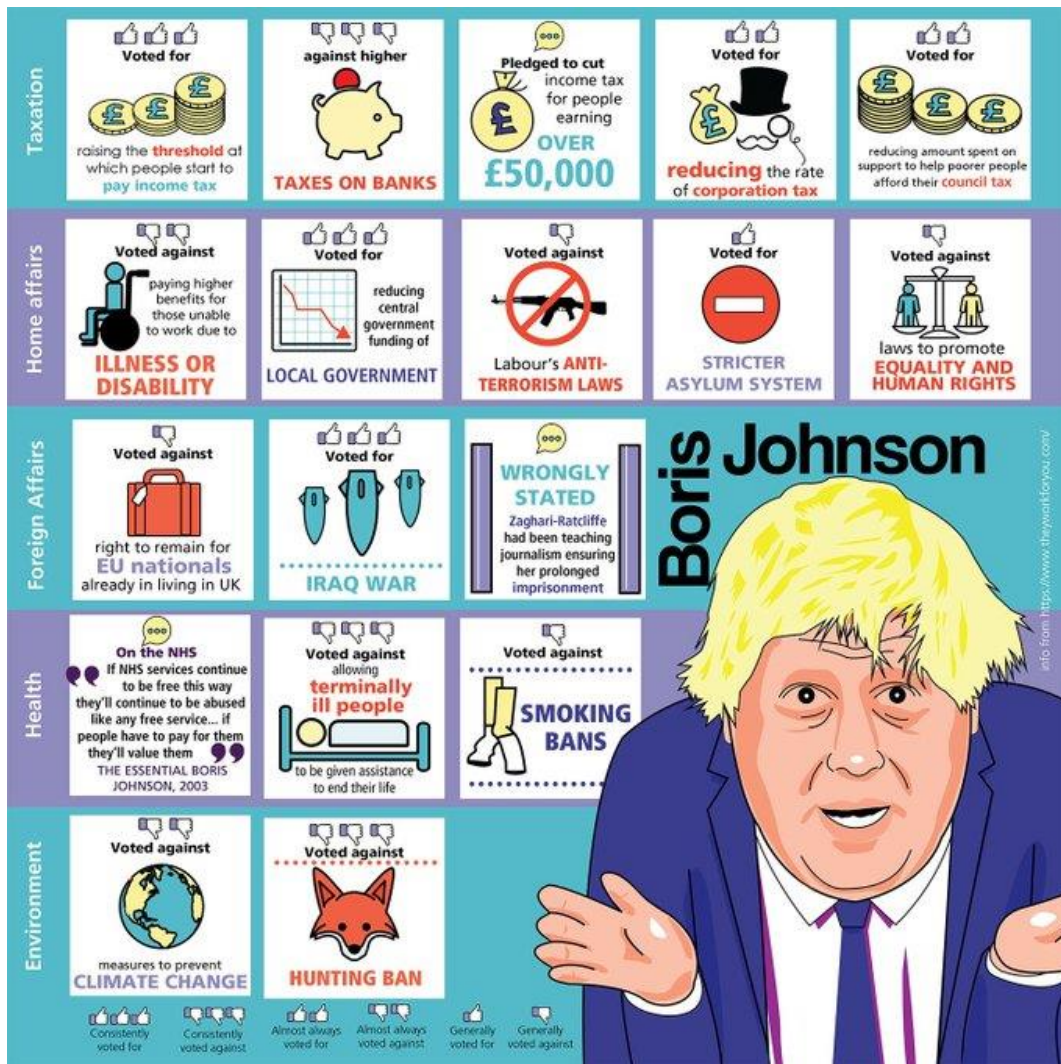


Who is Watching Parliament?

Monitory Democracy at Westminster



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Executive summary

Since 2004, a range of data tools and sources have allowed users to 'watch' what MPs and Peers are doing, in terms of how they are voting, their expenses and allowances or outside interests.

Who is using the data?

- **Users** are mainly journalists, campaigners, and activists, along with politicians, academics, and data activists and developers.
- **Citizen** users are often the 'usual suspects' already engaged in politics, but with a small but significant stream of new users.

How is it being used?

- It is driven by events such as elections and scandals.
- Information searching is most often **focused and localised**.
- It is frequently used in a **partisan** way as well as to **challenge the system**.
- It is used to **inform** voters, as a **shortcut** to understand a politician or issue, or as a way of **ranking or measuring politicians**.

What is the impact?

- The new data makes MPs and Peers more **accountable**, at an individual level as well as **collectively**.
- It creates some positive behaviour change and, in a few cases, has helped drive reforms.
- It has driven some **resistance** and attempts at gaming the system.
- Data has little effect on wider voting patterns but more **on 'everyday' engagement with politics**.
- There is some link to different means of **political participation** such as e-expression and e-petitions.

Watching Politics

This project examined the impact of new data tools and sources on Westminster. It aimed to find out:

- Who is using the new data to watch Parliament,
- What and who they are monitoring,
- What the impact is on those being watched and the public outside.

Over the last decade, a whole armoury of low-cost transparency tools has given citizens the chance to watch politicians more easily.¹ The new tools come in various shapes, sizes, and forms. They can be general or targeted, sector-specific, or body-specific. These range from formal, legal openness regulations to the 'radical transparency' or 'vigilantism' of WikiLeaks. Some tools or channels, such as Freedom Of Information or Open Data, offer structured means of accessing government information and data. However, there are more dynamic and less controlled instruments, from social media to mass leaks. The full effect is to create a 'permanent' and 'continuous' oversight of government. Various terms have been mooted for this new system, from 'monitory' democracy to 'counter-availing' power.²

Watching Parliament

The history of Westminster has been defined by battles between secrecy and openness. In the pre-democratic age, reporting on the proceedings of Parliament was technically banned until the early 1830s. For some time, Westminster prohibited the publication of debates lest this be an admission of its accountability to the electors.³

Numerous battles have been fought over what the public can access or see in Parliament, beginning in the 17th century over the recording of debates in pamphlets during the English civil war and continuing over whether newspapers could report debates and votes in the 1800s through to resistance to the televising of proceedings in the late 1980s⁴. In each case, technology has challenged, undermined, and eventually overcome resistance, whether the printing press, the newspaper or the television camera. Each, in its turn, changed how Parliament and democracy worked.

¹ Keane, J. (2009). *The life and death of democracy*. Simon and Schuster; Schudson, M. (2015). *The rise of the right to know*. Harvard University Press; Rosanvallon, P., (2008). *Counter-democracy: Politics in an age of distrust*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

² Keane, J. (2009). *The life and death of democracy*. Simon and Schuster; Schudson, M. (2015). *The rise of the right to know*. Harvard University Press.

³ Quoted in Birch, Anthony H., (1964) *Representative and Responsible Government*. London: George Allen & Unwin, p 15

⁴ See Blick, A. (2021). *Electrified Democracy: The Internet and the United Kingdom Parliament in History*. Cambridge University Press; Rix, K. (2014). 'Whatever Passed in Parliament Ought to be Communicated to the Public': Reporting the Proceedings of the Reformed Commons, 1833–50. *Parliamentary History*, 33(3), 453-474.

Secrecy and Parliament

For centuries, Parliament jealously guarded its deliberations from public scrutiny and repeatedly passed motions limiting access.

'That no news-letter writers do in their letters, or other papers that they disperse, presume to intermeddle with the debates or any other proceedings of the House'

House of Commons Resolution, 1694

'That it is a high indignity to, and a notorious breach of the privilege of, this House for any news-writer in letters or other papers...to give therein any account of the doings or other proceedings of this House, or any Committee thereof, as well during the recess as the sitting of Parliament, and this House will proceed with the utmost severity against such offenders.'

House of Commons Motion, 1738⁵

Legislatures face particular problems with being open. US scholars Hibbing and Theiss-Morse explained in a famous book on the US Congress in 1995 that legislatures are often forced to go public about activities the public dislike. The audience outside sees the 'internal debates...bargaining and politically expedited compromise.' This is the 'perfect recipe for disrespect,' and the legislature becomes, paradoxically, 'an enemy of the public because it is public' ⁶.

This is made more complicated by the fact that Westminster is both a working legislature and a 'theatre' where politicians perform⁷. Erwin Goffman's famous distinction between 'frontstage' (public) and 'backstage' (private) activities has been regularly applied to Westminster as an institution that is both a public performance space and a more hidden, working legislature⁸.

Watching Westminster Today

Watching Westminster has become a great deal easier. Since 2004, a whole array of new formal and informal disclosure tools mean we can watch, analyse, and verify what MPs and Peers are doing much more easily, often at the push of a button. An ever-changing and expanding 'ecosystem' of tools and sources labelled **Parliamentary Monitoring Organisations** (PMOs) now provide a stream of data⁹. These include:

⁵ See John Vice and Stephen Farrell, *The History of Hansard* (House of Lords, London, undated), pp. 7–10

⁶ See Hibbing, J. R., & Theiss-Morse, E. (1995). *Congress as public enemy: Public attitudes toward American political institutions*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

⁷ see Fenno 1978 Fenno, R. F. (1991). *Home style and Washington work: studies of congressional politics*. Michigan: University of Michigan Press.

⁸ Goffman, E. (1959). *The presentation of self in everyday life*. London: Harmondsworth. See for example Geddes, M. (2019). *Dramas at Westminster*. Manchester: Manchester University Press.

⁹ Edwards, A., de Kool, D., & Van Ooijen, C. (2015). The information ecology of parliamentary monitoring websites: Pathways towards strengthening democracy. *Information Polity*, 20(4), 253-268.

- **Data direct** from Parliament such as Hansard, around attendance, voting and other activities.
- Data from other **formal bodies** or **watchdogs**, such as the Independent Parliamentary Standards Authority (IPSA), which publishes data on MPs' expenses.
- Data from **third parties and platforms** such as TheyWorkForYou, Public Whip and Parallel Parliament.
- **Legal tools or regulatory reporting requirements** such as FOI requests or Registers of Financial Interests (in The House of Commons and House of Lords).
- Other **spins-offs** include searchable platforms of MPs' expenses data and a Twitter monitor of changes to MPs' Wikipedia pages.

The problem is then tracing the effect of PMOs. Even before the arrival of the internet, the link between information and democratic activities, such as voting, had long been discussed and debated. It has been assumed that an 'information rich' environment is better for democracy than an information-poor one. However, the democratic 'gap' between the ideal informed voter and what the average voter appears to know has been a source of 'omnipresent doubt' and a central 'paradox of mass politics'¹⁰.

Arguments about the impact of information or data sometimes presume a straight line, or a simple link, from information to voter. However, various studies have debated to what extent voters follow information about politics and whether it alters their behaviour. Some recent works cast doubt on voters' ability to be informed enough to carry out the democratic duties¹¹.

Despite the doubts, in the US and UK, research has shown how most voters have a rough sense of where MPs stand, picking up 'clues and scraps' from the media, politicians themselves and opponents¹². However, the exact impact of any information can be filtered or reduced by pre-existing views or partisanship. Even high-profile controversies like the MPs' expenses scandal of 2009 did not lead to large changes in voting behaviour because any knowledge of MPs' wrongdoing was balanced against partisanship at the ballot box¹³.

As well as being filtered, the data itself may not provide a full picture and may be:

- **uneven**, as watching naturally 'clusters' in areas where data exists or where interests lie.
- **counter-productive**, as data can open up some areas while making other actions more hidden.
- **contradictory**, as openness can illuminate issues but also decontextualise them¹⁴.

¹⁰ Rapeli, L. (2014). *The conception of citizen knowledge in democratic theory*. Springer, Cham.

¹¹ See the famous work on American knowledge Carpini, M. X. D., & Keeter, S. (1996). *What Americans know about politics and why it matters*. New Haven: Yale University Press.

¹² See Valgarðsson, V. O., Clarke, N., Jennings, W., & Stoker, G. (2021). The good politician and political trust: an authenticity gap in British politics?. *Political Studies*, 69(4), 858-880.

¹³ Vivyan, N., & Wagner, M. (2012). Do voters reward rebellion? The electoral accountability of MPs in Britain. *European Journal of Political Research*, 51(2), 235-264.

¹⁴ Strathern, M. (2000). The tyranny of transparency. *British Educational Research Journal*, 26(3), 309-321.

Tracing any impact from PMOs is difficult. Some studies have suggested a series of specific data effects since 2004:

- changes in **attendance** in the House of Commons or House of Lords as Members seek to 'manage' their 'scores' on rating sites.
- an increase in Parliamentary Questions asked, when used as a measure of activity.
- shifts in voting patterns and rebellion among MPs¹⁵.

One key question is what effect data can have. Could data lead, in certain situations, to concrete outcomes such as explanations, apologies or even resignations? Could it help drive changes to Westminster itself? Or, given the long chain of events needed from data to action, is it more likely data create media storms or social media outbursts? ¹⁶

¹⁵ See Edwards, A., de Kool, D., & Van Ooijen, C. (2015). The information ecology of parliamentary monitoring websites: Pathways towards strengthening democracy. *Information Polity*, 20(4), 253-268; Korthagen, I., & Dorst, H. (2020). Parliamentary Monitoring. In *European E-Democracy in Practice* (pp. 151-162). Springer, Cham.

¹⁶ Papacharissi, Z. (2015). *Affective publics: Sentiment, technology, and politics*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Research questions

The research project asked three central questions:

1

Who is using the data?

2

How is it being used?

3

What is the impact on the watched and the watchers?

Methods

The project used a mixed-methods approach, combining qualitative methods such as interviews, surveys, and case studies with quantitative data gathering and media analysis. The approaches were guided by the framework, research questions and objectives. For more detail on the methods, see Appendix A.

The quantitative aspects included:

- **Gathering data** from Parliament data team, TheyWorkForYou.com (TWFY) and other bodies such as IPSA on the use of their sites and general levels of interest. A series of FOI requests were made for further data, and sources such as Alexa trends and Google trends were drawn on to get a sense of information searching patterns.
- **Analysis of media stories** in the national, regional, and local media based on mentions of data, to trace both reporting and impact.
- A series of snapshots based on **selected votes and events**, through analysis of the national and regional media as well as samples of social media (using Twitter).
- A specially commissioned **YouGov Poll** of 101 MPs for their views on TWFY.

The qualitative aspects involved:

- A series of 30 semi-structured **interviews** with officials in parliament, former MPs, and third-party innovators.
- A **survey** of 53 data users to ask about their activity, what data they gathered and why. This was disseminated via social media between 2020 and 2022. It asked respondents if and how they have used data from parliament or elsewhere and what they used them for.
- **Case studies** of high profile events where data played a role or became part of the coverage, including Brexit, MPs' expenses, Hereditary By-elections, military action in Syria votes in 2013 and 2015, Same-sex marriage, House of Lords appointments, Lobbying, Proxy voting, Covid-19.
- Two **'living lab' experiments** with students acting as citizens searching data. Labs were used to gauge which data sources are normally used and what topics attract their interest. After the labs, a discussion and focus group focused on the effect of searching on their views of Westminster.

Who is using the data?

Who is or is not using the data is the key to the success or failure of PMOs. Many e-reforms are driven by the hope that an imagined 'rational' and 'objective' citizen user, and the myth of an 'informed citizen' continues to haunt the discussions around political reform¹⁷. Rather than citizens, it is more likely that users will be a small group of 'opinion formers' and activists, who then pass on data to a wider audience. Previous studies of the US Congress found the main 'watchers' were a combination of journalists, politicians, opponents and activists, who either acted as 'opinion formers' or 'watchdogs' to pass on information or sound the alarm with the wider public¹⁸.

What we know about PMOs in the UK paints a similar picture to the US, with use driven by a small group of opinion formers. Analysis of TheyWorkForYou.com in 2011 found that visitors were mostly the engaged public, private companies, NGOs, and the media, with most users already interested in politics¹⁹. FOIs to Parliament are similarly driven by a combination of citizens, journalists, NGOs, and businesses.

As Table 1 shows, users of the different tools and platforms constitute a relatively small group.

Table 1: Numbers using selected sites²⁰

Source	Use Per Month (2020)
They Work For You.com	304,656
MPs' expenses info.com	8-10,000
Members Interests.com	150-200
FOI requests to Independent Parliamentary Standards Authority	150

Gathering data from the surveys and case studies, major groups included:

- National, regional, and local press.
- Political opponents and candidates.
- Party groups, such as local party associations.
- NGOs, whether 'single issue' groups or wider organisations pushing for certain reforms.
- Academics.
- Innovators and developers.
- Citizens.
- MPs and their staff.

¹⁷ See Kreiss, D. (2015). The problem of citizens: E-democracy for actually existing democracy. *Social Media+ Society*, 1(2), 1-11.

¹⁸ Arnold, R. D. (2009). *Congress, the Press, and Political Accountability*. Princeton University Press.

¹⁹ Escher, T. (2011). *Analysis of users and usage for TheyWorkForYou. com*. London: mySociety

²⁰ Escher, T. (2011). *Analysis of users and usage for TheyWorkForYou. Com*. London: mySociety; interview

Sitting alongside are formally constituted bodies with a monitory role, such as the Independent Parliamentary Standards Authority (IPSA), which oversees MPs' expenses and payroll, or the House of Lords Appointments Commission (HOLAC), which monitors potential Peers and once elevated to the Lords, Cross-Benchers. Pulling data from various tools and platforms confirms the diverse picture of use, as Table 2 shows.

Table 2: Users of data according to various sources²¹

	FOI (IPSA)	TWFY	FOI (Parliament)
Journalists	20%	0.5% (BBC)	17%
MPs and staff	4%	2%	n/a
Civil society organisations	n/a	n/a	n/a
Political activist	3%	n/a	n/a
Public	57%	n/a	71%

More detailed data from TWFY, based on subscribers to their email alerts, found a breakdown of 16% professional against 84% public. Among professional users, 40% were from charitable organisations, 35% were public bodies, 24% were private bodies, and 22% were community groups. Journalists made up 10% and MPs' staff 6% ²².

Our smaller survey of data users pointed to a similar picture (though users self-classified under various options).

Table 3: Users of Data

Type or identity of user	Total
Citizen	23
Academic	21
Voter (in an MPs' area or constituency)	11
Member of a pressure group/interest group	9
Think tank	3
Journalist	2
MP or Peer	1

Together, the diverse groups had different motives and use patterns:

- The **national, regional, and local press** were major users, using data as a source for stories. While the national press focused on high profile or controversial votes and scandals, some detailed investigative pieces dug deeper into the data to find patterns or compare areas like expenses or lobbying.
- The **regional and local press** focused on their geographic area or local representative(s), often reflecting the same events flagged up by national coverage.
- **Political opponents** and candidates used voting or attendance records against incumbents, while party groups monitored their members or wider parties. Groups

²¹ Escher, T. (2011). *Analysis of users and usage for TheyWorkForYou. Com*. London: mySociety; IPSA website; Hazell, R., Bourke, G., & Worthy, B. (2012). Open house? Freedom of information and its impact on the UK parliament. *Public Administration*, 90(4), 901-921.

²² Parsons, A (2021) 'What do people find useful about TheyWorkForYou Alerts?' *mySociety Blog* 25th October 2021

representing the 'voice' of parties, such as *Conservative Home* or *Labour List*, analysed rebellions and votes and reported speeches.

- **NGOs** often drew on data, whether as a 'single issue' groups using it as part of a campaign or wider organisations for reform using it to push agendas.
- **Innovators** played a role in developing new apps, with analytics sites like DataLobo exploring in detail MPs' additional income or hospitality and gifts, broken down by party or gender.
- **Public Affairs groups or monitoring companies such as Dods** offered a detailed analysis of Parliament and MPs for a variety of businesses or NGOs.
- **Academics** conducted detailed analyses of particular events or issues, using data to examine and explore
 - *which MPs blocked Brexit* in the major votes in the House of Commons, finding it was the DUP and ERG who were pivotal.
 - *how political donations link to obtaining a place in the House of Lords*, concluding that giving a major donation and being appointed to the Lords could be a coincidence, but one roughly equal to 'winning the lottery five times in a row'.
 - *the impact of MPs' second jobs on their work in the House of Commons*, finding MPs with second jobs worked harder in the Commons but focused on specific areas²³.

Two other groups stood out as important. **Citizens**, for whom the tools are designed and intended, made up a small part of those directly monitoring. Data from TWFY and across mySociety indicates that citizen users are often the 'usual suspects' who are already engaged in politics; politically knowledgeable, male, with higher than average levels of education and income - though users with a disability are overrepresented²⁴.

Nevertheless, there was a flow of wider public use from those who don't fit the 'usual suspects' profile. A majority of FOI requesters to IPSA and Parliament are members of the public. TWFY found a proportion of users came across the site for the first time or accidentally and were relatively unengaged before²⁵. Taking out the 50% who use the site regularly, previously unengaged users could number 15,000 a month.

²³ See Russell, M. (2019). 'Which MPs are responsible for failing to 'get Brexit done'? *UK In A Changing Europe Blog* 02 Oct 2019 and Radford, S., Mell, A., & Thevoz, S. A. (2020). 'Lordy Me! Can donations buy you a British peerage? A study in the link between party political funding and peerage nominations, 2005–2014. *British Politics*, 15(2), 135-159.

²⁴ See Escher, T. (2011). *Analysis of users and usage for TheyWorkForYou.com*; London: mySociety. Cantijoch, Marta, Silvia Galandini, and Rachel Gibson. 2016. 'It's Not About Me, It's About My Community': A Mixed-Method Study of Civic Websites and Community Efficacy. *New Media & Society* 18 (9): 1896-1915

²⁵ Escher, T. (2011). *Analysis of users and usage for TheyWorkForYou. Com*. London: mySociety

MPs themselves and their staff represent an important internal user, in terms of their prestige and influence. TWFY cite 2% of all users as coming within the Parliamentary estate. Their use of data seemed to be a mixture of research on others, self-defence of their own records, and championing their reputation. Labour MP Madeline Moon used the data to defend her work:



TheyWorkForYou says that I have above-average commitments in terms of debates, I ask above-average numbers of questions and I have an above-average response to my electorate when I have letters, although I admit that it also indicates that my 'voting record' is lower than some...I am deeply concerned that I am being challenged on my commitment to democracy, and to Brexit in particular, and that that is how we define a Member of Parliament's commitment to this democratic institution (HC Deb, 26 September 2019, c958).

MPs regularly used data as part of their representation to constituents, citing it in speeches in Parliament but also in newsletters, tweets, gifs, or screenshots. Data were used as both a means of attack (on others) and defence or celebration (of their own actions).

How is data being used?

Patterns and motives

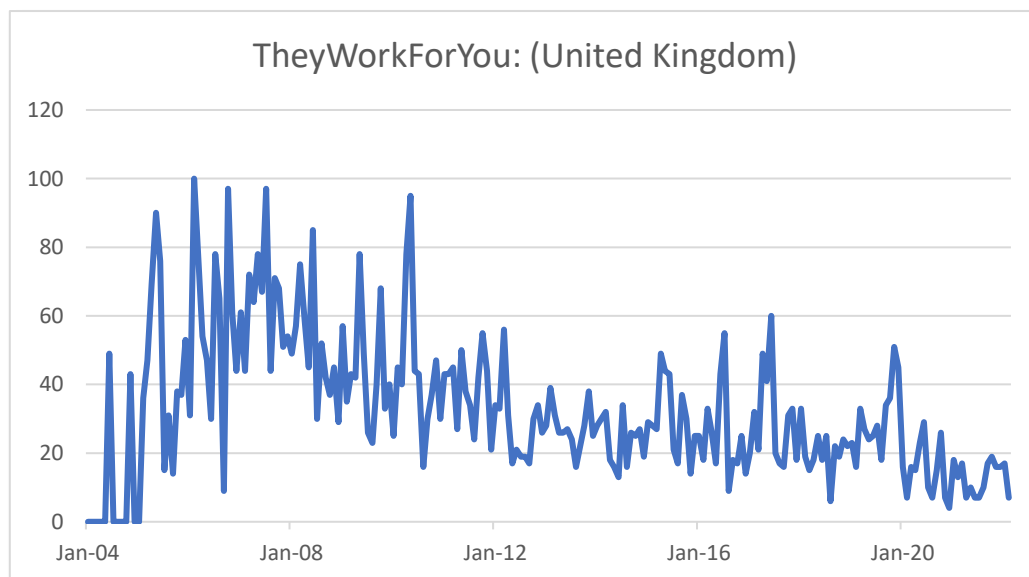
Broad pattern of use

There are clear political rhythms and cycles of data use. While some monitoring is built around structured events, others bubble up locally. Major drivers include

- Political **events** such as General Elections or Brexit, which created several surges of interest between 2017 and 2020.
- **Controversy** such as the MPs' expenses scandal.
- **Regular publication** of data, with IPSA's or Parliament's publication of expenses or allowances leading to reporting from national and regional angles (IPSA)
- At the lower level, interest in data platforms could build **around local media stories** or social media posts.

A *Google Trends* search using the phrase 'TheyWorkForYou' between January 2004 (the year TWFY began) until March 2022 found major spikes are around General Elections (2005, 2010, 2015, 2017, 2019), the MPs' expenses scandal of May 2009 and the various Brexit votes between 2016 and 2019. These patterns are similar, for example, to Wikipedia viewings of MPs.²⁶

Fig 1. TWFY Google Trends



²⁶ See Agarwal, P., Redi, M., Sastry, N., Wood, E., & Blick, A. (2020). Wikipedia and Westminster: Quality and dynamics of Wikipedia pages about UK politicians. In *Proceedings of the 31st ACM Conference on Hypertext and Social Media* (pp. 161-166).

Within these broad patterns, the focus is on

- The House of Commons rather than the House of Lords.
- Within the Commons, votes, voting data and 'position taking', with expenses and interests of some, but lesser, interest.
- Certain high-profile members (such as party leaders or Cabinet members) and controversial figures, especially in the Commons.
- In the House of Lords, appointments, activity, and allowances are sometimes tied together (see case study below). Some particular types of Peers are of interest, such as controversial members or groups such as Bishops or Hereditary Peers, and the institution as a whole was monitored for its representativeness across various metrics.

Use patterns were structured by data themselves - FOI requests allowed 'micro-targeting' of specific questions, whereas data from platforms allowed either focused monitoring or deeper comparison and analysis.

Micro-level patterns

Underneath the broad trends, there is a more a constant 'bubbling away' of data around expenses, Register of Interests or lobbying, which takes place at the national level, as well as at the regional or local level in newspapers and on social media.

Information searching is most often **focused and localised**. Analysis in 2011 and 2022 showed how TWFY hits had a high bounce rate on particular MPs' pages, indicating that searches were focused on individual MPs²⁷. Reporting of votes in the national and regional press often included 'postcode lookups' so readers could look up the position of their local MP.

However, analysis could expand to cover **groups**, such as rebels or party factions. It was sometimes driven by **issues** rather than individuals, with the starting point being the topic rather than the member, with data framed by questions around Climate Change or Brexit.

Living Lab Insights: How do users search?

During the project, we conducted two small 'living labs' designed to replicate, as closely as possible, the realities of an internet search. Using a group of 13 then 4 students, we allowed them to search in an open, unstructured way for data on MPs and Peers and feedback their findings.

The searches revealed a number of patterns:

- Searchers often began by looking for their own MP, using the postcode function.
- There was an attempt to look for 'local' angles or perspectives on national issues.
- Searchers looked for issues of interest to them to measure their own MPs position against their own.
- Most often, data 'confirmed' what searchers already believed of their own MPs' and their positions.
- Users found that some missing data was key, especially data on discipline and whipping instructions.

²⁷ See Escher, T. (2011). *Analysis of users and usage for TheyWorkForYou. Com*. London: mySociety and a search by the authors using Alexa Trends in February 2022.

To make sense of how the search and reporting patterns unfolded in the 'everyday', a snapshot was taken of media and social reporting in a month between the 20th November- 18th December 2020.

Everyday Use: 20th November- 18th December 2020

To gather a sense of how data fed into new stories and social media, we examined mentions in a Google news search and Twitter search between 20th November- 18th December 2020. Stories in the press covered a series of data-driven issues:

- resistance by MPs to a possible pay rise proposed by IPSA,
- accusations of the Prime Minister missing a vote,
- analysis of one MP's expenses claims on their accommodation
- analysis of one MP's expenses claims for face masks,
- a list of the expenses of MPs who voted against extending free school meals,
- an academic analysis of whether MPs' communication allowance made a difference to their re-election chances.

This was mirrored on social media in the same period, with 3,400 tweets that highlighted MPs' pay rises and votes. Some of the most popular Tweets included:

@jessphillips I'd like more questions asked about MPs expenses, pay increases, office costs & employing relatives. Are you turning down your £3k salary increase Jess?

Our money not the government's & they should held accountable for wasting our money. Too many MP's give favours to acquaintances, friends or where their investments are. How many backhanders? Remember the MPs expenses scandal. We need stricter law & jail time for all the culprits

Revealed: The new chief executive of the MPs' expenses watchdog has started on a £140,000-£145,000 salary. That's a 40% increase for the job's taxpayer-funded pay packet in six years <https://t.co/p6nljLZPB>

Lord Dodds claimed over £211k in MPs expenses in the 2018-2019 financial year. That's a serious amount of public money. Is he claiming this much as a member of the house of Lords? This is where your taxes are going. Are u happy? <https://t.co/WkdjYmtSNN>

*Chancellor Rishi Sunak has consistently voted against measures to promote equality and human rights...This is the man who is expected to help 'level up' the UK!
#DontHoldYourBreath #Marr #Ridge*

However, beyond this, data are used in a range of ways:

- **to anticipate** how a member could behave in the future.
- **Retrospectively** to see how they did behave.
- **Connectively** to put data together and make inferences.
- **As a Shortcut** to understand the ideology or outlook of an MP.
- As a basis for **experiments** and **innovations**.

The diverse patterns of use can be seen in an analysis of FOI requests to IPSA, the Independent Parliamentary Standards Authority that is charged with overseeing MPs expenses and salaries. Even within a contained set of data, the framing and focus of questions varied in numerous ways.

Table 4: the focus of FOI requests to IPSA²⁸

Focus of requests	Number of Requests
All MPs	76
Single MP	86
Political group	11
Political party	4
IPSA	46
Total	223

There was a variety of topics covered, moving from the micro to the macro:

- 'Broad brush' **fishing expeditions** looking at payments on the loss of office, travel, or credit card debts, often addressed to all MPs or certain groups (such as parties or regions).
- **Regular/repeat requests** on certain issues, such as MPs claiming TV licences or air travel.
- Requests focused on **certain pieces of information** such as particular invoices or equipment used, often by a named MP.
- Questions extend into some '**private**' areas, such as MPs' security, their staff and 'connected parties'/family. Requests sometimes delved into private financial issues of members, asking about the detachment of earning orders, payment of Scottish income tax, payroll charity payments and MPs who own properties as landlords.
- Questions around the **pay** and **gender** of staff working for MPs.
- **IPSA** itself was the target of some requests on salaries but also on its operations and processes.

Reporting in the press included details of MPs claiming for TV licences, MPs choosing to donate to charity and lists of the highest and lowest expenses claims of Northern Irish MPs²⁹. There were also more detailed investigations around which MPs were private landlords³⁰.

Clusters of Interest

These tools and sources create an ecology of transparency, with various interlocking and interacting parts. This ecology creates a continuous surveillance pressure which is:

- *expansive*, in that it moves into new areas and opens up the previously hidden or obscured 'backstage' of politics;
- *intertwined*, as part of an ecosystem that feeds off itself with a series of feedback effects;
- *diverse* in terms of use, users, and effects.

Rather than a broad external pressure, the use of data 'clustered' around certain topics, where diverse users gathered around certain tools or data releases³¹. These 'data public' clusters were different in size and make-up. The largest cluster was voting-related, followed by

²⁸ Taken from a sample of 300 FOI requests on the IPSA site <https://www.theipsa.org.uk/freedom-of-information/responses>

²⁹ Independent (2019) 'All these MPs claim for a TV licence – but many people who need it can't' June 24, 2019; Mirror (2015) 'Just TEN miserly MPs sign up to give massive pay rise to charity schemes', 10 Oct 2015; Belfast Live (2019) 'DUP's Jim Shannon Westminster expenses highest in UK: Sinn Fein's Órfhlaith Begley were lowest, 9 May 2019.

³⁰ See Open Democracy (2021) 'A quarter of Tory MPs are private landlords', 22 July 2021.

³¹ For more on 'data publics' see Gillespie, T. (2014). The relevance of algorithms. *Media technologies: Essays on communication, materiality, and society*, 167 (2014), 167; Gray, J. (2018). Three aspects of data worlds. *Krisis: Journal for Contemporary Philosophy*, (1), 5-17.

expenses/allowances and then interests. It is notable that the hierarchy was created by interest and the quality and availability of data: voting and expenses data were easier to access and analyse than lobbying.

Table 5: Monitory Clusters by Data Topic

Issue/event	Data source	Users	Examples of use
Voting	Data from Parliament or TWFY, asking MPs how they will vote.	National, regional, and local press, NGOs, local associations, constituents, political opponents.	Postcode 'look up' or 'find out how your MP voted on', anticipatory stories of 'how will MP vote', links to record.
Expenses	IPSA data for MPs, Parliament data for Lords.	National press, local and regional, constituents.	List of largest national/regional claimers, focus on certain items.
Lobbying	FOI requests on meetings, Register of Interests, donations data, APPG links, exposes, or stings.	National press, local and regional, constituents, CSOs.	Links between voting and interests, links to business and areas.

There exist several grey areas and gaps, illustrating some of the paradoxes and trade-offs involved. The differences can be seen between voting data and lobbying, which are explored below as case studies.

Voting Data: Democracy in Action?

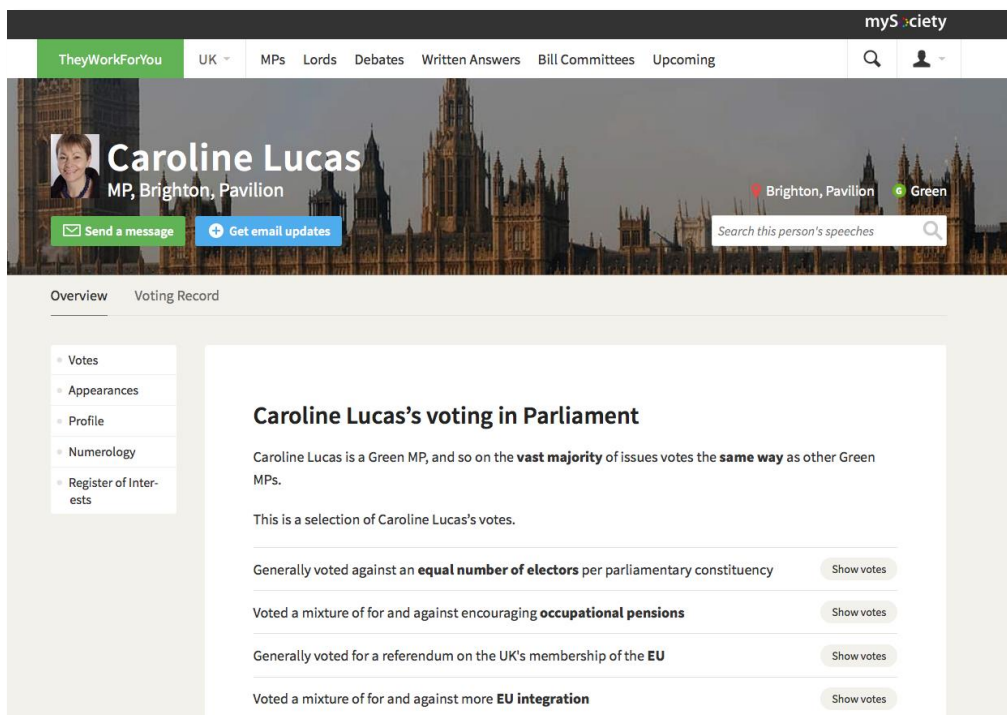
TheyWorkForYou (TWFY) is the main site for voting data, alongside Public Whip or Parallel Parliament. Created by volunteers in 2004 and run by mySociety since 2005, it averages around 200,000 to 300,000 monthly visits, though this jumps amid elections or scandals.

For each MP, it offers up, as the website describes, 'a summary of their stances on important policy areas such as combating climate change or reforming the NHS', using phrases such as '*generally voted for*', '*always voted against*', and '*never voted for*'.

Driven by a simple 'democratic vision', the platform's main purpose is to provide 'neutral, non-partisan information about the actions, words, and votes of MPs in a way that is understandable for everyone'³². While user-friendly, TWFY is intended to create 'friction' and a continuous archive of 'information that sticks' and is 'permanent...so these static pages ...influence what politicians do'.³³

³² Baack, S. (2018). Practically engaged: The entanglements between data journalism and civic tech. *Digital Journalism*, 6 (6), 673-692; Korthagen, I., & Dorst, H. (2020). Parliamentary Monitoring. In *European E-Democracy in Practice* (pp. 151-162). Springer, Cham, 152); Edwards, A., de Kool, D., & Van Ooijen, C. (2015). The information ecology of parliamentary monitoring websites: Pathways towards strengthening democracy. *Information Polity*, 20 (4), 253-268.

³³ See Baack 2018, 50; Hogge, B. (2016). *United Kingdom's TheyWorkForYou: Taking the Long View* <https://odimpact.org/case-united-kingdoms-theyworkforyou.html>



(Image from Hogget 2016)

Analysis of TheyWorkForYou.com in 2011 found users to be a mixture of the engaged public, private companies, NGOs, and the media, with most users already interested in politics³⁴. TWFY found that 30% of users were watching or fact-checking their own representative, and bounce rates indicated many searches were looking for particular facts about particular members. Our analysis of TWFY data showed that use was skewed towards certain MPs, particularly party leaders, as well as high profile or controversial members.

The main influence of lies TWFY in its power as a heuristic or shortcut. It is deployed *heuristically* to understand MPs' voting positions, or *inferentially*, around the influence of lobbying or donations. It is also used to *reveal* something about MPs who have come to prominence or even to see where MPs stand on certain topics in the future. Beyond this, data are used in a whole range of ways:

- To **predict and anticipate rebellions**, with rolling rebel lists identifying unhappy MPs, such as before the COVID-19 vote of December 2021³⁵.
- To look into **motive**: After the controversial Owen Paterson standards' vote, data was quickly found on how many of those supporting Paterson were themselves under investigation³⁶.
- To inform us about **where** they voted, as well as how. In the Summer of 2021, 12 MPs, including the Conservative Chief Whip, voted by proxy from the England vs Denmark game at Euro 2020³⁷.
- To push along **institutional change**. In 2013, the Sun used voting record data to create a list of the country's 'laziest MPs' featuring Lucy Powell, who quickly pointed out that she was on maternity leave. Not only was the article withdrawn and an apology made, but

³⁴ Escher, T. (2011). Analysis of users and usage for TheyWorkForYou. Com. London: mySociety.

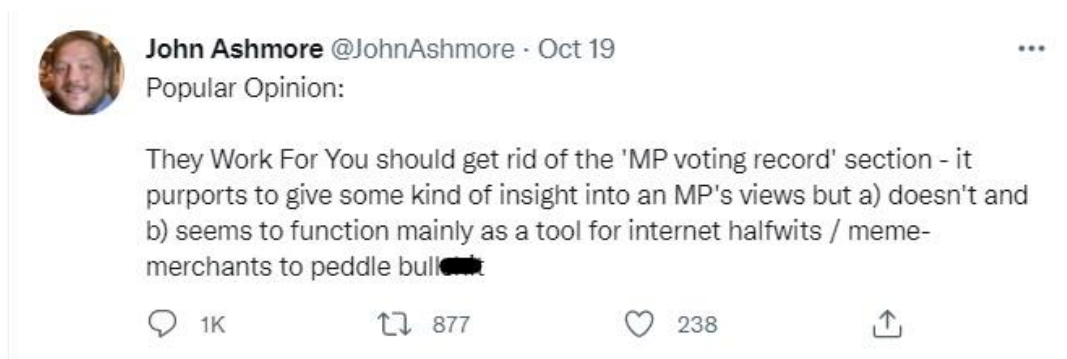
³⁵ Spectator Coffee House (2021) 'Who said they would vote against vaccine passports?' 13 December 2021

³⁶ Adam Bychawski (2021) 'Quarter of MPs calling to replace sleaze watchdog have been punished by it' *Open Democracy* 3 November 2021

³⁷ Politics Home (2021) 'UK MPs voted by proxy while attending Euro 2020 matches', November 17, 2021

the controversy helped the push for MPs on parental leave to be allowed to vote by proxy, which was instituted in 2019³⁸.

However, MPs have complained about the site. A tweet by [John Ashmore](#) summarised, perhaps rather too pithily, the two reasons for their unhappiness or concern:



(Image from @johnAshmore Oct 2019)

The first worry is that the voting data offers a distorted view, and it does not discriminate, for example, between certain types of votes and over-simplifies complex realities. This means, as Stephen Bush³⁹ recently explained, Green MP Caroline Lucas appears to have 'voted a mixture of for and against greater regulation of hydraulic fracturing (fracking) to extract shale gas' because she opposed, and voted against, legislation she considered too weak.

Some controversial votes, such as the Free School Meals vote, only make sense in the light of the fact it was an Opposition Day vote. Opposition Day debates can be used to call for votes on issues where voting a certain way would reflect badly on government MPs, and be potentially later used against them, such as over the extension of Free School Meals in 2020. This led one Conservative MP to complain that 'Opposition days should be a chance to have a healthy debate, not an exercise in generating fake news and misrepresenting parliamentary votes by the likes of The London Economic or TheyWorkForYou'⁴⁰.

MPs' unhappiness with voting data has gone public. Thirty Conservative MPs published an open letter to the Guardian in 2019 complaining about being misrepresented on their climate change records. A full 50 complained in a letter to the Chief Executive of mySociety in 2021 that 'misleading' data 'misrepresented' their positions on climate change⁴¹.

³⁸ See BBC (2013) 'MP Lucy Powell responds to 'lazy MP' Sun newspaper list', 14 December 2013

³⁹ Bush, S (2021) 'TheyWorkForYou is bad – but a world without it would be worse', *New Statesman* 21 Oct 2021

⁴⁰ See (Citation: HC Deb, 18 January 2021, c716).

⁴¹ Guardian (2019) 'We are proud of the Conservative record on climate action', 17 Oct 2019.

Cridge, M (2021) 'A response to Robert Langan', MP [A response to Robert Langan, MP / mySociety](#)



ROBERT LARGAN MP

Member of Parliament for High Peak

18 Market Street, Whaley Bridge, High Peak, SK23 7LP
Tel: 01663 769779 Email: mail@robertlargan.co.uk



Mark Cridge
Chief Executive
mySociety
483 Green Lanes
London
N13 4BS

18 January 2021

Dear Mark,

We are writing to ask that you correct the misrepresentation of our voting records on the website *TheyWorkForYou*, administered by *mySociety*.

Currently, many MPs' profiles on the website contain the misleading statement that they have "consistently voted against measures to **prevent climate change**". The claim is based on just two votes in Parliament. One on an Opposition Day Debate motion and another on an amendment to the UK Internal Market Bill. This is just a fraction of the votes we have made regarding climate change over the past year since being elected.

At the beginning of the parliamentary session, we voted in favour of the Queen's Speech which contained commitments to meet the target of net zero greenhouse gas emissions by 2050, host the COP26 Summit, and bring forward an Environment Bill to enshrine in law environmental principles and legally-binding targets as well as a world-leading independent regulator.

We have voted in favour of the Agriculture Bill, which establishes a new system of providing public money for farmers and land managers who produce public goods such as tackling climate change. We also voted for the Pension Schemes Bill, which mandates pension schemes to adopt and report against recommendations of the Task Force on Climate-related Financial Disclosures.

To more accurately reflect MPs' voting records, we would be most grateful if you could also include these votes in your voting summaries.

We are absolutely committed to tackling climate change and fulfilling our legal commitment to reach net zero. This ought to be reflected in the summary of our voting record.

Yours sincerely,

Robert Largan MP
Member of Parliament for High Peak

Co-Signed by:

Sir David Amess MP
Gareth Bacon MP
Duncan Baker MP
Steve Baker MP

Web: robertlargan.co.uk Facebook: [fb.com/RobertLargan4HighPeak](https://www.facebook.com/RobertLargan4HighPeak) Twitter: [@robertlargan](https://twitter.com/robertlargan)

It is not just what the data shows; it is what it does not show or is missing. As journalist Marie Le Conte put it, 'sharing screenshots of an MP's voting history misses out vital pieces of context'⁴². While TWFY is careful to explain the context of the data and asks those using it to tweet with care, this does not always happen. TWFY, for example, contains no data on whipping instructions, and an opinion poll in 2022 indicated that this shapes misperceptions when 55% of those asked felt MPs were personally responsible for their vote⁴³. Any data are subject to political and partisan bias and filters. Two different newspapers used Labour leader Jeremy Corbyn's voting record to show he was more anti-Europe than Thatcher or always on the right side of history⁴⁴.

⁴² Le Conte, M (2019) 'Sharing screenshots of an MP's voting history misses out vital pieces of context' *GQ*, 10 June 2019 <https://www.gq-magazine.co.uk/article/theyworkforyou>

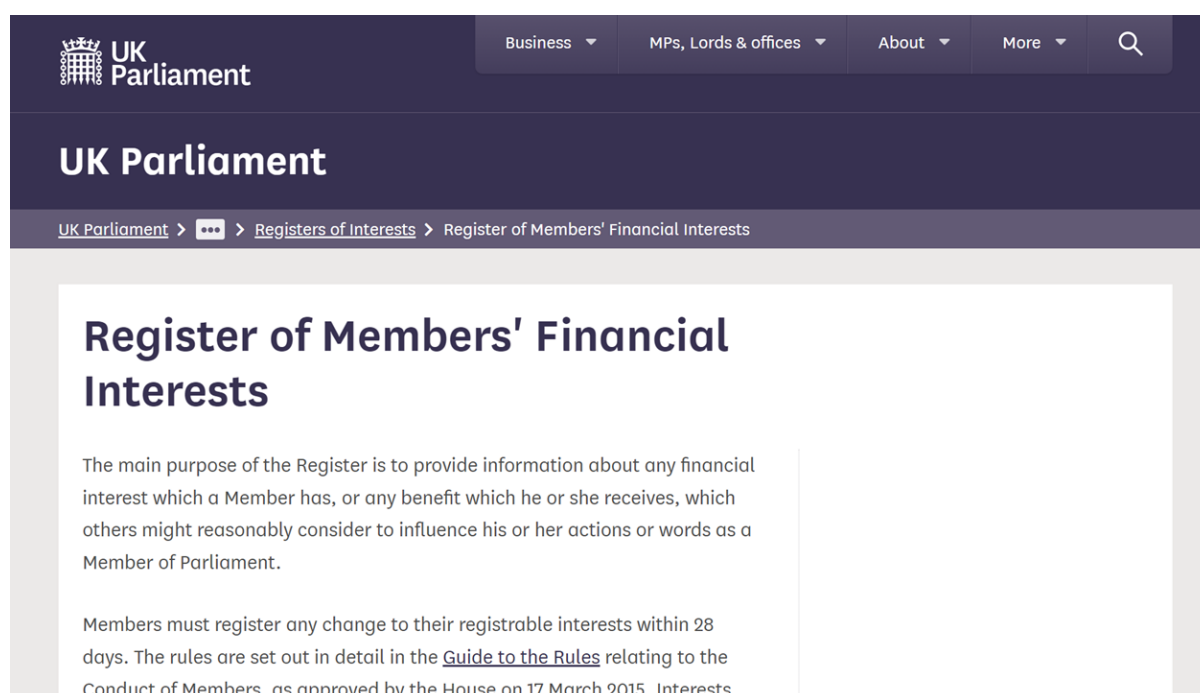
⁴³ Parsons, A (2022) 'Party voting instructions should be public' <https://www.mysociety.org/2022/01/21/the-voting-instructions-parties-give-their-mps-should-be-public/>

⁴⁴ Daily Mail (2019) 'Margaret Thatcher would be proud of Jeremy Corbyn... if his EU voting record is anything to go by', 24 September 2019; Guardian (2016) 'Jeremy Corbyn has been on the right side of history for 30 years. That's real leadership', 16 September 2016.

Moreover, the data only highlights some areas, such as voting or expenses. It could be argued that it even over-measures these, creating too much emphasis on 'cliff-hanger' votes or MPs' spending, leaving vital activities such as constituency work hidden in a data-less darkness.

Registers of Financial Interests: Democratic Darkness?

By contrast with voting, data on lobbying in the UK Parliament is opaque and fragmented. Westminster sits outside the formal lobbying regulation regime and is only illuminated by scandals or exposes⁴⁵. Many of the high-profile revelations come via undercover exposure by the media or indirectly by making FOI requests for meetings or room bookings. One common route is by carefully following the money and connections through disclosures on Registers of Interests.



(Image from Parliamentary Registers of Interests webpage)

As Peter Geoghegan put it, what data exists on MPs' interests has been 'hiding in plain sight' for many years with successive calls for better data and more detail⁴⁶. There have been interests stories based on data since Registers were created in the 1990s. Regular users include investigative journalists, lobbying and transparency campaigners, as well as for analytic sites. Interestingly, local and regional press draw on the data. Attention has often clustered around scandals, but there is a regular 'bubbling away' at the national and local level, which can spike when data are released (see box below).

Recent stories based on register data include MPs links to fossil fuel interests, MPs employing family members⁴⁷ or MPs earnings from their second incomes during the pandemic.⁴⁸ Data Lobo also

⁴⁵ See McKay, A. M., & Wozniak, A. (2020). Opaque: an empirical evaluation of lobbying transparency in the UK. *Interest Groups & Advocacy*, 9(1), 102-118.

⁴⁶ Guardian (2021) 'Why are so many Tory MPs able to get filthy rich? Because we let them', 11 Nov 2021

⁴⁷ Guardian (2019) 'Tories received £1.3m from fossil fuel interests and climate sceptics since 2019', *Guardian* 25 Oct 2021; Independent (2021) '1 in 8 MPs use loophole to employ close family members with taxpayer money after 2017 rule change', November 11, 2021

⁴⁸ Martin Williams (2021) 'Open Democracy MPs net £6m from second jobs since pandemic began' *Open Democracy* 5 November 2021

conducted a detailed analysis of MPs outside interests between June 2017 and October 2019, while Sophie Hill used data to establish links between donors and politicians.⁴⁹

Lobbying and Interest Stories

17/01/2022-17/02/2022

- Guardian (2022) 'Former Tory minister criticised for lobbying role on Covid contract', 24 Jan 2022
- Independent (2022) 'Tory MP Andrew Bridgen under investigation over alleged paid lobbying', 12 Feb 2022
- Huffington Post (2022) 'Ian Hislop Tears Into MPs Over Sleaze, Second Jobs And Lobbying', 25 Jan 2022
- Guardian (2022) 'Lobbying fears as MPs' interest groups receive £13m from private firms', 17 Feb 2022
- London Economic (2022) 'Murky: Tory MP under investigation over alleged paid lobbying', 12 Feb 2022
- My London (2022) 'London MP who got free trips boasted about lobbying government for 'good friends' in Azerbaijan', 11 Feb 2022
- Sky News (2022) 'MP's WhatsApp messages to Matt Hancock reveal extent of lobbying', 5 February 2022
- Independent (2022) 'Boris Johnson could still face probe into lobbying allegations over Downing Street flat', 21 Jan 2022

The Register has led to some transparency and accountability. Between 2010 and 2021, at least 10 MPs were made to apologise for failures to declare interests⁵⁰. Research conducted on a similar Register of Interests in the Republic of Ireland suggests that potential conflict of interest disclosure can reduce people's perceptions of corruption of MPs.⁵¹

The existence of reporting requirements could deter certain behaviour. As one journalist pointed out, the requirement to record data on family employees engaged in lobbying may do exactly this-and; the lack of use is a sign of its preventive effect. He suggested that "if you were to scrap it, you might see a resurgence of people whose partners or children are in lobbying"⁵². In the wake of the Paterson vote of October 2021, there was also some positive action. At least one MP self-reported undeclared interests, two admitted possible breaches, and three dropped their second jobs.

Nevertheless, Reporting of data can have a distorting effect on perceptions. In 2022, investigative journalists pointed out to the Standards Committee that the number of MPs with large scale earnings from second jobs or potential conflicts of interests is relatively small⁵³. However, the exposure and uncertainty ignite suspicion rather than reassurance. As journalist Ian Hislop put it "the public perception is: ""Is this the tip of the iceberg?"".

⁴⁹ See Data Lobo '[MPs additional income – Lobo' datalobo.com](https://www.datalobo.com) and <https://www.sophie-e-hill.com/slides/my-little-crony/>

⁵⁰ See House of Commons Library (2021) *Apologies by MPs to the House of Commons since 1979* Research Briefing, 23 July 2021

⁵¹ See Forthcoming Crepez and Arikan (2022) 'The Effects of Political Transparency on Political Trust and Perceived Corruption: Evidence from a Survey Experiment' (Crepez Michele, QUB and Gizem Arikan, TCD)

⁵² House of Commons Standards Committee (2022) Formal meeting (oral evidence session): *Code of Conduct consultation*, Wednesday 26 January 2022

⁵³ See National World (2021) 'MPs have received almost £10m from second jobs and other work outside of Parliament during the Covid pandemic' 8th November 2021

The danger is that the poor quality of data, and semi-transparency it creates, leads to exposés and scandals that reinforce the poor opinions of politicians as a group. As past scandals showed, partial data can feed greater uncertainty and suspicion, worsening rather than clearing up controversy⁵⁴. In the wake of the Paterson vote, when Conservative MPs voted to undo the regulatory system rather than punish an MP who had broken the Code of Conduct, perceptions of corruption increased. As importantly, 71% of the public polled felt MPs' 'make' decisions to a large extent/to some extent to benefit their own financial interests⁵⁵. This is despite the fact that public attitudes can be nuanced⁵⁶. The continual revelations, pieced together by investigation or revelation, have a reinforcing effect and acts to reinforce pre-existing perceptions and views of politicians and lobbying.

The public are also aware of what is not known or hidden. In 2021 a survey found that "two-thirds (67%) of UK adults feel the public should know more about lobbyists seeking to influence MPs and Ministers new CIPR research can reveal...Only 15% believe the public currently has enough information about who is lobbying". Taken together, this builds a particularly negative view of lobbying and what its influence on democracy is.

⁵⁴ See Harvey, P., Reeves, M., & Ruppert, E. (2013). Anticipating failure: Transparency devices and their effects. *Journal of Cultural Economy*, 6(3), 294-312.

⁵⁵ YouGov (2021) 'Second jobs and sleaze: what do Britons make of a murky week in Westminster?' 12 November 2021

⁵⁶ Campbell, R., & Cowley, P. (2015). Attitudes to moonlighting politicians: Evidence from the United Kingdom. *Journal of Experimental Political Science*, 2(1), 63-72.

What impact is monitoring having on Parliament?

Tracing the impact between data and how MPs and Peers behave is complex. Monitoring should improve behaviour by catching out misbehaving members and convincing others to alter what they do. However, being watched could simply make the poorly behaved better at hiding.

The same uncertainty matches, for example, the contradictory effects of publicity in the 19th Century or televising parliament 1980s and 1990s. The regular publication of Hansard after 1832 meant some members became more verbose, while the creation of two lobbies led to MPs avoiding votes or celebrating their voting records to show their loyalty to their electoral promises⁵⁷.

A series of experiments reached different conclusions in different countries and systems.

- Televising voting in Switzerland led to more party loyalty and **less deviation** from the party line by members.
- Research across eight different Latin American legislatures found online voting data led to **greater deviation** from party lines and more individualised, constituent focused voting activity.
- Using MEP data before and after VoteEUWatch was created, one EU study found a higher **attendance rate** and **more parliamentary questions, motions, and speeches by members** when data were published.
- Making US legislators aware of fact-checking made them "less likely to make inaccurate statements"⁵⁸.

One crucial difference appears to be around the anticipated audience and the extent to which legislators feel they are being watched and by whom. Legislators may also be subject to a "spotlight effect" and tendency to "overestimate how salient" what they do is "to others"⁵⁹.

The Impact on MPs and Peers

MPs and Peers have explicitly mentioned TWFY on 44 occasions in Hansard, highlighting its existence, complaining at misrepresentation, or using the data themselves between 2004 and 2021.

⁵⁷ See Rix, K. (2014). 'Whatever Passed in Parliament Ought to be Communicated to the Public': Reporting the Proceedings of the Reformed Commons, 1833–50. *Parliamentary History*, 33(3); Franklin, B. (1992). *Televising democracies*. London: Routledge.

⁵⁸ Benesch, C., Büttler, M., & Hofer, K. E. (2018). Transparency in parliamentary voting. *Journal of Public Economics*, 163, 60-76; Hix, S & Hagemann, S., Fratescu D. (2012) *Effects of Transparency on Behaviour in the European Parliament*. Political Science and Political Economy Working Paper Department of Government London School of Economics and Nyhan, B., & Reifler, J. (2015). The effect of fact-checking on elites: A field experiment on US state legislators. *American Journal of Political Science*, 59(3), 628-640.

⁵⁹ See Gilovich, T., & Savitsky, K. (1999). The spotlight effect and the illusion of transparency: Egocentric assessments of how we are seen by others. *Current Directions in Psychological Science*, 8(6), 165-168.

Used or Abused? MPs and Peers Mentions of TWFY in Hansard



We have all been on the receiving end of communications from constituents that misrepresent the facts, derived from the far from perfect reporting of our voting records on websites such as TheyWorkForYou. (Sarah Newton Conservative, Truro and Falmouth HC Deb, 5 November 2019, c722).

According to that invaluable website TheyWorkForYou, the Prime Minister has assured the House on no fewer than 74 previous occasions that we will be leaving the EU on 29 March. Will she categorically confirm today that there is absolutely no question at all of delaying that date? (Julian Lewis Chair, Defence Committee, Chair, Defence Committee HC Deb, 9 January 2019, c363)

As a former chair of the Parliamentary Labour Party, and indeed in this House, she has a reputation as a loyalist without ever allowing it to be of Foulkesian proportions. The internet site TheyWorkForYou.com puts her in the ""Never rebels against their party"" column. I hope we can entice her into a little rebelliousness in the year ahead. (Lord McNally HL Deb, 6 November 2007, c12)

The hon. Member for Glasgow North East has been reviewing his statistics as he finishes his first full year. As someone who used to do that, can I warn him that the tyranny of TheyWorkForYou.com can be an unpredictable guide to future activity? (Paul Maynard HC Deb, 20 December 2018, c405WH).

I took a moment yesterday evening to visit the estimable website TheyWorkForYou and carry out a search for my own speeches, which I think may be one of the main functions of the website. I suggest that they change the name to ""I Work for You"". I searched my own speeches to see how many times over the course of this Parliament I had used the words ""pub companies"" or ""pubs"" in speeches, questions, and other parliamentary interventions. I discovered 39 different occasions in which I had raised the subject of pub companies and 62 separate debates or questions in which I had raised the issue of pubs (Toby Perkins Small Business, Enterprise and Employment Bill Deb, 28 October 2014, c291).

Unusually, I do not have to qualify which speech, because he has made only one in the past year according to his www.theyworkforyou.com entry (Greg Hands Finance Bill Deb, 19 May 2009, c64)

It appears Peers and MPs feel they are "being watched" and behave accordingly, albeit to very different degrees. It has led to greater accountability and "humility", although at the lower end of the accountability spectrum. It has most frequently led to explanation and apologies from MPs, with fewer cases of sanctioning or action.

Accountability

Monitoring and watching MPs does make them more accountable. MPs share explanations and justifications in Hansard, on Twitter or in the local press. In 2021, for example, Conservative MPs who voted against the government's COVID-19 lockdown measures and tier system took to Twitter to explain their decisions – making memes themselves both before and after key votes.



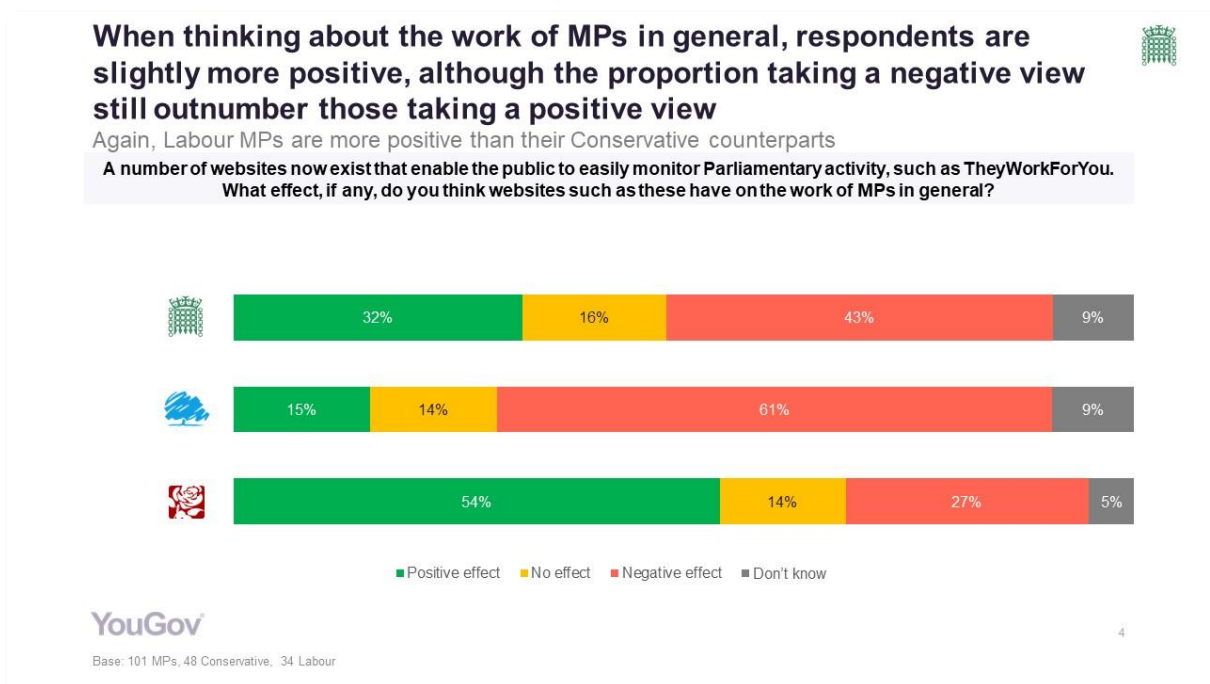
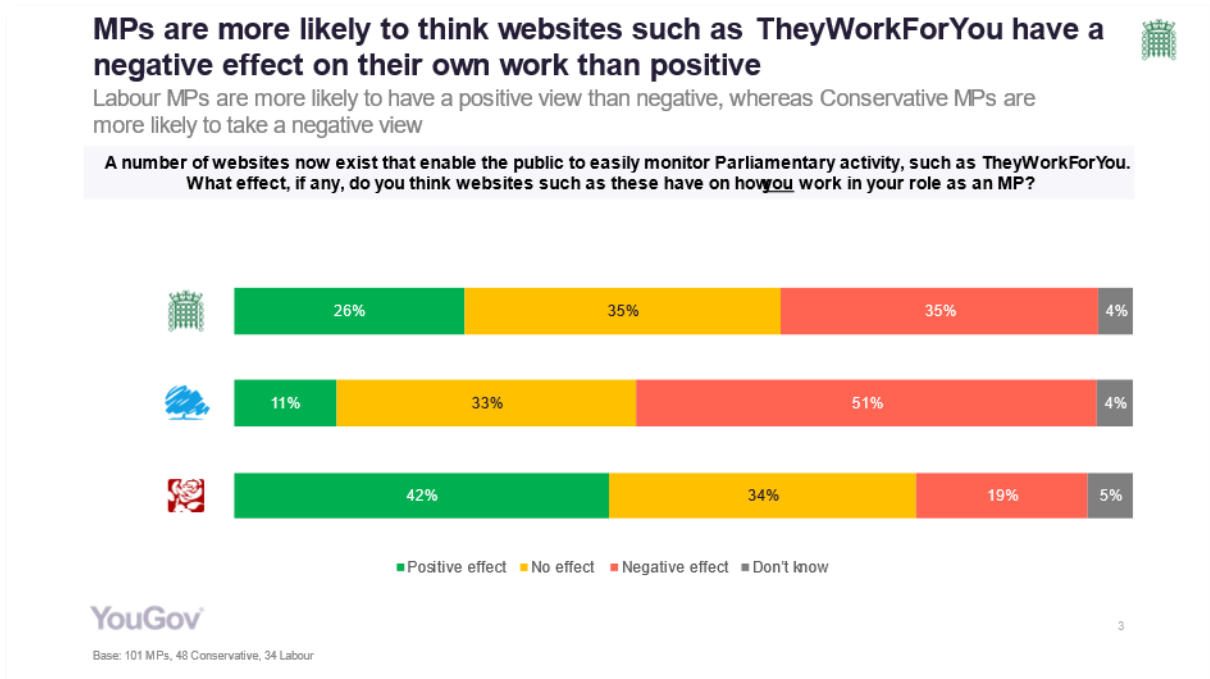
(Image from @ABridgen June 2017)

Members' explanations were usually retrospective, but there were signs of a growing anticipatory pressure, as MPs explain how and why they will vote in advance through the local press and social media, as seen with Brexit or Covid restrictions in 2020 and 2021. Some votes have symbolic resonance long afterwards, as seen with the Iraq war vote, where MPs' positions were re-examined in 2016 with the publication of the Chilcott report or same-sex marriage reform, where some MPs later apologised for how they voted⁶⁰.

⁶⁰ See Metro (2016) 'Chilcot Report: Did my MP vote FOR or AGAINST the Iraq War?' 6 Jul 2016; Pink News (2021) 'Former MP apologises for voting against same-sex marriage: 'I am sorry that I got it so wrong'' 6 July 2021

The YouGov poll and Hansard found that Peers and MPs do feel they are 'being watched', albeit to different degrees. One MP described how data from monitory sites 'keep MPs on their toes and accountable'. However, there were differences between government MPs and opposition MPs, reflecting a 'cost of governing' whereby voting data was often targeted at those in power. There were also some more subtle skews around gender.

Figure 2: Results of the YouGov survey of 101 MPs on Monitory sites⁶¹



⁶¹ YouGov (2021) Birkbeck, University of London MPs poll – February 2021

Beyond voting, the MPs' expenses scandal forced explanations from MPs, with 19% of all MPs explaining their personal actions on blogs and elsewhere. Members regularly explained their stances on proposed pay rises for Members in 2020 and MPs' second jobs in 2021⁶².

The UK Parliament has relatively few sanctions for MPs outside of elections and fewer for Peers, so there are few options for an unhappy voter. The main formal mechanisms are a complaint by the Commons or Lords Commissioner for Standards or triggering a recall vote under the Recall Act 2015. However, both these options have very narrow remits.

Another possibility is to censure an MP through their local party association. In 2022, Labour MP Rosie Duffield was subject to criticism over her attendance record in Parliament as part of a wider conflict with her local party. Conservative MP Steve Baker was subject to a crowdfunding campaign by constituents who sought to monitor his activities over concern at his stance on green issues⁶³.

There were some examples of stronger sanctioning actions linked to data, from formal investigations to resignations, removal of MPs and expulsions of Peers.

- One MP was subject to a recall vote over their expenses and another over undeclared interests.
- Between 2005 and 2022, 7 MPs were threatened with or subject to votes of no confidence from local parties, 5 over their voting record, 1 over lobbying and 1 over their expenses.
- In 2019 21 Conservative MPs had the whip removed over their Brexit voting record⁶⁴.

Has it changed Parliament?

Data has helped drive institutional change, including MPs' expenses reforms, the shift to proxy voting in 2019, and constant pressure over reform of the House of Lords.

- **Voting data:** there has been greater explanation and justification in Hansard, on Twitter or in the local press.
- **Expenses/salary:** there has been some reluctance to claim expenses (especially by female MPs) in the House of Commons, a public commitment by some Peers not to claim allowances in the House of Lords, and regular resistance to pay rises by MPs when suggested by IPSA. Data helped push institutional change around the expenses system after 2009 and helped create the pressure that led to the Recall Act of 2015.
- **Interests:** there have been apologies to the House and rectifications. Controversy over foreign influence in 2020 and 2021 led to an extension of Registers in the House of Lords to cover declarations of ownership and foreign influence. After the Paterson scandal in the House of Commons, there were ongoing reform proposals in late 2021 and early 2022 around caps on Members outside work.
- **Attendance:** pressure around attendance from 2010 onwards helped contribute towards the House of Lords becoming more 'full time', both due to stories on non-attendance, as well as indirect effects of both HOLAC and certain political parties using data to monitor

⁶² Allington, N. F., & Peele, G. (2010). Moats, duck houses and bath plugs: Members of Parliament, the expenses scandal and the use of web sites. *Parliamentary Affairs*, 63(3), 385-406; House of Commons Library (2022) *Apologies by MPs to the House of Commons since 1979*. Research Briefing, 14 February 2022

⁶³ Whitstable Views (2022) 'Why Canterbury & Whitstable Needs A New Labour M.P.'

January 30, 2022 <https://whitstableviews.com/2022/01/30/why-canterbury-whitstable-needs-a-new-labour-m-p/> : Crowdfunder.co.uk (2022) 'Steve Baker Watch', 27 Feb 2022 <https://www.crowdfunder.co.uk/p/steve-baker-watch-1>

⁶⁴ See House of Commons Library (2022) *Recall elections*. Research Briefing, 09 November 2021; Alexandre-Collier, A. (2020). From rebellion to extinction: where have all the Tory Remainder MPs gone?. *The Political Quarterly*, 91(1), 24-30.

attendance, with suggestions that future candidates may have to commit to attend and participate in writing. However, attendance may now have dipped again due to the growing size of the Lords⁶⁵.

There is evidence that monitoring, as with monitoring data elsewhere, compels members to 'raise their reputational game' ⁶⁶. One MP in our poll spoke of how members can 'become obsessed with being ranked above average'. Nick De Bois, an MP with a very slim majority, pointed out that MPs can speak in debates:



Sometimes...so you can enlighten constituents on your position on any given issue. Either that, or because it's not a good thing to have against your name 'Below-average number of speeches in the House of Commons' on that pesky 'They Work for You' website, which relentlessly measures how active you are in the chamber ⁶⁷

Another MP, Craig Williams, pointed to peer pressure:



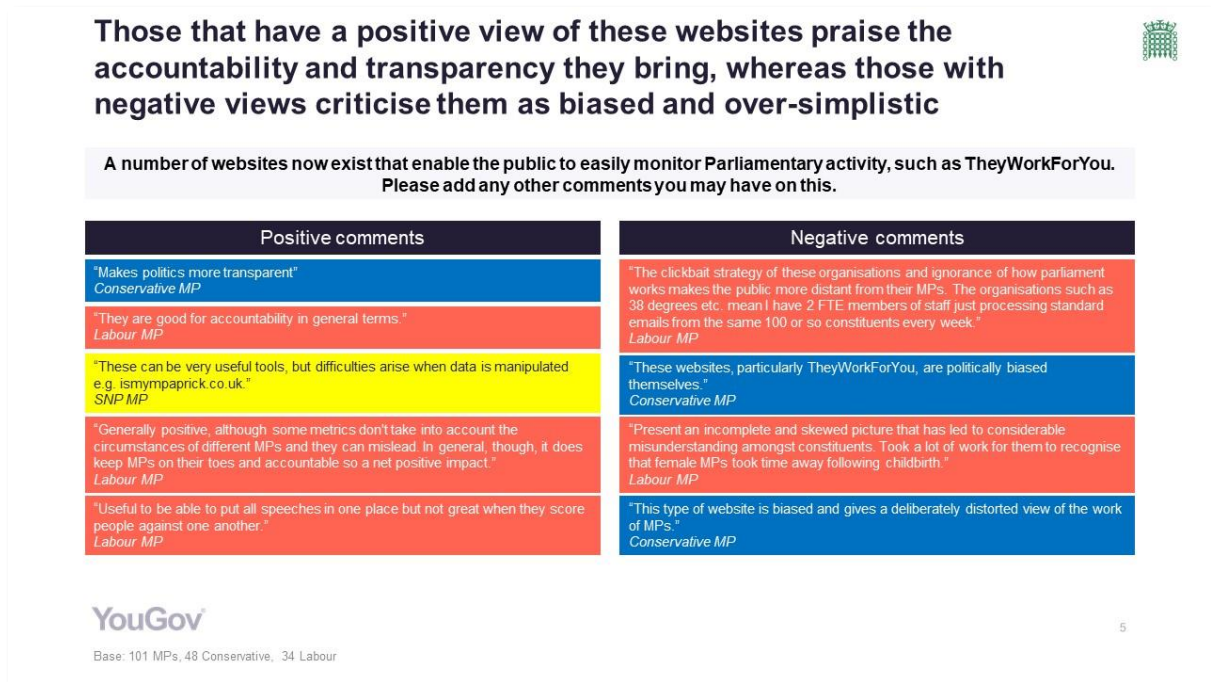
I wanted to make my non- maiden speech on the Third Reading of this Bill, because I was reminded by a colleague that they had looked me up on TheyWorkForYou and saw that I done little speaking for two and a half years, so I hope that I can correct the record.

⁶⁵ See PACAC (2022) The House of Lords Appointments Commission (Non-inquiry session), Witnesses Lord Bew (Chair at House of Lords Appointments Commission) Committees, 20 April 2022.

⁶⁶ See Mau, S. (2020). Numbers matter! The society of indicators, scores and ratings. *International Studies in Sociology of Education*, 29(1-2), 19-37.

⁶⁷ De Bois, N. (2018). *Confessions of A Recovering MP*. London: Biteback.

Figure 3: Results of the YouGov survey of 101 MPs on Monitory sites⁶⁸



There has been questionable use of data. The Sun's 'lazy list' of MPs cited above stands out as one example of misrepresentation. Others border on fabrication, as when in 2021, Prime Minister Boris Johnson claimed that the Opposition voted in a division that never took place⁶⁹. Many MPs in our YouGov poll saw monitoring as often politicised and weaponised and felt it painted a very particular and distorted picture of their activity. This complaint is far from new, as similar claims of a 'narrow focus' and 'misrepresentation' were raised by MPs with the arrival of the press and sketch writers in the 1840s⁷⁰.

Another worry, from the outside, was that data can be gamed or manipulated:

- **Attendance:** In 2006, the Times claimed some MPs merely intervened briefly in debates and left'. In 2018, one Member accused a group of Conservative MPs of having briefly 'turned up to get their names on TheyWorkForYou and up their speaking record' (HC Deb, 31 January 2018, c359WH)⁷¹.
- **Questions:** one oft-repeated claim is that TWFY drove up the number of parliamentary questions when used as a proxy for an MP's level of activity, especially as TWFY initially used Parliamentary Questions as one measure of ranking activity in 2005. One MP claimed that some Members' table long lists of questions in an attempt to appear active [or] table and sign large numbers of early-day motions⁷². Data shows that PQs did increase in 2005-2006. However, it was already moving upwards from 2000 onwards, and numbers continued to climb even after TWFY stopped using it. The Procedure Committee concluded that the rise in

⁶⁸ YouGov (2021) Birkbeck, University of London MPs poll – February 2021

⁶⁹ Huffington Post (2021) 'Boris Johnson Lies About Labour Voting Against Nurses' Pay Rise', 10 March, 2021

⁷⁰ Sparrow, A. (2003). *Obscure scribblers: A history of parliamentary journalism*. London: Politicos Pub

⁷¹ HC Deb, 31 January 2018, c359WH.

⁷² See HC Deb, 28 June 2006, c348.

PQs was primarily driven by growing opposition use, with TWFY a 'secondary factor' (see below).

- **Rebellion:** this is more complex to measure, and it is less likely PMOs play a direct role. While data may play a part, MPs have become more rebellious since the 1970s, and the public are only likely to support them if they agree with the principle on which they rebel⁷³.

Did TWFY lead to more parliamentary questions?

Because the asking of Parliamentary Questions (PQs) was (initially) used as a measure of members' activity, several studies have argued that data publication drove MPs to ask more of them⁷⁴. However, the Procedure Committee offered a somewhat more nuanced analysis:

'Several secondary factors may have also contributed to the rise in the number of questions. First, Members are under increasing pressure to demonstrate parliamentary activity, not least because the internet has provided new ways to scrutinise the actions of Members...The then Deputy Leader of the House confirmed that the intense analysis of statistics by websites could have encouraged Members to table more questions 'as proof of their effectiveness as MPs'.

Although the website TheyWorkForYou.com (the most high-profile site to rate Members in this way) has now changed its ranking system, the habits it set in motion are likely to persist. The tabling of WPOs is one of the few concrete and comparable statistics that can be gleaned from the varied careers of MPs. Despite its inadequacy as a performance measure, the perception that high numbers of questions equate to high levels of activity is likely to remain.'

Procedure Committee (2009) *Written Parliamentary Questions, Session 2008-09* (HC 859)

⁷³ See Duell, D., & Slapin, J. B. (2020) The Role of Representation in Rebel Appeal: Why Voters Express Support for Parliamentary Dissent http://www.dominikduell.com/papers/DDuellJSlapin_representationRebels.pdf

⁷⁴ See Edwards, A., de Kool, D., & Van Ooijen, C. (2015). The information ecology of parliamentary monitoring websites: Pathways towards strengthening democracy. *Information Polity*, 20(4), 253-268; Korthagen, I., & Dorst, H. (2020). Parliamentary Monitoring. In *European E-Democracy in Practice* (pp. 151-162). Springer, Cham.

What impact is monitoring having on UK Democracy?

Measuring the impact of any technology on politics is difficult. Data could potentially help drive greater accountability, encourage more involvement in political processes, and improve public understanding of political issues and institutions. Tracing the cause and effect can be difficult, and it is possible data may have contradictory, uneven or unpredictable effects⁷⁵.

One way to think about the effect is to trace how a voter encounters the data and with what impact. As outlined above, the major effect is to create a **continuous sense of watching** across a range of MPs' activities, from voting to expenses and attendance. It also expands across **new areas**, generating measures and yardsticks of what a 'good politician' and 'good' representation should look like.

Data and Voting

In theory, the new data and platforms should create a new, easier flow of data from PMOs to voters. However, it is a much bigger question as to whether this then changes voting behaviour on a large scale. As numerous studies point out, many things need to happen for one piece of information or data to change a voters' mind: it would need to be seen, it would need to be on an issue of such importance to them it could change their vote, and there needs to be an opponent offering an alternative, in a seat that was marginal enough to change hands (of which there were around 67 in 2019)⁷⁶.

Studies show this happens rarely and in particular contexts. A study of MPs and voters' positions on Brexit in 2017, where candidate positions were unusually stark, a significant number of MPs and constituents had opposing views, and the topic was unusually high profile, found that where an MP stood proved decisive in only 5 out of 653 constituencies.⁷⁷ Nor can we even be sure that any data will change voters' minds, as partisanship plays a strong role. Even during the expenses scandal, the data on individual MPs' expenses record was outweighed by the demands of partisanship at the ballot box.⁷⁸

Data and Everyday Democracy

The real impact of the data lies in the 'everyday', and the way in which PMOs fuel democratic discussion. Our media analysis and case studies showed how data on voting, expenses or interests rapidly became a yardstick and heuristic, picked up, noted, and repeated in articles and tweets on an

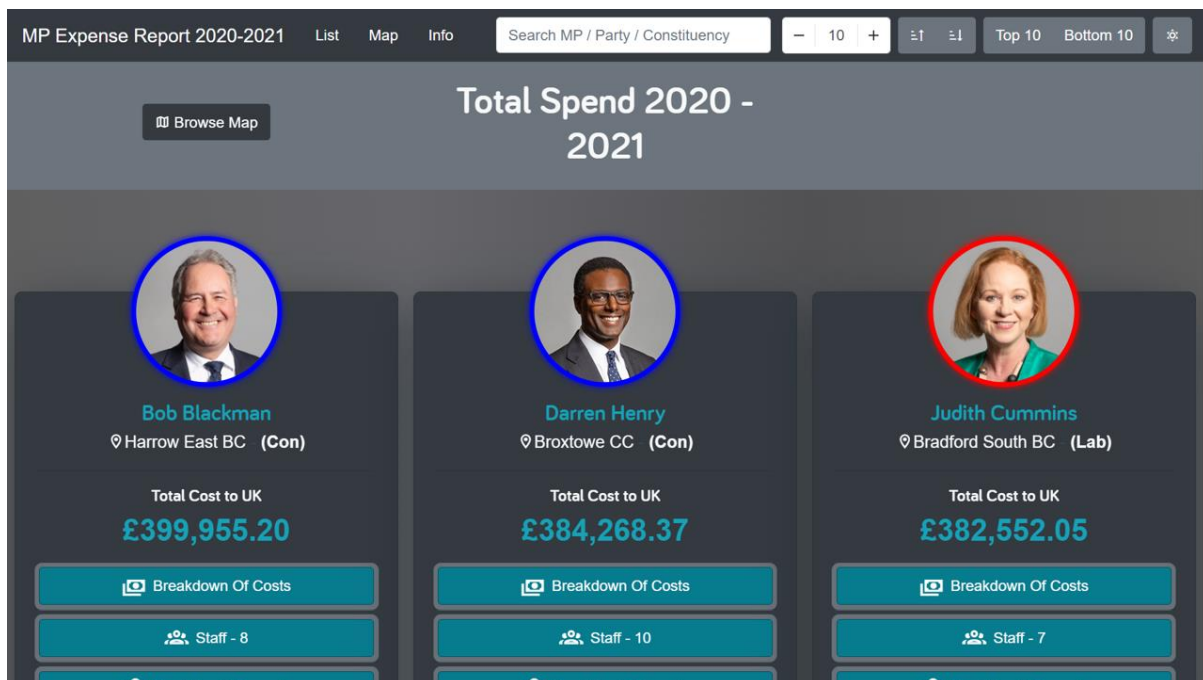
⁷⁵ For a good discussion of the difficulties, see Jungherr, A., Rivero, G., & Gayo-Avello, D. (2020). *Retooling politics: How digital media are shaping democracy*. Cambridge University Press.

⁷⁶ See House of Commons Library (2020) *General Election 2019: Marginality Insight*, 07 January 2020

⁷⁷ Hanretty, C., Mellon, J., & English, P. (2021). Members of Parliament are Minimally Accountable for Their Issue Stances (and They Know It). *American Political Science Review*, 115(4), 1275-1291.

⁷⁸ Vivyan, N., Wagner, M., & Tarlov, J. (2012). Representative misconduct, voter perceptions and accountability: Evidence from the 2009 House of Commons expenses scandal. *Electoral studies*, 31(4), 750-763.

almost daily basis. Voting positions appeared in national, local, and regional press and in tweets, on Facebook and blogs. One way to think about this data is that it allows the public and others to 'remix' democracy in different ways.⁷⁹



(image from MPsexpenses.info)

At the margins, it is now easier for voters to access or come across data on MPs' positions or expenses. Data became many things at once:

- a go-to **measure or shortcut** on MPs' position and outlook, creating a permanent record.
- Something to **highlight** on an MPs or their opponent's leaflets.
- A source for **innovation, analysis, and new developments**.

One constant feature of PMOs is that of innovation. In the wake of key votes, especially during Brexit and after, national and regional press offered postcode lookups, which are now a mainstay of analysis. In 2015 and again in 2021, a series of MPs' report cards were created and retweeted, with the latter designing a website where users could create their own MPs card. The 2021 report appeared to be made by a Labour activist with a strong bias for left-wing votes where Conservative MPs were 'designed to fail'⁸⁰.

⁷⁹ van Wessel, M. (2017). Citizens as sense-makers: towards a deeper appreciation of citizens' understandings of democratic politics. *Political Studies*, 65 (1_suppl), 127-145.

⁸⁰ See BBC (2019) 'Here's how data science has changed the way we cover parliamentary votes', Sep 12, 2019; MP report cards could be found at <http://www.mpreportcard.co.uk/>

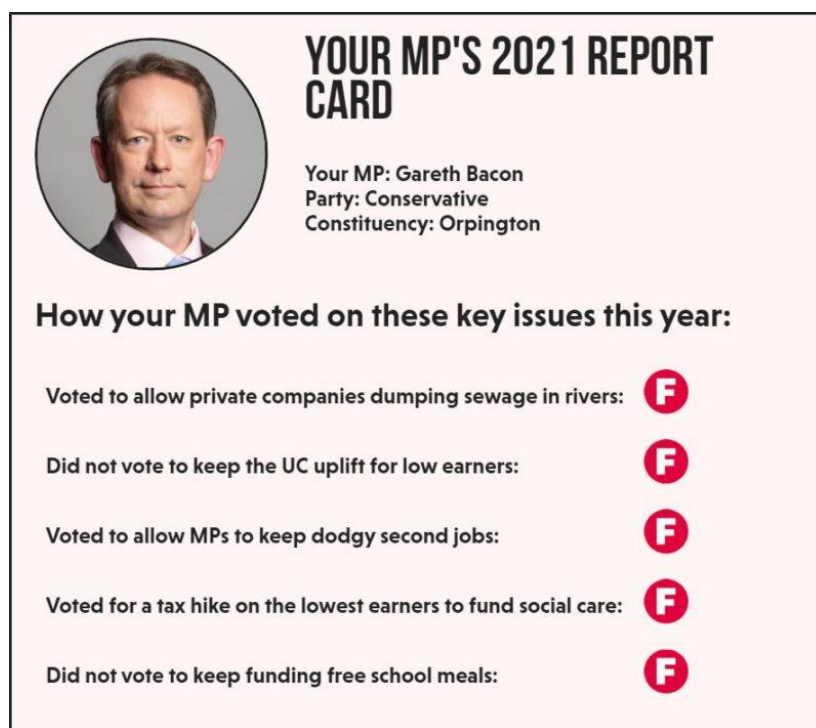


Figure 4: An MP's Report Card⁸¹

As our survey indicated, data also led to a series of innovations and applications. While some only existed for a short-time, others have continued and become sources themselves (Bush 2021).

Table 6: Data Innovations

Application	Type	Temp/Perm?	Activity
Did my MP Show Up https://www.theguardian.com/open-platform/apps-did-my-mp-show-up-or-not	Website	Temporary	Attendance
MPs expenses info https://www.mpsexpenses.info/#!/search	Website	Permanent	Expenses
Members Interests https://www.membersinterests.org.uk/	Website	Permanent	Interests
Alex Chalk MP @chalkcheck	Twitter	Permanent	Activity
ParliWikiEdits @parliamentedits	Twitter	Permanent	Activity/ History

Data also influenced various forms of participation, which can draw in a wider group of citizens. Some may be swept up in the campaigns that surround monitoring or even the crowd-sourcing or, occasionally, protests that are produced.

⁸¹ Taken from the website <http://www.mpreportcard.co.uk/>

Our research found 20 e-petitions from the Parliament site itself linked to data topics and stories on MPs' expenses, food allowance or attendance revealed by FOI data and reported by newspapers. Around 131 petitions listed on change.org also referred to issues around the activities and behaviour of MPs, with two triggered in the wake of the October 2020 Free School Meals vote.

Table 6: Examples of E-Petitions

Our search of various petition sites found a number related to data released on the behaviour of MPs. These included:

- 'Introduce a law that all MPs attend parliament regularly'
- 'Abolish the subsidy on food and drink in the Palace of Westminster restaurants'
- 'Abolish the Palace of Westminster restaurant subsidy for those earning over £23K'
- 'Fine MP's who fall asleep whilst attending parliament a £250 flat rate'
- 'Stop MP's voting if they don't attend the debate for 15 minutes before division'
- 'Require at least 80% of MPs to attend debates held as a result of a petition'⁸²

In a few cases, data led to physical participation. In 2020 there were protests outside the offices of several MPs who voted against extending school meal provisions, with one office covered in empty paper plates. In 2021 anti-racism and reparations campaigners staged a rally outside the home of Conservative MP, Richard Drax over his links revealed in Register of Interest declarations to colonial sugar plantations⁸³

There were also a series of attempts at crowds-sourcing or encouraging the public to involve themselves. Most famously, in 2009, the Guardian launched an open platform to encourage the public to look through MPs expenses. By 'June 2010, about half of the 460,000 claim documents were reviewed by 26,774 registered readers [with] 170,000 documents were reviewed in the first eighty hours'⁸⁴. Searchable databases of MPs' Interests or Second jobs or Hereditary Peers' allowances often accompany reporting in the national and sometimes regional press.

Finally, high-profile votes or scandals are accompanied by a flurry, and sometimes a storm of e-expression, with tweets, gifs, and images were used by both MPs themselves and opponents

⁸² Taken from the Parliament e-petitions database

⁸³ See Independent (2020) 'Queues of people wait to leave empty plates in office garden of Tory MP who voted against free school meals' 26 October 2020; Guardian (2021) 'Protesters demand wealthy MP pays up for family's slave trade past', 18 July 2021.

⁸⁴ See Daniel, A., & Flew, T. (2010). The Guardian reportage of the UK MP expenses scandal: A case study of computational journalism; Ruppert, E., & Savage, M. (2011). Transactional politics. *The Sociological Review*, 59, 73-92.

Jo Swinson's record

~~X~~ **Scrapped EMA & cut disability payments**

Voted to introduce the Bedroom Tax ~~X~~

~~X~~ **Voted for £9,000 university tuition fees**

Willing to work in another Tory coalition ~~X~~



(SNP Facebook Page, 22 July 2019)



GEORGE EUSTICE
VOTED TO CONTINUE
DUMPING RAW
SEWAGE
IN OUR RIVERS



(@labourdoorstep_, 22 October 2021)

Data, Narratives and Conflict

Schattschneider (1960) famously spoke about how politics was often about conflict, whereby political battles were mapped out by the mobilisation of groups, timing, and control of the definition. Data played a part in all these aspects, as data was seized, used, and misused by various groups to open up issues, and portray people, groups, or institutions in a certain light⁸⁵.

Data is not only used but also mis-used to fit different narratives around policies and politics, from Brexit to 'elitism'. Data adds to or reinforces 'democratic' narratives around 'process' issues like expenses use, lobbying or 'outputs', on issues such as Brexit or climate change.

During the project, a series of narratives were highlighted by data:

- **Brexit** and the role of the House of Commons and Lords in 'blocking' Brexit. Theresa May spoke of how 'there should be unity here in Westminster, but instead there is division. The country is coming together, but Westminster is not'. She explained that 'in recent weeks Labour has threatened to vote against the final agreement we reach with the European Union. The Liberal Democrats have said they want to grind the business of government to a standstill....And unelected members of the House of Lords have vowed to fight us every step of the way'⁸⁶.
- **Climate change** and MPs attitudes to it, in terms of positions as well as a link to interests.
- **House of Lords** legitimacy and function, with data on Peers' appointments, attendance and allowances used to question its existence and call for reform.
- **MPs interests, lobbying and links**, especially around the issue of 'second jobs' in 2021.

Monitoring becomes a force and source for challenge and disruption, constantly exposing problems or disputes and challenging and undermining rules, procedures, and consensus.

Data and Trust

The discussions around accountability and conflict opened up the question of how the new data influences levels of trust. The debate around openness and trust is complex, and whether how or if data or information alters trust or legitimacy is hard to say. Overall, it could be argued that coverage of data in the media tended towards negativity, frequently highlighting contradiction, hypocrisy or secrecy. Use of data for partisan ends or to challenge institutions would also, presumably, erode legitimacy or reinforce the cynicism that many feel about Parliament.

In some cases, there may be more nuanced effects. At an individual level, some MPs did use data to show how they were working for their voters. On an institutional level, it was suggested that the publication of regular data in certain areas, such as expenses, could take the controversy out of an issue and reduce its profile (see below). Alternatively, systems for reporting could deter wrongdoing, acting as a kind of trust 'safety net' to stop it from falling further.

⁸⁵ In Schattschneider, E. E. (1960). *The semisovereign people: A realist's view of democracy in America*. Wadsworth Publishing Company. For a wonderful explanation of the theory see David Karpf's lived experience <https://davekarpf.substack.com/p/talking-bretbug-in-the-classroom?s=r>

⁸⁶ See BBC (2017) Theresa May's general election statement in full, 18 April 2017

'Concrete, Shocking, and Graphic Proof': the MPs' Expenses scandal 2009

The MPs' expenses scandal was the first, and perhaps the defining, data-driven scandal of contemporary politics. MPs' expenses had long been a problem for political leaders, who wished to avoid public votes on the topic. Instead, in a somewhat murky agreement in the 1980s, party leaders agreed that expenses could be used as a top up⁸⁷.

In 2005, a small group of journalists, including Heather Brooke, pushed for the release of MPs' expenses when the FOI Act came into force. The slow burn process gathered space and attention over the course of four years. The House of Commons fought a rear-guard action against Freedom of Information requests and against external auditing. Each 'stage of resistance simply added to the reputational damage, lending authoritative voices to the campaign for change, and inducing the media to probe more deeply'.⁸⁸ After a series of requests, appeals and a court case between 2005 and 2009, details of all MPs' expenses was leaked to a national newspaper in May 2009, triggering a deep institutional crisis. While rumours and allegations of expenses misuse had spread through British politics, it was the concrete data that 'proved' it.⁸⁹

Once released, the data 'dominated media and news agendas for close to a month' and moved from coverage of claims to 'demands for heads to roll'⁹⁰. The focus was overwhelmingly negative on misdeeds, though the Daily Telegraph and others attempted to publicise 'saints' and those who used few expenses.

The data itself 'raised the objectivity of a story' so that the 'clever presentation of raw data' appeared to 'offer facts in an unbiased way'⁹¹. However, hidden within were several layers of 'politics' in how the data were interpreted. First, and most obvious, the 'behaviour of a minority of MPs' was 'presented in a stylised and stereotypical fashion, as symptomatic of a systemic failure of all politicians'⁹². The expenses scandal was an example of how data itself could create a 'politics of measurement' whereby the 'the traceability of transactions...enable the interpreter to move from individuals to aggregates and back again'.⁹³

Second, there was partisanship in how Labour suffered far more than the Conservatives in terms of the sequencing of coverage.⁹⁴ The gendered nature of the focus meant female MPs suffered disproportionately at the time and afterwards. Beyond this was the politics of privacy and

⁸⁷ Little, G., & Stopforth, D. (2013). The Legislative Origins of the MPs' Expenses Scandal. *The Modern Law Review*, 76(1), 83-108.

⁸⁸ Hine, D., & Peele, G. (2016). *The Regulation of Standards in British Public Life: Doing the right thing?* Manchester University Press., 103

⁸⁹ Brooke, H. (2011). *The silent state: secrets, surveillance and the myth of British democracy*. Random House and Allen, N., & Birch, S. (2011). Political conduct and misconduct: probing public opinion. *Parliamentary Affairs*, 64(1), 61-81.

⁹⁰ Kelso, A. (2013). *Parliamentary reform at Westminster*. Manchester University Press., 53

⁹¹ Ruppert, E., & Savage, M. (2011). Transactional politics. *The Sociological Review*, 59, 73-92, 88

⁹² See Flinders, M. V. (2012). The demonisation of politicians: Moral panics, folk devils and MPs' expenses. *Contemporary Politics*, 18(1), 1-17.

⁹³ Ruppert, E., & Savage, M. (2011). Transactional politics. *The Sociological Review*, 59, 73-92, 83:76

⁹⁴ Worthy, B. (2014). Freedom of information and the MPs' expenses crisis. In *The Political Costs of the 2009 British MPs' Expenses Scandal* (pp. 27-42). Palgrave Macmillan, London.

boundaries, with the expenses crisis likened to 'a crisis of appearances in which the...sharp boundary between public and private came unstuck'⁹⁵.

Third, the scandal was, above all, a mediated and media-driven one, shaped by the 'drip fed' disclosure and 'repetitive intensity' of media coverage. The way in which the story was exposed and explained, with 'moral norms transgressed', was then 'easily narrativized'⁹⁶.

The scandal was a 'profound challenge to the powerful myth that Britain was not corrupt'. It encompassed 'the entire Westminster political class' who 'were the architects of that system as well as its principal beneficiaries'⁹⁷. When asked, 59% of the public agreed that 'the scandal proves most MPs are corrupt'⁹⁸. The public broadly viewed 'MPs as being self-interested, venal and power-hungry' and 'the expenses scandal...offers concrete, shocking, and graphic proof.'⁹⁹ As well as corruption, the scandal provided proof of the 'different ethical worlds' of MPs and the public. It seemed to confirm that MPs were 'out of touch', potentially corrupt and self-interested¹⁰⁰. It exposed a 'tearoom syndrome' where MPs were 'sharing with colleagues...what could be accepted'¹⁰¹.

Nevertheless, there was some nuance as to its final impact. Even though the 2010 General Election followed quickly, the issue had a muted impact on voting. It led to expenses system reform with the creation of IPSA and the introduction of a Recall Act, but some of the bigger transformations, such as a referendum on PR, failed to happen¹⁰².

The Hansard Society found that the expenses scandal acted as a confirmation of public suspicion¹⁰³. Though the public were undoubtedly angered, the media frenzy may have 'desensitised already cynical citizens', meaning the scandal 'lit up the sky but did not change the underlying terrain'.¹⁰⁴

One open question is whether the changes made for a better system. On the one hand, the main legacy was a low-level conflict between IPSA and certain groups of MPs. On a smaller scale, expenses itself continued to claim careers in 2010 and again in 2012. Expenses' lists also became a feature of the national press and, more worrying for members, the regional and local press, with small lists of 'big' and 'small' spenders. Other lines of inquiry included 'the questionable practice of employing family members', the MPs' Communications Expenditure Allowance, and outside earnings¹⁰⁵.

⁹⁵ Gainsborough, M. (2011). Keeping Up Appearances: MPs' Expenses and the Hidden Dimensions of Rule in Britain Today (No. 03-11). *Working Paper*.

⁹⁶ VanHeerde-Hudson, J., & Van Heerde-Hudson, J. (Eds.). (2014). *The political costs of the 2009 British MPs' expenses scandal*. Springer.

⁹⁷ Kelso, A. (2009). Parliament on its knees: MPs' expenses and the crisis of transparency at Westminster. *The Political Quarterly*, 80(3), 329-338.

⁹⁸ See this analysis from BES here <https://www.markpack.org.uk/4030/public-opinion-mps-expenses/>

⁹⁹ Crewe, E., & Walker, A. (2019). *An Extraordinary Scandal: The Westminster expenses crisis and why it still matters*. Haus Publishing.

¹⁰⁰ Allen, N., Birch, S., & Sarmiento-Mirwaldt, K. (2018). Honesty above all else? Expectations and perceptions of political conduct in three established democracies. *Comparative European Politics*, 16(3), 511-534.

¹⁰¹ Hine, D., & Peele, G. (2016). *The regulation of standards in British public life: Doing the right thing?* Manchester: Manchester University Press.

¹⁰² See VanHeerde-Hudson, J., & Van Heerde-Hudson, J. (Eds.). (2014). *The political costs of the 2009 British MPs' expenses scandal*. Springer.

¹⁰³ See Hansard Society (2010) *What's trust got to do with it? Public Trust in and Expectations of Politicians and Parliament*. Hansard Society; London

¹⁰⁴ Allen, N., & Birch, S. (2014). Tempests and Teacups: Politicians' Reputations in the Wake of the Expenses Scandal. In *The Political Costs of the 2009 British MPs' Expenses Scandal* (pp. 132-152). Palgrave Macmillan, London, 148).

¹⁰⁵ Hine, D., & Peele, G. (2016). *The regulation of standards in British public life: Doing the right thing?* Manchester: Manchester University Press.

The data continues to drive monitoring and complaints, and in March 2022 'MPs have complained that the publication of their expenses is equivalent "to bullying", that their accommodation budget is too small, and that they should have more control over how much money is available'.¹⁰⁶

However, the issue itself may be less toxic. The former head of IPSA argued that the reforms to the system, especially the creation of IPSA itself and regular publication of data, meant expenses abuse could no longer happen and was much less of an issue¹⁰⁷.

¹⁰⁶ See Dyer, H (2022) INSIDER MPs say publishing their expenses is like 'bullying' and demand more control over budgets March 17, 2022,

¹⁰⁷ See Kennedy, I. (2019). *Cleaning up the mess: After the MPs' expenses scandal*. London: Biteback Publishing.

Hiding in Plain Sight: MPs' Second Jobs 2021-2022

Monitoring Parliament has shown how data can generate accountability but equally provoke resistance, behaviour change or trigger more monitoring. The Paterson scandal in 2021 has shown all of these things happening, all at once.

Paterson's rule breach was exposed in 2019 by a Guardian FOI. This resulted in an investigation by the Standards Commissioner, which concluded there had been three breaches of the MPs' Code of Conduct. There was then a final report from the Committee on Standards and the vote two years later¹⁰⁸.

In the case of Paterson, there was a change to the usual nodding through of a formal vote of punishment. Unusually, Conservative MPs were whipped to vote against punishing Paterson and in favour of reforming the entire appeal system in October 2021. Some voted in favour, though many abstained and a few rebelled.

Precisely what drove the concern is unclear, but what is obvious is that the resistance backfired in what is informally known as the Streisand effect, where an attempt to hide something draws attention to it instead¹⁰⁹. Amid a wave of criticism and non-cooperation, the outcome of the vote was undone within 24 hours. But the vote was the beginning of the scandal, not the end.

After the vote, the raised awareness in MPs' interests' data led to a wave of monitoring and drove analysis in several directions or angles¹¹⁰. Initially, a few enterprising searchers analysed how many of the MPs who voted to scrap the system were either under investigation themselves or were earning second incomes¹¹¹. Data crunching found that second jobs appeared to be primarily a Conservative problem. Data was, however, examined from a Scottish and Welsh angle, and party leaders came in for particular criticism. Johnson was criticised over his apparent hypocrisy, given his own substantial earnings.

In parallel to the national collective picture, there was a trickle down to individual MPs. The BBC, Guardian and Times created postcode lookups so you could see for yourself what your MP had earned¹¹². From Doncaster to Cumbria and Belfast to North Wales, local reporters combed their MPs' entries.

At this point, the data-led in several directions, becoming a series of stories about how and where MPs vote, their expenses and lobbying activities. One of the most high profile was Geoffrey Cox, whose Caribbean based voting (while lobbying) also kick-started a discussion about tax havens. Attention turned elsewhere to other data hiding in plain sight, such as the list of former MPs with Parliamentary passes.

The pressure of monitoring had an effect on both individual MPs and the institution as a whole. A small number of MPs responded by self-reporting undeclared interests or admitting possible

¹⁰⁸ See the background Guardian (2021) 'Lobbying for 'naked' bacon: how the Owen Paterson scandal began', 5 November 2022

¹⁰⁹ See Hobbs, W. R., & Roberts, M. E. (2018). How sudden censorship can increase access to information. *American Political Science Review*, 112(3), 621-636.

¹¹⁰ Peter Geoghegan (2021) 'Why are so many Tory MPs able to get filthy rich? Because we let them' *Guardian* 11 Nov 2021

¹¹¹ See Adam Bychawski (2021) 'Quarter of MPs calling to replace sleaze watchdog have been punished by it' *Open Democracy*, 3 November 2021; Sam Bright (2021) 'Conservative MPs Opposing Lobbying Suspension have Second Jobs, Worth £1 Million 3' *Byline Times*, 4 November 2021

¹¹² See National World (2021) 'Does my MP have a second job? How much your MP earned from additional work during the Covid-19 pandemic', 8th November 2021

breaches¹¹³. Others have signalled their good behaviour, seeking positive headlines, such as the 'No second job for Isle of Wight MP Bob Seely'¹¹⁴.

By January 2022, a House of Commons Standards committee inquiry was underway, promising an overhaul of the system, including restrictions on outside earnings and greater transparency. This was seemingly built atop a seeming cross-party consensus that outside interests need to be restricted. However, in March of 2022, the government appeared to be backing down, and a number of MPs urged the Standards Committee not to cap possible outside earnings¹¹⁵. In their final report in May 2022, the Standards Committee recommended "an outright ban on MPs providing paid parliamentary advice, consultancy or strategy services", written contracts "which makes explicit that their duties cannot include lobbying ministers, members or public officials, or providing advice about how to lobby or influence Parliament" and improved accessibility of data itself¹¹⁶.

¹¹³ Sky (2021) 'Ross reports himself to sleaze watchdog over failure to declare MSP and football earnings' Sky News 13 November 2021; Guardian (2021) 'Two MPs admit using parliamentary offices for paid outside work', 13 November 2021; Sky (2021) 'MPs give up second jobs worth £250k a year in wake of Westminster sleaze row', 2 December 2021

¹¹⁴ See County Press (2021) 'No second job for Isle of Wight MP Bob Seely', 13th November 2021

¹¹⁵ See Guardian (2022) 'Plans to cap UK MPs' earnings from second jobs dropped', 17 March 2022

¹¹⁶ BBC (2022) 'New MPs' code of conduct to tighten lobbying rules', 25 May 2022

The Rise of the Couch Potato Peers? House of Lords allowances and activity 2013-2022

Reflecting the low levels of public interest in the Second Chamber generally, there is much less monitoring of the House of Lords, which is watched by a smaller group of campaigners and mainly investigative journalists. Though there is some interest in controversial votes or certain Peers, the focus has frequently fallen on their **activity** and **allowances**, sometimes together.

Since 2010, when the system of Peers' allowances was reformed, journalists and campaigners have regularly analysed allowances and activity. Although coverage varies between focusing on individuals or groups, the result has been to create a trope of a 'couch potato' or 'silent' Peer, claiming allowances but doing little. In a 2013 BBC documentary, one Peer, Lord Haddingfield, claimed he could 'name 50 peers who 'clock in' to claim expenses' and suggested 'that making brief attendances at House of Lords to qualify for allowances is normal practice'.¹¹⁷ In 2017 the Electoral Reform Society analysed data and found that '33 inactive peers picked up £462,510 in tax-free expenses' and 'nearly 1 in 10 of the peers eligible to vote throughout 2016/17 (9.2% – 72 of the 779) are inactive'.¹¹⁸ The House of Lords itself has challenged the analysis, arguing the overly narrow focus on debates doesn't capture Peers' activities and misrepresents the full work of the Second Chamber. Nevertheless, the problem of 'inactive' Peers was highlighted again in 2019 and 2020.

Newspaper Reporting of Peers

Sky News (2021) 'Peers in House of Lords charged taxpayers more than £46,000 on day of tributes to Prince Philip', 13 Aug 2021

Sunday Times (2020) 'Silent lords: the peers who don't speak but claim their allowance' February 23, 2020

Sunday Post (2019) 'The silence of the Lords: Critics demand reform as Scots peers claim a fortune but don't say a word', 16 June 2019

Guardian (2019) 'Peer who never spoke in Lords last year claims £50,000 expenses', 30 May 2019

Huffington Post (2017) 'Couch Potato Peers' Claimed Average Of £14,000 In Expenses, Campaigners Reveal', 15 November 2017

BBC (2017) 'House of Lords rejects 'couch potato peers' allegation', 21 September 2017

Financial Times (2017) 'Digby Jones claims £15,000 expenses for non-speaking Lords role', 17 September 2017

Daily Mail (2015) 'Revealed: Peers who NEVER spoke in the House of Lords claimed £1.3 million in expenses last year', 7 September 2015

Independent (2011) 'Revealed: 137 'silent peers' who make the case for reform', 06 June 2011

¹¹⁷ Guardian (2013) 'Lord Hanningfield: I can name 50 peers who 'clock in' to claim expenses', 17 Dec 2013

¹¹⁸ See ERS (2017) *The High Cost of Small Change: The House of Lords*. ERS: London.

FOI requests too have been made around Peers' allowances, again varying between individual and groups.

FOI requests on allowances and expenses 2016-2020¹¹⁹

'Do members of the House of Lords pay income tax on their daily allowance?'

'How many members of the House claimed a daily allowance for 22 March 2017?'

'Members of House of Lords claiming allowance on 20 June 2016'.

'Whether specified members had claimed expenses from the House of Lords?'

'Amount claimed in expenses by Lords Spiritual (Bishops) by year from 2013 to 2018.'

'Details of the members who have paid expenses back in 2015, 2016 and 2017.'

'Record of any investigation into Lord Hanningfield regarding expenses claims after July 2016.'

'Members who have been convicted of offences relating to House of Lords' expenses and are still attending the House and claiming expenses.'

'Expense claims and costs incurred by Black Rod in each of the last five years.'

'Details of expenses claims lodged by the Lord Speaker since 1 September 2016.'

Allowance monitoring has spread to look at controversial or noteworthy Peer groupings, such as Bishops, and regional angles on allowance use by Scottish or Northern Irish Peers.¹²⁰ There is also deeper, more detailed analysis cross-comparing or examining particular groups. In 2020 the *New Statesman* looked at the attendance, activity and allowance claims of Hereditary and Life Peers, and argued the Lords' remains a symbol of our crumbling political system'.¹²¹ A *Times* analysis in 2021 focused on hereditary allowance claims and activity, with a searchable database for readers to look themselves. An accompanying editorial called for an ending of their right to sit in the Lords.¹²²

While the watching of the Lords has been less spectacular or instant than the expenses or interests scandals, the recurring analysis has helped drive and reinforce an elitist narrative and open up further questions about the legitimacy and role of the Lords. Reporting is often accompanied by calls for reform or abolition. If, as Russell argues, one prop of Lords' support lies in its perceived legitimacy, then the constant scrutiny chips away at its strength and its ability to perform its role as an effective Second Chamber¹²³.

¹¹⁹ Taken from the House of Lords FOI disclosure logs <https://www.parliament.uk/mps-lords-and-offices/offices/lords/freedom-of-information-in-the-house-of-lords/log/>

¹²⁰ See *The National* (2021) 'House of Lords: Scottish peers claim almost £1m during pandemic', 26th December 2021 <https://www.thenational.scot/news/19802455.house-lords-scottish-peers-claim-almost-1m-pandemic/>; *Belfast Telegraph* (2017) 'Northern Ireland peer claimed £20k in expenses', October 26, 2017; *Independent* (2017) 'The Lords will provide: Bishops paid up to £27,000 for attending Parliament', 21 June 2012

¹²¹ *New Statesman* (2020) 'Peers reviewed: An analysis of the failings of the House of Lords', 12 August 2020

¹²² *The Sunday Times* (2021) 'Revealed: the truth about the peers who are born to rule', 20 Mar 2021

¹²³ See Russell, M. (2019). Foreword: Bicameralism in an age of populism in *Constitutional Reform of National Legislatures: Bicameralism Under Pressure*, Cheltenham, UK and Northampton, MA, USA: Edward Elgar Publishing, pp. ix–xix.

In 2020, analysis of the rising costs of the House of Lords led to criticism from both sides of the political spectrum, with Nigel Farage and left-wing Labour MP Zarah Sultana tweeting the story with a call to abolish the House¹²⁴.



5:36 PM · Feb 22, 2020 · Twitter for iPhone

972 Retweets 86 Quote Tweets 4,049 Likes

(Image from @Nigel_Farage Feb 2020)



¹²⁴ Tweets from @nigelfarage 22 Feb 2020 and @zarahsultana 23 Feb 2020

Zarah Sultana MP 
@zarahsultana

Daily House of Lords attendance payment: £323.

Monthly Universal Credit standard payment: £318.

Abolish the Lords. Build a social security system that treats people with dignity and respect.

 **The Mirror**  @DailyMirror · Feb 23, 2020
House of Lords peers give themselves big pay rise - with one claiming £80k in expenses
[mirror.co.uk/news/uk-news/h...](https://www.mirror.co.uk/news/uk-news/h...)



12:55 PM · Feb 23, 2020 · Twitter Web App

1,136 Retweets 63 Quote Tweets 2,779 Likes

(Image from @zarahsultanaFeb 2020)

For the Lords, the allowance data create a self-perpetuating cycle of exposure, questioning and calls for reform. The most important effect was to exacerbate the 'essentially contested' nature of the institution and challenge its legitimacy¹²⁵.

¹²⁵ See Russell, M. (2019). 'Foreword: Bicameralism in an age of populism' in *Constitutional Reform of National Legislatures: Bicameralism Under Pressure*, Cheltenham, UK and Northampton, MA, USA: Edward Elgar Publishing, pp. ix–xix.

Conclusion: what impact does monitoring have?

It is important to keep in mind that monitoring impacts on two potential groups; those being *watched* and those *doing the watching*. This means that there are a set of 'elites' and 'public effects'. However, some commonalities can be drawn out, that sometimes bridge the two groups.

Trips, triggers and controls. For those being watched, monitoring creates a new pressure of democratic control and a set of potential triggers, metrics, and pressures, which can and do 'spring up' unexpectedly amid votes or scandals, sometimes locally, sometimes nationally. The success of the new pressures can be seen in 'everyday' democratic discussion, where voting data, expenses or interests are a yardstick and heuristic, picked up, noted, and repeated in articles and tweets on a daily basis. Monitoring has its own momentum of leading to more monitoring. The effect may be stronger for the Lords, where there is a far lower base of pressure than for the Commons.

Engagements, Expression and Narratives. The core users of data tend to be those who are already interested in politics. However, these activists, journalists, politicians and their staff act as 'opinion formers', using the data to frame the story and then pass it outwards to a wider watching audience. Data becomes part of other expressive democratic activities, whether e-petitions, gifs or even protests. More generally, it creates or reinforces controversial or impactful narratives, reaching a potentially wide audience and impacting upon how the public understand politics and democracy.

Clashes, Conflict and Controversy. Monitoring creates a series of conflicts, moving in contradictory directions, expanding and deepening the 'uncertainty' that is the essence of democracy.¹²⁶ Some of these may be partisan based, but others may be questioning the system itself, as seen with the House of Lords¹²⁷. It expands the 'frontstage' and shrinks the 'backstage', forcing politicians to be more open and less concealed in new areas. The sheer unpredictability of the conflict and where it leads or doesn't is notable: a 'lazy' list of MPs leading to proxy voting in the Commons, a constant rolling 'scandal' in the Lords.

¹²⁶ See Müller, J. W. (2021). *Democracy rules*. Farrar, Straus and Giroux.

¹²⁷ See Coleman, S., & Blumler, J. G. (2009). *The Internet and democratic citizenship: Theory, practice and policy*. Cambridge University Press.

Future Directions: Data-Driven Democracy in the UK

What is Data Driven Democracy?

Data Driven Democracy is a term designed to explain the existence, presence and use (and abuse) of data in politics. It looks at how data can drive certain behaviours, outcomes, and understandings across political elites and the public. Data driven democracy is both about *access*, with a 'politics of disclosure' driven by a diverse group of external 'information seekers', and *impact*, as use and release drives conflict and a 'contentious politics of data' around assessment and 'the politics of measurement'¹²⁸. Data may create sites of 'ethical contestation' that mobilise or draw others in and becomes a cause and driver of political conflict¹²⁹.

Data-driven democracy is the last in a long line of attempts to know better what politicians are doing and offer some form of (superficial) measurement or quantification. New technologies and mediums, from the printing press to the newspaper, have created cycles of conflict and greater openness, often accompanied with vociferous claims that politicians are being misrepresented.

Data-driven democracy looks at the effects of a growing 'ecology' of instruments of transparency and openness on political institutions¹³⁰. These include:

- **Primary** sources and tools such as open data and FOI or reporting systems.
- **Third-party** platforms, tools and apps that offer raw data, metrics, or shortcuts.
- **Infomediaries** who disseminate, analyse or narrativize data such as journalists, CSOs or politicians.

However, exactly where the ecology begins, and ends is unclear. Not only does it expand and push outwards itself, the ecology of monitoring also overlaps and interacts with a whole range of other instruments both formal (such as e-petitions) as well as informal (such as social media).

What would it mean?

The effects of such use are wide-ranging and complex. A growing 'politics of numbers' or 'politics of measurement' makes, at least superficially, for a more 'objective' assessment¹³¹. These are marked by:

- A growing use of **metrics/yardsticks** as **heuristics**: as data are used to look at individuals, groups, or populations.
- An increase in **ranking, assessment, and comparison** across and within groups and institutions as a whole.

¹²⁸ Heimstädt, M., & Dobusch, L. (2018). Politics of Disclosure: Organizational transparency as multiactor negotiation. *Public Administration Review*, 78(5), 727-738, p 727

¹²⁹ See Schattschneider, E. E. (1960). *The semisovereign people: A realist's view of democracy in America*. Wadsworth Publishing Company.

¹³⁰ For more on this see Kreimer, S. F. (2018). 7. The Ecology of Transparency Reloaded. In *Troubling Transparency* (pp. 135-165). Columbia University Press.

¹³¹ See Mau, S. (2019). *The metric society: On the quantification of the social*. London: John Wiley & Sons.

- Continual **experiments**, pushing boundaries and moving outwards into new areas.

The features of the ecology and tools are that they are:

- **Flexible** and can be used and applied in different ways, e.g., zoom in or zoom out but as heuristic of values and positions or predictor of behaviour.
- **Expansive** and continually pushing outwards as, for example, FOIs or data releases expand at the boundaries of what is 'open' and 'closed', and experiments and innovations make new areas visible or link different data to offer new insights.
- **Interactive** and feeding off each other, as data or groups work together or work of each other with narratives or repeated issues.

What is the democratic impact?

- **Accountability** as data make individuals and, to a lesser extent, groups and institutions justify and explain their actions to voters, sharpening 'informatory' accountability¹³². Data can, to a lesser degree, trigger stronger sanctions and reform attempts, which indirectly can improve the system.
- **Participation** with a link to traditional and alternative mechanisms of participation. Though there is no strong link to voting, there is some to e-petitions, crowdsourcing as well as 'affective' e-expression.
- **Narratives** as data play a role in creating, and reinforcing certain narratives around politics, which is used and abused.

What are the limitations?

Data-driven democracy contains several limitations. The central problem is that data are not 'objective' and in so heavily politicised environment, which can be manipulated and misrepresented. This creates different forms of '**democratic distortion**':

- **Uneven openness** with some issues or actions highlighted where data exists, but others obscured, with politics 'misrepresented' or 'selectively' represented.
- **Uneven context** with data taken out, to misrepresent or portray certain activities, with an impact on trust or legitimacy.
- **Continual conflict** across several lines.

There are further difficulties that are less about the data and more about the system in which they exist, such as around the mechanisms to enforce sanctions or tools of Between Election Democracy.

¹³² Judge, D. (2022). 'Would I Lie to You?': Boris Johnson and Lying in the House of Commons. *The Political Quarterly*.

Appendix 1

Methods

Methods	Detail
Survey of data users	53 users of Parliament data surveyed
Survey of MPs' staff users	8 users of Parliament data surveyed
Coding of media stories	Majority of coding done for the Commons and Lords covering: -Data use -Attendance -Register of interest -IPSA -Appointments (for the Lords)
Coding of FOI requests to parliament	Coded 4 years of requests to House of Commons and House of Lords. The year 2020 to be done when record of requests is published.
Interviews	Conducted 30+ interviews with a range of those involved including: Officials Former MPs Peers NGOs Data users, journalists, and innovators
Social media analysis	Analysis of social media data on specific events: Peer expenses Feb 2020 COVID pay increase and October 2020 pay increase Grenfell vote Internal Market Bill stages
Case studies	Brexit Impact of TV and other historical openness MPs' expenses Hereditary By-elections Military action in Syria votes in 2013 and 2015 Same-sex marriage House of Lords appointments Lobbying Proxy voting Covid-19
YouGov Poll 2020	YouGov poll of 100 MPs for their views on TWFY
Data	TheyWorkForYou Parliament website IPSA web use data

Living Lab	Online living lab involving 13 students searching for data and then a survey and focus group discussion of motives and results (June 2021).
House of Lords expenses monitoring experiment	Using allowance and attendance data as a 'natural experiment' to see if changes to voting procedures during COVID led to behaviour change in making claims.

Appendix 2: The UK's Monitory Landscape

Data Sources and Tools

Name	Type of tool or source	Data	Link
Parliament data	Platform	Open data	https://explore.data.parliament.uk/
TheyWorkForYou	Platform	Open Data	https://www.theyworkforyou.com/
Parallel Parliament	Platform	Open data	https://www.parallelparliament.co.uk/
Public Whip	Platform	Open data	https://www.publicwhip.org.uk/
Members Interests.org	Platform	Open data	https://www.membersinterests.org.uk/
MPs Expenses.org	Platform	Open data	https://www.membersinterests.org.uk/
Freedom of Information Act (covers House of Commons and Lords as well as IPSA and HOLAC)	Law/Regulation	Pro-active and reactive	House of Commons https://www.parliament.uk/site-information/foi/foi-and-eir/commons-request-disclosure-logs/ House of Lords https://www.parliament.uk/mps-lords-and-offices/offices/lords/freedom-of-information-in-the-house-of-lords/log/
Register of Financial Interest (covers House of Commons and House of Lords)	Law/Regulation	Self-reporting mechanism	House of Commons https://publications.parliament.uk/pa/cm/cmregmem/contents2122.htm House of Lords https://www.parliament.uk/mps-lords-and-offices/standards-and-financial-interests/register-of-lords-interests/

Oversight Bodies

Name	Role	Data	Function
Standards Commissioner (Commons) ¹³³	Oversees Code of Conduct and Register of interest/deals with complaints	Reactive but can be pro-active	Regulator of MPs but public facing-but public can report
Standards Commissioner (Lords)	Oversees Code of Conduct and Register of interest/deals with complaints	Reactive but can be pro-active	Regulator of Peers but public facing-but public can report
Independent Parliamentary Standards Authority	Oversees MPs expenses payments and payroll	Reactive published information	Regulator of MPs but public facing (note also subject to FOI and used indirectly) ¹³⁴
House of Lords Appointments Commission	The Commission (i) recommend individuals for appointment as non-party-political life peers (ii) vets nominations for life peers, including those nominated by the UK political parties, to ensure the highest standards of propriety.	Proactive	Subject to FOI

¹³³ <https://www.parliament.uk/mps-lords-and-offices/standards-and-financial-interests/parliamentary-commissioner-for-standards>

¹³⁴ <https://www.theipsa.org.uk/publications/freedom-of-information/>