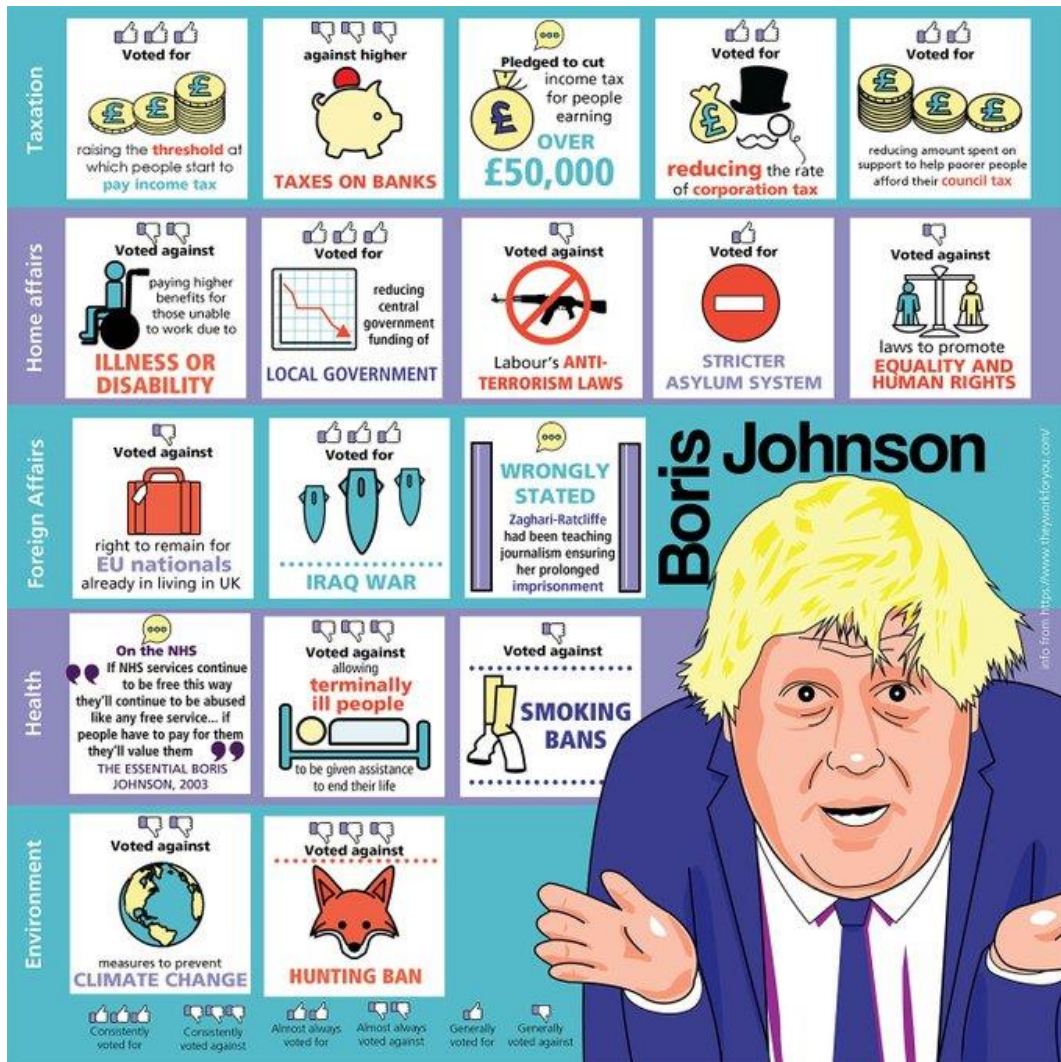


Who is Watching Parliament?

Executive Summary and Conclusions

Monitory Democracy at Westminster



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Funded by the Leverhulme Trust



Acknowledgements

This research was funded by a Leverhulme Research Grant (RPG-2019-124).

We would like to thank all the staff in Birkbeck Politics Department, especially Professor Dermot Hodson and Professor Deborah Mabbett, for their feedback. We would also like to thank the PSA Parliament and Legislatures group for their constructive comments and thoughts.

We are grateful to all who helped with interviews, answering questions and queries, especially at such a difficult time.

Cover design image courtesy of Sven Shaw Illustration <https://www.svenshaw.com/>

Formatting by Cat Morgan

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.

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.¹ Some of these may be partisan based, but others may be questioning the system itself, as seen with the House of Lords². 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.

¹ See Müller, J. W. (2021). *Democracy rules*. Farrar, Straus and Giroux.

² 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'³. Data may create sites of 'ethical contestation' that mobilise or draw others in and becomes a cause and driver of political conflict⁴.

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 institutions⁵. 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' assessment⁶. 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.

³ Heimstädt, M., & Dobusch, L. (2018). Politics of Disclosure: Organizational transparency as multiactor negotiation. *Public Administration Review*, 78(5), 727-738, p 727

⁴ See Schattschneider, E. E. (1960). *The semisovereign people: A realist's view of democracy in America*. Wadsworth Publishing Company.

⁵ For more on this see Kreimer, S. F. (2018). 7. The Ecology of Transparency Reloaded. In *Troubling Transparency* (pp. 135-165). Columbia University Press.

⁶ 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' accountability⁷. 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.

⁷ 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 monitory 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. |

