

Democracy in danger:

why the government
must restore the
Electoral Commission's
full independence



September 2025

**By Dr Susan Hawley,
Sam Parrett-Jung**

with additional research
by Guilherme France

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Democracy in danger: why the government must restore the Electoral Commission's full independence

Introduction

A fully independent Electoral Commission is critical to ensuring the integrity of UK elections, and maintaining public confidence that elections are run fairly.

However, the previous Conservative government curtailed the independence of the Electoral Commission by introducing a new power for a minister to set out a strategy and policy statement (the Statement) for the Commission.

This power weakens the Electoral Commission's autonomy, leaving it vulnerable to the whims of a ruling party. And it creates serious risks that in the wrong hands a governing party could shift the rules of the electoral game in its favour and direct the Commission to act in ways that help it maintain power. Political capture of the Commission would have devastating consequences for the health of our democracy.

In July 2025, the Labour government announced its long-awaited strategy for electoral reform, *Restoring Trust in Our Democracy: our strategy for modern and secure elections*. While this strategy contains many welcome reforms, the government has chosen to maintain the new power rather than remove it from statute. This undermines the central tenet of reforms which is to strengthen the UK's democracy and restore public trust.

As we lay out in this report, the ministerial power to set a policy and strategy for the UK's electoral body:

- was widely condemned by the Labour party in opposition, multiple parliamentary committees and the Electoral Commission itself, as well as its Parliamentary oversight mechanism, the Speaker's Committee;
- breaches eight international standards on electoral management;
- has caused the UK to fall from ranking among the top 15 countries in the world for the autonomy of its electoral body to ranking 49th, putting it on a par with Ghana, Nepal and Croatia;
- puts the UK at odds with comparable democracies such as Canada, Australia, New Zealand and Ireland; and
- creates serious vulnerabilities that would enable a future government with autocratic tendencies to use the power to distort the electoral rules in its favour.

Removing the power is critical for restoring the independence of the Commission and ensuring full public trust in its activities. Lessons from countries that have experienced democratic backsliding show that this will also need to be accompanied by further measures to future-proof the integrity of UK elections, including beefing up the independence of the Speaker's Committee.

Recommendations

Spotlight on Corruption recommends that the government deliver on its pledge to protect democracy by:

- 1. Repealing the provisions that allow the government to set a Strategy and Policy Statement for the Electoral Commission in the forthcoming Elections Bill**
- 2. Incorporating a new specific provision into the forthcoming Bill that confirms the statutory independence of the Electoral Commission**
- 3. Introducing new rules in the forthcoming Bill for the composition of the Speaker's Committee to include at least two lay members representing the ordinary voter, and to prevent a government majority which could lead to partisan capture.**

Part 1: Clipping the wings of the Electoral Commission: Background to the Statement

The Electoral Commission is the independent body set up in 2001 by the last Labour government to a) oversee elections and referendums and b) regulate political finance. It was created under the Political Parties, Elections and Referendums Act 2000 to be accountable to Parliament through a Speaker's Committee which was also created by the Act.

While the independence of the Commission is not specified in statute, the commentary to the Act states that: *"The Electoral Commission will be a body corporate independent of any government department and will report directly to Parliament."*¹

At the time of its establishment, the lead Minister, Labour's Jack Straw said *"the commission must be as independent of the Government of the day as our constitutional arrangements allow, and it must be answerable directly to Parliament and not to Ministers"*.²

The Electoral Commission maintains widespread public trust in how it carries out its role – something that is absolutely vital for the legitimacy of UK elections. However, there was a significant drop in the number of people believing in the Electoral Commission's independence in 2023 after the electoral reforms of 2022 – with just 19% choosing 'independent' as their top word to describe the Commission, down from 26% in 2022.³

Broader trust in the Commission to act as an independent regulator does appear to have recovered over the past few years, increasing from 43% in 2023 to 59% in 2025.⁴ But this trust could easily be reversed, as these trends show it is fragile and dependent on the political actions of those in government.

Changes in the Elections Act 2022 – power to make a Statement

The Elections Act 2022 (Clause 16) introduced the new power for the relevant government minister to set out a 'Strategy and Policy Statement' for the Electoral Commission.

The Statement allows the government of the day to:

- set out the *"strategic and policy priorities"* for elections and *"the role and responsibilities of the Commission"* in supporting these priorities,
- issue *"guidance"* on areas the Commission has responsibility for and include *"any other information"* including in relation to the *"roles and responsibilities of other persons"* that is deemed *"appropriate."*⁵

The Electoral Commission must now *"have regard"* to any guidance in the Statement issued by the government *"in the discharge of its functions."*⁶ It must also report annually to the Speaker's Committee on what activities it has undertaken with regard to the government's Statement.⁷

Stated rationale for the Statement

When it introduced the new power in July 2021 as part of its new Elections Bill, the Conservative government argued that the power to designate a Strategy and Policy Statement for the Commission would:

- make the Commission more accountable to Parliament, and
- provide guidance and principles to the Commission about how to exercise its statutory remit *“to regulate the framework set out by the Government of the day’s electoral policies and legislation as approved by Parliament.”*⁸

Ministers justified the introduction of the Statement by saying that some members of Parliament had *“lost confidence in the work of the Commission and have questioned the adequacy of the existing accountability structures.”*⁹ Examples cited in Parliament included work around the Brexit referendum and the 2019 General Election.¹⁰

An Electoral Commission investigation into potential breaches by the Conservative Party during the 2015 general election had led to serious criticism of the regulator.¹¹ During 2020, there had also been concerted calls for the Commission to be either heavily reformed or abolished altogether, including from the Conservative Party Co-Chair Amanda Milling, based on arguments that it lacked accountability and was not investigating political finance breaches fairly.¹²

No public consultation was conducted as would normally be expected for a significant change to the oversight arrangements of such an important regulatory body.

Opposition to the Statement during the passage of the Elections Bill

The position of the Labour party

The Labour party in opposition criticised the introduction of the new power, with the shadow minister for democracy in the Commons and member of the Speaker’s Committee Cat Smith calling it *“a dangerous precedent”* which was out of step with similar democracies.¹³

In the Lords, Labour’s frontbench spokesperson on the bill, Baroness Hayman of Ullock, noted that the power:

*“would seem to be political interference in the regulation of our elections ... [and] calls into question the commission’s independence from political control by the Government.”*¹⁴

Labour voted against the motion to approve the final draft Statement when it was put before Parliament in January 2024, with then Labour frontbench spokesperson Florence Eshalomi stating:

“... this Statement is setting a political agenda for an independent watchdog. That is completely wrong ... the contents of the Statement completely undermine the Electoral Commission, representing a dangerous threat to the independence of a vital watchdog.”¹⁵

“The existence of a strategy and policy Statement for the Electoral Commission is inconsistent with the commission’s role as an independent regulator.”

In the Lords, the Labour frontbench also voted against the motion to approve, and put down a motion of regret when it was put before the chamber in February 2024. Lord Khan, Labour frontbench spokesperson, told the Chamber that the Statement:

“is inconsistent with the role that an independent electoral commission plays in a healthy democracy [and] ... has no precedent in the accountability arrangements of electoral commissions in other comparable democracies.”¹⁶

This is a position that Lord Khan maintained shortly after the July 2024 Election – and after becoming a junior minister at the Ministry for Housing, Communities and Local Government (MHCLG). During the King’s speech debate in the Lords, he stated:

“... it is vital for public confidence in our democracy that the independence of the Electoral Commission is upheld. The existence of a strategy and policy Statement for the Electoral Commission is inconsistent with the commission’s role as an independent regulator.”¹⁷

Opposition in the Lords

During scrutiny of the 2022 Elections Bill in the House of Lords, a widely supported amendment was put forward by the former Lord Chief Justice, Lord Judge, to remove the provision to make a Statement. The amendment noted that the provision was “*repugnant*” to the principle that the Electoral Commission should be “*independent of all political influence, whether direct or indirect, over the electoral process.*”¹⁸

Lord Judge argued that it is a “*constitutional imperative*” that “*the Electoral Commission should be politically independent – independent of all political influence, whether direct or indirect.*”¹⁹

He went on to explain that:

“... how our elections are conducted and handled should, as far as possible, be clear of party-political pressures or Executive pressures, influence, control, or power. If they are subjected to any of those, they damage public confidence in how the Electoral Commission will work.”²⁰

As a result of this widespread opposition in the Lords, the government introduced amendments to the draft provision to address concerns. These prevented the Statement from including reference to the Commission’s investigatory or enforcement activity in relation to a particular person. It also limited the Statement’s ability to contain provisions relating to Scottish and Welsh elections and ensured that the Statement had to be fully consulted on and properly approved by Parliament.²¹

Ultimately, due to the government's majority, the Statement remained in the Act which received Royal Assent in April 2022 despite ongoing widespread concerns.

Widespread opposition to the Statement from parliamentary committees, constitutional bodies and the Electoral Commission

The introduction of the power to make a Statement – and the Statement itself – was widely condemned by various parliamentary bodies that scrutinise the work of the Electoral Commission and which examined the proposed measure during the passage of the Elections Act. The table lays out the reasons for their opposition.

Body	Role	Position on Statement	Reasons for opposition to Statement
The Speaker's Committee	Statutory Parliamentary oversight mechanism for the Electoral Commission	Did not support the power to make a Statement	The Statement is: “neither necessary, nor likely to assist the Commission” (December 2022); ²² is “fundamentally flawed and incompatible with the Commission's operational independence”; and may foster the perception that the Commission is “prioritising the interests of one political party over another.” (September 2023) ²³
Select Committee on Housing, Communities and Local Government	Parliamentary committee with oversight for the government department responsible for elections One of three bodies (with the Electoral Commission and the Speaker's Committee) that must be consulted on any draft Statement by law	Did not support the power to make a Statement	Found overwhelming consensus that: “no Statement is necessary at the current time: and no evidence has been provided justifying it” and expressed concerns that “any perception that the Commission is being influenced to favour the particular government of the day ... could seriously damage public confidence in the democratic process.” (November 2022) ²⁴ Following consultation on a revised draft Statement, the Committee restated that: “no Statement is necessary” ²⁵ , and reconfirmed its belief that: “the Statement will not bring any tangible benefits to the exercise of the Commission's functions that would outweigh the serious disadvantages”. ²⁶
The Committee on Standards in Public Life	Independent body advising the Prime Minister on how to uphold standards in public life	Did not, and does not, support the power to make a Statement	In evidence to PACAC (see below), expressed “serious misgivings” about the Statement and that it needs to be demonstrated that the Commission “is entirely independent.” (September 2021) ²⁷ In a letter to the Secretary of State for Levelling up, Housing and Local Communities, stated that the Committee: “remain deeply troubled by the long-term risk to our democratic system that is inherent in provisions which give the government of the day, whatever its political complexion, the opportunity to exert influence on the way the Commission operates.” (April 2022) ²⁸ In a letter to the Democracy Minister, highlighted that the Committee “continue to take the view that it is inappropriate for the government of the day to seek to guide the work of the independent electoral commission.” (July 2025) ²⁹

The Electoral Commission and the Electoral Commissioners	Independent body overseeing elections and political finance	Did not and does not support power to make a Statement	<p>The Commission itself has stated that the Statement: <i>“is not consistent with its role as an independent regulator;”</i> <i>“would enable actual or perceived involvement by the current Government or future UK Governments in the commission’s operational functions and decision making;”</i> <i>“would allow Ministers from one party to shape how electoral law is applied to them and their political competitors.”</i> (December 2021)³⁰</p> <p>The Commissioners wrote to the relevant ministers telling them that the Statement was: <i>“inconsistent with the role that an independent electoral commission plays in a healthy democracy. This independence is fundamental to maintaining confidence and legitimacy in our electoral system.”</i> (February 2022).³¹</p> <p>The Commission told Parliament that the Statement <i>“could undermine its operational independence;”</i> <i>“could multiply opportunities for legal challenge of its decisions, and damage confidence in the impartiality of its enforcement activities”.</i> (January 2024)³²</p> <p>Responded to the Labour government’s electoral strategy by saying that the Commission is: <i>“opposed to the principle of a strategy and policy Statement, by which a government can guide our work. The independence and impartiality of an electoral commission must be clear for voters and campaigners to see, and this form of influence from a government is inconsistent with that role.”</i> (July 2025)³³</p>
Select Committee on Public Administration and Constitutional Affairs (PACAC)	Parliamentary committee with a remit to review constitutional issues including oversight of the Electoral Commission	Expressed concerns about the power to make a Statement	<p>Concluded that the government <i>“has not provided sufficient evidence to justify”</i> why a Statement was <i>“both necessary and proportionate”</i> and recommended relevant clauses be removed and consulted on properly. (December 2021)³⁴</p> <p>Expressed concern at <i>“the Government’s ability to set the strategic direction of the Electoral Commission through the issuance of a Strategy and Policy Statement”</i> and that: <i>“this significantly alters the Electoral Commission’s relationship with Government as an independent body.”</i> (October 2022)³⁵</p>

Part 2: Damaging the UK's international reputation on electoral integrity

The steps taken in the Elections Act 2022 have had a significant impact on the UK's international reputation. The introduction of the Statement:

- Potentially breaches international law obligations and goes against a wide range of international guidelines on the independence of electoral bodies;
- Has resulted in a significant drop in the UK's international ranking for the autonomy of its electoral body; and
- Puts the UK well behind comparable peer democracies, particularly Canada, New Zealand, Australia and Ireland.

Potential breach of international law and falling short of international guidance

Ensuring the independence of the Electoral Commission is a legal obligation under various international treaties signed and ratified by the United Kingdom. Leading electoral law specialist Helen Mountfield KC warned Parliament in 2021 that the introduction of the Statement meant that *“arguably there are breaches of international law.”*³⁶

It is also a key recommendation under a range of global and Commonwealth-wide standards and guidelines for electoral integrity, preventing corruption in political finance and ensuring the autonomy of electoral bodies.

As one of the world's oldest democracies, the UK arguably has a duty to ensure best practice in meeting the standards for electoral body independence outlined in the codes, rules and guidance below.

International body	Instrument/s or text	Type of Instrument or text	Specific provision on independence
United Nations	International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (Article 25) – the right to vote and to be elected at genuine elections (Also reflected in Universal Declaration of Human Rights – Article 21)	International law	Interpretation of Article 25: An independent electoral authority should be established to supervise the electoral process and to ensure that it is conducted fairly, impartially and in accordance with established laws which are compatible with the Covenant. ³⁷
United Nations	2021 UNHCR Handbook on International Human Rights Standards on Elections	Guidance	<i>“electoral management bodies should be able to function independently (in the sense that they should not bend to governmental, political or other partisan influence in their decisions).”</i> ³⁸

Council of Europe Venice Commission	Code of Good Practice in Election Matters 2002	Code of Good Practice	<i>“independent, impartial electoral commissions must be set up.”³⁹ “only transparency, impartiality and independence from politically motivated manipulation will ensure proper administration of the election process.”⁴⁰</i>
Council of Europe	Common rules against corruption in the funding of political parties and electoral campaigns (Article 14)	Recommendation	signatories must have an independent supervisory authority established by law which is <i>“free from improper external influence in discharging its functions.”⁴¹</i>
Organisation for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE)’s Office for Democratic Institutions and Human Rights (ODIHR)	ODIHR Guidelines (jointly with the Venice Commission) on political party regulation 2023	Guidance	electoral oversight bodies should <i>“be non-partisan in nature and meet requirements of independence and impartiality;”⁴²</i> and <i>“effective measures”</i> should be taken in legislation and in state practice to ensure that the body which monitors party funding and campaigns has <i>“independence from political pressure and commitment to impartiality.”</i>
The Commonwealth	Commonwealth Electoral Network Guide on Good Electoral Practices, <i>“Independence of Election Management Bodies”</i> (2016)	Guidance	the Electoral Management Body needs <i>“to be independent and impartial, subject to neither political preference nor political influence.”⁴³</i>
International Foundation for Electoral Systems (IFES) ⁴⁴	Framework for Autonomy and Accountability (2021)	Guidance	recommends that governments should avoid: <i>“interference in policy-making of the independent institution within its defined mandate;”</i> <i>“interference in internal rule-setting and processes of the independent institution;”</i> and that there should be: <i>“no statutory or other requirements for government approval of planning processes and outputs.”⁴⁵</i>
International Institute for Democracy and Electoral Assistance (IDEA)	Primer on Independence in Electoral Management (2021)	Guidance	warns that an electoral body that is <i>“reliant upon an executive to decide its strategic and operational priorities ... may lack functional independence;”</i> and if it <i>“is susceptible to political capture or monopolization by the executive or any political party”⁴⁶</i> it will not be independent in practice.

Given this guidance, expert opinion in the UK, and international consensus it is perhaps unsurprising that international election observers have recommended that the UK’s Statement be reviewed:

- the Commonwealth Parliamentary Association’s election assessment mission report in the July 2024 elections recommended that the government *“review the rationale for the Electoral Commission’s Strategy and Policy Statement and consider the Commission’s view that the statement be abolished to safeguard its independence;”⁴⁷* and
- the ODIHR in its review of the July 2024 elections also recommended that the Statement be reviewed *“to maintain full public confidence in election administration.”⁴⁸*

Sliding down the rankings: losing international leadership on electoral body autonomy

Since its introduction in 2021, the UK has dropped dramatically in international rankings on electoral autonomy.

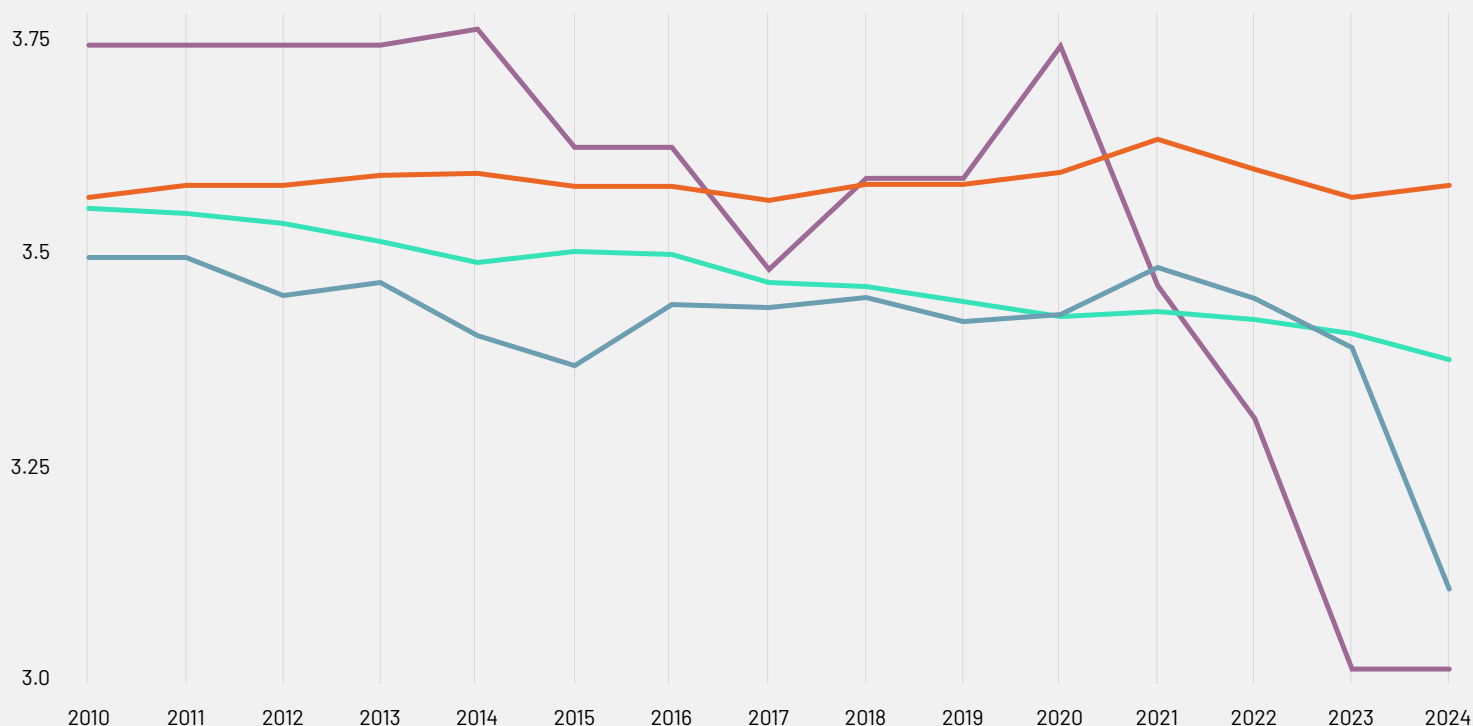
The Varieties of Democracy (V-Dem) index is a tool that quantifies electoral body autonomy. V-Dem's figures are based on expert coding and assessments from thousands of academic and country experts worldwide⁴⁹ who respond to the following question on a 0-4 ordinal scale: "*Does the [Election Management Body (EMB)] have autonomy from government to apply election laws and administrative rules impartially in national elections?*"⁵⁰

Between 2000 and 2020, the UK consistently scored among the highest in the world for electoral body autonomy on V-Dem rankings, scoring 3.74 in 2020. However, between 2020 and 2024, the UK's score fell significantly to 3.12 – placing it below the average for North America, Western Europe and Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) countries.⁵¹ While this slide started in 2020, it became even more pronounced in 2021 after the introduction of the new power was announced:

Figure 1

V-Dem EMB autonomy score

Western Europe United Kingdom North America OECD



Between 2020-2021 the UK fell from 15th to 30th in the rankings on electoral body autonomy, but between 2021 and 2023 it fell from 30th to 52nd.⁵²

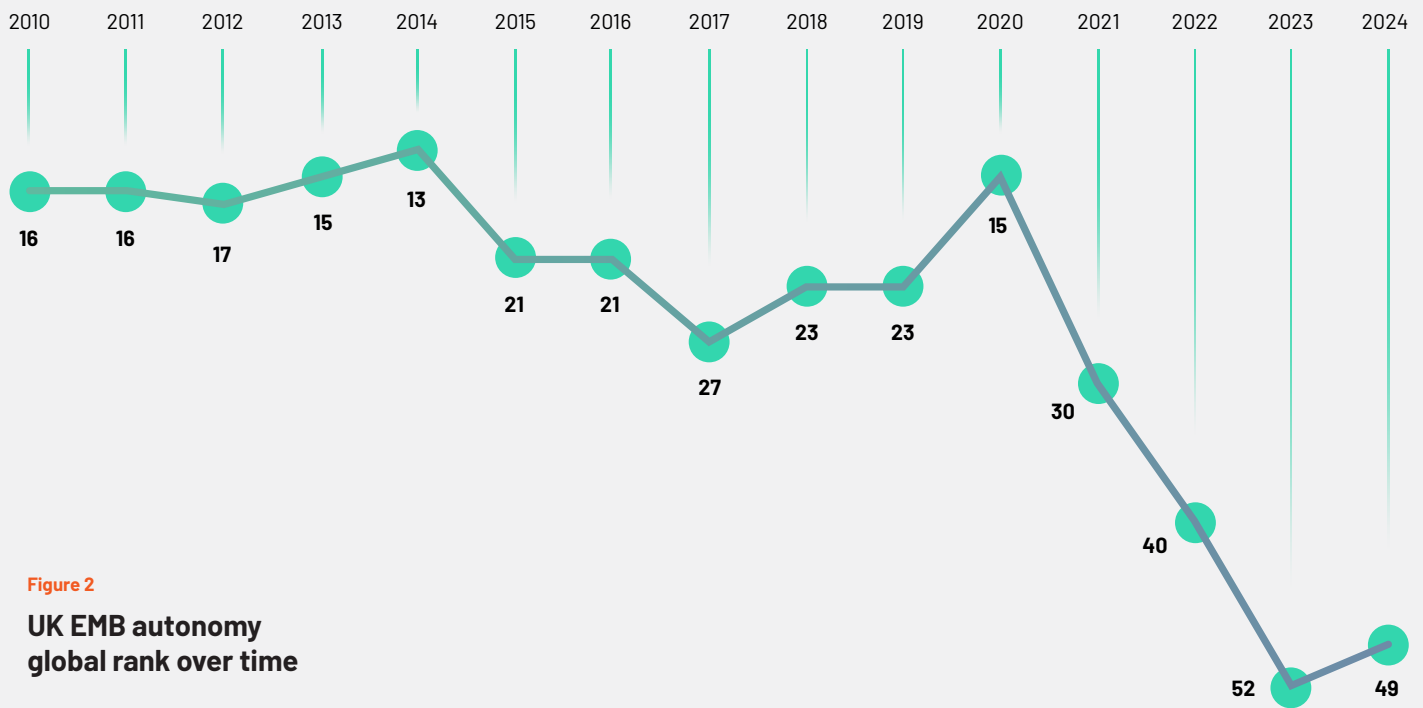


Figure 2

UK EMB autonomy global rank over time

This sharp decrease now places the UK within the 3.1-3.2 range for EMB autonomy, alongside Ghana (3.15), Nepal (3.14) and Croatia (3.12).

Falling behind peer democracies

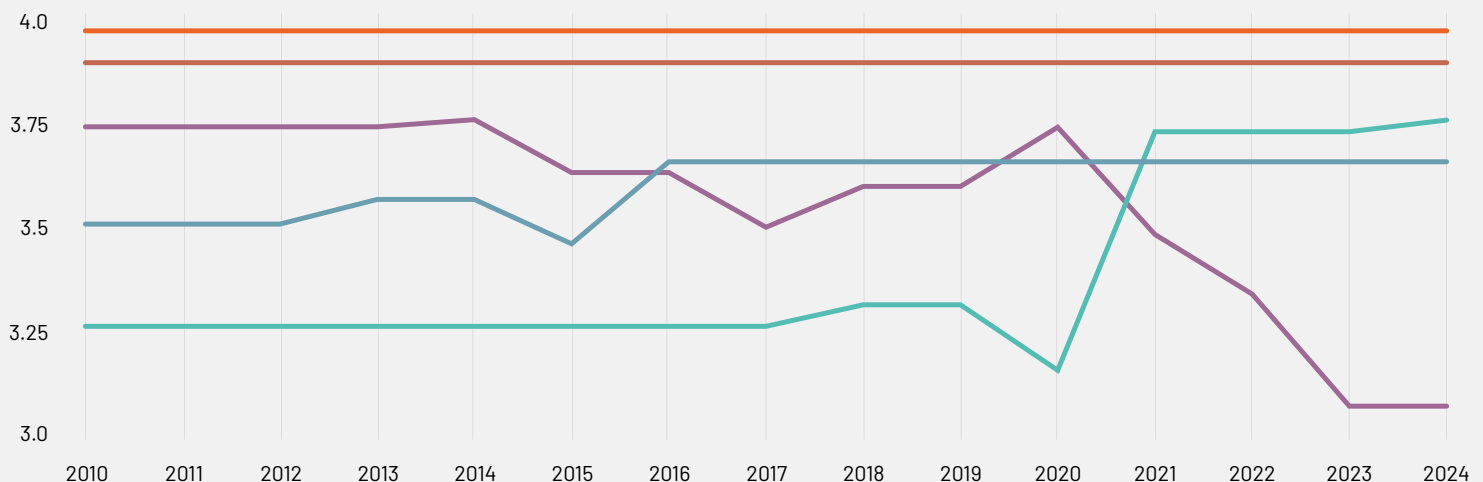
The Electoral Commission has consistently highlighted that the Statement: “*has no precedent in the accountability arrangements of electoral commissions in other comparable democracies, such as Canada, Australia or New Zealand.*”⁵³

The introduction of the Statement has led to the UK falling well behind these peer democracies. In 2020, the UK’s V-Dem score was broadly in line with Canada (3.66), Australia (3.95), and New Zealand (3.88). However, by 2024, the UK was trailing well behind all of them as their scores remained stable:

Figure 3

V-Dem EMB autonomy score

Australia New Zealand United Kingdom Canada Ireland



Our review of the governance frameworks in these peer democracies confirms that no equivalent mechanism for setting the strategic direction of the electoral body exists – and that ministers in these democracies typically have a far more limited role in relation to the body’s oversight.

The table below summarises how strategic direction, ministerial involvement, and oversight structures operate in the UK compared to the comparable democracies:

Country	Who sets strategy?	Ministerial direction?	Ministers involved in oversight?	Who oversees performance?	Specific statutory provision for independence?
UK	Board (must have regard to ministers’ priorities)	Yes – via Strategy and Policy Statement	Yes	Speaker’s Committee (includes the Minister responsible for elections and Secretary of State) and relevant committees in devolved parliaments	No explicit reference (PPERA 2000)
Australia	Electoral Commissioner	No	Yes	Minister (formally), not directly	No explicit reference (Commonwealth Electoral Act 1918)
New Zealand	Board	No (minister informed only)	No	Justice Committee (Cross-party)	Yes – “ <i>The Electoral Commission must act independently in performing its statutory functions and duties</i> ” (Electoral Act 1993)
Canada	CEO (sole authority)	No	No	Parliament (Standing Committee on Procedure and House Affairs – PROC – includes one minister from governing party)	Yes – Elections Canada is an “independent, non-partisan agency of Parliament” (Elections Act 2000)
Ireland	CEO (executes board strategy)	No	No	Parliament via Oireachtas Committees	Yes – “ <i>the Commission shall... be independent in the performance of its functions...</i> ” (Electoral Reform Act 2022)

Part 3: Why the power to make a Statement must be removed

Without proper safeguards, there is real potential for an autocratic government to conduct a serious assault on the independence and impartiality of the UK's Electoral Commission with potentially devastating consequences for our democracy. The Statement sets a dangerous precedent that suggests that the government has a right to interfere in the Commission's activities.

It is important to understand what arguments might lie behind why the government has decided to keep the Statement and whether these withstand scrutiny, and to learn the lessons from the US and Hungary which have experienced significant democratic backsliding. It is also vital to understand how the independence of the Commission could be curtailed by a government with autocratic leanings in order to genuinely future-proof it.

Labour's volte face on the Statement

The Labour government has said that it will now designate its own Strategy and Policy Statement for the Electoral Commission *"to reflect the government's priorities for elections and the Commission's increased roles and responsibilities."*⁵⁴

Some of the thinking behind its decision to keep the power – despite the fact that Labour criticised it in opposition – may lie in a report published by the influential think tank Policy Exchange just a few weeks after Labour won power in July 2024.

Policy Exchange's report, *"Getting A Grip on the System: Restoring Ministerial Authority over the Machine,"*⁵⁵ jointly authored by former government insiders under New Labour and the Conservatives, cites the power to set a strategic and policy framework for the Electoral Commission as something that should be extended across all arm's-length bodies.

Claiming a *"chronic lack of accountability throughout the regulatory system"*, the report argued for a new Bill to *"ensure that all statutory Bodies are subject to Ministerial strategic direction, and that the Chair, executives and board ... can be removed if they do not [follow it]."* It also called for all regulators to be under a statutory duty to exercise their functions proportionately, to enable legal challenge if they do not.⁵⁶

Meanwhile, it directly dismissed criticisms made of the new power for the Electoral Commission on the grounds that *"the broad policy direction of any public body is a matter of public interest and can only be set by Ministers who are accountable to Parliament and to the electorate for this."*

Since taking office in July, this vision of executive-led control over regulatory bodies – that are otherwise accountable to Parliament – has been echoed in various speeches, actions and policies of the new government, culminating in a review announced in April 2025 of arm's-length bodies.⁵⁷

The review seeks to ensure direct ministerial oversight over all policy making that is of “national importance” on the grounds that major decisions affecting the country should be taken “by those elected by the country to do so.” The government has said “every quango across government will be reviewed, with a view to close, merge or bring functions back into departments if its continued existence cannot be justified.”

Constitutional experts at the time also strongly contested the comparison between the Electoral Commission and other regulators

Why the arguments for the Statement don't stack up

The Conservative Government argued when it introduced the Statement that “it is commonplace for the Government and Parliament to set a policy framework by which independent regulators should work.”⁵⁸ This was heavily contested by the Electoral Commission,⁵⁹ and indeed Policy Exchange in its report found that “only a relatively small number of ALBs [arm's-length bodies] have explicit powers for Ministers to set their strategic direction.”⁶⁰

Constitutional experts at the time also strongly contested the comparison between the Electoral Commission and other regulators. The Chair of the Committee on Standards in Public Life told Parliament that it was a “completely false analogy. This is not a regulator that is there for implementing Government policy. This is an Electoral Commission that needs to be independent of Government ... this is a point to do with the overall integrity of our electoral system.”⁶¹

Other constitutional experts also told Parliament that the power to set the policy and strategic direction of the Electoral Commission:

1. **Breached standards of constitutional propriety.** Helen Mountfield KC – a constitutional legal expert – said the introduction of the Statement risked “breaches of the standards of constitutional propriety and perceived fair play that are part of the electoral game as a result of our own unwritten constitutional standards.”⁶²
2. **Created conflicts of interest.** The Constitution Unit's Professor Alan Renwick highlighted that “ministers and parliamentarians should recognise their own potential conflict of interest” in directing the strategic priorities of a body that regulates them.⁶³
3. **Risked undermining democratic principles.** Gavin Millar KC – an electoral law specialist – outlined that the Electoral Commission “should be free from Government influence as a matter of principle, because of its role in a democracy. It should be rather akin to the police or the Crown Prosecution Service in that respect. Its decision making, and indeed its powers to investigate and act, should be framed and guided solely by the public interest and the merits of the evidence before it.”⁶⁴

The current government's review of arm's-length bodies recognises that crucially there must be exceptions to ministerial control. It clarifies that:

“Where independence from Ministerial decision making is essential, such as quangos which scrutinise government or protect the rule of law, then these will remain unaffected.”

This reflects an important caveat – one which the Policy Exchange report acknowledged when it noted that “*there are circumstances where a body carries out sensitive functions for which being distant from Ministers is an important confidence builder.*”

There is little doubt that, given the significant concerns raised by constitutional experts, civil society, parliamentary committees, the Electoral Commission and its oversight body – the Speaker’s Committee – it is essential that the Commission is recognised as one of these exceptions.

There could be no more sensitive function than the role of a regulator who oversees and enforces the rules on the financing and campaigning of political parties

Arguably there could be no more sensitive function than the role of a regulator who oversees and enforces the rules on the financing and campaigning of political parties, one of which might take power and determine the course of the country. The robust independence of the Commission is critical to ensure that elections are held on a level playing field between parties, and that the rules can be enforced just as impartially against those parties that hold power as those who do not.

While there is a potential argument that the Electoral Commission should be more accountable with the increased powers it will be given under the government’s proposed reforms – including increased fining powers and more responsibility for policing candidate finance – it is critical that this should be built on its already extensive accountability to Parliament via the Speaker’s Committee, the Public Administration and Constitution Affairs Committee, and the Committee for Standards in Public Life, and not to the government itself.

Parliamentary oversight in action: the Speaker’s Committee on the Electoral Commission

The Electoral Commission is overseen by the Speaker’s Committee in the House of Commons. Alongside broader functions, it is tasked with:

- Overseeing the ‘Commission’s plan of aims and objectives over the next five years’⁶⁵ (including the Strategy and Policy Statement set out by the relevant minister).
- Examining the Commission’s ‘estimated requirement for resources’⁶⁶ over the next five years, giving it the power to recommend cutting or increasing the Commission’s resources.
- Overseeing the appointment of the Chair of the Electoral Commission and Electoral Commissioners.

The committee is currently composed of: the Speaker; five backbench MPs (appointed by the Speaker)⁶⁷; the chair of the Housing, Communities, and Local Government Committee; the Secretary of State, Minister of State and the Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for local government (appointed by the Prime Minister).⁶⁸

The process by which the backbench MPs on the committee are selected lacks transparency and its reports shed little light on how it operates in practice.

Concerningly, the laws that created and amended the Speaker's Committee do not put in place safeguards to prevent the government holding a majority on the committee – something that happened in the 2019-2020 and 2020-2021 parliamentary sessions.⁶⁹ The government currently holds half the membership of the committee,⁷⁰ giving it significant power over the committee's decisions.

Moreover, as Professor Alistair Clark argues,⁷¹ there are no lay representatives who could act as representatives of voters as a counterbalance to the representation of political parties. There is precedent for this in other parliamentary committees which play important oversight functions including the Speaker's Committee for the Independent Parliamentary Standards Authority and the House of Commons Committee on Standards which have three and seven lay members respectively. Adding lay members could give voters a voice, and further guard against government capture of the committee's strategy and budget.

Professor Clark also argues that allowing ministers to sit on such a parliamentary committee is inherently problematic.⁷² He points out that it reduces the ability of the committee and parliament to hold the Electoral Commission to account, further reducing its independence.

Lessons from countries experiencing democratic backsliding

Developments in the United States (US) and Hungary offer particularly instructive examples of how swiftly democratic safeguards around electoral integrity can backslide under political pressure.

The United States – Project 2025, President Trump and the Federal Electoral Commission (FEC)

The US's Federal Electoral Commission (FEC) has long had structural vulnerabilities relating to its independence. The FEC's six commissioners are appointed by the President, with Congressional confirmation (three of them must be Republicans and three Democrats), and may be removed by the President (if there is cause to do so). Given the even party political balance on the Commission, there has been regular partisan gridlock which has limited the FEC's ability to police or amend campaign finance rules.⁷³

An initiative to end this gridlock – the Freedom to Vote Act 2019 and 2021 – which would have reduced the number of commissioners to five (to allow a majority on decisions) and required one of them to be an independent candidate was blocked by the Republicans.

What did Project 2025 recommend

Project 2025 – which has often been cited as the blueprint for the Trump administration’s policy agenda – had two main priorities for the FEC and electoral regulation. These were that:

- neither the FEC, nor the Department of Justice should be allowed to “overregulate” political activity or engage in “aggressive overenforcement.” It recommended sympathetic commissioners who shared this view be appointed and any efforts to restructure the FEC be blocked.
- There should be an increase in the limits for contributions to candidates and parties which should be indexed to inflation.⁷⁴

The FEC is currently unable to fully enforce campaign finance laws, issue advisory opinions, or conduct investigations

In addition, Project 2025 proposed that an incoming president should assert authority over the whole of the federal bureaucracy, including independent agencies – under what is known as the “unitary executive theory.” Under this theory the president embodies the will of the people and therefore should have control over all decision-making.

What has President Trump done since taking office

Since Trump’s inauguration as president, he has moved forward with this agenda in the following way:

i) Bringing the FEC under executive control

In February 2025, his Executive Order, ‘Ensuring Accountability for All Agencies’, brought independent regulatory agencies, specifically including the FEC, under Presidential control.⁷⁵ Legal attempts to challenge the application of the order to the FEC as unconstitutional by the Democrats have failed on the grounds that there is not yet concrete evidence that the FEC’s independence has been undermined in practice.⁷⁶

In March 2025, Trump issued another Executive Order, ‘Preserving and Protecting the Integrity of American Elections.’⁷⁷ Legal experts have described this as “considerable legal overreach,”⁷⁸ given that the US Constitution specifies that it is only States and Congress that have authority to set electoral rules, not the president.⁷⁹ The Order requires enforcement of new rules that voters must prove their citizenship to be able to vote and prevents electronic methods for counting votes. Experts have warned it would disenfranchise millions of voters.⁸⁰

Meanwhile, in an unprecedented move in February 2025, President Trump removed a Democratic FEC Commissioner, Ellen Weintraub – a move some legal experts have described as illegal since no ‘cause’ was given.⁸¹ He has yet to replace a Republican Commissioner who resigned at the end of April 2025, leaving the FEC below its minimum quorum of four commissioners. As a result, the FEC is currently unable to fully enforce campaign finance laws, issue advisory opinions, or conduct investigations.⁸²

ii) Taking steps to prevent enforcement of election finance laws

At the same time, the Trump administration has taken steps to seriously curtail enforcement of the US' foreign interference laws. These laws were used to investigate Trump's first presidential campaign. Meanwhile, Trump was said to be frustrated at the failure of independent agencies enforcing these rules to support his allegations that the 2020 elections were 'stolen'.⁸³

These steps include:

- Disbanding the FBI's Foreign Influence Taskforce in February 2025;⁸⁴
- Limiting criminal enforcement of the Foreign Agents Registration Act (FARA);⁸⁵
- Freezing all election security activity by the Cybersecurity and Infrastructure Security Agency (CISA) and axing the agency's key election-related specialists and critical intelligence-sharing mechanisms;⁸⁶ and
- Closing the State Department's Counter Foreign Information Manipulation and Interference (R/FIMI) Centre on grounds that it censored conservative American speech.⁸⁷

iii) Taking steps to remove spending limits

Separately, Republican groups and individuals including Vice-President JD Vance are taking legal steps to challenge limits to how much can be spent on campaign advertising by candidates and political parties on the grounds it breaches First Amendment rights. The case is now before the Supreme Court and if successful would allow unlimited spending by US political parties and candidates on campaign ads.⁸⁸

Hungary – Orbán's transformation of the National Election Committee (NEC)

After taking office in 2010, Victor Orbán moved swiftly to rewrite Hungary's electoral laws in favour of his ruling party Fidesz. Using his super majority in Hungary's parliament, Orbán introduced a new constitution which reshaped Hungary's electoral system, including redrawing constituency boundaries in favour of a party with a majority, and making it harder for smaller parties to campaign, among other reforms.⁸⁹ These reforms have played a significant role in ensuring Orbán has won the subsequent three elections and remains in power.

The reforms have extended to how Hungary's National Election Commission (NEC) operates, with international electoral observers consistently finding significant issues with how it functions as an independent body. This included the ODIHR finding:

- The NEC to be a "*partisan committee*" following reforms to the appointment process of permanent Commissioners (ODIHR report on elections in 2014);⁹⁰
- Considerable discretionary powers for the president in proposing members of the Commission to be approved by Parliament, and lack of cross-party oversight at key moments of the electoral cycle (ODIHR report on elections in 2018);⁹¹
- Weak enforcement of complaints submitted to the NEC – with many complaints dismissed without proper assessment of their substance or "*sound reasoning*" (ODIHR reports on 2018 and 2022 elections).⁹²

As a result, Freedom House has assessed that Hungary's "*electoral authorities are not independent*."⁹³ This has damaged Hungary's standing as a democratic nation with Hungary now classified as "*an electoral autocracy*" by members of the European Parliament,⁹⁴ and the ODIHR finding repeatedly that Hungary has not run fair elections.⁹⁵

Freedom House has assessed that Hungary's "electoral authorities are not independent."

"Giving a toddler a gun": how a Statement could be used to undermine democracy

In 2021, Lord Evans, then Chair of the Committee on Standards in Public Life and a former Director-General of the Security Service (MI5), told Parliament that the introduction of the new power to set a Statement "*is a bit like giving a toddler a gun. It may not immediately lead to disaster but it is an extremely dangerous thing to do.*"⁹⁶

This warning is worth heeding. A future government with autocratic leanings could use the Statement to do the following things:

i. Increase voter mistrust in the administration of elections

The Statement could require the Commission to "*have regard*" to government priorities which might include:

- Making it more difficult for those without certain forms of ID to vote (the Trump administration for instance has focused on requiring passports to be eligible to register despite only 48% of US citizens holding passports) thus undoing any reforms in this regard made under the forthcoming Elections Bill, and
- Stipulating that the existing form of vote-counting must be amended on grounds that it currently can't be trusted. (President Bolsonaro in Brazil and President Trump have both sought to ban any form of digital count in elections as part of broader rhetoric about count tampering for which there was little evidence,⁹⁷ but it could also involve pushing for forms of digital counting which might be open to manipulation).

This might be an extension of the existing Statement set under the Conservative government which required the Commission to focus on its priority of tackling voter fraud through Voter ID – which was widely criticised at the time for focusing on a problem for which there was little evidence.⁹⁸

ii. Limit enforcement of political finance rules

A new government could set 'free speech' as an absolute priority, and use this to require the Commission to limit regulation of political parties and their funding, as well as how third-party campaigners operate and their spending is regulated. This focus on free

speech in politics was at the heart of the *Citizens United* ruling in the US,⁹⁹ which has allowed unlimited fundraising and spending on political campaigns by third parties.¹⁰⁰

This might be an extension of the existing Statement set under the Conservative government which required “*proportionate enforcement*” in relation to new digital rules, and for the Commission to adopt supposed “*best practice*” from other regulators “*including where appropriate the use of requests for improvements before resorting to fines.*”¹⁰¹

Conclusion

There is no doubt that the Electoral Commission must be accountable in performing its dual functions of administering elections and regulating political finance effectively. However, in order to preserve trust in the UK’s electoral processes, and in line with constitutional principles, it is critical that this accountability is to Parliament and not to the government of the day.

As recent trajectories in both the US and Hungary show, there are a range of avenues by which electoral integrity can be undermined. For that reason, an electoral regulator is a particularly unique form of regulator that must have accountability mechanisms that ensure it is resilient to a range of different threats. These threats might include executive overreach, the use of a supermajority to rewrite the rules in favour of a governing party, or as we saw at the time of the introduction of the Statement in the UK, threats of abolishment of the Commission itself in the face of unfavourable enforcement outcomes against a ruling party.

That requires the accountability from Parliament to be robustly cross-party, free from majority capture, and able to command public confidence. And the Electoral Commission must be statutorily protected from any attempt to influence how it performs its functions by ministers.

The creation of a power to set a Statement by the government for the Commission was strongly criticised by parliamentary bodies and constitutional experts in the UK. It breaches numerous international guidelines, and its introduction has resulted in the UK’s international reputation for the independence of its elections being badly damaged.

The forthcoming Elections Bill is an opportunity for parliamentarians and the public to make clear that a fully independent Electoral Commission is at the heart of future-proofing and protecting our democracy.

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We are grateful to expert input and comment from Dr Alistair Clarke, Dr Jess Garland, Bob Posner, Steve Goodrich, Magnus Ohman and Tom Brake.

Funded by the JRSST Charitable Trust.

The JRSST Charitable Trust has supported this work in recognition of the importance of the issue. The facts presented and the views expressed in this report are, however, those of the authors and not necessarily those of the Trust.



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