In depth: campaigning at the 2019 UK Parliamentary general election   You are in the UK general elections section Home UK general elections On this page Misleading campaign techniques risk undermining voters' trust The rules for campaigners need modernising for the digital age Tackling intimidation of candidates requires a holistic approach Steps taken to secure the democratic processes must continue What next First published: 21 April 2020 Last updated: 21 April 2020 Overview People were concerned about misleading campaign techniques from across the political spectrum, and bias in the media. We received a large number of complaints raising concerns about the presentation, tone and content of election campaigns Transparency about who is behind political campaigns online at elections is important for people in the UK. In our research after the election, nearly three quarters of people agreed that it was important for them to know who produced the political information they see online, but less than a third agreed that they can find out who has produced it A significant number of candidates who responded to our survey said they experienced intimidation, with a sixth experiencing significant levels. Online abuse was the most common activity mentioned by those who had experienced problems The UK Government and other bodies monitored digital campaigning during the election period for risks to democratic processes from foreign interference and organised disinformation. The UK Government has said that work to examine these aspects after the election is ongoing Misleading campaign techniques risk undermining voters' trust Democracies rely on campaigners being able to communicate with voters. In return, voters need to be able to trust the information that campaigners are giving them. Campaigning at the 2019 election At the 2019 general election, voters were concerned about the use of misleading campaign techniques by campaigners from across the political spectrum. During the campaign period, we reminded campaigners that voters are entitled to transparency and integrity, and called on all campaigners to undertake their vital role responsibly. Voting at a polling station A voter casting their vote in a polling station Where voters got information Voters got information about candidates and parties at the election from a range of different sources. Over half the people who took part in our survey after the election said they saw campaign materials from parties and candidates. Around a third said they got information from the televised leader debates or online sources. 55% of people who took part in our research after the election said that they got information from leaflets/flyers 32% from a party leader debate on television 29% from newspapers or news websites 24% from social media posts and adverts by campaigners During the election period, voters raised concerns directly with us and other regulators about both printed and digital material that some campaigners were using at the election. They were concerned about the presentation, labelling or layout of campaign material that they thought was misleading, and also about the messaging and content of some campaigns. Public concerns about misleading campaign techniques Public concerns about misleading campaign techniques Some campaigners branded their social media pages in ways that meant it wasn't clear who was responsible for them, or used misleading website links to encourage people to visit their sites. Other examples used edited video clips to present their opponents negatively Information about who was responsible for printed campaign material wasn't always clear or easily readable. Some digital campaign material didn't have any information about its source at all Some leaflets were designed to look like local newspapers. Others used colours normally associated with other parties Some statistics were incorrectly quoted or presented in misleading

ways, and without important context Use of imprints s should include information about themselves – called an 'imprint' – on their campaign material. The law already requires them to do this for printed material in Great Britain, but not in Northern Ireland. At this election there were issues with some campaigners' materials in Northern Ireland that didn't say who was responsible for them. The UK Government should update the law so that election campaigners in Northern Ireland have to put imprints on their printed materials. There were also complaints from voters in Great Britain because some campaigners included imprints that were not clear on letters or leaflets. All campaigners should respect the spirit of the imprint rules and provide easily readable information about themselves. There is evidence from our research after the election that concerns about truthfulness and transparency are having an impact on public trust and confidence: More than half of people (58%) agreed with the statement that, in general, "campaigning online is untrue or misleading" A similar proportion (60%) disagreed that "information available online about politics is trustworthy" Overall, nearly one in five people (18%) said they were not confident the election was well-run, and of these people nearly half (49%) selected as a reason that "campaigning was based on incorrect information/made untrue claims" When we asked people to prioritise their concerns about the election from a list of issues, two thirds of people (67%) said "media bias" was a problem and half (52%) said "inadequate control of political activity on social media" was a problem We have signalled our concern about these issues before. If voters lose trust and confidence in political campaigning, democracy as a whole will suffer. s, candidates and parties themselves need to take greater responsibility for the presentation and content of campaigns they run and the impact of their activities on public confidence in elections. We cannot afford to miss the window of opportunity between now and the next scheduled general election. There needs to be real change to protect trust and confidence in campaigns at future elections and the integrity of our democracy. It will take governments, parties, campaigners, social media companies and regulators to work together to agree new laws or standards of conduct. We will support this work. The rules for campaigners need modernising for the digital age New digital tools and channels have changed the campaigning landscape in the UK significantly in the last decade. Digital campaigning can be a force for good, by encouraging political dialogue and debate. However, we are seeing evidence that concerns about transparency are beginning to overshadow these benefits. This is having an impact on public trust and confidence in campaigns. electoral law Election law books concerns about transparency Our research after the election confirmed that transparency about who is behind political campaigns online at elections is important for people in the UK: Nearly three quarters of people (72%) agreed that it was important for them to know who produced the political information they see online Less than a third (29%) agreed that they can find out who has produced the political information they see online Nearly half (46%) agreed that they were concerned about why and how political ads were targeted at them The imprint rules only apply to printed material and don't cover digital material. This is a major gap in the rules that require campaigners to provide information about themselves on their campaign material. The UK Government has confirmed that it will consult on new rules for imprints on digital campaigning. We will help develop these new rules so they provide transparency for voters and are workable for campaigners. The social media companies should make it straightforward for campaigners to put imprints on both unpaid and paid digital material when it is a legal requirement. The UK Government should also set out plans to modernise the rules for campaigners to keep pace with the digital age. The law should tell campaigners

and digital platforms the amount and type of information they need to give to voters, the media, other campaigners and regulators, including to us. At this election, Facebook, Google and Snapchat published libraries and reports of the political advertising run on their platforms and channels during the election. They also required political advertisers to put 'Paid for by' disclaimers on their political adverts. These measures are a step in the right direction and they enabled us to see who is paying to place adverts. But they still don't provide enough information about digital campaigning. Limitations of social media transparency measures and ways forward Limitations of social media transparency measures and ways forward The social media companies each have different definitions of political advertising which do not completely align with election law. They should ensure their policies fit the legal definitions of election campaigning The 'Paid for by' disclaimers don't always make it clear who is behind advertising. Disclaimers should include the name of the person or organisation who authorised the election campaign advert, not just a campaign name or slogan The companies' policies don't require unpaid election campaign material to be labelled as political material, and this means they won't appear in the advert libraries. Their policies should cover unpaid election campaigning that campaigners publish to reach voters and to be shared by others Facebook and Google provide very broad information about where adverts were targeted. They should show which constituencies were targeted, if this is the case. This information should be embedded in the advert itself and in the advert libraries The advert libraries contain ranges of amounts campaigners spend. They should provide precise figures for amounts spent. Advert libraries These measures are voluntary, and not every company that runs political advertising has created special labelling or advert libraries. They should be a legal requirement so that we and voters can see more information about who is campaigning. Social media companies should be required to provide more detailed and accurate data about election campaigns and spending in their ad libraries so we and voters can see more information about who is campaigning. The companies themselves have said that they would welcome clear and consistent requirements for how they should deal with campaign material. The UK Government should set out how it might be possible to achieve this. For example, through the proposed new online harms regulatory framework. But it is not just social media companies that need to provide greater transparency about campaign spending at elections. s should also be responsible for increasing transparency about their campaigning. In 2018 we said they should have to provide more detailed information about their spending after an election. We continue to recommend this and will talk with campaigners about how it could work in practice. The UK Government should include proposals for implementing this recommendation in its planned consultation on electoral integrity to refresh our laws for the digital age. Tackling intimidation of candidates requires a holistic approach Open political debate is an essential part of elections, but there has been increasing concern at recent elections about intimidating and threatening behaviour towards candidates and campaigners. Police in a count centre Police officers in a count centre Responding to intimidation of candidates In response to these concerns, we asked candidates a wide range of questions about whether they had experienced, or had concerns about, threats, abuse or intimidation. This was the first time we have focused on this topic in our survey of candidates after the election. Some told us that they experienced significant and unacceptable levels of threats, abuse or intimidation. Online abuse was the type of activity most commonly mentioned by those who had experienced problems. We received feedback from 776 candidates, representing just under a quarter of the total who

stood for election. Only a quarter of those candidates who responded (27%) said that they had no problem at all with threats, abuse or intimidation More than half (54%) of those candidates who gave us feedback said they had concerns about standing for election that related to threats, abuse or intimidation Three quarters of respondents (73%) said that they had experienced some abuse, threats or intimidation, and a sixth said they experienced significant levels. Some candidates felt there was co-ordinated abuse and intimidation by supporters of other parties or causes The most common type of abuse, threats or intimidation was online (mentioned by 82% of people who gave us feedback), but we also heard reports of verbal abuse and printed material Nearly one in ten who said they had experienced abuse (9%) said it had included physical abuse Data provided by UK police forces after the election shows that just over half (54%) had received reports of threats, abuse or intimidation towards candidates or those campaigning on their behalf. Feedback from candidates "In order to protect our democracy we need to be much more visible in dealing with intimidation and show a zero tolerance for what is at the end of the day election interference and trying to influence the outcome of an election." "It's a more complex issue than it being 'someone's' fault or responsibility. It's a wider social problem encompassing democracy, respect for the democratic process and the undermining and constant hyena like obsession with finding fault and chastising those in public life." Feedback from candidates Candidate survey responses Many candidates told us that they felt supported by their political party or the police when it came to combating intimidation or abuse. The majority of respondents felt well supported by their political party (57%) and around two-fifths (43%) by the police. There was support to help candidates run respectful campaigns and to protect themselves from abuse online or at public events. This included guidance that we published jointly with the National Police Chiefs' Council Crown Prosecution Service and the College of Policing. There were also a number of initiatives that highlighted positive behaviours that candidates could pledge to contribute to a respectful election campaign. During the election, some of the social media companies also provided guidance for candidates about online safety and set up a reporting channel to flag intimidating content. Despite this, nearly seven in ten candidates (69%) said that they did not feel supported at all by social media companies. We agree with the conclusions of a review into intimidation in public life by the Committee on Standards in Public Life (CSPL) which recommended in 2018 that tackling intimidation of candidates and others needs a holistic approach. It is up to everyone involved in the political process to consider the effects of their behaviour on UK democracy. Political parties must continue to work together with the CSPL on the Joint Standard of Conduct for parties and their members that they have developed with independent support from the Jo Cox Foundation. The UK Government should continue with measures to tackle intimidatory behaviour. It should set out how it intends to create an electoral offence for intimidation of candidates and campaigners, and confirm whether it will place a duty of care on social media companies through its proposed online harms regulatory framework Social media companies themselves should actively take steps to limit intimidatory behaviour online; this includes taking forward the actions for social media companies proposed by the CSPL Steps taken to secure the democratic processes must continue Many people and organisations were and remain concerned about the risks of foreign interference or organised disinformation. Several bodies monitored these risks during the election. What UK Government did in 2019 The UK Government put a coordinated structure in place to identify and respond to emerging issues and protect the safety and security of democratic processes, and

we took part in this group A number of academic researchers and groups studied how people accessed and shared news about the election on social media like Facebook and Twitter. This included monitoring for evidence of junk news or disinformation It is important not to be complacent about these risks and the UK Government has said that work to examine these aspects after the election is ongoing. In 2018, we identified areas where election law could be improved to strengthen protections against foreign interference at future elections. The UK Government should set out how it will take these recommendations forward as part of its planned consultation on foreign interference: The law should be clear that spending on election or referendum campaigns by foreign organisations or individuals is not allowed The controls on donations and loans for political parties and campaigners should be improved, building on approaches for enhanced due diligence and risk assessment used in financial regulation We will work with the government to consider how these proposed laws could be enforced and ensure they do not have a disproportionate impact on free speech. What next? What next? Read about how the 2019 general election was run Find out what we're doing to make digital campaigning more transparent Or, go back and read our overview Related content Report overview: 2019 UK Parliamentary general election Read our full report on the 2019 UK Parliamentary general election. Find out how it was run, voters' experience, candidates' experience, challenges faced, and how they'll be addressed In depth: delivering the 2019 UK Parliamentary general election Take an in depth look at how the 2019 UK Parliamentary general election was run. Find out about the experience for voters and electoral administrators Report: How the 2017 UK general election was run Read our report about how the 2017 general election was run Results and turnout at the 2017 UK general election View the results and turnout at the 2017 general election