

Postal votes and allegations of electoral fraud in Peterborough's by-election

Timothy Peace and **Parveen Akhtar** discuss the allegations of electoral malpractice in the recent Peterborough by-election in which Labour won by 683 votes. While an initial police inquiry found that no offences were revealed, they explain why certain areas are more susceptible to such claims than others.



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After its success in the European Parliament elections, many expected Nigel Farage's Brexit Party to follow this result by electing [its first MP](#) at the subsequent by-election in Peterborough, held on 6 June. Called because the sitting Labour MP Fiona Onasanya was forced out of office following a conviction, few expected Labour to retain the seat. So when their candidate Lisa Forbes won the contest by just 683 votes, many observers were surprised even if nothing untoward was initially mentioned as a reason for her victory.

Fast forward just over a week after the result and Nigel Farage was [claiming that](#) Peterborough was a 'rotten borough' and that postal voting was producing the 'wrong results'. Out of the 33,998 ballot papers counted, 9,898 were postal votes, with approximately 400 of these being rejected because of discrepancies in details including signatures and dates of births not matching the council records. Cambridgeshire Police subsequently confirmed that it was investigating [five allegations of electoral irregularities](#), three of which related to postal votes, with one allegation of bribery and corruption and another involving a breach of the privacy of the vote. Speculation about potential malpractice was also suggested in various [media reports](#) and the social media rumour mill [went into overdrive](#).

Electoral malpractice is relatively rare in the UK, but the allegations of irregularities involving postal votes, bribery and corruption in the Peterborough by-election have once again thrown the spotlight on this issue and its relation to voters from the South Asian community. A report by the [Electoral Commission](#) published in 2014 identified 16 local authority areas, including Peterborough, where there was a greater risk of cases of alleged electoral fraud being reported. These were all areas which are known to have a significant South Asian presence and the authors reported receiving strongly held views about electoral fraud being 'more likely to be committed by or in support of candidates standing for election in areas which are largely or predominately populated by some South Asian communities, specifically those with roots in parts of Pakistan or Bangladesh.'

The Electoral Commission subsequently commissioned a report, [Understanding Electoral Fraud Vulnerability in Pakistani and Bangladeshi Origin Communities](#). The authors identified seven main sources of vulnerability to fraud and recommended several solutions including stricter and more transparent guidelines to political parties and candidates on postal vote handling. Just a few months later, this issue became national news when the Mayor of the London Borough of Tower Hamlets was [removed from office](#) after he was found guilty of electoral fraud. The case also prompted the government to ask Sir Eric Pickles to carry out an [independent review into electoral fraud](#). A series of 50 recommendations were outlined in the report, including clamping down on postal vote 'harvesting' by political activists. [Subsequent research](#) also outlined how community leaders or elders can 'take advantage of the postal voting on demand system to commit personation and tamper with ballots.'

In our research into British-Pakistani communities and local politics in Bradford and Birmingham, issues of electoral fraud were regularly invoked by research participants. In the constituency of Bradford West, one political activist [recounted](#) how people would often go around houses to collect people's postal votes. However, it was also stressed that this fraudulent practice was not only committed by supporters of the Labour Party. Indeed, back in 2010, five men, including two former councillors, [were jailed](#) for their part in a failed postal votes scam intended to benefit a Conservative candidate.

The introduction of postal voting on demand in the early 2000s certainly provided a very clear opportunity for anyone tempted to influence electoral outcomes through dubious means. Labour councillors [convicted of fraud](#) in Birmingham's 2004 local elections continue to maintain their innocence, with one blaming instead South Asian family structures where the male head of the household [fill in postal ballot papers on behalf of wives, sons and daughters](#). It is clear that postal voting strengthened the hand of community or 'biraderi' leaders who view this as a convenient way to deliver a bloc vote. However, rather than illegal practices such as vote rigging, many people we spoke to were more concerned about the *legal* means through which these biraderi connections can still influence local politics.

This was noted in relation to the candidate selection contests, despite repeated attempts by the Labour Party to improve the transparency of its selection contests in the wake of the Bradford by-election result in 2012. [According to those we interviewed](#), the local Constituency Labour Party in several locations is dominated by key biraderis and candidate selection is influenced by the mobilisation of biraderi members who are signed up to the Constituency Labour Party to ensure they have a vote in the selection process. This despite the fact that the influence of such community leaders has been waning and that [young people in particular are more likely to reject practices](#) which are either corrupt or seriously disenfranchise them from the political process.

The allegations of irregularities in Peterborough centre around the potential misuse of postal votes although the initial police inquiry found that [no offences were revealed](#) with the allegations relating to postal votes. If any misconduct is proven to have taken place, it will be particularly embarrassing for the government given that it had selected Tower Hamlets and Peterborough as the locations for [postal voting pilots](#) at the local elections of May 2018 to test measures to improve the integrity of the postal vote process.

The Brexit Party have now announced that they will challenge the Peterborough by-election result and [lodge a petition](#) under the Representation of the People Act 1983. It is to be hoped that the results of any such investigation can be announced sooner rather than later as the current debate is dominated by hearsay. What is certain is that more work needs to be done to ensure that the integrity of the electoral process is maintained. Postal voting can be a tool for enfranchisement and inclusive democracy. It should remain an option for those who require or desire it. At the same time, robust mechanisms of countering possible malpractice would help to restore confidence amidst recurrent allegations of fraud.

*This article gives the views of the authors, and not the position of Democratic Audit. It was first published [LSE British Politics and Policy blog](#). It draws on the authors' [published work](#) in the *Journal of Ethnic and Migration Studies*.*

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