



# Professor David Denver

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[journals.sagepub.com/home/psrev](https://journals.sagepub.com/home/psrev)**Justin Fisher<sup>1</sup>**  **and Philip Cowley<sup>2</sup>**

Professor David Denver, who died in August 2024, made an outstanding contribution to the study of elections, public opinion and parties.

The legacy of his scholarly work is considerable, most obviously in his pioneering work on election campaigning. Experiments are now *de rigueur* in the discipline, but in 1970, Denver (along with John Bochel) conducted the first field experiment in British political science, demonstrating the electoral impact of campaigns on the ground. Published in the *British Journal of Political Science* in 1971, this work was the first in a long line of analysis which turned on its head what was at that point the conventional approach to the analysis of British elections. Rather than being an ineffective relic, Denver showed that local campaigning had the potential to alter the outcome.

In 1992, Denver ran the first comprehensive study of constituency-level campaigning in the UK. Together with Gordon Hands, he pioneered a survey of election agents, producing a robust measure of campaign intensity that captured both those activities that cost money, and those which were supplied free by volunteers – something that the various surrogate measures of campaign intensity used previously had not been successful in doing. The findings – that constituency campaigns did deliver electoral payoffs, but only if they were targeted properly – represented another significant challenge to the mainstream view, and after further studies at subsequent elections, it was this view that prevailed and became the mainstream. In response to the clear academic evidence of the electoral impact of constituency campaigns, party professionals put much more organisational effort into these activities. David Denver delivered impact before impact was a thing.

He was also the author of what can best be described as the textbook textbook. *Elections and Voters in Britain* (previously *Elections and Voting Behaviour in Britain*) is now in its sixth iteration and is perhaps the best general book on British elections around. Countless students (and many academics), both in Britain and beyond, will attest to the book's ability to make complicated topics straightforward to understand. The writing was superb – a Denver characteristic – and beneath the apparent simplicity of the text lay a detailed understanding of the field. The book has been inspirational to many, making the topics come alive and delivering significant understanding of the main issues in the study of British elections.

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He also made an enormous contribution in terms of the organisation and infrastructure of the British elections, public opinion and party community. He was a lead member of the original ‘Gang of Four’ (along with Ivor Crewe, Pippa Norris and David Broughton) who set up the Elections Public Opinion and Parties (EPOP) specialist group of the Political Studies Association (PSA) in 1990. The group and its activities grew rapidly. There was a very successful annual conference, regular panels at the PSA and initially an annual publication – the *British Elections & Parties Yearbook* succeeded by the establishment of the very successful *Journal of Elections, Public Opinion & Parties*, along with other books. EPOP has grown to be one of the largest, most successful and, increasingly, the most international organisation of elections, public opinion and party scholars in the world. Denver shouldered the bulk of the organisational burden (particularly in the days when EPOP subs were paid by cheque into the special bank account that he had set up for this purpose), but he was also central to the group’s ethos. EPOP conferences are renowned not only for the strength of the academic endeavour but also for their friendliness and atmosphere of encouragement. That welcoming culture of inclusion is in a large part down to David Denver. He ensured that in EPOP’s early days, the conference was not just an event for senior colleagues. He actively encouraged younger colleagues to attend and made all feel welcome, regardless of their career stage.

He continued to be a regular attendee at the EPOP conference some years after his retirement, always making thought-provoking interjections. Indeed, while retirement brought with it the chance to play more golf, it did not mark an end to David’s work. He continued to write and review (woe betide the poorly written paper), and his encyclopaedic knowledge of Scottish electoral geography helped him produce the estimates of constituency boundaries used in the analysis of the general election in July 2024.

David Denver’s contribution to the study of elections, public opinion and parties and political science more generally was immense. We were privileged to know and work with him, and he will be greatly missed.

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