



## Making elections happen: Five challenges facing today's electoral administrators

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Multiple general and local elections, a new system of electoral registration, and referendums on Scottish independence and UK membership of the European Union have stretched – almost to breaking point – the resources of the country's electoral administrators. And this year, their efforts to continue providing electoral services to the high standard they always strive for has been tested further.

Our customers often joke that they're asked what they do all year round when elections aren't being held. The reality is that the work of an electoral team is constant and ongoing – it isn't just a case of turning up on polling day.

Here are just five of the major challenges facing the people who deliver democracy today...

### **1. Short timelines: The European Parliament Elections**

It's the poll that UK voters weren't expecting to be a part of, but given Brexit didn't happen as planned, the UK was obliged to take part in the elections to the European Parliament.

Making elections happen is no small matter – it involves months of planning and many different agencies, including central and local authorities, non-statutory bodies, partners and contractors, such as the police and postal services. Printing of ballot papers, arrangements for postal voting, booking polling stations and arranging venues for election counts are just some of the elements that need to be confirmed well in advance of polling day.



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When the Government confirmed in April that the UK would take part in the European Parliament elections on 23 May, this left electoral administrators with just a few weeks to organise a poll that would usually take months to prepare. Things were further complicated by unpredictable factors. Would enough staff be available to count the votes on a bank holiday weekend? And, with forecasts of a higher than expected turnout, would extra ballot boxes be needed?

Initially, it looked as if the elections would be delivered smoothly. However, on Thursday morning (23 May 2019), **reports** began to emerge of citizens from other EU countries being denied the right to vote. Thousands took to social media under the hashtag #deniedmyvote to complain that they had either been turned away from polling stations or barred from voting because of delays in registering them.

The Electoral Commission, which oversees UK elections, acknowledged the problems, and said the very short notice of the UK's participation in the EU elections had significantly affected election administrators' ability to inform and register citizens of other EU states intending to vote in the UK.

Cat Smith, the shadow minister for voter engagement highlighted the difficulties facing electoral services teams: *"This has caused havoc for electoral administrators tasked with delivering a national poll with extremely short notice."*

The Electoral Commission has promised to review the process, but its chief executive, Bob Posner, has **indicated** that there are broader lessons to learn:

*"We have argued for some time that the failure of governments and parliament to properly maintain and update electoral law, and to address the pressures on local authorities, has built up significant risks for well-run elections. It is time that these warnings are properly heard and acted upon."*

## **2. Changing practices: Trialling voter ID**

In 2018, five areas in England piloted identity checks at polling stations. The trial followed a 2016 government-sponsored **review** of electoral fraud which recommended ID checks to prevent vote stealing.

Earlier this month, further pilots took place during local elections, involving 10 areas of England, including Derby, Mid Sussex, North West Leicestershire and Pendle. The trials required voters to show different types of photo ID and/or non-photo ID in order to be given a ballot paper.

The pilot schemes involved additional work for electoral administrators. Voters had to be informed well in advance of polling day about which forms of identification were valid in each area, and staff required additional training on delivering the identification requirements. In three areas, voters could apply for local identification cards, while two areas used technology to scan QR codes on voters' polling cards. Before the 2019 pilots began, two councils pulled out of the trial, with one believing it was too much work on top of a boundary review, and another expressing concerns about the time needed to inform the electorate about the changes.



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**Benjamin Highton**  
**Political Science and Politics**  
**January 2006**

Although an **evaluation** of the 2018 trials found that Returning Officers and their staff in polling stations were able to run the new processes without any significant problems, the Electoral Commission was not able to draw definitive conclusions on how a voter identification requirement would operate in the future across the country, or at polls with higher levels of turnout.

The authors of the report also found it impossible to say whether the requirements actually prevented attempts to commit electoral fraud at elections. Critics of Voter ID say the relatively low levels of fraud in UK elections mean identification is unnecessary, and could put some voters off – particularly the elderly, homeless and people with disabilities – if they do not have the necessary documentation.

It’s still too early to assess the impact of the 2019 trials, but a Local Government Chronicle **analysis** of the pilots found that almost 700 people were turned away from polling stations operating voter ID pilots and did not return.

### **3. A question of cash: Funding elections**

*“Administering elections requires ample resources. Administering them well requires even more.”* – Benjamin Highton: Political Science and Politics, January 2006

Funding arrangements for elections in the UK are highly complex, with separate personnel and operational costs for electoral registration and elections / referenda, and funding coming from local and central government. But, there is surprisingly little information available about the cost of electoral services.

A 2017 **University of East Anglia (UEA) study** has underlined the difficulties in collecting accurate data about the budgets and spending of electoral organisations. However, the UEA survey found that, while budgets for electoral services have been rising, so too has the cost of managing these services. The authors found “strong evidence of many electoral services being financially stretched.”

Local elections and registration are funded from local authority budgets, and since 2010 they have been significantly affected by the financial restraints imposed by austerity cutbacks. At the same time, election administrators’ resources have been stretched by additional polls, as well as the introduction of a new electoral registration system.

In **2010**, the Association of Electoral Administrators called on the UK Government to undertake a thorough review of funding and resources required to deliver electoral services. The AEA repeated this call in **2015** and again in **2017**, when it described the existing funding model as flawed:

*“We remain disappointed that, despite recognising in its response to our 2015 report that general funding arrangements are an ongoing issue, the Government has failed to give any further thought as to how to address it.”*



*The LGiU report expressed concern about falling turnout, suggesting that factors may include voters being unaware about candidates and their policies, difficulties in finding out local election results and a sense that local democracy is somehow 'lesser democracy'.*

Does this matter? For those who believe elections just happen, their funding might seem of marginal importance. But when lack of resources leads to electoral mismanagement, the consequences for public confidence in democracy could be grave.

#### 4. Spreading the word: Improving elections communications

The May 2019 elections have underlined the importance of spreading the word to voters in order to ensure that they know when, where and how to vote in forthcoming polls. The issue of elections communications was put in the spotlight earlier this year in a Local Government information Unit (LGiU) **report**.

The report focused on local elections, and expressed concern about falling turnout, suggesting that factors may include voters being unaware about candidates and their policies, difficulties in finding out local election results and a sense that local democracy is somehow 'lesser democracy'.

The report went on to provide local authorities with tips on improving elections communications. The advice included simple guidance, such as:

- » providing photographs of preparations for elections and of the count
- » posting the results of elections on council websites
- » using social media to raise awareness about registration, voting information and other election-related information

In addition, websites such as **Where Do I Vote?** and **Who Can I Vote For?** can deploy council-supplied information to raise awareness about local elections and candidates – some councils are also highlighting these sites on their own websites.

The report highlighted examples of good practice. These include efforts by **Kirklees Council** to convey the many different aspects of delivering local democracy, and the inventive use of infographics by **Coventry City Council** to display election results quickly and clearly.

These techniques are all helpful in raising awareness about the opportunity to take part in decisions that could affect the way we are governed at local and national levels. As the LGiU report concludes:

*"Proactive, open and transparent communication about elections does not guarantee active engagement with local government, but it is the essential base on which we build democratic involvement."*

#### 5. Achieving inclusion: Enabling blind / partially-sighted people to vote

A functioning democracy is one where anyone entitled to vote is able to vote – and that includes people with disabilities.



*Unsung heroes they may be, but our democracy depends on them.*

Earlier this year, a High Court decision highlighted the difficulties facing blind and partially-sighted people when they enter a polling station.

The ruling concerned a tactile voting device (TVD), a transparent plastic overlay that fits on top of the ballot paper, with cut-out sections for the voter to mark their vote. However, even with the device, blind or partially-sighted voters still require assistance to read the names on the ballots. The High Court **ruling**, delivered earlier this month, said the provision of a TVD “does not in any realistic sense enable that person to vote”, and described it as “a parody of the electoral process”.

The challenge is to find and implement a solution that allows blind people to vote independently, while maintaining the secrecy of the ballot. Elsewhere, new technology has been used, such as a telephone dictation system in New Zealand and a combination of audio and braille systems in Germany.

Perhaps the most effective solution would be a web-based system, enabling all voters to cast their votes **online**. But the UK government has been reluctant to introduce electronic voting because of concerns about fraud and security.

In the meantime, 350,000 people in the UK who are blind or partially sighted are waiting for the day when they can vote independently and with complete privacy, just like the rest of the electorate.

### Final thoughts from the front line

Former prime minister Harold Wilson once observed that a week is a long time in politics. The truth of that statement has been brought home as May 2019 comes to a close and with it, the end of this nationwide polling season. We have seen another attempt to break the Brexit deadlock in parliament, significant results in the European Parliament elections, and the announcement of the current Prime Minister’s resignation.

Interesting times lie ahead, and it’s not out of the question that the UK’s electoral administrators could soon be called upon once again to help voters play their part in shaping the country’s political future.

We’ve been proud to support electoral teams across the UK, who have all worked incredibly hard in increasingly pressurised and constrained circumstances – from the election that was never meant to be to financial and resource limitations. Unsung heroes they may be, but our democracy depends on them – after all, contrary to what some might believe, elections don’t just happen.



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