

Voter Engagement in the UK

Evidence to

The Political and Constitutional Reform Committee

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Introductory remarks and overview

1. The committee has invited evidence on the causes of low voter engagement in the UK and possible solutions. Amongst the solutions being considered by the committee are changes to the procedures for registering and casting votes. I am a Lecturer at the University of East Anglia whose research focuses on how electoral administration can increase voter engagement. My research has been funded by a number of organisations (ESRC, AHRC, Nuffield Foundation and the McDougall Trust) over many years. My book, *Elite Statecraft and Election Administration*, was published by Palgrave in 2012. I have had many articles published in leading international journals and was invited to speak at Harvard University on the topic last summer. I am also a member of the advisory committee to the Law Commission's Review of Election Law (Law Commission, 2012). I am therefore submitting evidence to the committee based on my research.
2. Levels of voter turnout and registration are a pressing concern for British democracy. My research has suggested that the introduction of individual electoral registration may further exacerbate this problem. In summary, this evidence suggests that:
 - There is a very strong case for making election-day registration a long term policy goal.
 - The use of electronic voting mechanisms is kept under review, but it should be noted that previous UK experiments with e-voting initiatives did not show that they could make significant increases in voter turnout.
 - There are other measures that the committee should consider supporting including:
 - prompting or requiring citizens to register to vote when they access other government services
 - reviewing and strengthening the funding available to Electoral Registration Officers and Returning Officers
 - simplifying election law
3. Election administration is not a complete panacea for problems with voter engagement, but it can make a very important difference to British elections.

The problem of voter engagement in Britain

4. Participation at the ballot box in the UK is low and has been in decline for some time. General election turnouts have dropped significantly in the post-war period from 83.9% in 1950 to only 59.4% in 2001, with only a minimal recovery since. Voter engagement in other types of elections, of which there are increasingly more, is much lower. In November 2012, fewer than 15% of registered voters cast their vote in the inaugural Police and Crime Commissioner elections.
5. Just as important, but less noticed, has been the decline in registration levels. These have been estimated to have fallen from approximately 95% of the voting age population in the 1950s and 1960s to 82.3% in 2012 (Rosenblatt,

Thompson, & Tiberti, 2014, forthcoming). Registration rates are also lower amongst the young, those renting property, Black and Minority Ethnic communities and eligible non-UK citizens (Rosenblatt et al., 2014, forthcoming).

6. Low voter engagement is costly to society because it can lead to significant political inequality. Governments are being elected by an increasingly small and disproportionate sections of the population. The policies and electoral interests of such governments risk being insensitive to those groups who are not active at the ballot box.
7. There is no single cause of these trends. The causes of the decline in voter turnout include changes in political culture, changes in the party system with the Labour party moving to the centre of the political spectrum, changes in public sector management structures and much more.
8. The causes of declining levels of registration are complex. I have undertaken research on the challenges that Electoral Registration Officers face maintaining complete and accurate registers (James, 2014). These challenges include:
 - engaging with a public that is increasingly disinterested in politics and elections
 - perceptions of increased crime in some urban areas and problems with urban geography that have made conducting the annual canvas difficult;
 - citizens increasingly thinking that they are already on the electoral register because they pay tax or access other government services;
 - huge population churns in inner-city areas;
 - increased immigration;
 - financial austerity and budget cuts to electoral registration services;
 - changing employment patterns which make it more difficult for electoral registration officers to contact citizens.
9. There is therefore no single 'silver bullet' for voter engagement. However, electoral administration and management is important. More convenient registration and voting systems can help voter engagement. This relatively intuitive point has been supported by decades of academic research (Wolfinger & Rosenstone, 1980). Newer research, including my own, also points to how better resourced and managed electoral services departments can also improve voter engagement (Clark, 2014; James, 2013a, 2013b).

Changing election administration can help voter engagement

10. In chapter 2 of my recent book, *Elite Statecraft and Election Administration* (James, 2012), I develop a framework for identifying potential reforms that a country might want to consider introducing to increase voter turnout. This includes both registration procedures and voting procedures. This is based on a review of the available research.
11. There should be some caution in using this as a precise tool to estimate the effects of implementing a registration or voting reform. Most of the research is based on comparisons between states within the USA. Every country will

have a unique political culture which might mean that introducing a law in one country, will not have the same the effect as another. Voter turnout is also measured differently in the USA. However, the framework remains useful for diagnosing some solutions that should be considered and their likely effects on voter engagement.

12. It is important to note that the reforms introduced by the Coalition government have been those that are likely to reduce electoral registration and voter turnout. A concern with reducing perceived opportunities for electoral fraud has meant that the Coalition has introduced individual electoral registration. This involves requiring citizens to register individually rather than as a household and have their personal details confirmed against a government database before being entered onto the electoral register. My research, about to be published in *Parliamentary Affairs*, suggests that this will have a negative effect on voter registration rates. These declines are likely to be especially significant amongst young and mobile populations (James, 2014, forthcoming). The government has since planned to introduce measures to boost voter registration such as electronic matching and online registration. However, we do not yet know what effect these will have. There is therefore a need to consider further measures to increase voter registration and turnout. Potential reforms that could be considered include election-day registration and the use of electronic voting mechanisms, which the committee seems to have under review. The committee should also consider proposing a range of other measures such as the introduction of requirements for citizens to register to vote when accessing other government services. These are discussed in more detail below, but I would be delighted to advise the committee further.

Election-day registration can increase voter turnout

13. Election-day registration could have a very positive effect on both voter registration rates and turnout. Citizens are currently required to register 11 days in advance of a general election (Gay, 2014). Election-day registration would mean that citizens could register on the day of the election, at the point of voting. This would mean that people who had forgotten to register earlier or had only become interested in the election late on could still cast a vote.
14. Election-day registration is currently practiced in ten states (plus the District of Columbia) in the USA. California is due to implement it in the near future (NCSL, 2014). There is therefore a range of expertise and experience from which lessons can be drawn.
15. Studies on election-day registration have consistently shown that it can increase voter registration rates. In the 2012 US Presidential election those states that had election day registration had turnout rates of 10 percentage points higher than other states (Demos, 2013). Academic studies have also consistently estimated that it has had a positive effect on turnout (Alvarez & Nagler, 2011; Burden, Canon, Mayer, & Moynihan, 2014; Hall, 2013; Knack & White, 2000; Neiheisel & Burden, 2012; Vonnahme, 2012). We should expect that the effect on the UK would also therefore also be very positive.

16. Election day registration would pose implementation challenges for election officials:
 - a. *New technology.* Many US states have electronic poll-books to allow election officials to check that an individual has not registered elsewhere on the same day. UK election officials currently use paper lists and have no central database to undertake such real-time checking. This would be costly.
 - b. *Staffing.* More staff may be required to verify the details of those registering on election-day so that queues did not develop at polling stations.
 - c. *A delay in the announcement of the results.* It may take officials additional time to verify details of election-day registrants. Such voters could be issued a provisional ballot that could be later included into the tally if the result was close and their registration was confirmed as valid.
17. Election-day registration could therefore be a big success for elections in the UK, but it would require funding and carefully managed implementation. None of these challenges should make it impossible to overcome, however. It is also unlikely to lead to a problem with election fraud. As part of the introduction of individual electoral registration, citizens will be required to provide a National Insurance Number and date of birth which will allow an election-day registrant to have their details checked on a computer system.
18. It might be wise to pilot the system before implementing nation-wide. Pilots do not always deliver the increase in turnout rates, but they would be a sensible way of teasing out problems.

Technology remains worth checking

19. The argument has recently been raised by John Bercow that Britain should introduce internet voting for elections to increase turnout.
20. Internet voting has been used in the UK before. From 2000-2007 a range of innovative pilots took place in the UK which included internet voting, text message voting and digital TV voting. I evaluated the experience in an article in the *Election Law Journal*. My conclusions were that:

‘On balance, Internet voting and other remote electronic schemes appear to produce only a marginally positive effect on turnout. This effect may increase with more regular use and if Internet voting is always allowed until the close of the traditional poll. However, it is too early to tell on the basis of the experiments so far’ (James, 2011: 45-46).

21. I was cautious because in the in the 14 pilots held in 2003, 12.6% of votes were cast via the internet. That might not sound like much but the take up of internet voting was higher in some places than others. It was higher when internet voting pilots had been held before and when internet voting was open until the close of the poll (in some pilots internet voting closed very early).
22. Surveys did show that many people who used internet voting would have voted anyway. Yet in one survey 31% of people suggested that it encouraged them to vote and this figure was higher among the 18–34 age group (37%) than

the older groups. Surveys at the time also showed that it was popular with the public and there were no concerns about fraud (James, 2011).

23. Learning lessons from the earlier pilots is difficult because:

- Internet voting was run simultaneously with text message voting, all-postal voting, digital TV and various other schemes – when evaluating the pilots it was difficult to work out the effect of one from the others.
- It is over ten years since the 2003 elections and the spread of tablets, iPhones and smart phones is much greater, and attitudes to the internet may have changed.
- Pilots in local government elections are completely different to national elections. If people were allowed to vote via the internet for a 2015 election, for example, the media hype and the reaction of politicians and citizens would be completely different.

Other measures

24. There are other reforms to election administration that could boost levels of electoral registration and voter turnout. These include:

- *Prompting or requiring citizens to register to vote when accessing other government services.* This has been required in the US under federal law since the early 1990s and has been successful in bringing in more registrations.
- *Reviewing whether local authorities have sufficient funding for elections.* As mentioned above, my research has suggested that many election officials have had their budgets cut and this is likely to have affected their electoral registration activities.
- *Simplifying election law.* The Law Commission has recently begun a project to propose the streamlining of election law. My research has identified how election officials find the law unnecessarily complex and convoluted. This has therefore made it more difficult to implement. This can drain their time and lead to administrative errors.
- *Funding research on further innovations for election administration.* Academic researchers and local government officials have increasingly limited access to financial resources to support research on methods for improving election administration. The research on UK election administration remains underdeveloped compared to that in the US and it could help develop new policy solutions for increasing voter engagement.

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