# THE ELECTORAL INTEGRITY PROJECT

## WHY ELECTIONS FAIL AND WHAT WE CAN DO ABOUT IT

# Organisational Performance in Electoral Management Boards:
# The New Challenges in Running British Elections[1]

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## Abstract

Existing approaches to the study of electoral malpractice have primarily focussed on how the strategic office-seeking behaviour of political elites has led to defects in the practice of elections. This paper argues that problems can also occur through failures of rowing and steering in electoral management boards which can cause low levels of organisational performance. The article offers a new framework for assessing organisational performance and a typology for identifying failures. It then explores the environment in which policy makers and electoral officials run elections in Britain using qualitative interviews. It finds that new challenges and opportunities have emerged that require change and adaption. Elections are now implemented in times of post-industrial, digital-era governance and this may make organisational performance more difficult to achieve.

Keywords: electoral malpractice, electoral integrity, election administration, voting procedures, electoral management, performance management

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Understanding the causes, consequences and remedies for defects in the practice of elections is being subjected to renewed scrutiny and a variety of competing approaches have been developed to conceptualise and identify flaws in elections. However, the focus has predominantly been on the effects of the calculative behaviour of actors structured by office-seeking incentives of statecraft. In each case the perpetrators might be the 'governing party', the incumbent government or actors lower down a regime's hierarchy such as party activists. The focus might be on how such actors deploy state repression and electoral violence (Bhasin & Gandhi, 2012) manipulate or maintain favourable electoral laws (James, 2012; Renwick, 2010; Tan, forthcoming), or sponsor voting buying and voting carousel activities. All of these activities, argues Birch (2011), constitute electoral malpractice or as Norris (forthcoming) conceptualises it, threaten electoral integrity (also see: Elklit & Reynolds, 2005; Hyde & Marinov, 2012).

This paper provides a more complete picture of electoral malpractice by conceptualizing how problems can also occur through errors, inefficiencies and poor management in the running of elections. Politics and public management are inseparable (Lodge & Wegrich, 2012) but not all flaws in elections are the direct result of the strategic activity of elites and their agents. In the recent 2010 UK general election, there were queues at polling stations because of understaffing. There was significant the technical and operational difficulties in the 2013 Kenyan elections resulting in a delayed count. An evaluation of the Canadian 2011 federal elections found that election officers, on average, made over 500 serious administrative errors per electoral district on election day (Neufield, 2013: 6). In the 2013 Malaysia election, election officials were criticised for not shaking the bottles of indelible ink meaning that some citizens could wash off the ink and double vote (Lai, 2013). These are important because poor electoral management can undermine public confidence in the electoral process (Atkeson & Saunders, 2007; Claassen, Magleby, Monson, & Patterson, 2012; Claassen, Magleby, Monson, & Patterson, 2008; Hall, Quin Monson, & Patterson, 2009). Moreover, as Norris suggests (forthcoming: 14) 'minor second-order irregularities may spread to catalyze first order problems, especially in autocratic states with little accumulated historical experience of elections.'

Theories and frameworks from public sector management have much to add to the study of elections. Elections are highly complex events that require careful management and much can, and often does, go wrong. Their implementation involves complex relationships between people (individual workers, employers, and contractors), organisations (local and national governments, private sector companies, QUANGOS amongst others) and voting technologies to deliver electoral services at the front-line. One useful concept is that of electoral maladministration, which Norris (forthcoming: 14) defines as 'routine flaws and unintended mishaps by election officials… due to managerial failures, inefficiency and incompetence'. However, there is scope for further disaggregation of this concept to help establish the types, causes and potential remedies for such problems. This paper offers this advancement through the concepts of organisational performance, and failures in the steering and rowing in electoral management.

The paper begins by defining the study of organizational performance in electoral management as a variety of electoral malpractice. A framework for evaluating organization performance is proposed and applied to Britain. The paper then identifies the challenges that policy makers and implementers face in organizing elections in Britain through in-depth primary interviews. These reveal the new challenges that have emerged which can make organizational performance in electoral management difficult.

**Conceptualising organisational performance in electoral management**
Governments have increasingly sought to evaluate the performance of their public services. It is therefore unsurprising that the study of organisational performance has a long history and an established, multi-disciplinary literature (Carter, Klein, & Day, 1992; Ostrom, 1973; Parks, 1984). However, the outputs and performance of Electoral Management Boards (EMBs) has generally received much less academic and public attention than other public services such as schools, hospitals and the police. Studies of organisational effectiveness in electoral management remain underdeveloped (although see: Gerken, 2009; Pew Trust, 2013). But EMBs also provide important public services. Poor quality management can lead to effective disenfranchisement of individuals or whole geographical areas if their ballots are not processed effectively or unnecessary barriers are faced in front of them such as long queues. Poor management can cause delays in the publication of results that can lead to political and economic instability. In extreme cases it can also lead to the wrong candidate or party winning. Confidence in the electoral process can be shaken. The professionalization of independent EMBs has therefore been defined as an important policy objective by international organisations (Global Commission on Elections, 2012), but there is a little in the way of international standards of electoral management (Norris, forthcoming) and few conceptual tools to help academics cluster problems.

How can we conceptualise organisational performance in electoral management? The discipline of public management promises much, given the dense literature on the topic. Organisational performance has been described as 'ultimate dependent variable of interest for researchers concerned with just about any area of management' (Richard, Devinney, Yip, & Johnson, 2009). Yet the terms tend be elusive, and devoid of consensus. There is a division between those who seek objective measures and those who prefer subjective measures. Objective measures of performance are sometimes treated as the 'gold standard' because of the allure of scientific objectivity. However, the case that performance is a socially constructed is strong (Brewer, 2006). According to Andrews *et al*. (2006: 19) if there is any disagreement about what is to be measured, how it is to be measured or the weighting attached to each measure then performance is subjective. In the sphere of elections, do we prioritise participation or security of the ballot, if there is a trade-off between the two? As a result, the concept of organisational failure is contested as well.

To deal with these issues, a multiple-indicator or mixed approach is increasingly preferred (Kelly & Swindell, 2002; Parks, 1984; Richard et al., 2009). One such approach has been developed by Boyne (2002) who forged a comprehensive list of performance criteria for evaluating public sector organisations by merging previous approaches. Public organisations can be evaluated, he suggests, on the basis of the quantity and quality of the outputs that they produce, the efficiency with which these outputs are produced and the degree to which those outputs are effective at producing the desired outcomes. However, going beyond a simple inputs-outputs-outcomes model, organisations should also be responsive to the demands of citizens and staff within the organisation. They should also seek to achieve democratic outcomes such as ensuring probity, participation and accountability.

This provides a useful initial framework for assessing EMBs. As Elklit and Reynolds (2005) note in the sphere of elections, the outputs produced by EMBs include canvasses of citizens, polling cards, staff training and voter education activities. The number and quality of these outputs might vary, however, as some ballot papers will be better designed than others and queues in

some polling stations longer than others.  The outcome effectiveness of services might vary as measured by registration rates, turnout, cases of fraud and levels of voter education.  These outcomes might also vary by segments of the population.  However, going beyond the Elklit and Reynolds typology, the Boyne's model encourages a more holistic assessment of an EMBs' impact.  We should also consider levels of staff satisfaction in addition to citizen satisfaction because a) EMBs are employers and have a duty of care to their employees and b) higher satisfaction levels amongst staff can increase the quality of service.  Probity and accountability is also important (table 1).   It follows that a further type of electoral malpractice is poor organisational performance based on the above criteria.    Both quantitative and qualitative information can be used in forming an assessment of an EMB against each criterion.

| Dimension of performance | | Example for EMBs |
| --- | --- | --- |
| Outputs | Quantity | The number of doors knocked, registration enquiries processed, polling cards sent, advertisement, outreach activities organised. |
| | Quality | The speed of the speed of the count, the clarity of election materials, ballot paper design, the accessibility of registration procedures, polling queue wait times |
| | Cost per unit of production | Cost per unit of production |
| Service Outcomes | Formal effectiveness | Registration rates<br>Voter turnout<br>Cases of electoral fraud<br>Levels of voter education |
| | Impact | The broader positive and negative side-effects such as levels of civic engagement, creation of databases of useful for providing other government services |
| | Equity | The distribution of registration and turnout rates by gender, age, race, income and geographical area |
| | Cost per unit of service production | Cost per registration and  vote cast |
| Responsiveness | Citizen satisfaction | Citizen satisfaction with the services provided and confidence in the electoral process |
| | Staff satisfaction | Levels of staff satisfaction |
| | Cost per unit of responsiveness | Cost per unit of responsiveness |
| Democratic outcomes | Probity | The proper use of public funds and the absence of fraud by electoral administrators |
| | Accountability | Redress for errors such as miscounting, rejection of paper or long polling queues |

*Table 1: A framework for evaluating Electoral Management Board Performance*

Identifying performance as poor requires an analysis of the contextual factors that might affect organisational performance beyond those responsible for managing the organisation.  Walshe et al. (2004: 201) suggest that in the private sector, some symptoms or causes of failure are 'primarily internal to the organization, such as poor leadership, while others are primarily external and concerned with its environment, such as increased competition, product or service

innovation or changes in consumer expectations'.  Andrews et al. (2006) claim that the same is true of the public sector.  Organisational performance can be partly determined by the environment (figure 1).  However, there will also be failures of electoral management which mean that organisations will not perform as effectively as they could.  In the public sector the symptoms of these are commonly thought to include the absence or poor use of indicators, unrealistic aims and goals, poor relations between managers, poor relations with external stakeholders, poor levels of external partnership and ineffective leadership (*ibid*, 2006: 276-280).

A *failure of steering in electoral management* is therefore defined as *the adoption of practices and strategies that have generated sub-optimal organisational performance in EMBs*.  These types of problems are system level and exist in the management of organisations.  However, problems can also be individual level involved in the implementation or 'rowing'.  For example, EMBs might be successful in setting clear guidelines for processing postal vote application forms but an individual administrator or team of administrators might not follow these appropriately.  A *failure of rowing in electoral management* is therefore defined as an *error in the implementation of practices and strategies that results in sub-optimal organisational performance in the management of elections.*  These types of problems are limited to particular units of organisations.  Examples of these are provided in Table 2.

| Failures of steering | Failures of rowing |
|---|---|
| Poor strategic leadership e.g. response to external changes | Errors in implementing of centrally defined rules e.g. mistabulating ballots |
| Poor learning from other organisations e.g. other EMBs locally, nationally or internationally | Failures to follow instructions such as the shaking of bottles of indelible ink |
| Under resourcing e.g. of polling stations | |
| Inadequate provision of guidelines to staff e.g. guidance on when a voter's signature is 'legitimate' | |
| Adoption of inappropriate managerial policy instruments e.g. absence of use of performance information | |
| Adoption of inefficient procedures for outputs e.g. canvassing citizens if this is not the most effective use of resources | |
| Poor planning and contingency mechanisms e.g. problems on polling day | |
| Failure to test appropriate technologies e.g. vote counting machines | |
| Inadequate staff training | |

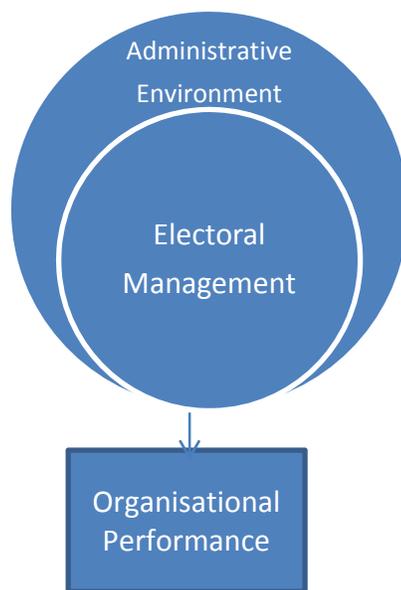*Table 2: Incidences of organisational failure in electoral management*

*Figure 1: Context, Electoral Management and Organisational Performance in Electoral Management Boards*

This approach is especially significant in the study of the integrity of election administration because much of the previous work has focussed on the effects of voting technologies such as all-mail ballots, early voting, voter identification requirements or voting equipment on voter participation, levels of electoral fraud or voter confidence in the electoral procedures (e.g. Alvarez, Ansolabehere, & Stewart, 2005; Ansolabehere & Stewart, 2005; Atkeson, Bryant, Hall, Saunders, & Alvarez, 2010).  The adoption of inappropriate voting technologies might be one cause of organisational failure because they might be an inefficient deployment of resources or might not maximise effective outcomes as successfully as other voting technologies.  However, the literature from public management and the concepts of failures of steering and rowing suggest that there might be a greater variety of causes.

**Organisational Performance in Britain**
What have been the trends in organisational performance in Britain?[2]  Britain provides a useful case study because it has often been held up to be a model democracy to the world.  Britain has a complex institutional environment for organising elections involving many actors.  Law, which decides most the voting technologies to be used, is defined by Westminster and guidance issued by the Cabinet Office. A Returning Officer (RO) and Electoral Registration Officer (ERO) have ultimate legal responsibility for implementing the poll and the compilation of the electoral register subject to these laws.  They are local government employees but are independent of government with respect to their electoral functions.  In Scotland, Joint Valuation Boards (JVBs) are responsible for compiling the electoral register.  A UK wide Electoral Commission has a statutory duty to evaluate elections, keep electoral practices under review and provide advice and guidance.  A Scottish Electoral Management Board was established in 2011 to co-ordinate the work of local officials for Scottish local elections (James, forthcoming-b).  Steering therefore

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[2] A comprehensive audit is not offered here.  Rather, an initial assessment is presented based on the available evidence.

takes place across a range of organisations but rowing is undertaken by staff employed in local government.

In terms of *output quantity and quality* the results of the Electoral Commission's performance standards show significant variation in the range of activities undertaken by local authorities. Some are proactive at undertaking public awareness activities, for example, whereas others undertake little or none (Clark, 2012; James, forthcoming-a). There is also evidence of significant variations in *cost per unit of service production*. For example, the cost of printing ballot papers varied in the 2012 referendum from 3.8p in London to 9.3p in Northern Ireland (Electoral Commission, 2012b: 19). In terms of the key *service outcomes*, there has been a significant decline in formal effectiveness measured by voter turnout and registration levels. Registration levels 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, 2012). Registration rates are also lower amongst the young, those renting property, Black and Minority Ethnic communities, eligible non-UK citizens (Rosenblatt et al., 2012). Voter turnout has also witnessed a general decline but it is generally lower amongst the young, less educated and less affluent (Clarke, Sanders, Stewart, & Whiteley, 2004). Stuart Wilks-Heeg *et al.* (2012) have logged cases of fraud in the UK, implying that this might be on the rise. The cost effectiveness of innovative pilot schemes to increase turnout 2000-7 were heavily evaluated (James, 2011). Early voting schemes in 2006, for example, were estimated to have cost between £3.00 to £115.00 per vote (Electoral Commission, 2006). But there are no evaluations of permanent practices, as far as the author is aware.

There have been concerns about *responsiveness*. Surveys undertaken between 2003-12 found that between 75-85% of citizens were satisfied with the process of registering to vote. Most unsatisfied citizens claimed that the registration process was too confusing or inconvenient (TNS, 2013: 11-12). Satisfaction with the process of voting was 64% in 2012; the lowest level recorded since Electoral Commission funded research began in 2003. The proportion of people that were confident that elections were well run stood at less than two-thirds (61%) in 2012. Just over a third (36%) thought that electoral fraud as a problem and one in ten (9%) claimed that it was a very big problem (TNS, 2013: 4). There are no specific evaluations of staff satisfaction within electoral service departments, however, satisfaction levels amongst public sector worker in general is often reported as being behind private and third sector employers (CIPD, 2012). Despite concerns about electoral fraud there have been few concerns raised about the probity of electoral officials themselves. Concerns about the lack of opportunity for redress were raised in 2010 after 1,200 citizens were thought to have been unable to cast their ballot (Electoral Commission, 2010b) and for miscounts such as in Birmingham in 2006 (Electoral Commission, 2012a).

There are plenty of examples of failures of *steering in electoral management* that have contributed towards sub-optimal performance. The Electoral Commission review found some election officials culpable for inadequate planning, risk management and contingency planning in the 2010 general election with the resulting problems affecting 1,200 citizens (Electoral Commission, 2010a). Poor planning and ballot paper design were blamed for the rejection of 140,000 ballot papers being rejected in the 2007 Scottish Parliamentary and Local government elections (Gould, 2007). Problems were also experienced with electronic counting machines that had to be abandoned. Considerable fraud was found to have taken place in local elections in Birmingham in 2004 (amongst others) (Stewart, 2006) owing to poorly designed postal voting

procedures. Other long established procedures such as household registration have been criticised for not being robust enough to detect and deter electoral fraud, even by international observers (Council of Europe, 2008). Many authorities have not undertaken door-to-door canvasses, even though they are under a statutory responsibility to do so (Electoral Commission, 2012c: 1).

There are also plenty of examples of failures of *rowing in electoral management.* There have been miscounts which have led to the wrong candidate being declared winner in cases such as the local elections in Birmingham's Kingstanding ward in 2006, Waltham Forest in 2010 and Denbighshire County Council's Prestatyn North in 2011. Ballot boxes were lost resulting in delayed counts in the 2012 London Mayoral elections (The Telegraph, 2012). There have been uneven rejection rates of postal vote applications around the country and variations in the extent to which waivers were granted by authorities to those who may not be able to provide a consistent signature (Rallings & Thrasher, 2009). There is no evidence, as far as the author is aware, of fraudulent conduct by staff, however.

**The Administrative Environment in Britain for Running Elections**
What is the nature of the administrative environment in which elections are organised in Britain? What challenges do electoral administrators face in the implementation of elections today? Has electoral management become more difficult? Might this partially explain concerns about performance and cases of failures of steering and rowing? Concepts from historical institutionalism can help to understand how a changing context can cause change in organisational performance. One key feature of historical institutionalism is the interest in the temporal development of political institutions. As contexts change over time the effects of different institutions may change (Pierson, 2011). The concept of institutional drift, originally developed by Jacob Hacker (2004), refers to how 'rules remain formally the same but their impact changes as a result of shifts in external conditions' (Mahoney & Thelan, 2010: 17). Hacker sought to explain how welfare provision in the US had undergone profound change after World War II. He noted that social policy provision had remained broadly resistant to change but that, in effect, change had occurred because these policies no longer provided citizens with the protection from risk that they once had. Exogenous changes such as changing family structures, patterns of employment and rising inequality meant that old social policies do not have the effect that they once had (Hacker, 2004). Importantly, the sources of change are not necessarily a result of active policy changes, but exogenous dynamics. Institutional drift therefore occurs because 'institutions require active maintenance; to remain what they are they need to be reset and refocused, or sometimes fundamentally recalibrated or renegotiated' (Streeck & Thelan, 2005: 24).

This concept is useful because electoral administration in Britain has seen little change but we might expect the administrative environment to have shifted significantly. The institutions, policy instruments and methods that electoral administrators use to implement elections have not regularly changed. British election administration has its roots in the 1872 Municipal Elections Act which established the secret ballot and the 1918 Representation of the People Act which set out the framework for the annual canvass and compilation of the electoral register. During what could be considered a *pre-modern period* (c.1832-1918) in Britain electoral administrators faced particular challenges for which these initial voting technologies and systems of management might have been well suited. Elections were conducted with only a limited franchise, the population was relatively stable and the legal framework was simple as elections were relatively new. There was a relatively low take up of mass media but knowledge of electoral fraud by

elections officials was widespread, especially in elections such as the 1868 general election (O'Leary, 1962: 58). Relatively simple technologies were employed by electoral officials to conduct elections. Elections were initially via a show of hands and no electoral registration was required prior to 1832. Parish officers, who oversaw the Poor Law, were given responsibility for compiling the register. The Secret Ballot Act led to paper ballots being revised.

New challenges were, however, brought by the *modern period* (c.1918-1990). The dramatic extensions to the franchise meant that expanded administrative machinery was required to deal with the enormous growth in registrations and ballot papers cast. This posed enormous logistical challenges, especially because the franchise extension took place during a period of war which created significant population displacements and drained resources (James, 2012: 129-133). Electoral administrative functions were consolidated into local government and the significant growth in the size of the state and bureaucracy no doubt enabled local government achieve high levels of organisational performance. This was a period during which high levels of registration were maintained and high electoral participation achieved with relatively infrequent questioning of Britain's electoral machinery.

**Methodology**
This paper draws from semi-structured interviews with those involved in managing and implementing elections to identify the challenges that are faced and the nature of the administrative environment. Five interviews were undertaken with 'elite actors': past and present officials from the Electoral Commission and other elite stakeholders. 74 interviews were also undertaken with local election officials (LEOs) involved in implementing elections. These local government officials include Returning Officers, Electoral Registration Officers, Democratic Services Managers and Elections Mangers. These interviews were spread across 41 organisations, in England, Scotland and Wales in 2011. Respondents were asked to explain the key challenges that they faced in the organisation of elections. Interviews lasted about an hour. The interviews were semi-structured in order to let the interviewees define the issues. The names of individuals and authorities included in the study were withheld so that the interviewees could speak freely. A quota sampling method was used to ensure that all different authority types were included in England, Scotland and Wales.[3] A mix of urban and rural authorities was also included.

A thematic analysis of the interviews was conducted to identify common challenges. Thematic analysis 'involves the searching across a data set… to find repeated patterns of meaning' (Braun & Clarke, 2006: 86). Interviews were transcribed and themes identified from the texts. The aim was to identify both semantic and latent meanings. Semantic themes involve the construction of themes on the basis of the literal wording of the transcripts. Latent themes require the researcher to read across the cases to identify underlying phenomena that are not always explicitly stated by respondents. This research process requires the researcher to undertake 'a constant moving back and forward between the entire data set, the coded extracts of data… and the analysis of the data' (*ibid*, p.86). Following Fereday and Muir-Cochrane (2006), the process of developing themes was both inductive from the data and deductive from theory.

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[3] The sample included London boroughs (5), Unitary Authorities (4), Metropolitan district authorities (9), Two-tier 'shire' counties (5), Welsh unitary authorities (6), Scottish councils (5) and Scottish VJBs (7).

**Top-down voices**

Officials in the Electoral Commission highlight a number of challenges faced in ensuring high organisational performance and avoiding failures of steering and rowing. They stress how they have no direct role in administering elections (except in referenda) and are therefore reliant on staff in local government to do this for them: 'Well we wouldn't mind being blamed for things going wrong in the electoral process if we were in charge of the electoral process'. Moreover, the conduct and performance of some LEOs is sometimes sub-optimal. As noted above, following the 2010 general election Jenny Watson, Chair of the Electoral Commission, publically complained that some officials:

> 'did not properly plan for, or react to, polling day problems. That is unacceptable. People in these areas were badly let down' (Gilligan, 2010).

However, the systems of ensuring accountability prior to 2008 were perceived to be unsatisfactory. Electoral officials were usually accountable to the courts and independent of their employing authorities and this 'didn't really help, because it meant they were isolated in terms of being judged on that performance.' There were few systems of central control.

Developing and implementing such systems for increasing performance, however, is beset with problems. Firstly, LEOs may also exert considerable resistance to the development of mechanisms of central control over 'their territory' and some policy tools might backfire by upsetting LEOs and it can be difficult to work with those people afterwards'. Secondly, Electoral Commission officials would have liked to focus on service outcomes, but they recognise that LEOs don't have direct control over these themselves:

> 'the number of people on the electoral register doesn't directly correlate to the efforts that Electoral Registration Officers make to get people on the register. Clearly there is a level of influence there but there are factors like social deprivation'.

Thirdly, there is often a lack of consensus about which outcomes should be prioritised. The Electoral Commission was put under pressure from different political parties to ensure that it did not 'overemphasise completeness at the expense of integrity or vice versa'.

Other challenges exist such as low levels of understanding of the policy area from MPs and the perception amongst local council managers that elections are a low priority 'cinderella department'. As one Electoral Commission official noted: 'elections officers have always been in an incredibly weak position to compete for resources inside the authority'. But the core concern of Electoral Commission officials is the number of actors within the network that makes controlling LEOs and influencing outcomes difficult:

> There are a lot of different bodies out there and there's Government and there's devolved government and responsibility for legislation lies in a lot of different places. And then funding for elections comes from a lot of different places depending on which election it happens to be. The funding source is different almost every time so that is, that sort of plethora of different involvement isn't helpful I don't think.

**Contemporary Implementation-level Challenges**
The interviews with staff in local authorities and JVBs revealed ten core themes of challenges that they face in implementing elections effectively.

*1. Increased apathy, decreased trust*
LEOs complain that increased apathy causes them significant problems compiling the electoral register. There is a core pool of citizens that they failed to include on the register each year.

> There's a general apathy towards elections and politics… we'll never crack that final 5-10% of people who just have absolutely no desire to get onto the register.

LEOs suggested that they needed to invest increasing resources on schemes such as performance pay for canvassers, employing former bailiffs and extended local advertising simply to stop the register falling further.

A minority of LEOs also claimed that citizens increasingly questioned the 'anachronistic' security provisions that they had in place for voting. No voter identification is required at either the polling or registration stage of the election. They claimed that this system was based on 'trust' but that this trust no longer exited. There were changing expectations amongst citizens about the security procedures required when interacting with government services.

> '[E]verybody needs to produce a PIN number or a signature for most things they do nowadays.'

Achieving high levels of citizen satisfaction could therefore be more difficult.

*2. Changing urban Britain: increased crime and problems with urban geography*
The main source of names for the electoral register has traditionally been the annual canvass but this has become more difficult to conduct. There are concerns about the safety of canvassers. Public abuse of canvassers was very common and EROs therefore often struggle with recruitment.

> 'If a person of authority or is seen to be part of an institution goes in there they're just drummed out. I mean they're just not accepted… '

Councils would ask canvassers whether there were areas in which they did not feel safe and would not door-knock in these 'no go areas'. However, the process works both ways. An increasing number of the public may not answer the door fearing unsolicited doorknockers.

> 'And then you get little old ladies who are on their own who just won't answer the door after 6pm because there have been bogus callers.'

Urban architecture does not facilitate an annual canvass either. Properties such as high-rise flats are difficult to access.

> '[W]here you've got HMOs, where three or four storey property is – there are bedsits there, there's shared communal facilities, and there are 8 to 16 doorbells that don't work on the door, or at the side of the door. How do you get somebody to the door? Legislation doesn't cater for that.'

In rural areas the population can be so sparse that conducting a complete door-knock becomes very expensive.  Some areas are also heavily covered by holiday homes.

*3.  Legal complexity and diversity*

There has been a considerable increase in the legal complexity of elections in Britain as a result of a rise in the *frequency* of elections and *types* of elections since 1997.  In addition to Westminster, local government, parish council and European Parliamentary elections, there are now Greater London Council, Scottish government, Welsh government, Mayoral and Police, Crime Commissioner elections and more frequent referenda.  Many of the elections are run under a different electoral system.  This has added to the complexity of election administration and makes administrative errors and poor organisational performance more likely.  One officer recalled how it was in a combined election that their authority 'made an administrative error' which led to a BNP candidate being elected instead of a Labour one because of the double counting of ballots.

> Poll management is different… One year is very different from the next year.  A few years ago… a combination of elections was the rarity.  Now it's completely tipped up on its head.

Devolution has also created different regulatory frameworks for elections.  One LEO reported that in one year they had conflicting deadlines for the closing dates of postal vote applications.  Legal complexity also makes it more difficult to convey information to the electorate and for them to understand.  This is important when the public are commonly poor at completing forms.

Legal Fragmentation is a further problem.  Election law is not contained in one Act but is spread across a variety of Acts and Amendment Acts – approximately over 35 primary pieces of legislation and over 100 pieces of secondary legislation (Electoral Commission, 2012d).  This poses particular problems for 'newcomers' who are not aware of older legislation.

> One of the things that we all find quite difficult is the convoluted legislation.  Different pieces of legislation have different timetables…  Some of the legislation is UK some of it is Scottish Government.  And it's all amendment Act, amendment Act, amendment Act… It's just not understandable to the vast majority of people and most of the administrators as well.

Legislative changes have also become more frequent and are commonly made very close to the run up to an election leaving uncertainty in the planning.  The Gould inquiry into the problems in the 2007 Scottish elections found that late legislation was a key problem and recommended that no changes were made less than six months before an election.  However, this advice was not always heeded.

> Legislators don't account for the time it takes software houses to change systems, test them, implement them with all the customers and let customers confidently run with it.  So again you get the impression that the legislators or the political classes seem to think that computers just sort themselves at the press of a button.

The challenge of rising complexity is heightened, LEOs report, by an exodus of staff from the profession.  Many long-standing members are retiring early because of public sector cuts or pressures of the job (see below).  New staff is not being brought though the system, they suggest, and authorities have faced problems recruiting experienced staff.

*4. New Technology*

The wider availability of new technology has led to rising expectations amongst citizens about electoral services and their changed behaviour. Many citizens think that electoral registration is isn't necessary because they use other government services and they *expect* their data to be shared. Some citizens therefore turn up at the polls without registering.

> You know I'm registered for Council Tax is a huge misconception. They think because they're registered and paying Council Tax they're registered for electoral registration.

Citizens' expectations about data-sharing also cause many to not register. Some refuse to be included, LEOs reported, because they feared that their information would be used for other purposes such as calculating benefit entitlements, preventing tax avoidance or they did not want their information to be made public.

> So many of our canvassers come to us and say "I'm sure there's somebody else living there but she says she's there on her own."

Some LEOs are proactive data-matching databases within their local authority. However, they such databases are often imperfect for the purposes of compiling or checking the accuracy of a register as there is no single national identity record in Britain, as there is in Estonia.

New technology offers opportunities for increased productivity. However, LEOs report that this requires increased investment in new skills for staff. In the process of adapting to them errors can easily be made. In Scotland electronic counting equipment has been used by officials but some noted a number of teething problems with such innovations.

*5. Population Movements*

Increased population movements have made keeping the electoral register up-to-date more challenging. Inner-city areas were difficult to keep track of because of 'huge population churns'.

> [E]very couple of months and we get thousands of new names. So there's this constant pressure throughout the year for the updating of the register (sic).

Immigration from non-English speaking countries poses new challenges for LEOs[4] because some communities may not engage with the registration process or it may require significant investment in multi-lingual materials.

> We have got quite a large black minority ethnic community, big chunks of which are not necessarily culturally attuned to the life in the UK. Many of whom don't speak English as their first language; those are all a whole host of barriers that you need to get across.

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[4] LEOs have to maintain two separate registers, both of which may be deployed when there are simultaneous local and Parliamentary elections. To be eligible to vote at a general election, citizens need a British citizen, a qualifying Commonwealth citizen or a citizen of the Republic of Ireland. EU citizens resident in the UK can also vote at elections to local authorities, devolved legislatures, the European Parliament and some referenda (depending on the rules for that particular referenda).

Some authorities have been proactive at tackling under registration by employing canvassers who speak the native language. In one authority in the East of England a Portuguese speaker was recruited and she was able to substantially raise registration amongst the Portuguese community working on farms, but this proved expensive. Bi-lingual printed resources can also be costly and complex for the citizen.

> If you compare our [bi-lingual English & Welsh] forms to an English Authority, their forms are far more user-friendly (sic).

*6. Resources and Financial austerity*
LEOs commonly report that they are faced with high costs running elections and frequently experience difficulty obtaining sufficient money from the Council. This echoes comments from Electoral Commission officials. One authority explained that they commonly had to try to build up reserves from one election to pay for the next. There would commonly be unexpected costs such as those for new ballot papers should there be an unusually high number of candidates.

> [t]he national elections are funded generally from central Government but you can't, you don't recover all the costs, there are a lot of costs that are borne by the Council…. And that determines obviously how much you want to invest.

Hard choices often have to be made about what services could be provided to the public. Services which were non-statutory, such as public awareness schemes are therefore often cut. Some local authorities did not door-knock all houses which did not return an electoral registration form, even though this was a legal requirement and also a requirement to meet the Electoral Commission performance standards because of costs (Electoral Commission, 2012c). There are also many other everyday examples of where LEOs are making judgements about the value of additional registered citizens or votes.

> Ultimately my goal is to get 100% registration. But I know that that is a bridge too far. But you should advertise more, you should be doing this. We're downsizing as a council. My resources staff wise have gone down. So to maintain what we've got is a challenge.

The challenge of providing sufficient funding has heightened, LEOs suggest because local government has to undertake budget cuts, yet simultaneously, election departments were required to undertake new work in line with the reports expected of them.

> I think that the electoral administration is in a world of its own really as if the credit crunch hadn't occurred as if we didn't have to take 20% out of our budgets (sic).

LEOs very commonly stress the tight timetables involved in the delivery of elections. The period from the deadlines for completing the electoral register and nomination of candidates to election-day are particularly tight. If they are under-resourced during these times then errors become likely. Staff are consequently forced to work extremely long hours during the election period which can result in burn out.

> [we made it] only by the skin of our teeth really, particularly with this year's election. We were working until 12 'o clock every night, we came in at weekends and you rely on the commitment of the staff really to see through that election because you've deadlines for everything.

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Larger authorities are often more able to cope in the run up to elections because of the additional capacity. Yet, clearly resource constraints and spiralling costs contribute to a situation in which names can be missed off registers, errors can appear on ballot papers and polling stations can be under resourced.

*7. Networked governance*
LEOs often face increased problems co-ordinating with the increased range of actors involved in the provision of electoral services. Some LEOs are often reliant on a small pool of private organisations such as printers because Councils do not have in-house facilities. The outsourcing of this work has not always been successfully completed by private contractors. In England and Wales co-ordination also is commonly required between authorities because there are different tiers of local government in the election. In Scotland, the function of electoral registration and the conduct of the poll is split between organisations. Parliamentary districts commonly cross council boundaries which mean that organisations have to co-ordinate their registers together. Sometimes these relationships can break down.

> Constituencies always going to be beyond the Council area, so then we would have a working relationship with a neighbouring Local Authority. And again we have good relationships, so it works. But there are dangers where if that was to break down, then you have issues.

Whereas LEOs were once reliant on information provided to them by the Home Office, information now comes from a range of organisations including the (national and regional) Electoral Commission, SOLACE, Scottish Electoral Management Board, the police and Association of Electoral Administrators. Some LEOs also report that there common co-ordination problems within authorities because the formally appointed Returning Officer is a high-level official who has little interest in the running of the election.

*8. Rising Partisanship?*
In some authorities, LEOs claim that election administration has been increasingly politicised with local candidates making accusations of fraud against other candidates or malpractice against administrators. Local politicians complain about polling station adjustments, if they feel that their interests are adversely affected. In some areas electoral challenges were become increasingly common.

> It's become more divisive politics, whereas before it may have been done more on a amenable level, there are now real party political divides, for which administrators will get caught in the middle.

These claims were isolated to particular areas and were built on previous antagonisms but could be widely reported in the national media. This is significant because Vonnahme and Miller (2012) find that the public, knowing little about the quality of election administration, take 'cues' from politicians. Partisan criticism can therefore lower citizen's satisfaction with electoral services, whatever the quality of service provided.

*9. Changing lifestyles; rising expectations*
LEOs report that they face rising expectations about the services that they provide to voters. Employment patterns have changed dramatically in Britain with a rise in service-sector and part-

time employment.  This has meant that some citizens find it increasingly hard to vote on election days because there is a mismatch between the voting procedures and the opportunities to vote that citizens have.  Registration procedures are also affected.  There were some pilots in the UK of innovative systems such as text-message voting and  internet voting from 2000-7 (James, 2011) but most of these were not taken forward to permanent changes.  Some LEOs reported that canvassing was difficult because it was difficult to call when all citizens were in.

> A lot of our canvassers work here in the day.  It's something that they do as an additional bonus.  So they're not going out until 5pm and then people are just coming home from work or they're gone straight to the gym.  So they have to make up to about four visits before they can establish that somebody's in.

*10.  The development of 24/7 and social media*
LEOs suggest that the development of the 27/7 news media and social media have placed new pressures on electoral administrators and amplify any mistakes that might have been made.  On the night of the 2010 general election, the news media focused on problems in polling stations that were being circulated by social media.   These problems were, perhaps, not new or uncommon in the past, but could now be more readily reported and circulated by citizens.  According to one LEO, who had worked in elections for over 30 years:

> going back 15 or 20 years there were far worse things that happened at elections but they never, ever got into the public eye because the public gaze wasn't on that aspect of elections.  But now it highlights that we have to be extremely careful about every single aspect of the operation of an election that we undertake.

Many LEOs suggest that in a post-Florida environment the media and politicians are more aware of the news-worthiness of failures in elections and therefore look for problems:

> Our local newspaper is very on-the-ball and would pick up any issue that we've not dealt with.

> local politicians will even pick on the smallest wee thing they can find to get themselves in the newspaper, promote themselves and stuff.

Maintaining high levels of citizen satisfaction with electoral services can therefore be more difficult, even if the quality of electoral services is high.

**A New Post-Industrial, Digital Age Environment**
The interviews suggest that a particularly challenging environment has emerged in Britain for managing and implementing elections in Britain.  This can be defined as a *post-industrial, digital age* era (c.1990s – present) characterised by demographic, technological, legal, economic and political complexity and fluidity (table 3).

The new environment has emerged in part as a result of major changes in the management of the British state. Resource and financial austerity have been core concerns since the 'crisis of the state' in the 1970s, but also a second wave crisis since the financial crisis of 2008.  This, combined with the rising costs of elections, pose cost pressures and tough choices about which areas to maximise performance in (theme 6).  New public management reforms, introduced to many advanced capitalist democracies such as Britain, have led to the fragmentation of the state.  The

process of disaggregating public sector hierarchies has led to the state being 'hollowed out', reduced the capacity of state actors to achieve policy outcomes and introduced new co-ordination problems and caused complex delivery chains (Dunleavy & Margetts, 2006; Rhodes, 1997; Smith *et al.* 2011). This is manifesting itself in the complex networks involved in delivering elections (theme 7) but also in the interviews from Electoral Commission officials who claim to struggle to develop management tools (although, see: James, forthcoming-a).

The new environment owes much to technological change. Technology has opened up new opportunities and challenges for the state to provide public services (Dunleavy & Margetts, 2006). New ICT offers the prospect of increasing productivity gains by consolidating existing 'labyrinths of discrete mainframe facilities and associated administrative units' (*ibid*, p.482). The provision of 'one-stop shops' offers the opportunity to remove the duplication of government services (*ibid,* p.484). However, it has also changed citizens' expectations about how governments use ICT which alters their behaviour and can make them more difficult to register (theme 4&9). LEOs are faced with the need to re-skill and retrain in using these services to maximise registrations and make the registration process clear to citizens. The development of 24/7 and social media reports the errors that electoral administrators make more quickly and loudly (theme 10).

Demographic change is important. Recent decades have seen high levels of internal migration across Britain, especially in international perspective (Champion, 2005) and an increasingly linguistically and culturally diverse population because of rising immigration, especially from the EU (Office for National Statistics, 2011) (theme 5). Socio-economic, cultural and legal changes in Britain matter. Declining social trust (Putnam, 2000) can bring about increased apathy amongst the public which can drain resources (theme 1). Rising economic inequality and the 'ghettoisation' of parts of urban Britain poses problems conducting the electoral canvass (theme 2). A more complex legal framework has developed as a result of the layering of legislation (theme 3).

A shifting environment does not mean that declining organisational performance and failures of steering and rowing are inevitable. Electoral officials unsurprisingly stress the difficulties that they face but their changing environment also poses opportunities. A flexible and disaggregated state might encourage innovation. The availability of new technology might offer opportunities to increase efficiency through the use of 'big data' and Web 2.0 tools. Social media can be harnessed for encouraging electoral registration and voter registration. However, without adaption institutional drift can occur. Institutions and management practices may need adaption for new times.

| | *Pre-modern* | *Modern* | *Post-industrial* |
|---|---|---|---|
| *Time* | 1832-1918 | 1918-1990s | 2000 - |
| *Characteristics* | Limited | Mass franchise | Demographic, technological, legal, economic and political complexity and fluidity. |
| *Main methods* | Self-administered | House to house enquiries Annual canvass | Moves towards: Online registration Individual registration, electronic registration, data matching |

| Political participation and civic trust | Limited franchise | Mass franchise -mass participation | Mass franchise depleted participation |
|---|---|---|---|
| Population dynamics | Stable | Stable | Fluid |
| Legal framework | Linear | Linear | Complex Multilevel |
| Media | Low take-up | Mass media | 24/7 Internet age Web 2.0 |
| Technology | Paper | Mass record systems | ICT and database driven |
| Expectations gap | Low resources required, low expectations | High resources, high expectations | Potential for under resourced, high expectations |
| Governance | Locally led | Centrally led split | Networked governance |
| Partisanship | High | Low | High |

*Table 3: periods of election administration challenges in Britain*

**Conclusions**

There have been concerns about the administration of elections in many democracies, old and new. This article has suggested that the poor organisational performance of EMBs constitutes a new variety of electoral malpractice. This can occur because of failures of steering and rowing in EMBs. Examining the performance of EMBs in Britain, an established democracy whose practices were once held up as an exemplar for democracies around the world, it has found some cause for concern. However, levels of organisational performance owe much to the environment in which actors find themselves. This paper has found that new challenges have emerged arising from broader changes in the British state and society. It follows that further declines in organisational performance might follow unless EMBs adapt within this new environment. Qualitative interviews that capture 'top-down' and 'bottom-up' voices are a useful way of identifying and developing responses to these challenges.

How generalizable are the findings from Britain? Similar themes appear to be present in some policy reports from other states suggesting (e.g. Neufield, 2013). The UK is a case study which is in many ways representative of others established democracies such as the US that were amongst the first states to democratise run elections with a large (if not universal) franchise since the nineteenth/early twentieth century (Huntington, 1993). We should therefore anticipate problems of drift to exist in similar states as well. Britain is also typical of the many post-industrial capitalist democracies that have seen widening levels of economic inequality and declining social capital, and among many states that have implemented new public management reforms since the 1980s. We should therefore also expect these challenges to be facing other capitalist democracies too. However, in some other respects Britain remains relatively unique. Britain's arrangements for running elections has traditionally been classified as a governmental model because local government has been responsible for implementing elections according to laws set by Parliament. However, the institutional arrangements for electoral governance have been in transition because of processes of devolution and have become more complex (James, forthcoming-b). Other states have not seen such rapid change and/or institutional complexity and this might partially explain some of the British troubles. Each state may also face similar challenges but to different degrees. There is therefore an urgent need for further research to

identify the challenges that local officials in different states face using qualitative interviews in order to identify commonalities and differences.  This 'bottom up' knowledge can then be used to identify problems and appropriate policies for improving organisational performance in EMBs.

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