

The Unsung Heroes of Electoral Democracy: Poll Workers and Electoral Integrity in Britain¹

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Abstract

Electoral democracy would be unable to function without the large numbers of people who staff polling stations on election day. Such poll workers are ‘street level bureaucrats’ who have local knowledge which makes them uniquely positioned to understand the nature, causes and effects of problems with the electoral process. Yet, little is known about the people who act as poll workers during elections, the training and skills that they have, and what they see on the frontline of elections. This is a major lacuna in understanding ‘what works’ in electoral integrity.

This paper therefore reports initial findings of the first British poll worker survey, conducted in the 2015 British general election. It extends knowledge from earlier US studies of poll workers to a major parliamentary democracy where issues of electoral integrity have recently emerged as important. In particular, it examines the socio-demographic backgrounds of British poll workers, their training and investigates the difficulties that they face in implementing elections. Our sample suggests that British poll workers, unlike their US counterparts, tend to be experienced at working in the electoral process and are drawn from a commonly re-used pool. They generally found the training of appropriate length, interesting and of practical use for the day. They tend to experience relatively few problems and the quality of this aspect of elections are therefore generally high. Suspicions about electoral fraud, doubts about the identity of the elector, inappropriate behaviour from party officials, electors being turned away and queues at polling stations do occur, however. Yet overall, there is much good practice to be learnt from the UK case.

The Unsung Heroes of Electoral Democracy: Poll Workers and Electoral Integrity in Britain

Elections are held in an increasing number of states worldwide. The quality of these elections, however, is often less than perfect. Electoral integrity is often compromised by voter intimidation, vote buying or ballot box stuffing, for example (Norris 2014; Birch 2011). Established democracies are often thought to be free from such problems. They do, however, commonly face problems with election administration and management. In the USA (Wand et al. 2001), Australia (AEC 2013), Canada (Neufield 2013) and UK (Electoral Commission 2010), for example, there have been problems with long queues at polling stations, poor ballot design, accusations that there has been electoral fraud, or a high number of rejected ballot papers because of implementation problems or other difficulties in delivering electoral services to voters.

Poll workers are key public administrators in delivering quality elections. When voters enter a polling station, it is the poll worker that they meet that is responsible for greeting and speaking to the voter, giving and ensuring ballot papers are cast securely. Yet the role of the poll worker and their knowledge about the democratic process has, outside of the USA, largely been ignored by academic research. Events in a number of democracies, most notably the USA and Britain have shown that the professionalism of poll workers is crucial in organising the process, particularly when difficulties arise. In some cases, poll worker professionalism, training and reactions can make the difference between people being able to vote or not when there are problems, having a good experience at the polls and, ultimately, contributing to voters' satisfaction with democracy. The lack of research on poll workers is a major oversight in the study of elections in advanced democracies. Difficulties at the polls mean that their role cannot be taken for granted. Without knowing more about the electoral process and its administration, it is difficult to state with confidence that voters have been able to cast their vote in security, without undue influence, and that their vote will be counted.

This study seeks to make a major contribution towards understanding more about poll workers' role in administering elections through a rare survey conducted in the 2015 British general election. The project provides unique information about who poll workers are, assesses the quality of elections in Britain through their eyes, and considers the policy instruments that can make them and the polling process more effective on the basis of their 'local knowledge'. Discussion proceeds in four parts. Part one briefly introduces the key background on election administration and management before the second part moves on to identify key issues in poll worker research. The third part describes British systems of electoral management and brings into focus some questions raised about electoral integrity in recent years. Part four outlines the methodology before presenting an analysis of the data from the 2015 poll worker survey in the fifth section.

Election Administration and Management

Studies that seek to assess the quality of elections in established democracies have usually focused on electoral systems, franchise legislation and party finance. There has been a growth of studies, however, that seek to establish whether electoral integrity is compromised by

problems in electoral administration and management. Electoral administration refers to the ‘administrative systems through which the electoral register is compiled, and votes are cast and counted’ (James 2010, 369). A primary focus, going back to Wolfinger and Rosenstone’s study of *Who Votes* (1980) was how the voting and registration processes used for elections can shape turnout, confidence in elections and possibly who wins. Worldwide, there are variations in how citizens cast their vote, the deadline by which they need to register and how they register, for example. Electoral management, meanwhile, focusses on the systems for managing staff and resources within electoral management boards. The use of performance standards, audits and sufficient funding, for example, have been demonstrated to improve the quality of elections (Clark 2014, 2015; James 2014a; Alvarez, Atkeson, and Hall 2012b, 2012a).

Three forms of electoral malpractice are commonly claimed to be present in electoral administration and management in electoral democracies. The first is that integrity of the polling and registration process is undermined by *cases and opportunities for electoral fraud and malpractice by citizens or party agents* (Lehoucq 2003). In response to this many academics, politicians or policy makers advocate increased voter security provisions such as voter ID requirements (Fund 2008). Critiques of this view argue that actual cases of electoral fraud are few and far between and do not warrant the type of policies prescribed (Minnite 2010; Levitt 2014). Evidence on the extent of such problems at election time remain scarce, however, especially outside of the US. A second problem is that voting and registration procedures can provide *bureaucratic hurdles for participation*. The classic rational choice institutionalist claim is that voter participation will be higher when the costs of voting are lower. Researchers therefore often prescribe more convenient or ‘expansive’ voting procedures in order to maximise electoral participation (James 2010; Wang, 2012).

These first two sets of concerns are a classic dilemma in the design of electoral administration: should procedures be designed to maximise security and prevent fraud, or maximise participation? Ideally both goals would obviously be obtained, but there is likely to be a trade-off and to some extent the problem is zero sum. A third type of problem, however, is positive sum. There have been concerns about *failures of electoral management and poor organisational performance* (James 2014a) – errors made by returning officers and election managers in the management of the polling process. These are not usually deliberate partisan efforts to alter the result of the election. Instead, they might result from human error, under-resourcing or poor performance management systems and/or leadership (James 2013, 2014a; Clark 2014, 2015).

The Importance of Poll Workers

As with the delivery of any other public service, once a policy has been designed, the successful delivery of elections is dependent on the public officials who implement it. Recent work which seeks to examine the public administration of elections has therefore drawn from public management theorists who have long argued that such front-line workers are an important focus of study. James (2014b) has argued that scholars should mine the knowledge and experience of electoral officials as a useful way of establishing the integrity of the electoral process and the suitability of the voting technologies. This follows theories of bottom-up implementation which argue that governmental projects, such as elections, can

appear to be well designed from above, but can be flawed on the ground if policy-makers do not consider the unique perspectives that front-line workers have (Sabatier 1986; Pressman and Wildavsky 1973). According to Lipsky they constitute ‘street-level bureaucrats’ who have the opportunity to make and remake policy (Lipsky 1980). Meanwhile, Durose (2009) argues that such workers have ‘local knowledge’ which, citing Yanow, consists of: ‘a kind of non-verbal knowing that evolves from seeing, interacting with someone (or some place or something) over time’ (Yanow 2004, 12). This makes them uniquely positioned to understand the effects of different voting processes and problems with the functioning of elections.

A focus on poll workers’ experience is especially important because research has highlighted how this has been a problematic point in the implementation of elections (for example, see: Atkeson et al. 2010). A growing US literature has therefore undertaken poll worker surveys to identify who poll workers are (Alvarez, Atkeson, and Hall 2007; Mockabee, Monson, and Patterson 2009), what motivates them to serve (Mac Donald and Glaser 2007; Alvarez, Atkeson, and Hall 2007; Senecal 2007), whether they have the appropriate skills with technology to work on election day (Glaser et al. 2007) and how effective training schemes are for poll workers (Cobb, Greiner, and Quinn 2012; Mockabee, Monson, and Patterson 2009). Yet studies of this sort remain entirely US based. This method or these empirical questions have not been explored outside of that context and certainly not in the UK.

Frontline Electoral Integrity in Britain

This study focusses on the administration and management of elections in Britain. Responsibility for implementing elections in Britain lies with local government officials. Returning Officers are responsible for the conduct of the poll and have some discretion over the timing of the count. Electoral Registration Officers are responsible for compiling the electoral register. Both Returning Officers and Electoral Registration Officers are local government employees, appointed by local government authorities, but are independent of both central and local government with respect to their electoral duties. They are legally accountable to the courts system as an independent statutory officer and can be prosecuted for being in breach of their duties (Gay 2010). Democratic Services Managers and/or Election Managers are the ‘middle-level’ bureaucrats who tend to handle the day to day running of the services, such as managing poll workers or permanent staff who update the electoral register and deal with queries from the public. In Scotland, Joint Valuation Boards are responsible for compiling the electoral register.

There are three different types of ‘poll workers.’ *Presiding Officers’* duties include responsibility for liaising with the key-holder of the building, organising the layout of the polling station, maintaining order in the polling station, monitoring tellers outside of the poll and supervising polling clerks. *Polling clerks* are responsible for checking the eligibility of electors against the register, marking the register and issuing ballots to the elector (Electoral Commission 2015a, 2-3). *Counting Assistants* sort and count the ballot papers at a central location, after the ballot boxes have been securely transported from the various polling stations (Electoral Commission 2015c). All three are appointed only for the temporary purpose of the election alone.

Until recently, very little had been written on electoral administration. But there are now a range of historiographical studies that have described processes of institutional change and the drivers of them (James 2012; Butler 1963; O'Leary 1962; Pugh 1988), studies which have tried to measure the effects of particular voting technologies (Orford et al. 2011; Rallings, Thrasher, and Borisjuk 2010; Banducci et al. 2008; James 2011) and a newer wave of scholarship which approaches the subject from the field of public administration (James 2013; Clark 2014, 2015; James 2014b, 2014a).

Electoral administration and management has also become a pressing policy problem in the past fifteen years, with existing practices being subject to criticism. Arguments have been made that each of the three core problems with electoral administration and management exist in Britain. First, high profile convictions for electoral fraud, such as those in Birmingham in 2004 and the Tower Hamlets Mayoral election in 2014 have led some to argue that Britain's electoral machinery is open for abuse from those seeking to conduct electoral malpractice. The introduction of postal voting on demand has been subjected to considerable criticism. A Joseph Rowntree Report suggested that the system of postal voting opened up opportunities for electoral fraud (Wilks-Heeg 2008), while the Birmingham election court judge was scathing about the non-existence of fraud prevention processes in postal voting (Stewart 2006). A report commissioned for the Electoral Commission suggested that ethnic-kinship groups were being exploited in Pakistani and Bangladeshi communities to influence voters and enable electoral fraud (Sobolewska et al. 2015). Although it has suggested that cases of electoral fraud are rare, and concentrated within certain communities, the Electoral Commission (2014) has therefore argued in favour of the introduction of voter ID requirements to Britain (they are already in place in Northern Ireland).

Secondly, concerns have been raised about low and declining electoral registration and voter participation rates in the UK. These concerns have led many to argue for easier registration and voting procedures. These concerns came at a time when it was thought that individual electoral registration would dampen levels of electoral registration further (James 2014b). Thirdly, there have been cases of failures of electoral management. In the 2010 general election problems occurred at many polling stations including long-queues and insufficient ballot papers being ordered (Electoral Commission 2010). These problems are set against a broader context in which many have argued that the performance of local election officials varies across the UK, with some returning officers, for example, not reaching the requisite performance standards in some areas and others exceeding them (Clark 2015).

Yet there are important gaps in knowledge which prevent the extent of these problems to be identified and evidence based policy solutions to be proposed. Virtually nothing is known about the demographics, values and backgrounds of those who administer the poll; there is still limited data about the quality of elections, such as the number of cases of personation on election day or the number of people who don't vote because of administrative barriers to participation.

Research Design

This paper seeks to address the following research questions, using the 2015 British general election poll workers survey, which was designed and implemented by the authors:

- Who are the poll workers? What are their demographic characteristics?
- What training do they undergo? Do they find that training satisfactory?
- What problems do poll workers face implementing elections? How widespread are such problems?

The survey was developed from a previous questionnaire, the Ohio Poll Worker Survey, which was used in Ohio's 2008 Primary election (Mockabee, Monson, and Patterson 2009). The 2015 questionnaire was developed and adapted for British circumstances. It contained questions on recruitment, training, motivations for working at the election, election day experiences, views of the democratic process and more general demographic information. With the co-operation of electoral services departments in eight English local authorities, hard copies of the questionnaires were distributed to poll workers on election day along with pre-paid envelopes, asking them to complete the survey after the election and return it by post.

The participating local authorities were based on a convenience sample. The local authorities were all close to the two researchers' universities and had electoral officials willing to engage in the project. Of the fourteen local authorities approached, eight agreed to participate. Four local authorities were located in the North East of England, and four in Norfolk.² These local authorities, between them, administered 21 of the 650 parliamentary constituencies at the general election. Convenience sampling is often criticised for not guaranteeing a representative sample (Bryman 2008, 183-4). Notably, the local authorities did not include those where the most prominent cases of electoral fraud have been found, such as Birmingham or Tower Hamlets. While acknowledging these criticisms, there is unfortunately no way to sample or survey polling station workers in Britain without gaining access through electoral services departments at close to 400 separate local authorities. No national database of polling station workers exists, nor were the authors able even to obtain an estimate of the numbers of polling station workers nationwide. A representative sample would therefore be extremely difficult to achieve. Selecting authorities where problems had knowingly taken place would further risk the difficulty of 'selecting on the dependent variable'.³

This notwithstanding, such a convenience sampling strategy is common in organisation and administration studies (Bryman 2008, 183). The study covers eight local authorities, who administer the electoral process in twenty one parliamentary constituencies.⁴ It therefore provides greater data than has hitherto been collected, and in different parts of the country. Gaining agreement from local authorities to participate meant that it was possible to distribute a questionnaire to every polling station worker which was employed by those local authorities. In other words, this was a full population survey of the poll workers within the eight local authorities who agreed to take part. Most studies of poll workers have studied specific locations rather than deploy a nationwide random sample (Hall, Quin Monson, and Patterson 2009; Claassen et al. 2008). The methodology is therefore appropriate and accepted in this field of study.

In total, 3350 questionnaires were distributed, achieving a response rate of 38.8 per cent. The analysis is therefore based on responses from around 1300 polling station workers in a mix of rural, urban and mixed local authorities and constituencies. This is a very good response rate

for a postal survey. Participating local authorities appear broadly representative of wider levels of electoral administrative performance. The average performance of the participating local authorities is only just slightly below the nationwide mean for British election administration in Clark's (2015) index of performance in the 2010 general election.⁵

Results

The socio-demographics of poll workers at the 2015 general election

Analysis begins with a sociology of the poll workers employed in the 21 constituencies under consideration. Understanding who participates, in any aspect of politics, is a central aspect of political science. Aside from some very limited evidence from the USA (Kimball, Kropf, and Battles 2006), analysts have virtually no knowledge of who administers elections in advanced democracies, nor how they are recruited.

The survey therefore asked a range of questions of poll workers to establish their socio-economic characteristics. In both regions, the ranks of poll workers are predominantly female. Women account for 63 per cent of poll workers, with the proportion in Norfolk being lower at 60 per cent than in the North East's 64 per cent. This gender split holds when considering the positions held by the respective genders. Around 57 per cent of presiding officers were women, and 42 per cent men. Similarly, around two-thirds of polling clerks were women. In terms of their ethnic background, 97 per cent of poll workers were White British. According to the 2011 Census, 96.8 per cent of the combined populations of the local authorities included in the study were White British. This, of course, may well be different in some of the major, and considerably more multicultural, British cities such as Birmingham or London

The average age of polling station workers in 2015 was 53.4 years of age. Just over three fifths were employees with a further 30 per cent indicating that they had retired. Slightly over half (52.5 per cent) indicated that they had to take time off to work on polling day. There was some variation between the two regions in this regard, with 48 per cent of those in Norfolk having had to take time off work, by comparison with 54 per cent in the North East. Just under a third (32 per cent) of poll workers claimed an annual income of between £10,000 to £19,999, with a further 31.5 per cent claiming an income of between £20,000 to £29,999. As might be expected by the relative income distributions of the two regions, a greater proportion of north east poll workers (15.8 per cent) are located at the lower end of the income distribution (between £0-£9,999) than in Norfolk (13.4 per cent). In terms of occupation, 43 per cent of poll workers were either managers or administrators, with a further 18 per cent from clerical backgrounds and 17 per cent from a profession or technical occupation.

Poll workers typically have to follow complex guidelines on polling day, while dealing with electors, sometimes under pressure. This means that there is a premium on staff that are either well educated, or experienced in complex administrative tasks performed accurately and swiftly. Certainly, poll workers appear to be relatively well educated. Approximately the same proportion of respondents claimed to have undertaken higher education below degree level as reported holding a university degree (23.5-23.6 per cent respectively). A further 20 per cent reported having the equivalent of 'O' level education.

One criticism of election administration on polling day is that many poll workers are inexperienced, employed only for the short term of the election. The argument, generally forwarded from a US perspective, is that this may cause problems on polling day as staff may not be familiar with procedures (e.g. Hall et al., 2007; White et al., 2015). Evidence from the 2015 British poll workers survey seems to begin to contradict this assertion. While just under a third (32.1 per cent) had worked at four elections or less, the average number of elections which British poll workers had worked at was 9.6. Remarkably, a small number of respondents claimed to have worked at more than 30 elections. On average, as might be expected from the responsibility of the position, Presiding Officers had worked at around 15 previous elections. By comparison, polling clerks had less experience, having only worked at between 5-6 elections on average.

Table 1: Recruitment methods %

	Norfolk	North East
Worked at previous elections	47.2	58.9
By a local council official	17.8	13.7
By volunteering	15.0	10.4
By another poll worker	6.8	7.0
Official job posting by council	6.3	5.8
Other	6.9	4.2
N	426	866

Experience at previous elections impacts upon how poll workers are recruited to work on election day. Table 1 sets out the methods through which poll workers were recruited to work at the 2015 general election in both regions. Although there is some variation between the two regions, the predominant method of recruiting poll workers was through the pool of people who have previously had experience of staffing polling stations. The proportion recruited in this way was more than 10 per cent greater in the North East by comparison with Norfolk. By contrast, Norfolk had greater proportions recruited either by a council official, or by volunteering. The dominance of those who have worked previously at elections means that a relatively experienced workforce is available to draw upon. While this might suggest a limited pool of poll workers, the fact that a sizeable proportion are also recruited through other routes indicates a workforce which is open to those with less or no experience in doing so.

Poll worker training

Literature on poll workers has generally argued that their training may not be adequate for the pressures that they are likely to face on polling day (e.g. Hall et al., 2007). Consequently, the survey asked a range of questions about the training that British poll workers had undergone prior to polling day. Of all respondents, 92 per cent attended one training session prior to polling day, with North East respondents (95 per cent) attending one training session to a greater degree than Norfolk respondents (86.5 per cent).

Table 2: Quality of Poll Worker Training Methods %

	Did not receive	Poor	Fair	Good	Excellent	N
Talk/presentation from senior election official	2.9	2.7	12.3	51.8	30.2	1221
Video/DVD	81.3	1.2	3.3	11.1	3.1	1139
Role-playing of scenarios	85.1	1.0	3.9	7.2	2.8	1124
Q & A of possible scenarios	28.5	1.6	17.2	38.2	14.4	1160
On the day training by the Presiding Officer	48.6	0.6	5.3	25.5	19.9	1014
Informal telephone conversation with election official	78.2	1.3	3.4	10.6	6.5	1111
Booklets to read through	0.3	0.7	9.7	53.2	36.0	1210

Such training can take a range of forms. Typically it consists of training by electoral services managers using presentations adapted from templates developed by the UK Electoral Commission. More occasionally, training might involve role play of possible scenarios, and additional material such as DVDs or literature to read through. Table 2 outlines various potential types of training and the views of poll workers as to its quality and effectiveness. The main form of training experienced by respondents was a talk or presentation from a senior electoral official, which 82 per cent rated either good or excellent. Other methods were less regularly utilised. However, literature to read on the polling process was widely thought either good or excellent, while approaches such as running through possible scenarios, or, where appropriate, on-the-day training from the Presiding Officer, were also well regarded.

What of the content of training sessions? Most poll workers found the training of appropriate length and interesting. Only 6 per cent thought the training too long, while 9.4 per cent thought they were boring. Most also appear to have felt that the content was useful; 70.4 per cent agreed that enough time had been spent covering election law and procedures, while 89.8 agreed the sessions had been easy to understand. More specific instructions also received similar agreement as to how useful they had been. For example, in relation to opening and closing the polling station, 92.4 per cent agreed that instructions for opening the polls had been clear, while 90.8 per cent agreed that instructions for closing the polls had also been clear. This is important given difficulties with queues as polls closed in 2010 which saw considerable variation in practice in affected polling stations (Clark 2015). Finally, while 88.4 per cent agreed that instructions around voter identification were clear, only two thirds agreed that instructions regarding the casting of provisional ballots were clear.

Overall, the poll workers appear to have thought their training stood them in good stead for polling day. Four-fifths or respondents agreed that the training had prepared them well for election day, while 83 per cent indicated agreement with the statement that ‘after training I was confident in my ability to do my job on election day’. In total, 86.2 per cent rated their training either good or excellent. Norfolk poll workers appeared a little less satisfied, with 81.9 per cent rating their training either good or excellent by comparison with 88.2 per cent

in the North East. These are nonetheless high levels of satisfaction with the poll worker training process.

Problems on polling day

To what extent were there evidence of polling day problems at the 2015 general election? Following the three-fold categorisation made above, the first group of possible problems are *cases and opportunities for electoral fraud and malpractice by citizens or party agents*. The perceived presence of these types of problems have led many to argue that tighter security provisions need to be introduced in Britain, such as voter identification (Electoral Commission 2014; Golds 2015). It should be stressed that most poll workers appear to have had a trouble-free polling day. This notwithstanding, we found a small number of such problems.

The key findings are summarised in Table 3. Across the eight authorities, 11 poll workers (0.9 per cent) suspected one case of electoral fraud. This figure may overstate the actual number of cases because two poll workers in the same polling station may have reported the same case. However, the cases were spread over five different local authorities, meaning that there were at least five such cases. A related problem of integrity was poll workers encountering people asking to vote whose identity they were unsure of. With no requirement for voter ID, electors simply have to state their name and residence to the poll worker before being given a ballot. Poll workers' perceptions of the integrity of this process gives a unique first-hand reflection on this act through their 'local knowledge'. A small but significant proportion of poll workers, 5.6 per cent, encountered at least one such individual. Cases were found in all eight authorities. The survey also asked poll workers whether they had 'no problems maintaining the secrecy of the vote at the polling station.' Again, a small but significant proportion, 5.3 per cent, 'strongly disagreed' or 'agreed.' Based on this sample, suspicions of 'bogus voters' among poll workers and problems with voter secrecy are few in number, but do exist.

Arguably, a less serious problem, which, depending on how it is practised, could be categorised as electoral fraud, is citizens taking photos (or 'selfies') in polling stations. This is legal in many countries, such as the Netherlands, and encouraged as a means of increasing turnout but illegal under UK law. Experience of observation at British elections by one of the researchers has suggested there are some difficulties in this area. While some of this appears innocuous, pictures can potentially be used to identify people who have voted, while pictures of completed ballot papers may be used in fraudulent schemes. Polling station workers were not always as aware of the difficulty as might be expected in previous elections. There was therefore a high profile public awareness campaign before the election by the Electoral Commission to discourage it (Rudgard 2015). Cases of this were low but also still present, with 5.4 per cent of poll workers coming across at least one case.

One further form of electoral malpractice under this category is the intimidation of voters by party officials. There are tight requirements on where party officials can stand and behave at the polling station (Law Commission, Scottish Law Commission, and Northern Ireland Law Commission 2014) and the intimidation of voters during the polling process was a key issue raised by the judge presiding over the 2014 Tower Hamlets case (Mawrey 2015). Table 3 also illustrates that cases were again limited to a few in number, but the inappropriate behaviour of party officials can pose a problem. Over 5 per cent of poll workers reported some

problems, although these were mostly limited to individual indiscretions by one individual party official. Qualitative comments by poll workers suggested that ‘Tellers’ were acting within the rules, but were intimidating electors. Younger voters in particular, not aware that they did not have to give them their poll card number, were described as being intimidated.

Table 3: Problems Experienced by Poll Workers (%)

	None	1	2-5	6-10	10+	N
Suspected cases of electoral fraud	99.1	0.9	0	0	0	1269
People ask to vote whose identity I was unsure of	94.4	4.8	0.7	0	0.1	1260
People taking photos of ballot/polling stations	94.6	4.6	0.9	0	0.0	1270
Members of parties being where they shouldn't be	94.7	3.9	1.2	0.1	0.1	1269
Members of parties intimidating public	94.5	2.4	2.4	0.6	0.2	1270
People asking to vote but not on register	31.3	16.2	39.5	9.8	3.2	1267

The second type of possible problem is that voting and registration procedures can provide *bureaucratic hurdles for participation*. In the UK, citizens are required to vote in person at a specific polling station close to their home, unless they request a postal or proxy vote in advance. They cannot therefore vote at an alternative location close to their work or somewhere else more convenient. In the run-up to the 2015 general election concerns were also raised about the implementation of individual electoral registration (James 2014b). This was the first contest at which newly registering citizens would have to do individually and provide a national insurance number before their name was added to the electoral register. Existing registrants would not be removed from the register until 2015 or 2016 (subject to a government decision) but it was thought that young and mobile citizens could be affected. This was in the context of an electoral register that has seen a long term decline in levels of completeness to as low as 82% in 2011 (Rosenblatt, Thompson, and Tiberti 2012). This raised the prospect of unregistered voters turning up on election day.

The data suggest that electors being turned away from the polling station because their name was not on the register was a more widespread difficulty. As table 3 demonstrates, under a third of poll workers (31.3 per cent) reported no problems, but the remaining respondents turned away at least one person. The modal response at 39.5 per cent was 2-5 people who asked to vote but were not on the register. Given that polling stations can be as large as 2,500 electors (Electoral Commission 2015b, 7), this figure is low. However, it does identify a problem for some citizens wishing to cast their vote, as under different rules, they may have been able to vote. Qualitative responses to the survey suggested that many of these may have been people who had gone to the wrong polling station. Better poll card design or allowing citizens to vote at different polling stations could have prevented this problem.

Table 4: Electoral maladministration at the polls (%)

	Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Neither agree or disagree	Agree	Strongly agree	N
Problems setting up polling station	63.6	28.1	3.5	4.0	0.8	1300
Problems closing polling station	64.0	31.3	3.0	1.1	0.6	1251
Poll workers worked well together	2.5	0.6	1.2	26.0	69.7	1297
Voting process went smoothly at my polling station	2.5	1.0	1.9	37.3	57.2	1286
Problems with queues during the day	48.4	38.0	8.0	3.6	2.0	1290
Problems with queues towards end of the day	56.5	35.8	5.3	1.0	1.4	1271

A third category of possible problems are *the maladministration of the poll*. Problems were reported in the international media at the 2010 general election following cases of queues at polling stations which prevented voters from casting their ballot and some polling stations running short on ballot papers. An Electoral Commission review estimated that 1,200 people were affected at 27 polling places in 16 constituencies (Electoral Commission 2010). The 2015 Poll Worker Survey suggested that the frequency of problems are low, but again not uncommon. Table 4 details the different types of problems and their frequencies, with poll workers being offered a Likert scale to respond to. More problems were experienced setting up the polling station (4.8% either ‘agree’ or ‘disagree’) than closing down the poll (1.7%). In most cases poll workers worked well together on the day. As with 2010, problems with queues were experienced, but this time they were more likely to be during (5.6% either ‘agree’ or ‘disagree’) than at the end of the day (2.4% either ‘agree’ or ‘disagree’). Queues during the day were dispersed across all 8 local authorities and 16 of the 21 constituencies covered. One poll worker complained:

‘The polling station needed extra staff and booths. There were constant queues as people had to wait to vote. The poll clerks were constantly explaining procedure as there were so many different papers holding up the system. We also needed someone to assist with posting the votes in box and explaining the hold up to outside queues.’

Satisfaction with the Democratic Process

To what extent are poll workers satisfied with the electoral and democratic process? Since poll workers have unique knowledge on how elections work on the ground, and where the difficulties are, their evaluations are important. If they exhibit large degrees of dissatisfaction, then it may be surmised that additional difficulties exist which have not yet been identified. The survey therefore asked a number of questions regarding poll workers satisfaction with British democracy, and their satisfaction with their own role in the democratic process.

Table 5: Satisfaction with democratic process (%)

	Very dissatisfied	Dissatisfied	Neither	Satisfied	Very satisfied	N
How British democracy works generally	3.7	19.9	28.0	43.8	4.6	1280
How electoral process works on polling day	0.9	4.1	11.6	61.0	22.3	1280
Level of information about electoral process	2.5	15.2	27.4	48.0	6.8	1279
Changes to how electoral process works	1.7	11.9	40.9	40.7	4.8	1269

Table 5 sets out responses to these questions on democratic satisfaction. On the whole, poll workers appear more satisfied than dissatisfied, even if more than a fifth show some level of dissatisfaction. Poll workers do appear more satisfied with the democratic process than the electorate however. For instance, the 2015 British Election Study shows that 49.9 per cent were either very or a little dissatisfied with UK democracy (N=30,027), while the equivalent finding on dissatisfaction with English democracy was 50.2 per cent (N=21,841).⁶ Importantly, there is broad satisfaction with how the electoral process works on polling day. More than four fifths indicate some level of satisfaction with polling day operations, while only 5 per cent express any dissatisfaction. The highest level of dissatisfaction (17.7 per cent) exists when asked about levels of information people have on the electoral process. This is interesting because it confirms another similar finding, and suggests it remained relevant in 2015. This is that the accessibility of information to electors had the highest levels of non-compliance in the Electoral Commission's performance standards for returning officers in the 2009 European and 2010 general elections (Clark, 2015). Finally, respondents appear most uncertain or neutral about changes to the electoral process; just over two-fifths indicate neither satisfaction or dissatisfaction.

While these questions addressed poll workers' satisfaction with the electoral process generally, this can be separated from their own satisfaction, or otherwise, regarding their work on polling day. This is a very long day at work for them, beginning well before polls open at 6am, and going on beyond polls closing at 10pm as polling stations are packed up. There can be long periods of tedium with few voters turning out, and periods which are extremely busy. What level of job satisfaction do poll workers have? In short, they are highly satisfied; 99.4 per cent of respondents were either very or somewhat satisfied with their work on election day. Given that a sizeable number return to work regularly at elections, it might also be expected that high proportions were planning to do so after 2015. Indeed, responses to a question asking whether respondents were likely to work at the next election suggested a higher proportion than probably will in actuality do so; 97.9 per cent indicated they were either very or somewhat likely to work at the next election. Whatever the reservations among poll workers about the electoral process, it does not appear to put them off working at it.

Conclusions

Poll workers, the staff who implement elections at the local level play a vital role in ensuring that elections are safely and securely delivered, but they have historically long been understudied. This paper has extended knowledge from earlier US studies of poll workers to a major parliamentary democracy where issues of electoral integrity have recently emerged as important. Unlike their US counterparts, they tend to be experienced at working in the electoral process and are drawn from a commonly reused pool. They generally found the training of appropriate length, interesting and of practical use for the day. There is therefore much good practice to be learnt from the UK case. Poll workers also have 'local knowledge' of poll day and are in many respects uniquely positioned to evaluate the quality of the election. They appear to have experienced few problems on the day in 2015. The difficulties they did face, although small in number and likely quite localised, remain significant. It seems clear that there are suspicions of electoral fraud, inappropriate activity by party officials and citizens being turned away from the polls in many cases. These difficulties notwithstanding, poll workers evidence both a generally high level of satisfaction with the democratic process, but also almost universally got satisfaction out of their own participation in helping administer the election. Without their contribution, running elections would be well-nigh impossible. They are then very much unsung heroes of the electoral process. While the lack of studies from other countries studies make cross-national comparison difficult, further poll worker surveys in Britain and elsewhere would substantially advance our knowledge of the electoral process.

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² The local authorities were: Broadland, Co. Durham; Great Yarmouth; Kings Lynn and West Norfolk; Northumberland; Norwich; South Tyneside, Sunderland.

³ See also Hall et al's (2007) account of the difficulties of sampling and surveying poll workers in the US context.

⁴ The partisan make-up of these constituencies was: two marginals (1 Liberal Democrat/Conservative, 1 Liberal Democrat/Labour); Four comfortable Conservative seats and two safe Conservative seats; Two Labour comfortable seats and 11 Labour safe seats.

⁵ This was measured on a scale of performance ranging from scores of 7 to 21. The mean for the eight local authorities in this study was 15.13; the nationwide mean was 15.75. See Clark (2015) for more detail.

⁶ Data from Wave 6. The British Election Study data is available at: <http://www.britishelectionstudy.com/data-objects/panel-study-data/> [23/7/2015].