

Why volunteer? The motivations of polling station workers on election day¹

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Abstract

Elections could not happen without the hundreds of thousands of people who give up their time to staff polling stations and ensure votes are issued, cast & counted. These poll workers are a crucial resource for electoral democracy and many countries experience problems recruiting sufficient numbers of poll workers. Indeed, approximately 120,000 people are estimated to have worked in the 2015 British general election. Given these are potentially high stress, low pay temporary positions, this poses an important question for electoral democracy and those interested in electoral integrity: why do people choose to give up their time to provide this crucial service to their fellow citizens? Almost no research has been carried out into this vital issue. Consequently, using data from the first British poll worker survey conducted in the 2015 general election, this paper begins to investigate the motivations & incentives for poll workers. Hypotheses are developed to test whether poll workers are motivated by a sense of civic culture or material incentives. The provisional findings are that the poll workers who worked at the UK 2015 general election are not typical of the public since they undertake much more frequent civic and political activities than other citizens. The presence of a civic culture therefore seems to be an important factor in shaping levels of volunteering. Material incentives are also present but subsidiary to solidarity or purposive motivations. This an important finding for countries like the UK where there is evidence that civic mindedness is in decline, or transitional democracies where a civic culture may not yet be established because poll worker recruitment could become a key challenge for electoral integrity.

Introduction

Elections could not happen without the hundreds of thousands of people who give up their time to staff polling stations and ensure votes are issued, cast & counted on polling day. These poll workers are a crucial resource for electoral democracy and many countries experience problems recruiting sufficient numbers of them. Given these are potentially high stress, often low pay temporary positions, this poses an important question for electoral democracy and those interested in electoral integrity: why do people choose to give up their time to provide this crucial service to their fellow citizens? Research into this question is extremely rare, and indeed little is known about poll workers more generally, particularly outside the American context. Using data from the first British poll worker survey conducted in the 2015 general election, this paper begins to investigate the motivations & incentives for poll workers. The paper proceeds as follows. The first section reviews the general importance of poll workers to electoral democracy. The second section discusses how literature on civic culture and rational incentives may be useful in deriving some hypotheses. Solidary, material and purposive incentives are all examined. The third section briefly sets out the data used in this study. The fourth part presents an analysis, with multivariate techniques demonstrating a number of factors structuring poll worker motivations to work on polling day. Discussing the implications, the paper concludes by making a number of recommendations for analysts & policymakers to consider.

The Importance of Poll Workers

The number of elections that are held around the world has increased substantially with over 2,600 national contests taking place between 1945 and 2006 (Hyde and Marinov 2012). All too often, however, elections are undermined by concerns about electoral integrity and malpractice (Birch 2011, Hyde and Marinov 2012, Norris 2014). The polling station is the venue where many of these electoral malpractices are commonly thought to occur (Birch, 2011; Lehoucq, 2003; Lehoucq and Molina, 2002; Norris, 2015a; Schedler 2002). ‘First order’ malpractices might include ballot stuffing, voter intimidation or electoral violence (Norris 2013). Established democracies are commonly thought to be free from these more serious problems, but still riddled with forms of electoral malpractice that the poll worker may be part of. For example, queues at polling stations have been reported in many American presidential

elections, at the 2010 UK general election (Electoral Commission 2010) and the 2010 Indian Assembly elections (Times of India 2012), amongst others. A new interest in the public administration of elections highlights the complex organisation of people, resources and technologies necessary to deliver trouble-free elections. This requires long term planning over the period of an electoral cycle. As with any other public service, there is therefore scope for variation in the quality of delivery. Things can, and often do, go wrong. What makes an election distinct from the provision of many other public services is that there might be deliberate attempts at sabotaging service delivery. The result will determine the formation of subsequent government and political futures of incumbent politicians. There are therefore high incentives for incumbent decision-makers to design laws and the flow of resources to maximise their chances of re-election. Electoral democracy is rich with examples of elites under-registering demographic groups more likely to support their opponents and under resourcing the polling stations where they might vote (Kousser 1974, Piven and Cloward 1988, Piven, Minnite et al. 2009, James 2012). In addition, partisan agents may seek to influence the polling process by intimidating voters or trying to coerce electoral officials to conduct or turn a blind eye to electoral fraud.

Literature on the public administration of elections has begun to identify ways of evaluating the quality of electoral administration (Clark, 2014; Clark 2015a; Clark, forthcoming; Elklit and Reynolds 2002, Bland 2014, James 2014, James, forthcoming) and the reforms and practices that can improve the quality of electoral management. These include the design of electoral management boards (Elklit and Reynolds 2002, Birch 2011, Clark, 2015b; Norris 2015, van Ham and Lindberg 2015), use of performance management systems (Clark, 2015a; James 2013), centralisation (James 2013), funding (Clark, 2014; Clark, Forthcoming), network structure (James 2015), use of ICT (Garnett, forthcoming) and the use of audits.

One line of enquiry that remains underdeveloped is the role of the officials who staff polling stations on the day of the election. These poll workers are the public face of democracy, and the implementers of a country's electoral machinery: they set up polling stations, greet voters, hand out ballot papers and are asked to ensure voting secrecy. Scholarship within public policy has historically taught us even the best-designed policies from above can go wrong at the implementation stage (Sabatier and Mazmanian 1983, Sabatier 1986). Street-level bureaucrats have considerable discretion and opportunity to implement policies differently (Lipsky 1980, Lipsky 2000).

For an election to be free from electoral malpractice, poll workers are required to successfully achieve a number of tasks:

- First, officials are needed who act in an impartial matter and without preference to any particular candidate. They should manage party agents evenly, not influence the voter with their own opinion and report any partisan attempts at electoral malpractice. To do otherwise would introduce bias into the electoral process and give advantage for a particular candidate or party.
- Secondly, poll workers need to provide a high quality service to voters, treating them equally, regardless of ethnicity, gender or any other characteristics.
- Thirdly, officials are needed who are competent and will follow instructions without errors. Ballot papers must be given to the right people, and polling stations need to be set out so that ballot secrecy is ensured.
- Fourthly, poll workers may need to be ‘problem solvers.’ An election day can throw up unforeseen events which they may need to resolve efficiently and within the guidelines.

In the context of long working hours, a potentially stressful environment and a natural human capacity for error, these are not inconsiderable tasks. Poll workers are therefore central to the democratic process.

What do we know about poll workers? In the USA, surveys of poll workers have become a well-established method of identifying their role in implementing elections. These surveys have been used to answer questions such as the demographic characteristics of poll workers and how are they recruited, whether poll workers have the appropriate skills with technology to work on election day, and how effective training schemes are for poll workers (Alvarez, Atkeson et al. 2007; Cobb, Greiner et al. 2012; Glaser, MacDonald et al. 2007; Mockabee, Monson et al. 2009). The study of poll workers is extremely rare outside of the USA, although studies are now beginning to take place in Europe (Clark and James, forthcoming).

Little is known about why poll workers volunteer to work on election day. Unlike some countries, such as Germany, there is no civic obligation in most states upon people to work on polling day.² So why do they volunteer? Given the importance of poll workers to well-run

elections and evidence that many electoral managers report problems with recruitment, this is a pressing public policy problem. For instance, Burden reports that just under half of all US jurisdictions, between 2008 and 2012, had difficulty in finding a sufficient number of poll workers. Recruitment problems were greater in urban areas and those with high registration rates. Such problems are not confined only to American experience but are also experienced elsewhere (Burden 2015:40; Electoral Commission, 2011; OSCE/ODIHR, 2008: 11).

Little research exists on why poll workers choose to work on election day. Only two studies appear to have addressed the issue. Glaser et al. (2007) undertook a survey of 15,000 poll workers in Florida in 2006. They found that the most commonly stated reason for becoming a poll worker was ‘to help my community’, ‘to help out’ or ‘community service.’ Material benefits were commonly highlighted as important (2007: 10). Meanwhile, on the basis of a survey in Leon County, also in Florida (n=845), McAuliffe (2008) tested the importance of theories of social capital, public service and volunteer motivation, coproduction, and principal-agent theory. She concluded that that poll workers are a ‘singular hybrid of volunteer and public servant’.

Theories of Public Service Motivation

Classically, debates about the drivers of human behaviour stress the competing influences of cultural norms and rational calculus (Peters, 2005). Taking culture first, as Brewer (2003) notes, there is a rich history of philosophical thought on the concept of civic culture, which is one obvious reason why individuals may volunteer. Alexis de Tocqueville (2010 [1889]) argued the success of American democracy was built on the civic-minded attitudes and behaviour of ordinary American citizens. More recently, Robert Putnam argued for the importance of social capital. This referred to the ‘connections among individuals – social networks and the norms of reciprocity and trustworthiness that arise from them.’ (Putnam, 2000:19). Social capital, he argued, was ‘closely related to what some have called “civic virtue”’ (p.19) and was ‘simultaneously a “private good” and a “public good” because the beneficiaries of social capital could be both individuals who were part of enduring networks but also broader society (2000: 20).³

A common approach to identifying the presence of a civic culture is to examine levels of political participation. Political participation was defined by Verba and Nie (1972: 2) as ‘those activities by private citizens that are more or less aimed at influencing the selection of

governmental personnel and/or the actions they take.’ This approach, limiting the scope to ‘acts that aim at influencing *governmental* decisions’ (1972: 2), has been criticised for having a narrow focus (Conge 1988). Audits of civic engagement and participation therefore now commonly involve other measures of civic activity.

Is being a poll worker an act of political participation? Serving as a poll worker is not conventionally a political act in which the individual is trying to influence government policy, in the sense that Verba and Nie defined political participation. In liberal democratic theory, the state infrastructure should act as a neutral arbiter between interests and competing parties. If a poll worker does as they are asked, they should act in non-partisan manner and have no effect whatsoever on governmental policy. However, given that so much can go wrong in the polling process, as described above, volunteering could also be considered an act of civic mindedness in the way that many other acts of political participation are. Professional, hard-working staff are indispensable for electoral process. It is important to note that an overlapping literature has sought to explain why individuals seek to serve in public office. In the context of concerns about integrity of civil servants, research sought to measure the strength of public service ethos amongst bureaucrats (Perry and Wilson, 1990). Brewer (2003), for example, found that public servants were far more active in civic affairs than other citizens.

It follows that theories used to explain why individuals participate in politics might be useful in explaining why they might volunteer as poll workers. Typically there are two main approaches towards explaining political participation. The first of these is the agency-based model, where characteristics of the individual taking part are central to explanation. The second relates to how individuals are mobilised in the first place (Norris, 2002; Whiteley, 2012). Taking individual characteristics first, Verba et al.’s (1995) civic voluntarism model suggests that those who are active need to have resources which will enable them to do so and they need to have a psychological interest in and engagement with government and politics. Resources include having essentially three things – money, time and civic skills – and link closely to the socio-economic status of activists, and their levels of education. The argument is broadly that those with more time, who are reasonably well educated and relatively well-off are more likely to have the civic skills needed to enable them to participate. With engagement, a psychological interest in politics means that individuals feel they can make a difference, have a commitment to certain principles, and group benefits that participation brings. Consequently, their interest in politics and government means that they get some gratification out of taking part in political processes (Verba et al., 1995).

Interest in politics on its own, however, is unlikely to be sufficient to explain participation. Individuals may also be motivated by other factors. A predisposition to being interested in politics therefore needs to be linked to a rational choice assumption. This provides alternative explanations about public service motivations. Clark and Wilson (1961: 131) argue that incentive systems are the main variable bridging the gap between individuals and organisations. They offer a threefold classification of material, purposive and solidary incentives (Clark and Wilson, 1961: 134-137). *Material* incentives are provided by some sort of material gain for the person participating, whether through payment or career advancement. Indeed, while the temporary nature of poll worker employment means there is unlikely to be any career advancement involved, the positions are paid. It is therefore quite conceivable that some people work on polling day to earn some extra money. *Solidaristic* or process benefits offer the chance to participate in social and political activities and thereby meet like-minded individuals. The rewards are therefore ‘socializing, congeniality, the sense of group membership and identification, the status resulting from membership, fun and conviviality, the maintenance of social distinctions and so on’ (1961, p.134-5). Finally, *purposive* benefits are those achieved by the organisations that the individual works for implementing or achieving its aims. In the examples that Clark and Wilson provide, this might include, ‘the elimination of corruption or inefficiency from public service or beautification of community, dissemination of information about politics or city life, and so forth’ (Clark and Wilson, 1961: 135-6). In the context of this study, poll workers may be motivated by helping electoral authorities achieve well run elections.

Research questions and hypotheses

These approaches provide a number of hypotheses that can be tested amongst those who acted as poll workers in the 2015 general election. Two things are of broad interest. Firstly, the pattern of civic-mindedness associated with poll workers. To what extent do they differ from the general population in how they participate in politics? Secondly, and central to the paper’s key question, how might their volunteering to work on polling day be explained?

The first hypotheses relates to levels of civic culture. Given that poll workers might be expected to be particularly civically minded, it may be that they demonstrated a different pattern of general participation to that of the population at large. This provides the following:

H1: Poll workers have resources and skills which permit them to volunteer to work on polling day

H2: Political participation for all activities will be at a higher level than for the general population

H3: Civic culture, illustrated by high levels of political and civic participation, is a key determinant of poll worker motivation.

Explaining why poll workers volunteer on polling day will likely revolve around civic voluntarism, incentive-based and social capital explanations. Thus, from the foregoing discussion of participation, it might be expected that:

H4: Poll workers have a high level of psychological interest and engagement with politics

H5: Poll workers have a high level of engagement in the associational networks crucial to social capital explanations of participation.

Civic culture may not be the only driver of motivation, however. Following Clark and Wilson (1961), hypotheses are developed to identify the other incentives that motivate poll workers to serve:

H6: Poll workers' motivations revolve around solidary, material and purposive incentives.

H7: Poll workers who did not enjoy their experience will be less likely to serve again.

Data

The British 2015 general election poll worker survey was designed and implemented to establish the demographic characteristics of British poll workers, the training they undertake, the extent to which they find the training satisfactory, the problems they face implementing elections and how widespread these problems are.

There are two different types of 'poll workers' working in polling stations in the UK. *Presiding Officers'* duties include responsibility for liaising with the key-holder of the building where polling will take place, 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). Both categories of poll worker are appointed only for the temporary purpose of the election alone.

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. 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.⁴ 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 to obtain an official 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'.⁵

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.⁶ It therefore provides greater data than has hitherto been collected, and in different parts of England. 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).

Participating local authorities appear broadly representative of wider levels of electoral administrative performance. The average performance of the participating local authorities is close to the nationwide mean for British election administration in Clark’s (2015a) index of performance in the 2010 general election.⁷ The partisan make-up of these constituencies was: two marginal seats (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. The average electorate across the 21 constituencies was 66,829, with a mean turnout of 63 per cent. Excluding Scotland and Northern Ireland, which have slightly different electoral arrangements, the average constituency electorate in 2015 was just under 65,000, while the mean turnout across the two regions was 64.6 per cent, and across England and Wales 65.8. Based on census 2011 data, the broader representativeness of the eight local authority areas on a range of socio-economic occupational variables is detailed in table 1. Surveyed local authorities have an occupational structure slightly less concentrated at the higher ends of the occupational spectrum than in England and Wales, and slightly more at the lower ends, but appear broadly representative. The methodology is therefore appropriate and accepted in this field of study.

Table 1: Socio-economic/occupational representativeness of participating local authorities, 2011 census (%)

	Surveyed local authorities	England & Wales
Higher managerial, administration & professional	7.4	10.3
Lower managerial, administration & professional	18.6	20.8
Intermediate	13.0	12.7
Semi-routine	17.2	14.1
Routine	14.0	11.1
Never worked & long-term unemployed	5.4	5.6
Full time students	7.6	9.0

Source: 2011 census, table KS611EW.

In total, 3,350 questionnaires were distributed to poll workers by their local authority on the day of the election. Poll workers were asked to complete and return them by mail in a pre-paid envelope to the researchers. The response rate was 39.4 per cent. The analysis is therefore based on responses from 1,321 polling station workers in a mix of rural, urban and mixed local authorities and constituencies. This is a good response rate for a postal survey.

Analysis

Analysis of the 2015 poll worker survey data begins with a brief outline of their socio-economic status and examination of, in the terminology of the civic voluntarism model, the resources which they can draw upon to enable them to participate. The age of poll workers ranged between 20 at youngest, with the oldest being 82. The mean age of poll workers in 2015 was 53.3, and the median age was 55. In line with evidence from the USA (Burden and Milyo, 2015), 63.2 per cent of all poll workers surveyed were women, with men making up only 36.8 per cent of the election-day workforce.

A number of proxies typically are used to measure resources that individuals have available to them. Thus, having time and money are both argued to enable interested individuals to participate, while education and occupation both provide the opportunity for people to exercise and enhance their civic skills (Verba et al., 1995: Chs. 10 & 11). In terms of income, poll workers are clustered either side of the average in Britain before taxes albeit with a slight bias under the average,⁸ with 32.1 per cent earning between £10,000-£19,999 and 31.6 per cent earning between £20,000-£29,999. More than half (52.3 per cent) had to take time off to work on polling day. Earning a little extra for working at the election may therefore be a very important motivation for some. While 30.5 per cent were retired, and thus had ample time to work at the election, most respondents were employees (61.3 per cent). In terms of occupation, 42.6 per cent were in administrative or managerial roles, with a further 18 per cent in clerical posts and 17.6 per cent in professional or technical occupations. Poll workers appear to be a generally well-educated workforce; 34 per cent had degree level or postgraduate qualifications, while a further 23.5 per cent had some higher or further education below degree level and 12.6 per cent were educated to 'A' level standard or equivalent. Taken together their education levels and administrative experience suggest that the poll workers surveyed had the resources necessary to enable them to undertake what are complex administrative tasks on polling day. Hypothesis 1 can therefore be broadly confirmed, although earning more money on polling day cannot be excluded as a motivating factor from the data to hand.

What patterns of political participation more generally are exhibited by those who work in polling stations? The survey asked a range of questions in regard to political participation that respondents had undertaken in the past 2-3 years. For ease of comparability with one important annual survey of political participation which has been conducted for more than a decade, these questions were modelled on those asked by the Hansard Society's Annual *Audit of Political Engagement*.

The responses are outlined in table 2 below. This permits an exploration of hypotheses 2 and 3. Participation can be ordered by the level of costs involved in undertaking various activities. This is evident in table 2. For example, just over 90 per cent claimed to have voted at the last local elections, over 86 per cent voted in general elections and over 78 per cent in the last European elections. Much smaller numbers indicate that they have participated in a more high-cost way with taking part in a march or demonstration (3.7 per cent), attending to a political meeting (5.1 per cent) or taking part in an active political campaign (2.1 per cent). As might be expected, other activities fall somewhere between these two extremes, with for example more than a quarter boycotting goods for political, ethical or environmental reasons, expressing opinions online and 24.6 per cent having been an officer of a club or organisation. More than two-fifths had either signed a petition or e-petition, or done some voluntary work.

Table 2: Poll workers and political participation

	Poll Workers %	Hansard Audit %
Voted in last local elections	90.6	63.8
Voted in last European election	78.7	-
Voted in last general election	86.6	57.4
Signed petition / e-petition	41.5	26.7
Done voluntary work	46.3	15.3
Boycotted certain products for political, ethical, environmental reasons	26.6	10.0
Expressed opinions online	29.8	4.3
Taken part in march or demonstration	3.7	3.2
Been to any political meeting	5.1	2.4
Donated or paid membership to a political party	2.8	0.5
Contacted local councillor or MP	23.3	14.3
Been officer of club or organisation	24.6	3.7
Written letter to newspaper editor	4.9	3.5
Taken part in active political campaign	2.1	0.4
Stood for public office	1.4	0.1
None of the above	3.5	-

In some countries, poll workers are selected because of their party allegiance or membership.⁹ The party politicisation of electoral administration is an undoubted difficulty when considering whether contests are ‘free or fair’. In the UK, this has been much less of a problem as electoral administration is non-partisan. Local authority returning officers and their staff, for instance, act as apolitical civil servants in implementing their duties. Nonetheless, what is interesting to note in table 2 is that poll workers are more likely to have party allegiances than the general

public, even if this remains very small proportion. For instance, 2.8 per cent have paid membership dues or donated to a party (compared to 0.5 percent), while 1.4 per cent had stood for election (compared to 0.1). Similarly, although the word ‘political’ is undefined, and may in respondents’ answers relate to non-party events, over five per cent had been to a political meeting and 2 per cent had taken part in a political campaign.

Hypothesis 2 and 3 can be broadly confirmed. Poll workers’ political participation is higher than for the broader population, as demonstrated in table 2. Sometimes this is strikingly so. For instance, 90 per cent of poll workers claim to have voted in local elections. This is higher than the 63.8 per cent of those in the Hansard Audit who also claimed to have done so.¹⁰ Actual turnout in English local elections however is much lower, anywhere between 30-40 per cent normally, although this can be higher in a general election year. The same applies to European and general elections; poll worker turnout is much higher than that of the electorate as a whole. In other activities, poll workers have more than double the level of participation. Thus, while 46 per cent of poll workers have done some voluntary work, only 15 per cent of Hansard respondents had done so. Similarly there are large gaps with boycotting, petition signing, expressing opinions online, contacting local representatives and being an officer of a club or organisation. Poll workers were also more likely to donate to parties or stand for election. Underlining hypothesis 3, poll workers are therefore clearly civically-minded individuals, more likely to participate than most fellow citizens.

Previous studies of participation in Britain have shown that individuals can be grouped around various different types of participation. Thus, Parry et al. (1992: Ch. 11) identified seven types of participation in Britain. These were: just voters (42.6 per cent); almost inactives (16.6 per cent); collective activists (16.7 per cent); contacting activists (11.5 per cent); direct activists (5.1 per cent); party campaign activists (4.1 per cent); and complete activists (3.4 per cent).

Table 3 presents a factor analysis of questions on poll workers’ repertoires of political participation. Factor analysis is a data reduction technique which allows the underlying structures or groupings of answers to be discovered in a set of questions. The analysis was a principal components analysis, with varimax rotation. Five factors, or different groups of participation among poll workers, were found. Together these explain 53.8 per cent of variance in the activities included in the analysis. Factor loadings were selected at .4 and above.

The first, and largest, group are labelled ‘voters’, because the factor loadings simply group the three types of voting together. The second group are labelled ‘old’ activists. This is not meant

Table 3: Factor analysis of poll workers' political participation

	Voters	'Old' Activists	'New' Activists	Volunteers	Contacters
Voted in last local elections	.843				
Voted in last European election	.766				
Voted in last general election	.755				
Signed petition / e-petition			.787		
Done voluntary work				.698	
Boycotted certain products for political, ethical, environmental reasons			.557		
Expressed opinions online			.757		
Taken part in march or demonstration		.646			
Been to any political meeting		.680			
Donated or paid membership to a political party		.497			
Contacted local councillor or MP					.634
Been officer of club or organisation				.699	
Written letter to newspaper editor					.825
Taken part in active political campaign		.705			
Stood for public office				.585	

in relation to age, but to type of participation. If we accept that the nature of political participation is changing towards a more consumerist, online version of activism (e.g. Norris, 2002, Ch. 10), then this group reflects previous types of political participation. This revolves around taking part in marches or demonstrations, attending political meetings, donating money or joining, and participating in an active campaign. 'New' activists by contrast concentrate on signing petitions or e-petitions, boycotting products and expressing opinions online. The fourth group of 'volunteers' participate through being active in voluntary work, holding positions as officers of clubs or organisations, and standing for office. Finally, the fifth group concentrate

on contacting local councillors or MPs, or writing letters to newspaper editors. Broadly then this is consistent with what previous studies such as Parry et al. (1992) have found.

So far it has been established that poll workers display a high level of political participation, higher than the general population, even if the types of participation mirror those found more generally. This high level of participation demonstrates the civic mindedness of polling station workers. However, it is necessary to test this more directly with questions regarding political engagement, as per the civic voluntarism model, and in relation to the social capital and various types of incentives that working on polling day may satisfy.

The poll worker survey established levels of interest in politics among respondents at four levels, politics generally, local, national and international issues. The highest levels of interest were shown in relation to local and national issues, with 88.8 per cent being either fairly or very interested in national issues and 90.8 either fairly or very interested in local issues. Again, this demonstrates more interest than the broader population; 79.6 were either fairly or very interested in local issues and 75.7 in national issues in the first decade of the Hansard Audit of political engagement. Poll workers appear a little less interested when asked about politics generally or international issues, with only 72.1 per cent for both questions indicating they were either fairly or very interested. Yet, this is again higher than the broader population, of whom the Hansard Audit found only 45.6 per cent interested in politics generally, and 66.9 in international issues. Poll workers therefore clearly have the levels of engagement and psychological interest that the civic voluntarism model suggests are an important precursor to explaining participation (Verba, et al., 1995). Thus, hypothesis 4 can be confirmed among the poll workers surveyed.

At one point there was considerable discussion about social capital explanations of participation. In the USA, it was famously said to be in decline by Putnam (2000) who saw Americans increasingly not joining social groups and civic associations. Hall (1999) however argued otherwise in Britain, suggesting that social capital was broadly stable. More recently, both Halpern (2005) and Whiteley (2012) suggest that social capital is also now declining in Britain, measured by levels of interpersonal trust and voluntary activity.

Levels of voluntary activity have already been established above for poll worker respondents. Indeed, they undertake such activity more often than the broader population, with voluntary activity being the main form of political participation for some of them. A crucial indicator of social capital has always been associational activity. It was this, for instance, that Putnam

(2000) used to set the scene in his famous *Bowling Alone* study. Poll workers were therefore asked how many civic organisations they belonged to, and given examples such as the National Trust, Royal Society for the Protection of Birds, Parent Teacher Associations, Religious organisations or other such groups to guide them. At 46.5 per cent, just under half of respondents belonged to no civic association, while 38.3 per cent belonged to either one or two associations, 11.6 per cent belonged to three or four and the remaining 3.7 per cent to five or more. It is not possible to get any sense of how this may have developed over time from this cross-sectional poll worker data unfortunately. However, given generally higher levels of participation among poll workers, it is possible that levels of associational membership are also higher. Halpern (2005: 212-217) suggests that, on average, associational membership rose from 0.73 to 1.43 between 1959-1999, but that such memberships have only limited strength of loyalty to their associations and that many traditional associations, and indicators of social capital, are in decline. More recently, the 2011-12 *Understanding Society* panel survey found that 47 per cent were members of some form of association, equivalent to the results found in the poll workers survey and not notably higher as suggested in hypothesis 5.¹¹

So far, the evidence points to an engaged, civically minded workforce. What of more specific poll worker motivations for working on election day? The survey asked respondents about their reasons for working on polling day. Table 4 reports their responses in relation to how many said the reason was either somewhat or very important in explaining why they worked at the election.

Table 4: Reasons for Working on Polling Day

	% somewhat / very important	N
I wanted to experience the democratic process	62.0	1275
I wanted to learn more about politics and government	37.5	1263
I was asked by someone in a local group I attend	11.7	1206
I like to be with people who share my ideals	20.4	1228
I think it is my duty as a citizen	52.5	1255
I am the kind of person who does my share	66.1	1256
I wanted to make some extra money	89.5	1289
I received recognition from people I respect	29.5	1243
I can be with friends and like-minded people	38.6	1246
It was different to the usual day at work	66.1	1261

The reason highlighted by most poll workers as important was to make some extra money, indicated as being either somewhat or very important by 89.5 per cent. It should not however be imagined that poll workers are raking it in at public expense when providing this crucial civic duty. They are not. In two local authorities in the North East, the most responsible position of Presiding Officer in the 2015 general election was paid a fee of £195 with travel and a small training allowance covered. Those local authorities paid their polling clerks a fee of £115, again with travel covered. One local authority paid a little more; £285 for presiding officers, and £185 for polling clerks, which included a training payment. In this local authority, the fee is reduced by £35 if a standalone election is held. Given that this is roughly a sixteen hour day at work, these figures equate to between £12.18-£17.80 for Presiding Officers and £7.19-£11.56 for polling clerks. While extra money may well be helpful, as suggested above, no-one appears to be getting rich from working at elections.

Other explanations are therefore clearly important. To two thirds, it was different from the usual day at work, and civic motivation was clearly important as they were the kind of person who does their share. Similarly, 62 per cent wanted to experience the democratic process. Some social explanations appear to have been of mid-range importance, such as it being a civic duty, or being with friends and like-minded people. The lowest ranking in terms of importance were wanting to be with people who share their ideals and, at 11.7 per cent, being asked by someone in a local group they attend suggests that a small number may well be motivated by social capital or civic voluntarism social network explanations.

A way of getting a clearer sense of the cluster of reasons which may motivate participation as a poll worker is, as with discussion of patterns of participation more broadly, to perform a factor analysis. Table 5 presents a principal components analysis with varimax rotation of the reasons for working on polling day. Three main factors were identified, which together identify 60.9 per cent of variance in the data. Broadly, they rotate around the solidary, purposive and material incentives that Clark and Wilson (1961) set out in their influential framework. This confirms hypothesis 6. The most important set of motivations or incentives are social or solidary, and include being asked by someone in a local group to work on polling day, being with people who share ideals, it being a civic duty and wanting to do their share, receiving recognition and being with friends and like-minded people. On its own, this was the most important factor loading accounting for 35.9 per cent of variation. The second group of motivations related to purposive issues, experiencing the democratic process, learning more about politics and government, and, in an overlap with solidary motivations, being a civic duty

and wanting to do their share. This accounted for 14.9 per cent of variance. Finally, a smaller group, accounting for 10 per cent of variance, remained motivated by earning additional money, and it being different to a normal day at work.

Table 5: Principal components analysis of reasons for working on polling day

	Solidary	Purposive	Material
I wanted to experience the democratic process		.858	
I wanted to learn more about politics and government		.805	
I was asked by someone in a local group I attend	.734		
I like to be with people who share my ideals	.733		
I think it is my duty as a citizen	.445	.606	
I am the kind of person who does my share	.512	.561	
I wanted to make some extra money			.794
I received recognition from people I respect	.611		
I can be with friends and like-minded people	.667		
It was different to the usual day at work			.629

Saving these results as factor scores means that a little more can be done with this data to understand the motivations of polling station workers. Factor scores can take either positive or negative form, are standardised around zero and they provide an indication of the extent to which respondents most emphasise material, purposive or solidary incentives. Thus a negative value indicates a respondent is below the average on that particular incentive scale, while a positive value indicates that they are stronger than average on a particular scale. This permits an assessment of how respondents' placement on each of these factors correlates with a number of other features, such as age, experience and the level of resources they have available to them.

Poll workers in this study are relatively experienced. On average, poll workers had worked at 9.5 elections, with the average for presiding officers being 15.4 and for polling clerks being 5.6. Might experience relate to the incentives for working on polling day? There are however no statistically significant correlations between the number of elections worked at and the types of incentives for participation outlined above. The age of poll workers has an interesting effect. There is a weakly positive Pearson correlation of .138 which is statistically significant ($p < .05$)

between poll worker age and the solidary incentive scale. In other words, older workers are more likely to participate because of solidary motivations. Yet, a statistically significant ($p < .05$) negative bivariate Pearson correlation of $-.293$ exists between age and the material scale, suggesting that for older poll workers money is less of a motivation than for younger poll workers. Education only had one statistically significant ($p < .05$) but relatively weak negative correlation ($-.141$) with the solidary scale, suggesting that those with higher educational levels were less likely to be motivated by solidary incentives.

For a lower income earner, the pay rate is proportionately higher than it is for a higher income earner. Those who wanted to earn extra money were analysed by income and occupation. There was a little evidence that material motivations vary by income. Those who thought that money was ‘not at all important’ or ‘not very important’ increased as income increased from 5.8 per cent in the lowest income category to 11.1 per cent in the highest category but money seemed to be important to all groups. There was no clear pattern in relation to employment status, perhaps because only seven poll workers were recruited who were in full time education, and nine who were in unemployed (notable in itself).¹² There was only a small difference between the 83 per cent of retired poll workers who indicated that earning extra money was important to some degree, and the 92 per cent of those who were employees.

Table 6: Coding of free-text comments relating to satisfaction

Theme	Number of comments	Example quote
Solidary	28	My husband and I work at our local polling station in the village hall, we know most of the attendees. Comments from voters 'It is nice to see people we know in charge.' I obey my husband implicitly on that day! 'All part of life's rich pageant - only 170 voters in this area so quite a long day - but worth it'
Purposive	16	Excellent experience and I was happy to assist many first time voters.
Material	2	Enjoyed the day very much. The polling station was busy so always something to do. Made a real change from my day job and the extra cash can go towards my holiday!

Poll workers were asked to provide additional information about their experience in a free text format at the end of the survey. This provides additional information about their motivations since it identifies the aspects of the job that they enjoyed. There were 64 comments explaining how poll workers enjoyed the experience. Those which provided sufficient information to judge whether it was for solidary, purposive or material reasons are described in Table 6. Solidary themes were more present. It was notable, however, that it was engaging with the public as much as with fellow co-workers that was as often stated as being important. As one respondent put it: ‘We got on really well as a team and the electors were very pleasant and friendly. It made for an enjoyable if very tiring day!’ As with the factor analysis, purposive themes were the second most frequent and material themes were hardly stated at all.

Material themes featured more commonly as stated reasons for not enjoying the day. Table 7 summarises the negative comments of poll workers with the poor working conditions being the most common problem. Regardless of these rare few dissatisfied poll workers, 97.9 per cent said they were likely to work as a poll worker at the next election. This suggests little support for H7.

Table 7: Coding of free-text comments relating to dissatisfaction

Theme	Number of comments	Example quote
Long hours	8	Long and boring day. I don't think it was worth taking a day off work to do it.
Low payment	18	‘A very demanding day of work - length of time, complexity, problem solving, knowledge required. This is not acknowledged in the pay or recognition /respect for the post. ‘Considering the hours inc. travelling were 6:00 am 10:30 pm (16.5) I feel that the fee paid is poor!’
Poor working conditions	21	Arriving at 6:15 am and leaving at 10:15 was too long to sit - 'meals' missed /delayed - toilet breaks not regular - cold church hall - too busy at times to cope’

Conclusion

The focus of election studies is understandably usually on the behaviour of political parties, candidates and voters. But elections could not function with poll workers setting up polling stations early in the morning, managing the poll smoothly during the day, and transferring the votes that citizens have cast to be counted. This study is amongst the first to consider why poll workers volunteer, a crucial public policy question given that many electoral officials struggle to recruit them in sufficient quantity and quality. The poll workers used at the UK 2015 general election are not typical of the public. They undertake much more frequent civic and political activities than other citizens. The presence of a civic culture therefore seems to be an important factor in shaping levels of volunteering. Put in terms of incentives, poll workers are keen to help electoral officials achieve their goals of well-run elections. This is important for countries like the UK where there is evidence that civic mindedness is in decline, or transitional democracies where it is not yet established because poll worker recruitment may become a challenge for electoral integrity. Poll workers, however, are also motivated by other factors. Working on polling day is also a social act which allows poll workers to collaborate with members of their community and engage with members of their community. Finally, material rewards are not insignificant and appear to motivate a sizeable section of the poll worker community. But this is tertiary to other reasons for poll workers as a whole.

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² In Germany, it is an obligation or duty of citizenship to work at the polls if requested, in a manner something equivalent to jury duty in Britain.

³ Also see: Coleman (1994) and Bourdieu (1983) among others.

⁴ Local authorities in the UK do not routinely hold an email list of poll workers requiring the survey to be conducted by post rather than online. The local authorities were: Broadland, Co. Durham; Great Yarmouth; Kings Lynn and West Norfolk; Northumberland; Norwich; South Tyneside, Sunderland.

⁵ See also Hall et al's (2007) account of the difficulties of sampling and surveying poll workers in the US context.

⁶ The constituencies, ordered by local authority, are as follows. North East: Bishop Auckland; Durham City; Easington; North Durham; North West Durham; Sedgefield; Berwick; Blyth; Hexham; Wansbeck; Jarrow; South Shields; Houghton & Sunderland South; Sunderland Central; Washington & Sunderland West. Norfolk: Broadland; Norwich North; Norwich South; Great Yarmouth; North West Norfolk; South West Norfolk.

⁷ 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; Forthcoming) for more detail.

⁸ The median income in Britain was roughly around £20,100 before tax in 2012-13, with median income for the North East £19,400 and for Norfolk £18,100 (HMRC, 2015: 15).

⁹ For example, Austria has such a system. (OSCE/ODIHR, 2016).

¹⁰ This is likely to be due to self-selection bias. This is a well known effect where those who are interested in a particular issue, volunteer to respond to social surveys. Its latest effect was most publicly cited in the 2015 polling debacle when Labour voters were overestimated because pollsters were picking up too many people who were interested in politics through their sampling techniques.

¹¹ The successor survey to the British Household Panel Survey (BHPS). The question was: Are you currently a member of any of the kinds of organisations on this card? The organisations offered were around 16 organisations ranging from political parties and trades unions to religious groups, voluntary services groups and pensioners groups. The frequencies are available at: https://www.understandingsociety.ac.uk/documentation/mainstage/dataset-documentation/wave/3/datafile/c_indresp/variable/c_org [8/3/2016].

¹² As one electoral official explained about the long-term unemployed: 'they are the last people we would want running polling stations... we need people we can trust.'