



The Cost of Elections

Funding Electoral Services in England and Wales

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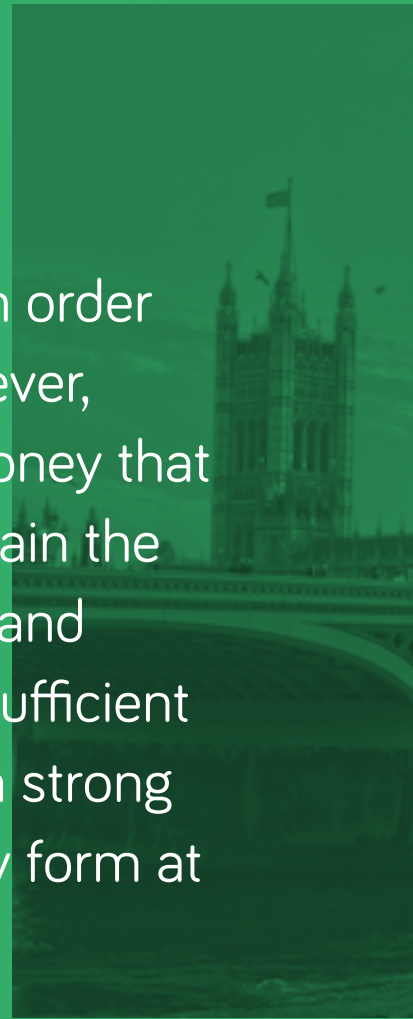
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Executive summary

- The funding of electoral services has become a key concern for policy makers in recent years. Concerns have been raised about whether electoral officials have sufficient funds to compile the electoral register and provide a high quality service to citizens. At the same time, with pressures on public spending, there have also been concerns about whether resources have been spent efficiently.
- The budgets and spending of local authorities on elections is not regularly published making these claims difficult to verify. However, this report provides new information surrounding funding that electoral service departments have in England and Wales based on Freedom of Information requests. This is an important first step in analysing a long-neglected policy issue.
- The average budget for local authorities to run elections was £340,000 in 2015/16, according to the sample. There was considerable variation however, especially by local authority type.
- Between the financial years 2010-11 and 2015-16 there was an average budget increase of £10,200 per local authority in real terms. However, there was huge variation with a fall in a 43 per cent authorities. These falls were often very significant. Increases may have also been because of the availability of short-term funds.
- There is evidence to suggest that local authorities do lack resources since they are increasingly over-budget. During 2015-16, electoral services were running 129 per cent over budget on average.
- The areas that have seen more cuts to funding on elections are less likely to undertake a public engagement strategy and marginally less likely to undertake school outreach activities. This suggests that democratic engagement activities are less likely to be pursued when electoral services are underfunded and under resourced.
- The report recommends that, going forward, budgets and spending are routinely made identified and published; and bring about better run elections for the voter.

Money matters at elections.

Candidates and parties need money in order to run campaigns and win office. However, what is less often considered is the money that electoral administrators need to maintain the electoral register and plan for the poll and running of the election itself. Without sufficient resources, staff and finances, there is a strong risk that errors may occur, queues may form at polling stations and citizens may be unregistered.





It is concerning that the finances of electoral administrations are largely unpublished and unknown. This report reveals new data on the amount of money that local authorities budget for and spend on elections in England and Wales based on an original dataset and attempts to shed some light on this area.

It demonstrates that there is considerable variation in the money that is made available to run elections by local authority area. When data from all responding local authorities is aggregated together, it suggests there has been slightly more money spent on elections in recent years, partly owing to short-term investments made by the Cabinet Office. However, there was a decline in real terms budgets in nearly half of local authorities at a time when major changes in the electoral registration process have been made.

Worryingly, the report provides evidence that local authorities are increasingly over budget. This suggests that many electoral administrators are cash strapped. The report recommends that, going forward, budgets and spending are routinely made public and reported in a standard format across the UK. This will ensure transparency, identify underfunded services in need of further resources, allow best practices to be identified and bring about better run elections for the voter.

The report also seeks to undertake a preliminary analysis of the effects of budgets and spending. The data suggests that those local authorities that have reduced their electoral administration budgets are much less likely to have public awareness strategies or undertaken school visits to increase voter engagement. It can therefore be said that that vital public engagement work has been sacrificed to save money.

The report was not able to identify a clear relationship between the completeness of the electoral register and spending. It argues that further data and research would be needed to do this. Lastly, the report suggests that methodologies could be developed to identify the most efficient local services, so that best practices could be shared.

The first part of the report summarises what is already known about spending on elections in Britain from recent research and why concerns have been raised. The second part explains how elections are funded. Part three explains the methodology used to collect information about spending before the main results are summarised in part four. The conclusions and recommendations are then made.

Recent concerns about funding electoral services in Britain

Until recently, there were barely any thoughts given to the finances of electoral administrators. However, some recent research has shone a light on potentially emerging challenges, crises and conflicts in the relationship between resources and running elections:

- A common claim has been that **electoral services departments have seen cuts to their budgets or lack the resources needed** to organise elections and electoral registration properly. Interviews with electoral officials in 2011, found that a lack of resources and budget cuts was a common problem (James 2014a). This research was undertaken in the context of expected local government cuts, promised by the Coalition government in the facing of a significant public deficit (Lowndes and Pratchett 2012).

More recently, a survey of electoral officials working during the 2016 EU referendum found that many flagged problems with the access to resources to do their jobs. Only 43% agreed that they did have sufficient funds for the poll and only 24% said that they had sufficient funds for their electoral registration work (Clark and James 2016).

- Any shortfall in funding to electoral officials can be attributed, in part, to changes in business processes, which has led to an increase in overheads. **The introduction of individual electoral registration is thought to have added to the cost-pressures** by making it more expensive to compile the register. Applicants need to have their records checked against other government databases. Although most applications (approximately 90%) are processed centrally, local authorities are required to process those that initially fail 'verification'.

They are also required to undertake a two-stage canvass process that increases postage, stationery and canvassing costs. This can place enormous pressure on the resources of electoral service officers (James forthcoming), especially when a large volume of duplicates are received (Clark and James 2016). The concerns associated with the pressures that comes from costs, has been used by government to support introducing cost-saving initiatives such as the introduction of automatic re-registration.

24%

said that they had sufficient funds for their electoral registration work

- There is also evidence to suggest that **the amount of funding that electoral services receive, matters in terms of the quality of delivery for elections**. A statistical link has been demonstrated between the funding that is provided to electoral officials and the frequency with which they meet the performance standards that they were set by the Electoral Commission in 2010 (Clark 2014).
- There has also been **concerns about potential inefficiencies within electoral services**. Cost efficiency is an important measure of success for any public service, elections included (James forthcoming, 2014a). There has been public concern expressed in Scotland about the amount of money that has been paid to Returning Officers in fees to run elections, when they already earn a high salary from their role as Chief Executive.
- **Information on how much money is spent on running elections is not routinely reported**, however, the Electoral Commission undertook an earlier financial survey of the cost of running elections, having developed a bespoke accounting method (Electoral Commission 2012a). The Commission also reported on the costs of the AV referendum (Electoral Commission 2012b) and plans to publish information about the costs of the EU referendum. The government has published information about the money spent on the 2014 European elections (HM Government, 2016).

There is information in the relevant Fees and Charges order, a piece of secondary legislation published by Parliament for each election, on the maximum money that a returning officer can claim for their services or expenses. The amount that they subsequently do claim and how this money is spent, however, is not regularly available. In this respect, the UK is not entirely alone. Attempts to work out how much money is spent on elections in other countries have also faced methodological problems (López-Pintor and Fischer 2005; James et al. 2016).

This has led to the Scottish Parliament Select Committee on Local Government and Communities launching an investigation which recommended that payments should be stopped and there should be much greater transparency (Local Government and Communities Committee 2017).

How elections are funded in Britain

How are elections funded?

There is an increasing range of organisations involved in funding elections because of an increase in the number and type of elections that are held (James 2014b; James 2015).

The arrangements for funding elections across the UK, as a result, are complex. Costs can be categorised into two broad camps; electoral registration and the election itself. Table 1 and Table 2 detail the typical costs that are involved for each and the respective funder. Funders therefore vary by country but also election type.

In addition to the information detailed here, the Cabinet Office and Electoral Commission have provided additional occasional funds. For example, the Cabinet Office provided substantial additional funding for the implementation of individual electoral registration in Britain. It also provided funding to 40 local authorities for the administration of overseas electors and communication work in the run up to the EU referendum (Electoral Commission 2012a, 9; AEA 2016, 24-5).

Electoral registration funding

Typical costs	Nation	Funder
Staffing costs for the core team	England	Local authorities
	Wales	Local authorities
	Scotland	Valuation Joint Boards
	Northern Ireland	Chief Electoral Officer for Northern Ireland
Mail		
Canvassing		
Designing and printing		
Queries and appeals		
Publicity		

Table 1: Funders of electoral registration. Based on information in Electoral Commission (2012a, 9 and 25-6) and AEA (2016, 24-5).

Election funding

Typical costs	Election Type	Funder	
Staffing	Westminster Parliamentary	UK Government	
	Designing and printing of electoral stationery such as ballots and poll cards	European Parliamentary	UK Government
		Scottish Parliamentary	Scottish Parliamentary
	Hiring premises for polling stations and counting venues	Welsh Assembly	Welsh Assembly
		Local government	Local authority
		London Mayoral and Assembly	Greater London Authority
		Police and Crime Commissioner Elections	UK Government
	Parish and Community	Parish or Community Council	

Table 2: Funders of elections. Based on information in: Electoral Commission (2012a, 9-10 and 31-3) and AEA (2016, 24-5).

Methods of data collection

Collecting information about the budgets and spending of electoral organisations poses many challenges which makes it difficult to produce accurate data. For example, often resources are merged and shared between staff and organisations working in areas that do not directly relate to elections (International IDEA, 2014: 207-229; López-Pintor and Fischer 2005).

Every local electoral organisation in the UK involved in compiling the electoral register and running elections were contacted by ClearView Research and asked for information about their funding and expenditure on electoral administration. Information about their funding sources, the number of registered electors, the voter engagement strategy and any outreach activity with schools was also asked for. The questions posed are listed in Appendix A. The response rate was 57.9 per cent. This response was comprised of 207 out of the 353 English authorities and 10 out of the 22 Welsh authorities. The Scottish response rate was much lower so this was dropped from the analysis.

There are some limitations on the dataset. Unlike the financial surveys that were undertaken by the Electoral Commission, a distinction was not made between the money that was spent on electoral registration and the poll. No single accounting method was set for the respondents meaning that some may have included some items that others did not. Some organisations have 'Electoral services' departments and 'Democratic Services' departments with the latter undertaking a wider range of work.

It is possible that some authorities included this wider activity and others did not. An advantage of this simple approach was that it encourage a higher response rate. Year-on-year analysis is still possible for the same local authorities because we can assume that the same accounting method would have been used in each year. The data was reliant on self-reporting, but this is a problem with all types of social analysis. The dataset remains important because it is the only data available of the trends in funding under the Coalition and Conservative governments. This was an important period of time because of the introduction of individual electoral registration and public sector cuts. It is therefore an important first step in identifying underlying patterns and developing methodologies for analysing these.

Adjustments were made to figures to account for inflation in some calculations. When this has been done, it is explicitly stated below. The adjustments were made using the methods proposed by the House of Commons Library (Thompson 2009) which involved calculating the HM Treasury GDP deflator index (HM Treasury 2016). The names of individual local authorities were not given in the analysis since the purpose of the research was not to 'name and shame' local authorities but to identify wider trends and contribute towards a discussion about the use of resources in elections.

Results: funding elections

The uneven budgets for running elections

How much money is made available to run elections? The survey revealed the amount that the average budget to organise elections and compile the electoral register was £340,000 for 2015-16. Local electoral organisations have very different sizes and areas to cover, therefore we should expect considerable variation between each type. Table 3 illustrates how larger and more urban authorities do have a larger budget.

Local government type 2015-16 Budget

Metropolitan District
£585,000

London Borough
£468,000

English Unitary Authority
£510,000

District Council
£259,000

Welsh Unitary
£248,000

Table 3: Average budget by local authority type, 2015-16

To what extent was there a fall in the budgets for elections? Figure 1 shows the average budget for local authorities over time for the period 2010-11 to 2015-16. According to the data, there was a small decline in overall budget during the first four years, but then a noticeable increase in the period 2014-6. In fact, the average change in the annual budget for a local authority over the period was an increase by £33,400. When inflation is adjusted for, over the period 2010-2011 to 2015-16, the average increase in budget was only £10,200.

We would expect that more money would be invested in when elections are held and as a result, more money would have been allocated to 2015-6 because it was a general election year. However, there was still an increase compared to 2010-11, which also contained a general election. It therefore seems as if there was a very small overall increase in the money available provided to local authorities in England and Wales to run elections over this five year period.

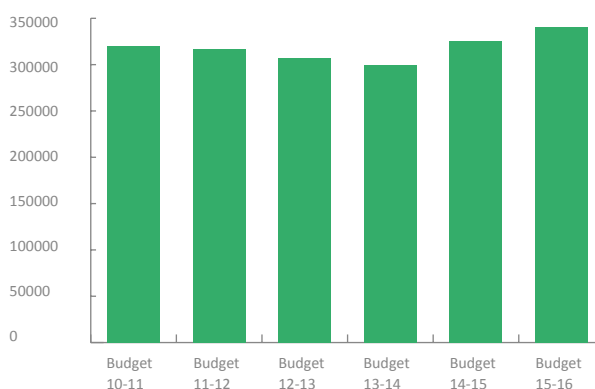


Figure 1: Average budgets for elections 2010/11 to 2015/16.

43%

of local authorities experienced cuts to their budgets for elections between 2010 and 2016.

The aggregate data masks two important patterns. Firstly, there were major local variations in election budgets. Figure 2 demonstrates how the budget increased in many authorities (57 per cent), but also shows that there were real term cuts, often major ones in many others (43 per cent). This suggests that electoral services have had very different experiences across the country and actually reinforces the picture from earlier research about some authorities being underfunded.

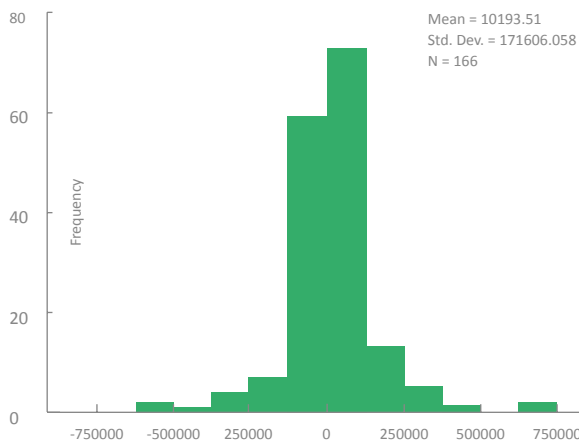


Figure 2: Real terms changes in budgets, 2010/11 to 2015/16

Secondly, the rise in funding for 2015-6 can be partly explained by a substantial investment from the Cabinet Office to help the additional costs involved in implementing individual electoral registration. Separate information provided by the Cabinet Office indicates that they provided £6.8 million to local authorities according to levels of under-registration.

This equates to an average of £18,134 for authorities in England and Wales. Without this funding in future years, there is a risk of significant real term falls in electoral services. The survey also asked for information on how much local authorities contributed towards elections, however. This also demonstrated that there had been a small real terms rise over the 2010-11 to 2015-16 period.

Increasingly over-budget: spending in local authorities

The budget made available for elections does not give a complete picture of the cost pressures on electoral services, since elections may have become more expensive to run. One reason why this might occur would be if changes were made to the way the register was maintained, which required more resources. As noted above, there is some evidence that individual electoral registration had this effect because it requires applications to be checked against government databases and for local authorities to process those cases that fail central verification. There are also more substantial staff, IT and postage costs (James forthcoming). Establishing another way of trying to identify whether electoral services are under financial strain is therefore worth investigating.

One calculation that might help with this would be to establish how much money was spent as a proportion of the available budget. Should electoral services have money left remaining in their budgets, or be at their budget limit, then we could imply that they had sufficient resources. If, however, they were substantially over-budget then this might suggest considerable cost pressures.

Figure 3 therefore charts the percentage of the budget that was spent by local authorities over the periods of study. It illustrates that electoral services were usually within their budget for the first four years, but this situation worsened over time. In 2015/16 the average spending was 129% of the annual budget. There is therefore strong evidence of many electoral services being financially stretched.

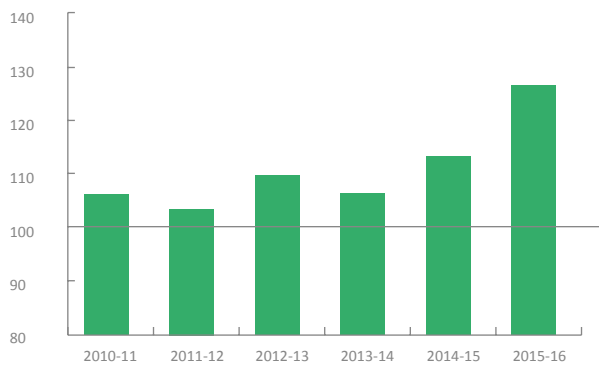


Figure 3: Proportion of budgets spent, 2010/11 - 2015/16

In 2015/16, many electoral
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129%

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Does funding affect the quality of elections?

To what extent does the amount of funding provided affect the frontline services offered to citizens? Does the amount of money spent make a difference or are there other factors that seem to be important? We look here at three measures of the quality of elections. These are: the extent to which the local authority has an outreach strategy, whether the local authority undertakes more school visits and the effects on the completeness of the electoral register.

Outreach strategy

Does funding affect whether electoral services undertake public awareness work to encourage more people to register to vote? As part of the survey, local authorities were asked to provide copies of the Electoral Registration Officer's public engagement strategy. There were 148 responses to this with 84 per cent providing one from the period 2010-11 to 2015-16 or clearly stating that there was a strategy in place. 16 per cent said that there was not one in place.

Although most do undertake this type of work, it is a concern that many do not have one in place or seem to consider this not a priority. Some responses were not particularly reassuring about the importance given to public awareness. For example, according to one:

'The previous Electoral Registration Officer has left the authority and we are unable to find any other documents.'

There is good evidence, however, that the absence of a strategy could be explained by a lack of funding. One measure that can be used to suggest this was the real budget change from the period 2010-11 to 2015-16. The average budget change for those with a strategy was very positive at a £13,580 increase. The average budget change for those without a public awareness strategy was -£50,952.

Some qualitative replies that accompanied the survey confirmed the relationship between funding and outreach activity. According to one:

‘Resources are stretched and there is no formal public engagement strategy for electoral registration. Activities have largely been limited to an ‘as required’ basis and have reflected or reacted to national or regional campaigns, which have themselves been reflective of evolving national policy or direction.’

In short, when budgets fall or resources become strained, public awareness strategies become the first to go.

The effects of an absence of a public awareness strategy are unclear, however, we might expect that the completeness of the electoral register (see page 14) would be higher where there was a strategy in place. But there was no noticeable difference. This might be the result of a relatively small sample size. It might also suggest that the strategies that were in place, which were often modelled from an Electoral Commission template, may not be the most effective way of increasing engagement. An alternative explanation is that investments in national campaigns by the Electoral Commission and Bite The Ballot’s National Voter Registration Drive may be more important than local strategies. Nonetheless, there is therefore much scope for reviewing local outreach strategies to establish ‘what works’ when it comes to increasing registration rates.

School visits

Only 66 local authorities responded to say whether they undertook school visits during 2014-15 or 2015-16. Of those that did reply, the vast majority (nearly 60 per cent) said that they did not undertake any visits (figure 4). School visits were more commonly undertaken in larger areas (Metropolitan, London boroughs and unitary authorities) than smaller areas (district and Welsh unitary).

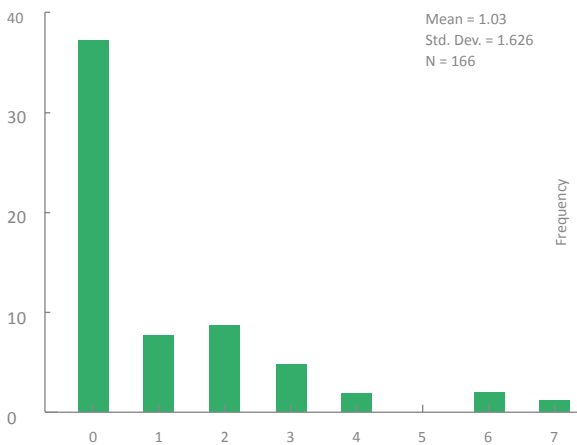


Figure 4: The number of school visits undertaken by responding local authorities in 2015-16

There was a small relationship between spending and whether school visits were undertaken. The real terms mean budget change from 2010-11 to 2015-16 was £7,133 for those local authorities who did not undertake any school outreach. It was higher for all authorities who answered the question those (£19,133). The average spend per citizen was £2.86 for local authorities who did not undertake visits, compared to £3.36 for all of those who responded to the survey².

Completeness of the register

It has been estimated that the December 2015 electoral register, which is being used for the boundary review for Westminster elections, has up to 8 million missing electors (Electoral Commission 2016, ¹). This has been highlighted as a problem by many including the All Party Parliamentary Group on Democratic Participation (James, Bite The Ballot, and ClearView Research 2016). The completeness of the electoral register is the extent to which every person who is entitled to have an entry in an electoral register is registered. However, the completeness of electoral register varies enormously across the UK. Figure 5 details the estimates of the extent to which the electoral register was complete at the 2016 EU referendum. This was calculated by dividing the electorate provided in our survey, by the estimated eligible electorate. The estimated eligible electorate was calculated as the over 18 population from the mid-2015 population estimate from the Office of National Statistics. The weakness of using this as a measure of completeness is that it does not account for any inaccurate or duplicate entries. However, it is only the available measure of completeness available for all authorities.

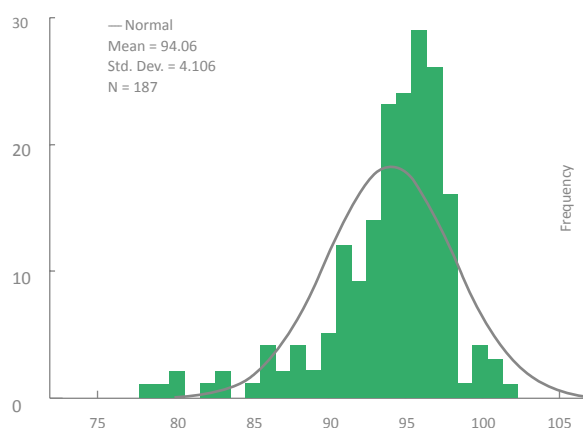


Figure 5: The Completeness of the electoral register in June 2016 (electorate/ONS estimate)

1. A Pearson's correlation revealed a -0.372 association which was statistically significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed).
2. These relationships were not found to be statistically significant, however, in a Pearson's correlation.
3. For a discussion of the available methods, see: Stuart Wilks-Heeg (2012).

Does funding affect the completeness of the register? In theory, we would expect those authorities that provided more resources to their staff to have more complete electoral registers would be missing fewer voters. Figure 6 seems to suggest little relationship between the amount of money spent and the completeness of the register.

The datapoints, each representing a local authority, are relatively spread out and no statistically relationship was detected. This might arise because of weaknesses with the measure of completeness used. A local authority with low levels of funding, might have a high completeness rate because they are accumulating an inaccurate, incomplete register. Further research is therefore required to identify the impact of funding on completeness.

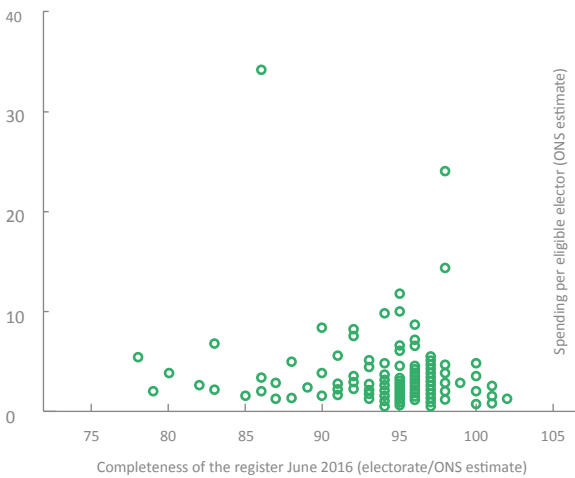


Figure 6: Completeness of the electoral register and spending per eligible elector

8 million

people are estimated missing from the electoral register as of December 2015.

Variations in cost efficiency

The report has so far established that there are many cash-strapped local authorities who may be in need of further funding. However, are there also authorities that have more resources than they need? In other words, could they be more efficient with their existing resources to increase voter registration rates and the quality of service to the voter?

It is possible to provide a very crude measure of efficiency in each organisation by mapping resources spent in a given year by the number of registered voters in each area (James 2014a, forthcoming). Figure 7 does this for spending data in 2015-16 and the number of electors that were registered for the EU referendum. We would expect that as spending goes up, so does the number of electors. A line in middle of the graph charts a best line of fit against the data. One-way of suggesting variation in efficiency is to consider those above this line as being under-efficient, and those below the line as being overly efficient.

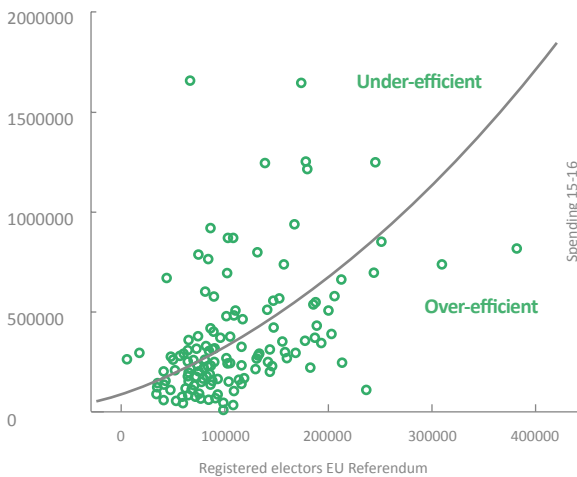


Figure 7: Variations in cost efficiency across local authorities

This is a helpful step towards identifying those authorities which might be more efficient and where best practices can be learnt. However, this simple distinction would be unfair to some organisations that had other challenges because of their geographical area or demographic characteristics (James, 2014a). For example, a large but sparsely populated area may legitimately require additional resources because of the need to canvass properties that were far apart. Figure 8 therefore just maps the relationship between spending and registrations for English Unitary authorities since they will have more similar characteristics. The models show that there is a strong fit but still outliers. This might be a useful first step in identifying the most resource efficient organisations and the types of factors that might need to be taken into consideration about when and why further resources may be required.

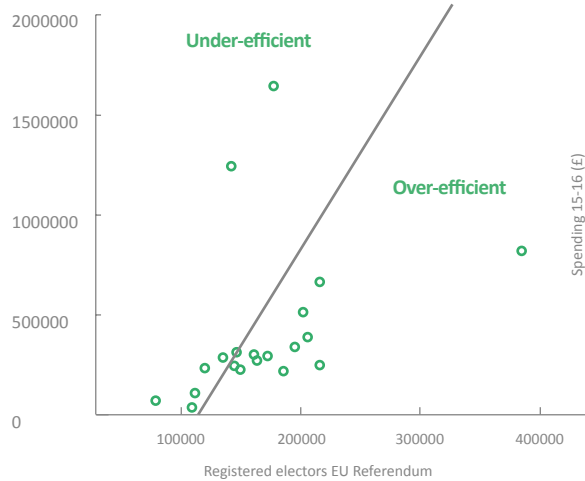


Figure 8: Variations in cost efficiency, for English unitary authorities

4. The R squared value of .517 in the figure suggests a good relationship between registrations and spending. A good fit was also found for Metropolitan authorities and Welsh Unitaries. There was not a good fit for the London Boroughs and English Districts, which suggests that much more sophisticated models are needed to advance this analysis further.

Conclusions and Recommendations

Elections remain the principal way in which citizens participate in the democratic process. Their smooth and efficient organisation are absolutely essential for the democracy, decision making and governance in Britain. In order for elections to be run effectively, administrators require sufficient resources and capacity, yet concerns have been raised that they have not been provided this. These concerns seem to be well founded. There are considerable variations in the budgets of local authorities. Many have seen major real terms cuts and there is an increasing trend to being over-budget. It is concerning that the areas that have seen more cuts to funding on elections are less likely to undertake public engagement activities. This suggests that underfunding and resource pressures have an effect on democratic engagement activities.

Alongside transparency and identifying best practices, there are other measures that may relieve the burden on local authorities. The government's pilots for automatic re-registration provide an important opportunity for cost savings. By using other data sources to re-enrol citizens, there is an opportunity to save funds from the annual canvass and focus on the unregistered.

A logical extension, however, is to pilot automatic registration, which may also generate cost savings. Why spend money writing to and paying canvassers to knock on the doors of citizens to register when their details can already be verified by a variety of other public sources such as Council Tax records? The provision of a website on which citizen could check their registration status would be likely to reduce the number of duplicate registration applications, which the evidence suggests, overwhelm many officials (Clark and James 2016). More widely, there should be a fundamental review of the financing of elections and electoral registration in the UK. This report hopes to have made a first step towards that.

This report has revealed new data about a sample of local authorities in Britain and reported initial findings. However, it is noteworthy that this information is extremely difficult to compile. Given the importance of elections and the vast volume of resources involved, it is recommended that this information should be routinely collected and published in a standard format using standardised accounting practices. This will allow local authorities to be held to account for their budgeting and spending by ensuring that sufficient resources are allocated for an indispensable public service.

Recommendations

1. There should be a fundamental review of the financing of elections and electoral registration in the UK.
2. Local authority election budgets and spending should be routinely published to the public in a standard accounting practice to ensure transparency. Electoral Registration Officers are not a public authority under the Freedom of Information Act 2000 and, as such, are exempt from the disclosure requirements imposed by it. The advantages and disadvantages of this provision should be reviewed.
3. Data on local authority election should be used to identify the most cost efficient organisations so that best practices can be identified and shared. Under-resourced local authorities should be identified and sufficient funds allocated to their budgets.
4. Further resources should be provided by central government to offset additional costs that may continue to be faced by local authorities as a result of the introduction of individual electoral registration.
5. Practices such as automatic registration and re-registration should be piloted to identify efficient ways to compile a complete and accurate register.
6. A national website to allow citizens to check their registration status should be introduced to reduce duplicate applications, thereby reducing pressures on local authorities.

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