

# The Effects of Centralising Electoral Management Board Design <sup>i</sup>

## Abstract

The public administration of elections frequently fails. Variation in the performance of electoral management boards around the world has been demonstrated, illustrated by delays in the count, inaccurate or incomplete voter registers, or severe queues at polling stations. Centralising the management of the electoral process has often been proposed as a solution. There has been little theorisation and no empirical investigations into the effects that centralising an already decentralised system would have, however. This article addresses this lacuna by conceptualising centralisation through the literature on bureaucratic control and discretion. It then empirically investigates the effects through a case study of centralisation in two UK referendums. Semi-structured interviews were used with those who devised the policy instrument and those who were subject to it. The introduction of central directions had some of the desired effects such as producing more consistent services and eliminating errors. It also had side effects, however, such as reducing economic efficiency in some areas and overlooking local knowledge. Furthermore, the reforms caused a decline of staff morale, job satisfaction and souring of relations among stakeholder organisations. The *process* of making organisational change therefore warrants closer attention by policy makers and future scholarship on electoral integrity.

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Improving the quality of public administration is a pressing concern for policy makers worldwide. A surprisingly fresh area of concern for national and international organisations has been the public administration of elections (Bauer and Ginsberg 2014; Global Commission on Elections 2012). Research has long documented how elections are subverted by elites seeking to maintain power through a menu of manipulation including electoral violence, vote buying, and maintaining favourable electoral laws (Birch 2011; James 2012; Schedler 2002). But problems with elections do not always occur because of deliberate partisan attempts to subvert the democratic process: they might come about through poor management, logistical difficulties, limited resources, error or incompetence (James 2014a). Cases of severe electoral mismanagement, such as delays in the count, inaccurate or incomplete voter registers, severe queues at polling stations, flawed ballot paper design and faulty equipment have been found in many countries. Cross-national datasets demonstrate considerable variation in the quality of the delivery of elections worldwide (Norris et al. 2016). But the causes of poor organisational performance in electoral management and the viability of the available fixes have been systematically overlooked by scholars despite interest by policy-makers. These problems are important because they deny individual voters the exercise of a fundamental right if their vote is not counted or they are discouraged from voting by long queues. Electoral mismanagement has been shown to undermine citizens' confidence in the electoral process in established democracies (Atkeson and Saunders 2007; Claassen et al. 2008; Claassen et al. 2012; Hall et al. 2009), and threaten democratic consolidation or cause electoral violence in emerging democracies as starkly illustrated in Kenya in 2007 when post-election violence followed the delayed results leaving the country on the brink of civil war (Elklit and Reynolds 2002; Pastor 1999; Snyder 2013). They can even alter the result (for example, see: Wand et al. 2001).

International policy makers and academics have frequently prescribed the centralisation of electoral management to provide a more consistent experience for the voter and overcome problems of poor management at the local level (Gerken 2009; International IDEA 2014). There have been no published academic studies on the effects that centralising electoral management might have, however. This article uses the literature from public administration on bureaucratic control and discretion to theorise the likely effects of centralisation. It then tests the theoretical expectations with a case study of where centralisation has occurred. In

two UK referendums in 2011 the central Electoral Management Board (EMB), the Electoral Commission, gave centralised directions to local officials. Long existing systems of local management were therefore overridden. Semi-structured interviews were undertaken with those officials who designed the policy mechanism as well as those who were subjected to it to identify its effects. The article finds that the introduction of 'command and control' directions from the centre enabled more consistent service provision and led to the early identification and remedy of errors by administrators. However, it also led to side-effects such as reducing efficiency in some areas and overlooking of local knowledge. Furthermore, the reforms caused a decline of staff morale, job satisfaction and soured of relations amongst stakeholder organisations. These are known to be important drivers of organisational performance but are also of value in and of themselves. The *process* of making organisational changes, hereto ignored by the scholarship, therefore warrants closer attention by policy makers and future researchers.

The article is structured as follows. The first section reviews the emerging literature on the public management of elections, noting a new interest in EMB design as a determinant of electoral integrity. The second section argues that although there has been much speculation, there has been no concrete research on the effects of centralising EMB design. It therefore reviews the broader literature from public administration on how and why bureaucratic centralization can affect organizational performance. Hypotheses are then developed from this literature in the third section. The article proceeds by giving contextual background to the UK reforms in section four, before explaining the research methodology in section five. A thematic analysis of the interviews are then provided in section six before the analysis and conclusions are detailed in sections seven and eight.

### **Electoral Management: the State of the Field**

Research on elections has traditionally focussed on voting behaviour, the design of electoral systems, the drawing of boundaries, finance laws and the use of voting technologies. The study of electoral management, however, focuses on *the people and organisations* involved in the *implementation* elections. It is a distinct and underdeveloped arena of study, defined here as *the organisational relationships, use of policy instruments and resources amongst the*

*stakeholders involved in the delivery of elections.* It therefore cuts across the fields of public administration, human resource management and electoral studies.

Electoral mismanagement is far more widespread across liberal democracies than often thought. Unweighted data from the *Quality of Elections Database* (2011) suggests that problems with electoral management are present on the day of elections in 15.2% of contests between 1977-2004. The *Perception of Electoral Integrity Index*, an expert survey of academics about the quality of elections held worldwide in 2015, suggested very high levels of variation on the quality of electoral management (Norris et al. 2016). The importance of electoral management is beginning to gain global recognition amongst policy makers. The professionalization of Electoral Management Boards (EMBs), the organisations responsible for running elections, has been defined as an important policy objective by international organisations such as Kofi Annan's *Global Commission on Elections* (2012) and bespoke national investigations such as the US Presidential Commission on Election Administration (Bauer and Ginsberg 2014).

Frameworks have been developed to define what constitutes 'good' EMB performance. James (2014a) has drawn from the public sector management literature on organisational performance to produce a heuristic framework evaluating EMBs. This involves identifying and assessing the outputs that they produce; the economic efficiency with which they produce them; and, the efficacy of those outputs for the desired outcomes (Table 1). The responsiveness of EMBs to the needs of citizens and their employees are also included into the framework, as are the levels of probity and accountability within the organisations (also see: Bland et al. 2012; Clark 2015; Elklit and Reynolds 2002).

*[Insert Table 1 about here]*

The determinants of EMB performance are beginning to be identified. A first wave of inquiry focussed on legal structure. This distinguished between EMBs according to whether the government, an independent organisation or a mixture of both was responsible for running elections (Lopez-Pinter 2000). Statutorily independent EMBs were held up as the 'gold standard' because they were thought to reduce the opportunities for partisan actors to

promote their own interests (Pastor 1999; Ugues 2014). However, when studies then investigated the effects of formal-legal independence using large n, cross-national studies the evidence was mixed (Birch 2008, Norris 2015, Lindberg and van Ham 2015). More recent research has identified the challenges that election officials face delivering elections (James, 2014), the effects of funding (Clark 2014, 2015) and the effect of policy instruments used within EMBs (Alvarez et al. 2012b, 2012a; Goggin et al. 2012; James 2013). Yet there remains a huge lacuna on 'what works?'

### **Centralising (electoral) management**

There has been speculation about whether centralised or decentralised EMBs perform better, but no detailed theorisation or research. Failings in electoral integrity have often been attributed to decentralised management. These claims are predominately in the US where decentralisation is blamed for variations in the voter's experience of election administration, usually for the worse. Gerken (2009, 1585-6) has suggested that 'localism' has been the cause of many American problems and can make reform difficult to achieve. Pastor has claimed that the US system has been 'decentralized to the point of being dysfunctional' (Pastor 2006, 273; also see Pastor 2004). The most cited advantage of centralised systems are therefore consistent experiences for the voter (Guess 2009; International IDEA 2014, 17; Pastor 2004, 2006). However, decentralised forms of election management have also been said to have some advantages. Guess (2009) suggests that they often allow more responsive service delivery for diverse local needs and they enable innovation. International IDEA's *Electoral Management Design Handbook* state that they can 'ensure continuity' and 'enhance inclusiveness and transparency in electoral management' (International IDEA 2014, 17).

Although there is little research on the effects of centralising electoral management, broader research from the field of public administration provides an extensive literature on how and why bureaucratic centralization can affect organizational performance (Brehm and Gates 1999, 1-24). Firstly, a *scientific management school* emerged in the early decades of the twentieth century, seeking to measure inefficiencies in the workplace. It prescribed the better coordination of workers through clear chains of command from central management,

strict rules and the use of penalties to increase performance. These Taylorist work processes were criticised, however, for bringing about harsh working conditions for employees. A counter-reaction therefore emerged in the growth of trade union movements in the 1930s. A *human relations school of management* instead proposed more cooperative management practices between employers and labour. Boosting employee morale was seen as important if organisations wanted to be productive (Barnard 1938). Performance could be improved by trying to embed the norms of professionalism into organisations, rather than through central command (Friedrich 1940). Herbert Simon (1945) also argued that top-down scientific management techniques assumed a level of rationality that central planners (or any humans) were not capable of. The centralised control of bureaucracies was therefore strongly discouraged.

A *bureaucratic discretion school* followed which issued further warnings about centralisation. This approach argued that public officials, or 'street-level bureaucrats', had the capacity to make policies and decide whether or not to enforce them (Lipsky 1980). The sanctions available to central decision-makers were therefore often argued to be ineffective because they were too costly to enforce. Central control was a practical impossibility. However, many authors did not necessarily consider this a problem. 'Street-level bureaucrats' were well positioned to make policy because of their close proximity to the everyday challenges involved with delivering public services. Feldman (1989), for example, describes public officials as being diligent and hard-working. They were therefore not motivated by material rewards and could work autonomous of central direction.

The new public management school that emerged in the 1980s, by contrast, argued that some form of central control of bureaucracy was needed because workers (and supervisors) were assumed to be rational, self-interested actors. The problem that followed was that, as Brehm and Gates noted (1999, 21):

Some bureaucrats devote extraordinary effort toward accomplishing policy ("work"), where other may expend as much effort deliberately undermining policy objectives of their superiors ("sabotage"). Other bureaucrats may be directing effort towards non-policy goals ("shirking").

New public management theorists therefore sought to develop a range of policy tools that could be used by supervisors to structure the incentives of agents into bringing about compliance, such as targeting rewards and punishments (Bianco and Bates 1990) although the efficacy of these were sometimes questioned (Brehm and Gates 1994; Hood 2006).

### **Research questions and hypothesis**

This article seeks to answer the question of *what effect does the centralisation of electoral management have?* Two contrasting hypotheses are developed based on the literature discussed above.

Firstly, based on the problems that have been commonly attributed to localism in the US and elsewhere, we should expect some improvements in the quality of electoral services. This position is reinforced by insights from the scientific management school that often suggested that a centralised decision-maker is well positioned to identify and prescribe best practice for the delivery of elections because of their position of oversight. The central decision-maker might also overcome any shirking or sabotage by bureaucrats, if practice is centrally prescribed. Hypothesis 1 is therefore:

*H1: Centralisation enables more efficient services and better quality services because the EC able to prescribe better solutions from the centre*

Based on the arguments of the bureaucratic discretion school, that top-down prescriptions are difficult to enforce and that local officials are often best placed to judge local needs, a second hypothesis is that:

*H2: Centralisation leads to no change or poorer quality and less efficient services because of a lack of sensitivity to a) local needs and b) the local knowledge of bureaucrats.*

### **The UK Electoral Commission: from benchmarking to 'command and control'**

The UK provides a useful case study for identifying the effects of centralising electoral management because it is an example of a decentralised system where there is variation in local practice and performance. The *process of making* of UK electoral law has always been centralised. It is made by Parliament in Westminster.<sup>ii</sup> The *process of implementing* election law, however, has always been highly decentralised. Elections have historically been run by Returning Officers (ROs) who are appointed by local authorities. ROs are responsible for the conduct of the poll and have some discretion over the timing of the count. An Electoral Registration Officer (ERO) is responsible for compiling the electoral register. Both ROs and EROs are local government employees but are independent of both central and local government with respect to their electoral duties. They are instead accountable to the courts system as an independent statutory officer and can be prosecuted for being in breach of their duties (Gay 2010). They both draw from local government staff to manage the poll and compile the register.<sup>iii</sup>

Between 2000 and 2011, there were common complaints by parliamentarians to the Electoral Commission about variation in practice and performance local ROs and EROs, illustrated by variations in local registration rates (various private interviews). These complaints led to a performance monitoring scheme being legislated for in 2006 (James 2013). High profile localised problems became headline news at the 2010 general election, however, as some polling stations developed queues that prevented citizens from casting their vote and officials did not print enough ballot papers (Electoral Commission 2010). Centralisation was therefore seen as a remedy to local variation in the administration of elections. Officials within the Commission thought that, having improved electoral administration with an earlier performance monitoring scheme, the directions would provide them 'a way of influencing what is done locally' which would allow them to 'report in a more timely fashion and if necessary seek to influence legislative change later on' (private interview, Electoral Commission Official, October 2011). The nature of the electoral malpractice was not that electoral officials were acting in partisan way, engaged in electoral fraud on behalf of political parties. The perceived problem was thought to be variation in the compliance with statutory requirements and overall performance because of uneven resourcing and practice.

The focus of this article is on the case study of the implementation of a management system by the UK Electoral Commission for the electoral administration in the Welsh devolution referendum in March 2011 and the AV referendum in May 2011.<sup>iv</sup> Under the Political Parties, Elections and Referendums Act 2000 the Commission had a number of specific responsibilities and functions in relation to the delivery and regulation of the referendum that it does not have at elections and had not been used before. The Electoral Commission's Chair, Jenny Watson, was therefore the Chief Counting Officer and able to issue directions to EROs and ROs. The use of centralised directions was historically unprecedented in British elections.

The Welsh devolution referendum took place on 3 March 2011 and the AV referendum on 5<sup>th</sup> May 2011. In the winter preceding this, the Commission published a list of directions that it expected officials to implement in the referendums (see Table 2). Local officials were then required to report to the Commission as to whether these directions had been implemented in the run up to the election. Five checklists were sent out between 28 March and 21 April. Local officials were also required to submit project plans and risk registers. ROs could apply for exceptions of some tasks if compliance was not possible or compliance would introduce further risk in the conduct of the poll, but Electoral Commission approval was required.<sup>v</sup> The Commission provided election officials with PowerPoint briefings for polling workers, flowcharts for postal vote processes, and template project plan and risk registers (Electoral Commission 2011a, 115).

[Insert table 2 about here]

Unlike the previous performance management scheme, documented in James (2013) which sought to induce compliance through incentivisation and punishment ('name and shame'), the system used in the referendums involved central command. It therefore provides a unique opportunity to identify what happens to electoral management if it is centralised.

## **Data and methods**

How can the effects of this reform be identified? An established method for evaluating the impact of institutional reforms in electoral services is to ask those involved in running elections themselves (James 2014b, 2014a). The logic is that, drawing from theories of implementation, public officials are front-line workers with 'local knowledge' who will have first-hand experience of the reform (Durose 2009, 2011; Lipsky 1980). Scholarship from realist approaches to public policy evaluation argue that practitioners have unique, real and concrete experience of a programme's effects (Pawson and Tilley 1997, 161). The risk of drawing from the experience of practitioners is that, as Pawson and Tilley argue, they often stress the immediate, local and personalised effects of their experiences and might be tempted to overstate the negative consequences to themselves. They therefore often lack the ability to systematically chart, typify and generalise. However, through aggregation, carefully analysing and externally verifying (where possible) the researcher can use the practitioner's insights of the effects of the reforms to argument a 'big picture' (Pawson and Tilley 1997, 161). The effects of such back-office reforms are unlikely to be known and experienced by the citizen.

To test the hypotheses this article therefore draws from semi-structured interviews with those who set the standards centrally and those who were involved in managing elections and were subject to the new standards. The advantage of qualitative interviews is that they allow the meanings that actors attach to events, experiences and actions to be explained and they provide unique insider information. Four interviews were undertaken with 'elite actors': past and present officials from the Electoral Commission and other key stakeholders. 74 interviews were also undertaken with local election officials (LEOs) involved in implementing elections. These local government officials include Returning Officers, Electoral Registration Officers, Democratic Services Managers and Elections Managers. These interviews were spread across 41 organisations, in England, Scotland and Wales in 2011. The interviews were semi-structured in order to let the interviewees define the issues. The names of individuals and authorities included in the study were withheld so that the interviewees could speak freely. A quota sampling method was used to ensure that all different authority types were included in England, Scotland and Wales and a mix of urban and rural authorities was also included. The sample included London boroughs (5), Unitary Authorities (4), Metropolitan

district authorities (9), Two-tier 'shire' counties (5), Welsh unitary authorities (6), Scottish councils (5) and Scottish VJBs (7).

A thematic analysis of the interviews was conducted to identify common challenges. Thematic analysis 'involves the searching across a data set... to find repeated patterns of meaning' (Braun and Clarke 2006, 86). Interviews were transcribed and themes identified from the texts. The aim was to identify both semantic and latent meanings. Semantic themes involve the construction of themes on the basis of the literal wording of the transcripts. Latent themes require the researcher to read across the dataset to identify underlying phenomena that are not always explicitly stated by respondents.

## **Results**

The publicly available data from the Electoral Commission suggests that there was a relatively high level of compliance by local election officials with the standards. The Electoral Commission, based on the returns that they received, considered 47 of the 400 Counting Officers to be 'high risk' at the AV referendum. Each of these was visited by the Commission. The number of 'high risk' authorities fell to 18 by 31 March and then 3 by the 6 April 2011 when weekly monitoring was in place. Concerns in two of these authorities were about the experience of the electoral services team. Concerns in the third authority were about the Counting Officer's approach to ballot verification and the count (Electoral Commission 2011a). The Commission did not publish similar data for the Welsh referendum.

However, there was evidence from the interviews that some officials did not complete the standards and were relaxed about the consequences.

[T]hey said that all the postal votes must be issued on the 18th. I categorically said "My supplier refuses to guarantee that it'll happen on the 18th." "He guarantees it'll go out on the 19th but I'm not going to lie to you and say it's going out on the 18th." "He will do his utmost to get them out on the 18th but..." Also

our supplier refused to do a combined pack because, in his opinion, it was too risky. So we did that (sic) (Electoral Services Manager, October 2011).

*[Insert Table 3 about here]*

But when the directions were implemented, what effect did they have? What effect did the *presence* of directions have? Eight themes were identified from the interviews. The theme definition, sub-themes (if appropriate) and the frequency of themes across in the interviews are detailed in Table 3 and each discussed in turn.

### *Consistent Services*

As hoped by the Electoral Commission, there was evidence that the provision of centralised instructions for election officials removed room for local discretion and therefore produced more consistent services (T1). Some officials thought that this had enabled a better experience for the voter.

Having that consistent approach, having the same message going out from all authorities is not a bad thing for the electorate, rather than [authority A] giving one message and [Authority B] giving one message (Electoral Services Manager, October 2011).

The most visual of these was the counting times. However, in some local authorities central directions also ensured a minimal level of service to voters and forced local authorities to undertake activity that they would not otherwise do. For example, one authority explained that they had not previously had polling station inspectors, but had to under the directions. Another claimed that presiding officers said that the additional polling staff 'made our job a lot easier'. One LEO suggested that they had begun to prepare for an election earlier than they otherwise would have done. Another suggested that they increased the size of their cards because of the guidance. The move towards being more consistent therefore generally meant doing more for the voter, than less.

### *Error Elimination*

The directions also allowed for the identification of errors in the run-up to the election and for them to be rectified (T2). A member of Electoral Commission staff explained how one authority initially used the wrong electoral register for the Welsh Referendum; they had used the Parliamentary franchise rather than the local government franchise. This had meant that about 900 poll cards were not sent out. As they explained:

Well we found that out the following day and were able to address it very quickly and make sure that the problem got sorted within 48 hours and was corrected and it wasn't a problem. Whereas in fact I'm not sure how otherwise that would've been picked up (Electoral Commission official, May 2011).

One election officer said that:

I think it's a real move forward. Because after the event, well, we've got a year to get it right if we've got it wrong. But ... I want to know if I've not got it right at the time, when I can make a difference (Electoral Services Manager, October 2011).

The ability to identify such problems increased the Commission's confidence that the referendums would be successfully run:

Going into the Referendum... we had an absolute handle on what had been done and the level of preparation made (Electoral Commission official, May 2011).

### *New Practices and Easier Implementation*

Thirdly, the directions sometimes provided election officials with new ideas or practices that they perceived to be better for the voter or more efficient (T3). According to one election official 'some of the notices, we quite liked the way they'd done it'. There was evidence that some election officials found the guidance useful in structuring their work (T4). The directions

made identifying the prescribed practice quicker, which can be important when legislation is complex. It was especially useful for new employees, who were less certain of what to do.

Just the fact that it enables you to kind of make sure you haven't left anything critical out in your plan, because there is so much going on, and all the bits have to all come together on polling day and then the count (Electoral Services Manager, December 2011).

### *Financial costs*

Although the effects identified so far may be considered beneficial, there were four key adverse effects. To begin with, there was significant evidence of increased financial costs involved in the running of the election to meet the centrally defined directions (T5). Election officials generally reported that increased spending did not lead to improved outcomes; rather it simply reduced the efficiency of local services. A requirement to print ballot papers for every elector was reported as unnecessary, when turnout was eventually only 41%, and widely predicted to be low. One election official claimed that he had to increase staffing levels by nearly 20%, which 'has a significant impact on resources, and time of course in recruitment'. Another authority reported that it had spent roughly £40,000 on the AV referendum than it otherwise would have done. The new scheme was also more resource intensive for the Electoral Commission.

### *Staff Time*

Completing and complying with the directions also drained staff time and diverted this from other aspects of the election (T6). An election official explained that there was a significant number of directions and work to complete. This was costly in terms of staff time and also distracted them from their key tasks at the peak 'pinch points' in preparing for an election.

It was a lot of pressure and in the end we didn't respond. Because it was "Do we respond to this, or do we do this, which has an impact on whether we deliver the

election or not?” (Laughter) So it was “Well we’ll deal with the election and we’ll worry about that later, shall we?” (Democratic Services Manager, October 2011).

One requirement was for election officials to witness the printing of poll cards and postal voting packs. However, many authorities had long running arrangements with contractors for them to be printed elsewhere in the country, where they had found high levels of quality and economic efficiency. One authority north of Glasgow therefore had to pay for an employee to travel a 500 mile round-trip to a printers in Yorkshire with two overnight stays. Other election officials said that the standards caused some duplication. For example, one election official described how he had a risk plan for his authority but needed to create another one to satisfy the Commission:

Actually some of the ones I’ve had were much more detailed and much more effective than the Electoral Commission’s. I’ve felt much more comfortable with mine, but we’ve still had to complete theirs and I just felt it was a lot of double handling at a time which was very stressful (Electoral Services Manager, November 2011).

Yet the amount of additional work was not always significant. It depended mostly on the amount of additional work required to meet the standards.

But I mean they literally don’t take long you know. I would think the most intensive one was probably 20 minutes at the most and that’s nothing really in your week. You’re busy enough as it is I know, you’re probably doing a 60 hour week but 20 minutes just to get something to say that you’ve passed that part of your indicator – do it, get it on there – forget about it (Electoral Registration Officer, June 2011).

*Lost local knowledge*

Election officials also suggested that Commission's directions overlooked the experience and local knowledge that had been accumulated from many previous elections (T7). Variations in local circumstances meant that a one size fits all approach was not the most effective.

We are the electoral experts at the end of the day, we know our local areas, we know what works, what doesn't work... it does vary from authority to authority, because of, you know, geography, if nothing else, and when they try to dictate procedures...(Electoral Services Manager, May 2011).

The directions forced the solutions to local problems that officials had found and developed over a number of years to be changed. For example, an election official explained how they often faced severe challenges hiring premises for polling stations but had often found local solutions. However the cap of 2,500 electors per station meant that some less appropriate premises had to be hired. One official explained that they had developed a risk register to overcome any local problems they were forced to not use it and use a centrally defined one which 'wasn't half as good as ours.' Central directions also affected other aspects of election management. Centrally defined counting and declaration times for the AV referendum had knock-on effects for local practices. One RO, who was simultaneously holding local elections, was forced to delay the counting and declaration of local election results until after the AV votes were counted. This meant that for a significant amount of time there was '11 counting stations with nobody doing anything', declaration was not complete until 5am when officials were tired and more error prone, and the RO had to deal with 'pissed off [local council] members'.

Some officials noted that move towards central management reduced local responsiveness.

The reality is things go wrong every single election and you can't manage all those 300 crises [from the centre] because you just don't know what's going on in a count centre or in a polling station or in a local bypass or a gas explosion... If I phone up Jenny and say "What am I going to do?" She might say "do this" but often I'd have to say "that just wouldn't work!" (sic) (Democratic Services Manager, October 2011).

The changes triggered by the Electoral Commission directions sometimes directly or indirectly adversely affected the citizen's satisfaction. The cap on the number of electors for each polling station led some electoral officials to split their polling stations into two with electors instructed to go into a room according to their street name.

And the electors would start at the door with us saying "If you live in street A to K, go to table one." You know. "These ones go to table two, these to three and four." What we had to do was put a physical barrier down the centre of the room and run them as two separate polling stations with two separate ballot boxes. Which caused us confusion with the voters. Because they were like "Why have we got to do this? And why have I got to put my ballot paper in that box when I'm nearer to that box?" And then causes problems at the count (Electoral Services Manager, October 2011).

Election officials also said that some polling stations were overstaffed as a result of the minimal staffing requirements, which led to comment from members of the public:

Returning Officer: Yes, and ironically, it's our reputation that gets affected, not the Electoral Commission's because people will come to me and say, "You've had people twiddling their thumbs in this," you know, "You've had three people in that polling station and it only gets 300 electors, why have you done that?"

Elections Manager: Especially at the present situation when, you know, we're having to make cutbacks and justify services and things and, as you say, if electors see three people sat in a very quiet station twiddling their thumbs all day, it will be us that they come back to (private interviews, June 2011).

### *Staff morale, job satisfaction and stakeholder relations*

Significantly, a further adverse effect was that many election officials noted that the introduction of the performance standards reduced their enjoyment of their role in elections (T8). The introduction of central directions reduced their sense of 'ownership' over their work

and demotivated them. One RO raised concerns about what he was being asked to do before the referendum but got a response that made him feel 'dismissed as some sort of thicko from the provinces who just needs to get on and do it and not make a fuss about it.' Another RO said that:

I think the enjoyment factor would go down if the Commission had its way. If the Commission had powers of direction for all electoral purposes, like they had in the referendum, and used them like they had in the referendum, that would actually remove what for me is some of the interesting parts of being personally responsible for a process (Electoral Services Manager, August 2011).

There was also a broader souring of relations between the election officials, their representative organisation the Association of Electoral Administrators and the Electoral Commission. Officials claimed that the Commission's requirements 'grated on a number of people,' were 'quite patronising... and a wee bit offensive', were 'a bit irksome' or was:

A bit like teaching your grandmother to suck eggs. And stuff that individual councils know their own areas, they know what works for them, what doesn't work for them. And by imposing these directions, they've rubbed a lot of people up the wrong way (Electoral Services Officer, July 2011).

There was no real appreciation that we're dealing with- in most cases dedicated and professional people in their field (Electoral Services Manager, August 2011)

In fact have run elections far more often than them. I mean they've never run an election. All they've done is they've run a central dictatorial and coordination type election, they've never actually run an election themselves. They haven't actually had staff polling stations and have to open ballot boxes and have to adjudicate on ballot papers and all the things that we do (Returning Officer, November 2011).

Following the referendum the Commission 'kept a low profile... because they are not flavour of the month'. The Commission seemed aware of this effect:

[W]e're getting the response from some of them "Oh this is a dictate, we don't like being told how to do things (Electoral Commission Official, May 2011).

In some authorities, where staff morale may already have been low, and further budget cuts were on the horizon, officials became quite despondent. One explained that:

I used to really enjoy elections, I used to enjoy everything there was about it. Over the years... it has certainly become more and more stressful and after every election I do sort of look at myself or during the election period and think, "I don't really want to do this, should I just go and get a job..." and no disrespect to anybody who stacks shelves in Tesco but, should I just go and do that and get out of this because you struggle to sleep, you've got so many things you've got to do, so many people asking questions, just the whole process has become more and more difficult (Electoral Services Manager, August 2011).

## **Discussion**

To what extent do the empirical findings confirm the hypotheses? There is some evidence to support H1, that the directions led to more efficient and better quality services because the Commission was able to prescribe solutions from the centre. More consistent services was thought to lead to perceptions among citizens that services were of better quality (T1). Errors were prevented in some cases (T2). The presence of central directions was useful to officials in learning new practices and ideas (T3) and locating best practice quickly (T4). However, as Table 3 illustrates, the frequency at which these themes were found in the interviews were low. On the one hand, this does suggest that there was relatively little improvement in the quality of electoral management as a result of the scheme. However, a low volume of occurrences of these themes does not equate to importance. Such themes, especially T2, would be likely to be found in the interviews with the centralising agent, who would be best

placed to identify them, and these interviews were fewer in number. It is difficult to ascertain the number of local authorities where the Commission found errors and initiated action such there was no public record. The presence of the casual mechanisms outlined in H1 can therefore be confirmed.

There was much more support for H2. This hypothesis was pessimistic about the effects of centralisation on the quality and efficiency of electoral services. There is clear evidence that in some cases, electoral services became less economically efficient – a criteria of electoral management quality set out in Table 1. Many officials reported unnecessary additional financial costs (T5) so the costs per unit of production would have increased. The interviews showed clear evidence of further polling staff being employed and ballot papers being printed where they were then unused (T5). In addition, more staff time was taken up by administering the scheme (T6). The Electoral Commission argued that the scheme was not ‘an onerous task’ (private interview, Electoral Commission Official, October 2011) and many officials pointed out that the directions were mostly ‘things they should be doing anyway’. Nonetheless, more resources were often required. T7 provides evidence that the causal mechanism of some of these inefficiencies was overlooking local experience, knowledge and discretion. This is a highly valued commodity for those in the bureaucratic discretion school. A decline in economic efficiency may not be a problem for resource rich EMBs, but EMBs might be wary of setting minimal standards if resources are scarce as efficiency levels might drop.

The quality of electoral management was undermined in a further way, however. The more holistic set of criteria outlined in Table 1 for evaluating electoral management includes job satisfaction because it is of value in and of itself, but also because it is thought to improve organisational performance, staff turnover and intension to quit (Griffeth et al. 2000; Harter et al. 2002; Judge et al. 2001). A significant finding from this study was the impact of the directions on staff satisfaction within electoral services (T8). This finding supports the arguments from within the human relations school of management that top-down procedures can undermine workforce motivation, which can help organisational performance.

As Table 3 demonstrates, the frequency of the themes found in support of H2 was much higher. This evidence, should be treated critically. As noted in the methods section above, practitioners may over-emphasise the local effects and not be able to always see the general effects of programmes. They may over-state the costs to themselves. However, there is little reason to question the evidence in support of T8: interviews with electoral officials were clearly aggravated by the approach of the Commission.

It is plausible that some of the themes, particularly T6 (staff time) and T8 (staff morale) would prove to only have a short term effect. As election officials become familiar with central directions they may take less time to read through them and assess the changes that are needed. The immediate decline in staff morale might also recover as unhappy officials become used to the new arrangements or leave the profession and are replaced by new ones. These effects might also be partly explained by a poorly designed scheme and therefore could have been avoided in further iterations of the directions. Many directions were sent out very late to election officials because of delays in the passing of the legislation for the referendums. However, the directions did create a significant period of time in which staff time was drained and morale was low. In eventuality, the referendum was characterised by low turnout and the outcome was clear cut. However, in different circumstances this could have created significant problems for the experience of the voter.

It therefore seems important to separate out the *temporal* effects of introducing change in electoral management. Centralisation might accrue certain advantages and disadvantages. However, discussions about EMB reform, such as that in the US, has so far focussed on the longer term effects of implementing an ideal-type system be it centralised or decentralised, independent or otherwise. But *implementing change* can bring considerable problems in itself. Poorly managed change at 'pinch-points' in the electoral process could produce more dramatic effects.

In more abstract theoretical terms, major organisational change, such as the transition from decentralised to centralised systems of electoral management, creates a critical juncture in which the performance of EMBs could be adversely affected by demotivated and disillusioned staff. This study has revealed that centralisation has advantages and disadvantages; but

crucially, the *process* of centralising needs to be managed carefully. Unhappy employees, who begin to disregard instructions or respond slowly or discourteously to the public could undermine voter's confidence in the electoral process. If there is a rapid change over in staff because of organisational change then this could leave electoral services with reduced knowledge and capacity.

Policy makers should therefore be cautious in introducing major reform without wider consultation of stakeholders or well-resourced plans for managing and enforcing change. The consequence for theory is that there are some considerable institutional 'lock-in' effects for EMBs. Once institutions are set up in a particular way, there are considerable path-dependencies (Mahoney 2000, 512). Knowing the likely consequences of reform, it could politically become very difficult for reformers to implement change.

## **Conclusions**

The quality of electoral management has been questioned in many democracies. Centralising electoral management has often been proposed as a solution. This study, however, shows that centralisation can be a double-edge sword. It can bring a more consistent nationwide experience for the voter, help give local election officials clear and unambiguous instructions in times of uncertainty and allow the centre to pre-empt and respond to some problems in the periphery, when it is aware of them. There are, however, some significant advantages to decentralised electoral services and reasons to stick up for localism. Decentralised services can better allow experienced local election officials to use their local knowledge to conduct elections with a higher degree of economic efficiency and responsiveness to local problems. An implication is that we should exert extreme caution in measuring the quality of electoral management by whether local officials met centrally defined standards and subject the standards themselves to scrutiny.

Significantly, the *process* of centralising electoral management introduces risk and challenges for electoral integrity. It may sour relationships between organisations which form part of a network involved in delivering services. It may leave staff unhappy, which can affect their motivation and cause them to consider leaving the profession. This, in turn, can affect

organisational performance. Although this study has focussed on the centralisation of electoral management, it may follow that the process of decentralising other services, or undertaking other organisational reforms in electoral services holds similar risk. Institutional reform is difficult and needs to be managed carefully.

This article has only examined the effects of centralisation in one country, but it does demonstrate the importance of strong 'lock in' path dependencies in the choice and design of EMBs. EMBs designs are not drawn on a blank canvass. When a new organisation like the Electoral Commission is set up, it is forced to work with those individuals and organisations that have been running elections, often for some time. Things brings a wider framework of norms, values and expectations about 'how things are done'. Even in newly democratising states there are pre-existing relationships between core and peripheral organisations that will affect the viability of centralised or decentralised electoral management. The 'best' choice of EMB may therefore be more contextually dependent than the existing literature acknowledges. It is certainly *temporally* dependent. Further research will help identify the important characteristics of these contexts that should be borne in mind for institutional designers.

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

*Table 1: A framework for evaluating Electoral Management Board Performance. Source: James (2014a).*

***Example directions issued to local officials in preparation for the 2011 referendums***

- A maximum number of electors for each polling station
- A minimum number of staff per polling station
- A requirement to print ballot papers for all electors
- Deadlines for the posting of polling cards and postal ballots
- A requirement to check the personal identifiers on 100% of returned postal ballots rather than 20%, which was law.
- A deadline for the verification of ballot boxes and a requirement that counting should begin at 4pm the following day.
- Specific wording and layout for the ballot paper, poll cards, postal voting statements and instructions and guidance for voters.
- Counting times were centrally defined

*Table 2: Example directions issued to local officials in preparation for the 2011 referendums.  
Compiled from: Electoral Commission (2011a, 2011b)*

Theme	Definition	Sub-theme count	Count
T1: Consistent services	Centralised instructions produced uniform services		<b>8</b>
T2: Elimination of errors	Errors in the practices of electoral administrators were identified, prevented or rectified		<b>3</b>
T3: New practices and ideas	Election officials adopted or became aware of new practices		<b>4</b>
T4: Eased implementation	The directions helped officials implement elections		<b>10</b>
- 4a. Locating practices	The directions helped officials identify 'good practice' quickly and efficiently	4	
- 4b. Early action	Officials took actions earlier than they would have done	3	
- 4c. Helped new staff	Directions gave structure and guidance that was valuable for newer staff	3	
T5: Financial costs	Complying with the direction led to increased local costs.		<b>43</b>
- 5a. Staff	More staff had to be employed	15	
- 5b. Ballot papers	More ballot papers had to be printed	9	
- 5c. Misc.	Costs increased in general (without the area being specified).	19	
T6: Staff time	Completing and complying with the directions drained staff time		<b>27</b>
- 6a. Bureaucratic	The completion process was bureaucratic	9	
- 6b. Distraction	The directions distracted staff from completing other tasks	9	
- 6c. Duplication	The directions required staff to duplicate tasks already being undertaken.	3	
- 6d. No time	Staff did not have sufficient time to comply with the directions	6	
T7: Lost local experience or knowledge	The Commission's directions overlooked experience and local knowledge that had been accumulated from many previous elections and adversely affected the voter's experience		<b>42</b>
- 7a. Local experience overlooked	The experience of a local electoral official was over-ridden by the need to meet the directions	13	
- 7b. Local knowledge overlooked	The electoral officials' knowledge of their local area was over-looked by the need to meet the directions	15	
- 7c. Local needs differ	Local needs were perceived to differ from that prescribed by the directions	14	
T8: Staff morale	The Commission's directions reduced the electoral officials' enjoyment of their role in elections and/or reduced staff morale		<b>32</b>
- 8a. Job enjoyment declined	The electoral officials' enjoyment of their own decline	7	
- 8b. EC – LEO relations declined	Relations between the electoral official and the Electoral Commission declined as a result of the directions scheme	25	

*Table 3: The effects on top-down directions on electoral management during the 2011 referendum*

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<sup>ii</sup> Although some powers relating to Scottish Parliamentary elections and local elections in Scotland are now devolved to the Scotland Government under the Scotland Act 2016.

<sup>iii</sup> There are some important variations across the UK. In England and Wales the RO and ERO are often the same person working within the same local authority. However, in Scotland, electoral registration is organised by Valuation Joint Boards. There are also different arrangements for Northern Ireland.

<sup>iv</sup> The same system was therefore used in both referendums. Interviewees in Wales had therefore been subject to the directions scheme twice.

<sup>v</sup> A total of 19 exemptions were applied for with only six granted (Electoral Commission 2011a, 121).