

Voter Engagement in the UK

Second Submission of Evidence to

The Political and Constitutional Reform Committee

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Introductory remarks and overview

1. The committee has invited evidence on the causes of low voter engagement in the UK and possible solutions. I have already provided written and oral evidence which made a range of recommendations on electoral administration and management.
2. During the committee's subsequent deliberations, however, the performance standards scheme run by the Electoral Commission has been discussed.¹ The Electoral Commission currently sets performance standards for Returning Officers (ROs) and Electoral Registration Officers (EROs). It then publishes information online about whether electoral officials in each authority meets the standards. There was concern among the committee members that some ROs and EROs have not always met the standards, such as undertaking an annual canvass of electors. Poor quality service from electoral officials might be a cause of low voter engagement. There was some speculation about why EROs and ROs have not met the standards, and discussion about whether the standards system could be improved.
3. I recently undertook a project funded by The Nuffield Foundation and McDougall Trust that evaluated the performance standards scheme. This involved extensive interviews with electoral officials. Some of the research has recently been published (James 2013c, 2014, 2013b, 2013a), but did not feature in my initial evidence. This additional piece of written evidence summarises the findings and makes recommendations to the committee based on this. In summary, it suggests:
 - Maintaining the performance standards scheme, which the research has shown to be an effective way of rolling out 'best practice' across EROs and ROs.
 - In the future, the Electoral Commission should draw 'best practices' from the 'best in the class' local authorities. The better performing authorities should be identified by standardised outcomes such as higher registration rates and levels of voter satisfaction about their voting and registration experience. This might allow other authorities to replicate their success.

Why do electoral officials (not) meet the standards?

4. The research involved asking electoral officials why they did or did not meet the standards. Table 1 summarises the reasons they gave. Often the standards were adopted because they were associated with professionalism – it was 'the right thing to do'. They also provided a template for organising elections in periods of change such as local government mergers or the appointment of new members of staff. However, the most commonly found theme for why the standards were adopted was that individuals or organisations felt that they would suffer reputational loss if the standards were not met. Returning

¹ For example, at the end of my oral evidence and in an exchange between John Turner of the Association of Electoral Administrators about the Chris Ruane.

Officers frequently knew their peers at other authorities very well and knew that their peers would be making comparisons.

5. The research therefore concluded that the scheme was very effective at bringing about change in local authorities, especially given that it was a relatively low cost scheme (James 2013c). The interviews also revealed a number of other positive effects of the scheme, such as increased confidence in the quality of elections among local politicians and more frequent service evaluations. I therefore strongly recommend keeping the performance standards scheme.

Table 1: Reasons why election officials met the standards. Source: James (2013a, 603)
The performance standards made election officials aware of new procedures or ways of working.
The introduction of the standards triggered some election officials to undertake formal or informal reviews of their working practices.
The standards provided a useful model for services during periods of transition or change e.g. the merging of local authorities or when new staff were appointed
Standards were associated with 'best practice', 'professionalism' and good 'quality service'.
Individuals or organisations would suffer reputation loss if the standards were not met.
MPs or local politicians would ask whether standards were met. This would increase the chances of reputational loss.

6. Clearly, however, not all ROs and EROs met the standards. Table 2 summarises the reasons why officials said that they did not meet them. In some cases this was because officials did not think that elections would improve by meeting the standards or think that there was not a strong penalty for doing so. There was also some strategic responses. In many cases, however, there were very often legitimate reasons for not meeting them. Most officials expressed significant challenges with resources. Local government has experienced significant budget cuts and officials suggested that they were having to cut services in elections. It is probably not coincidental that there was a spike in the non-compliance of the annual canvass in 2011 at the same time that cuts in local government funding was announced.

Table 2: Reasons why election officials did not meet the standards. Source: James (2013a, 604)
Election officials questioned the legitimacy or efficacy of the standards.
Election officials felt that there was insufficient reward for meeting the standards.
Election officials had insufficient budgets for meeting or being above the standard
Meeting or being above standard was perceived as not being possible
Election officials deliberately underestimated their performance in order to show an improvement in the future which would impress their senior managers or the council leaders.

How can the standards system be improved?

7. The research found that the standards scheme are a useful way of rolling out best practice in electoral services across the UK. The scheme should therefore be kept. The process of identifying what 'best practice' is, however, could be made more transparent. This might make election officials more convinced of the need to comply with them. The Electoral Commission should identify the techniques used in the better performing local authorities – those with higher registration and citizen satisfaction rates. The scheme could then be used to roll out their 'best in the class' procedures to other local authorities. This is known as a system of benchmarking, and has frequently been used in local government outside of electoral services (Grace 2013).
8. The standards scheme currently focuses on processes, but not outcomes such as registration rates or voter satisfaction rates. A further alternative approach would be to incorporate some outcomes into the standards. I have developed an approach for evaluating electoral management and some of these outputs could be considered for a revised scheme (James 2014). This approach has recently been adopted in the US, but the scheme has not been evaluated yet, and it might be therefore wiser to stick with a proven system.
9. Resource and budget cuts are a key reason why many local authorities do not meet the standards. The funding of elections should be strengthened, perhaps through ring-fencing.
10. The answer does not appear to be giving the Electoral Commission greater control over electoral administration. The research found that the system used at the 2011 referendums, in which the Commission issued directions to electoral officials, increased their costs and undermined their sense of ownership over the process (James 2013b).
11. There is a case for targetting support for authorities that are continuously not meeting the standards. MPs could do more, however, to put pressure on local authorities that consistently do not meet the standards, as any such publicity will increase the reputational costs to the local authority for not meeting them.

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