Engaging young voters with enhanced election information

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About the authors

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http://www.parliament.uk/business/committees/committees-a-z/commons-select/political-and-constitutional-reform-committee/inquiries/parliament-2010/voter-engagement-in-the-uk/

Executive summary

Current arrangements in the UK only give very poor, fragmented and old-fashioned feedback to voters about what effect their participation has had, and what election outcomes were. Yet providing good information to voters before elections, and timely feedback afterwards on what happened, is fundamentally important for attracting and sustaining participation.

Different elections are publicized in very different ways and places, often after long delays. The poor online availability of election data in the UK is now something of a scandal. Taxpayers pay a lot for electoral administration – the UK spent almost £800 million administering elections in the past five years – and yet reporting standards and the provision of easy-access information to citizens are very uneven across the country.

The strong barriers to easily finding out what happens when you have voted have serious consequences. Some 91% of people over 55 and with a degree voted in 2010, compared with just 44% of people aged 18-34 and with GCSEs or lower qualifications. The gap in voting between young and old citizens is higher in the UK than in any other developed democracy.

Younger voters are more geographically mobile for university and work reasons, and through private renting. They are especially cut off from the diffuse local channels of political information that work better for older voters, who use public services more and are long established in a community.

More comprehensive and accessible online and digital sources of information need to be developed to reach *all* voters. Yet the need is especially urgent for younger voters in their 20s and 30s. Improved provision could easily be implemented speedily and at low cost, in time for the 2015 general election.

There is a strong case that a voting age of 16 would better allow young people to acquire the habit of voting for two years while living in an established home, before leaving for university or work reasons.

With votes at 18, the introduction of fixed five-year Parliaments means that 60% of young people now cannot vote in a general election until they are aged 21, 22 or 23, long after they have gained all other adult rights. Their interests may consequently be poorly represented.

We would make the following recommendations, aimed at increasing engagement among the electorate, particularly young people, through enhanced election information and other measures:

- The Cabinet Office, government and Electoral Commission should urgently review the easy-access online provision of election information before all forms of UK elections, and the timely online provision of election results after voting, with the aim of achieving common and robust standards across all elections and radical improvements in digital access by the 2015 general election.

- These bodies also consider how integrated, comprehensive sources of election results can encourage the easy development of voting and participation apps (on phones and PCs) by the widest possible range of media, charities, NGOs, universities and parties.

- A large-scale local experiment with online and weekend voting should be organized as soon as feasible.

- Lowering the voting age to 16 is a low-risk measure. It could offer many advantages in engaging young voters while they are still at home, and compensate for some adverse by-product implications of five year Parliaments for young people's opportunities to participate.

Introduction

The UK now has comparatively low levels of voter turnout and registration. Recent OECD data show that the UK was ranked 25th in the OECD, with a turnout of 62 per cent in 2010, compared to the recent OECD average of 70 per cent.[1] Turnout in the UK is now only just ahead of some industrializing but troubled democracies such as India and Mexico.

Figure 1 below shows that the UK has a very serious additional problem. We currently lead the OECD rankings as the country with by far the largest adverse gap between the levels of voting amongst older voters (aged 55 plus) and the youngest group (16-34 years old). The average reduction in voting by young people across the OECD is 12 percentage points, but in the UK is 38 percentage points – more than three times as large.

Figure 1: The gap in percentage points between level of voting by citizens aged 55 years or more and those aged 18 to 34 years old, for OECD countries, most recent general election
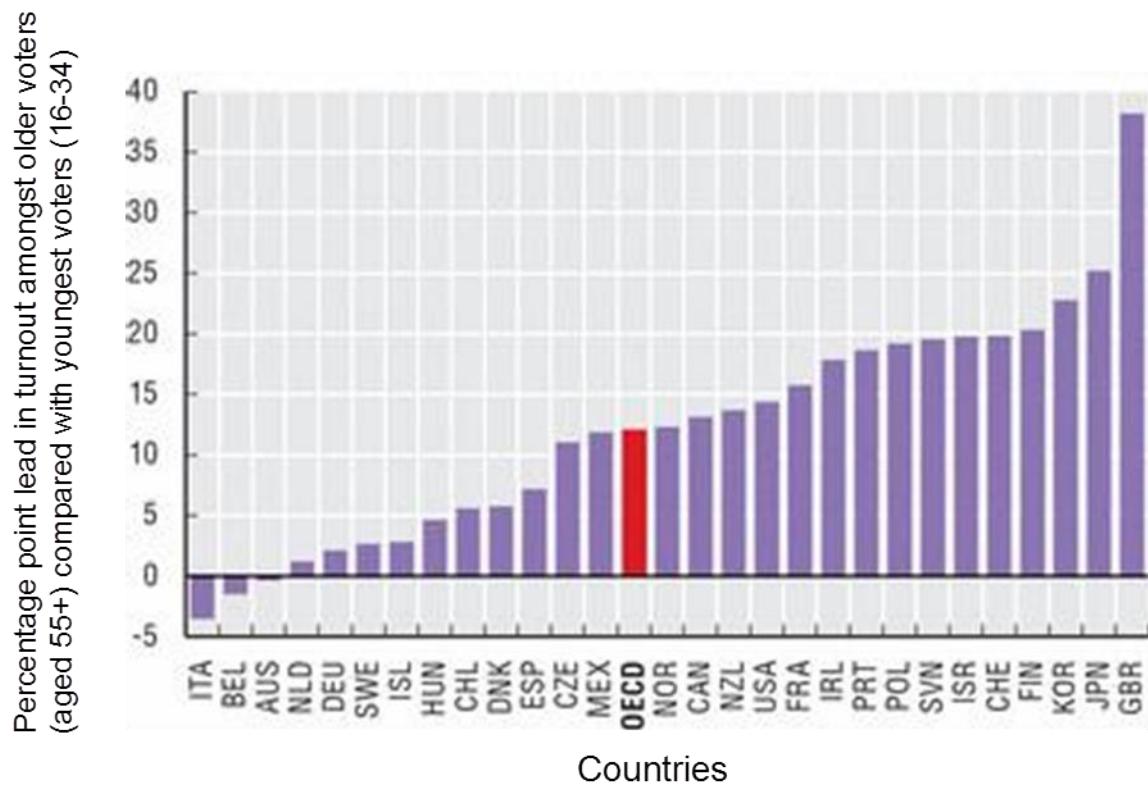
Source: OECD 2011

Such a large gap is especially disturbing because younger people are better educated than earlier generations, and people with more educational qualifications generally vote more. We undertook original analysis of the British Election Study 2010 to show turnout by people of different ages and levels of education and Figure 2 shows the disturbing results. Over 90 per cent of older people with a degree or higher qualifications report voting in 2010, compared with just 44 per cent of young people with only GCSE or lower qualifications. The best educated older people are more than twice as likely to vote as less educated young people.

Figure 2: The percentage of different social groups who reported voting in the 2010 general election in Great Britain
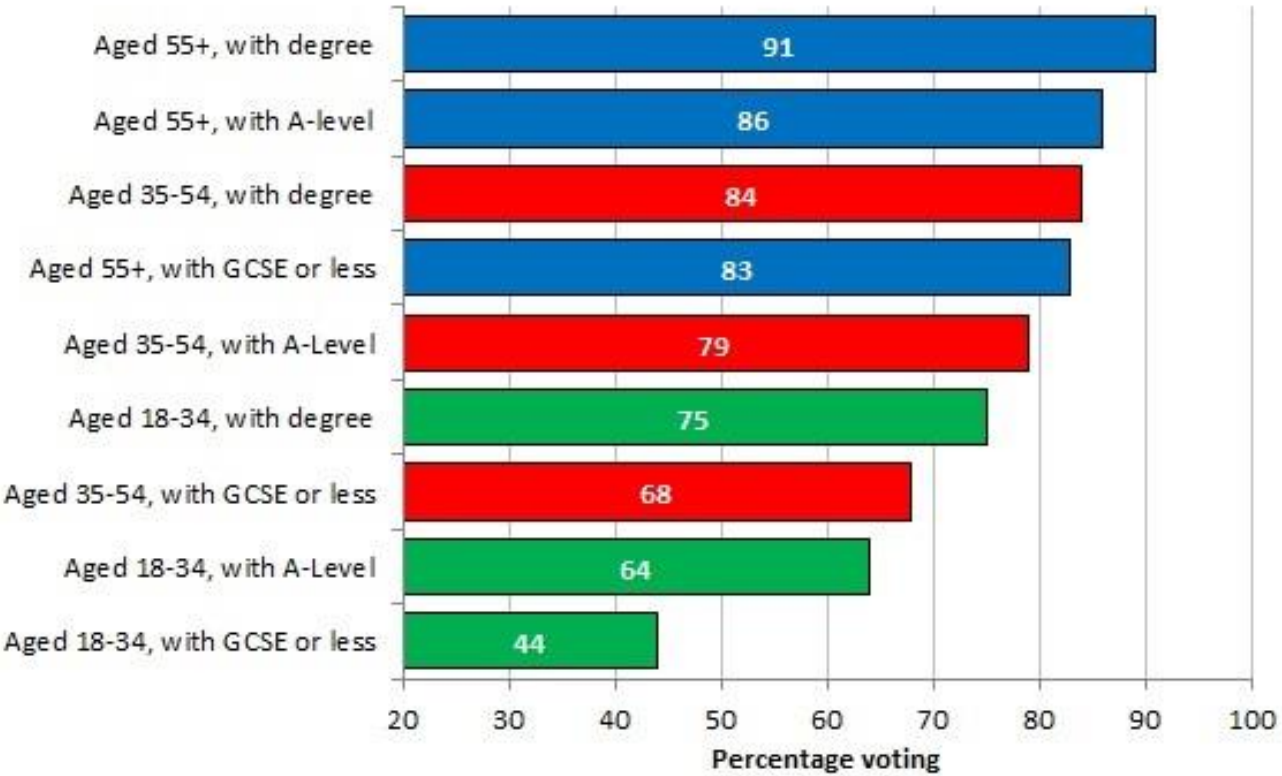
Source: Democratic Audit analysis of British Election Study, 2010

The cost of elections

We estimated of the cost of administering elections in the UK, including all levels, using a variety of official sources. We found that over the past five years (2009-2013), taxpayers have spent over £760 million administering elections and referendums, including the running costs of electoral agencies. This does not include money spent by parties and candidates, or by-election costs.

This means that in the past five years, the UK has spent over £150 million per year on elections. Whether this level of spending remains the same in the future will depend on the frequency of referendums, whether different elections are held on the same day, budgetary decisions, changes to electoral systems, and so on. Table 1 shows the elections held in the past five years, and Table 2 overleaf gives information on their cost.

Table 1: Major elections and referendums held in the UK, 2009-2013[2]

| Year	Election	Total votes
2009	European Parliament election	15,724,000
	Local authority elections	6,901,000
2010	General Election	29,991,000
	Local authority elections	14,000,000
2011	Welsh devolution referendum	824,000
	Scottish Parliament election	1,998,000
	Welsh Assembly election	949,000
	Northern Ireland Assembly election	673,000
	Alternative Vote referendum	19,166,000
	Local authority elections	17,170,000
2012	Greater London Authority election	2,249,000
	English mayoral referendums	1,161,000
	Local authority elections	7,277,000
	Police & Crime Commissioner elections	5,491,000
2013	Local authority elections	5,709,000
	TOTAL	**129,283,000**

Table 2: Cost of major elections and referendums held in the UK, 2009-2013[3]

Election	Year	Approximate cost (£millions)	Cost per vote (£)
Police and Crime Commissioner elections	2012	75.0	13.66
Greater London Authority election	2012	20.3	9.03
Welsh Assembly election	2011	8.1	8.54
Welsh devolution referendum	2011	5.9	7.16
Scottish Parliament election	2011	12.6	6.31
European Parliament election	2009	102.2	6.50
Local authority elections	2013	34.2	5.99
Local authority elections	2012	41.1	5.65
Local authority elections	2009	32.6	4.72
Northern Ireland Assembly election	2011	2.9	4.31
Local authority elections	2011	74.6	4.34
Alternative Vote referendum	2011	75.3	3.93
General election	2010	113.3	3.78
Local authority elections	2010	39.5	2.82
English mayoral referendums	2012	2.5	2.15
Electoral Commission running costs	n/a	103.0	n/a
Boundary commissions running costs	n/a	20.4	n/a
	TOTAL	**763.5**	**5.91**

The importance of giving voters information

Most of us do not engage in behaviours where we are uncertain what is at stake, and where we get no feedback on our actions or participation after being involved. Yet UK central government and local authorities currently provide no easy access to information about who is standing at elections before voting takes place, and make very inadequate provision to inform voters about what happened in their specific ward or constituency as a result of their going to the polls. Yet, as Figure 3 shows, providing voter information and feedback is crucial in any democracy to encouraging and sustaining voting.

Figure 3: Voter information feedback loop
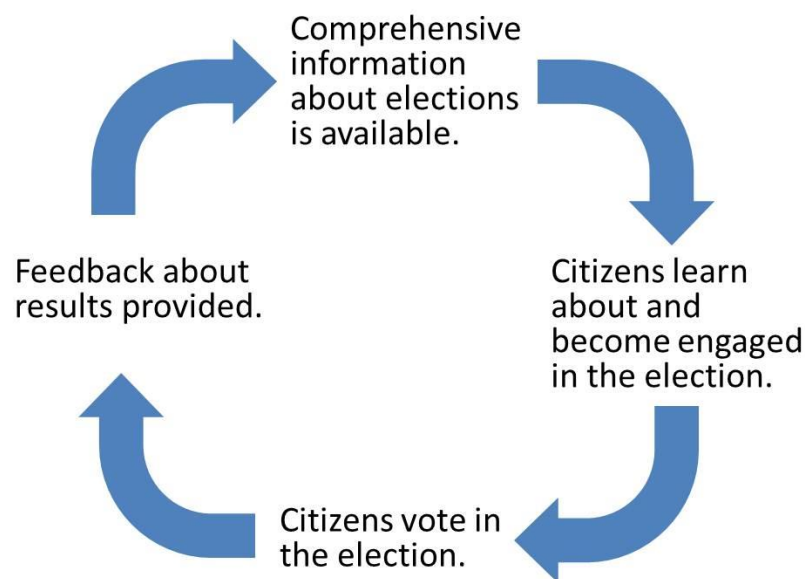
Opinion research has consistently indicated that information provided to UK voters is insufficient. Following the 2013 local elections, 53 per cent of voters and non-voters to an Electoral Commission survey said they knew 'not very much' or 'nothing at all' about the election.[4] European Commission research has found that 83 per cent of UK citizens think that better information would increase turnout at European Parliament elections.[5]

The information provided by public authorities has become particularly vital as local media outlets have declined. Recent research in Denmark has shown that coverage of local elections in the local media has a significant impact on

Election results should be available at the touch of a button or swipe of a screen.

voter turnout.[6] However, in the UK the number of local newspapers and their overall levels of circulation have both been falling for many years, and are now at serious levels.[7] The displacement of local newspapers by free sheets orientated only to advertising has had serious adverse impacts on local information provision.

Council websites counteract this decline in information availability only to a limited extent, and often vary greatly in what information they provide. As a result most local circulation of information about council and Westminster elections now takes place through informal local and community channels. These work best for long-established residents with experience of using local health, school and council services to draw on.

Consequences of poor information

The limited ways that voter information is currently provided has serious implications for younger voters, who are the social group least likely to be on the electoral register. Recent survey evidence shows that 24 per cent of 18-21 year olds are unregistered, and a further 9 per cent are unsure whether they are registered or not – that is, over a third of the youngest voters may not be able to participate in democratic processes.[8] The introduction of individual voter registration is likely to exacerbate the problems here.

The structural reasons behind young people's low registration and voting levels are numerous and they increase in severity with every passing year. When citizens get the right to vote at 18, they are highly likely to be embarking on a uniquely unsettled period of their life. Figure 4 below shows that 18-19 is by far the peak age for people moving between local authority areas. In June 2012, 23 per cent of people aged 19 had moved between local council areas within the past year.[9]

Figure 4: The proportion (%) of England and Wales population who moved local authority within the UK during the year ending June 2012, by age group
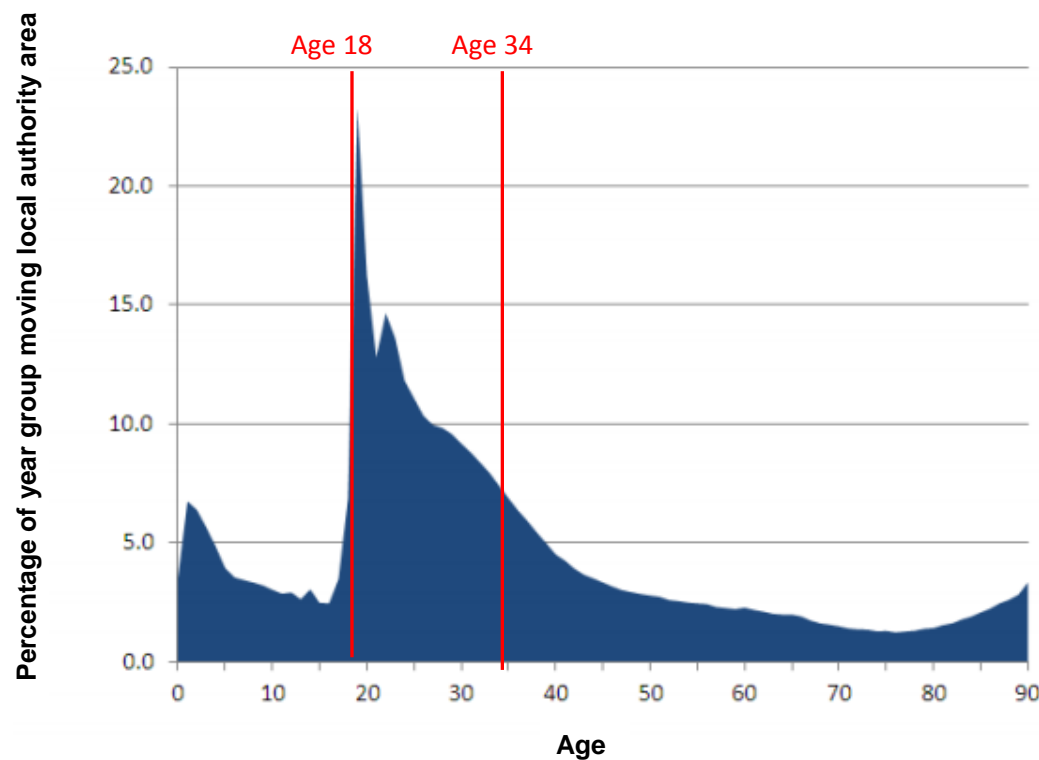
Source: Office for National Statistics, 2013

Figure 5: The estimated completeness rate of the electoral register by how long citizens have lived at the same residence address

Percentage of people
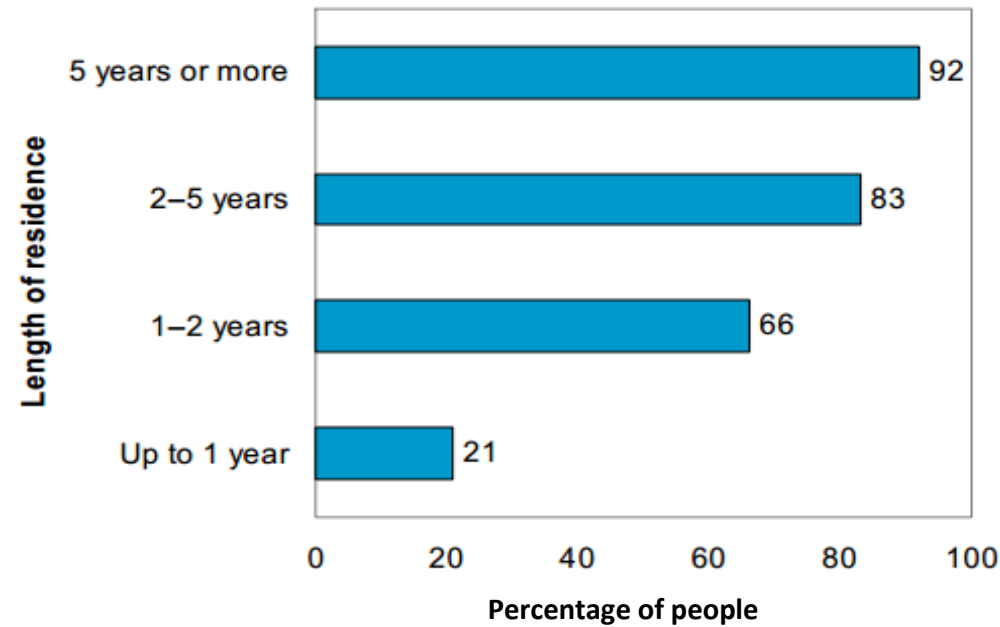
Source: Electoral Commission, 2010. Based on seven case studies.

Electoral Commission research has found that while 92 per cent of people who had lived at the same address for five years were registered to vote, only 21 per cent of those who had been there less than a year were registered.[10] Figure 5 above provides full details of how longer residence leads to better registrations levels.

In the UK people who live in settled communities are more likely to vote and those who have recently moved home are less likely to vote: this factor has an independent impact on turnout when controlling for all other variables.[11] The same effect has also been demonstrated for elections in the United States.[12] Moving between areas would require a young person (who often has never voted before) to register or re-register to vote with a new authority, at the same time as dealing with the multitude of other complications of moving home and living independently.

Even after periods like university, where many UK students must move every year of their study time, young people are also much more likely to rent housing in the private sector and to have to move regularly in response to job opportunities – which increasingly reflect 'portfolio' career patterns, where people enter the labour market and then may hold a succession of short-

period jobs. Figure 6 below shows that younger people (aged 16 to 34) have the lowest levels of home ownership and the maximum exposure to private sector renting of any age group.

Figure 7 overleaf shows recent moves by housing tenure in England. While only one in thirty owner-occupiers has moved in the past year (and one in ten over three years), nearly a third of private renters have moved in the past year (and two thirds have moved in the past three years).[13] Hence it is unsurprising that research shows that people who live in rented accommodation are less likely to be registered or to vote. According to Electoral Commission research, while about 90 per cent of owner-occupiers are registered to vote, only 44 per cent of those renting privately are registered (all ages).[14]

Figure 6: Tenure by age group, 2011
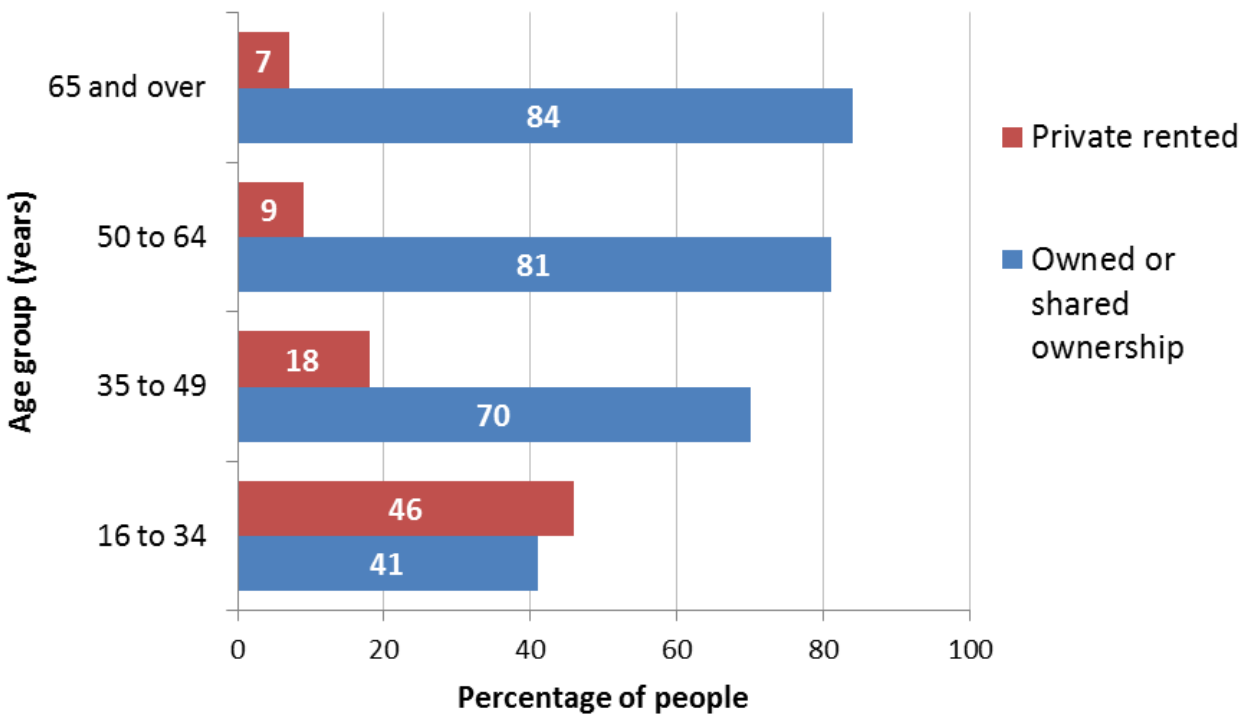
Source: Census 2011 (Office for National Statistics). Social rented and 'other' tenures not included.

Figure 7: Length of residence by tenure, 2011-12
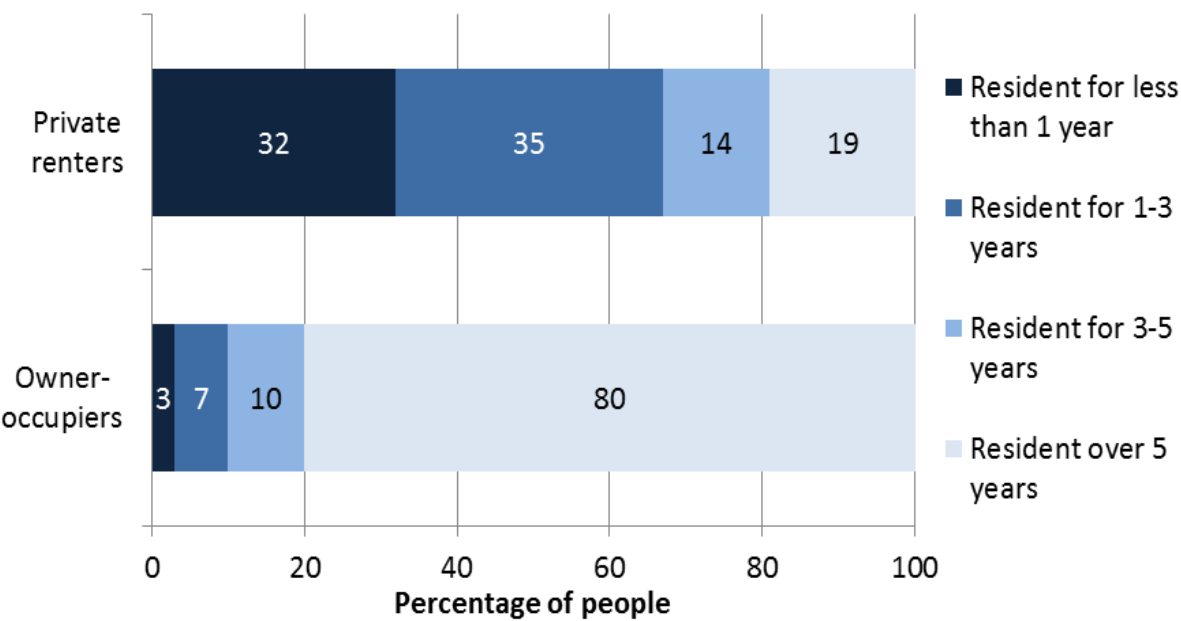
Source: English Housing Survey 2011-12 (Department for Communities and Local Government)

There is very substantial and reliable evidence then suggesting that younger voters are now strongly disadvantaged by existing methods of getting them registered and able to participate in UK elections. The existing strong structural barriers can be partly overcome by better skilled and educated young people, used to making their way through university or educational bureaucracies. But these barriers clearly play a large role in depressing the voting participation of young people less skilled or motivated to overcome the many difficulties of getting registered and finding out about voting opportunities.

Online information resources for voters

There is a potentially countervailing force that could be employed to try to counteract the strong exclusionary effects currently disadvantaging young people – namely, the provision of really easy to use and accessible digital information online. We believe that improved online resources about elections could play a vital role in reaching out to better engage young citizens. We know that young people are much more likely to access news online than older generations, and so accessing election information would be a natural progression. Online sources are also particularly suitable for a geographically mobile group who are least likely to be able to tap informal sources of information in the local community.

The Prime Minister, David Cameron has said that:

I want to explain why I believe [open government] is all so important. Why open government isn't some sort of optional add on, some sort of 'nice to have', but why it's absolutely fundamental to a nation's potential success in the 21st century ….

We can't just talk about open government, we've got to deliver. Now, during Britain's presidency of the G8 this year, we promised a big push on transparency... [15]

However, if we look at information given to voters online about *upcoming elections* (apart from by political parties) the UK has conspicuously weak provision compared with other countries. The Electoral Commission runs an *About My Vote* website that is supposed to give people this information, but it is very limited. For instance, in 13 February 2014 we entered a Westminster postcode into this site and received the message, *"There are currently no elections planned in your area"* (see Figure 8 overleaf). This information is misleading: the forward dates of the City of Westminster, European Parliament, Mayor of London, London Assembly and House of Commons elections for this area are all known, but not listed. Elections to Westminster borough and for London MEPS will take place on 22 May 2014, yet the Electoral Commission website is failing to inform voters about them.

**Figure 8: About My Vote information on upcoming elections**

www.aboutmyvote.co.uk screenshot after search for postcode WC2A 2AE, 13 February 2014. Highlight added.

The provision of information about election results in the UK is also unreliable. An extreme example was the Police and Crime Commissioner (PCC) elections in November 2012 across England and Wales. The official Home Office election website *Choose My PCC* provided very limited links to candidate's websites before the election, with no attempt at presenting information in easy to use fashion. It then gave no information whatsoever on the numbers or shares of votes received by candidates after the election. Little wonder that turnout on this occasion was just 15 per cent.

In the past the BBC has been the best public-facing source for individual constituency results for some types of election (see Figure 9), and it provides reasonable general election coverage. However, the BBC is providing a news service. While comprehensive information is provided about the national result and individual Westminster constituency results, there is no integration between different types of election.

Figure 9: BBC election result page for single constituency
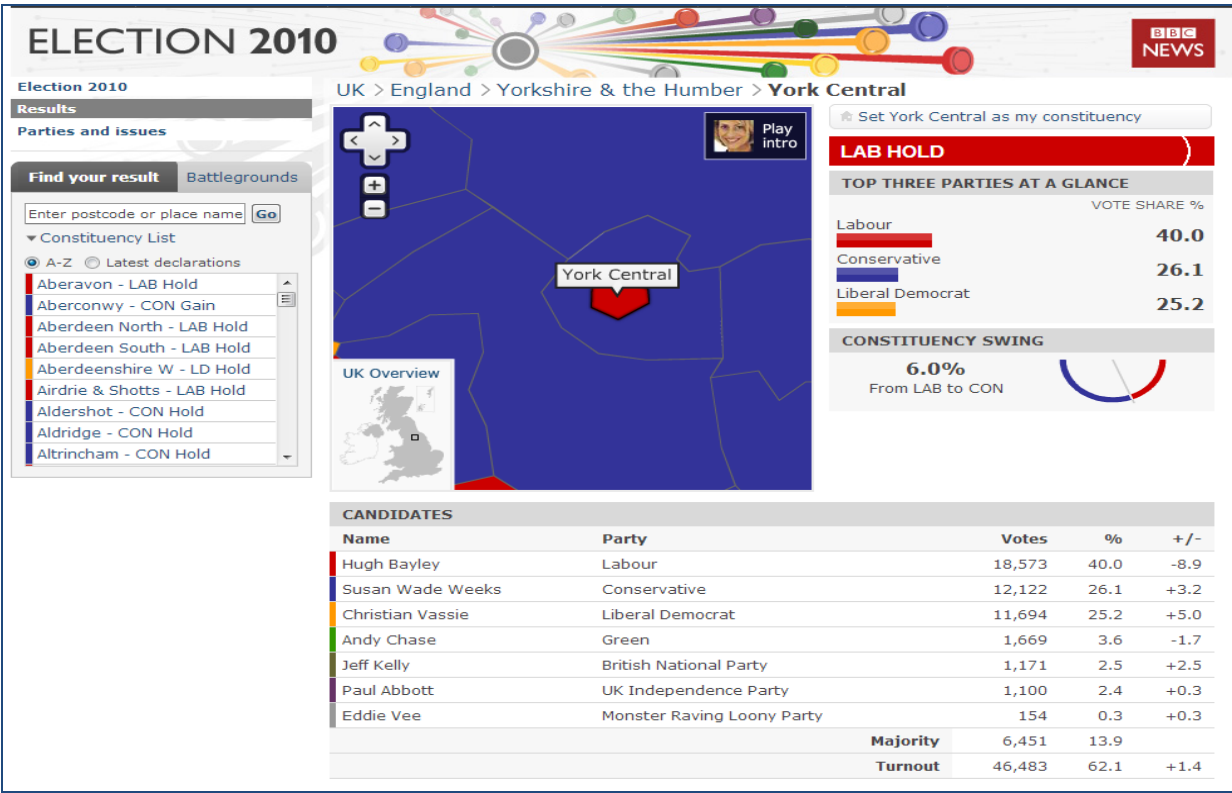
A user could not, for instance, enter their postcode on the BBC and find out about other recent elections in their area (even though some useful information may get published for a while somewhere on the BBC website) or anything about upcoming elections. The same is true for the Electoral Commission website, which also has pages showing individual constituency results, but in less detail and with a less sophisticated search function.

Table 2 overleaf looks at the major public and private sources of UK election results. Our analysis above shows the fragmentation of election results reporting in the UK. Key problems are:

- Each type of election is currently reported in a different manner.

- Results reporting is fragmented across many different sources. Voters would need to have a PhD in British political science to know why one particular institution has a remit to publish particular results and others do not.

Table 3: Online sources of election results[16]

TYPE OF ELECTION	Source of information				
	Electoral Commission	BBC	Local authorities	The Guardian	Other
House of Commons	Webpage with detailed constituency results.	Webpage with detailed constituency results	Results for constituencies within the council area	Webpage and spreadsheet with detailed constituency results	Parliament publishes a PDF with a summary of constituency results
Scottish Parliament	Webpage with detailed constituency results	Webpage with detailed constituency results	Results for constituencies within the council area	Webpage and spreadsheet with summary results for constituencies	Scottish Parliament: webpage and spreadsheet with detailed constituency results
Welsh Assembly	Webpage with detailed constituency results	Webpage with detailed constituency results	Results for constituencies within the council area	Webpage and spreadsheet with summary results for constituencies	Welsh Assembly: webpage with detailed constituency results
Local authority (council overview)	None	Webpages showing seats held by each party (no vote numbers or shares)	Webpages showing seats held by each party (no vote numbers or shares)	Webpage and spreadsheet showing seats held by each party (no vote numbers or shares)	
Local authority wards	None	None	Webpages or PDFs showing detailed results for each ward	None	GLA publishes full details of London borough elections
Greater London Authority	None	Webpage with detailed constituency results	Results for constituencies within the council area	Webpage with detailed constituency results	GLA: Webpage and spreadsheet with detailed constituency results
European Parliament	Webpage with summary results for each region (no losing candidates)	Webpage with summary results for each region (no losing candidates)	Results for constituencies within the council area	None	
Police & Crime Commissioner	None	Webpage with summary of constituency results (no vote numbers)	Results for constituencies within the council area	Webpage and spreadsheet with detailed constituency results	The Home Office 'Choose My PCC' website gives the names of winning candidates (no vote numbers or shares)

Shading: Blue indicates detailed results are available. Red indicates postcode search is available.

- There are no standard formats for the publication of results; variation occurs between different sources for the same election, and between types of election at the same source.

- Many different sources provide only summary results with no links to locally specific details that voters need to have about their ward or constituency area.

- Postcode search is not widely available, often requiring users to find the name of their ward or constituency (if known) by scrolling long lists. Of course, new residents and young people are least likely to know such highly esoteric names.

- Sources do not integrate different types of election so they are all easily accessible in one place; for instance someone inputting their postcode on the BBC would not bring up both the general election and the local election.

Information about annual local elections is particularly poor, in two respects:

- There is *no central source of ward-level election results*. The BBC and other media outlets only publish summaries of results for each council, while the Electoral Commission does not publish any local election results. Citizens can only find out the results of a ward contest by visiting the website of their local council, and in many cases these sites are not user-friendly (some council only publish ward results by scanning a copy of the handwritten declaration form and posting it as a PDF).

- For councils with no majority party, it is very difficult for citizens to find out which party or parties are in power locally. Election results published by the BBC and other sources invariably list these councils as being under 'No Overall Control' (NOC). Very few councils that are NOC will provide clear information on their website about which parties have formed the Cabinet. Figures 10 and 11 show examples of this practice from the BBC and from one council, the London Borough of Merton, which similarly fails to indicate the 'winner' of the latest local election on its own election results page.

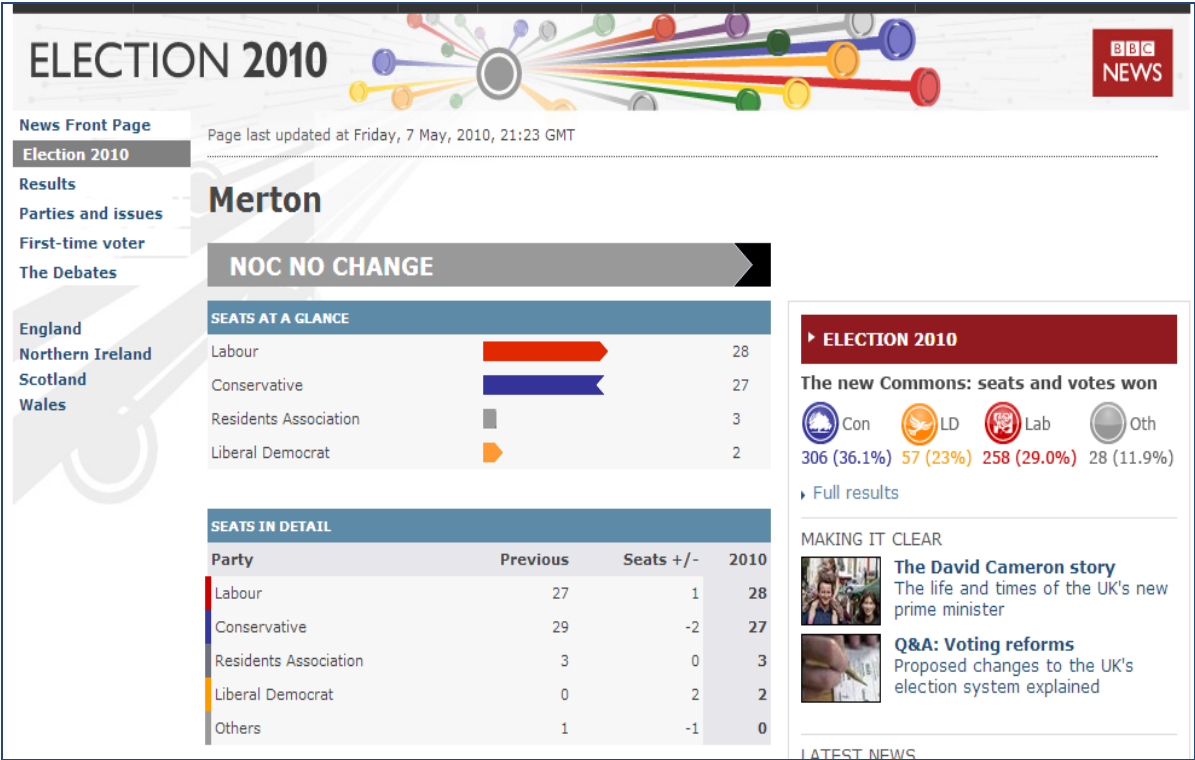**Figure 10: BBC election result page for a single council**

Figure 11: Election results page from the London Borough of Merton

Detailed local election results in Ireland are available from a central source.

We have examined how other countries publish local election results centrally. There are a number of examples of much more detailed, local results being published by national or regional bodies in several:

- Ireland: the Department of the Environment, Community and Local Government document (PDF format) with a complete set of local election results for every local authority, including the votes for every candidate in every ward.

- India: the Election Commission publishes a spreadsheet with full results for every constituency in the 29 regional elections. This also indicated whether candidates were male or female.

- Australia: Regional bodies publish full results including every ward for local elections in their area. For instance the Western Australia Electoral Commission publishes webpages with results for over 100 local authorities, while the New South Wales Electoral Commission publishes results for about 150 local authorities in PDF documents.

- Bangladesh: the Election Commission publishes webpages with detailed results for three tiers of local government.
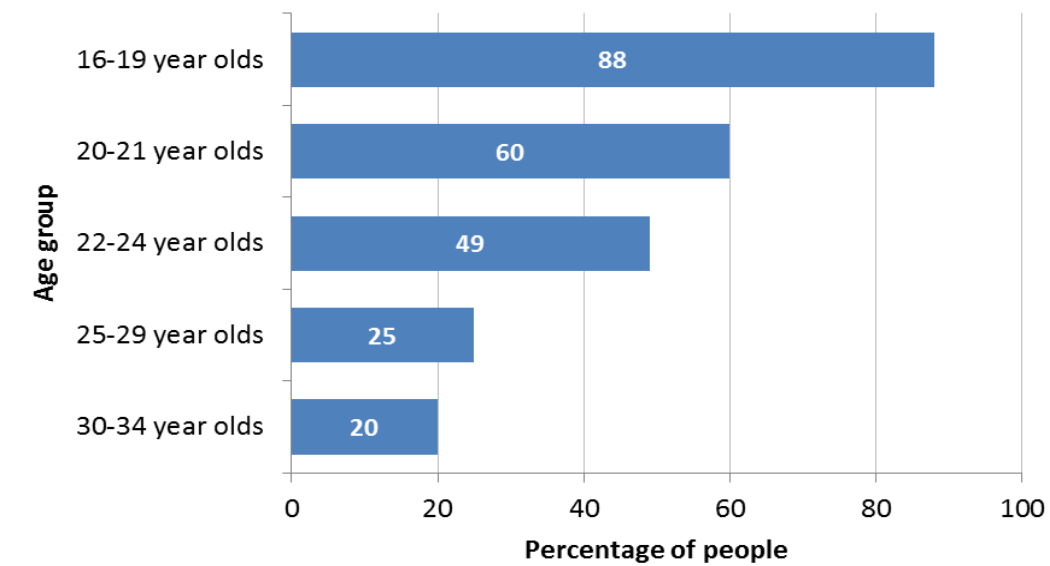
Lowering the voting age to 16

Voting is a critically important habit for citizens to develop in a democracy, and patterns of participation are established early in people's voting lives. Research by both Elias Dinas[17] and by Mark Franklin[18] has shown that if voters vote in the first elections they are eligible for, they are more likely to vote throughout their lives, and vice versaTthe evidence presented above on the life circumstances of young people establishes a strong case for lowering the voting age to 16.

Nearly nine in ten 16-19 year olds live with their parents. Votes at 16 would allow young people to vote at an age when the vast majority of them are living in a stable environment: that is, with parents and in a community that they are long resident in, where they go to school and have many peers with whom they share local information and insights.

Although there has been a recent increase in adults living with parents across age groups, it is clear that only the youngest adults live predominantly with their parents.[19] Figure 12 shows this in more detail. One US study of under-25 year olds showed that turnout among those who were still living with parents was nine percentage points higher than among those who had left home.[20]

Figure 12: Proportion of people living with parents by age group, 2008

Source: Stone, Berrington and Falkingham 2011

The Austrian experience demonstrates the positive impact of lowering the voting age to 16. Austria is so far the only European country to have done this for nationwide elections. Evidence indicates that first-time voters aged 16 and 17 were more likely to vote than first-time voters at older ages. After the voting age was lowered, turnout was 8-10 percentage points higher among 16-17 year first-time voters in regional elections than it was among older first-time voters.[21] Figure 13 demonstrates this for elections in two regions (Vienna in 2010 and Krems in 2012).

Figure 13: Turnout among first time voters in Austrian regional elections, 2010 and 2012
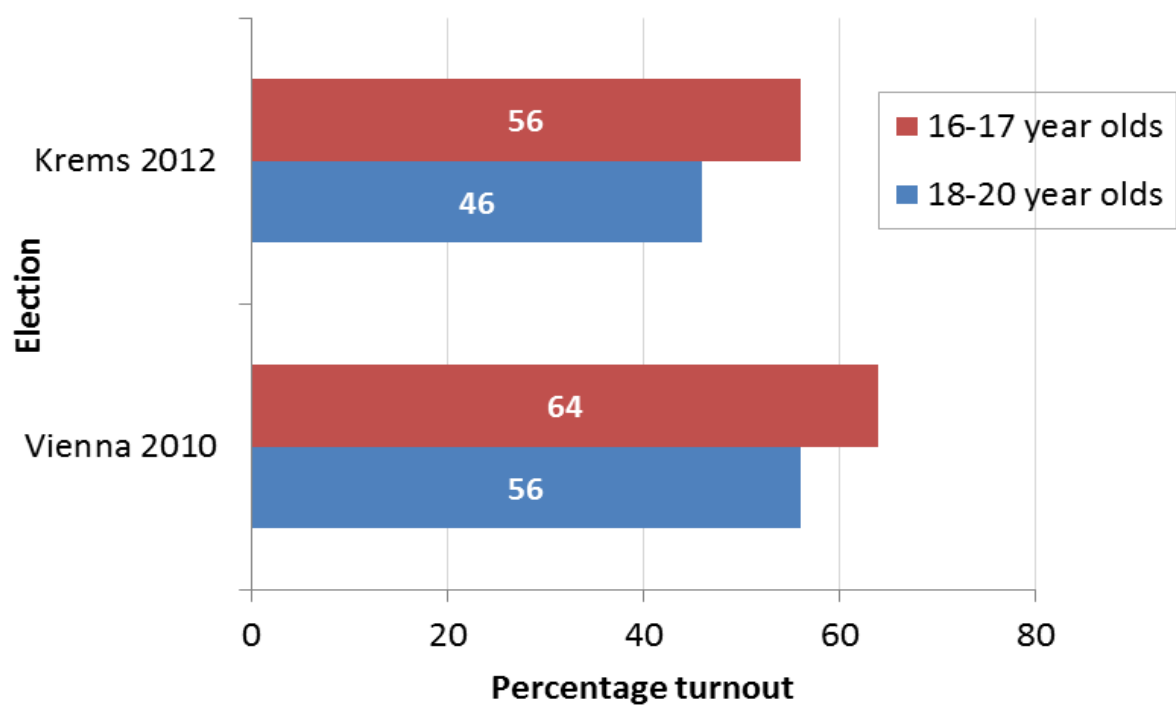
Source: Zeglovits and Aichholzer, 2014

Changing the way we vote

For many people, current voting practices are inconvenient. After the last general election, an Electoral Commission survey found that 31 percent of non-voters cited 'circumstances' as the main reason they did not vote, which included those who were too busy to vote, those who were away on election day, those who were prevented by health reasons and those who found it too inconvenient to get to the polling station.[22]

Voting over the internet is already possible in a number of other democracies.

Online voting has been introduced in other countries successfully, particularly Estonia. Findings are mixed on whether it has increased turnout directly, but it has certainly increased convenience.[23] In New Zealand and Canada, opinion research suggests that large numbers of voters would consider voting online; in the UK, 82 per cent of 18-35 year olds said they would be more likely to vote if they could do it online.[24] The main concern cited is security; however evidence of fraud at UK elections is very low,[25] and the vast majority of UK citizens (82 per cent) already report being confident in carrying out financial transactions online.[26]

Thursday polling day is a historic device for the convenience of the government. Electoral Commission opinion research found 36 per cent of non-voters at the 2009 local election said they would have been more likely to vote if the election were held on a weekend.[27] Research into European

Parliament elections has found that countries voting at the weekend have an average higher turnout of 10 percentage points.[28]

A vibrant polling station in Riverina, for the Australian 2010 federal elections.

Off-putting polling stations make voting in person a depressing experience. Corrupt practices legislation dating from the 1880s currently sterilizes the immediate environments for voting of all life and colour. The Electoral Commission should study Australian practice, where school PTAs have bake-sales and fairs on polling day, and where all parts of Australian government seek to 'reach out' to citizens about their services and their rights. A lively community event focused around polling stations and maximizing the social value of participation could help make voting in person a lot more attractive for more citizens.

Notes

[1] Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development, *Society at a Glance 2011*, 2011.
http://www.oecd-ilibrary.org/social-issues-migration-health/society-at-a-glance-2011_soc_glance-2011-en

[2] Notes for Table 1:
a) Sources of information on electorate sizes and turnouts are available at:
https://dl.dropboxusercontent.com/u/38530929/UK%20elections%20electorate%20and%20votes%202009%202013%20Richard%20Berry.ods
b) For some local authority elections, electorate sizes and turnout were not available. Estimates were based on the electorates for other elections held on the same day, where information was available.

[3] Notes for Table 2:
a) Sources of information on the cost of elections and referendums is available at:
https://dl.dropboxusercontent.com/u/38530929/Sources%20of%20election%20cost%20information%202009%202013%20Richard%20Berry.ods
b) Electoral Commission and boundary commissions' costs are based on annual expenditure in 2008/09 to 2012/13. National and local boundary review agencies for England, Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland are included (except for local boundary reviews in Northern Ireland). For breakdowns and sources see:
https://dl.dropboxusercontent.com/u/38530929/Electoral%20and%20boundary%20commissions%20spending%202008%202013%20Richard%20Berry.ods
c) For some local authority elections, electorate sizes and turnout were not available. Estimates were based on the turnout for other elections held on the same day, where information was available.
d) All costs for local authority elections are estimates. Our estimate is based on an assumption that these elections have the same cost per individual elector as the 2010 general election, excluding the cost of delivering election addresses by Royal Mail (which was £28.6 million).
e) Costs of the Welsh Assembly 2011 elections reflect the total budgeted recoverable cost for local returning officers; actual expenditure may have been lower.

[4] Electoral Commission, *2013 local elections post-polling public opinion research*, 2013 (produced by BMG Research).
http://www.electoralcommission.org.uk/__data/assets/pdf_file/0020/162137/2013-Post-election-survey-Report.pdf

[5] European Commission, *Electoral Rights* (Flash Eurobarometer 364), March 2013.
http://ec.europa.eu/public_opinion/flash/fl_364_en.pdf

[6] Martin Baekgaard et al, 'Local News Media and Voter Turnout', *Local Government Studies*, 9 January 2014. http://www.tandfonline.com/doi/abs/10.1080/03003930.2013.834253#.UwTVavl_sxA

[7] See, for example Jasper Jackson, 'Regional newspapers continue slow decline as volume drops three percent', *The Media Briefing*, 28 August 2013. http://www.themediabriefing.com/article/abc-regional-decline

[8] Nigel Morris, 'Up to 800,00 young Britons are missing from voters' register', *The Independent*, 5 February 2014. http://www.independent.co.uk/news/uk/politics/up-to-800000-young-britons-are-missing-from-voters-register-9107742.html

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[16] Notes for Table 3:
a. The Electoral Commission publishes 'electoral data' for other elections, covering turnout, spoilt ballots, and so on.
b. Local authority columns represent a general summary of practices. Individual council websites may differ.
c. Some individuals have also published ward results on personal websites, with differing levels of comprehensiveness.
d. The Guardian website has a map intended to show 2009 European Parliament election results, but it currently (21 February 2014) has no past results on it.

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