1. My expertise is in electoral integrity and administration in Britain, with several published research articles and reports on these themes, including an evaluation of electoral administration in the 2016 EU Referendum (http://www.ncl.ac.uk/gps/staff/profile/alistairclark.html#background). I write in a personal capacity, focusing on two specific aspects of interest to the committee: the impact of electoral law; and how civic engagement may be supported.

**Impact of current electoral law**

2. The government is committed to putting the onus on the individual to register. Recent registration drives and publicity around this at election and referendums have certainly helped increase the numbers of people registered to vote.

3. There remain clear issues with the system of individual electoral registration. The government have recently reintroduced annual canvasses for electoral registration. This is a system where electoral registration officers (EROs) write to the head of household to check who is registered at that address. This was already tried and tested before being abolished, and reintroduced. This will have added additional costs, both in staff time and financially, to local authorities who are already financially pressed.

4. The current system of individual registration has led to many people who are already registered reapplying, having seen publicity about registration during electoral events. In some cases this has been up to half of these applications. These duplicate applications still need to be checked by administrators; there is currently no way of individuals checking their registration status prior to reapplying. This leads to considerable pressure on electoral administration and registration teams.

5. Our research shows that the extension of the deadline in the 2016 EU Referendum after the Cabinet Office website crashed had a significant impact on the ability of 44% of electoral administration teams to deliver the referendum for example (Clark and James, 2016). Similar issues caused problems in the 2017 general election.

6. **There should now be an urgent move towards establishing a system where individual registration can be checked. All publicity should state clearly that if you are already registered, there is no need to re-register. I would recommend investigating a secure online database, located with either local authorities or the Electoral Commission, but funded by the Cabinet Office.**

7. Research by myself and Dr. Toby James into the experience of polling station workers in the 2015 general election found that the biggest problem they experienced was people turning up to vote, but not being on the electoral register for some reason (e.g. having moved house) (Clark and James, 2017). 69% of responding polling station workers highlighted this as a problem, with 39% experiencing between 2-5 instances of this, and a further 13% experiencing 6 or more instances on polling day. This was across eight local authorities in North East England and Norfolk. Scaling up, with around 380 local authorities administering elections, this difficulty with registration is likely to be a much wider problem.
Polling station staff have no option but to turn away such individuals. This represents a missed opportunity to engage clearly democratically interested people for the future.

8. There is therefore a need for measures to resolve these difficulties. *Automatic electoral registration should be investigated by the Cabinet Office, with pilot work being begun into which government datasets might be useful for doing so.* Evidence on how this might be achieved may be drawn from American practice in some states where automatic registration is used.

9. Alternatively *a version of the American ‘motor voter’ law could be investigated*, with information on electoral registration being prominent in communications from other government departments, and the ability to complete registration forms when visiting government departments provided.

10. An additional proposal may help ensure those wishing to vote can be registered to do so. *On the day registration* is utilised in some American states. This has the benefit of leading to higher turnout. Investigation of this could provide a way of increasing engagement, with a longer term view to piloting it in local elections.

11. With the franchise devolved to the Scottish parliament for some elections, Scottish 16-17 year olds can now vote in local, devolved and other elections in Scotland, although not in those to the Westminster parliament. 16-17 year olds in England, Wales and Northern Ireland do not have such an opportunity, creating an anomaly in the franchise across the UK.

12. As an observer at the 2014 Scottish Independence Referendum, I personally observed many 16-17 year olds voting. They took the process extremely seriously. Research has shown that voting is habit forming. Once the habit is acquired, it is likely to continue.*I would recommend extending the vote to 16-17 year olds for all institutions in England, such as PCCs, local government and Mayors, and provide the same powers over the franchise to Wales and Northern Ireland (when the institutions recommence) as Scotland. I would also extend the right to vote in Westminster elections to 16-17 year olds across the UK.*

13. Many EU citizens living in the UK are politically engaged, voting in, for example, local and devolved elections and making substantial contributions to British society and economic life. Their electoral status has been thrown into extreme uncertainty after the Brexit result.*Urgent clarity is required for such citizens as to what their future electoral and civic rights will be post-Brexit.*

14. At minimum, existing electoral rights for EU citizens should be maintained. However, given their contribution to society and engagement more generally,*I would argue most strongly for extending this to including elections to the UK parliament for all who have been granted Permanent Residency or equivalent status.* This would go some way towards civic engagement and in creating goodwill among a section of society who have been little other than good citizens who have made the UK their home.

15. Our research into the EU referendum (Clark and James, 2016) demonstrated that there are problems with the system for British citizens overseas voting. Mail licences in some countries overseas are reported to not have been recognised, while dispatch dates do not
always permit time to send the necessary documentation securely and in a fashion that it can be returned in time to be counted.

16. The government has promised to look at the franchise for overseas voters and the current 15 year limit. This is important. Much more important and pressing is enabling those registered to vote from overseas to do so in a reliable and timely fashion. Given the ubiquity of online modes of voting in some countries, research should be carried out into how such a system might be developed in the limited case of overseas voters, with extensive pilots and evaluation carried out before final implementation.

17. The government and Conservative backbenchers have placed considerable emphasis on the perception that there is considerable electoral fraud taking place across Britain. The Pickles Review into Electoral Fraud (which I contributed evidence to) recommended the piloting of voter identification. The Electoral Commission have also argued for and recommend voter ID. This is already practice in Northern Ireland. It is being implemented in local elections in parts of England in 2018. Many details are still to be arranged, such as which local authorities will take part.

18. Introduction of voter identification laws elsewhere, notably the United States, have in effect become a vote suppression measure with partisan consequences (Wang, 2012). Typically, groups which tend not to carry identification include lower socio-economic groups, students and minorities. There is no current legal requirement in Britain to carry any form of identification.

19. Our research into polling station problems in the 2015 general election suggested that electoral fraud was suspected on barely any occasion by polling station workers across the eight local authorities; 99% of respondents reporting no such problems or suspicions (Clark and James, 2017). While there may be localised problems in some areas, influencing an election by large scale personation is logistically highly unlikely. Research by the Electoral Commission has underlined the rarity of electoral fraud, even if some continue to perceive it as a major difficulty.

20. As noted above, electoral registration is a much bigger problem. I would expect that, under current voter ID proposals, a larger number of people turned away than usual because they do not have any identification with them when they visit the polling station. They are unlikely to make a second trip. There will also be suspicions of vote suppression for partisan benefit, with voter ID requirements likely to hit similar groups to that in the US and hitting Labour support hardest.

21. Implementation of voter ID needs careful and rigorous evaluation which is demonstrably independent from government. This will be carried out by the Electoral Commission. If this policy not to negatively affect citizen engagement, it also requires independent academic assessment, and a pause to its implementation until the effects can be properly established. If the effects are shown to have unintended negative consequences, it requires a commitment from the government to rethink its approach in light of the evidence that electoral fraud in polling stations is actually extremely rare.

22. Our research into the 2016 EU referendum showed an increasing problem with the use of emergency proxy votes, creating difficulties for election administrators (Clark and James,
One view was that this had increased because busy people are not always attentive to electoral deadlines for options such as postal voting.

23. To minimise such difficulties, a further American innovation might provide an answer. This is the option of using early vote centres, where people can vote securely at selected local authority buildings in advance of polling day. This may be more secure than postal voting, which is often criticised for problems with ballot secrecy. It would also provide a way of minimising the numbers of emergency proxies granted by local authorities by allowing voting up to polling day itself. This should be investigated.

Supporting Civic Engagement

24. There are currently some very good efforts at engaging the public with civic affairs. The parliamentary outreach service runs an excellent Parliament Week and year round programme. The Cabinet Office and Minister Chris Skidmore also deserve praise for reforms aimed at hard to reach groups, such as those who need to register anonymously having been victims of domestic abuse. These efforts must continue.

25. Such efforts are also likely to be effective at local level. Yet, electoral administrators have complained of inadequate funding of their vital service. For example, it can take up to two years for local authorities to be refunded the costs of running national elections. Electoral registration activities are not reimbursed, even if the Cabinet Office did provide some funds for implementing IER.

26. Local authorities typically have small teams in their electoral services departments, with an average of around three members of staff (Clark, 2017b). This leaves them vulnerable to staff illness and pressure of work. This has been made worse by the recent cycle of electoral events. The Association of Electoral Administrators have complained about the physical and mental stresses on their members caused in part by inadequate resourcing of a vital service. Importantly, this limits considerably what electoral administrators can do to encourage civic engagement and improve the experience of voters with the electoral system.

27. My own data-driven research has shown that increased financial resource for electoral administrators leads to higher quality elections (Clark, 2014; 2017a; b). Much of this will be spent on staffing, but the physical provision of electoral infrastructure is also an important driver of electoral costs. The finding that more spending leads to better quality elections in Britain has come from two separate investigations into spending on the 2009 European and 2010 general elections.

28. Little is known about this. There is an urgent need for more transparency around how much is spent on electoral administration in the UK. Estimates are that spending on elections is increasing at a time where public spending in local authorities is being squeezed. Transparency and research into public spending on elections would enable efficiencies to be identified and best practice comparisons to be made across local authorities.

29. The Cabinet Office should review the system of election funding, to ensure that local authorities are not out of pocket as a consequence of providing this vital service to electors. This may include a review of time taken to settle accounts, transparency around allocated
amounts and so on. Only with such a review will the link between capacity in electoral administration and its resourcing begin to be resolved.

Recommendations

30. I would make the following recommendations:

- There is an urgent need for a system where individual registration can be checked. This should be investigated by the Cabinet Office and Electoral Commission.
- All publicity on electoral registration should state clearly that if you are already registered, there is no need to re-register.
- Investigation of a system where registration can be checked, which could take the form of a secure online database, located with either local authorities or the Electoral Commission, but be funded by the Cabinet Office.
- Automatic electoral registration should be investigated by the Cabinet Office, with pilot work being begun into which government datasets might be useful for doing so.
- A version of the American ‘motor voter’ law should be examined, to enable ease of registration when individuals interact with government departments
- Consider the possibility of providing on-the-day electoral registration and early vote centres
- Extend the vote to 16-17 year olds for all institutions in England, and provide the same powers over the franchise to Wales and Northern Ireland (when those institutions recommence) as Scotland. Extend the right to vote in Westminster elections to 16-17 year olds across the UK.
- Urgent clarity is required for EU citizens as to what their future electoral and civic rights will be post-Brexit.
- Extend the right to vote to include elections to the UK parliament for all EU citizens who have been granted Permanent Residency or equivalent status.
- Research should be carried out into how a system of online voting might be developed in the limited case of overseas voters
- Implementation of voter ID laws should be carefully evaluated in a manner which is demonstrably independent from government.
- Provide a commitment to transparency in election funding and a review of practices around the funding of elections to enable electoral administrators to encourage and maximise civic engagement

Conclusion

31. There are difficulties and inefficiencies in the UK electoral system which hamper civic engagement. This inquiry is therefore a welcome one. The recommendations provided may go some way to resolving some of the issues identified. We all want the best quality elections possible, where everyone eligible to vote can do so, with a minimum of difficulty. I remain happy to discuss these and related matters with the Committee or any stakeholder seeking to improve the operation of the electoral system. If I can be of any further assistance, or can elaborate further on any of these points, please do not hesitate to contact me.

References


6 September 2017