

# Centralising Electoral Management and Electoral Integrity: Lessons from Britain<sup>1</sup>

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## Abstract

Concerns about the quality of electoral management have been raised in many established democracies. The centralisation of electoral management has often been proposed to avoid problems resulting from 'localism'. However, there is no research on the effects that such centralisation might have in practice. This paper identifies the effects of measures introduced by the UK Electoral Commission to centralise management in two referendums. Semi-structured interviews were used with those who devised the policy instrument and those who were subject to it. The introduction of 'command and control' directions from the centre had some predicted positive and some negative outcomes. However, an unpredicted finding was the decline of staff morale and souring of relations amongst stakeholder organisations. The paper therefore argues that the *process* of making major organisational changes can make the performance of electoral management boards unpredictable and this can have unintended consequences for electoral integrity.

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Many elections worldwide are undermined by concerns about electoral integrity and malpractice (Birch, 2011; Norris, 2014). Established democracies are often thought to be free from more serious 'first order' problems but commonly do face problems with election administration and management (Norris, 2013). These include administrative errors in the implementation of elections or the adoption of poor management practices that produce poor electoral management performance (James, 2014a).

What can be done to improve the quality of electoral management? A common theme has been for academics and policy-makers to prescribe the centralisation of electoral management to provide a more consistent experience for the voter and overcome problems of poor management at the local level. There has been no published studies on the effects that centralising electoral management might have, however. This paper uses the literature from public administration on bureaucratic control and discretion to develop expectations about the likely effects of centralisation. It then applies the hypotheses to a case study of where centralisation has occurred. In two UK referendums in 2011 the central Electoral Management Board (EMB), the Electoral Commission, took a unique position in giving 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 paper finds that the introduction of 'command and control' directions from the centre enabled more consistent service provision, the early identification and remedy of errors by administrators, increased costs, absorption of staff time and neglect of local knowledge and experience. These effects of centralisation are largely predictable from the literature on bureaucratic control. However, a notable and surprising finding was the decline of staff morale and souring of relations amongst stakeholder organisations. The paper argues that major organisational changes can create critical junctures in which the performance of electoral management boards can become unpredictable. Centralising electoral management can therefore have unintended consequences for electoral integrity.

The paper begins by reviewing the existing literature on electoral management and the known effects of centralising public services on performance which allows the development of some hypotheses. The paper then explains the methods, results and analyses the significance of the findings.

### **The importance of electoral management**

Studies which seek to understand how elections can be improved have traditionally focussed on the design of the electoral system, electoral finance laws, the drawing of boundaries and design of election administration. A new line of research, however, is to investigate the role of electoral management. Electoral management is defined here as *the inter- and intra-organisational relationships, use of policy instruments and resources amongst the stakeholders involved in the delivery of elections*. Research has shown that poor electoral management can undermine citizens' confidence in the electoral process in established democracies (Atkeson & Saunders, 2007; Claassen, Magleby, Monson, & Patterson, 2012; Claassen, Magleby, Monson, & Patterson, 2008;

Hall, Quin Monson, & Patterson, 2009) and threaten democratic consolidation and cause electoral violence in emerging democracies (Elklit & Reynolds, 2002; Pastor, 1999b; Snyder, 2013). The professionalization of EMBs has been defined as an important policy objective by international organisations (Global Commission on Elections, 2012) and a new research agenda has begun to focus on the policy instruments used within electoral management boards to manage the people, resources and technology at their disposal (James, 2013). In other words, there has been a turn to theories of public sector management or a 'public administration turn' in the study of elections (Clark, forthcoming; James, 2014b; Montjoy, 2008; Norris, 2013: 570).

There has been some work on what constitutes 'good' EMB performance. Elections are often evaluated in terms of whether international norms (Norris, 2013), democratic norms (Birch, 2011) or national laws (Minnite, 2010) are broken. A range of frameworks have been developed, however, to more narrowly assess EMBs and election administration (Bland, Green, & Moore, 2012; Clark, forthcoming; Elklit & Reynolds, 2002; James, 2014a; Ugues, 2014). Many of these frameworks go beyond looking at the flaws in elections that directly result from office-seeking statecraft. For example, James (2014a) has drawn from the public sector management literature on organisational performance to produce a heuristic framework identifying and assessing the outputs that EMBs 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.

*[Insert Table 1 about here]*

Which organisational design maximises EMB performance? The original line of enquiry about how good performance could be generated focussed on the type of EMB responsible for running elections. This only emerged very recently, with Robert Pastor noting as recently as 1999 that he was 'unable to locate a book or even an article on election commissions or their history' (Pastor, 1999a: 77). One milestone publication was a UNDP report which developed a taxonomy of EMBs and classified 148 countries according to whether the government ran elections, the government ran elections under supervision from an external organisation or whether an independent organisation was responsible for running elections (Lopez-Pinter, 2000). This was followed by International IDEAs handbook on electoral management which developed a similar typology and gave more detail on methods for improving EMB performance (Wall et al., 2006). EMBs that are statutorily independent from government were frequently held up as the 'gold standard' because they reduce the opportunities for partisan actors to promote their own interests (Pastor, 1999b; Ugues, 2013). However, there is some sceptical evidence about the effects that they have had on popular confidence in elections (Birch, 2008).

More recent research has gone beyond looking at formal independence to identify the effect of policy instruments used within EMBs (James, 2013). This has included the

has identified the effect that election audits (Alvarez, Atkeson, & Hall, 2012a, 2012b; Goggin, Byrne, & Gilbert, 2012), provision of funding (Clark, 2014; James, 2014a) and the use of performance standards as management tool (James, 2013). Relatively little academic research has been undertaken on the range of policy instruments used within EMBs and their effects. This research is urgently needed.

### **Centralising electoral management**

What is already known about the likely effects of centralising electoral management? Again, there has been virtually no detailed research. Decentralised management has been criticised by academics and practitioners in some countries where it is found and problems with electoral integrity often attributed towards it. These claims are predominately in the US where decentralisation is thought to have brought about variations in the voter's experience of election administration. In many cases this has been for the worse. Gerken (2009: 1585-1586) has suggested that the 'localism' has been the cause of many problems with US election administration and can also make reform difficult to achieve. Guess (2009) argues there was a qualitative difference in the voter experience between the those in Palm Beach County, Florida and in other counties and states during the 2000 US Presidential election. The former used voting equipment and ballot designs of inferior quality to other jurisdictions. It also invested less in staff recruitment. Meanwhile, Pastor has suggested that the US system has been 'decentralized to the point of being dysfunctional (Pastor, 2006: 273)<sup>2</sup>:

'Both the strength and the weakness of the US electoral administration system stem from its decentralized nature. It allows for great autonomy but no uniformity. Most Americans have focused on the result rather than the process, but close elections compel a re-focus on the process. Over time, if it is to respond to the many complaints, the federal government will need to insist on a much higher degree of uniformity of rules, and the states will need to retrieve authority from the local areas, starting with the registration list and the voter identification cards.'

The most cited advantage of centralised systems are therefore consistent experiences for the voter (Guess, 2009; Pastor, 2004). However, as Pastor alludes to above, decentralised forms of election management are also thought to have some advantages. Guess (2009) suggests that they often allow more responsive service delivery for diverse local needs and they enable innovation.

There is therefore relatively little research on the effects of centralising electoral management. Broader research from the field of public administration, however, provides an extensive literature on how and why bureaucratic centralization may have both positive and negative effect on organizational performance. Brehm et al. (1999: 1-24) frame this literature into four clusters. 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, incentives and strict rules to combat these

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<sup>2</sup> Also see: Pastor (2004).

inefficiencies. 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 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). For others, the integrity of workers could be best embedded into organisations through the norms of professionalism (Friedrich, 1940). Herbert Simon (1945) 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 discouraged.

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

Public administration worldwide gradually became increasingly influenced, however, by rational choice theory and *new public management*. This made the assumptions of human behaviour that guided supervisors and workers explicit: individuals are assumed to be rational, self-interested actors. The important consequence of this is that workers may either *work, shirk or sabotage*. As Brehm and Gates suggest (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"). In all three instances, the central concern is whether bureaucrats are producing policy as intended by the public'.

The development of the principal-agent model in many ways provided a conceptual framework for sympathising with supervisors about the challenges that they faced in bringing about compliance amongst workers. Principals (supervisors) were likely to have little knowledge about the skills, aptitudes and values of agents (workers) and therefore faced the problem of adverse selection. Principals were also likely to find it difficult to monitor the activities of agents and therefore also faced the problem of moral hazard. New public management theorists therefore sought to develop a range of policy tools that could be used by principals to structure the incentives of agents into bringing about compliance, such as targeting rewards and punishments (Bianco & Bates, 1990). The efficacy of these were sometimes questioned (Brehm & Gates, 1994; Christopher & Hood, 2006). By focussing on structuring incentives, however,

the new public management approach in many ways sought to avoid direct centralisation and top down control that was prescribed by many within the scientific management school.

### **Research Questions and Hypothesis**

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

Firstly, based on the problems that have been commonly been caused by 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*

Secondly, the opposite hypothesis can be developed. As Pastor noted, decentralised systems can allow services to be responsive to local needs. The insights of the bureaucratic discretion school also suggest that top-down prescriptions are difficult to enforce and that local officials are often best placed to judge local needs based on their local expertise. Hypothesis 2 is therefore:

*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 answering these broader questions because it provides an example of a decentralised system where there is thought to be variation in local practice and performance. The *process of making* of UK electoral law has always been centralised.<sup>3</sup> It is made by Parliament in Westminster. 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 the count. An Electoral Registration Officer (ERO) is responsible for compiling the electoral register. Both ROs and EROs are local government employees

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<sup>3</sup> Although some power is now devolved to Scotland.

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>4</sup> There has often been anecdotal evidence of variations in practice and performance among ROs and EROs. These have been highlighted by problems at polling stations in the 2010 general election where some polling stations developed queues that prevented citizens from casting their vote and officials did not prevent enough ballot papers (Electoral Commission, 2010). The introduction of performance standards, set by the Electoral Commission, confirmed that there was some variation in practices used (Clark, forthcoming; Electoral Commission, 2008) although there is evidence of deliberate gaming of the results which casts doubt on the reliability of the data (James, 2013).

The focus of this case study is on the system that the Electoral Commission introduced for managing the electoral administration in the Welsh devolution referendum in March 2011 and the AV referendum in May 2011. 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. The Electoral Commission's Chair, Jenny Watson, was therefore the Chief Counting Officer and able to issue directions to EROs and ROs. The Commission was also more predisposed to use these powers because of the problems that had occurred at the 2010 general election, where it blamed local officials for errors. This central direction in the implementation of elections was historically unprecedented.

The Welsh devolution referendum took place on 3 March 2011 and the AV referendum on 5<sup>th</sup> May 2011. In both referendums the Commission published a list of directions that it expected officials to implement during the winter of 2010 (see Table 3). 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>5</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 3 about here]

Unlike the previous performance management scheme, documented in James (2013) which sought to induce compliance through incentivisation and punishment ('name

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<sup>4</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>5</sup> A total of 19 exemptions were applied for with only six granted (Electoral Commission, 2011a: 121).

and shame'), the system used in the referendums involved central command. It therefore provides a unique opportunity to test hypotheses about what happens to electoral management when it is centralised.

## **Data and Methods**

To test the hypotheses the paper 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 over quantitative data analysis is that it allows the meanings that actors attach to events, experiences and actions to be identified and explored. These might vary by context and cannot always be captured by cross-national quantitative analysis. Five 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.<sup>6</sup> A mix of urban and rural authorities was also included.

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 & 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 cases 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 when weekly monitoring was in place. Two of these cases were because of concerns about the experience of the electoral services team and one was because of concerns about the Counting Officers approach to verification and the

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<sup>6</sup> 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).

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).

*[Insert Table 2 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 (Table 2). Firstly, 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’

The most visible of these was the counting times. However, in some cases 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.

Secondly, the directions 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.’

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 don’t really want to have it wrong. I want to know if I’ve

not got it right at the time, when I can make a difference. So I think the new system of checking on us as we go along is fine.'

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'

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'.

Fourthly, 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.

'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'

Fifthly, was 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.

Sixthly, 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 paperwork 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.

'for me it was just the folly of paperwork that came through daily, two or three times a day. It was just too much.'

'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?"

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.’

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.

Seventh, election officials 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...’

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 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; you just cannot do that...centrism can't deal with crises that happen. If I turn up at the count centre the fire brigade are there and it isn't there, well I phone up Jenny and say "What am I going to do?" She'd say "do this" and I'd say 'the police can't do that'.

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'.

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:

RO: 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.

Eighth, 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 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.

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.'

'there was no real appreciation that we're dealing with- in most cases dedicated and professional people in their field'

'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.'

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'.

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.

## **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 better solutions from the centre. More consistent services was thought to lead to perceptions among citizens that services were of better quality (T1). The presence of central directions was useful to officials in learning new practices ideas (T3) and locating best practice quickly (T4). However, the volume of support for the themes was low in the interviews and like the original performance standards it was unclear whether the procedures being rolled out were better practices in the first instance. The Commission did not make the process of identifying what constituted best practice transparent. A more significant positive theme was that it allowed the Commission to identify problems with administration of elections and intervene (P2). However, it is also difficult to ascertain the volume of cases where the Commission found errors and initiated action. Unsurprisingly, the errors that the Commission were able to identify were not published and only one concrete example was identified through the interviews. Relatively little evidence of improvement was therefore found.

There was much more support for H2. This hypothesis predicted no change or a decline in the quality and less efficient electoral services because of a lack of sensitivity to a) local needs and b) the local knowledge of bureaucrats. Theme T5 (financial cost), T6 (staff time) and T7 (lost local experience or knowledge) suggest that the directions all undermined cost efficiency. They also suggest that poorer quality services may have been the result as officials had to prioritise meeting the directions rather than local needs and the interviews revealed some bizarre experiences for voters as a result. T8 (staff morale) was not predicted but supports the arguments from within the human relations school of management that top-down procedures can undermine rather than reinforce the capacity of organisations to meet policy goals.

It is quite 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 electoral management board performance.

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 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, organisational change creates a critical juncture in which the performance of EMBs becomes very unpredictable and this could lead to wider problems. Centralisation might have advantages (or not), but the process of centralising might itself be a very risky strategy for electoral integrity. For example, poor performance in close or pivotal elections could affect voter confidence, the legitimacy of the winner or outbreaks of electoral violence, as witnessed in Kenya in 2007.

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**

In recent years the quality of electoral management has been questioned in many democracies. Decentralised EMBs have often been criticised and centralisation proposed as a remedy. This paper has identified the consequences of a introducing a more centralised system of electoral management into the UK. It has suggested that although there were some positive outcomes such as an increase in the consistency of services and a central capacity to reduce the number of errors being made in elections, there were many other side-effects and unforeseen consequences that most likely undermined any positive effects. These included increased financial costs, an absorption of staff time, lost local experience and effects on staff morale and relationships. As Schaffer (2008: 13) notes '[b]ecause election reforms are often complex and difficult to implement and because candidates, operatives, and voters often respond to reforms in unanticipated ways, well-intentioned measures can produce harm.' Although his claim was made with respect to 'front end' election reforms such as voter identification, the laws of unintended consequences can apply to electoral management reforms too. Moreover, there is a temporal dimension to institutional reform. The *process* of reform itself can produce significant challenges for electoral integrity. This has not yet been identified by the public administration literature on elections.

The case suggests that the choice of policy instruments used to manage electoral officials clearly matters and can have positive or negative effects on electoral management performance and the voters' experience. The case therefore underlines the need to further research the effects of different policy instruments and institutional reforms in different settings as part of the 'public administration turn' in the study of elections and electoral integrity.

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).

<b>Example directions issued to local officials in preparation for the 2011 referendums</b>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• A maximum number of electors for each polling station</li> <li>• A minimum number of staff per polling station</li> <li>• A requirement to print ballot papers for all electors</li> <li>• Deadlines for the posting of polling cards and postal ballots</li> <li>• A requirement to check the personal identifiers on 100% of returned postal ballots rather than 20%, which was law.</li> <li>• A deadline for the verification of ballot boxes and a requirement that counting should begin at 4pm the following day.</li> <li>• Specific wording and layout for the ballot paper, poll cards, postal voting statements and instructions and guidance for voters.</li> <li>• Counting times were centrally defined</li> </ul>

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

Theme	Definition
T1: Consistent services	Centralised instructions produced uniform services
T2: Elimination of errors	Errors in the practices of electoral administrators were identified, prevented or rectified
T3: New practices and ideas	Election officials adopted or became aware of new practices
T4: Finding practice efficiently	Helped officials identify 'good practice' quickly and efficiently
T5: Financial costs	Complying with the direction led to increased local costs
T6: Staff time	Completing and complying with the directions drained staff time and diverted this from other aspects of the election
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
T8: Staff morale	The Commission's directions reduced the staff's enjoyment of their role in elections and/or reduced staff morale

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

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