Chapter 8

Electoral Management in Britain

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Understanding the causes, consequences, and remedies for defects in the practice of elections is being subjected to renewed scrutiny. Considerable attention has focused on how elections are subverted by elites seeking to maintain power. Scholars have established a comprehensive menu of manipulation including electoral violence, vote buying, and maintaining favorable electoral laws.[1] This has been conceptualized as electoral malpractice[2] or as undermining international standards of electoral integrity.[3] Not all flaws in elections are the direct result of the partisan activity of elites and their agents, however. In *Electoral Malpractice*, Birch notes that systems of electoral administration can be prone to 'electoral mispractice'—"incompetence, lack of resources, unforeseen disturbances, and simple human error"[4]—but then focuses on the deliberate "manipulation of electoral processes and outcomes."[5] Elsewhere, Norris notes that elections can be plagued by 'electoral maladministration': "routine flaws and unintended mishaps by election officials . . . due to managerial failures, inefficiency and incompetence."[6] These problems can affect voter confidence and threaten democratic consolidation. However, previous accounts have not offered sufficient conceptual disaggregation or empirical research to help establish the types, causes, and potential remedies for such problems.

This study makes two contributions to the literature. First, it develops a new conceptual terminology for understanding a different type of electoral malpractice. Electoral integrity can be compromised through failures of rowing and steering in electoral management boards (EMBs), which

can cause suboptimal levels of organizational performance. Second, the study contributes toward knowledge of the causes of poor organizational performance in the case of Britain by using semi-structured interviews to identify the contemporary challenges facing electoral administrators. Proponents of "bottom-up" policymaking have long suggested mining the knowledge of "street-level bureaucrats" when developing policies, because of their unique insights into elections on the ground, but few studies have adopted this methodology. This chapter argues that many challenges are new in a historical perspective to long-established democracies such as Britain. Elections in post-industrial, digital-era governance make organizational performance more difficult to achieve without appropriate managerial responses. This environment is likely to be typical of that faced by many of the older post-industrial democracies.

The chapter begins by defining and conceptualizing the study of organizational performance in electoral management as a variety of electoral malpractice. A framework for evaluating organizational performance is proposed and applied to Britain. The chapter then identifies the challenges that policy makers and implementers face in organizing elections.

Standards of Electoral Management Board Performance

Democratic theory requires elections to provide fairness amongst parties, candidates, and citizens. For example, Beetham defines democracy as a system of rule that "embraces the concepts of popular control and political equality."[7] Studying electoral systems and boundaries has identified how they might generate bias, disproportionality, or "wasted votes." Electoral finance laws can provide candidates and parties with (dis)advantages. Restrictive voting and registration technologies, such as elector identification, are thought to depress turnout amongst particular groups. The *management and implementation* of election administration provides a further opportunity for citizens to have unequal influence and for parties or candidates to be (dis)advantaged. Consecutive US presidential elections have seen long lines for voters, poor ballot paper design, and faulty equipment.[8] The 2010 UK general election saw lines at polling stations because of understaffing. Significant technical and operational difficulties in the 2013 Kenyan elections caused a delayed count. An evaluation of the Canadian 2011 federal elections found that election officers, on average, made more than 500 serious administrative errors per electoral district on election day.[9] In the 2013 Malaysia contest, election officials were criticized for not shaking the bottles of indelible ink, meaning that some citizens could wash off the ink and double vote.[10] In each of these cases, individual citizens experienced unequal levels of service. These problems may disadvantage candidates and parties and undermine public confidence in the

electoral process.[11] In emerging democracies, such events can threaten democratic consolidation and may cause electoral violence.[12]

An emerging subfield in electoral studies addressing these problems is the study of the public administration of elections. Work has considered how performance management tools, auditing, funding, and election observation can affect the quality of elections.[13] But what constitutes "good" quality elections in the first instance?

The discipline of public sector management promises much given the dense literature on the topic. [14] Organizational performance has always been a concern for governments but it became increasingly prominent since the 1980s under the banner of "good governance" when Western states implemented management reforms and development aid was made conditional on public sector reforms. Today, it remains central for organizations such as the UNDP.[15] For scholars, organizational performance has been described as the "ultimate dependent variable of interest for researchers concerned with just about any area of management."[16]

Performance is also a contested concept dividing those who seek objective or subjective measures.[17] The former are sometimes treated as the "gold standard" because of the allure of scientific objectivity. However, the case that performance is socially constructed is strong. For example, assuming that there is a trade-off, should policy makers prioritize voter security or participation? According to Andrews et al., if there is any disagreement about what is to be measured, how it is to be measured, or the weighting attached to each measure, then performance is subjective. [18] To deal with these issues, a multiple-indicator or mixed approach is increasingly preferred to capture the multifaceted nature of organizations.[19] Boyne, for example, has forged a comprehensive list of performance criteria for evaluating public sector organizations by merging previous competing approaches.[20] Public organizations can be evaluated, he suggests, on the basis of the quantity and quality of the outputs that they produce, the efficiency with which these outputs are produced, and the degree to which those outputs are effective at producing the desired outcomes. Going beyond a simple inputs-outputs-outcomes model, however, organizations should also be responsive to the demands of citizens and staff within the organization and their evaluations should be taken into account. Public organizations, Boyne argues, should also be evaluated by whether they achieve democratic outcomes such as ensuring probity, participation, and accountability.

Boyne's framework is adapted here to assess EMB performance as it identifies what the core aims of these bodies should be according to democratic theory (Table 8.1). The *outputs* produced by EMBs, although varying by country, usually include canvasses of citizens, polling cards, staff training, and

voter education. It is important that these are of high quality, because they can affect whether citizens vote and their confidence in the electoral process. Economic efficiency is also important because, whatever the context, resources will be finite, and outcomes need to be maximized. In terms of *service outcomes*, outcome effectiveness such as registration rates, turnout rates, cases of fraud, and levels of voter education remain central to the proper functioning of elections. For example, low turnout can undermine the legitimacy of government and democratic rule, and also reduces inclusiveness. A significant variation in outcomes by gender, ethnicity, or other social cleavage also generates political inequality. The impact of the EMBs' work on other government services should be considered. A focus on *responsiveness* means that EMBs should be assessed by their levels of staff satisfaction, in addition to citizen satisfaction, because EMBs have a duty of care to their employees; and, more importantly, higher staff satisfaction can increase the quality of service to citizens. A focus on *democratic outcomes* means that probity and accountability are also important. Electoral officials should discharge their functions without resort to personal gain and there should be the opportunity for redress for voters. These two criteria have been the main standards through which EMBs have been assessed.[21]

It follows that a further type of electoral malpractice is poor organizational performance based on the above criteria. The framework provides a heuristic matrix for identifying deficiencies in the quality of electoral management through a mixed-methods approach combining both quantitative and qualitative information.

[Insert table 8.1 about here]

Failures of Steering and Rowing

Why do organizational failures occur? There are two core types or pathways. First, a *failure of steering in electoral management* is defined as *the adoption of practices and strategies that have generated suboptimal organizational performance in EMBs*. These types of problems are system level and exist in the management of organizations. Andrews et al. suggest that common management failures in the public sector are the absence or poor use of indicators, unrealistic aims and goals, weak relations between managers, inadequate relations with external stakeholders, and ineffective leadership.[22] Importantly, what constitutes a failure of steering might depend on context, since good practice in one might not be so in another.

Problems can also be found in the implementation or "rowing" of centrally defined strategies. For example, EMBs might set clear guidelines for processing postal vote application forms, but an

individual administrator or team of administrators might not follow these appropriately. A second type of failure, a *failure of rowing in electoral management,* is therefore defined as an *error in the implementation of practices and strategies that results in suboptimal organizational performance in the management of elections.* These types of problems are limited to particular units of organizations. Examples are provided in Table 8.2.

It is important, however, to understand the context in which actors operate when identifying the type and cause of poor performance. Walshe et al. suggest that in the private sector, some symptoms or causes of failure are "primarily internal to the organization, such as poor leadership," however, "others are primarily external and concerned with its environment, such as increased competition, product or service innovation or changes in consumer expectations."[23] Andrews et al. claim that the same is true of the public sector.[24] Shifting demographic trends, for example, place new pressures on health care systems. Poor organizational performance can therefore be partly determined by the *environment*, or organizational responses to the environment. The political, economic, and social context combines to create conditions under which it may be easier or more difficult for administrators and managers to achieve high performance.

[Insert table 8.2 about here]

The Context of the British Case Study

The British case illustrates the challenges facing electoral administrators in long-established democracies. British electoral law is defined by Parliament in Westminster and guidance is issued by the Cabinet Office. A UK-wide Electoral Commission has a statutory duty to evaluate elections, keep electoral practices under review, and provide advice and guidance. At the local level, Returning Officers (RO) and Electoral Registration Officers (ERO) have ultimate legal responsibility for implementing the poll and the compilation of the electoral register subject to these laws. They are local government employees but they are independent of government with respect to their electoral functions.

In Scotland, Joint Valuation Boards (JVBs) are responsible for compiling the electoral register. A Scottish Electoral Management Board was established in 2011 to coordinate the work of officials for Scottish local elections. Steering therefore takes place across a range of organizations, but rowing is undertaken by staff employed in local government (see Figure 8.1).

[Insert Figure 8.1 about here]

Systems of electoral management have often been categorized into those where the government runs elections, a body independent of government runs elections, or there is a mixed approach.[25] The UK was originally categorized by Wall et al. as a government model similar to the US, France, and Italy.[26] The growth of the de facto powers of the UK Electoral Commission has meant that the system has moved toward the mixed model, alongside states such as Argentina, Japan, the Netherlands, and Portugal.[27]

What has been the quality of organizational performance in Britain? There is evidence of some contemporary problems. Historical data is limited, but there are good grounds to think that there has been a recent decline in performance, long after the problems of nineteenth-century elections were thought to have been eradicated.

In terms of *output quantity and quality,* the results of the Electoral Commission's performance standards show significant variation in the range of activities undertaken by local authorities. Some are proactive at undertaking public awareness activities, for example, whereas others undertake little or none.

There is also evidence of significant variations in *cost per unit of service production*. For example, the cost of printing ballot papers varied in the 2012 referendum: they were 2.44 times higher in Northern Ireland than in London.[28] In terms of the key *service outcomes*, there has been a significant decline in formal effectiveness measured by voter turnout and registration levels. Figure 8.2 demonstrates how registration levels are estimated to have fallen dramatically, especially in the last decade. They are also lower amongst the young, those renting property, black and minority ethnic communities, and eligible non-UK citizens.[29] Voter turnout has also witnessed a general decline but it is generally lower amongst the young, less educated, and less affluent.[30] The average number of spoilt ballot papers per constituency and the number of rejected postal ballot papers remains low, but both have seen slight upward trends (see Figures 8.3 and 8.4). The case has been made that electoral fraud, which was thought to have been eradicated by the end of the nineteenth century, has returned to haunt British elections since 2000.[31] However, election petitions, which were very common in the nineteenth century, still remain very rare (see Figure 8.5). The cost effectiveness of temporary pilot schemes to increase turnout 2000-2007, however, were often evaluated as poor.[32] Early voting schemes in 2006, for example, were estimated to have cost between £3.00 and £115.00 per vote.[33]

In addition, there have been concerns about service *responsiveness*. Surveys undertaken between 2003 and 2012 found that anywhere from 75 to 85 percent of respondents were satisfied with

the process of registering to vote. Many dissatisfied citizens claimed that the registration process was too confusing or inconvenient.[34] Figure 8.6, reporting satisfaction with the voting process amongst respondents, demonstrates that satisfaction with the process of voting has also remained high, but the number of respondents that were "fairly unsatisfied" or "very unsatisfied" has grown since 2005. The proportion of people confident that elections were well run stood at less than two-thirds (61 percent) in 2012. Just over a third (36 percent) thought that electoral fraud was a problem and one in ten (9 percent) claimed that it was a very big problem.[35] Although there are no specific evaluations of staff satisfaction within electoral service departments, satisfaction levels amongst public sector workers in general are often reported as being behind those of private and third-sector employers.[36] Despite concerns about voter fraud, there have been few questions raised about the probity of electoral officials themselves. Problems regarding the lack of opportunity for redress were raised in 2010, after 1,200 citizens were thought to have been unable to cast their ballot and some miscounts occurred, such as in Birmingham in 2006.[37]

There are plenty of examples of *failures of steering in electoral management* that have contributed toward suboptimal performance. The Electoral Commission review found some election officials culpable for inadequate planning, risk management, and contingency planning in the 2010 general election, with the resulting problems affecting 1,200 citizens.[38] Poor planning and ballot paper design were blamed for the rejection of 140,000 ballot papers in the 2007 Scottish Parliamentary and Local government elections.[39] Problems were also experienced with the design of electronic counting machines, which had to be abandoned. It has been claimed that the considerable fraud that was found to have taken place in local elections in Birmingham in 2004 (amongst others) was a result of poorly designed postal voting procedures.[40] Other long-established procedures such as household registration have been criticized for not being robust enough to detect and deter electoral fraud, even by international observers.[41] For instance, many authorities have not undertaken door-to-door canvasses, even though they are under a statutory responsibility to do so.[42]

There are also plenty of examples of *failures of rowing in electoral management.* Miscounts have led to the wrong candidate being declared the winner in cases such as the local elections in Birmingham's Kingstanding ward in 2006, Waltham Forest in 2010, and Denbighshire County Council's Prestatyn North in 2011. In addition, ballot boxes were lost, resulting in delayed counts in the 2012 London mayoral elections.[43] There have been uneven rejection rates of postal vote applications around the country and variations in how far waivers were granted by authorities, suggesting inconsistent application of the rules.[44]

The New Context for Managing Elections in Britain

What is the nature of the environment in which elections are organized in Britain? What challenges do electoral administrators face in the implementation of elections today? Has electoral management become more difficult? Might this partially explain concerns about performance and cases of failures of steering and rowing? Concepts from historical institutionalism help us understand how a changing context can cause change in organizational performance. One key feature of historical institutionalism is the interest in the temporal development of political institutions. As contexts change over time, the effects of different institutions may alter.[45] The concept of institutional drift refers to how "rules remain formally the same but their impact changes as a result of shifts in external conditions."[46] The sources of change are not necessarily a result of active policy changes, but of exogenous dynamics. Institutional drift therefore occurs because "institutions require active maintenance; to remain what they are they need to be reset and refocused, or sometimes fundamentally recalibrated or renegotiated."[47]

This concept is useful because the institutions, policy instruments, and methods that electoral administrators employ to implement elections have not regularly changed. British election administration has its roots in the 1872 Municipal Elections Act, which established the secret ballot, and the 1918 Representation of the People Act, which set out the framework for the annual canvass and compilation of the electoral register. During what could be considered a *pre-modern period* (c.1832–1918) in Britain, electoral administrators faced particular challenges for which these initial voting technologies and systems of management might have been well suited. Elections were conducted with a limited franchise, the population was relatively stable, and the legal framework was simple. There was a relatively low take-up of mass media, but knowledge of electoral fraud was widespread, especially in elections such as the 1868 general election.[48] Elections were initially via a show of hands and no electoral registration was required prior to 1832. Parish officers, who oversaw the Poor Law, were given responsibility for compiling the register. The Secret Ballot Act led to paper ballots being introduced.

New challenges were, however, brought by the *modern period* (c.1918–1990). The dramatic extensions to the franchise in 1918, and 1928 meant that expanded administrative machinery was required to deal with the enormous growth in registrations and ballot papers cast. This posed logistical challenges, especially because World War I created significant population displacements and drained resources.[49] Electoral administrative functions were consolidated into local government, and the

significant growth in the size of the state and bureaucracy enabled local government to achieve high levels of organizational performance. High levels of registration were maintained, and the integrity of Britain's electoral machinery was rarely questioned.

More recently, a new *post-industrial, digital age* era (c.1990s–present) has emerged, characterized by demographic, technological, legal, economic, and political complexity and fluidity (Table 8.3). Significant changes in Britain pose new challenges for electoral administrators. In terms of demographic change, recent decades have seen more internal migration across Britain,[50] and an increasingly linguistically and culturally diverse population, because of rising immigration, especially from the EU.[51] Socioeconomic, cultural, and legal changes have also occurred. In addition, there may have been a rise in political apathy and "anti-politics," with the electorate less likely to vote.[52] Rising economic inequality and the "ghettoization" of parts of urban Britain pose problems for conducting the electoral canvass. A more complex legal framework has developed as a result of the layering of legislation.

There have also been major changes in the management of the British state. Resource and financial austerity have been core concerns since the "crisis of the state" in the 1970s, but also since the financial crisis of 2008. This, combined with the rising costs of elections, pose cost pressures and tough choices about which areas to maximize performance in. New public management reforms, introduced to many advanced capitalist democracies such as Britain, have led to the fragmentation of the state. The process of disaggregating public sector hierarchies has led to the state being "hollowed out," reduced the capacity of core actors to achieve policy outcomes, introduced new coordination problems, and caused complex delivery chains.[53] Meanwhile, constitutional devolution to Scotland and Wales has added further legal complexity to the rules for elections.

Technological change has opened up new opportunities and challenges for the state to provide public services. New ICT offers the prospect of increasing productivity gains by consolidating existing "labyrinths of discrete mainframe facilities and associated administrative units."[54] The provision of "one-stop shops" offers the opportunity to remove the duplication of government services.[55] However, it has also changed citizens' expectations about how governments use ICT, which can make it more difficult to register electors. The development of 24/7 news and social media reports means that any errors that electoral administrators make are discovered more quickly and loudly.

[Insert table 8.3 about here]

Methods and Evidence

How do electoral officials respond to these developments? This study draws from semi-structured interviews with those involved in implementing elections. In total, 74 interviews were undertaken with local election officials (LEOs): returning officers, electoral registration officers, democratic services managers and elections mangers. These interviews were spread across 41 organizations in England, Scotland, and Wales during 2011. Respondents were asked to explain the key challenges that they faced in the organization of elections. Interviews lasted about an hour and were semi-structured to allow the interviewees to 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.[56] 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" through an iterative movement between theory and data.[57] Interviews were transcribed and themes identified from the texts. The aim was to identify both semantic and latent meanings.

Interviewing local election officials holds much potential as a method for understanding the effects of different reforms to election administration because the academic literature from public administration suggests that "top-down" implementation of policies can often face implementation problems and unforeseen consequences.[58] Proponents of "bottom-up" policy making have therefore long suggested mining the knowledge of "street-level bureaucrats" when developing policies.[59] A disadvantage of the approach is that actors might overemphasize the problems that they face in order to make their performance look good. This can be overcome, however, by collaborating information with other sources when possible. Moreover, without "listening" to frontline perspectives, scholars and policy makers will not know *how* potential problems manifest themselves into the everyday experience of electoral administrations and elections on the frontline. Other methods, such as surveys and cross-national studies, can complement but not replace this.

Contemporary Implementation-Level Challenges

The interviews revealed 10 core challenges that staff face in implementing elections effectively.

1. Increased Apathy, Decreased Trust

Local election officials complain that increased citizen apathy causes them significant problems when compiling the electoral register. A core pool of citizens failed to be included on the register each year.

> There's a general apathy towards elections and politics . . . we'll never crack that final 5-10% of people who just have absolutely no desire to get onto the register.

Staff suggested that they needed to invest increasing resources on schemes such as performance pay for canvassers, employing former bailiffs, and extended local advertising to stop the register from falling further.

A minority of staff also claimed that citizens increasingly questioned the "anachronistic" security provisions that they had in place for voting. No electoral identification is required at either the polling or registration stage of the election. They claimed that this system was based on "trust" but that this no longer exists. There were changing expectations amongst citizens about the security procedures required when interacting with government services.

> [E]verybody needs to produce a PIN number or a signature for most things they do nowadays.

Achieving high levels of citizen satisfaction could therefore be more difficult.

2. Changing Urban Britain: Increased Crime and Problems with Urban Geography

The main source of names for the electoral register has traditionally been the annual canvass, but this has become more difficult to conduct. Public abuse of canvassers is rather common, leading to concerns about their safety and a difficulty in recruiting new ones.

> If a person of authority is seen to be part of an institution goes in there they're just drummed out. I mean they're just not accepted . . .

Councils would ask canvassers whether there were areas where they did not feel safe and would not go resulting in disproportionate attempts to register citizens across neighborhoods. Furthermore, the process also works both ways, with an increasing number of the public refusing to answer the door due to fear of unsolicited callers.

> And then you get little old ladies who are on their own who just won't answer the door after 6pm because there have been bogus callers.

Urban architecture does not facilitate an annual canvass, either, with properties such as high-rise flats being rather difficult to access.

> [W]here you've got HMOs, where three or four storey property is—there are bedsits there, there's shared communal facilities, and there are 8 to 16 doorbells that don't work on the door, or at the side of the door. How do you get somebody to the door? Legislation doesn't cater for that.

Throughout rural areas, in contrast, the population can be so sparse that conducting a complete door-knock canvass becomes very expensive.

3. Legal Complexity and Diversity

There has been a considerable increase in the legal complexity of elections in Britain as a result of a rise in the *frequency* of elections and *types* of elections since 1997. In addition to Westminster, local government, parish council, and European parliamentary elections, there are now elections for the Greater London Council, Scottish government, Welsh government, mayor and police, and crime commissioner and more frequent referenda. Many of the contests are run under a different electoral system. This has added to the complexity of election administration and makes administrative errors and poor organizational performance more likely. One officer recalled how it was in a combined election that their authority "made an administrative error" that led to a BNP candidate being elected instead of a Labour one, because of the double counting of ballots.

> Poll management is different . . . One year is very different from the next year. A few years ago . . . a combination of elections was the rarity. Now it's completely tipped up on its head.

Devolution has also created different regulatory frameworks for elections. One local election official reported that one year had conflicting deadlines for the closing dates of postal vote applications. Legal complexity also makes it more difficult to convey information to the electorate and for them to be understood.

Legal fragmentation is a further problem. Election law is spread across a variety of acts and amendment acts—over 35 primary pieces of legislation and over 100 pieces of secondary legislation.[60] This poses particular problems for "newcomers" who are not aware of older legislation.

> One of the things that we all find quite difficult is the convoluted legislation. Different pieces of legislation have different timetables . . . Some of the legislation is UK, some of it is Scottish Government. And it's all amendment Act, amendment Act, amendment Act . . . It's just not understandable to the vast majority of people and most of the administrators as well.

Legislative changes have also become more frequent, and they are commonly made very close to the run-up to an election, leaving uncertainty in the planning. The Gould inquiry into the problems in the 2007 Scottish elections found that late legislation was a key problem and recommended that no changes be made less than six months before an election. However, this advice was not always heeded.

> Legislators don't account for the time it takes software houses to change systems, test them, implement them with all the customers and let customers confidently run with it. So again you get the impression that the legislators or the political classes seem to think that computers just sort themselves at the press of a button.

The challenge of rising complexity is heightened, LEOs report, by an exodus of staff from the profession. Many long-standing members are retiring early because of public sector cuts or pressures of the job. New staff is not being brought through the system, they suggest, and authorities have faced problems recruiting experienced staff.

4. New Technology

The wider availability of new technology has led to rising expectations amongst citizens about electoral services. Many citizens think that electoral registration is not necessary because they use other government services and they expect their data to be shared. Some citizens therefore turn up at the polls without registering.

> You know I'm registered for Council Tax is a huge misconception. They think because they're registered and paying Council Tax they're registered for electoral registration.

Citizens' expectations about data-sharing also cause many to not register. Some refuse to be included, LEOs reported, because they fear that their information will be made public, or used for other purposes such as calculating benefit entitlements or preventing tax avoidance.

> So many of our canvassers come to us and say "I'm sure there's somebody else living there but she says she's there on her own."

Some staff are proactive at data-matching databases within their local authority. However, such databases are often imperfect for the purposes of compiling or checking the accuracy of a register, as, unlike in some other countries, there is no single national identity record in Britain.

New technology offers opportunities for increased productivity. However, LEOs report that this requires increased investment in new skills for staff. Errors can easily be made in the process of adapting to them.

5. Population Movements

Increased population movements have made keeping the electoral register up-to-date more challenging. Inner-city areas were difficult to keep track of because of "huge population churns."

> [E]very couple of months and we get thousands of new names. So there's this constant pressure throughout the year for the updating of the register (sic).

Immigration from non-English speaking countries poses new challenges for staff because some communities may not engage with the registration process or it may require significant investment in multilingual materials.

> We have got quite a large black minority ethnic community, big chunks of which are not necessarily culturally attuned to the life in the UK. Many of [them] don't speak English as their first language; those are all a whole host of barriers that you need to get across.

Some authorities have been proactive at tackling under-registration by employing canvassers who speak the native language. Bilingual printed resources can also be costly and complex for the citizen.

If you compare our [bi-lingual English & Welsh] forms to an English Authority, their forms are far more user-friendly (sic).

6. Resources and Financial Austerity

Staff commonly report that they are faced with high costs running elections and frequently experience difficulty obtaining sufficient money from the Council. This echoes comments from Electoral Commission officials (see Clarke, this volume). One authority explained that they commonly had to build up reserves in one election to pay for the next, and there would commonly be unexpected costs.

[T]he national elections are funded generally from central Government but you can't, you don't recover all the costs, there are a lot of costs that are borne by the Council . . . . And that determines obviously how much you want to invest.

Difficult choices often have to be made about what services could be provided to the public. Services that were non-statutory, such as public awareness schemes, are therefore often cut. Because of costs, some local authorities did not canvass all houses that did not return an electoral registration form, even though this was a legal requirement, and also a requirement to meet the Electoral Commission performance standards.[61] There are also many other everyday examples where staff weigh the value of additional registered citizens or votes.

Ultimately my goal is to get 100% registration. But I know that that is a bridge too far. But you should advertise more, you should be doing this. We're downsizing as a council. My resources, staff-wise, have gone down. So to maintain what we've got is a challenge.

The challenge of providing sufficient funding has heightened, staff suggest, because local government has to undertake budget cuts, yet simultaneously, election departments were required to undertake new work.

I think that the electoral administration is in a world of its own, really, as if the credit crunch hadn't occurred as if we didn't have to take 20% out of our budgets (sic).

Staff very commonly stress the tight timetables involved in the delivery of elections. The period from the deadlines for completing the electoral register and nomination of candidates to election day are particularly tight. If they are under-resourced during these times, then errors become likely. Staff are

consequently forced to work extremely long hours during the election period, which can result in burnout.

> [We made it] only by the skin of our teeth really, particularly with this year's election. We were working until 12 'o clock every night, we came in at weekends and you rely on the commitment of the staff, really, to see through that election because you've deadlines for everything.

Larger authorities are often more able to cope in the run-up to elections because of the additional capacity. Yet clearly, resource constraints and spiraling costs contribute to a situation in which names can be missed off registers, errors can appear on ballot papers, and polling stations can be underresourced.

7. Networked Governance

Staff often face increased problems coordinating the rising number of actors involved in the provision of electoral services. Some staff are often reliant on a small pool of private organizations such as printers, since councils do not have in-house facilities. The outsourcing of this work has not always been successfully completed by private contractors. In England and Wales, coordination is also commonly required among authorities because there are different tiers of local government in the election. In Scotland, the functions of electoral registration and the conduct of the poll are split between organizations. Parliamentary districts commonly cross council boundaries, which means that organizations have to coordinate registers. These relationships may sometimes break down.

> Constituencies [are] always going to be beyond the Council area, so then we would have a working relationship with a neighbouring Local Authority. And again we have good relationships, so it works. But there are dangers where if that was to break down, then you have issues.

Whereas staff were once reliant on information provided to them by the Home Office, information now comes from a range of organizations, including the (national and regional) Electoral Commission, SOLACE, Scottish Electoral Management Board, the police, and the Association of Electoral Administrators. Some staff also report common coordination problems within authorities, because the formally appointed returning officer is a high-level official who has little interest in running the election.

8. Rising Partisanship?

In some authorities, staff claim that election administration has been increasingly politicized, with local candidates making accusations of fraud against other candidates, or malpractice against administrators. Local politicians complain about polling station adjustments if they feel that their interests are adversely affected. In some areas, they suggest, electoral challenges were becoming increasingly common.[62]

> It's become more divisive politics; whereas before it may have been done more on an amenable level, there are now real party political divides, for which administrators will get caught in the middle.

These claims were isolated to particular areas and were built on previous antagonisms, but they could be widely reported in the national media. This is significant because Vonnahme and Miller find that the public, knowing little about the quality of election administration, take "cues" from politicians. [63] Partisan criticism can therefore lower citizens' satisfaction with electoral services, whatever the quality of service provided.

9. Changing Lifestyles; Changing Expectations

Staff report that they face changing public expectations about the services that they should provide. Employment patterns have changed dramatically in Britain, with a rise in service-sector and part-time employment. This has meant that some citizens find it increasingly hard to vote on election days.[64] Some UK pilots of innovative systems, such as text-message voting and Internet voting, were trialed in 2000-2007 but most were not adopted.[65] One LEO explained that citizens could reregister via telephone, SMS, or the Internet, if there were no changes to their status.

> However, when it comes to an election, they can't vote that way and . . . they don't understand why they can't in this day and age, where everything is electronic.

10. The Development of 24/7 and Social Media

Staff suggest that the development of the 24/7 news media and social media have placed additional pressures on electoral administrators by amplifying any mistakes. On the night of the 2010 general election, the news media focused on problems in polling stations, which were then circulated by social media. These problems were, perhaps, not new or uncommon in the past, but they could now be more readily reported and circulated by citizens. According to one official who had worked in elections for over 30 years:

> [G]oing back 15 or 20 years there were far worse things that happened at elections but they never, ever got into the public eye because the public gaze wasn't on that aspect of elections. But now it highlights that we have to be extremely careful about every single aspect of the operation of an election that we undertake.

Many LEOs suggest that in a "post-Florida" environment, the media and politicians were more aware of the news-worthiness of electoral failures:

> Our local newspaper is very on-the-ball and would pick up any issue that we've not dealt with.

> Local politicians will even pick on the smallest wee thing they can find to get themselves in the newspaper, promote themselves and stuff.

Maintaining high levels of citizen satisfaction with electoral services can therefore be more difficult, even if the quality of electoral services is high.

Conclusions

Research on the integrity of elections has often focused on how rival elites have sought to subvert the democratic process for strategic advantage. Yet poor organizational performance by electoral management bodies constitutes another variety of electoral malpractice.

The chapter has evaluated organizational performance in Britain, noting some recent causes for concern. Theories from implementation studies suggest that we need to understand the challenges that street-level bureaucrats face when implementing elections. Evidence from qualitative interviews with staff demonstrates that, historically and qualitatively, new challenges have emerged that help to explain recent concerns about electoral management. The interviews provide support for the emergence of a more challenging environment for managing and implementing elections in Britain. Lack of resources, as well as financial austerity and networked governance, have manifested in additional challenges for electoral administrators. The development of 24/7 news and social media, new technology, and changing lifestyles and expectations reflect the importance of technological changes. Population movements concern the effects of demographic changes as Britain has become a linguistically and culturally more diverse nation. Increased apathy and decreased trust, and changing urban Britain, demonstrate the role of socioeconomic and cultural developments. A more complex legal framework exists, and the practices and tactics of local candidates have evolved over time.
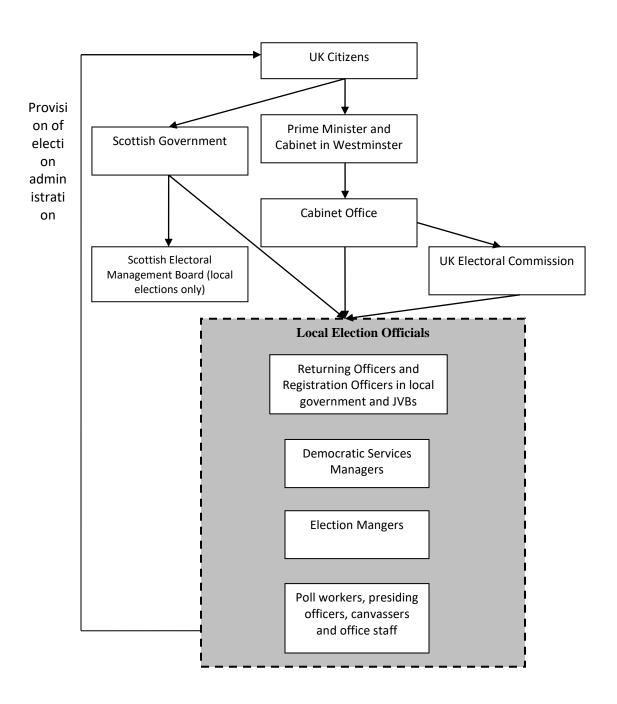
A shifting environment does not mean that declining organizational performance and failures of steering and rowing are inevitable, however. Electoral officials stress the difficulties that they face, but their changing environment also poses opportunities. A flexible and disaggregated state may encourage innovation. The availability of new technology can offer opportunities to increase efficiency through the use of "big data" and Web 2.0 tools. Social media can be harnessed for encouraging electoral registration and voter registration, and perhaps should also be celebrated because it might make electoral officials more accountable and responsive to errors. The environment in which officials run elections evolves over time, and this may influence organizational performance. Importantly, electoral management bodies need to adapt to the new challenges, otherwise institutional drift can occur.

Future research needs to establish whether these are challenges that are found elsewhere. Are these typical? If so, for what type of state? Democracies that have similar forms of electoral governance, according to the International IDEA classifications? Or are other variables more important? We might expect some problems relating to networks to be more present in those systems with the mixed model, because the greater variety of actors is more likely to contribute toward coordination problems. However, it seems that other variables might be more important, since most of the challenges are not necessarily related to electoral governance type. In the UK, problems of coordination were not just caused by the mixed model used. The complex institutional environment owed more to the institutional structure of local government, historically divergent institutional arrangements across the UK for electoral management, a dynamic for devolution since 1998, and the new public management reforms that encouraged the contracting out of services to the private sector. Other trends, such as demographic shifts, economic developments, technological transformations, a shifting political culture, and a fragmenting legal structure, are common to many established democracies. We might therefore expect many similar challenges to be confronting other post-industrial democracies as well. Further comparative research using mixed-methods is needed to test this argument in order to see whether the challenges are comparable or different.

Figure 8.1:

Key actors in the administration of UK elections

Provisi
on of
electi
on
admin
istrati
on

UK Citizens

Scottish Government

Prime Minister and
Cabinet in Westminster

Cabinet Office

Scottish Electoral
Management Board (local
elections only)

UK Electoral Commission

Local Election Officials

Returning Officers and
Registration Officers in local
government and JVBs

Democratic Services
Managers

Election Mangers

Poll workers, presiding
officers, canvassers
and office staff

Figure 8.2:

The estimated completeness of the electoral register in Great Britain, 1950–2010

Source: Based on estimates in Gemma Rosenblatt, Phil Thompson and Davide Tiberti. 2012. "The quality of the electoral registers in Great Britain and the future of electoral registration." *Parliamentary Affairs,* p. 4.
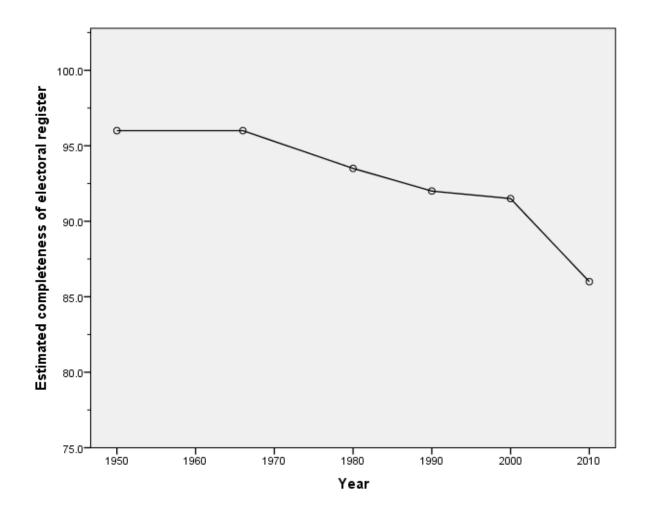
Figure 8.3:

Average number of spoilt ballot papers per constituency

Figure 8.4:

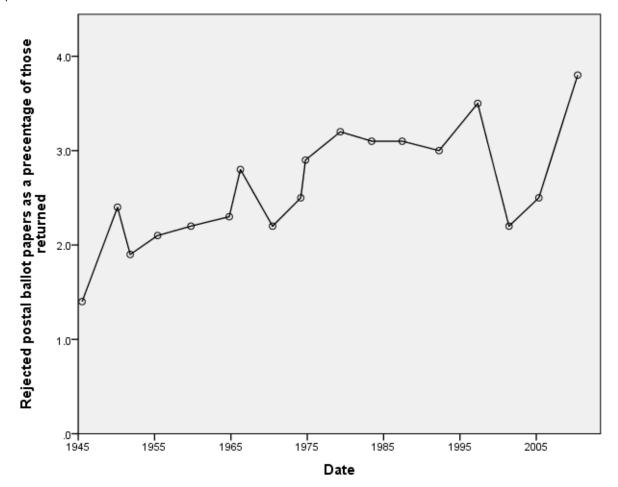Rejected postal ballot papers as a percentage of those returned, 1945–2010

Figure 8.5:

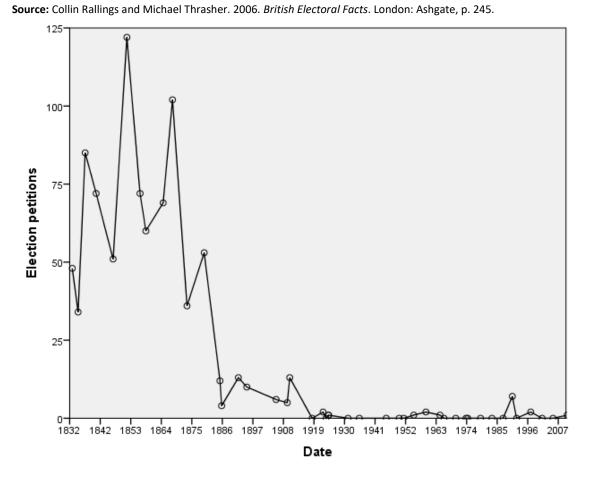Election petitions at British general elections, 1832–2010

Figure 8.6:

Public satisfaction with voting process

Note: Q. *"How satisfied or dissatisfied are you with the actual process of voting at elections in Great Britain/Northern Ireland?"*
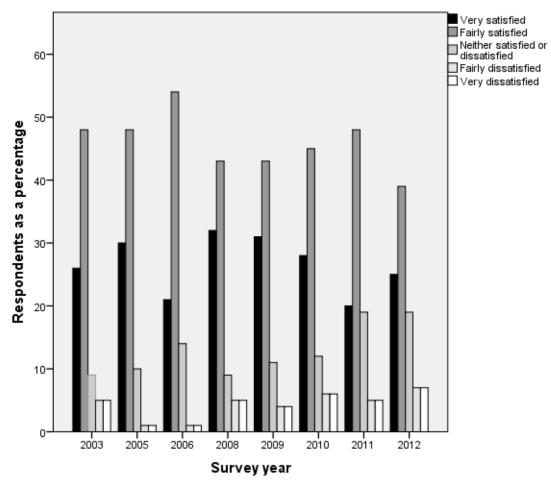
Source: TNS. 2013. p. 7

Table 8.1:

A Framework for Evaluating Electoral Management Board Performance

Dimension of performance		Example for EMBs
Outputs	Quantity	The number of invalid votes, doors knocked, registration enquiries processed, polling cards sent, advertisement, outreach activities organized.
	Quality	The speed of the count, the clarity of election materials, ballot paper design, the accessibility of registration procedures, polling line 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 positive and negative side-effects. For example, the effects the creation of databases for electoral registration which are useful for 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 lines

Table 8.2:

Types of Organizational Failure in Electoral Management

Failures of steering	Failures of rowing
Poor strategic leadership—e.g., response to external changes	Errors in implementing of centrally defined rules—e.g., mistabulating ballots
Poor learning from other organizations—e.g., other EMBs locally, nationally, or internationally	Failures to follow instructions, such as shaking bottles of indelible ink
Under resourcing—e.g., of polling stations	Failures to enforce penalties and fines to citizens and candidates in elections
Inadequate provision of guidelines to staff—e.g., guidance on when a voter's signature is "legitimate"	
Adoption of inappropriate managerial policy instruments—e.g., absence of use of performance information	
Adoption of inefficient procedures for outputs—e.g., canvassing citizens if this is not the most effective use of resources	
Poor planning and contingency mechanisms—e.g., problems on polling day	
Failure to test appropriate technologies—e.g., vote counting machines	
Inadequate staff training	
Failures to develop procedures to enforce penalties and fines to citizens and candidates	

Table 8.3:

Periods of Election Administration in Britain

	Pre-modern	Modern	Post-industrial
Time **Characteristics**	1832–1918 Limited	1918–1990s Mass franchise	2000–- Demographic, technological, legal, economic, and political complexity and fluidity.
Main methods	Self-administered	House-to-house enquiries Annual canvass	Moves toward: Online registration individual registration, electronic registration, data matching
Political participation and civic trust **Population dynamics** **Legal framework**	Limited franchise Stable Linear	Mass franchise-mass participation Stable Linear	Mass franchise depleted participation Fluid Complex Multilevel
Media	Low take-up	Mass media	24/7 Internet age Web 2.0
Technology **Expectations gap**	Paper Low resources required, low expectations	Mass record systems High resources, high expectations	ICT and database driven Potential for under-resourced, high expectations
Governance	Locally led	Centrally led split	Networked governance
Partisanship	High	Low	High

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