

FINAL REPORT

Batley & Spen – Westminster Parliamentary By-election
20th October 2016



Dr John Ault

28th November 2016



Westminster Parliamentary By-election – October 20th 2016

Report on Election Observation – Batley & Spen (Kirklees)

Objectives

1. To objectively observe the electoral process across the Batley and Spen parliamentary constituency (Westminster) on 20th October 2016.
2. To advise the local council (Kirklees) and national electoral bodies on the results of the observation for the improvement of electoral practice within the UK.
3. Support local councils and national election bodies with constructive feedback on areas of concern so that they may consider remedial action.

Methodology

A team of 3 observers, registered with the UK's Electoral Commission, made 26 separate observations in 26 different polling stations across the Batley and Spen Parliamentary constituency.

Each observation team was split into pairs to allow for objective observation and they then agreed their opinions of the electoral process before submitting data to the central team. The survey was conducted online so data was collected, and could be checked, live.

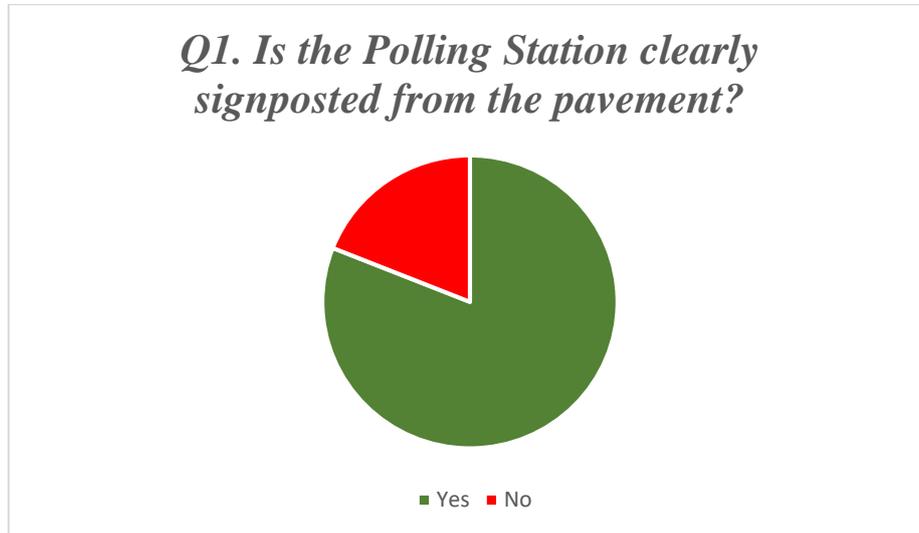
The observations generally took between fifteen and thirty minutes per polling station as the observers were asked to ensure that they attempted to see the entire process, which included staff greeting electors on arrival at the polling station.

Each team of observers was contacted throughout the day by the central team to ensure that observation was as uniform as possible.

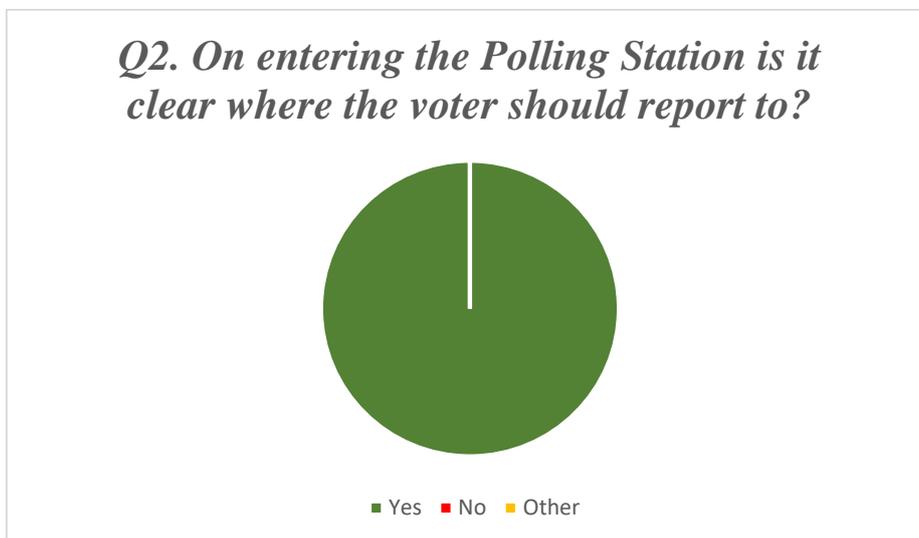
This means the observation attended all the polling stations across the constituency – in some cases more than once.

Results of the Observation

The observers answered the following questions in order as they progressed with each observation at each polling station:

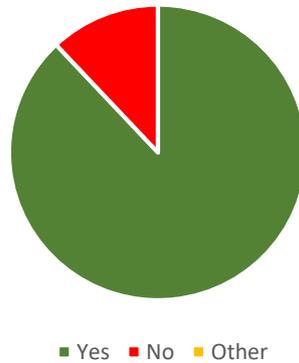


QUESTION 1: 19% of observations indicated that the polling station was not clearly identifiable from the main road, 81% identified that the polling station was highly visible. However, there were some issues over visibility that seemed to stem from lack of equipment to affix notices and also, due to weather conditions, many simply disappeared during the day.



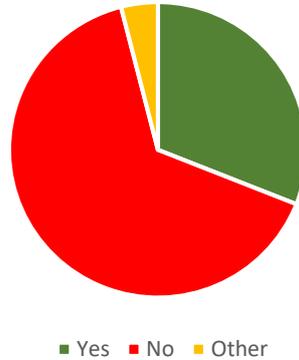
QUESTION 2: There were no problems with identifying where voters should report to when they arrived in the polling station.

Q3. Was it clear how disabled voters would access the Polling Station?



QUESTION 3: 88% of observations indicated that access to the polling station was clear, whilst 12% indicated that access was not. These problems focused on step-free access which was not always available. Some polling stations' disabled access polling booths were situated in such a way that made it difficult for disabled voters to access.

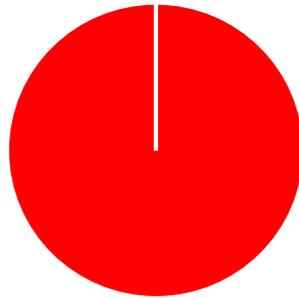
Q4. Did the polling staff ask to see your ID on arrival?



QUESTION 4: Although staff had clearly been informed that an observation team would be operating across the constituency, the formal procedure for identifying and then recording that observers had visited the polling station was not followed in the vast majority of cases.

65% of observers did not have their credentials checked on arrival at the polling station. 31% checked the ID of observers on arrival at the desk in the polling station. In one case the ID was eventually checked by the presiding officer following a clarification of the rules.

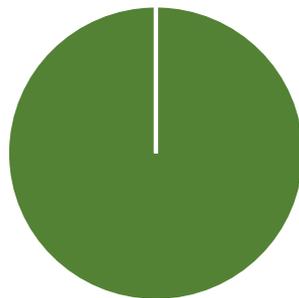
Q5. Did the staff record your ID number on a form?



■ Yes ■ No ■ Other

QUESTION 5: Similarly, we asked observers to note if the polling staff took a note of the ID that the observer was wearing. In each case this was an Electoral Commission badge which was numbered. No polling stations recorded the ID details of the observers.

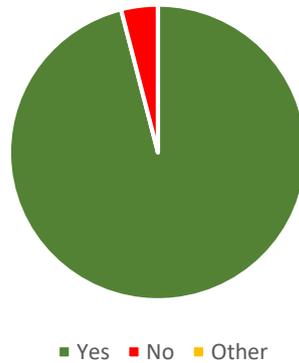
Q6. Are there two staff on duty in the polling station as you arrive?



■ Yes ■ No ■ Other

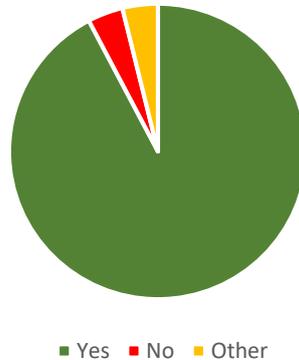
QUESTION 6: All polling stations had two members of polling staff on duty when observers arrived at the polling station.

Q7. Is the Ballot Box clearly sealed with cable ties?



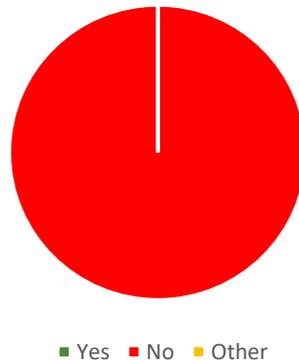
QUESTION 7: An important aspect of the electoral process is that the ballot should be secret and maintained as such allowing no one access to the ballot papers. The process for closing and sealing a ballot box, from the opening of the polls at 7am and closing at 10pm should be extremely clear but in one case this was not the case – a ballot box was simply unsealed and accessible.

Q8. Is each polling booth equipped with an explanatory poster and a pen/pencil?



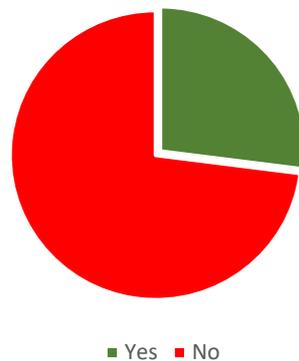
QUESTION 8: Generally, polling booths were properly equipped with the requisite posters and pencils required. However, on one occasion, late on polling day some of these had gone missing and had not been replaced.

Q9. Are there any political leaflets in sight within the Polling Station?



QUESTION 9: This question was asked primarily to illicit whether improper political activity was taking place within the polling station.¹ On no occasions did observers identify literature within the polling station that could arguably have been biased towards one candidate.

Q10. Was there evidence of 'family voting' in the polling station?

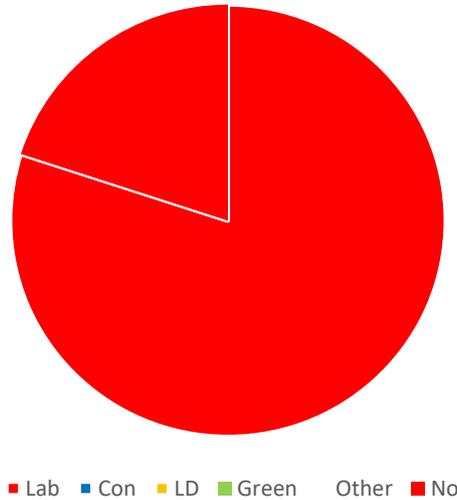


QUESTION 10: In 27% of cases, our observer team identified so-called 'family voting'. OSCE/ODIHR, which monitors elections within the UK, describes 'family voting' as an 'unacceptable practice'.² It occurs where husband and wife voting together is normalised and women, especially, are unable to choose for themselves who they wish to cast their votes for and/or this is actually done by another individual entirely. On one occasion this involved a father dragooning his daughter to support his party in the polling station. In all cases there was little attempt to hide this practice but in the vast majority of occasions polling staff interceded to prevent it. This activity was evident across ethnic communities but 27% equals the largest percentage in family voting the observer group has seen when observing an election in the UK.

¹ This question did not just relate to literature specific to this election but observers were also asked to identify if other literature, such as MP or councillors' surgeries were on public display – advertising the names of candidates and/or parties.

² <http://www.osce.org/>

Q11. Parties are allowed to take numbers from voters as they LEAVE the polling station. Which parties are present?



QUESTION 11: We saw no evidence of telling outside polling stations in this election.

OTHER COMMENTS: Possibly because of the context of this by-election and the lack of major parties, with the exception of the Labour Party, contesting the seat, polling day was extremely quiet and party activity appeared to be at a minimum.

This seemed to contribute to a low level of engagement with the electoral process.

FINAL CONCLUSIONS

This was a well-run election by officials. The weather did not help the maintenance of signage at times but overall the conduct of the election was of a very high standard by Kirklees Council.

However, the large number of observations of so-called ‘family voting’, which is considered an ‘unacceptable practice’ in elections should be considered a matter of statistical significance as this constitutes 1 in 4 polling stations across the constituency. Of course, the council is not to blame for a lack of knowledge of some voters on the conduct of a secret ballot, and when identified polling staff quickly intervened to prevent any collusion or intimidation.