

FINAL REPORT

Witney – Westminster Parliamentary By-election 20th
October 2016



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30th November 2016



Westminster Parliamentary By-election – October 20th 2016

Report on Election Observation – Witney (Oxfordshire)

Objectives

1. To objectively observe the electoral process across the Witney parliamentary constituency (Westminster) on 20th October 2016.
2. To advise the local council (West Oxfordshire) 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 32 separate observations in 32 different polling stations across the Witney 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.

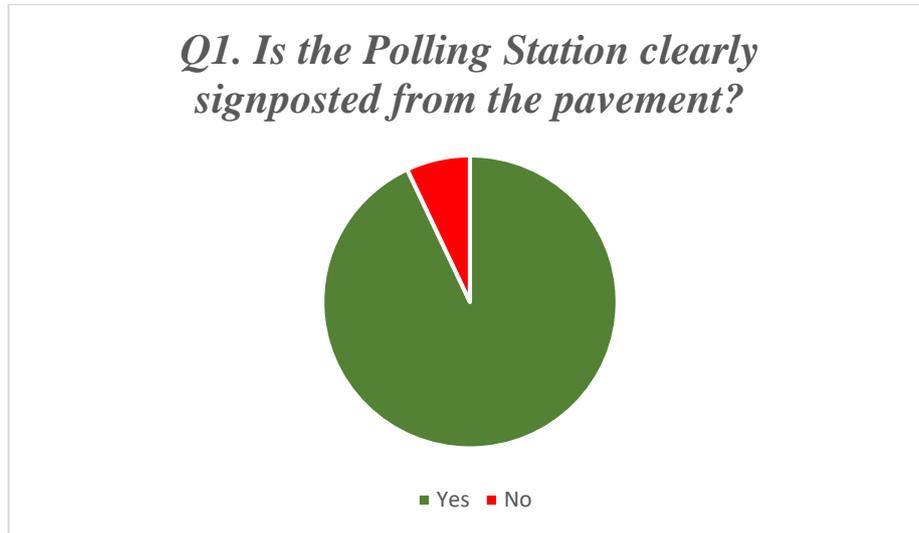
The observations generally took between fifteen and thirty minutes per polling station as the observers were asked to ensure that they attempted to see the entire process, which included staff greeting electors on arrival at the polling station.

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

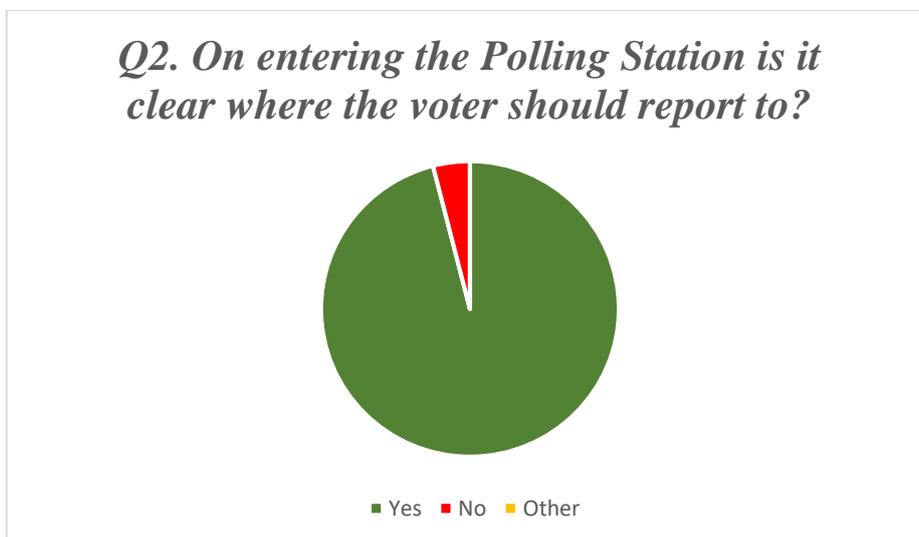
This means the observation attended all the polling stations across the constituency – in some cases more than once.

Results of the Observation

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

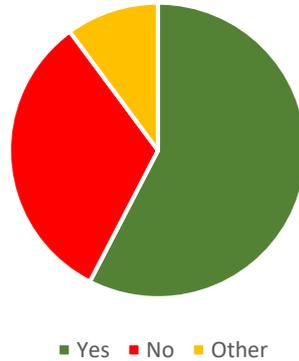


QUESTION 1: 7% of observations indicated that the polling station was not clearly identifiable from the main road, 93% identified that the polling station was highly visible.



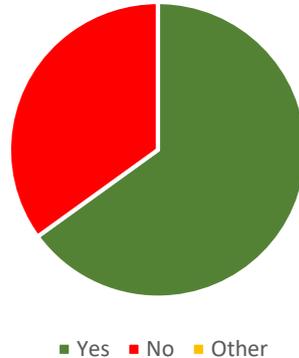
QUESTION 2: Observers identified only one occasion when there were problems with identifying where voters should report to when they arrived in the polling station.

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



QUESTION 3: Only 57% of observations indicated that access to the polling station was clear, whilst 32% indicated that access was not. Another 10% suggested that some aspects of the polling station (such as the designated polling booth for wheelchair users) was inadequate. These problems focused on step-free access which was not always available.

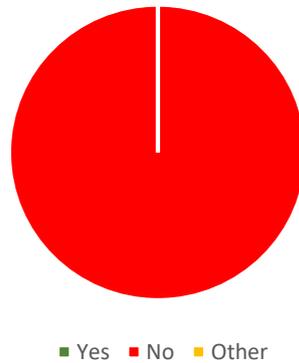
Q4. Did the polling staff ask to see your ID on arrival?



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.

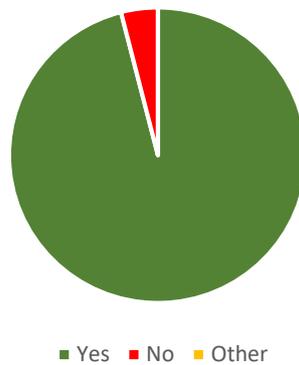
65% of observers had their credentials checked on arrival at the polling station. However, 35% did not check the ID of observers on arrival at the desk in the polling station.

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



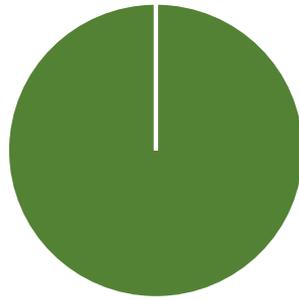
QUESTION 5: Similarly, we asked observers to note if the polling staff took a note of the ID that the observer was wearing. In each case this was an Electoral Commission badge which was numbered. No polling stations recorded the ID details of the observers.

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



QUESTION 6: All but one polling station had two members of polling staff on duty when observers arrived at the polling station. On the other occasion the other member of staff returned within a couple of minutes of the arrival of the observers.

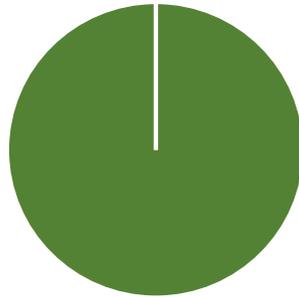
Q7. Is the Ballot Box clearly sealed with cable ties?



■ Yes ■ No ■ Other

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. All the ballot boxes observed were correctly sealed.

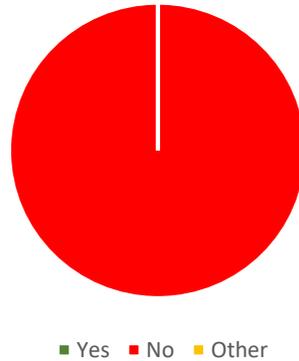
Q8. Is each polling booth equipped with an explanatory poster and a pen/pencil?



■ Yes ■ No ■ Other

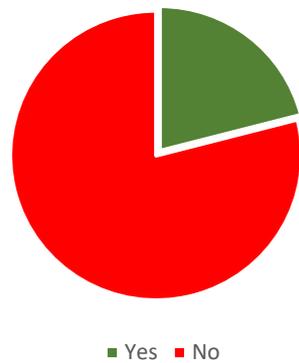
QUESTION 8: All polling booths were properly equipped with the requisite pencil and poster.

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?

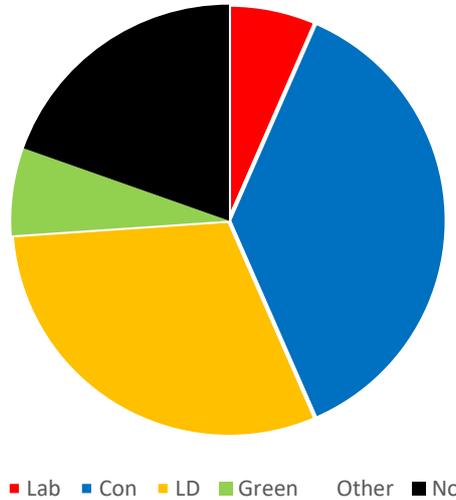


QUESTION 10: In 21% of cases, our observer team identified so-called 'family voting'. OSCE/ODIHR, which monitors elections within the UK, describes 'family voting' as an 'unacceptable practice'.² It occurs where husband and wife voting together is normalised and women, especially, are unable to choose for themselves who they wish to cast their votes for and/or this is actually done by another individual entirely. In all cases there was little attempt to hide this practice.

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/>

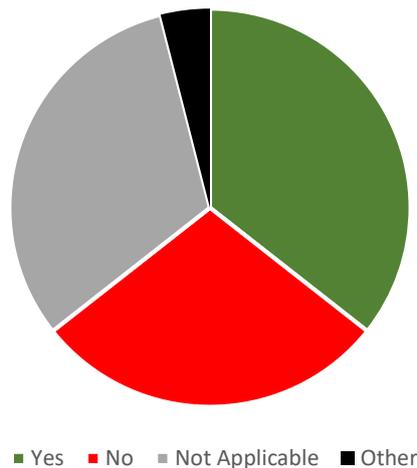
Q11. Parties are allowed to take numbers from voters as they LEAVE the polling station. Which parties are present?



QUESTION 11: We saw a great deal of evidence of telling outside polling stations in this election. More than any previous election we have observed, in the UK, in 2016.

We ask for this information for the next question.

Q12. Are the Party Tellers allowing the voter to access the Polling Station unmolested?



QUESTION 12: As can be seen from figure 12 only 36% of those tellers observed conformed to the Electoral Commission recommendation that only when voters have voted should they be

asked for their polling number. 29% actively did not wait until after the voter had cast their vote and 36% were categorised, by the observer group, as Other or not applicable.³

This election, being highly contested, has shown the highest level of interference to voters gaining access to the polling station without being impeded by party tellers that we have observed in 2016.

Many tellers were taking numbers for their respective parties but in many cases they were doing this as voters entered the polling station. In some cases, they also had leaflets to hand but we did not see any distribution of leaflets taking place outside polling stations.

OTHER COMMENTS: The high profile nature and highly contested nature of this election meant that we observed high levels of party political activity in this constituency.

This led to some debate with the electorate over the engagement of tellers and their role in the electoral process.

FINAL CONCLUSIONS

This was an extremely well-run election by officials. The only significant criticism, though this is not the fault of the council in such a large rural constituency, is the nature of access to some polling stations that would be restricted due to the limitations on step-free and wheelchair access.

However, as with other observations, 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 5 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.

Finally, with this election being so active with party tellers in attendance at the polls there was considerable debate with voters accessing and egressing the polling stations in some cases. Limiting access by asking the voter for their polling number before accessing the station is not recommended by the Electoral Commission but has remained custom and practice in many areas.

³ Not applicable in this instance means there were no tellers in attendance at observed polling stations.