

DEMOCRACY VOLUNTEERS

United Kingdom
General Election 2024



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the election observers

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NON OBSERVER

Our mission is to improve the quality of democratic elections, by advising those who legislate for, administer and oversee elections, to enhance them for the benefit of voters.

We aim to do this by attending elections and empirically reporting our findings in an accessible way through statistical analysis and interlocutor meetings to support this objective. We do this through a strong methodology, based on the international standards for election observation as set out by OSCE/ODIHR and others.

We maintain strict impartiality and require our observers to abide by international standards, as well as the relevant local legal framework, when acting as our observers.

We aim to report on our observations in a constructive and encouraging way to benefit the delivery of democracy and to benefit the electorate as a whole.



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UK Westminster Parliamentary General Election

4th July 2024

About Democracy Volunteers

Democracy Volunteers is a non-partisan, domestic election observation organisation committed to improving the security and accessibility of elections in the UK and abroad. Our mission is to improve the quality of democratic elections by advising those who legislate for, administer, and oversee elections to enhance them for the benefit of voters.

We aim to do this by attending elections, empirically reporting our findings in an accessible way through statistical analysis and the undertaking of interlocutor meetings to support this objective. We do this through a strong methodology, based on the international standards for election observation as set out by OSCE/ODIHR¹ and others. We are a member of the Global Network of Domestic Election Monitors (GNDEM) and abide by GNDEM's Declaration of Global Principles for Non-partisan Election Observation and Monitoring by Citizen Organisations and the accompanying Code of Conduct². Our observers sign this code of conduct and Democracy Volunteers also signs the Code of Conduct required by the UK's Electoral Commission to observe elections.

We maintain strict impartiality and require our observers to abide by UK and international standards, as well as the relevant local legal framework, when acting as our observers. All our observers, who observe in the UK, are officially accredited with the UK's Electoral Commission and undergo a thorough interview and training process to ensure they are able to accurately and impartially record and report data from polling stations and counting venues. None of our observers are members of political parties and they are not politically active.

We aim to report on our observations in a constructive and encouraging way to benefit the delivery of democracy and the electorate. Since we were formed in 2016, we have observed dozens of elections across the UK and internationally, including general elections, referenda, by-elections, council elections and devolved parliamentary/assembly elections.

Our reports have been used as the basis for trials of various methodologies and equipment at various elections. Our data is regularly cited in the Houses of Parliament and used in debates nationally, as well as informing local council training for election officials and the public on the conduct of electoral events. Lord Robert Hayward recently said that the data that Democracy Volunteers collects 'has been painstakingly researched over a number of years [and] has proved the case to parliament that it needed to legislate,' in reference to his Ballot Secrecy Act 2023, intended to deal with so-called 'family voting'.

¹ OSCE (2003) *Handbook for Domestic Election Observers*

² GNDEM (2022) *Declaration of Global Principles for Non-partisan Election Observation & Monitoring by Citizen Organisations* Available at: <https://gndem.org/declaration-of-global-principles/>

Funding

Democracy Volunteers observers were deployed for the observations during the UK General Election with the support of an ongoing grant from the Joseph Rowntree Reform Trust Ltd., as well as small grant of £10,000 specifically for the 2024 UK general election. This funding covered travel expenses, some accommodation, and subsistence for our volunteer observers, as well as supporting the use of online and in-person event organisation.

Credits

We would like to thank the elections staff who welcomed our observers and held meetings with our team. We also thank the UK's Electoral Commission for their assistance in accrediting our observers. In addition, we would like to thank those staff and officers of councils for making our teams welcome. A full list of these interlocutors can be found at the end of the report.

Observation Core Team



Dr John Ault FRSA FRGS (United Kingdom) was the Head of Mission for the 2024 UK General Election Observation Mission and is the Executive Director of Democracy Volunteers.

John has worked in elections throughout the UK, Europe, and the United States since the 1980s. He has observed on behalf of the OSCE/ODIHR and the UK Parliament's Commonwealth Parliamentary Association in parliamentary elections as wide-ranging as Kazakhstan and the Isle of Man. He is a former chair of the UK's Electoral Reform Society and has previously been elected to local government and the UK's South-West Regional Assembly.

John has observed numerous elections for Democracy Volunteers, including Swedish and Norwegian parliamentary elections, the UK general elections in 2017, 2019 and now 2024, the Finnish presidential and parliamentary elections in 2018, 2019 and 2023, as well as Dutch elections in 2017, 2018, 2019, 2022 and 2023.

He has been an academic consultant on electoral and parliamentary reform in Moldova. He is an Honorary Research Fellow at the University of Exeter and has previously lectured at several UK universities. He has also been a Research Fellow for the Constitution Society, writing the recent article 'An accident waiting to happen? Voter ID in the 2023 English local elections.' He specialises in elections and campaigns and has published several books, including his doctoral thesis, on electoral campaigning³.

³ <https://consoc.org.uk/publications/john-ault-report/>



Harry Busz FRSA (United Kingdom) is Democracy Volunteers' Deputy Director. He was Deputy Head of Mission for 2024 UK General Election.

Harry is a graduate in Human Geography at Cardiff University and holds an MA in International Relations from Exeter University and is currently researching for his PhD in Politics at Newcastle University. His research focuses on electoral integrity and the role of international, regional, and domestic observer groups in improving electoral practices across the OSCE region.

He has participated in multiple domestic and international observations such as the 2019 local elections in Northern Ireland, the provincial and Water Board elections in The Netherlands, national elections in Austria, as well as being the election coordinator for the 2020 USA midterm elections and 2019 UK general election, Ireland's 2020 general election, Denmark's 2021 kommune & regional elections, The Netherlands 2022 and 2023 municipal elections, the Swedish 2022 parliamentary elections, and Finland's 2023 parliamentary elections.



Lesley Abdela MBE (United Kingdom) led the Democracy Volunteers research into the intimidation and threats towards candidates as part of this year's assessment of the UK general election. She has worked on women's political empowerment and participation in elections in over 50 countries in the Balkans, Middle East and North Africa, Central and Eastern Europe, and Asia. As a journalist, Lesley's articles have been published in: The Guardian, The Independent, The Times, The Economist, the Royal Institute of Foreign Affairs (Chatham House) journal, The World Today and The Washington Post.

She was Political Editor of Cosmopolitan Magazine.

She won the '1996 Woman of Europe Award' for work as CEO of EU funded NGO Project Parity, working on women's participation in democratic elections in the transition period in East and Central Europe. In the UK she founded and ran the all-party 300 GROUP campaign to get more women elected.

Lesley is also Senior Partner in Shevolution Consultancy; Associate Consultant, Nordic Consulting Group Sweden – Member of the SIDA Gender Experts Help Desk providing guidance to Swedish Embassies globally to ensure gender equality is integrated into development cooperation projects. One main theme is strengthening women's participation in politics.



Elizabeth Blunt MBE (United Kingdom) was media expert for the UK general election and is a journalist and broadcaster. She joined the BBC in 1968 as a studio technician, and retired in 2009, having been one of the Corporation's first female Foreign Correspondents, and was awarded the MBE for her coverage of the conflict in Liberia.

She reported on numerous elections during her time in West Africa, and after she retired, she turned election observer. She took part in several European Union observer missions in various parts of Africa and was the media expert in the Commonwealth Observer Group in Nigeria in 2015. She has

observed with Democracy Volunteers in the UK as well as in Finland and the USA, observing on election day and contributing to the media analysis in the organisation's final reports.



Nathanael Cullis (United Kingdom) worked Head of Operations for the deployment in 2024, recruiting and organising our team of observers.

He is a graduate in Politics and International Relations from Exeter University and has spent five years working as a current affairs researcher in the charity sector. He has been observing elections for eight years and has been a part of in numerous domestic and international missions. This includes multiple observations across Scandinavia, several in Ireland and more

than 20 elections, referendums, and by-elections in the UK itself. On several of these missions, including the recent local elections in England, he has worked as part of the core team, helping to manage all the volunteer observers that Democracy Volunteers deployed.



Max Wheeler (United Kingdom) is a founding member of Democracy Volunteers and the Head of Training. He helped develop the new training programme for 2023/2024 to reflect the anticipated changes in the voting process at polling stations.

Max observed his first election as an accredited UK Observer during the Welsh Senedd by-election in Anglesey (Ynys Môn) in 2013, while completing his BSc in History and Global Politics. Shortly after finishing his MRes in Economic and Social History, Max took part in the first observation of Democracy Volunteers during the 2016 Welsh Senedd Election. Since then, Max has

observed elections every year in the UK with Democracy Volunteers, but also in Ireland, Sweden, The Netherlands and Finland. Max is in instructional designer for clinical systems training in the NHS.



Reuben Hellier (United Kingdom) worked as a Research Assistant for the General Election deployment in 2024, recruiting and organising the team of observers in advance of the deployment.

He has just completed his Bachelor's degree in Computer Science and Mathematics, at the University of Manchester. His research has recently been published in a symposium and surrounded smartphone pupillometry, with a specific focus on its uses as a diagnostic for aphasia.

He observed for the first time at the Mayoral, Local and Police and Crime Commissioner Elections in May 2024, joining the Democracy Volunteers Core team shortly after. He helped recruit observers and organise events around London in the run-up to the general election and helped direct teams during the day to ensure the best possible coverage of the UK.



Adilah McCarthy-Knowles (Republic of Ireland/United Kingdom) was a Research Assistant for the General Election and has a background in understanding human behaviour and organisational dynamics. She graduated with a degree in Psychology from Durham University, where she developed her research and critical thinking skills. As part of the core team for the UK General Election she acted a research assistant assessing aspects of the media and threats to candidates.

Adilah is currently studying for a Master's degree in Organisational Psychiatry and Psychology at King's College London and is completing a dissertation focusing on the causes and consequences of cyberbullying in professional settings, showing the importance of acknowledging contemporary adaptations of workplace challenges.

International Experts and Parliamentarians



Kim Kippen (Canada) is an electoral operations specialist with over twenty-five years' experience in domestic election administration and on international election observation missions. Her domestic election experience includes a wide variety of operational roles with federal and provincial election management bodies, both at headquarters and in the field. She has held positions as a Returning Officer, Regional Liaison Officer and Field Liaison Officer.

Kim has been an election administration expert with Democracy Volunteers for the Finnish Parliamentary elections in 2019, the UK Westminster General Election in the same year, and the Swedish Parliamentary elections in September 2022.



Dr David Levine (United States of America) is experienced in the field of electoral integrity and security with a particular interest in the challenges of fair democracies. David's passion for electoral integrity arose while attending the Case Western School of Law where he received his J.D. causing him to begin a career in this area. His work has been featured in notable publications such as The Hill, the BBC, USA Today, Business Insider and many more. He is an election integrity and management consultant who works to ensure that eligible voters can vote, free and fair elections are

perceived as legitimate, and election processes are properly administered and secured. Additionally, he is an adjunct professor at George Mason University, an advisory committee member for the Global Cyber Alliance's Cyber Security Toolkit for Elections, a contributor to the Fulcrum, an advisory council member for The Election Reformers Network, and a member of the Election Verification Network. Previously, he served as a senior fellow at the German Marshall Fund's Alliance for Securing Democracy, where he focused on assessing the vulnerabilities present in electoral infrastructure and policies. And prior to that, he worked as the Ada County, Idaho Elections Director.



Rick Stream (United States of America) is the Republican director of elections in St Louis County, Missouri, in the USA. From 2007 to 2015 Stream served as a state representative in the Missouri House of Representatives District 90. In legislative sessions from 2009 to 2014. Stream served on various committees including being chair of the budget committee and sitting on the joint committee on capital improvements and lease oversight, joint committee on legislative research, and various other Missouri committee assignments.

From 1971 to 1975, Stream served in the United States Navy. Since then, he has worked in the Army Aviation and Logistics Command and worked in the US Department of Defense.



Robert Ward (Jersey) is member of the States Assembly of Jersey and was elected as Deputy in St Helier, taking office on the 1st of June 2018. He has subsequently been re-elected as Deputy of St Helier Central, assuming office on June 27th, 2022.

He holds multiple roles within Jersey's political sphere. He currently serves as Minister for Educational and Lifelong Learning, and Assistant Minister for Children and Families. Ward also holds the role of Chair of the Commonwealth Parliamentary Association (Jersey Branch) Executive Committee, facilitating international parliamentary relations and election observation. Furthermore, he is an active member of Reform Jersey, engaging in discussions and initiatives for policy reform within the community.

Objectives of the Election Observation

1. Observe the election process across the Westminster General Election, including the nationwide introduction of the requirement to show ID for the first time at a General Election.
2. Advise election officials, legislators, and the UK's Electoral Commission on the results of the observation for the improvement of electoral practice, based on the evidence we collect and the recommendations we make.
3. Support these election bodies with constructive feedback on areas of concern so that they may consider remedial action.

Overview

Democracy Volunteers observed the electoral process in 204 Westminster parliamentary constituencies across the UK. The organisation deployed two or more observers to each constituency⁴. In total, the number of observers, experts and support staff was over 200 at this election.

These observers generally formed teams of two, sometimes three, and attended 1,173 polling stations, across these constituencies. A full list of these constituencies can be seen on page 9.

Democracy Volunteers' observers spent between 30 and 45 minutes at each polling venue observing the voting process and then completed an online survey, regarding the integrity of the electoral process, for each polling station.

The team of observers observed a total of 20,289 voters, in the process of those observations.

As well as our normal observations in polling stations we also assessed other aspects of the voting process, including the process of voter registration, the challenges of postal voting, and the media and social media landscape in the UK, as well as assessing some of the impacts of personal and political social media, verbal and physical attacks on candidates during the election campaign.

⁴ There are 1968 accredited observers with the UK's Electoral Commission, of which 480 are accredited through Democracy Volunteers, namely 24.4% Excluding duplicate entries. 976 are accredited as 'Individuals' and 990 through 'Organisations', meaning 49% of organisational observers are accredited through Democracy Volunteers.

Central, Reading West and Mid
Reigate, Rhondda and Ogmore,
Park, Rochdale, Romford, Ruislip
and Pinner, Runcorn and Helsby
and Weybridge, Sefton Central,
Slough, Solihull West and Shirle
Antrim, South Down, South Nor
West Hertfordshire, South North
Southport, Spelthorne, St Alban
North, St Ives, Stirling and Strath
Strangford, Stratford and Bow, S
Croydon North, Sunderland Cen
Heath, Sutton and Cheam, Swin
Swindon South, Tatton, Tooting
Tottenham, Truro and Falmouth
Upper Bann, Uxbridge and Sout
of Glamorgan, Vauxhall and Can
Walthamstow, Warrington North
South, Washington and Gateshe
Watford, Welwyn Hatfield, West
and Kincardine, West Dorset, W
Dunbartonshire, West Ham and
Tyrone, Wimbledon, Windsor, W
Wokingham, Worsley and Eccles
Yeovil and Ynys Mon.

Newport East, Newport West and Islwyn, Newry and Armagh, North Bedfordshire, North Down, North Durham, North Somerset, Northampton South, Norwich North, Norwich South, Oldham East and Saddleworth, Oldham West, Chadderton and Royton, Oxford West and Abingdon, Peckham, Perth and Kinross-shire, Pontypridd, Poplar and Limehouse, Putney, Queen's Park and Maida Vale, Reading Central, Reading West and Mid Berkshire, Reigate, Rhondda and Ogmore, Richmond Park, Rochdale, Romford, Ruislip, Northwood and Pinner, Runcorn and Helsby, Runnymede and Weybridge, Sefton Central, Shipley, Slough, Solihull West and Shirley, South Antrim, South Down, South Norfolk, South West Hertfordshire, South Northamptonshire, Southport, Spelthorne, St Albans, St Helens North, St Ives, Stirling and Strathallan, Strangford, Stratford and Bow, Streatham and Croydon North, Sunderland Central, Surrey Heath, Sutton and Cheam, Swindon North, Swindon South, Tatton, Tooting, Torfaen, Tottenham, Truro and Falmouth, Twickenham, Upper Bann, Uxbridge and South Ruislip, Vale of Glamorgan, Vauxhall and Camberwell Green, Walthamstow, Warrington North, Warrington South, Washington and Gateshead South, Watford, Welwyn Hatfield, West Aberdeenshire and Kincardine, West Dorset, West Dunbartonshire, West Ham and Beckton, West Tyrone, Wimbledon, Windsor, Woking, Wokingham, Worsley and Eccles, Wycombe, Yeovil and Ynys Mon.

Methodology

Democracy Volunteers observations follow internationally accepted practices and standards for election observation across the OCSE region^{5,6}, considering issues before and after polling day, in addition to our findings in polling stations and count venues.

Prior to polling day, all observers had been fully trained on how to act as a Short-Term Observer at these elections. This training included an online training course produced by our Head of Operations and Head of Training and included several lessons on the different types of data they would need to collect, how to act impartially, the purpose of observation, and many more topics⁷. Each observer who did not have extensive experience with observing UK elections with Democracy Volunteers then attended a training seminar with our Head of Training, Max Wheeler, where he fielded any questions that observers had about the course, presented walkthroughs of how to observe inside polling stations, and explained how to work logistically on polling day.

Each observation was conducted with at least two observers to allow for objective observation and the observers agreed on their opinions of the electoral process before submitting data to the central team. This is generally called the four eyes method and is the internationally accepted standard for election observation. All the data recorded was therefore verified by two individuals. In total, our observer teams observed 1,173 polling stations across 204 parliamentary constituencies across all four nations of the United Kingdom. Each team spent around 30-45 minutes in each polling station to observe the whole process of voting inside polling stations.

Observers did not interfere with the operation of polling stations or impede any voters or staff from fulfilling their jobs throughout the day. Following observations, an online survey was used to report findings back to the core team. These surveys were filled in collaboratively outside the polling station to ensure both observers agreed on the observations made.

Finally, our observers were invited to attend events following polling day to discuss the observations they had made and their overall impressions of the conduct of the election. At these meetings our observers were encouraged to share any issues they had observed, whilst referring to their notes from the day. These meetings allowed the team to discuss several issues that could not always be fully outlined in the online survey on polling day.

Elections staff working on these elections will be sent a copy of our report, and Democracy Volunteers will offer to conduct follow up meetings, if requested, to discuss individual challenges to help improve the electoral process.

⁵ OSCE (2003) Handbook for Domestic Election Observers

⁶ GNDEM (2022) Declaration of Global Principles for Non-partisan Election Observation & Monitoring by Citizen Organisations Available at: <https://gndem.org/declaration-of-global-principles/>

⁷ For those observers who attended counting, an additional online course was given.

Short-Term Observer Training Methodology

At Democracy Volunteers, we recognise the importance of a thorough and consistent training process for our Short-Term Observers (STOs) to ensure the accuracy and high standards of our election reports. Our comprehensive training process equips hundreds of volunteers with the necessary skills and knowledge to gather reliable data while fostering a uniform data gathering methodology. Following online interview and subsequent recruitment, the training process consists of three key stages:

- E-Learning: STOs undertake a modular 4-hour e-learning course that includes regular testing to reinforce their understanding of core concepts and practicalities. The e-learning components remain accessible on-demand after completion, allowing STOs to revisit the material as needed⁸.
- Training Seminar: Following the e-learning programme, STOs attend a 1-hour interactive seminar. Here, they participate in a mock observation exercise, working as a team to analyse videos of a simulated polling station. This hands-on experience helps them develop practical skills, while the seminar format allows for any questions or concerns to be addressed.
- Pre-Deployment Briefing: Before being deployed, STOs attend either an in-person or online briefing where the final details of their observation mission are reviewed. This includes a comprehensive walkthrough of the survey format and a question-by-question analysis to ensure a clear understanding of the data gathering process.

By implementing this robust training process, Democracy Volunteers enables our STOs to contribute to the creation of accurate and high-quality election reports. We believe that this level of preparation is essential in supporting our mission to promote transparency and maintain a healthy democratic system.

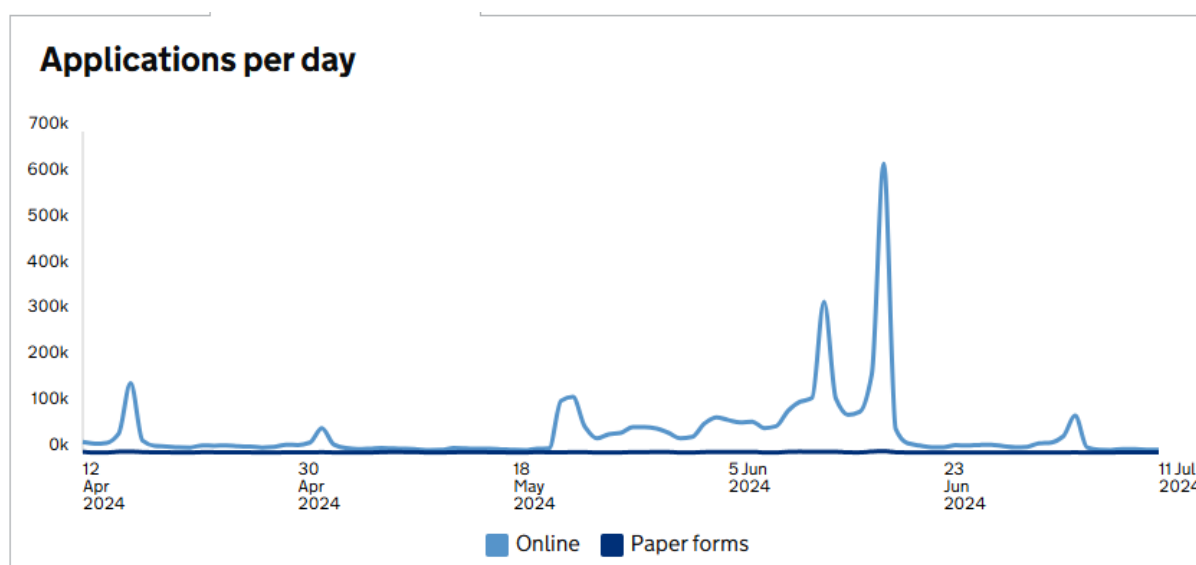
⁸ This training was updated for 2024 because of the changes to the voting process.

Voter Registration

Voter registration in the UK is an active process, with voters required to register in advance of an election to be able to vote. Unlike in many other countries which have automatic or assisted registration, this leads to a significant number of potential voters being excluded from the voting process on polling day, as they have forgotten, or did not know in the first place, that they were required to register. The total number of registered voters rose from 48,820,571 in December 2022 to 49,021,248 in December 2023⁹. At these elections, the deadline to register to vote was midnight on Tuesday 18th June, just over two weeks prior to polling day, with up to 3.4 million additional British Citizens living overseas added to the franchise following the Elections Act 2022.

Many of our interlocutors have highlighted at these elections, and previous ones, that this system not only excludes many potential voters from participating in elections but is also cumbersome and inefficient for elections staff. As voters tend to become more aware of the need to register in the run up to an election, so-called 'event-led' registration sees large peaks of voters registering themselves prior to the registration deadline. From the time the election was called on the 22nd May, until the deadline to register on the 18th June, 2,899,044 applications were made, almost all of these electronically, with a peak of 629,878 on the 18th June alone¹⁰.

Applications for registration per day (GOV.UK, 2024)



Whilst voter satisfaction with the online registration process remains high, normally between the high 80's and low 90's in percentage terms, interlocutors have highlighted the increased and condensed workload this gives rise to. Concern remains regarding the number of

⁹ ONS (2024) *Electoral Statistics for the UK*. Available at: <https://www.ons.gov.uk/peoplepopulationandcommunity/elections/electoralregistration/datasets/electoralstatisticsforuk>

¹⁰ GOV.UK (2024) *Register to Vote Performance Dashboard* Available at: <https://www.registertovote.service.gov.uk/performance>

duplicate registrations, where an elector who is already registered reapplies for registration, leading to wasted time and resources for staff preparing for the election itself.

Aside from administrative concerns, the process also leads to disenfranchisement of a large portion of the potential electorate. At these elections our observers identified 131 potential voters being turned away for not being registered, 0.6% of the voters we observed in total. This is, naturally, a smaller figure than one imagines did not vote due to not being registered, as many voters will have elected not to travel to the polling station if they were aware that they had missed the registration deadline.

Whilst academics¹¹ and the Levelling Up, Housing and Communities Committee¹² have explored the challenges and potential solutions in some depth, the data, both quantitative and qualitative that our observers collected on the day, and our meetings with interlocutors are indicative that the current system could, and should, be improved through either automatic, or at least some form of, assisted registration in the future. This will engage the wider public with elections, prevent disenfranchisement of polling day, and aid elections staff in providing even higher quality elections with their limited resources.

Nationality Loophole in the Voter Registration Process

When an elector wishes to register to vote, they are required to provide the following information:

- First Name
- Middle Name (if applicable)
- Surname
- Date of Birth
- National Insurance Number
- Nationality
- Open Register Preference
- Previous Address (if applicable)
- Absent Voting Preferences (if applicable)

The National Insurance Number and Date of Birth of the elector are checked against the records held by the Department for Work and Pensions (DWP). If accepted by the DWP, the elector is added to the register. If there is a discrepancy, the application is effectively placed on hold, pending further information from the elector in the form of a scan/photo of an identity document such as a driving licence/passport to prove their identity.

However, there is no mechanism to check of the nationality of the elector. Although the potential elector would break the law by providing false information in their registration,

¹¹ See Toby. S. James and Paul Bernal (2020) Is it time for Automatic Voter Registration in the UK? Joseph Rowntree Reform Trust: York. Available online at: <https://tobysjames.com/wp-content/uploads/2020/04/is-it-time-for-automatic-voter-registration-single-sides.pdf>

¹² <https://committees.parliament.uk/publications/43968/documents/217860/default/>

there is no mechanism to prevent incorrect information populating the nationality section of the registration system.

The nationality of the potential elector is taken at face value by the electoral administrators in local government, and the national government's online registration triage process.

At the end of the triage process on the national government's registration website, there is only the following warning message to potential electors:

'By sending your application you confirm that the information you have provided is true. Your information may be shared with other government departments to check your identity and that you're entitled to register to vote. You can also find out more about how we handle your data. If you knowingly give false information in your application, you could go to prison for up to 6 months or be fined¹³.'

If an elector would like to change their nationality on the electoral register, they can submit a fresh application to register to vote. The duplicate application is then merged with the existing application, so the nationality of the elector is updated in the Electoral Management System.

¹³ <https://www.registertovote.service.gov.uk/confirmation>

The Requirement to Show Official ID to Vote

Democracy Volunteers identified 262 voters who were turned away because they lacked ID. These can be seen in below. This constituted 1.29% of all the voters observed.

However, the requirement to show photographic ID has been in place in Northern Ireland for several years, ahead of the rest of the UK. In Northern Ireland, observers saw only 7 voters turned away out of 2085. As such, within Great Britain, 255 voters were turned away out of 18,622, this meant 1.37% of voters were turned away in England, Scotland and Wales. 28,805,931 people voted on July 4th and whilst it is not scientific, and with this appropriate caveat, if 1.37% of voters were those excluded across the UK, this would mean that over 370,000 people might have been turned away due to lacking useable ID.

However, we also asked our observers to assess different aspects of those voters being excluded. As we evaluated, even with a large-scale observation, the capacity to see large-scale exclusions was relatively low.

As in both the local elections in 2023 and 2024, as well as the parliamentary by-elections in the same period, we again asked our observers to report broad ethnicity descriptions for those turned away. To classify, we used the phrases 'white passing' and 'non-white passing' to see if there was evidence of this policy being more impactful on voters from ethnic minorities¹⁴. Our observers saw voters turned away in 17% of all polling stations.

Our observers discovered those excluded because they lacked the appropriate ID in the polling station were:

- 20.2% 'white passing' males
- 21.0% 'non-white passing' males
- 32.5% 'white passing' females
- 26.2% 'non-white passing' females

Once again, as in previous election observations by Democracy Volunteers, this has disproportionately affected those from non-white passing backgrounds, as well as those being excluded being disproportionately women.

We also observed 37 voters not being asked for ID before being allowed to vote during our observation. One team noted that voters *"were checked upon arrival at the door by a meeter and greeter, but not at the desk to tick off their name or receive a ballot."*

This is clearly not an acceptable methodology for the assessment of ID as the voter could easily say a different name to the presiding officer at the desk from that checked by the meeter and greeter at the door.

Our observers also saw voters who were allowed to vote as it appeared that the presiding officer knew the relevant person, this is equally unacceptable as a practice required to formally assess the identity of every voter, however reasonable it might seem to both parties.

¹⁴ These definitions were reached following a consultation with The Diversity Trust in 2023.

The Ballot Secrecy Act 2023

On 2nd May 2023, the Ballot Secrecy Act¹⁵ was signed into law by the King. The fact that the new legislation began in the House of Lords as a Private Member's Bill in the name of Lord Robert Hayward and was then passed in the House of Commons with cross-party support is testament to the necessity and obviousness of the new Act. As part of our meetings with interlocutors this year, especially some international visitors, there seemed to be little awareness of its significance to this election.

As stated in the heading of the new Act, its purpose is to "make provision for ensuring the secrecy of ballots cast in polling stations at elections; and for connected purposes." It does this in two primary ways.

- Adds a new section entitled "*Influencing voters at polling booths*"
- Removing the grey section of law by clearly defining the above as an offence liable to summary conviction with guidelines for sentencing

This legislation is an amendment to the Representation of the People Act¹⁶, adding section 62c - 'Influencing voters at polling booths'.

The first part of the Act defines this *influence* as a person who is with or near another person at a polling booth and intends to influence that other person to vote in a particular way or to refrain from voting." This would fall under the OSCE/ODIHR definition of 'family voting' and it is something we saw in approximately 21% of polling stations in the parliamentary by-elections. It is defined as the practice by which one member of a group influences or guides another on the way to cast their vote and is described by the OSCE/ODIHR as an 'unacceptable practice'. This percentage is in line with previous observations, arguably slightly higher.

Importantly, the Act also further defines what assisting a person with voting is not. The new Act states that someone assisting cannot influence that person to vote in a particular way or influence that person to refrain from voting.

Following the Act, there is now clear guidance and sentencing guidelines. We expect this to provide reassurance for presiding officers who are attempting to dissuade family voting and to provide them with a clear route to calling police and a criminal conviction. Up to a six-month prison sentence is a considerable incentive for an individual to obey the law in this instance.

We provided data to support this law in its formative stages and welcome its enactment. If properly utilised, we would hope to see it will improve ballot secrecy in future elections.

¹⁵ Ballot Secrecy Act 2023, Chapter 12.

¹⁶ Representation of the People Act 1983, Chapter 2.

Family Voting

Our team of observers also saw the ongoing challenge to the electoral process of breaches of the secret ballot. Once again, these focused on the challenge of family voting, where two or more people attempt to vote together in a polling booth, or affect, direct, or oversee the vote of another.

Our team saw family voting in 21% of all the polling stations that we observed. Across the parliamentary by-elections observed, the spread was:

- Clear direction 25.6%
- General Oversight 33.3%
- Collusion 35.6%
- Other 5.6%

So-called 'family voting' continues to be widespread in UK elections. In total, 3.5% of all the 20,289 voters we observed voting at these elections were either causing, or were affected by, Family Voting, some 706 people. Family Voting continues to be widespread in the UK. This compares to 4.3% in the 2023 local elections and 4.7% in the 2024 local elections and 5.5% in the 2023/24 parliamentary by-elections. It appears to be slightly lower than in the normal round of local elections. This is, however, the lowest percentage of family voting Democracy Volunteers has seen in recent elections. This could be an indication that the Ballot Secrecy Act 2023 is having some effect, but more evidence needs to be collected to evaluate this.

51% of those causing 'family voting' were assessed as being male and 63% of those affected were assessed as being female. 'Family voting' continues to be a gendered issue. Presiding officers and polling clerks invariably neither see nor prevent it happening as, especially in a General Election, they can be busy issuing ballot papers to monitor all aspects of the voting process.

We are often asked how we define 'Family Voting'; it has been described by the United Nations Development Programme as:

"...family voting refers to the situation in which the heads of family (often extended family and often male heads of family) influence other family members in how they cast a vote...Family voting can be a serious violation, especially when it is malicious, i.e., when it is carried out with the intent of influencing or removing the freedom of choice of a voter. In these cases, family voting violates the central principle of voter secrecy.....family voting often stops women from casting a vote of their own choice. In many situations, while the woman physically casts her own vote, she is under a strong cultural expectation to obey her husband or father and vote for the candidate or party that she has been instructed to vote for. The influence may extend to accompanying the female family members to the voting centre in order to oversee the casting of the vote."¹⁷

¹⁷ United Nations Development Programme (2016): *Inclusive Electoral Processes: A Guide for Electoral Management Bodies on Promoting Gender Equality and Women's Participation* p.74

Postal Voting

The availability of no excuse postal voting in the UK since its introduction in February 2001, has led to a steady increase in the number of postal votes issued, and received by local councils. This trend has continued since the collection of this data, and at these elections around 25% of voters applied for a postal vote. This non-supervised methodology of voting is scarcely used to the extent it is in UK at other elections observed by Democracy Volunteers across the OSCE region, and in many other states is not utilised at all, where no excuse is given for requiring a postal vote.

Concerning international best practice, the use of, and applicability of postal voting varies greatly between states. Addressing the practice, section 3.2.2.1, paragraphs 38 and 39 of the Venice Commission's Code for Good Practice in Electoral Matters (2003), states that:

'Postal voting, for instance, may be widespread in one country and prohibited in another owing to the danger of fraud. It should be allowed only if the postal service is secure – in other words, safe from intentional interference – and reliable, in the sense that it functions properly¹⁸.'

and as such:

'Neither of these practices should be widely encouraged if problems with the postal service are added to other difficulties inherent in this kind of voting, including the heightened risk of "family voting" ¹⁹.'

The deadline for applicants to apply for a postal vote, at this election, was 5pm on Wednesday 19th June.

It has been acknowledged by the Electoral Commission in their 'Post poll statement' that 'A record number of postal votes were successfully returned, but some couldn't vote both in the UK and abroad because of the late arrival of postal votes'. This issue, which seems to have been particularly potent in Scotland, has already been reported on by numerous news organisations and addressed by several councils.

Following the UK general election of 2019, YouGov research, conducted on behalf of the Electoral Commission, found that 3% of those asked the question 'Why did you not vote in the election on 12 December?' cited that they either didn't receive their postal vote, or that it arrived too late²⁰.

A lack of time to return postal votes was also the 'most frequently mentioned concern in feedback from overseas electors' in 2019. This election was held before changes brought by the Elections Act 2022 widened the franchise for overseas voters by removing the 15-year limit on voting rights for those British citizens who live abroad. Whilst comparable data has

¹⁸ European Commission for Democracy Through Law (Venice Commission) (2003) *Code of Good Practice in Electoral Matters: Guidelines and Explanatory Report*. Available online at: [https://www.venice.coe.int/webforms/documents/default.aspx?pdffile=CDL-STD\(2003\)034-e](https://www.venice.coe.int/webforms/documents/default.aspx?pdffile=CDL-STD(2003)034-e)

¹⁹ Ibid

²⁰ The Electoral Commission (2020) *Report overview: 2019 UK Parliamentary general election: Supporting evidence: main data tables for the 2019 UK Parliamentary general election*. Available online at: <https://www.electoralcommission.org.uk/research-reports-and-data/our-reports-and-data-past-elections-and-referendums/report-overview-2019-uk-parliamentary-general-election#in-depth>

not yet been published concerning these elections, it seems likely that issues with the postal voting process as is, will deepen under this expanded electorate.

Aside from the problems identified by many concerning the potential for votes being returned too late to be counted, other procedural problems are of particular concern. Democracy Volunteers has previously commented on data collected by the Electoral Commission which shows that in the 2019 General Election, over 2% of postal votes that do reach the council in time to be counted, are excluded due to mismatching personal identifiers (an electors date of birth, signature, or both of these), with some parts of the country such as the Airdrie and Shotts constituency rejecting 11.46% of all postal votes received.

Procedural problems such as these aside, postal voting remains one of the UK's most vulnerable activities regarding electoral integrity. As an unsupervised route for voting, postal voters are potentially subject to intimidation and coercion, family voting, in a similar fashion to what we can observe at polling booths. Due to the nature of this practice, we are unable to collect data on this issue, though the cross-party support for the Ballot Secrecy Act 2023, which attempts to prevent this in polling stations, indicates potential support for controls to prevent this during postal voting.

Some of the changes to the postal voting process brought into place by the Elections Act 2022 were in place at these elections. A new limit of 6 postal votes per elector (their own plus five others), a restriction in campaigners handling/handing in postal votes of those who are not close family members or those they care for, and a new 'Postal vote return form' to be filled in by all handing in postal votes at polling stations or directly to Returning Officers at council buildings. These were filled in by voters when handing in their postal vote(s) at all but seven instances we observed. These votes should therefore not be counted.

These changes, largely in line with some the recommendations made in the Pickles Report, are generally welcomed. However, our interlocutors and some observers, noted the self-identification of electors as campaigners make the legislation hard to enforce or verify at the polling station level. There must also be clarity from councils concerning the number of postal ballots 'hand-ins' that have been rejected due to the new postal vote forms not being completed.

Thus, it is vital that if postal voting is to operate more successfully at future elections, better education for voters to ensure personal identifiers are correct, the risks of returns not reaching the council in time, and their rights to a secret ballot in the home is prioritised when considering necessary changes.

Threats and Violence towards Political Representatives

Central to liberal democracy has been the fairness in the opportunity of legally eligible individuals from being elected without compromising their personal safety²¹. Nonetheless, threats towards political representatives have damaged this security, and impacted the integrity of democracy within the United Kingdom. Due to the nature of working in parliament, public passionate debates and disagreements have been highly prevalent, therefore members have attracted unwanted behaviours of an intrusive and aggressive form²². This has included a spectrum of behaviours, namely, violence, threats, intimidation, abuse, bullying, and harassment. These activities have been counterproductive to meaningful debate and freedom of expression under the Human Rights Act 1998, protected by law in the United Kingdom²³. Moreover, this behaviour may have burdened the psychological welfare of candidates and reduced their ability to work²⁴. Therefore, to protect democracy in the United Kingdom, preserve the mental and physical health of candidates and parliamentarians, and promote high-quality work, negative behaviour towards politicians should be acknowledged and addressed.

Negativity towards political representatives has been widespread, with evidence suggesting prevalence has been increasing. A 2022 open survey of 419 candidates, officers, and councillors showed 88% reported being subjected to abuse and/or intimidation due to being a political candidate, and 98% of these reported multiple incidents²⁵. The CIPD survey (2021)²⁶ illustrated that 72% of the 315 interviewed parliamentary members experienced excessive pressure, 22% had been undermined and humiliated, and 10% had been verbally abused or insulted. The May 2024 figures from the Electoral Commission reported 43% of surveyed candidates in England experienced some form of abuse or intimidation, however, this increased to 56% when given specific scenarios²⁷. While reported figures vary by survey,

²¹ Collignon, S. and Rüdiger, W. (2020). Harassment and Intimidation of Parliamentary Candidates in the United Kingdom. *The Political Quarterly*, 91(2), pp.422–429. doi:<https://doi.org/10.1111/1467-923x.12855>.

²² James, D.V., Sukhwai, S., Farnham, F.R., Evans, J., Barrie, C., Taylor, A. and Wilson, S.P. (2016). Harassment and stalking of Members of the United Kingdom Parliament: associations and consequences. *The Journal of Forensic Psychiatry & Psychology*, 27(3), pp.309–330. doi:<https://doi.org/10.1080/14789949.2015.1124909>.

²³ Legislation.gov.uk. (2022). *Human Rights Act 1998*. [online] Available at: <https://www.legislation.gov.uk/ukpga/1998/42/schedule/1/part/I/chapter/9#:~:text=Article%2010%20Freedom%20of%20expression&text=This%20right%20shall%20include%20freedom>.

²⁴ James (n 2).

²⁵ Debate not hate: The impact of abuse on Local Democracy (2022) *Local Government Association*. Available at: <https://www.local.gov.uk/publications/debate-not-hate-impact-abuse-local-democracy#key-facts-and-figures>.

²⁶ POLITICO. (2022). Report: UK parliament staff face ‘damaging’ stress levels and abuse at work. [online] Available at: <https://www.politico.eu/article/uk-parliamentary-staff-face-high-stress-level-abuse-survey/#:~:text=Staff%20were%20less%20likely%20to>

²⁷ www.electoralcommission.org.uk. (2024). Research reveals unacceptable abuse and intimidation towards election candidates | *Electoral Commission*. [online] Available at:

most likely due to sampling and survey or interview question design, the high prevalence has contributed to the growing normalisation of abuse being accepted as part of politicians' jobs which has enabled and perpetuated this behaviour²⁸. Notably, this is not unique to politics in the United Kingdom, as has been seen at its most extreme example in the United States. Of the surveyed U.S. state senators, 80% reported having been subjected to abuse and violence²⁹.

Negativity towards politicians has impacted those directly subjected, however, the extent to which it can also shape political aspirations, deter potential future participation, and inform decision making should not be underestimated³⁰. If individuals avoid political activity and abandon careers in politics due to harassment and abuse, diversity can be hindered and not all voices will be expressed. This is evidenced by reports that anticipated abuse and intimidation caused individuals to avoid leadership roles and contributed to an unwillingness and apprehension to stand or re-stand³¹. Mike Freer, former MP is an example of this, who stood down due to a series of death threats. He stated he "could no longer put his family through the worry of his safety"³². This is of particular concern if certain sections of the population are subjected to higher rates of abuse and harassment, causing those with specific characteristics to be silenced and excluded from politics.

Evidence has illustrated a strong gender dimension in the British parliament, with women experiencing higher rates of negativity of a particularly aggressive nature, demonstrating this as a unique form of political violence³³. Political violence against women refers to physical, psychological, or symbolic harm experienced by women due to acts or threats of violence related to politics³⁴. More women are standing for office and more are getting elected. Yet, the substantial abuse they face has threatened this growing representation and highlighted the cost women incurred for participating in politics, an historically male-dominated world³⁵.

<https://www.electoralcommission.org.uk/media-centre/research-reveals-unacceptable-abuse-and-intimidation-towards-election-candidates-3>.

²⁸ Phillips, H. (2023). Agenda-setting: Understanding abuse towards MPs in the UK. [online] *Transforming Society*. Available at: <https://www.transformingsociety.co.uk/2023/10/12/agenda-setting-understanding-abuse-towards-mps-in-the-uk/>.

²⁹ Herrick, R. and Thomas, S. (2021). Not Just Sticks and Stones: Psychological Abuse and Physical Violence among U.S. State Senators. *Politics & Gender*, pp.1–26.
doi:<https://doi.org/10.1017/s1743923x2000063x>.

³⁰ Collignon & Rüdig (n 1)

³¹ LGA (n 5)

³² Mike Freer: North London MP to step down over safety fears. (2024). *BBC News*. [online] 1 Feb. Available at: <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-england-london-68163968#:~:text=A%20minister%20says%20he%20will>

³³ Phillips, H. (2023). What is the problem? Representations of gender and violence towards politicians in UK parliamentary debates. *European journal of politics and gender*, pp.1–20.
doi:<https://doi.org/10.1332/251510821x16862273096979>.

³⁴ Kuperberg, R., 2017. Sexual Violence against Women in Politics. *Unpublished manuscript*.

³⁵ Collignon, S. and Rüdig, W. (2021). Increasing the cost of female representation? The gendered effects of harassment, abuse and intimidation towards Parliamentary candidates in the UK. *Journal of Elections, Public Opinion and Parties*, 31(4), pp.1–21.
doi:<https://doi.org/10.1080/17457289.2021.1968413>.

Evidence from the first nine months of 2019 showed that ethnic minority MPs were subjected to increased racist and sexist abuse, and this was more frequently received by women³⁶. It would seem that women face violence in politics purely because of their gender and participation in politics. However, identities are multifaceted as oppression and privilege can be intertwined; therefore, violence towards women in politics is intersectional, which has contributed to its complexity³⁷. Further challenges in conceptualising this domain of negativity are the lack of evidence directly comparing male and female politicians, the reliance on anecdotal evidence, and difficulties separating women politicians' gender from what they advocate.

History, causes, and factors contributing to escalation

In the last eight years, two members of parliament have been murdered, Jo Cox in June 2016, and Sir David Amess in October 2021. These murders have highlighted the devastating consequences of extreme violence towards parliamentarians and marked a turning point in addressing, preventing, and implementing interventions on violence, abuse, and intimidation. Labour MP Jo Cox was a white woman murdered in a violent and hateful attack by a misogynist white supremacist who at the time was self-described as a 'political activist'^{38,39}. This attack was shortly before the referendum on the UK's membership of the European Union and had political motivations based on the attacker's violent manifestation of his far right and neo-Nazi beliefs. Conservative Party Politician and MP, Sir David Amess was murdered in his constituency surgery in a terrorist attack motivated by Islamic extremism. Abuse and violence of candidates and MPs is not a new development, illustrated as attacks towards politicians is hardly something new⁴⁰.

This abuse is ongoing today with reports showing Sadiq Khan, London Mayor has received more than 300,000 instances of racist abuse since being elected⁴¹. These threats to political representatives have led to politicians fearing for their safety, which has prompted them to take action to protect themselves. This is evident as reports have surfaced that MPs have

³⁶ Gorrell, G., Greenwood, M., Roberts, I., Maynard, D. and Bontcheva, K. (2018). Twits, Twats and Twaddle: Trends in Online Abuse towards UK Politicians. *Proceedings of the International AAAI Conference on Web and Social Media*, [online] 12(1). doi:<https://doi.org/10.1609/icwsm.v12i1.15070>.

³⁷ Kuperberg, R. (2018). Intersectional Violence against Women in Politics. *Politics & Gender*, 14(4), pp.685–690. doi:<https://doi.org/10.1017/s1743923x18000612>.

³⁸ Jackson, P. (2019). The New Authoritarianism. [online] *Google Books. BoD – Books on Demand*. Available at:

<https://books.google.co.uk/books?hl=en&lr=&id=Z0S9DwAAQBAJ&oi=fnd&pg=PA149&dq=jo+cox&ots=2-dLOjDeuG&sig=Y0LR7mTwHTze4dUS0D8awzG7XQY#v=onepage&q=jo%20cox&f=false>

³⁹ Jones, H., 2020. More in common: the domestication of misogynist white supremacy and the assassination of Jo Cox. In *Racial Nationalisms* (pp. 39–57). Routledge.

⁴⁰ Peele, G. (2021). Women and Civility in British Politics: Reflections on a Changing Environment. *The Political Quarterly*. doi: <https://doi.org/10.1111/1467-923x.13076>.

⁴¹ Jo Cox Foundation: Abuse of politicians is a threat to democracy, report says. (2024). *BBC News*. [online] 24 Jan. Available at: <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-politics-68073395>.

chosen to wear stab vests and inform police of surgeries to ensure safety, namely Conservative MP Virginia Crosbie following Sir David's attack⁴².

Protecting the safety of MPs became even more relevant during the current general election as assault was present in various forms. Reform UK leader Nigel Farage had a milkshake thrown on him while campaigning in Clacton-on-Sea on June 4th⁴³. Despite Mr Farage making light of this assault, this action by members of the public has illustrated the persistent threat towards political figures who advocate for their beliefs. Incidents towards Farage escalated, with reports of objects from a construction site being thrown at the Reform UK leader whilst campaigning in Barnsley, just one week following the milkshake incident⁴⁴. Councillor Garry Burchett, an election agent for a Conservative parliamentary candidate, was attacked and assaulted whilst canvassing⁴⁵. He was hit multiple times and received black eyes and a potentially broken nose during knocking on doors and delivering leaflets. This occurred in Ford, near Shrewsbury. It was reported that the attacker shouted, "Why have you put these through my door?".

The DUP parliamentary candidate Sammy Wilson's offices were damaged. This included damage to windows and doors caused by ball bearings. It has been expressed that there were fears of a weapon being involved⁴⁶.

Lord Walney, the Political Violence Advisor, published a report entitled 'Protecting our Democracy from Coercion'⁴⁷. It outlined the right to express dissent and protest, yet extreme actions had led to violence, intimidation, and threatening behaviour which target fundamental elements of democracy. Several recommendations were provided to address this and protect politicians. He outlined the importance of the police having a robust understanding of extreme political protest movements. Further, Walney stated the government should restrict the activity of organisations that advocate mass disruption and lawbreaking to influence government and public debate. To protect politicians, Walney outlined that the Home Secretary should review access to security in Parliament and surrounding areas. The recording and reporting of threatening behaviour to politicians should be improved by the Metropolitan Police Parliamentary Liaison and the Investigation

⁴² Sky News. (n.d.). *Reports MPs are wearing stab vests to meet constituents 'concerning', No 10 says*. [online] Available at: <https://news.sky.com/story/reports-mps-are-wearing-stab-vests-to-meet-constituents-concerning-no-10-says-12779058>

⁴³ Addley, E. (2024). Woman charged after milkshake thrown at Nigel Farage. *The Guardian*. [online] 5 Jun. Available at: <https://www.theguardian.com/uk-news/article/2024/jun/05/woman-charged-after-milkshake-thrown-at-nigel-farage>

⁴⁴ BBC News. (2024). *Nigel Farage: Objects thrown at Reform leader while campaigning*. [online] Available at: <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/articles/cmjj1n030djo>

⁴⁵ BBC News. (2024). *Tory election volunteer attacked while canvassing in Shropshire*. [online] Available at: <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/articles/ck7g23mz98go>

⁴⁶ Alloa and Hillfoots Advertiser. (2024). *Police probe criminal damage at offices of DUP candidate Sammy Wilson*. [online] Available at: <https://www.alloaadvertiser.com/news/national/24412982.police-probe-criminal-damage-offices-dup-candidate-sammy-wilson/>

⁴⁷ GOV.UK. (2021). *Independent review: Political violence and disruption*. [online] Available at: https://www.gov.uk/government/consultations/independent-review-political-violence-and-disruption?trk=public_post_comment-text

Team. Moreover, locations of particularly high threat, for example, constituency offices and council chambers should have Expedited Public Spaces Protection Orders⁴⁸.

Understanding the causes of abuse towards parliamentarians is vital for ensuring appropriate intervention. Following rising hostility to politicians during the 2019 general election, Gorrell et al.⁴⁹ outlined a four-factor framework to conceptualise why politicians receive abuse using longitudinal data and drawing on earlier findings. A candidate's prominence was a key factor, suggesting that abuse resulted from attention, therefore those in the public eye are, perhaps more obviously, more likely to be subjected to these behaviours. Secondly, specific events could spark hostility towards individuals. Thirdly, engagement was stated, as politicians voicing opinions acted as a focus for abusive responses. Finally, the individuals' identity and personal factors could contribute. For example, race, gender, and political standpoint. Scholars questioned this, in particular, Theocharis et al.⁵⁰ stated that pervasive incivility was not necessarily driven by candidates' characteristics, despite this being the content of communication. Notably, the previously small number of parliamentarians from ethnic minorities in parliament was a barrier to collecting data from large enough samples to obtain statistically significant results comparing them to white counterparts. Therefore, examining abuse because of being an ethnic or racial minority proved challenging. Moreover, the proposed framework ignored perpetrator characteristics, for example, personality, impulsivity, and self-control and rather focused on the behaviours of victims. However, to obtain a complete understanding of these causes, factors from both sides must be considered.

Social media is a key factor that has driven the escalation of negativity towards politicians. The past decade saw a rise in online abuse, yet it was only from 2017 that this form of abuse was identified as harmful in isolation from other forms of violence⁵¹. A prominent platform that has enabled public negativity is X, formally known as Twitter. Southern and Harmer⁵² conducted an analysis of 117,802 posts over a 14-day period in March and April 2018 targeting MPs. They excluded the most-followed MPs, such as Theresa May and Jeremy Corbyn due to their high-profile status potentially skewing results. This exclusion aimed to ensure a more representative sample of online interactions towards MPs. From their study, 9.8% of posts analysed were classified as uncivil. Furthermore, two-thirds of MPs received at least one uncivil post during the timeframe. The findings also highlighted prevalent online

⁴⁸ Available at <https://www.legislation.gov.uk/ukpga/2022/32/part/3/crossheading/expedited-public-spaces-protection-orders>

⁴⁹ Gorrell, G., Bakir, M.E., Roberts, I., Greenwood, M.A. and Bontcheva, K. (2020). Which politicians receive abuse? Four factors illuminated in the UK general election 2019. *EPJ Data Science*, 9(1). doi:<https://doi.org/10.1140/epjds/s13688-020-00236-9>.

⁵⁰ Theocharis, Y., Barberá, P., Fazekas, Z., Popa, S.A. and Parnet, O. (2016). A Bad Workman Blames His Tweets: The Consequences of Citizens' Uncivil Twitter Use When Interacting With Party Candidates. *Journal of Communication*, 66(6), pp.1007–1031. doi:<https://doi.org/10.1111/jcom.12259>.

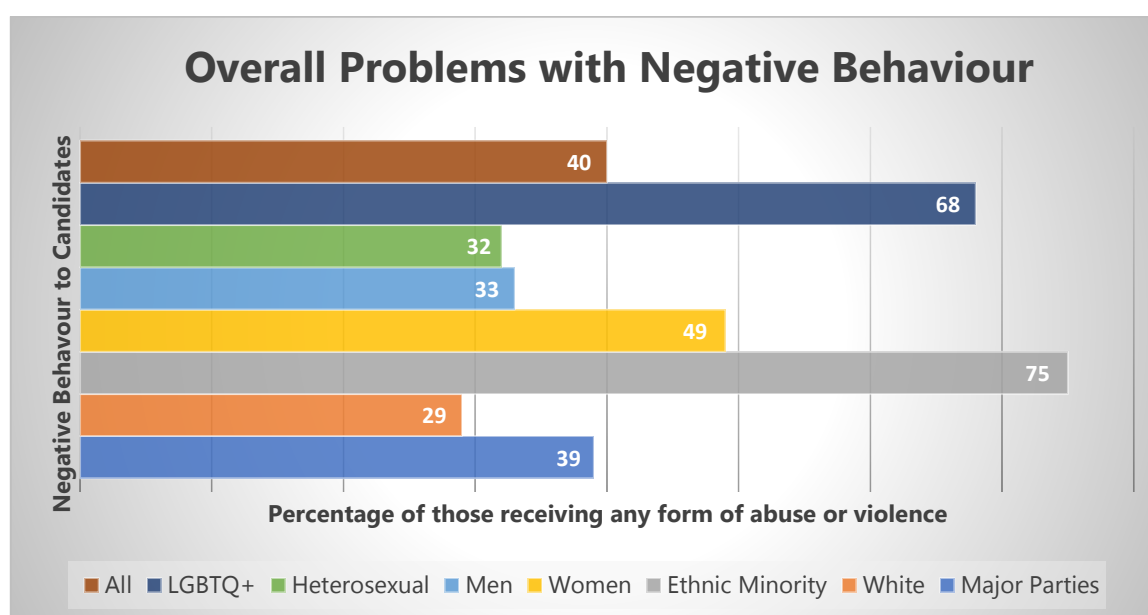
⁵¹ Phillips, H. (2023). Agenda-setting: Understanding abuse towards MPs in the UK. [online] *Transforming Society*. Available at: <https://www.transformingsociety.co.uk/2023/10/12/agenda-setting-understanding-abuse-towards-mps-in-the-uk/>.

⁵² Southern, R. and Harmer, E. (2019). Twitter, incivility and 'everyday' gendered othering: An analysis of tweets sent to UK Members of Parliament. *Social Science Computer Review*, 39(2), p.089443931986551. doi:<https://doi.org/10.1177/0894439319865519>.

sexism on X, where female MPs were disproportionately targeted with uncivil posts, stereotyping, and calls for them to exit politics. This form of so-called trolling⁵³ has been documented to cause emotional and psychological concern, particularly for female MPs⁵⁴. Addressing this growing phenomenon is crucial to providing victims with the necessary support and resources to cope and manage effectively.

Data Collection on Threats to Candidates

Our team sent an email to 3,569 candidates from Lesley Abdela who was leading the research on the threats and challenges faced by candidates. Except for Reform UK, candidates from all the major parties in Great Britain responded⁵⁵. 40% said they had been 'subject to concerning behaviour during the election campaign from voters, electors, campaigners, or other members of the public⁵⁶.' As this was a self-selecting survey this could potentially exaggerate the scale of the problem but is potentially indicative. We thank those respondents for their completion of the survey. Whilst the number of respondents is not excessive, we do feel the data should be published. 153 respondents completed the survey, as well as others anonymously. We identified specific groups that could be subject to these behaviours. We also identified 'Major Parties' as a group, assessing whether they might be subject to more challenges as they were arguably more public. For this group we identified 'Conservative, Green, Labour, Liberal Democrat, Reform UK, Plaid Cymru and SNP' as being main parties.



⁵³ Posts and comments online to cause deliberate harm.

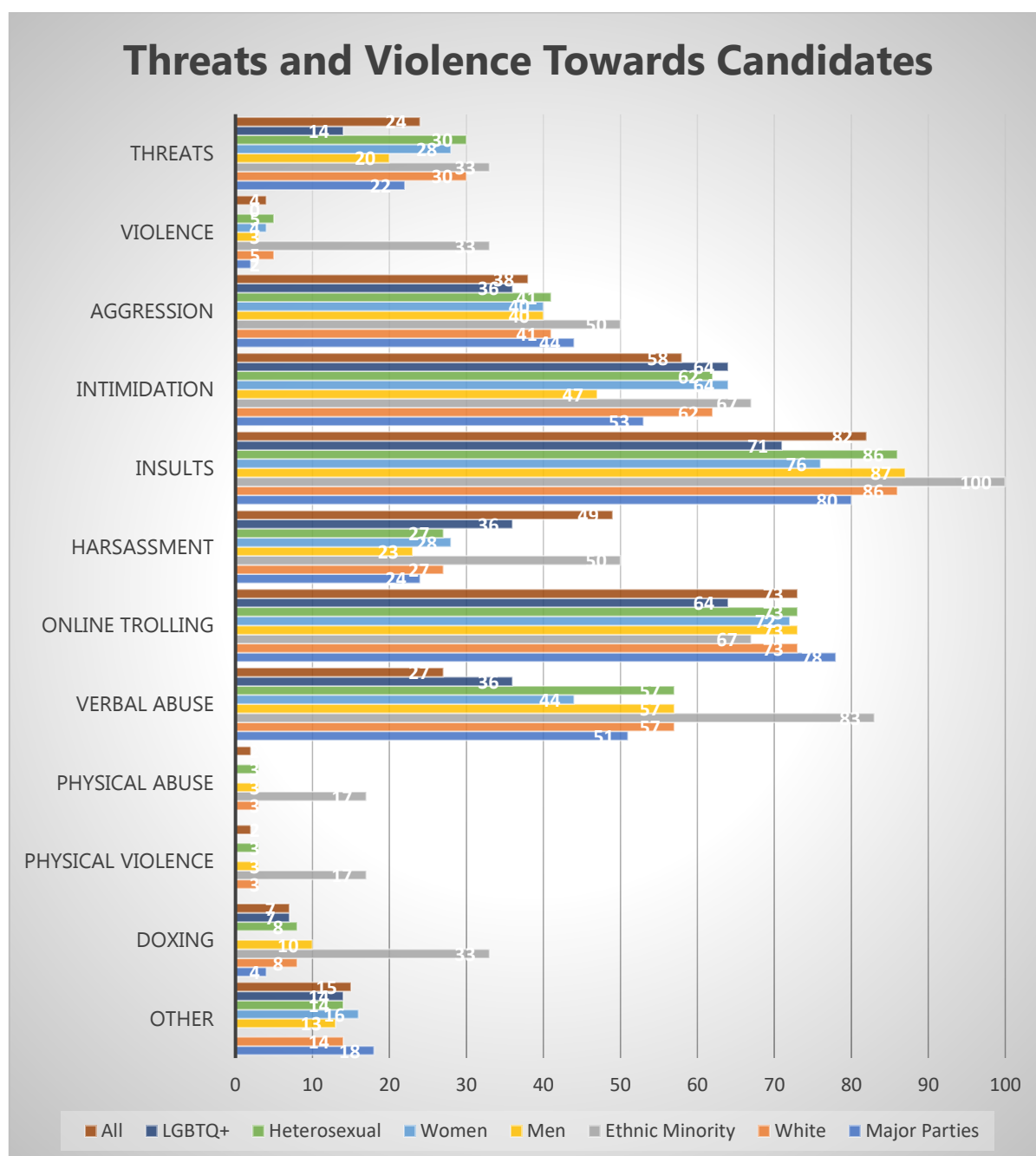
⁵⁴ Akhtar, S. and Morrison, C.M., 2019. The prevalence and impact of online trolling of UK members of parliament. *Computers in Human Behavior*, 99, pp.322-327.

⁵⁵ All the Reform UK email addresses were centrally created, and this may have been done specifically to prevent their candidates from receiving unsolicited emails, potentially of an abusive nature.

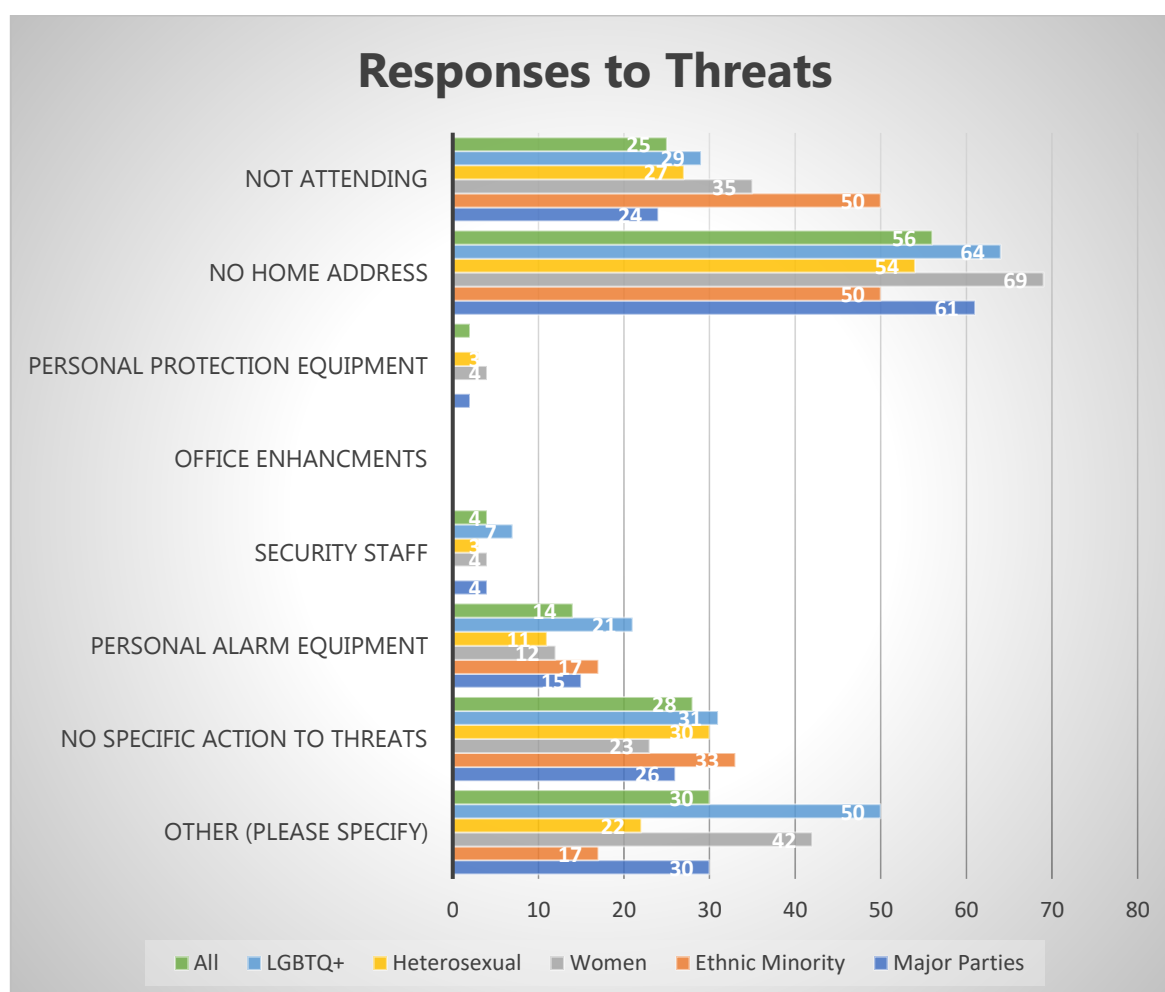
⁵⁶ The full question in the survey was 'Have you been subject to any concerning behaviour during the election campaign from voters, electors, campaigners, or other members of the public?'

Our team then asked those who had been subjected to intimidation or threat, which of the following categories best described the challenges they had faced during the election campaign. 67% of LGBTQ+ candidates said they had been subject to intimidation and 75% of those from ethnic minorities did so too. This is significantly higher than the average, 49% of women said they had.

As can be seen from *Figure 1* above, women are more likely to receive any form of abuse, as detailed later, than men. Those candidates who self-defined themselves as being part of the LGBTQ+ community were twice as likely to have received negative behaviour than heterosexual candidates. Candidates from ethnic minorities were more than twice as likely than white candidates to have been in receipt of negative behaviour.



We also asked candidates what action they had taken to deal with potential threats. These potential threats are listed in full below⁵⁷. What is clear from those receiving challenging behaviour, or worse, is that those from ethnic minorities faced the most challenges to their candidature. All of those that responded to the survey said they had received insults, 83% had received verbal abuse and topped the challenges in nearly all categories. It should be noted that, these figures reflect a percentage of those who are in that category, as such many more women, LGBTQ+ candidates and those from ethnic minorities received these behaviours compared to white, male or heterosexual candidates. One candidate commented, 'Doxxing is inherent in our electoral system; with smaller parties not having huge campaign headquarters we end up having to put our home address in all election material as an imprint', and other comments included 'non-personal offensive language suggesting all Palestinians should be killed', and even 'sending dogs out to intimidate me'.



⁵⁷ Threats - Promises of harm intended to frighten, Violence - Physical force used to harm or damage Aggression - Hostile behaviour aimed at causing harm, Intimidation - Actions meant to make someone afraid or submissive, Insults - Disrespectful or scornful remarks, Harassment - Persistent, unwanted behaviour causing distress, Online trolling - Posts/comments online to cause deliberate harm, Verbal abuse - Harmful spoken words meant to demean or hurt, Physical abuse - Intentional bodily harm inflicted on someone, Physical violence - Acts of physical force causing injury or damage, Threats of so-called 'Doxxing' - Menaces to expose personal information online, Other (Please Specify).

The full list of potential adaptations that candidates could take are listed below⁵⁸. Most candidates in all groups removed their home address from the ballot paper, preferring to state 'An address in the XXX constituency'⁵⁹. Many had withdrawn from public meetings due to potential problems and some had even invested in personal alarm equipment. Other methods candidates had used to respond to threats were: 'increased home security, including additional locks and CCTV,' living 'in an address with panic alarms in every room with an on call 24 hour a day 7 day a week call out service', 'always campaigning with someone', 'using my phone to alert my husband and having my location on at all times', and 'not telling people where I'm going to be and varying my travel plans regularly.'

⁵⁸ Personal Alarm System, Security Staff, Office enhancements to protect you and your staff (other than those advised by Parliament), Personal Safety Equipment - such as stab vests etc., Not disclosing your home address on the electoral register, Not attending some public events due to fears over your personal security, None of the above, Other (please specify).

⁵⁹ <https://www.electoralcommission.org.uk/guidance-candidates-and-agents-uk-parliamentary-general-elections-great-britain/nominations/completing-your-nomination-papers/home-address-form>

The Media Landscape and Regulatory Framework

The media landscape in the UK has changed considerably in recent years.

Most notably newspaper circulations have plummeted. In 2000 the biggest selling newspaper, The Sun, sold around three and a half million copies a day⁶⁰. It no longer publishes circulation figures, but although it is still probably the biggest selling paid-for newspaper, its likely circulation is around 700,000. The decline in local newspapers has been particularly steep. According to the Charitable Journalism Project there are probably fewer local newspapers in Britain now than at any time since the 18th century, and the number continues to decline; more than 320 local titles closed between 2009 and 2019⁶¹.

These days the British electorate gets most of its news from television. A survey⁶² conducted last year by the country's broadcast media regulator, Ofcom, found that 70% of British adults consume broadcast television news, a very large part of that from the BBC.

Sixty-eight per cent say they get news from online sources, with older adults more likely to go directly to the online pages of news providers, and younger adults more likely to find their way to news indirectly through various social media platforms.

Statutory regulation during election periods only applies to broadcast media – radio and television – and is overseen by the government-approved Office of Communication, Ofcom. The oldest media, newspapers, which existed long before Ofcom, are not regulated and nor are the new online media.

Print Media

Newspapers in Britain are privately owned and free to promote any candidates or parties their owners wish. In practice this has led to a very uneven playing field.

In recent years this has meant that The Times, The Telegraph, The Mail, The Express and The Sun all supported the Conservative Party, with The Mirror being the only overtly Labour paper, with The Guardian being generally left of centre, but not uncritical of the Labour Party. But this time there was a surprise; after having been hostile to Labour during the campaign, the two papers owned by Rupert Murdoch, the Times and The Sun, suddenly came out and said it was time for a change, as did The Financial Times. The Times, in its editorial, wrote that the Conservative Party had "in effect forfeited the right to govern" and that it was "the right time for Labour to be entrusted with restoring competence to government"⁶³.

Only the Mail and Express remained unremittingly hostile, warning against the disaster of 'Starmergeddon'⁶⁴. And although the Reform Party had adopted some of the Mail's favourite causes, it also attacked Nigel Farage, to the point where he accused the Daily Mail

⁶⁰ Audit Bureau of Circulations (2000)

⁶¹ The Guardian (2023) The Guardian view on local journalism's decline: bad news for democracy

⁶² Ofcom (2023) News consumption in the UK: 2023

⁶³ The Times (2024) The Tories have forfeited the right to govern. Over to Labour

⁶⁴ The Daily Mail (2024) Starmergeddon! The key House of Commons seats where just a handful of votes for Nigel Farage's Reform would hand Labour a 'super-majority'

of ‘collaborating with the Kremlin to protect the dying Conservative Party’ and was threatening to sue the paper for its allegations about his supposed ties to the Russian government⁶⁵.

A more even spread of opinion in the print media is welcome but must be set against the declining influence of newspapers overall. In 1992 the Sun trumpeted ‘It’s The Sun wot won it!’⁶⁶ after Neil Kinnock’s surprise election defeat. Such a claim from any newspaper would now be inconceivable.

Broadcast Media

Radio and television are regulated by Ofcom, which sets out what can and can’t be broadcast during an election period, from the declaration of the election to the close of polls. There are some specific rules – parliamentary candidates cannot report or present programmes (which forced Nigel Farage to leave his presenter role at GB News as soon as he declared his candidacy) and any constituency report must name all candidates standing.

But the main provision is a requirement for ‘due impartiality’. Apart from avoiding obvious bias, this used to be taken as meaning equal airtime for the larger parties (Labour and Conservative), with proportionately less time – based on previous electoral support – for the smaller parties. The rules have changed somewhat since 2017, with Ofcom dropping the concept of ‘larger parties’ and leaving more to the discretion of the broadcasters concerned, but they are still expected to allocate coverage about a party’s proven support in the past.

This disadvantages new parties, notably Reform which has been doing well in the opinion polls, despite having had no seats in the last parliament. It prompted a stinging attack from the Reform party leader, Nigel Farage, on Ofcom and what he called its ‘utterly ridiculous rules’. “Reform UK is brand new.... We are getting the same level of coverage as the Green Party, despite the fact we’re polling more than three times their number. All of these rules are designed to keep British politics and British broadcasting as a nice, cosy club”⁶⁷.

The broadcasters are well accustomed to Ofcom’s rules, and they work smoothly in practice. One long-serving BBC correspondent described election reporting as being like a well-oiled machine, which goes into action as soon as an election is declared, ‘everyone knows what to do and it all just clicks into place.’

There is one new television channel, for which this is its first time reporting a general election, GB News, which went on air in 2021. Unlike the other big TV broadcasters, which have a public service remit, GB news is partisan, supporting the political right and with ‘opinion-based’ programming, the first such channel in the UK. Unlike the public service broadcasters, it is not obliged to carry party election broadcasts, but it is still Ofcom licensed and must abide by the due impartiality rules.

⁶⁵ The Guardian (2024) Nigel Farage attacks Mail newspapers over ‘Putin ally’ reports

⁶⁶ British Journal of General Practice (2023) It’s The Sun Wot Won It

⁶⁷ GBNews (2024) Nigel Farage lets rip at Ofcom as he blasts ‘election interference’ following Reform surge

One of its political correspondents told Democracy Volunteers that this had not posed any problems, largely because the channel kept a clear separation between news reporting, which was expected to be impartial, and discussion programmes which could be more opinionated. She said this also seemed to be well understood by politicians, with no candidates or parties denying access to GB News reporters because of their channel's political affiliations.

But while relations between most parties and the media have been smooth, this has not been the case for Reform and its leader, Nigel Farage. As well as picking fights with Ofcom and the Daily Mail, he announced he was boycotting BBC events after getting a rough ride from the audience on question time⁶⁸, and Reform complained to the electoral commission about a Channel Four News programme which filmed party workers making abusive and racist remarks. (Ofcom dismissed the complaint, saying it 'did not raise substantive issues')⁶⁹. The party also instructed stewards to bar journalist Femi Oluwale from one of its rallies⁷⁰.

Online and Social Media

The use of social media during elections is not regulated; it is still new, and owners of the main social media platforms are based outside the UK. These decide their own policies; Facebook and X allow paid-for political advertising, but TikTok does not.

Social media is attractive to candidates because it allows them to present their own public image, avoiding misrepresentation or scrutiny by the conventional media. They can also tailor their message to specific groups of voters. However, the lack of regulation and the possibility of anonymity can enable misinformation, harmful content, and trolling behaviour. Earlier this year, the Parliamentary Joint Committee on National Security Strategy expressed concern about what it called the tech companies' 'uncoordinated, silo-ed approach to the many potential threats and harms facing UK and global democracy'⁷¹. Ofcom has been given new powers to combat online harm, but they were not in place in time for this election.

The strategies and spending of political parties and candidates during the campaign varied significantly. According to Sam Jeffers, the founder of the 'Who Targets Me' project, some parties, like Reform UK, focused their resources on a small number of constituencies⁷². Labour's social media advertising was more focussed than the Conservative Party's, and this approach can be more effective than spreading the same budget across the entire nation. Social media advertising can be geographically targeted and is much cheaper than printing leaflets and delivering them through doors.

Labour spent £3.93 million on Meta ads during the election campaign and the Conservatives spent £2.06 million, Reform UK spent £623,193, the Liberal Democrats, £336,179 and The

⁶⁸ The Guardian (2024) Nigel Farage to boycott BBC over 'biased' Question Time audience

⁶⁹ Ofcom (2024) Update on complaints about Channel 4 News' 'Undercover inside Reform's campaign'

⁷⁰ The Independent (2024) Black journalist removed from Reform UK rally by security

⁷¹ National Security Strategy (Joint Committee) (2024) Big tech and social media companies falling short ahead of UK general election

⁷² Who Targets Me? (2024) UK campaign analysis: 19th-25th June

Green Party £276,276⁷³. Nonetheless, some of the most viewed electoral campaign content was not paid-for adverts, but posts which went viral, particularly funny and meme-like short-form videos outlining policy on TikTok. Reform UK had notable success in creating 'viral' content aimed at younger voters, presenting their stand on key issues such as immigration. Ed Davey, leader of the Liberal Democrats, gained significant social media traction with his various campaign stunts.

But an anticipated 'deepfake tsunami' didn't materialise, according to the BBC's 'disinformation correspondent', Marianna Spring, and those misleading posts which did go viral were more likely to have been the work of homegrown activists than Russian or Chinese malicious actors. Perhaps the most disturbing incident was the dissemination of a fake audio clip of the Labour health spokesman, Wes Streeting, apparently swearing at a pro-Gaza protestor and saying he didn't care about the death of Palestinian children. According to Spring it got more than a million views⁷⁴. Streeting went on to win his seat, but a pro-Gaza independent came within 500 votes of defeating him, so the online fake may have had real world consequences.

The National and the Local

In terms of the national parties and the party leaders, the relationship with the media has been good. They have made themselves abundantly available, especially to television outlets, and have had every chance to get their views across. Voters have had plenty of opportunity to judge the leaders and their parties. A correspondent who has been covering elections for more than thirty years told Democracy Volunteers that campaigns had become increasingly 'presidential', focussed on party leaders, even though in this election the two main candidates themselves were not particularly flamboyant personalities.

At the local level, where the vote takes place, things are less encouraging. Many local newspapers have closed or been reduced to advertising-dominated freesheets. Local websites have partly filled the gap but are run on a shoestring with very little original reporting.

Local radio has largely withdrawn from the field. BBC Radio London, for instance, which once used to offer all candidates in the city a brief election broadcast, no longer does this except for mayoral elections. One smaller station told Democracy Volunteers that it had put itself into political 'purdah' for the duration of the campaign, since if it covered one candidate it would have been obliged to do the same for all and it didn't have the resources to do so. Did it ever get approached by candidates? Oh yes, "but we just delete their emails".

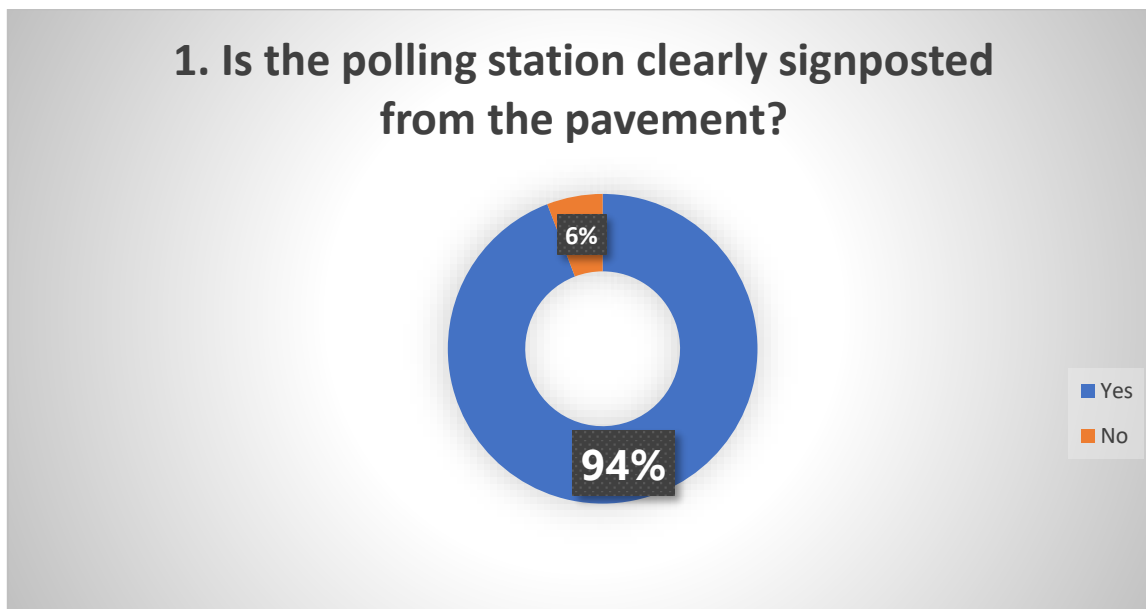
One MP running for re-election, asked about her relationship with the local media, responded simply, "There aren't any." She said one of the sad things was how local media had been very much diminished in recent years, leaving candidates with few ways – apart from their own leaflets – to reach the electorate.

⁷³ Who Targets Me? (2024) Meta spend in United Kingdom - 22/05/24 to 04/07/24

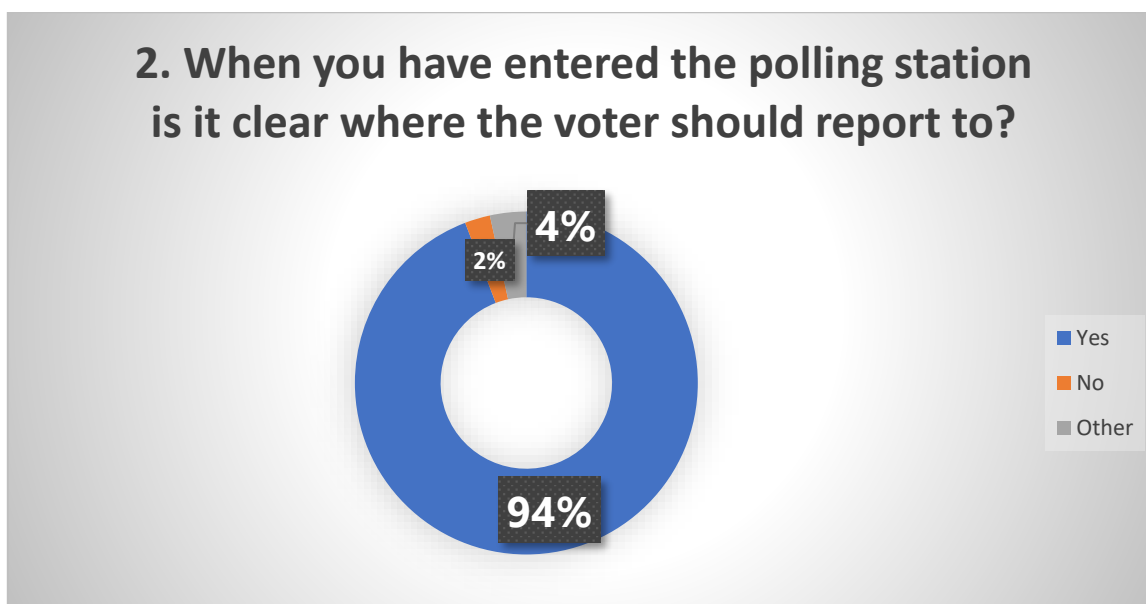
⁷⁴ BBC (2024) This wasn't the social media election everyone expected

Other data collected during the Observation

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

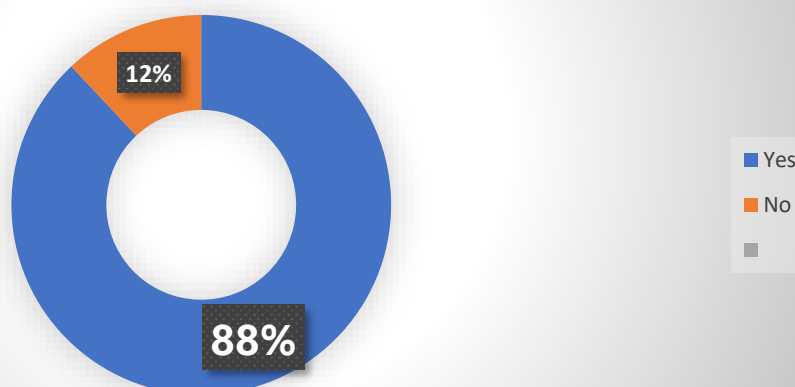


QUESTION 1: The signposting of the polling stations was generally good with 72 of the stations observed not being clearly signposted. In addition to signage, some polling stations had other members of the public, tellers, and campaigners outside which made the stations identifiable. This is the same percentage as in recent by-elections. (N.1153)



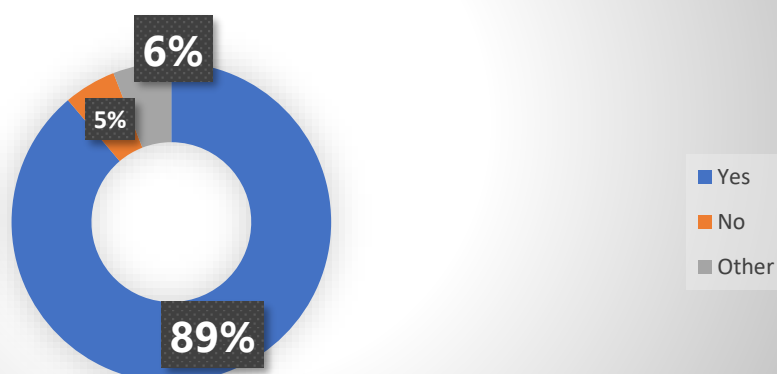
QUESTION 2: Observers identified 68 polling stations where it was not completely clear where the voter should report to. For most polling stations, clearly visible desks and signage were used to direct voters. In some polling stations our observers identified 'meeters and greeters' who helped voters find their relevant polling station, in the case of those where there were multiple polling stations in one venue. (N.1171)

3. Do you see voters queueing outside the polling station waiting to vote at any point?



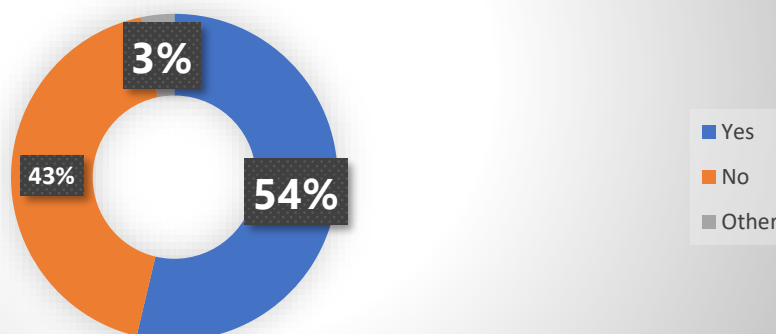
QUESTION 3: Observers identified queuing at 143 polling stations. In some cases, these numbers were over 50 people. (N.1172)

4. Having entered the polling station was it clear how disabled voters would access the station?



QUESTION 4: Disabled access was good in 1039 of the polling stations observed. Some observers did note that step-free access was not always available, or easy to use, at a very small number of polling stations. (N.1173)

5. Did the polling staff check your official Electoral Commission accreditation badge on arrival?

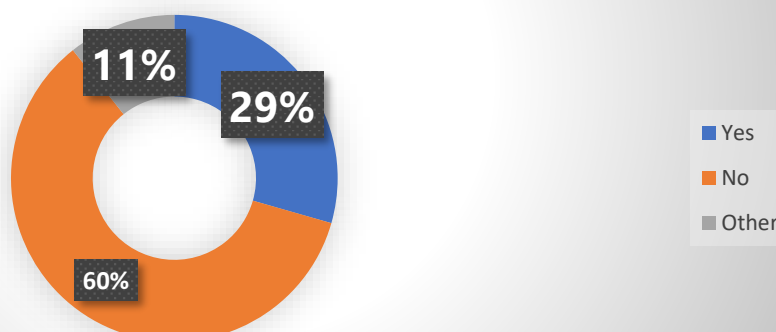


QUESTION 5: As in previous observations, polling staff were often unaware that the observation team would be operating on polling day. However, more than usual were aware.

Many teams had discussions with presiding officers concerning their rights of access; indeed, as on other occasions, some were refused access by presiding officers who were not aware of the rules concerning accredited observers. This resulted in several calls being required to councils to ensure their free entry to the polling stations involved. This ongoing lack of awareness of the rights of election observers is concerning as it is clearly set out in the handbook for presiding officers.

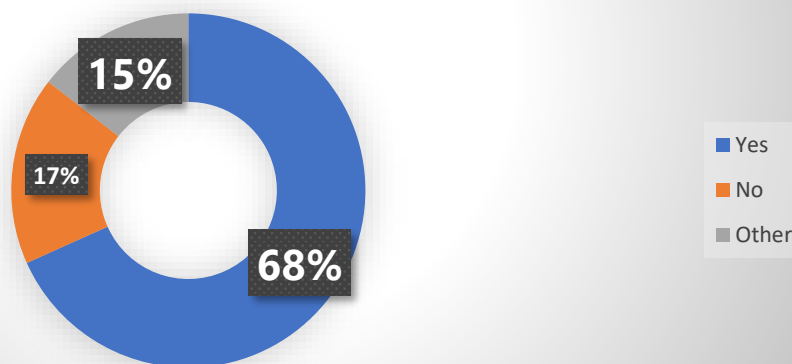
In 54% of those polling stations observed, staff asked to see observers official Electoral Commission issued ID badges. (N.1173)

6. Did the polling staff record your official Electoral Commission accreditation on arrival?



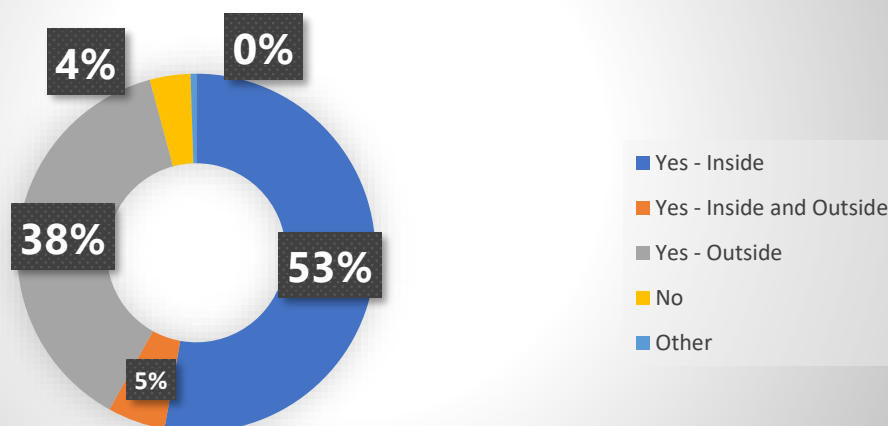
QUESTION 6: As before, polling station staff failed to record the names and accreditation details of our observers. 71% of polling stations made no apparent record of our presence. (N.1173)

7. Was equipment, such as a room or a privacy screen AND a mirror, in place in the polling station for those who needed to show their face in private?



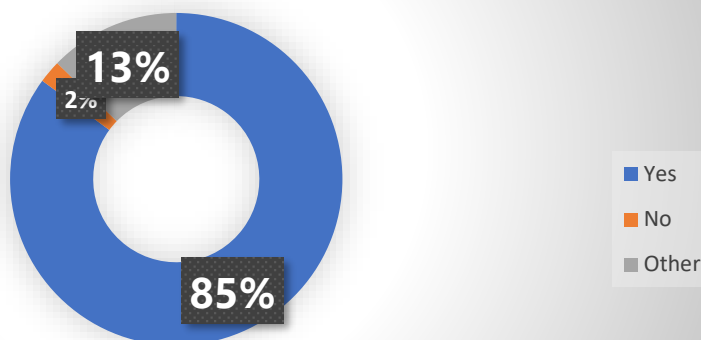
QUESTION 7: Most polling stations did have the required privacy screens in place that could be used by those seeking to have their official ID checked in a private space. 68% appeared to have space available or it was so positioned as to lack the required privacy. This compares to 71% not having it them in the recent parliamentary by-elections – clearly a significant improvement. (N.1173)

8. Was there signage in place informing voters about the new Voter ID requirements?



QUESTION 8: All but 4% of polling stations had signage in place telling voters about the new requirements to show ID to vote. (N.1173)

9. Is the Ballot Box properly sealed with numbered cable ties?



QUESTION 9: A key aspect of electoral integrity is clear and demonstrative evidence that ballot boxes are secure throughout the voting process and on their journey to the counting centre. As with previous observations there is little, if any, suggestion of foul play, this data suggests that despite our observers' best endeavours it is often difficult to assess if a ballot box is 'properly sealed'. This is especially the case when staff use standard cable ties, rather than coded ones, on ballot boxes that can easily be replaced, in some cases when they have even been issued with coded cable ties.

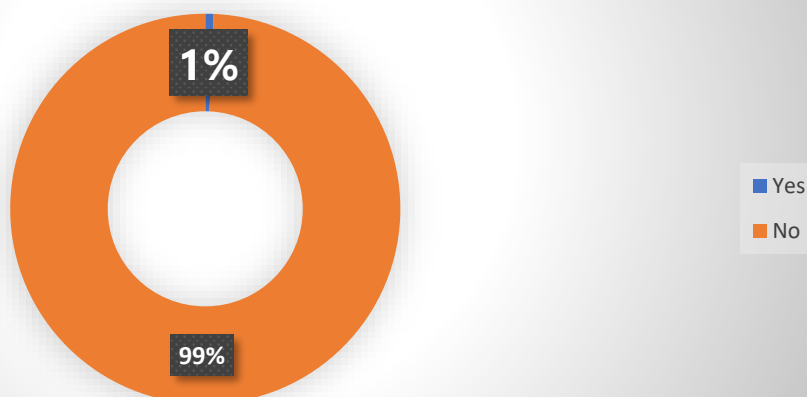
Our observers also noted the various different types of ballot boxes which can lead to some difficulty in the collection of data. The 13% of 'Other' ballot boxes being ones that require a single plug. However, it goes without saying that 2% of ballot boxes being unsealed is 2% too many. (N.1173)

10. Are there any political leaflets in sight and/or on the route to the booth within the Polling Station?



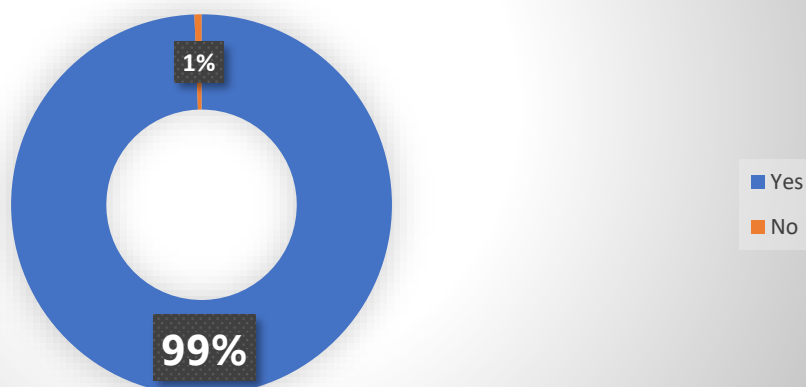
QUESTION 10: Polling stations should be apolitical environments, as much as possible. Our observers saw some political literature in a few polling stations. (N.1173)

11. Did you observe any 'clearly' party campaigners handing in postal votes?



QUESTION 11: The rules around the handing in of party officials to hand in postal votes have changed. 'Political campaigners cannot handle postal votes for other electors who are not close relatives or someone for whom they provide regular care'⁷⁵. (N.1173)

12. Did everyone who handed in a postal vote complete the form required for handing them in to register their identity?

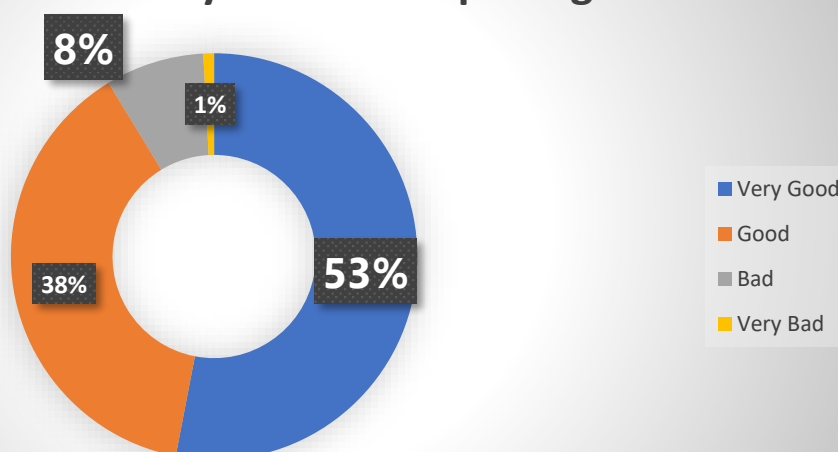


QUESTION 12: Those individuals now handing in their postal votes at polling stations are required to complete a specific form when doing so⁷⁶. Our observers saw this done on 99% of occasions that we saw them handed in. This means those votes should have been invalid and not counted. (N.1173)

⁷⁵ <https://www.electoralcommission.org.uk/guidance-returning-officers-administering-local-government-elections-england/absent-voting/receiving-and-opening-postal-votes/return-and-receipt-postal-votes/who-can-hand-postal-votes>

⁷⁶ <https://www.legislation.gov.uk/ukdsi/2023/9780348251517/regulation/2>

13. How would you rate this polling station?



QUESTION 13: Observers were asked to give an overall rating for each polling station they attended. 53% of polling stations were reported as being 'Very Good', 38% were 'Good' and 8% of polling stations were reported as being 'Bad' with 1% being 'Very Bad'. (N.1173)

What these terms mean⁷⁷:

1. Very Good - No significant incidents or irregularities
2. Good - A few incidents or some minor irregularities, but that had not significant effect on the integrity of the process
3. Bad - Incidents or irregularities that significantly affected the integrity of the process
4. Very Bad - Incidents or irregularities of such magnitude that the integrity of the process is in doubt.

⁷⁷ These descriptions are the same as those used by the Carter Center in the United States of America
<https://www.cartercenter.org/>

Recommendations

Following this election, we have a series of recommendations as set out below.

Recommendation 1 – Family Voting

As in previous elections, we continue to see ‘Family Voting’, where one voter directs, guides, or oversees the vote of another person.

We would urge all councils to use Electoral Commission posters (from the ‘Your Vote is Yours Alone’ campaign), or others, and to place privacy screens between polling booths, as these have been recognised to prevent a far higher number of cases of Family Voting.

We do note in unofficial conversations that ‘that’s not a problem around here’ is widespread and there is a presumption that this is not a problem.

- a. Now that the Ballot Secrecy Act has passed into law, we would encourage councils to add it to their training regime for presiding officers and polling clerks.

Recommendation 2 – Voter ID Requirements

The requirement to show ID at a polling station before being issued with a vote continues to have challenges.

There continues to be a need for greater clarity and potentially diversity in the forms of ID that are acceptable. As in 2023 and 2024’s local elections, on some occasions our observers identified perhaps perverse circumstances where police officers were unable to show their Police official warrant cards as identification to vote, as it is not listed, but could, at least in theory, have been allowed to clear a polling station for legal reasons. Even the accreditation badge, which afford election observers open access to the polling station, the opening of postal votes and the counting of votes, is not acceptable ID in a polling station to vote.

Some other countries allow a system of ‘attestation’ where a family member is allowed to swear the identity of another close family member, this maybe something that could be considered ahead of future elections.

- a. Valid forms of ID should be extended to include those issued by trusted organisations as well as more formal IDs that are presently acceptable.
- b. ID checks should only be conducted when the elector is greeted by the presiding officer at their desk, as their name is taken compared to the electoral register.
- c. A system of attestation as to the identity of another voter could be a possible solution to some of the ID challenges that are faced. This would have to be formalised, potentially under some form of oath-swearing process.

Recommendation 3 – Voter Registration

The process of registering voters can create large scale administrative challenges to council election departments in the immediate run up to an election, especially a general election, in which voters seek to be registered in a short period of time and in many cases, these are already registered. Council elections departments are not large teams, and this can create a large workload in the election period.

We believe this would benefit from significant change in the process of voter registration, making easier for electors to be registered, widening participation and simplifying the process for council officials. Whilst government will need to assess the practicalities of this process, we believe that a form of automatic voter registration, based on data that His Majesty's Government already holds, such as National Insurance Numbers, can and should be adopted to make it simpler, even automatic that voters are registered from the age of 16 on receipt of their National Insurance Number.

- a. The introduction of Automatic Voter Registration, to make the process simpler for voters and less time-consuming for council officials, preventing administrative challenges in the election period.
- b. Close the loophole that allows those applying to be on the register to self-identify as a UK citizen without this being formally checked.

Recommendation 4 - Postal Voting

Postal voting is not as equally secure a method of voting as it now is in polling stations. It is open to threats, intimidation, family voting and collusion in a way that should not be possible in a polling station context. Supervised voting in a formal space is preferable to this unmanaged methodology of voting. Those who wish to subvert the electoral process can simply apply for a postal vote and thus avoid the same level of oversight.

Furthermore, this election has seen several administrative challenges concerning postal voting, whether this is an issue with the postal service, printing or the different timing of school holidays in Scotland, as well as the challenges of newly enfranchised voters overseas, which need to be addressed.

There are also issues concerning mismatched personal identifiers on the postal vote return forms which can, and arguably, should lead to votes being invalid due to them not being correct. Whilst this data is yet to be published by the Electoral Commission, we anticipate there will be large numbers of invalid votes as well as votes received late due to challenges with domestic and international post.

- a. We believe that the standard of postal voting at this election does not meet the Venice Commission's Code of Good Practice for postal voting. Efforts should be made to encourage other forms of voting, which are not subject to the vagaries of the postal service or interference in a domestic setting. These could include advance voting in some centralised locations combined with supervised home voting, such as

in sheltered accommodation, to maintain higher levels of voter engagement and retain ease of access to the voting process.

Recommendation 5 - Security for Candidates

One of the increasing challenges at elections, and in politics in general, is the negative behaviour of some towards candidates which takes the form of abuse, anger and potentially violence. Whilst this behaviour is completely unacceptable, it would seem to be an increasingly common aspect of our elections. We noted that many candidates now regularly do not use their home address on the ballot papers, whilst some, especially smaller parties are still required, through legislation on the production of published election materials to display an address on their election communications. In the case of smaller parties and independent candidates, this is regularly their home address, meaning they are unable to have the same degree of anonymity as other candidates. As such, we recommend the following.

- a. Candidates to receive, as part of their candidate's pack, when applying to stand for election, a guide on maintaining their personal security. They could also receive a briefing from local law enforcement to the same end.
- b. We recommend that those candidates who are unable to publish any address other than their home address should be afforded the same potential personal safety as other candidates. We suggest this could be in the form of an anonymised post box code which is registered with the Returning Officer, to ensure that a barrier is created between the public and the residences of candidates.

Recommendation 6 – Election Observers

As in numerous previous elections in the UK, we would continue to urge the Electoral Commission introduce the recommendations we suggested in 2022, 2023, and earlier this year, concerning the role of Election Observers. As in the 2023 and 2024 local elections, whilst most polling staff are both welcoming and interested in our work, there continues to be a lack of awareness of the rights of election observers leading some polling staff to step outside their role and behave in an unacceptable and sometimes illegal or threatening way.

We once again make the same three recommendations concerning election observation in the UK, bearing in mind that observers are subject to the rules of Section 66 of the Representation of the Peoples Act (1983) to maintain secrecy during the process of the election.

The UK has had provision for accredited observers, and accredited organisations, for many years now. Importantly, observers 'do not need to tell electoral officials that you want to observe proceedings; by law [they] have a right to attend'⁷⁸.

⁷⁸ Electoral Commission: Guidance for electoral observers in England (2022)
<https://www.electoralcommission.org.uk/sites/default/files/2022-04/Guidance%20for%20observers%20England%202022.pdf>

Once again, our observers were sometimes challenged and even prevented from accessing polling stations. Better training on the rights and duties of observers would improve understanding of this important function in elections.

- a. Elections staff, especially those working in polling stations and at counting centres, should receive training on the formal role of observers and what they can and cannot do.

The Electoral Commission issues advice on what observers may observe, namely:

- the issue and receipt of postal ballot papers
 - the polling stations
 - the verification and counting of the votes
- b. We would also recommend that the Electoral Commission, and individual returning officers, grant access to the tabulation part of the voting process.

In many jurisdictions, this is the point at which elections can be subverted, as simply changing the data on the tabulation can deliver an incorrect result. There is no evidence that this is the case in the UK, but elections are subject to administrative errors as was seen in a few cases in 2024.

Elections staff, public trust in elections, and ongoing electoral integrity, would benefit from extra oversight of this part of the process, bearing in mind the global challenge to elections and democracy that can be clearly seen.

We regularly see ballot boxes that are not correctly sealed or where the use of generic cable ties means that they could, in theory, be easily replaced. Therefore,

- c. We would recommend that election observers should be allowed to affix seals to ballot boxes, like the right afforded to political parties.

Finally, we also believe there should be improvements in the process of applications for accreditation for observers. There are now almost 2000 accredited observers which require regular and efficient administration. As well as having a deadline for the receipt of applications, there should also be an earlier deadline, rather than polling day, for the receipt of accreditation by recipients, for example 7 days, and these should be sent via a registered or guaranteed postage method.

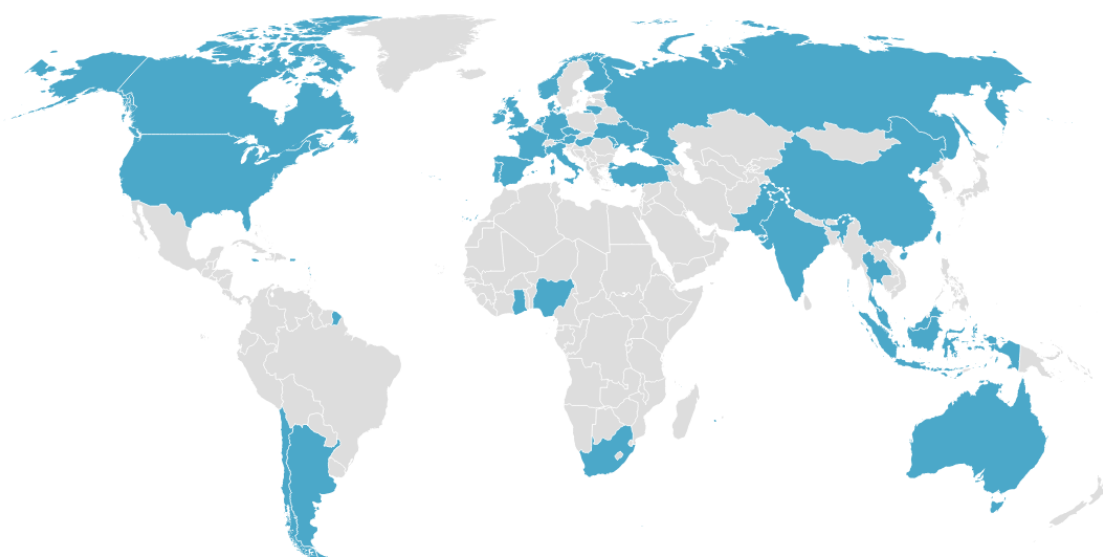
- d. We therefore recommend that that Electoral Commission reassess the process of accreditation, standardise the method of transmission of accreditation to applicant organisations or individual observers, and ensure that there is high quality communication of this process.

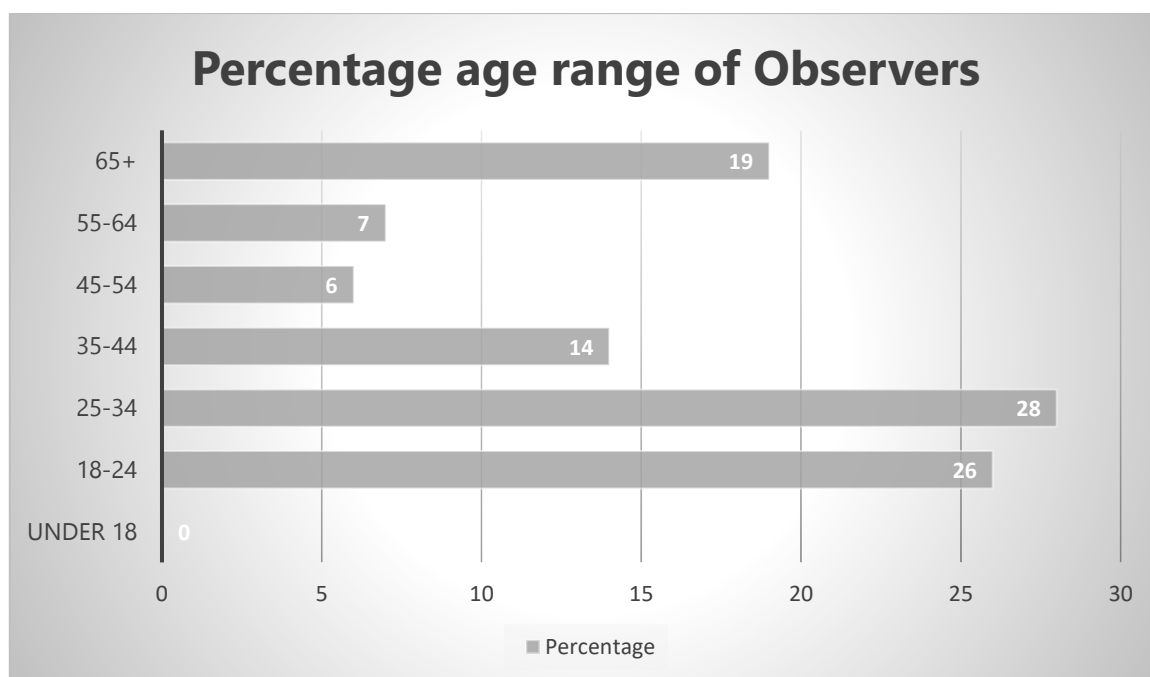
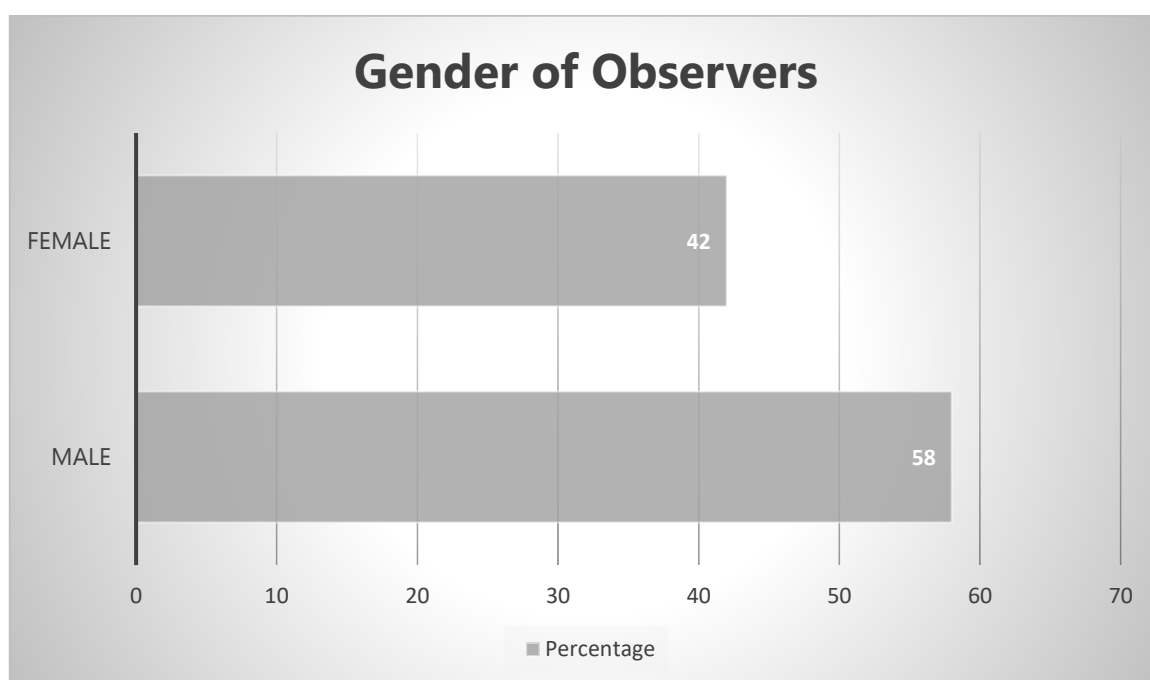
Our Observers

Following the observation, we asked our observers to complete a demographic survey to collect data about who they are and what their background is. Many of our observers are students, including many from overseas, others are election experts, former diplomatic staff, parliamentarians, both past and present, journalists as well as others who have worked in elections as polling staff, as well as many others with no background in elections.

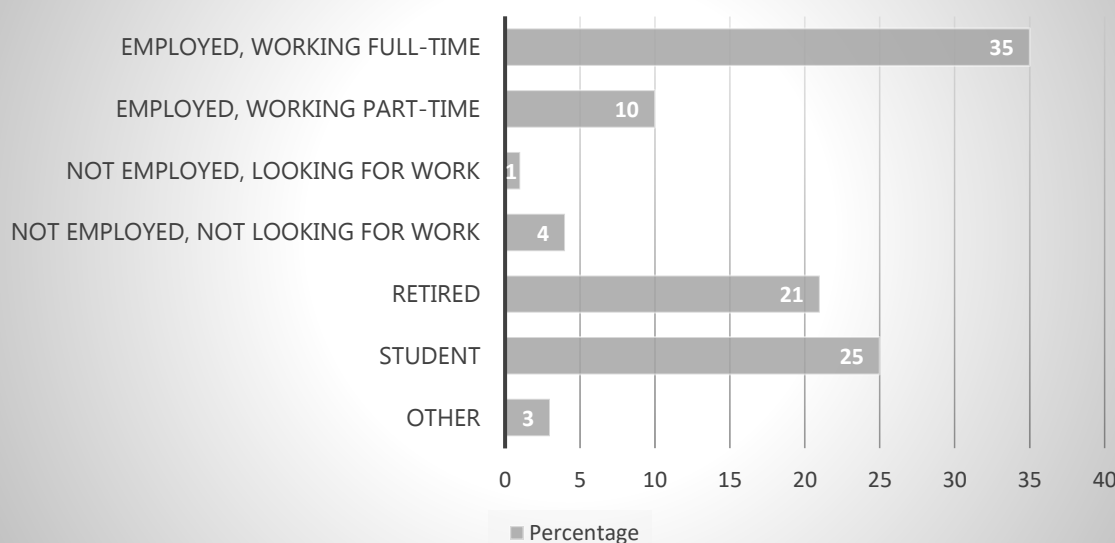
All our observers are volunteers, some taking time off from studies or work to help on polling day.

Observers from 40 countries





Employment status of Observers



We would also like to thank our team of volunteers for their hard work, on a long day, for collecting the data enclosed here. Without their hard work, it would be impossible to deliver such extensive data and quality of that which is collected.

We would also like to thank all those election officials in councils across the UK who we spoke to ahead of the election and who made us welcome on election day

Interlocutors

Electoral Commission

Tom Hawthorn (Head of Policy)

Association of Electoral Administrators

Peter Stanyon (Chief Executive)

Unlock Democracy

Tom Brake (Director)

Shaun Roberts (Campaigns Director)

OSCE/ODIHR

Xavier Noc (Election Analyst)

Septimius Parvu (Election Analyst)

Goran Petrov (ODIHR Election Adviser)

Commonwealth Parliamentary Association

Hon. Dr Otiende Amollo MP (Head of Mission, Parliament of Kenya)

Hon. Ryan Callus MP (Deputy Head of Mission, Parliament of Malta)

Sarah Dickson (CPA BIMR Regional Secretary)

Stefan Szwed (Election Analyst)

Vasil Vashchanka (Election Analyst)

Martin Vickery (Election Coordinator, CPA BIMR)

Dutch Kiesraad (Electoral Commission)

Rolf Achterhof

Arjen Baak

Nadine Jansen

Media

Louie Easton (Broadcast journalist, Radio Jackie)

Olivia Utley (Political correspondent, GB News)

Rob Watson (Political correspondent, BBC World Service)

Political Parties

Tom Bruce (Labour Party candidate)

Michaela Gaitskill (Social Media coordinator, Twickenham Labour Party)

David Stansell (Green Party candidate)

Alex Sterling (Reform UK Candidate)

Munira Wilson (Liberal Democrat candidate)



'An off-duty police officer tried to present her police card as a photo ID. This had to be rejected.'

A POLLING STATION IN MID CHESHIRE
CONSTITUENCY

'The presiding officer was very resistant, confrontational and against allowing us access to the polling station. She finally accepted after we politely insisted that she look at the training manual and that observers are allowed.'

A POLLING STATION IN READING WEST AND
MID BERKSHIRE CONSTITUENCY

'A person attempted to submit 7 postal votes but was stopped by the presiding officer who informed them of the cap of 6 including his own personal postal vote.'

A POLLING STATION IN KEIGHLEY AND
ILKLEY CONSTITUENCY



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