Delivering Electoral Integrity Under Pressure:

Local Government, Electoral Administration and the 2016 Brexit Referendum

Abstract

The management and delivery of elections is a core task for local government officials in many countries, but often overlooked by research and policy makers. This article charts the nature and consequences of emerging pressures on local government officials to deliver high profile electoral events in an established democracy. Through a rigorous and comprehensive survey of local electoral administrators and in-depth interviews, it examines how electoral administration functioned in the 2016 UK Brexit referendum. In so doing, it provides broader lessons about the dynamics of electoral integrity at the local level. Problems with insufficient funds, growing distrust of public officials and late legislation were particularly problematic. Inappropriate campaigner behaviour was concentrated amongst Leave campaigners, reflecting new challenges for electoral integrity as populist movements arise. Problems were less frequent in Scotland, suggesting that different organisational factors are important. The effects of funding deficiencies suggest that austerity agendas can affect electoral integrity.

Key words: local government, electoral integrity, electoral administration, electoral management, referendums, Brexit.

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The management and delivery of elections is a core task for local government officials in many countries. While this is often a forgotten 'Cinderella' service, the performance of local government in delivering elections is fundamental to the provision of representative democracy more generally. Despite recent advances in the area (Birch, 2011; James, 2020; James et. al. 2019; Norris 2013), the pressures that local electoral officials face and the drivers of electoral management quality remains relatively unexplored.

This article puts the pressures faced by this largely forgotten local government function centre stage. Through an original, rigorous and comprehensive survey of local electoral administrators, backed by in-depth interviews, it examines how local electoral administration performed in one of the highest-profile and pressurised electoral events in an advanced democracy in recent years, the 2016 Brexit referendum on whether the UK should leave or remain in the European Union. This was a significant electoral event that would have a major impact on the governance of Britain, its position within the world, the future of the European Union and was heralded as part of a dramatic turn towards populism across the West. International interest meant that Britain's electoral machinery was under intense scrutiny at a time when concerns had been raised about the functioning of electoral processes in many democracies.

The first part of the article introduces concerns that have been raised about electoral administration and integrity in recent years. The second section outlines the political context surrounding the referendum and the electoral machinery, while also describing the managerial structures that were in place. Some expectations about the underlying patterns and dynamics of problems that local administrators might have been expected to deal with at the referendum are identified by drawing from the broader comparative literature on electoral integrity. The third part briefly describes the data and methodology. The fourth part provides an analysis of the data, before the final section discusses the implications. It therefore makes an important empirical contribution to the literature on local government and its role in delivering electoral administration and integrity in established democracies in general. It also adds an important insight into the growing literature on the Brexit referendum, its conduct and wider debates about populism.

Electoral Administration, Management and Integrity

Electoral administration and management are key parts of the electoral cycle for researchers to examine in established democracies. Electoral administration refers to the administrative systems through which electoral registers are compiled, votes are cast and counted. Electoral management

refers to the 'organisations, networks, resources and instruments involved in implementing elections' (James, 2020: 5). These are crucial elements of electoral integrity.

The composition of the network that implements elections varies around the world (James et al., 2019). Local government has a central part to play in delivering electoral administration in many states, however. In some countries, such as the UK and USA, electoral administration is decentralised to local government. Even in countries where central government has overall responsibility, local government personnel and facilities have a considerable role in their on the ground delivery. Local government electoral administrators are therefore the 'street-level bureaucrats' of the electoral process (Lipsky, 1980), deploying local knowledge to help provide a fundamental democratic service.

The UK is an excellent case study for examining the performance of local electoral management. Electoral management is decentralised across just under 400 local authorities. Under the direction of individually appointed returning officers (ROs), these local administrators deliver and implement elections across the UK. While an Electoral Commission has oversight of the conduct of elections, it is something of a hybrid in standard models of electoral management which identify electoral management body ('EMB') independence as international best practice. Although the Electoral Commission acts independently of any government department, it is directly accountable to parliament and dependent upon parliament to set the bounds of its powers and the terms of electoral law more generally. The Electoral Commission has no powers of direction to local ROs in normal electoral circumstances, although, as discussed below, this changes during referendums. Funding for some contests is provided by national government, while local authorities fund local elections and electoral registration from their own budgets (James and Jervier, 2017; Clark, 2019).[1] Despite this complexity, the decentralised nature of UK elections means that there is potentially substantial local variation in performance and experience from which broader lessons about electoral administration and integrity can be learned.

A variety of frameworks have been established to evaluate the quality of electoral administration and management (Norris, 2013, Elklit and Reynolds 2005). Electoral Management Bodies are not unlike schools and hospitals in that they provide public services to citizens. James (2020) introduced the PROSeS framework for evalauting EMB performance, building from frameworks used to evaluate other public services. This focusses attention the design of electoral processes, availability and use of resources, service output quality, service outcomes and levels of satisfaction. This expanded upon concerns raised by Birch (2011: 26) and Norris (2014: 36) that there were other ways in which electoral malpractice might occur other than deliberate deliberate partisan efforts to alter the result.[2]

Research has identified several factors that can undermine electoral management and administration quality. One factor that affects the delivery of elections is funding. Clark (2014, 2017b, 2019) demonstrates that increased funding can positively affect the quality of electoral administration. James (2020) reveals that the introduction of individual electoral registration in the UK led to a significant increase in costs for electoral administrators. James and Jervier (2017) show that electoral administrators in England and Wales increasingly became over budget between 2010-11 and 2015-16 and that this affected whether voter engagement strategies were developed. We would therefore expect variation in the extent to which electoral administrators had sufficient resources for the referendum and that this might have had an effect on their capacity to deliver the poll.

A further threat that is commonly raised is that trust-based systems for polling and registration are open to electoral fraud. It has been argued that ballot box stuffing and personation in the polling station might occur if procedures are too lax (Ahlquist et al. 2014; Christensen and Schultz 2014; Schedler, 2002). Problems in Britain, such as nineteenth century cases of treating and bribery, were widely thought to have been fixed by measures ensuring ballot secrecy (James, 2012). Concerns have re-emerged in the twenty-first century following high-profile cases of electoral fraud (Mawrey 2005, 2015). Hill et al. (2017) argued that ethnic-kinship networks in Pakistani and Bangladeshi-origin communities in England had a 'range of vulnerabilities, which may make them susceptible to becoming victims of electoral fraud'. Although very few allegations result in successful prosecution, there were on average just under three hundred allegations of electoral fraud recorded annually by police forces between 2010-2017 (Electoral Commission, 2017). Some have advocated increased security provisions, such as voter identification requirements, or restricting postal and proxy voting provisions (Wilks-Heeg 2008; Electoral Commission 2014; Hill et al. 2017). In a report commissioned by the Conservative government, former local government secretary Sir Eric Pickles recommended introducing voter identification to combat perceived electoral fraud (Pickles 2016). This was piloted in English council elections in 2018 and 2019.[3]

Another broad threat that is commonly raised is that overly bureaucratic procedures can be used for voting and registration which can discourage participation. The classic rational choice institutionalist claim is that when the logistical costs of voting are lower, voter participation will be higher (Rosenstone and Wolfinger, 1980). Meanwhile, Schaffer (2008) has warned that there can be 'hidden costs' to electoral reforms. Researchers therefore often prescribe more convenient voting procedures to maximise participation. These might include postal voting, election-day registration, public holidays on election day or remote electronic voting. Restrictive procedures such as voter identification or early registration deadlines should be discouraged because they will lead to a reduction in democratic participation (James 2012; Garnett 2019). According to Birch (2011: 36) 'maladministration … of

electoral registration appears to be one of the most common forms of electoral abuse in many jurisdictions'.

There were reasons to expect problems with inconvienient polling and registration procedures at the referendum. A study of the 2015 general election found that two-thirds of polling stations turned away at least some would-be but unregistered voters (Clark and James 2017). There is no system of automatic electoral registration in the UK. This system of individual electoral registration (IER), which was introduced from 2014 and ended the transition in December 2015, required citizens to provide their national insurance number and other personal identifiers. Concerns were raised about whether this would negatively affect voter registration rates and participation, especially amongst young people (James, 2014b). The EU Referendum was the first major nationwide electoral event in which this system was used. The referendum therefore provided an opportunity to explore whether these antipcated problems had been averted.

A final potential challenge is that posed by populist movements to electoral integrity. Anti-elite populist movements show strong distrust towards the state apparatus, including electoral officials. They are also thought to reject norms of electoral integrity (e.g. Norris and Inglehart 2018). An extensive literature has focused on their emergence (e.g. Mudde, 2007). There is, however, little research on how populist campaigning interacts with electoral integrity and administration. Evidence from a comparable event, the 2014 Scottish independence referendum, suggests that administrators would be put under considerable pressure by often inexperienced campaigners mobilised by such a high-profile referendum (Birch and El Safoury, 2017; Clark, 2014b). Since the Brexit referendum has been claimed to be an archetypal case of an anti-elite populist movement (Freeden, 2017; Lakhnis et al 2018), it provides a unique opportunity to establish whether this added additional pressures to administering the referendum.

The EU Referendum

The 2016 referendum on whether the UK should remain or leave the European Union was a significant event that would have a major impact on the governance of Britain, its place in the world and the future of the EU. It was heralded as part of a turn towards populism across advanced democracies. It gathered coverage internationally ensuring that Britain's electoral machinery was under intense scrutiny. Against most expectations, Britain voted to leave the EU by 51.9 to 48.1 per cent.

Concerns were raised about the integrity of the UK's electoral machinery during the referendum. Two days before polling day, one YouGov poll reported that 28% of people thought it was 'probably true'

that the referendum would be rigged – rising to 46% amongst those intending to vote to leave the EU (Demianyk, 2016).[4] A social media campaign, reportedly by the Leave campaign, encouraged voters to take pens to polling stations to mark their ballot papers so that election officials could not change their vote afterwards (Fitzgerald 2016).   Warnings were made that 'millions could miss out' because their name was not on the electoral register (BBC News 2016). The government's voter registration website crashed on the deadline for applications (BBC News, 2017). UKIP leader Nigel Farage, minutes after polls closed, seemed to concede defeat and imply that integrity of the result could be questionable after the decision to extend the registration deadline (Pegg and Walker, 2018). The referendum came in a tense political climate, coming shortly after the murder of Labour MP Jo Cox by a far-right terrorist.

The UK has a different legal and management framework for the conduct of referendums to that of normal elections. The Electoral Commission's role is enhanced, becoming responsible for both regulating and delivering referendum processes. The Political Parties, Elections and Referendums Act (PPERA) 2000 specifies that the Electoral Commission Chair, or someone they appoint, must act as the Chief Counting Officer ('CCO') responsible for certifying the outcome of the referendum. The CCO is also responsible for appointing Regional Counting Officers ('RCOs') for each electoral region, a level of administration not found in normal electoral circumstances. These 11 RCOs were responsible for 'co-ordinating the planning and administration across their electoral region and for aggregating the local totals into a total for the electoral region'.[5] Departing from normal electoral practice, the CCO could also issue directions to all 382 Counting Officers (COs) responsible for the voting process in their local area.[6] In mainland Britain, the CO was the Returning Officer for the local authority.[7] The referendum was otherwise run in accordance with Britain's electoral laws under the electoral register used for parliamentary elections, which is maintained by electoral registration officers in local authorities. This management structure had only been used once before during the 2011 Alternative Vote referendum. This led to cost inefficiencies in that referendum and overlooked the local knowledge of electoral officials (James 2017). This meant that the EU referendum would also be an important test of how electoral management structures worked in practice.

Research Questions and Expectations

This article seeks to address the following questions:

- What were the nature and extent of the problems experienced by local electoral administrators in the management of the EU Brexit Referendum?
- What were the drivers of these problems?
- What lessons are there for the delivery of electoral integrity in established democracies?

Based on the challenges above, several areas problems with electoral management are examined: problems with the management structure and legislative framework, funding deficiencies, electoral fraud, and bureaucratic hurdles to participation. Bivariate and multivariate quantitative analysis, alongside qualitative analysis, will then be undertaken to assess four sets of expectations about the dynamics of electoral integrity at the referendum, each of which will be considered separately.

1. Problems with electoral fraud and intimidation were concentrated in communities with either/and/or a) higher levels of immigration b) higher proportion of Bangladeshi and Pakistani communities c) shaped by patterns in the leave/remain vote.

Research has already discussed claims that electoral fraud is more prevalent in Pakistani and Bangladeshi communities (Electoral Commission, 2014; Hill et al. 2017) so this should be considered. However, there was no obviously organised group campaigning at the referendum on behalf of Bangladeshi and Pakistani communities – although migrants in general stood to be profoundly affected by the outcome. Instead, the referendum was contested by between Leavers and Remainers. An analysis of patterns of voter fraud by voting intentions may therefore reveal important patterns in concerns about these problems.

2. Electoral registration problems were concentrated in areas that were either/and/or a) urban and b) had higher student populations

Existing research has suggested that under-registration is more likely to be a problem in urban areas and with student populations (James, 2020).

3. Insufficient funding led to lower quality management of the poll.

As noted above, electoral management problems are commonly connected to problems with the funding for the poll. We might expect areas with relatively low levels of resource, proportionate to need in the view of electoral officials, being correlated with various problems within the functioning of the poll.

4. Funding was more of a problem in a) Conservative areas and b) urban areas

The Conservative Party has usually been committed to budget deficit reduction, while the Labour Party has usually stressed a commitment to maintain public service provision. A common claim from the US and cross-national studies is that parties and politicians of the right perceive themselves to benefit from lower voter turnout, while parties of the left might perceive themselves to gain from higher participation (Clark, 2017b; Hasen 2012; James 2012). Conservative controlled councils may therefore be expected to spend less on electoral registration for both ideological and partisan reasons, leaving

greater strain on officials in these areas. At the same time, funding pressures might be shaped by demographic factors. Urban areas have a more transient population which could make updating the register more challenging – and therefore be more resource intensive.

Methodology

Surveys of electoral officials have now become established as a method for assessing electoral integrity (Burden et al., 2012; Clark and James 2017; Clark, 2017b; James 2014a, 2017, 2019, 2020; Moynihan and Silva, 2008). An electronic survey was sent to the 380 counting officers (COs) in local authorities administering the referendum throughout Great Britain. It was also sent to electoral authorities in Gibraltar and to the Electoral Office of Northern Ireland (EONI). Electoral administrators' expert knowledge as 'street-level bureaucrats' (Lipsky, 1980) makes them uniquely placed to report problems.

Responses were received from 254 local authority counting officers giving a very high 66 per cent response rate.[8] Scottish Unitary councils, London Boroughs and the South West region were slightly over-represented with response rates of 71, 72 and 76 per cent respectively, while the West Midlands and South East regions were slightly below average in responses at 57 and 58 per cent each. Nonetheless, this remains an excellent response rate for an electronic survey. All figures in tables are rounded and consequently may not sum to 100. An extensive range of qualitative replies to open questions were provided in addition to the quantitative replies. These provide a rich source of additional information about the problems faced by COs, mostly explaining the nature of problems experienced in more detail.

To add depth, 25 semi-structured interviews were conducted with key actors (1 with the CCO & DCCO, with all 11 RCOs and the Chief Electoral Officer for Northern Ireland (CEONI), and with a further 12 COs from across Britain) conducted mostly by telephone.[9] The interviews allowed electoral officials at all levels, from the local upwards, to highlight important challenges not anticipated by the survey. Overall, this provides the most comprehensive information about the quality of electoral administration and management at any single UK electoral event and provides a unique academic picture of the how it performed on the ground under considerable pressure. Additional data on the leave/remain vote was added was sourced from the Electoral Commission.[10] Socio-demographic information comes from the 2011 Census[11] and the ONS Migration Indicators Tool.[12]

Results

Management structure

The Electoral Commission is often criticised (Clark, 2017a; Pickles, 2016), including by local electoral administrators over its previous conduct of referendums (James, 2017). Nonetheless, the survey revealed high levels of overall satisfaction among local COs with the 2016 management structure. 82 per cent agreed or strongly agreed that it 'worked well' (Table 1). Interviews with RCOs also suggested that the system seemed to have been successfully adapted from the model used in 2011. They thought that the Chief Counting Officer (CCO) had made many efforts to reach out and speak to COs at local and regional levels. RCOs described themselves as being well-supported, drawing most of their support from their local teams. Many officials were keen to stress that informal local networks and relationships were more important than the formal structures in providing support, however. Informal regional support and peer advice networks often exist for elections (Clark, 2015).

RCOs explained that the management structure allowed them to provide advice, support and a problem-solving system to local COs. It allowed them to identify 'at risk' COs to ensure compliance and consistency in the delivery of the referendum.[13] However, the centralised management structure was not thought to be an improvement on the system used for elections. Respondents stressed the differences between the referendum and elections, most notably the complexity of the ballot structure in normal elections where many different candidates stand.

Table 1: Views on Referendum Management Structure (%)

	Strongly disagree	Disagree	Neither	Agree	Strongly agree	N
Overall management structure worked well	-	3	15	74	7	248
Management structure worked better than for an election	3	27	60	9	1	248
CCO's planning for the referendum was effective	1	5	20	66	9	248

RCO's planning for the referendum was effective	-	3	12	66	20	248

The negative effects of the use of directions included increased financial costs (43 per cent either agreed or strongly agreed), absorbing staff time (39 per cent either agreed or strongly agreed) and overriding local experience (24 per cent either agreed or strongly agreed). Qualitative interviews suggested that some local COs felt that the Electoral Commission was overly directive and that the directions were 'self-evident and just good practice'. The directions were therefore not accepted uncritically and did not add value in every circumstance, but had some positive effects.

Legislative framework

A key stage in organising an election is establishing a clear legislative framework. The government committed to hold the referendum before December 2017 but there was long-running uncertainty about the date of polling day. There was concern within the electoral community that it could be called at short notice with relatively short preparation time, or shortly after another set of elections, to the devolved institutions and local government. The worry was that this would amplify pressures on small local electoral services teams. The government laid The European Union Referendum Regulations 2016 before Parliament on 23rd February 2016, setting the date of the referendum as 23 June 2016. As Table 2 shows, most respondents were generally satisifed that the legislative framework was set out sufficiently in advance and that it set out the duties of electoral officials clearly. The Electoral Commission published a timetable containing the statutory deadlines for the referendum.[14] There were some concerns about this timetable, with 28 per cent of respondents agreeing or strongly agreeing that it was too tight.

The government was forced to introduce further late legislation extending the electoral registration deadline from 7th June by 48 hours to midnight on the 9th June. This followed a high-profile crash of the voter registration website.[15] The extension had a major effect on many electoral officials. Local authorities were unable to employ and train additional staff at such short notice. This meant that many local authority electoral administrators worked longer hours, adding to stress levels. Some respondents reported significant degrees of exhaustion since the referendum had closely followed major devolved and local elections a month earlier. Many staff had not taken holidays. As one indicated:

'There was just no let up in the work load and it just got progressively more and more. It's no wonder so many people went off with stress related issues'.

The extention of the deadline also reduced the time available to prepare for polling day. This increased the chances of errors and in some cases led to compromises being made such as there being insufficient time to send polling cards to the late registrants:

'Not all late applicants received poll cards despite them being sent 1st class on Monday 20th June as it was simply too close to the date of the poll. We were unable to carry out all the checks we would normally carry out on polling station registers to ensure that they were both complete and accurate… due to a software issue caused by the deadline extension. This added a significant risk to the process that could have been mitigated by not altering the determination deadline for the Referendum.'

Table 2 shows that 44 per cent of respondents agreed or strongly agreed that the extention affected their ability to deliver the referendum. Although the outcome of the referendum was clear cut, these compromises could have had a profound effect on the delivery of the referendum and potentially, therefore, the legitimacy of the outcome in a closer and contested referendum result.

Table 2: Legislative Framework (%)

	Strongly disagree	Disagree	Neither agree nor disagree	Agree	Strongly agree	N
The statutory timetable for the referendum was too tight	4	35	32	23	5	248
The overall timing of the referendum did not cause any significant difficulties	26	44	12	17	1	248
The legislative framework for the referendum was set in sufficient time ahead of the poll	4	24	19	51	2	248
The legislative framework clearly set out my responsibilities	-	3	15	78	5	248
The extension of the registration deadline caused challenges	3	9	12	35	42	248

disproportionate to the number of electors registered as a result						
The extension of the registration deadline had a significant impact on our ability to deliver the referendum	5	30	21	28	16	248

Funding

Major concerns were raised about the system that funds electoral administration (Table 3). Alarmingly, 47 per cent disagreed or strongly disagreed that they had funding available to support the work required to compile the electoral register. Interviews with RCOs also suggested that while many areas were sufficiently funded others faced serious problems. As one observed:

> 'We had some serious concerns about whether all COs in the [region] had enough resources. In some councils it felt like a shoe string operation.'

Cuts within local authority budgets appear to be one cause of the problem. As one respondent put it:

> 'Local Authority budgets are severely squeezed and while historically authorities have "subsidized" elections, this is becoming more difficult or impossible.'

Another explanation was the introduction of a new individual electoral registration (IER) system, which was commonly described as more expensive to implement (James, 2020). One CO described how the 'funding massively underestimates the scale of the task at in hand in IER.' Cuts in central government Cabinet Office funding for election administration were also cited.

Table 3: Funding (%)

	Strongly disagree	Disagree	Neither agree or disagree	Agree	Strongly agree	N
There is an efficient process for distributing referendum funds to administrators	-	8	26	61	3	248
Sufficient funds were provided through the	5	15	38	40	3	248

fees and charges process to run the referendum						
There is sufficient funding available to support the work required to compile the electoral register	16		29	23	1	248

A further source of resource pressures was the rise in applications for postal and proxy votes. Over half of respondents highlighted extensive challenges in this. One local authority spoke of an 'over 30 per cent increase in postal [vote applications] between May and June… [and an] …over 150 per cent increase in proxies'. This quote was typical:

> 'The sheer volume and timing of postal and proxy vote applications was a big challenge for the electoral services team (time consuming to process) especially in the week before the poll.'

Qualitative comments suggested the existing arrangements whereby the costs of the poll were covered by central government were insufficient. Electoral registration had become a seasonal event with people registering and requesting a postal vote close to the deadline. The strain of the electoral event was therefore put on local authority electoral registration teams, not central government.

There was evidence that funding levels affected the running of elections and voter registration. Table 4 below demonstrates the associations between responses to whether sufficient funding was provided and various work that COs undertook. The negative correlations in the first three lines show some statistically significant effects on voter registration problems. Insufficient funding for electoral registration reduced the ability of officials to deal with duplicate registrations and address confusion amongst the public about their registration status.

The availability of funds for the poll also affected respondents' overall sense of satisfaction with the management process. Printing and the despatch of postal votes were also related to electoral registration funding. There is therefore an understandable logic linking these and some evidence in support of hypothesis 3. Effects were not always found on the polling process, however.

Table 4: Correlations between funding and polling/registration problems

	Sufficient funds were provided through the fees and charges process to run the referendum	There is sufficient funding available to support the work required to compile the electoral register
Levels of duplicate applications for registration	n/a	-.263**
Confusion from the public about their registration status	n/a	-.187**
Requirement to provide date of birth and National Insurance Number	n/a	-.150*
The overall management structure for the referendum worked well	.181**	n/a
Postal vote dispatch timings (domestic)	-.016	-.138*
Postal vote dispatch timings (overseas)	.036	-.078
Printing	-.072	-.132*
Polling Station Recruitment	-.092	-.139*
Polling Stations not opening on time	.031	n/a
Queues during the day at polling	-.065	n/a

**. Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed). *. Correlation is significant at the 0.05 level (2-tailed).

No statistically significant relationship was found between a council's political composition and resourcing. Geographical effects were evident. London boroughs were more likely to report insufficient funds to conduct the poll (β = .190, p< 0.01), while having insufficiently experienced staff was less likely to be a problem in Scotland (β = .145, p< 0.05).

Electoral Fraud

Table 5 shows that there were very few suspected cases of electoral fraud with only 11 per cent of COs reporting a problem.[16] However, slightly contradictorily, a higher proportion pointed to suspected

cases of personation and postal vote fraud. Nonetheless, these numbers are still miniscule when placed alongside an electorate of 46 million potential voters. The few suspected cases are in contrast to the problems posed by campaigners on the day. The hashtag #pengate was widely circulated on social media encouraging voters to take pens to the polling station rather than pencils because their votes could be rubbed out and changed by electoral officials. Some COs suggested that this created difficulties in polling stations and telephone calls to helplines. Pens were thrown at polling staff in one instance. Some voters 'insist[ed] that the Council would rub out their marks on the ballot paper when we emptied the ballot boxes at the count'. They might then take photographs in the polling stations, something which is forbidden in Britain, out of mistrust. As one report noted:

> 'Only had one incident of an elector taking a photo of their ballot paper. They were challenged by the Presiding Officer and reacted very aggressively and verbally abused the Presiding Officer.'

Some Leave campaigners were suspicious of officials in other ways:

> 'We had some issues with agents from vote leave who did not nominate postal vote agents until after we had begun opening postal votes… they then verbally accused the team of potential fraudulent activity…. Although the Vote Leave agent did apologise for this slur, at times this campaign group were aggressive.'

Table 5: Problems with electoral fraud

%	N/A	No problems / challenges 0	1	2	3	4	Extensive problems / challenges 5	N
Suspected cases of electoral fraud		89	10	-	1	-	-	248
Suspected cases of personation		77	17	3	3	1	-	248
Postal vote fraud	14	69	13	3	1	-	-	248
Campaign groups behaving inappropriately at polling stations		63	20	8	5	3	1	248

Campaign groups behaving inappropriately at the count	3	75	15	3	2	1	1	248
People taking photos of ballots/polling stations		68	25	4	3	-	-	248

Concerns have been raised about postal vote fraud in Britain (and elsewhere). However, there was little evidence of postal vote fraud in the referendum. Indeed, there were only 291 alleged cases of electoral fraud reported by police forces in 2016, across all electoral events including the referendum (Electoral Commission, 2017). The extent to which problems were reported, it seems as if error may have been the cause. In one case a referendum agent reported a number of routine signature mismatches to the Police as fraudulent – but the electoral official suspected that this was just due to a misunderstanding of the adjudication process.

Table 5 suggests that the most widespread problem was inappropriate behaviour or intimidation at polling stations by campaigners, with a third of local COs suggesting that there was a challenge of some degree. Qualitative comments described how this could include displaying campaign posters, or handing out leaflets close to polling stations. One CO said that they had 'several instances of tellers having to be moved on due to their intimidation of the electorate.' In another counting area:

> We had one incident where a supporter of the exit campaign parked a car and the individual used a speaker to hail abuse at voters entering one polling station at [Location given]. Due to the attitude of the individual campaigning for exit, polling staff were advised to ring the police but the incident passed before the Police arrived.

Qualitative comments also recorded that some campaigners were not following procedures at the count. When the affiliation of the agents involved in problems was cited by COs in the qualitative comments, they were all identified as Leave campaigners.

What can be said about the drivers of electoral fraud? Taking electoral fraud as the dependent variable, no correlations were found with the levels of immigration or the size of the Pakistani and Bangladeshi communities. Instead, the patterns of voter fraud were correlated with voting intentions in bivariate analysis. The higher the leave vote was associated with fewer suspicions of electoral fraud ($\beta = -.167$, $p < 0.05$) fewer suspicions of impersonation ($\beta = -.217$, $p < 0.01$) but more inappropriate

campaigning in polling stations (β =.151, p < 0.05). This suggests that political dynamics were most important.

There was also qualitative evidence that voter intimidation from campaigners had clear political dynamics. It is important to note that many problems with intimidation may have been due to differences in perception between what some campaigners, voters and administrators saw as legitimate campaign efforts. Electoral officials widely suggested that inappropriate campaigning were not for the most part attempts to deliberately rig the referendum. Rather, the actions were often from 'new [campaigners] and were not familiar with the 'do's and don'ts'.'   Some RCOs and COs had to deal with counting agents who were inexperienced and unfamiliar with the counting process because they had not been involved in elections before. This led to some uncertainty and to some practical confusion as to who the electoral officials should liaise with on the night. All reported examples were with Leave campaigners.

Bureaucratic Hurdles to Participation

There was much more evidence of problems with bureaucratic hurdles impeding participation at the referendum. As Table 6 shows, local electoral officials commonly reported widespread confusion amongst the public about their registration status. Only two per cent of COs said that they experienced no problems and nearly half of COs rated this problem as extensive. As one suggested:

> We had a number of people who were not registered and who thought that paying Council Tax meant that they were registered… considering the amount of voters, it was unnerving to see how many people did not know the process.

Table 6: Bureaucratic Hurdles to Participation

	N/A	No probs / challenges 0	1	2	3	4	Extensive probs / challenges 5	N
Confusion about registration status		2	-	7	16	31	45	248
Levels of duplicate		2	4	7	20	31	37	248

registration applications								
People asking to vote who were not on register		3	32	31	21	11	2	254
Requirement to provide DoB & NI number		10	21	27	23	15	4	248

This directly affected the polling process with a low level, but common, problem of citizens turning up but not being allowed to vote because they were not on the register. Only 3 per cent of respondents reported no problems with this. Similar results were reported by local poll workers at the 2015 general election, suggesting that this is a regular problem in UK elections (Clark and James, 2017). Qualitative interviews with RCOs suggested that overall numbers were relatively low. Nonetheless, comments from COs suggested that the numbers could be high in places, and there was evidence that some of these were citizens that had been removed from the electoral register in December 2015 as a result of the introduction of IER.

There was no evidence that any of these problems were more likely to occur in urban or student areas, however. Using data from the 2011 Census about the population density or student population, neither correlated with the problems identified in Table 6. There therefore was not much support for hypothesis 2. Geography did matter, however. Using a comparison of means, problems were less frequent in Scottish unitary authorities. Another driver of these problems also seemed to be the Vote Leave/Remain vote share. An analysis of Pearson correlations revealed bivariate relationships between the Leave share and confusion amongst the public (β = .214, p < 0.01) duplicate registrations (β =.229, p < 0.01) and people asking to vote who were not on the register (β =.184, p < 0.01).

Table 7 reports four logit ordinal regression models. The dependent variables are four separate registration problems, each measured on a 1-6 Likert scale with lower scores indicating no problems, high scores indicating a high level of problems. The independent variables are a range of socio-economic, institutional and electoral data that have been correlated with electoral administrative performance elsewhere (Clark, 2017b, 2019). The models suggest that many of these bivariate effects disappear in multivariate analysis, even when significance levels are relaxed to the .10 level. Model fit is also very low. The one small remaining effect, however, is that confusion about registration status was less of a problem in Scotland. What makes Scotland unique is that it has different

institutional arrangements: Valuation Joint Boards (VJBs) co-ordinate electoral registration, while a Scottish Electoral Management Board has been proactive at creating a community of shared practices for elections, following problems in 2007. This suggests that institutional arrangements and networks amongst practitioners may have a small positive influence on the electoral process, a finding echoed in other parts of this article.

Table 7: Ordinal regression model of the determinants of four barriers to participation at the EU Referendum

	Duplicate registrations	Names missing from the register	Confusion about registration status	National insurance number verification
Student population	.063 (.052)	-.031 (.050)	-.073 (.053)	-.027 (.050)
Immigration	.028 (0.14)	.013 (.013)	-.001 (.013)	-.006 (.013)
Voted Leave	.035 (0.17)	.005 (.016)	.026 (.017)	.005 (.016)
Population Density	-.015 (.011)	-.014 (.011)	-.010 (.011)	.005 (.010)
Local Authority type				
Scottish Unitary = 0	1.499 (.593)	.750 (.498)	1.052 (.537)**	.294 (.562)
Metropolitan = 0	-.606 (4.66)	-.410 (.359)	.255 (.457)	.440 (.441)
London = 0	-.600 (.813)	.087 (.778)	-.362 (.802)	-.269 (.760)
English Unitary = 0	-.118 (.360)	-.876 (.355)	-.206 (.371)	-.515 (.348)
Welsh Unitary = 0	.503 (.600)	-.549 (.599)	-.089 (.628)	-.818 (.594)
N	226	236	230	227
Nagelkerke R2	.134	.081	.069	.034

*** Significant at the 0.01 level. ** Significant at the 0.05 level. * Significant at the 0.10 level. Standard errors in parentheses.

Conclusions

A key but often unappreciated and unexamined, task for local government officials in many countries is to run elections. This article has documented the nature of the challenges posed by the UK Brexit referendum as a way of examining the pressures and consequences on local government to deliver elections in an established democracy. The views of such election administrators are crucial as they arguably perform a key role as the 'street-level bureaucrats' (Lipsky, 1980) of the electoral process.

The UK is a case study of a decentralised of electoral management for elections, but a hybrid model for referendums in which the Electoral Commission is given some powers of direction. In this respect,

the case is relatively unique, and it is important to note for comparative purposes that the management structure used for the referendum was largely effective and an improvement on earlier referendums. There were wider problems with late legislation passed, a lack of available funding, and problems such as levels of duplicate registrations that are likely to be challenges in all states holding elections.

There was no evidence that problems with electoral fraud were associated with immigration, Bangladeshi or Pakistani communities, despite recent suggestions in Britain. Instead, any suspicions were structured by voting patterns. The behaviour of Leave campaigners, particularly at polling stations, was cited as a cause for concern. Bureaucratic hurdles to participation were commonly found in the referendum – especially problems with voters wanting to register, but not appearing on the electoral roll. Multi-variate analysis suggested these problems were less frequent in Scotland, suggesting that regional organisational arrangements were more conducive to electoral integrity. The strongest bivariate relationship identified, however, was the effect of funding deficiencies on the compilation of the electoral register.

There are therefore some important lessons for the theory and practice of electoral integrity where it faces the voter, at local level. During an age of austerity, local electoral services departments, like many other local government services, are under financial pressure and this can impact negatively upon election quality. The rise of new populist movements, who are naturally more critical of public officials, may pose further challenges to the administration of elections. Lastly, organisational factors and informal networks are important in countering these challenges. These all need further research at the local level, in different types of electoral contest, and in different countries, to understand more fully the pressures faced by local government in delivering this crucial democratic service.

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[1] The devolution of electoral law for Scottish elections, and the unique history of Northern Ireland have led to slightly different arrangements there.

[2] Van Ham (2014) identifies 23 different conceptualisations of well-run elections. These include frameworks proposed by Elklit and Reynolds, 2005 and Norris et al., 2013. However, most tend to be broader than just electoral administration and management.

[3] The outcome of these initial pilots was contested, with the government claiming success and opponents claiming many had been deterred from voting.

[4] Conducted for LBC, Fieldwork 13th-14th June 2016, sample size 1656. Full tables are available at: http://d25d2506sfb94s.cloudfront.net/cumulus_uploads/document/463g4e5e0e/LBCResults_160614_EURefe rendum_W.pdf

[5] http://www.electoralcommission.org.uk/__data/assets/pdf_file/0003/196248/EU-Ref-Part-A-Role-and-responsibilities.pdf, p. 8

[6] Para 7(5) Schedule 3 European Union Referendum Act 2015

[7] https://www.electoralcommission.org.uk/__data/assets/pdf_file/0007/209419/Briefing-European-Union-Referendum-Management-2016-06-14.pdf Gibraltar was a separate electoral area and overseen by the South West RCO. The Chief Electoral Officer for Northern Ireland (CEONI) was the CO for the whole of Northern Ireland.

[8] Nine hard copy responses were received and added to the dataset manually. These are included in the overall response rates.

[9] Two interviews were conducted face to face: a joint interview with the CCO and DCCO; and another with one RCO.

[1010] https://www.electoralcommission.org.uk/find-information-by-subject/elections-and-referendums/past-elections-and-referendums/eu-referendum/electorate-and-count-information, date accessed 28th October 2017.

[11] Student population (Table KS501UK) for 'Schoolchildren and full-time student: Age 18 and over (Percentage)'; population density (Table QS102EW); Pakistani and Bangladeshi communities were taken from Table KS201UK.

[12] Migrant population levels for local authorities for 2016 taken from ONS Migration Indicators Tool, published on 24 August 2017, 'Migrant NINo registrations per thousand resident population aged 16 to 64', https://www.ons.gov.uk/peoplepopulationandcommunity/populationandmigration/migrationwithintheuk/dat asets/localareamigrationindicatorsunitedkingdom.

[13] The Electoral Commission routinely published and updated a risk register throughout the EU referendum process summarising these issues and helping to identify any potential difficulties.

[14] http://www.electoralcommission.org.uk/__data/assets/file/0004/198229/EU-Referendum-timetable-23-June-Final.doc

[15] Commonly explained as caused by weight of applications. For other suggestions, see Public Administration & Constitutional Affairs Select Committee (2017).

[16] For data on suspected electoral fraud cases see: https://www.electoralcommission.org.uk/find-information-by-subject/electoral-fraud/data-and-analysis