

# Housing, Communities and Local Government Committee

## Oral evidence: Electoral Policy and Reform, HC 673

Tuesday 4 February 2025

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### [Watch the meeting](#)

Members present: Florence Eshalomi (Chair); Lewis Cocking; Chris Curtis; Mr Lee Dillon; Maya Ellis; Mr Will Forster; Naushabah Khan; Joe Powell; Sarah Smith.

Public Administration and Constitutional Affairs Committee member present: Luke Taylor.

Questions 1 to 52

### Witnesses

**I:** Duncan Hames, Director of Policy and Programmes, Transparency International UK; Peter Stanyon, Chief Executive, Association of Electoral Administrators; Lara Parizotto, Executive Director, Migrant Democracy Project; and Dr Parth Patel, Associate Director for Democracy and Politics, Institute for Public Policy Research.

**II:** Vijay Rangarajan, Chief Executive, Electoral Commission; John Pullinger, Chair, Electoral Commission; Tom Hawthorn, Director of Policy and Research, Electoral Commission; and Laura Douglas, Head of Regulatory Support, Electoral Commission.

### Examination of witnesses

Witnesses: Duncan Hames, Peter Stanyon, Lara Parizotto and Dr Parth Patel.

**Chair:** Good morning, everyone. I am Florence Eshalomi. Welcome to today's session of the Housing, Communities and Local Government Select Committee. We will be looking at electoral policy and we have a range of guests before us. I ask my colleagues to introduce themselves and to make any declarable interests.

**Joe Powell:** Joe Powell, Kensington and Bayswater.

**Chris Curtis:** Chris Curtis, Milton Keynes North.



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**Sarah Smith:** Sarah Smith, Hyndburn.

**Maya Ellis:** Maya Ellis, Ribble Valley.

**Naushabah Khan:** Naushabah Khan, Gillingham and Rainham.

**Mr Will Forster:** Will Forster, Woking.

**Luke Taylor:** Luke Taylor, Sutton and Cheam.

**Mr Lee Dillon:** Lee Dillon, Newbury.

**Lewis Cocking:** Lewis Cocking, Broxbourne.

**Chair:** I ask our guests to introduce themselves for the record, please.

**Duncan Hames:** I am Duncan Hames, the Director of Policy at Transparency International UK.

**Lara Parizotto:** I am Lara Parizotto, Executive Director at Migrant Democracy Project.

**Peter Stanyon:** Peter Stanyon, Chief Executive of the Association of Electoral Administrators.

**Dr Patel:** I am Dr Parth Patel, Associate Director for Democracy and Politics at the Institute for Public Policy Research.

Q1 **Chair:** Good morning. Elections are always in the news. July 2024 seems like a long time ago, but elections and semi-elections continued to happen last year and this year there will be many elections as well.

You may recall that in the last survey looking at the public attitude to elections so many people felt unhappy with the way that elections are run in this country. A lot of people responded about misinformation online. Some people commented on how easy it was to vote and partake in elections. A number of changes were contained in the Elections Act 2022 for postal votes, voter ID, how many postal votes you can submit on behalf of people. On a scale of one to 10, with 10 being extremely healthy and one being not healthy, how healthy would you say the state of the UK's democracy is right now?

**Duncan Hames:** I will give you a low number because we are here to sound the alarm today. A central premise of democracy is equality of voice and the role of money in politics distorts that and is increasingly distorting it in very extreme ways. You only have to look at what is happening across the Atlantic. Last weekend the world's richest man closed down the largest humanitarian effort in the world and no one ever voted for him. We need to ask ourselves: are we going to sit around and see whether that can happen here or are we going to make sure that people do have equal voice in our elections?



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Our research found that the cost of elections has been rising, up to £100 million for a major party in an election cycle, not least because last year the election campaign spending limits were increased by around 50% for the first time in a while. Shockingly, so much of the money that the political parties rely on comes from so few people. In 2003, two thirds of the £85 million in private donations came from just 19 donors; that is 19 people and two thirds of the private donations in British politics. There was a similar pattern at the time of the EU referendum with a very small number of people—I think it was about 10 on each side of the argument—being sufficient for their donations to cover the whole of the regulated permitted spending amount.

Unfortunately, we also see that those who give a lot of money are recognised in a fashion that they might have a reasonable expectation of. We found that, in the last 20 years, nearly £50 million had come from donors who were alleged to have secured privileged access or influence or honours. There are as many major party donors, donors giving over £100,000, in the House of Lords as there are bishops. If you got the big party donors to sit together—and to some extent they do sit together in the House of Lords—it would be a bigger group in the second Chamber of our Parliament.

Big money is very much here in British politics and it is an affront to the premise that we all have an equal voice in democracy.

**Lara Parizotto:** Unfortunately, I also have to give a one. We are talking about residents who have no rights to vote at all. We are talking about 4.4 million residents, your own constituents who are coming to surgeries for immigration casework, transport, housing support who don't have any say over who represents them. We cannot consider it a healthy democracy when there are millions of people who are not able to have a say, to represent themselves, to inform their own interests. We cannot consider it a healthy democracy when those migrant residents who do have the right to vote, Commonwealth and EU citizens, are not voting nearly as much as their UK counterparts because of lack of information, support and awareness.

The Government's response in the Elections Act has been to further disenfranchise EU citizens from the right to vote; 171,000 EU citizens have been removed from the right to vote with the Elections Act. That was clear during the general election when EU citizens were so confused about whether they could or could not vote. We have spoken to a few of them who are still not aware of which citizens in your own constituencies can continue voting or not.

It cannot be considered democratic because the point of democracy is that it is equal for everyone, it is participatory, that those who live, work, pay taxes, contribute to public services are able to have a say over their future. That is simply not happening for millions of people who live in the UK and are part of the UK. Over 16% of the UK population, 10 million,



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were born abroad. It is a huge number of us who are our neighbours, often here even in the House of Commons, who have naturalised as British citizens, but participation is simply locked away from too many of our residents.

**Peter Stanyon:** I come from a slightly different angle. It is a nine or a 10 for the delivery of elections because you can't knock the system of those who are trying to deliver against all odds. If you are talking about the actual system itself, it is two, three, four—somewhere in that region.

The reason is, as all members will know, the current legislation is based on the 1872 Ballot Act and has not really changed. It is a piece of paper, a pencil in a polling station, which works but is not necessarily conducive to modern society where many administrators, many returning officers receive an awful lot of criticism for not getting postal votes out the day following the application coming in when in fact that is often because the application was made before the close of nominations. There are misunderstandings about how the system works.

On where we are now, there is that Act and the changes to the modern way we deal with most things that we do now—I will call it the Amazon culture type of thing. There is nothing wrong with that, but it does not apply to elections. Within the boundaries that administrators work in, there was no massive story about the election falling over; it was about the election results. That has to be seen as a positive for that boundary but the legislation definitely needs looking at.

**Dr Patel:** I think it is difficult to conclude anything but the health of electoral democracy in the UK is in pretty bad shape. I can say that with confidence because it is easy to tell. Turnout patterns in elections is one of the best barometers of social and collective wellbeing because elections are basically the points at which we collectively express a desired future en masse.

It is the mass dimension that matters most. It is the mass dimension that separates voting from all other forms of political activity, and that is receding. One in two adults living in this country voted at last year's general election. That is the lowest share of the population since universal suffrage, since women were given the right to vote, and that should be setting off many more alarm bells than it is currently.

It is surely one of the big questions of our times: where did all the voters go? We are getting awfully close to the tipping point where elections lose legitimacy because the majority did not take part and that is quite a dangerous place to be. I can say that again because we can see signs and symptoms of that. Just months after last year's election there was a petition to rerun it. It is easy to be flippant about that, but 3 million people signed it—more than 10% of the people who actually cast a vote.

Duncan mentioned the US. We look at the election denial movement there and think, "That can't really happen here" but the ground beneath



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your feet can fall through much quicker than you think, especially when so many people have lost faith in the idea that the future is susceptible to human influence. That is the entire premise of democratic politics.

**Q2 Chair:** All of you have touched on some of the challenges that we are facing with democracy. There are issues with funding, participation, access, who can vote. How confident are you that the Government are taking the health of democracy and elections seriously? Peter, I think you touched on that more people focused on the majority of the Government than how many people participated in the election.

**Peter Stanyon:** It is difficult to answer because we are still very early in the term of office. The Law Commission published its report on electoral reform several years ago and nothing has moved forward on that side. That is not to say there have been some positive noises coming out to try to look at some of the more mundane issues in elections, things such as timetabling. There are lots of recommendations coming out and I am sure the Electoral Commission will cover its recommendations in that sort of area later

However, leading on from what Parth said, it is reaching the point where we almost need to stand back and look at what we are trying to deliver. I will go back to the point that 80% of what we do now was written in 1872. We have sedimentarily put things on top of that and there has been a lot of unintended consequences.

There are issues with postal voting, for example, that are well documented in Scotland, partly because of the short timetables, partly because of the reliance on suppliers and the supply chain, partly because of the reliance on the Royal Mail. There are lots of things around the edges where maybe the time has come for a stand-back from what we are trying to achieve rather than tinkering around the edges of what we have currently because of the changes that have already come into the system.

**Duncan Hames:** Governments of all political stripes now have yet to act on the recommendations of the Committee on Standards in Public Life on this issue back in 2011, which called for a cap on political donations at £10,000 annually from permitted donors. It also had recommendations about how one might address issues of company donations, which perhaps we can come on to.

But at least this Government in their early days maybe—we will reserve judgment for now—have a commitment in their manifesto to set some controls for donations. We make the case that while you can make lots of small changes to try to strengthen the existing controls, fundamentally if your system works on the basis that some people are allowed to have disproportionate influence over elections, as long as they are the right sort of people, you will struggle to make those controls work.

**Q3 Chair:** I can assure you there was a really good shadow Minister for



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Democracy who made sure that that was in the manifesto. Lara, what reforms do you think we should see in electoral law, in the short term and the long term, to essentially improve the integrity of elections?

**Lara Parizotto:** Scotland and Wales have extended the franchise to 16-year-olds and also to qualifying foreign nationals on the basis of lawful immigration status. There is a system that is working in the UK that can be done in England and Northern Ireland as well.

On how the Government are responding to this, societies and countries' policies are becoming more and more diverse, more and more international. Countries like New Zealand have extended the franchise to every resident after 12 months of residence. Many other countries across the world are adapting to modern societies that have a globalised population.

With the Elections Act in particular, we have removed the voting rights of new citizens and now we have three tiers of new citizens with different levels of voting rights. We have EU citizens who arrived in the UK by 31 December 2020 and have secured some form of local status, who have the right to vote in local elections. We have EU citizens who arrived in the UK from 2021 onwards, who have the right to vote only if their country of origin has secured a bilateral voting rights agreement with the UK. So far only Poland, Luxembourg, Denmark, Spain and Portugal have secured those bilateral voting rights agreements. There is a third category that if you are an EU citizen who arrived in the UK from 2021 onwards and you are not from one of those countries, you will not have the right to vote in local elections. We are seeing the confusion in practice in many elections where people are not aware whether they can or cannot vote. We have seen politicians and councillors who are struggling to communicate that to their residents.

The response to further disenfranchise residents is problematic. Within the Elections Act there is the pursuit of bilateral agreements with all the EU countries, but there will always be some citizens, some residents who will fall through the gaps and will not benefit from those bilateral agreements.

**Chair:** I am sure we will come back to some of these points later on. We will move on to transparency in funding.

Q4 **Joe Powell:** I will start with Duncan to try to get a sense of the scale of the challenge. Currently, what do we know and not know about where money is coming from to political parties?

**Duncan Hames:** There are two particular avenues whereby money can reach political parties and we cannot know who it has come from. One is through unincorporated associations. Since 2010 unincorporated associations have given over £40 million in political contributions and 95% of that has come from unincorporated associations that have not reported the source of their income. That is quite a lot of money to have



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entered British politics and not know whose money it is or, therefore, whether they are people who are allowed to give money to British political parties in their own personal capacity.

The other route is company donations. The PPERA legislation, which is quite old now, was drafted with the sense that companies were separate legal personalities with a stake in the future of the country that perhaps ought to be allowed to make political donations. In practice, what we see in the pattern of company donations is that it is privately-held companies that are making political donations essentially on behalf of their owners.

Although this is seen to be a lawful practice, in many respects it is not very different from the channelling provisions that are prohibited. I cannot give your money to a British political party regardless of whether you are allowed to do it yourself personally, but if you set up a company and you put money into the company, that company can give money to a British political party.

Sometimes the ownership structures, and not even just the ownership but the pattern of the transactions, can make it very hard to be sure exactly where the money has come from. The back door is wide open to individuals who are not permitted to make donations to British political parties to use companies as a vehicle by which they can get round that rule.

**Q5** **Joe Powell:** On the first category of unincorporated associations, is there anything that would stop us requiring for unincorporated associations the permissibility checks that are required for donations that come regularly to political parties?

**Duncan Hames:** I don't see any reason why you shouldn't make the requirement and, indeed, reduce the level at which unincorporated associations report their source of income of the order of £500 in a similar manner that one might make on individual donations. You could still have unincorporated associations making donations on that basis. It would just no longer provide the shield of anonymity around those who have put money into them.

**Q6** **Joe Powell:** At the moment you could be a foreign millionaire, billionaire and put money through an unincorporated association and there would be no requirement to report who that person is or to check whether they are a permissible donor?

**Duncan Hames:** Some 95% of unincorporated associations have not declared the source of that income. The threshold at which they end up doing checks is far too high for that to be an obstacle to getting significant amounts of money into British politics.

**Q7** **Joe Powell:** On companies specifically, you referenced the idea that they have a British personality, a stake in the British economy. One of the proposals that has been suggested is you could tie the amount a company can donate to its British activity, whether that is profit in the UK



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or some other measure. Do you think that could prevent the loophole of setting up a company purely for the purposes of bringing in foreign money?

**Duncan Hames:** We have recommended that that is a modest change that one could make to try to address this particular risk. In the work that we do on anti-corruption and money laundering, we find that there are any number of ways to game rules that are designed to put restrictions on the way companies operate.

One could certainly try but my sense is that ultimately without material donation caps there are companies, maybe with five owners between them co-owning, a private group of people owning a company, multiple companies where it is unclear who the person in significant control is. There are many ways in which one perhaps might still be able to game the system as long as we maintain a situation in this country where there is no limit to the amount that any individual can give.

Q8 **Joe Powell:** I am interested in views on whether or not there should be a cap, but if you were to have a cap, you would need some of this transparency to implement it because otherwise you would not know necessarily where the money is coming from. That is for Duncan and anyone else who wants to address the cap.

**Duncan Hames:** Yes, absolutely. That was recognised by the Committee on Standards in Public Life in 2011 where it wanted to know the owner of the companies that were making donations. I don't think it is a case of either/or. The needs at the moment—as demonstrated not just in America; there are many democracies in which wealthy individuals essentially seek to control democratic outcomes—require a belt and braces approach.

**Dr Patel:** Can I briefly build on that? I completely agree with Duncan that you need both sets of measures because there are two problems in UK political finance. One is about the source of the funding and the other is about the size of the funding. We should not kid ourselves that undue influence can only come from beyond our borders and if we fix the foreign interference problem, political financing in the UK is in a good place, because it is not. There are concerning trends in patterns of political donations over the past 20 years.

The volume of money in British politics has grown—it has doubled in real terms since 2000—but, more worryingly, it has become more concentrated. The share of political finance in the UK coming from super donors, people giving more than £100,000, has grown and is growing quickly. That comes with heightened risks of undue influence and corruption and it affects public perceptions and public behaviour. There is emerging evidence linking rising concentration and volume of money in British politics to low voter turnout, to distrust of the political system.





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If we all agree, which I am sure we do, that this is one of the main challenges of our time, doing something about the volume and concentration of funding in British politics is a good idea. That is where caps can come in. They help not only with the foreign interference problem but they also help with the concentration problem. The last thing that is worth saying on that is that the UK is somewhat of an outlier relative to other European democracies. France, Germany, Italy, Spain, Portugal and Belgium all have political donation caps. It is quite popular with the public, including with most reform budgets, and that is worth bearing in mind.

**Q9 Chair:** But would you not say that the public would also take umbrage at having to fund political parties and political donations? In essence, political parties would argue about where they would get that money from.

**Dr Patel:** Yes, and that depends on where you set the cap. This is where Duncan and I might disagree. The IPPR view is to set the cap at £100,000. Other expert bodies have suggested a much lower cap of £10,000. If you set the cap at that level, you will need alternative sources of party financing. If you set the cap higher, you don't have to answer that question right now, you can answer that question later. You can put in the higher cap, reduce the risk of corruption now and start a cross-party conversation on how to get alternative sources of party funding.

**Duncan Hames:** On your point, Chair, if you reduce the spending limits, reverse the increase that happened last year, reduce them down to £16 million as the national spending limit in line with the Committee on Standards in Public Life recommendations, that would help the political parties deal with the question that you present. The principal challenge they face is not just how much they can spend but how much their opponents can spend. It is an arms race and if everyone has some restraints imposed on them for this arms race, it will help politicians of all political parties break their dependency on these very large individual donors.

**Chair:** Thank you. We will move on to foreign interference in UK elections and hopefully our colleague will not be sanctioned after this session.

**Q10 Mr Will Forster:** Thank you; that is why you chose me to do this question. Foreign political donations are banned in the UK but it is possible for foreign money to enter UK politics—that is the House of Commons Library, not a conspiracy theorist. The fact that we have that rule but there are huge loopholes is concerning. I welcome your thoughts on the impact those huge loopholes are having and what should be done about it. Trying to broaden it to not just being about money, how serious do you think foreign interference is in elections in the UK?

**Duncan Hames:** One of the challenges we have is that it has become increasingly hard for the Electoral Commission to enforce the rules that



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we do have. The maximum fine that it can impose is £20,000, which does not compare with the kind of numbers we have used earlier on in this session. It was stripped of the power in recent legislation to mount criminal prosecutions. I could privately mount a criminal prosecution but the Electoral Commission is not allowed to, which is perverse. Certainly where the police, who are pretty busy with lots of other forms of crime, don't seek to bring criminal prosecutions under the law, having an independent body like the Electoral Commission able to do so would be very helpful.

It lost an important part of its independence. It was a very powerful signal when the requirement was introduced that there should be a strategy and policy statement for the commission published by a Government Minister. It really does not live up to international standards. If you see that sort of thing happening in other countries you start to question the independence of their electoral regulatory body. If we want to be able to mount proper defences, we need the watchdog to have the independence to do that. It and others have looked at cases where it has appeared that foreign money has come into British politics and, as far as we can see, it has been unable to do anything about it.

There was a case where a bank raised a suspicious transaction report because it could see the connections to Russian bank accounts of a major donor to a British political party. He gave nearly £500,000 to a British political party within weeks of receiving several millions from his Russian father-in-law. There are other instances, sadly. We had a major donor recently who had served as a minister in the Mubarak dictatorship in Egypt. We had the interesting case of the donations made by Quinn Limited, which initially everyone assumed were essentially donations coming from the party-supporting director of that company, who gave interviews about, as a supporter, what he wanted to see from the future leadership of the party that he had been donating to. It was only subsequently going through the records that we were able to find that the owner of that company was a British-Russian dual national who had made his money from Caspian oil pipelines.

I think that the House of Commons Library is quite right to say that one way or another money that has essentially been earned overseas by overseas actors has ended up making its way into the campaign funds of British political parties and we have not been able to do enough to stop it.

**Dr Patel:** I will be brief and not repeat too much. There is agreement among most experts—and not just the House of Commons Library: this Committee a few years ago, the colleagues behind me—that UK political finance is vulnerable to foreign influence and that is within the letter of the law if not the spirit of the law. It feels like a relative no-brainer for us to act on that. Many of the ways we can do that have been mentioned already but some of the others are you can apply a know-your-donor policy on the political parties, ban corporations from donating anything beyond their UK-generated revenues or profits, put due diligence checks



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on unincorporated associations. These things are all quite easy to do and we should wonder why we have not done them.

I re-emphasise my point that we should not kid ourselves that this is the only problem with UK political financing. Public contractors is a good example. It was very prominent during the pandemic about how procurement contracts were given to donors to the party that was in charge of the British state at that point. That is another point of conflict of interest. The US is not held up as the gold standard for political financing but even it bans public contractors from donating to political parties from the period at which negotiations start to the period at which the contract is completed. If you look at people getting public contracts in the UK at the moment, quite a high share of them donate to political parties.

**Q11 Luke Taylor:** This is a very brief point and an open question. We have heard about how foreign citizens living here are unable to vote, yet the system is set up that foreign citizens not living here are able to donate massive amounts of money to influence the process. Does this seem particularly perverse and contradictory to you?

**Lara Parizotto:** Yes, absolutely. The people I am talking about, the residents we meet daily when we are out doing voter registration drives are ordinary citizens, residents of the UK. There was one case of a Brazilian man who is working as an Uber driver and has been here for 18 years. He has indefinite leave to remain but he is not prepared to pay the almost £2,000 fee to become a naturalised British citizen. We should not ask that from him because he has been here, he has an interest in the school that he takes his kids to, in the state of the roads that he drives on. He was a key worker during the pandemic but is not able to have any say.

I think that it is perverse on your side as MPs as well because you are seeing these residents come to your surgery weekly, you are seeing their casework, and in turn they can't vote for you or vote for someone else, so it is back on you, Mr Powell. You can see on our research the highest number of unenfranchised residents of 32,000 residents without the right to vote.

**Joe Powell:** I told IPSA.

**Lara Parizotto:** I don't work in your office but I can expect there is a really high amount of casework in immigration and other cases. I am sure you are doing a great job, but those residents are unenfranchised and without the power to either thank you or find an alternative.

**Q12 Lewis Cocking:** In the scenario you have just given, he can get the right to vote if he becomes a British citizen; is that correct? In effect, you are misleading us a bit because it is his choice. There is a choice available to him. If he wants to become a British citizen and get the privilege to vote, he can do that. He is choosing not to do that.



**Lara Parizotto:** It is not a choice when the cost of British citizenship is £1,600 just for the application fee itself, amounting to over £2,000 if you consider all other legal fees, but I will take that point. However, many nations across the world do not allow dual nationality. For example, a Japanese resident in the UK, again with indefinite leave to remain, would have to make a really tough choice of abandoning their nationality of origin to vote in the country where they live, where they reside, because very likely they still have ties to their country of birth but they have made their home here. That is compared to me when I moved to the UK; I immediately got a vote at least in local elections because I had EU citizenship. That is a question of choice. We can argue whether it is a real choice when the cost is so high and some people are locked out of that choice.

**Chair:** We will move on to voter engagement.

Q13 **Lewis Cocking:** You do agree though that becoming a British citizen is a real privilege?

**Lara Parizotto:** I became a British citizen. I applied for my UK naturalisation and now have a British passport and I chose to do that because I wanted to vote. Voting is really important for me, but I would argue from a personal perspective that choosing to become a British citizen should be much bigger, should be much more about cultural belonging rather than just wanting to have a right to vote, when a Commonwealth citizen counterpart just like me who decided to come to the UK has been able to vote in general elections from day one of arrival.

Q14 **Sarah Smith:** You have all expressed the deep concern about the apathy and disengagement from the democratic process that we are currently witnessing. Why do people feel so disengaged? That is an open question.

**Lara Parizotto:** From our experience it is so much lack of awareness of voting rights. We do regular voter registration drives where we go to a cultural festival, for example. When we are talking to Commonwealth or EU citizens, they simply do not know that they have the right to vote. Even when we pull up the gov.uk page that shows they have the right to vote, they still doubt that because so little is done to promote their right to vote for them.

During the general election, because of all the changes that I mentioned earlier about some EU citizens being removed from the right to vote, there were very contradictory messages on who had the right to vote. We came across some influencers on Instagram and other social media platforms that were saying EU citizens can now vote in general elections and that information was passed on to people with followers of over 20,000. We had to message them and ask them to please correct that because it was not true and they were giving misleading information, but it was not their fault.



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If you went on the gov.uk register to vote page before the general election it said, "The general election is on 4 July. This is who can register to vote" and that list includes British, Irish, Commonwealth citizens, EU citizens who arrived in the UK before 2022 and EU citizens from those countries that have a bilateral voting rights agreement. When you are just looking at the register to vote page, you understand that you have the right to vote. If the top of the message is that the election is happening soon and this is who can register to vote, you are almost understanding that you can because registering to vote is one right and then voting is another.

There was a lot of contradictory messages around and I think that leads to the statistic that 66% of EU and Commonwealth citizens are registered to vote compared to almost 90% of British and Irish because of the lack of information, lack of understanding. Of course, gov.uk is not translated, so civil society organisations like ours put a lot of effort and money into translating materials and going to churches, mosques and other events to get the information out there.

**Dr Patel:** I have a slightly different answer. This is a big question. There are books and books on this. Like all wicked problems, the causes here are multiple and complicated but if I have to say just one thing, low voter engagement to a large extent reflects alienation from organised politics. To be frank, you all know this better than most people because you are at the other end of the ledger here. In a way, you are the experts on this. You are elected politicians. You feel and see the anti-politics mood of the times up close every single day and you know it is an actual anger.

The distinguishing political mood of the times is more angry than it is apathetic and we know from surveys that, "People like me have no say in what government does" and "people like me think it is not worth voting" are rocketing. There are disparities here between top and bottom income distribution, between people who have been to university and people who have not been to university.

I think in broadly two ways about what is underlying this. There are the individuals and what is it about individuals that makes them not really want to engage with the political system. Then there is the political system and what has changed in the political system that has alienated people from organised politics, because it is easy to forget it wasn't always this way.

On the individual side, it is along the lines of what Lara said. It is about awareness, education, social and economic backgrounds, getting time off work. All of these reasons are the classic reasons and we sometimes overfocus on them, so I won't say enough about them. They are very important and some of them are very easy to fix, but there are changes in the political system that have alienated people from organised politics over the past 30 to 40 years. They include the withdrawal of parties from civil society, the convergence of the mainstream parties on policy issues,



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the decline of working-class MPs, the unequal responsiveness of Government policy, high profile scandal and corruption, the rising role of money in politics. The list goes on.

These are things that we can correct to some extent. We will not fix the issue that is 30 to 40 years in the making. The problem right now is the trend is still going in the wrong direction and as Parliament you can take steps to at least reverse that trend. I feel that that should be target of Government policy.

**Q15 Sarah Smith:** You did not mention the role of social media and how that is part of the picture we now find ourselves in. To what extent is there the impact of trade unions and, linked to that, the issue of working-class MPs?

**Dr Patel:** These are big questions. The way in which people relate to one another and then relate to the political system that is about collective governance has completely changed. To be frank, I don't think we completely understood that and, therefore, policy has not really come to terms with that reality. The evidence is much clearer on the role of civic organisations like unions and churches and what that does to mobilise people into politics from their own psychology but also their political behaviour.

The evidence on how new media and information systems are affecting perceptions of democracy and what democracy means is much thinner. That is an active research question and one that we are looking at right now, but clearly it is important. How we work within the new information system to try to rebuild engagement in democracy is a tough question and I am afraid I don't have a clear answer to that now.

**Duncan Hames:** On your question about why trust is so low, to some extent speaking from experience as a former Member of Parliament, you are not judged by the public on your conduct alone. They judge the political class as a whole, so effectively you are not just judged for what you do. You could be trying your best to behave in an upright manner and supporting good democratic practice but you are judged on what you are seen to let others get away with, especially when they are your own colleagues but not even just your own colleagues, just as the way politics operate in this country.

I urge you to consider that it is enough for your own political party or your own parliamentary local office to get your house in order. You need to persuade your colleagues across the House or sufficient of you to act in good number to address the issues that we have discussed today, otherwise the status of democratic politics in this country will still be held in disdain by many people who, frankly, surveys say, assume that those with more money carry more influence in what are supposed to be decisions made in the public interest.

**Dr Patel:** Nine in 10 people believe that.



Q16 **Sarah Smith:** How do you think we can improve levels of voter registration specifically and broaden democratic engagement, particularly among those who are less likely to register? As we hear, it is an across-the-board question now. I will leave it open to you.

**Dr Patel:** On voter registration, introducing a form of automatic or assisted registration is the way forward. The UK is very clearly an outlier here. I can't think of another liberal democracy that takes a laissez-faire approach to voter registration in the same way we do. Automatic registration is very common in most European democracies and I think about 30 democracies in Europe do it. Assisted voter registration is common in the Anglophone countries—America, Australia, Canada. We don't do either of those things and there is no good reason why we don't do them because they are not that difficult to do. Automatic voter registration is fast acting and high impact.

There are different ways to think about it. Some are more complicated than others but at the moment we have a system where you have local electoral officers in local government. One way you can do it is to give them more information-sharing powers so that they can automatically register people themselves. Instead of someone having to write in saying, "I want to register", they write to the person saying, "Can I register you?" or "I'm going to register you; opt out if you want or go anonymous if you want". That is very easy to do. That is being piloted in Wales now.

The Electoral Commission colleagues behind me might be able to tell you a little bit more about the implementation but I urge this Parliament and Government to try to implement that ahead of the next election.

**Peter Stanyon:** I think it comes back down to the way we are registered to vote. We have had significant changes over the last few years, just in my career. It used to be household registration. We used to have a canvass and the head of household registered people. The canvass now doesn't do that. It just audits and invites people to register. That was a fundamental decision made by Parliament that said, "This is the way we want to do this".

On things like AVR and the systems, we need to understand what we are trying to fix and what is the best method of doing that. Data sharing is one, absolutely. There are massive databases that electoral officers don't have access to. It is very much a locally-based thing but we don't have access to DVLA. There is data matching with DWP and things like that but it is not, "There is somebody there who should be on the electoral register".

Going back to your question about social media and general media reporting, fortunately or unfortunately—I think unfortunately—there is a great emphasis on Parliament, a great emphasis that every five years there will be a general election and "let's focus everything on that". Every Thursday across the country there is an election taking place, whether it



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is a parish election, and we have the discussions about local government reorganisation to contend with.

There is an issue about communications. Colleagues on the panel have far more experience and expertise in their areas, but across the board it is about raising the awareness that voter registration is now and when the election is called you can vote if you wish to and we have gone away from that. Certainly, statistics that have come out of the last few national polls suggest that we are moving to event-led registration rather than it being the normal process. That is because when individual electoral registration came into being, in the first three years of that, there were three major national events taking place and the registration levels were very high. I think we are now dropping down to the level where there is that disengagement, for whatever reason that might well be. Again, it is a step-back thing. Let's see what we are trying to fix and get the right system in place because, while automatic registration is a sliding scale of providing data or putting people on the register and somewhere in between is where we need to consider where we need to place it.

**Chair:** On that piece of recognising the weekly work that you and your colleagues do, electoral administration is making sure elections function, that we have a functioning transparent democracy. We do thank you for that. We are going to move on swiftly now. Luke and Chris are going to ask some questions about voting reforms.

Q17 **Luke Taylor:** Voting reform; democratic questions. Strap in.

I am going to start with some numbers. I am going to use seven adults sitting on that side of the panel as an illustration. In 2023-24 there were about 68 million adults in the UK, of whom 50 million were eligible to vote. Of the seven people over there, only five were eligible to vote in the last general election, in which only 28 million chose to vote. We are already down to three of the adults on that side of the table who actually decided to go out and vote, of which 9.7 million voted for Labour. Therefore, we are down to Joe as our single Labour voter out of those seven adults representing all the adults in our country, which resulted in 63% of seats and a crushing majority for Joe. Is that a functioning electoral system?

**Peter Stanyon:** I am not sure I can answer that. I will just say that whatever system is in place, we will administer it.

**Dr Patel:** I am going to interpret that as a question about the voting system. I think that is what you were getting at.

**Chair:** First past the post.

**Dr Patel:** The first past the post system—again, we are not going to have time to have a proper debate on this. This is an issue that has periodic revivals in British political history. The prospects currently are just very low. You are right: Labour won an historic majority on an extremely





efficient or an extremely disproportionate distribution of votes, depending on which way you see it. “Distribution” is the keyword there.

The main thing about the first past the post system is that geography matters. Where you live determines how influential your vote is in any given election. You can make an argument for it, or an argument against, but that is the key difference. There are lots of instrumental differences between majoritarian and proportional systems—effects on public attitudes, perceptions of political efficacy, voter turnout levels, the stability of policy. All those things are—the evidence says—better, basically, in proportional systems compared to winner-takes-all systems, but the debate should be happening on the intrinsic level. Should it matter where you live? Should all votes be equal regardless of where you live or not? That is the question. That is not for me to answer. That is for you guys to answer.

Q18 **Chair:** Who wants to come back on that really quickly? Lara?

**Lara Parizotto:** I am not going to comment on first past the post, but still on reforms, there is the philosophical question of why so many of those who have the right to vote are not voting. Touching on Sarah’s point as well that, for example, there are over 1 million Romanian residents in the UK, but no Romanian MPs. That point of seeing yourself in politics is really important to get people inspired and wanting to vote. Still staying on Romanian residents, there are single-digit Romanian councillors across the UK and that really inspires a person to participate in politics.

On the practical side of voting, with the introduction of voter ID, one angle that we are concerned about is that a lot of migrants do have a form of photo ID. They either have their biometric residence permit card or a passport. They are often asked to prove their immigration status. With the move to eVisas, however, many migrant residents are going to lose that physical proof of their ID, so there is the question of how they are going to continue to vote in person if they do not have that photo ID with them anymore. Therefore, there are some contradictions in immigration policy pursuing, for example, eVisas, whereas on democracy we are still asking people to take some form of physical proof of their ID to vote.

Q19 **Luke Taylor:** It was a question about the electoral system, and I am not going to ask about recommendations because we could go into the weeds there.

Peter, the work of the electoral administrators—and I think we touched on it in PACAC the other week—changing the voting system will obviously have a dramatic impact on how counts proceed and how long it takes to declare results. Do you see challenges around that? Do you see public perception with the speed of results? Maybe you want to explore the impact of change on those issues.



**Peter Stanyon:** First past the post is a simple system to count, as we all know—sort and count—and very quick results can come out as a result of that. It is not the only system that has been used or is in use in the UK. Certainly, there is the STV system in Scotland and for example, local government elections had the old SV system in London recently, which has now gone back to first past the post.

It very much comes down to the practicalities of what is being delivered. Take an STV system. That is incredibly complicated because of the sharing of the votes, and that may lend itself to electronic counting. As it has done in Scotland and in Northern Ireland, they don't do that. They count by hand and that takes four or five days sometimes.

In London, my experience was that it was a reasonably straightforward system that had the three contests taking place at the same time, one of which was the proportional system. I think the administration will adapt to whatever the system actually is, and there will be the reality that if it was STV, for example, that came in for a UK parliamentary election, the results will not be there at 2 o'clock on a Friday morning after the polling the day before. There will be that period. As for how voters would take to that, that is just a communications issue about how the process actually works. I think it is fair to say that whatever system is approved will be administered as efficiently as it can be in the circumstances.

Q20 **Chris Curtis:** A few questions, if that is okay. Lara, you talked there about the impact that you expect the voter ID laws to have had or will have on migrant communities. First, do you think the introduction of voter ID has had an overall positive or negative impact on the participation of migrant communities in British politics? Secondly, do you think the Electoral Commission and the previous Government have taken those kinds of concerns seriously?

**Lara Parizotto:** Thank you for the question. There is a general fact that migrant communities are more likely to have some form of ID because they are asked for that all the time. However, what we have heard when we are out with communities is, "What if, on the day of the election, I have a pending immigration case and all my documents—" because you have to send all original copies of your documents to the Home Office and, as you probably know, that can often stay with the Home Office for months. So, again, there are elections every Thursday, so what if, on the day of the election, you do not have any form of ID with you?

Yes, we promote voter authority certificates, but that is still a difficult message. That in itself is something that is going to disproportionately affect migrant residents. The move to EVisas is something that has been postponed by the Government but we are concerned that when it comes into practice people are simply not going to have their IDs to vote with.

Q21 **Chris Curtis:** You would say negative.

**Lara Parizotto:** Yes.

Q22 **Chris Curtis:** Do you think that the previous Government and the



Electoral Commission took those concerns seriously?

**Lara Parizotto:** We have not had a very thorough conversation on photo ID with the previous Government or this Government. What we have been focusing on a lot is on the extension of the franchise, which has not been taken seriously.

Q23 **Chris Curtis:** Thank you. Peter, I think in late 2022 your organisation put out a press release saying that it was no longer realistic to successfully introduce voter ID in May 2023. A quote directly from you said, "We risk electors being deprived of their right to vote". Do you think the Electoral Commission and the previous Government disagreed with you and thought you were wrong, or do you think that they did not care about electors being deprived of their right to vote?

**Peter Stanyon:** That was at the time that the voter ID was first coming in. It was a very constrained timescale at that particular period the for communication to staff in terms of understanding what they needed to do was taken on board. I believe that the Electoral Commission was on the same page as us in terms of the risks to the actual electoral process. The decision was taken by the Government to proceed. So, administrators can only deliver what they can deliver at those elections.

Q24 **Chris Curtis:** We will ask them in a little bit, but I do not believe they came out and ever made those comments publicly that they had those concerns, did they?

**Peter Stanyon:** We felt at the time that the speed of the introduction had the potential to give risk to the process. That is why we came out publicly and expressed our concerns that there was a significant chance of risk coming in. As it happened, nothing did happen. So, in terms of the safe delivery of those particular elections, it was—

Q25 **Chris Curtis:** Thank you for doing so. That is what many of us expect from independent organisations like yourself and would expect from the Electoral Commission if it also had the concerns that you mentioned.

Parth, we heard in our inquiry recently at PACAC that the Electoral Commission recommended these changes in 2014 because of risks of personification, despite the fact that there was little evidence of risks of personification. This was because it was worried there was a public perception of personification happening despite evidence showing that that was very far down voters' priority lists of concerns about elections. Do you think that it was reasonable for the Electoral Commission to recommend bringing in voter ID in 2014, and do you agree with the logic that the committee used in making that recommendation?

**Dr Patel:** Some of that information is new to me. I can certainly say that I do not agree with that logic. The aims of increasing the security of the electoral process and in increasing voter confidence in those electoral processes is perfectly legitimate and should be pursued, but to me the introduction of voter IDs as a means reflects a profound misunderstanding of where the threats are coming from, to put it plainly.



There are negative consequences of introducing voter ID. Two million people did not have an acceptable ID at last year's general election. That is 5% of the electorate, according to the team behind the British Election Study, an esteemed group of researchers. Whether you like it or not, the introduction of this policy has unintentionally caused voter suppression. We can debate the size of that suppression, but not the fact.

**Q26** **Chris Curtis:** A final question, if I may, Chair. Given that view—and given that I think that there is a lot of cynicism about a lot of the recommendations the Electoral Commission has made on this—how much trust do you think we should be giving to the Electoral Commission's current view on voter ID rules?

**Dr Patel:** I don't know what the Electoral Commission's current view is on voter ID rules, so I cannot comment on that. I think the Electoral Commission is a body that does demand trust for elections to perform legitimately, and I am of the view, as Duncan said, that it should have more powers and much greater independence. The removal of the commission's independence with the new statement by the last Government was a significant issue and the paring back of some of its powers was a significant issue, but I am not in a position to comment with an expert view on the actual Electoral Commission as an institution itself.

**Chair:** Thank you. Lastly, I am mindful of time, colleagues, and the responses from our guests. The voting age. Maya.

**Q27** **Maya Ellis:** This Government are committed to introducing legislation to lower the voting age to 16; Dr Patel, I believe you have recently released a report very much in support of that, saying that it would build a norm of democratic participation. A question to all of you: what would the main impacts and opportunities be of lowering the voting age to 16?

**Lara Parizotto:** I am happy to say something on that. When Scotland and Wales extended the franchise, they did it for 16-year-olds and for qualifying foreign nationals. In their own impact assessment in Scotland, for example, of those surveyed about 79% were in favour. Therefore, if the Government extend the right to vote to 16-year-olds, it would be ideal to use the opportunity to also extend the franchise to every other resident who does not yet have the right to vote.

We constantly meet families and 16-year-olds who may be from the US, Brazil, and Ukraine, who will not be enfranchised either at age 16 or 18 and beyond, if that is the case. Especially when you are in school, when some of your colleagues have the right to vote and you will not; something that big is going to happen to your friends, and you are still going to be excluded, that can exacerbate social exclusion and, yes, it is not good democracy for those in certain spaces.

**Peter Stanyon:** From an administrative perspective, I think we have to learn from Scotland and Wales. They have done it, so England should not reinvent the wheel as far as that is concerned.



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There are a couple of areas that I think the Committee would like to hear about. There are some differences between registration in Scotland and Wales and what is being proposed. There will still be some bits where they butt against each other so it would be helpful to get consistency, one system, respecting devolution and that we are talking about 16 and 17-year-olds being able to register. The crucial bit is communication about the individual being able to vote. Let's not reinvent the wheel. Let's go down the lines of using the good practice that first Scotland introduced and then Wales introduced when bringing this in, so that it is a reasonably straight forward administrative process.

**Dr Patel:** I can be super brief. I can see very few reasons not to lower the voting age. I think all the arguments against it are essentially condescending opinions of 16 and 17-year-olds and, to be honest, do not stand up. Our social norms and our laws already allow these people to leave school, get a job, pay tax, get married, have a child. It is strange that we don't let them collectively express a desired future.

In terms of the impact, it will bring 1.5 million people into the franchise. In the immediate term, that is a small but significant increase. In the long run, the impacts are probably more positive because of the thing you refer to. It helps to build a democratic culture, habituation—if you vote as 16, you are more likely to vote at later ages. At least, that is the evidence that is coming out of Scotland. It is slightly more complicated in Austria, but in Scotland that is what we are seeing. Greece and Malta also do it, so it is not too many countries. It is worth remembering the UK was one of the first countries, I think, to lower the voting age to 18. Therefore, that is something we can do, to lower it to 16 and lead a movement on the global stage on that.

I guess this is the last point to end on—there is something strange happening at the moment with democracy and young people. I think we all know this. The socialisation and politicisation of young people has changed. We can say that. How it has changed, we do not know but it doesn't look very optimistic. For this Government to go out and lower the voting age, that would be quite a powerful move to say, "Okay, we are going to do things a bit differently now".

Q28 **Maya Ellis:** Can I ask one follow-up on that? Where do you think the discussion needs to sit on what we need to do alongside that? Whether it is education, whether it is community engagement, what needs to sit alongside that to make that a success in terms of voter engagement and participation at that age?

**Lara Parizotto:** It is really powerful to have that education still happening in schools. Speaking from my own personal life, when you are in school, when you are receiving information from teachers, as a migrant child you are the one who brings that information to your parents who are not in spaces that are allowing them to build democratic political and civic knowledge. Extending the right to vote to 16-year-olds, alongside extending it to all residents, will be very powerful because those newly



enfranchised 16-year-olds from various countries will be able to give that information to their parents as well, and that will build democratic participation for everyone.

**Peter Stanyon:** I think it is education in the correct form. It goes back to the point I made earlier. Elections take place every Thursday. It is not just the once every four years. I am afraid there is still that ethos that that is the case so if we can get that reality ingrained into people's psyches—potholes and roads are different from making law, for example; that is fundamental. It is for the experts in education to be able to work what is the best language, alongside bodies, such as the commission.

**Chair:** Thank you very much to our guests this morning. That has given us a lot of food for thought and something that I am sure we will continue the conversation on.

## Examination of witnesses

Witnesses: Vijay Rangarajan, John Pullinger, Tom Hawthorn and Laura Douglas.

Q29 **Chair:** Good morning to our guests. Apologies. We are running a bit behind, but we will make sure that we get through the questions.

Can I ask our guests to introduce themselves for the record, please? I will start with Laura.

**Laura Douglas:** Hi. I am Laura Douglas. I am Head of Regulatory Support.

**John Pullinger:** I am John Pullinger. I am the Chair of the Electoral Commission.

**Vijay Rangarajan:** Vijay Rangarajan, the Chief Executive of the Electoral Commission.

**Tom Hawthorn:** Tom Hawthorn, Director of Policy and Research at the Electoral Commission.

**Chair:** Great. Thank you very much. We are going to start our questioning with Luke Taylor.

Q30 **Luke Taylor:** Good morning and hello again. We will start off by echoing some of the questions we asked in the previous section around monitoring and regulating, the financing of political parties and campaigning organisations.

We heard in the previous section about some of the restrictions on what the Electoral Commission can do—limits on fines, it cannot bring criminal prosecutions, limits on police time and effort to investigate. The question I have written down here is quite a good way to frame it. Has the way that political parties have been funded and how that has changed in recent years made it difficult to oversee and to police, and how are you adapting to those changes?



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**John Pullinger:** The legal framework in which we operate is out of date, over-complicated and inconsistent. That creates a big series of challenges for us. Political parties must be commended for the effort that they put in to comply with the transparency regime that is in place. Thanks to their efforts, and the efforts of Laura's team, we have very high levels of compliance with the regime.

However, over the last 10 years or so, we have seen quite a dramatic drop, to very low levels, in public confidence in the transparency of the political finance regime. We see the whole system within which we are operating changing very rapidly and there is a real need to future proof the system for changes that are still very much in progress. You heard a lot about that from the previous panel. We also have a series of weaknesses that were there at the beginning that do need to be addressed now, if we are not to face some even more damaging consequences for public trust in the system. That seems to us to be the key metric that we should think about.

If you like, I will invite Vijay to say a bit more about some of the reforms that we think we should put in place to address some of those issues, but that is my opening point which is yes to your question.

**Vijay Rangarajan:** Thank you very much, Chair. As John said, public agreement that spending and funding of parties is transparent has fallen from 37% in 2011. It is now down at about 15%. That really is a significant issue in terms of public trust. Whereas trust in other parts of the system is quite high, that one is going down.

We have made, and have been making for a long time, three core recommendations since about 2013. I think you heard about these from your previous guests. The first is on company donations. A company doing business in the UK, as is currently the case, should only be able to donate as much as its profits are over the last year or so. That would have a significant effect, and we have been suggesting that for a long time.

Our second recommendation is on unincorporated associations, which are possibly even worse a problem than your previous guests set out. Any two foreign nationals, or more, abroad could set up an unincorporated association in the UK and by law they are a permissible donor at that point. The transparency requirements on them are really very low. We do not have to publish—and they do not have to make public—the name of the person who is responsible and directing, and they do not have to be permissible donors themselves who are donating in. There are a number of things to do with unincorporated associations that we think need to be changed in the law—and this in primary legislation—to bring them under the same kind of controls and transparency that apply to other donors.

Finally, your previous guests touched on the 'know your donor' checks by political parties who do a good job in trying to check what they can. There is more they can do and there is more that we probably need to do to look a little bit behind some of the donors coming through. We have



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the agency or other requirements where you cannot donate through someone else, but it is great if the parties themselves can build their capability in checking who their donors are and asking the question when they have any concerns.

Those are our three main recommendations. We don't think they will make the system perfect but they would fix some of the significant issues that we have seen and that your previous guests have pointed out.

**Luke Taylor:** Can I just take advantage of the moment to congratulate all of the various party treasurers, local party treasurers and agents around the country for the incredible work they do in complying with—

**Chair:** Keeping us out of prison.

Q31 **Luke Taylor:** Exactly, yes. Although their frequency in declaring us as the legal necessities in the process is slightly disappointing. It does take the sheen off their achievements somewhat, but, yes, it is incredible the work that they do and the abilities they have to comply with the rules that are very clearly set.

**Vijay Rangarajan:** I could not agree more. We have been stepping up tremendously the amount of support that we give to parties. The main parties have good operations in place. We now have over 400 political parties in the UK, and one of the challenges of the system is that if you are one of the smaller parties, compliance with this is a real challenge, and so Laura's team in particular—and she may want to say more—has been stepping up the support part of enforcement.

We are not just trying to enforce after the event when someone breaches, inadvertently maybe, some of these complex laws but helping them to comply long before they have to actually produce what are very long and complicated returns as you know.

**Laura Douglas:** I would just say briefly that we provide guidance and support for parties and campaigners. We want to do that in a way and at a time that works for them. Our key objectives are making sure that people understand their obligations, but also that they can campaign with confidence.

At the most recent election, we had over 800 requests for support with filling in the candidate return. We also want to make sure that those parties that do not have massive teams understand the law and are able to participate in our democracy. We do this primarily through feedback that we get about how the law is applied in practice and make sure that that is reflected in our guidance and importantly, as I say, provide that targeted advice and support.

Q32 **Luke Taylor:** You have answered some of the follow-up questions, but I will just ask—and keep it brief because of time—what specific changes do you need to see from the Government to ensure that the Electoral Commission is best able to ensure the integrity of political funding? So what changes? You have spoken about some of the problems.





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**Vijay Rangarajan:** First, the ability to have fines proportionate to some of the more serious offences and we don't; £20,000 does not necessarily make a dent for some of the people who are potentially committing these offences.

We would also like a further set of data-sharing powers. It is very, very complex at times to track the money, and track some of the donations back through the various channels they have come through. We work very closely with the police, with the MCA, with plenty of other agencies. The data sharing between us can be quite a challenge at times, so there are some data sharing powers that we would also find very helpful.

**John Pullinger:** If I may, Chair, just one other thing, which is not so much about us but for the system. It is to deal with the horrendous inconsistency between the regimes that candidates face, which is criminal for everything and the regime that parties face, which is civil for everything. That creates a huge jeopardy for you and your agents and for political parties. That is something that I think would make the lives of individual candidates and the parties much more straightforward if that was joined up.

Q33 **Mr Lee Dillon:** Fines: do you find that there is an issue with recovering the fine once you have set them? Take the unincorporated body example: two foreign nationals who set up an unincorporated body and make a donation. If you fine them, how do you get the money back at the end?

**Vijay Rangarajan:** Most of our fines, I think, have been on political parties rather than unincorporated associations because, under the law as it stands, an unincorporated association is a permissible donor, so they are able to do this.

In general, no, we do not have a major problem, but we have at times had real problems in enforcing some of the fines. In the end, it just takes a long time, and we have had to go to civil recovery on a couple of occasions to do so.

Q34 **Naushabah Khan:** We heard from the previous panel in quite some detail about the potential influence of foreign individuals and organisations in UK elections, particularly around finance. I know, Vijay, you just referenced it as well. What are the main challenges that you face in monitoring and regulating the threat of interference from foreign nationals and organisations in UK elections?

**Vijay Rangarajan:** Clearly, there is the financial one that we have touched on. That is quite significant. Separate from that, we were looking very closely before this general election at the social media sphere and the mis- and disinformation that was flowing. We were looking at the abuse and intimidation that were obviously published quite significantly. Some of that was clearly to do events outside the UK, particularly in the Middle East, which immediately came back into the British domestic political sphere. We were clearly worried about some of the influence of AI and how that could be used in some of the technologies.



I don't think any of them were dominant or affected the election result. We gave a fairly positive assurance at the end of it, but they are clearly things we cannot be complacent about. So, we are concerned about the social media world and what we can do about that, particularly changes in things such as fact checking. We are working very closely with other regulators on how we can support candidates and the public to understand what is going on.

We did not see evidence—and we worked very closely with the Government on this—of major foreign hostile state activity and that was good. Clearly it is another possibility, and so with the Defending Democracy Task Force we are very plugged in to try to do whatever we can to support.

Then finally, on the mis and disinformation, there was some. There were deep fakes. A significant number of people were saying in our post-poll report that they had seen mis- and disinformation. Where we came in was if we saw mis and disinformation about the electoral process—and there was some—we would try to contradict it very loudly and very clearly. Things like, "You don't need to bring a voter ID". "Yes, you do and here is why and what you have to do." We will take a very clear stand on that.

Overall, therefore, it wasn't a massive feature of the election, but it is something that we are going to include in our next corporate plan, which will extend for the next five years because we think, looking at elections around the world, that there is an increasing set of challenges. I was on a Teams call with my Australian colleagues this morning. They need to run an election before May, and they are really concerned about some of the challenges coming their way. So, we are working with partner regulators around the world to see what the challenges are and what we can do about them.

**Q35 Naushabah Khan:** You have picked out a few things, hostile states and the use of social media. Do you think that the UK Government are suitably equipped at this point, and is there legislation in place to deal with that? How can we close that gap? What more should we be doing for future elections?

**John Pullinger:** Let me start, if I may. One thing we think is really important is for the electoral system to be seen as part of our critical national infrastructure. With that kind of designation comes the full support of the state and the resources at its disposal. As Vijay said, we have had some very active and supportive engagement with the Defending Democracy Task Force and the various agencies that can get the intelligence to help us understand what is going on.

Investment is needed and we may come to that later in this conversation, but it underpins, at a series of levels, the corporate plan that we will be putting forward for the next five years.

Our electoral system has been underinvested in. Peter Stanyon mentioned the electoral administrator point on this. The system is run on



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a shoestring and yet it absolutely matters that it is run well for the success of democracy, the health of our future and the institutions that enable the state to function effectively. That is the step-up that we think we need to see over the next few years.

- Q36 **Naushabah Khan:** One final question, going back to donations—and, Vijay, I know that you did touch on this in previous comments. How urgent do you think it is that we close that gap, that the Government take action to close that gap, particularly for unincorporated associations and the potential threat of foreign donations that we might see?

**Vijay Rangarajan:** We have been making that recommendation since 2013, so we would very much like to see it in place as soon as possible.

I do not think it is urgent in the sense that it has to be rushed through Parliament but in the next piece of legislation. We are working with the Government on what those provisions could be. They are complex. They will need proper scrutiny, debate and consultation with the many people who would be affected, not least the parties. We have been discussing this in the various political parties' panels as well, but they have been a long time in gestation.

**Chair:** Joe, do you want to add anything?

- Q37 **Joe Powell:** Very quickly, just for clarity. You feel that there is consensus on unincorporated associations, transparency over who is donating and requiring permissibility checks if they are a regular donor. Is that right? Those would be the two things where you feel like—

**John Pullinger:** Yes, those two and the restriction on company donations as well. I don't know whether there is consensus about that, but those are the recommendations that we and the Committee on Standards in Public Life have made consistently. Those arguments were put forward in debates, for example, around the National Security Act that came into force quite recently. There is certainly a consistent line of argument put forward. As Vijay said, if it came before the House it would need to be debated and scrutinised thoroughly and properly.

**Chair:** Thank you. Electoral reform, Chris.

- Q38 **Chris Curtis:** I am going to focus on voter ID, unsurprisingly, and a few other bits.

First, Mr Stanyon made some comments in the previous panel. He implied that you may share some of the views that he was bringing up at the time on the changes to the voter ID laws. Do you think that was a fair characterisation? Do you think you made those views known—including publicly—at the time and, if not, why not, as an organisation, not individuals obviously.

**John Pullinger:** My recollection is that we have been very clear publicly and with the Government that the introduction of voter ID needs to meet three tests. The first is that it meets the test of providing assurance around security, which is where our initial report came in, but only if it



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meets the test of accessibility. I can recall the phrase that I used in Committees. “One person turned away is one too many” and voter ID has to meet that test.

The third test is workability, and that is where Peter Stanyon and his colleagues come in. It has to be introduced in time and in a manner that can be effectively administered. Our position now is that there is still work to be done, particularly around the accessibility test.

Local authorities did a magnificent job in 2023 and then in 2024 of administering this effectively. We need to make sure that they have the resources to continue to do that. However, many people were turned away and we need to take action to ensure that is minimised and, ideally, that nobody is turned away.

There are three things that we think need to happen. The first is the list of acceptable forms of ID needs to be expanded for certain groups. Take young people, for example. Young people’s Oyster cards could be included. Unemployed people are more likely to be discouraged from voting than others but the DWP card that many of them have could be made part of the expanded list.

The second thing, which was referenced in the earlier panel, was the voter authority certificate. That was a very clunky thing. Make that much more straightforward and ideally digital so the people can get it very easily.

Q39 **Chair:** There was quite a low take up of that wasn’t there?

**John Pullinger:** Yes, because it was clunky.

The third one would deal with the question of people having their documents away. I recall witnessing someone in exactly that position at a polling station that I went to. I was very impressed with the presiding officer trying to think of solutions, but the solution that we propose—which is the one adopted in Canada—is to allow vouching for people. If someone who is there knows that you are that person, but you cannot provide the documents, then that is possible.

We believe that with those three changes, photo ID can meet the three tests as it has done now for 20 years in Northern Ireland.

Q40 **Chris Curtis:** That is a lot of work to do in order to fix a problem in the system, which as one of the previous panel has said, did not really exist in the first place. I think that is not an unfair characterisation. The reason I phrased the previous question in the way that I did is because what many of us found interesting through this process is that we felt the Electoral Commission was not acknowledging the problems that were being faced as we went through this process. Let me give you one example.

On the night—please correct me if you think I am wrong on this, but it is my best recollection—at 10 pm-ish, straight after voter ID laws came out, the Electoral Commission put out a press release before any data had



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been collected, before anyone had looked at the impact, turning people away for instance, saying that it thought the first elections after voter ID laws has been brought in had been well run. As any comms professional would have told you, that was widely interpreted by the press as being tacit support for the voter ID law changes, not challenging some of the problems that may have arisen before we had had any time to analyse whether those problems had come about.

I think many of us find it quite concerning that the Electoral Commission was not performing its purpose properly and correctly, challenging some of the issues that came along during that process.

**Vijay Rangarajan:** Let me explain the two things. One is a press release—you are absolutely right: at 10 pm on the close of the poll, which was looking at the entirety of the poll and how it had run. Had we seen long queues outside polling stations and people turned away because of voter ID checking, that would have been a real problem. That was a problem we identified in advance, and, with the AEA and other administrators, we and local councils made sure that the polling stations were—

Q41 **Chris Curtis:** You knew how that press release was going to be interpreted, right? You knew that that press release was going to be interpreted as the big electoral check, and the big change that was made to our electoral system that way, “That has gone fine, no problems”. We did not know that at the time.

**Vijay Rangarajan:** Broadly, we saw what was going on on that day. We had people in many of council polling stations and we thought that the implementation of voter ID in the polling stations, as I said, did work broadly well. We then of course did a full-scale piece of work analysing what had happened, and we published that late last year in a standalone report on voter ID doing, Mr Curtis, I think exactly what you are asking us to do, which is to analyse the policy and go through all the numbers. We did a major piece of public polling research as well to find out, not just who was turned away at the polling station but who was put off by the voter ID requirement.

We then made a series of policy recommendations to try to improve it, which John has set out so I won't repeat that, but I think there was a degree of assurance that we should have given on the night of the poll, about the entirety of the poll. It was not really about voter ID specifically. It was saying, “Look, we have just been through a snap general election, in the middle of the holidays in parts of the UK, in quite a heated environment politically”—which you all know as well as we do—“and it worked well”.

Witness the fact that I think we had no challenges to the results, and we had a tremendous amount of—if I can put it this way—losers' consent exhibited that night, which is a fundamental part of our system. I stand by the fact that we think those elections were well run and, broadly, did indeed reflect very much the will of the people who voted, but we do not



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minimise the fact that we should have come back, and we have made those recommendations on voter ID very specifically in the standalone report.

**Q42 Chris Curtis:** Okay. Final question from me. I will try to word this carefully. Over the time when these debates were happening—so let's say 2013 to 2024—was there any communication between the previous Government and the Electoral Commission that any reasonable person would have considered as pressure being applied by the previous Government in order to make the Commission in its communications more favourable towards the voter ID changes?

**John Pullinger:** I would say absolutely no to that, certainly during my time. I have been in post for nearly four years now and no. Had there been, we would have resisted it.

**Q43 Chris Curtis:** It would be good to have confirmation that that was not the case over the entire period as well.

**John Pullinger:** I would be astonished. I can only speak from my own experience here. Tom, you were here at the time. Do you want to respond?

**Tom Hawthorn:** Yes. I am absolutely not aware of that. I think, certainly while the Elections Bill was being debated, and as it went through Parliament, we briefed Parliament on our views and concerns about some of the risks relating to the approach that the Government were taking on voter ID. We made those points clear to Parliament at the time the Bill was being debated.

**Chair:** Yes, and the predecessor Committee did look at that as well.

**Q44 Naushabah Khan:** Two very quick questions from me. The first one, John, I think you mentioned some of your recommendations that are going to be coming forward, which include, for example, looking at unemployed people who are less likely to have that type of ID. Has there been any further work done on socioeconomic background and the connection to photo ID in terms of having those types of identification?

**John Pullinger:** Vijay?

**Vijay Rangarajan:** Yes, that was the conclusion of our voter ID report. Tom may want to come in with more on this. We did quite a lot of checks about which groups were more or less affected by voter ID. I think the strongest correlation that we found was with socioeconomic class. There was definitely a correlation with C2DE finding it more off-putting and they were less likely to have voter ID. Most of our recommendations we made based on the evidence of what was then seen in successive elections and that finding was one of the reasons for the recommendations of broadening the list of voter ID and which ones should be chosen.

**Tom Hawthorn:** The other groups that we identified through our research that are much less likely to have already accepted forms of ID



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include people who are severely limited by disability and people who say that they are renting from a social landlord.

Q45 **Naushabah Khan:** We have had a conversation today about people feeling disenfranchised or feeling that they do not have a say in the political system and wanting to increase the number of people voting, particularly people from particular backgrounds for example, ensuring that we involve them. Do you think that voter ID is helping or hindering that endeavour?

**John Pullinger:** We heard some of the comments made by the previous panel. Most of us are required to show ID in all kinds of situations now, particularly migrants and some of the others who are otherwise potentially disenfranchised here. To that extent, I don't think it makes a difference one way or the other, as long as it is not too restrictive. The complaint that we have had throughout is that if you make a very tight list of voter IDs, it is definitely going to put those who have it in one box and those who do not will be disenfranchised unless they make an extra effort. Therefore, we very much favour thinking more broadly about the people who are struggling with the policy. Tom has outlined that, and our research goes into quite a bit of detail about what is the ID that those people can bring to ensure they are not put off.

**Vijay Rangarajan:** The proposal to have a digital ID would also be very important. We have made that recommendation. It looks very much as if the Government are thinking about such a thing because I think it came out in a recent paper from the Secretary of State for Science, Innovation and Technology. That would make a significant difference.

The other thing is communication. We ran a major communications campaign before the general election to make sure that awareness was as high as possible and preferably uniform across the UK. Another of our concerns was that in areas like Scotland, which have never had an election with voter ID, awareness could be significantly lower than in, say, Northern Ireland, which as John says has had it for 20 years. We got to about 90%, the high eighties and 90% uniformly across the UK. That was important partly for the legitimacy of the process.

Finally, we do think that this will bed in to some extent. We have already seen it in Northern Ireland in particular, where it has been there for 20 years and people do turn up with ID and the rates of rejection are very low. Parliament having put the system in place, we can tweak the list and that will definitely help.

The final point, the lack of consistency between different elections does cause some voters concern. Do they need to bring, for example, voter ID for the next Scottish Parliament election? No, they don't. But then they are being told in another way that they do for some of the local elections. So, there is an element there for us to work on in our communications, but also some consistency is required in the process.

**Chair:** Thank you. Moving on swiftly, now. We could have elections in 12



weeks. Maya: upcoming council elections.

Q46 **Maya Ellis:** As pointed out earlier council elections take up a greater proportion of the time. Does the prospect of unitarisation of district and county councils across the country carry risks in your opinion for democratic legitimacy?

**Vijay Rangarajan:** The short answer is yes. We are concerned in several ways, and we have been working closely with the Government—and MHCLG in particular—about this process. We are very, very close to the May elections. We and local authorities and many of the independent candidates and parties, are already committing significant funds and have been working up to these elections. There is just a timing issue for starters.

We can see the case for postponing sometimes, but our overall attitude is that scheduled elections should go ahead. Clearly, if they are going to waste money or voters are going to be asked to vote twice or vote people into a body that will not exist for very long, cases can be made. We can see cases, and there is precedent, for some of the local elections being postponed for a year. Where we get extremely nervous—and I think we would have grave doubts—is postponement for more than a year. It is really difficult because then essentially you have a council existing almost past its mandate. Certainly, it creates problems for voter expectation, for democratic legitimacy and for the legitimacy of the decision-making that that council is doing while these reorganisations are going on. We hope to hear from the Government soon.

I think there have been about 18 applications from councils for postponement. My understanding is that the Government will not accept anything like that number. There has to be a very strong case for postponement, and it has to come back to are we confusing voters or are we actually helping voters vote for something meaningful at the time.

Q47 **Chair:** Finally, we have touched on the statement and, just for clarity, I should declare I was the Shadow Minister responding when the Government introduced that statement back in February. The Speaker's Committee also scrutinises the function of the Electoral Commission and I, in my role as the Chair of this Committee, sit on that Committee as well.

In responding to that statement, some of the points that the Government outlined were around that the commission should support the effective delivery of the voter ID system and raising awareness, should support local authorities in issuing the VAC authority forms and assist the Government to tackle voter and electoral fraud. The predecessor Committee looked at the issue of the statement when that was raised. Do you feel that that statement has had an impact on the work that you have had to carry out as a commission, again in light of some of the questions that my colleague, Chris Curtis, posed earlier?





**John Pullinger:** Primary legislation that enables the current Government to guide the body that is overseeing future elections needs to be repealed. The commission studied the Government's current statement but decided to carry on acting independently because of the overriding requirement to assure public trust in what we do.

Q48 **Chair:** Would you prefer that the Government retained or repealed that and would you—

**John Pullinger:** The primary legislation should be repealed.

**Chair:** Repealed.

Q49 **Joe Powell:** Have you done any internal assessment with your staff of any chilling effect that that statement has had or noticed anything that has happened differently?

**John Pullinger:** I have done my utmost with staff—as has Vijay—to say, “You carry on as normal”. We will continue to act independently because our whole credibility—

Q50 **Joe Powell:** Regardless of what that statement said?

**John Pullinger:** Exactly, yes. Of course, we considered it, as we are required to do. Then in the round, looking at everything else that we were required to do, we decided that we will carry on acting independently and that was a decision of the board.

Q51 **Chair:** In essence, you feel that that statement as it stands threatens the independence of the Electoral Commission?

**John Pullinger:** Yes. It is a threat because the commission exists on the statute books. In the public mind, and in many debates in this House, there have been statements about the formerly independent Electoral Commission and the Government having this power, raising the kinds of questions that Mr Curtis has quite rightly asked of us, which would otherwise be much less likely to have been raised because it would have been unthinkable.

Q52 **Mr Will Forster:** Thank you, John, for highlighting your concerns about the independence—that is really helpful, to be honest with the Committee about it. This panel has been very useful, but the previous panel highlighted the concerns with the electoral law. As candidates, we know the electoral law system is not helpful and not fit for purpose. If we, the Committee, recommended to the Government that they do a comprehensive review of electoral law and work with you and other stakeholders on it, would you welcome starting from scratch because the system is not fit for purpose?

**John Pullinger:** I don't know that we need to start from scratch. As Peter Stanyon referenced in the previous panel, the Law Commissions of England, Wales and Scotland have done a significant amount of work at the invitation of the Government which gives us something to start from, a properly consolidated, up to date picture of law that actually fits



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together rather than how it does not at the moment. Therefore, we do not need to start from scratch, but we do need a fundamental review that thinks of the electoral system as an entity and as part of our critical national infrastructure.

**Chair:** Thank you. I think at a time when we are looking at the issues around trust in politics and trust in our political system, it is right that we have an electoral system that is separate from Parliament, separate from Ministers, so that you can carry out that function with independence.

I will bring today's session to a close.