



Political and Constitutional Reform Committee

Oral evidence: [Voter engagement in the UK](#), HC 1059

Thursday 3 April 2014

Ordered by the House of Commons to be published on 3 April 2014.

Written evidence from witnesses:

- [Bite the Ballot](#)
- [Dr Toby S. James](#)

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Members present: Mr Graham Allen (Chair); Mr Christopher Chope; Tracey Crouch; Paul Flynn; Fabian Hamilton; David Morris; Chris Ruane; Mr Andrew Turner

Questions 207 - 257

Witnesses: **Michael Sani**, Managing Director, Bite the Ballot, and **Oliver Sidorczuk**, Policy Coordinator, Bite the Ballot, gave evidence.

Q207 Chair: Welcome. You probably know we are continuing our evidence-taking on voter engagement in the UK. Obviously your organisation has a lot of expertise in this area, and we would love to pick your brains this morning, if you would be so kind. Would you like to start us off, or shall we jump straight into questions? Do you have anything you would like to say by way of opening, or would you like to go straight to questions?

Michael Sani: Only that we are delighted to be here. As you say, we are more than happy to share our expertise in this area, but ultimately the hope for us is that there are some clear action points that come out of this. We have been doing the stuff we are going to share today for over two years now with various different people in the civil service and three or four Ministers, and it always seems to be received well but never really acted upon.

Chair: If you look at some of our past reports, you will see that we have been, hopefully, quite influential in moving issues forward. It certainly would not be my intention to do anything other than make a set of proposals that whoever forms the Government after the next election would be able to take on and put into law. That is always my ambition. If we get there as a committee that would be wonderful but we can only do that with your help and expertise. So, welcome again.

Q208 Fabian Hamilton: I think we all have an interest in making sure that as many people are registered as possible, so your work is incredibly important and we will do everything we can to support you. 5 February was the first National Voter Registration Day, which was an initiative you set up, I believe, at Bite the Ballot. You have estimated that you registered around 35,000 people who would not otherwise have been registered. Can you tell us how you did it?

Michael Sani: How we established the day and put it into place?

Fabian Hamilton: Yes, how you got an extra 35,000. I think your report says that it cost about 2p per registration as opposed to some Electoral Commission campaigns that have come in at over £70 per registration, which is an enormous difference. So I just wondered how you did it, how you kept the costs down. What is the secret? We would all like to know, because we would all like to do the same.

Michael Sani: I think essentially it was not about the money—obviously we didn't have a lot so it couldn't have been—but it was about the inspiration. It was about the call to action to the individuals. There were lots of different registration drives that happened throughout the UK. These were led by individuals who felt inspired to bring a team together and just concentrate on that peer-to-peer element of engagement. It was about actually talking and listening—nine times out of 10 leaving the word “politics” out initially—about issues people felt passionately about, and then linking that to voter registration, the gateway to democracy, having your say. Then the other benefits such as your credit rating all played a role. We were delighted to know that many of the registration drives that happened in schools were carried out and led by people who were not even 16, so they could not even register themselves. For us, it was the beauty of knowing that these people would be inspired through their own work so that when they turned 16 they would treat voter registration as a rite of passage.

So it was about the calls to action, and we had help from some celeb supporters, which was a fantastic addition to the campaign. But I guess really it was all about that inspiration for the individuals to take on the challenge, and they did. Some people registered as many as 3,000 people at certain universities across one day. It was incredible. They went to all the different societies, they had stalls in the canteen. It was brilliant.

Q209 Fabian Hamilton: With a couple of hundred people doing 3,000, you get a lot more registrations. Your goal was 250,000, I think. Is that right?

Michael Sani: Yes.

Fabian Hamilton: You were a bit short of that. Was it simply because you did not have the several hundred people who were registering 3,000 voters? What prevented you?

Michael Sani: There are two things to say on that. We knew that to get the initial traction from the media we had to be bold with our aim. The truth is that the core team that sat in the office knew that 250,000 was a tough ask, but when we put that out there it got the calls from ITV *Daybreak*, the BBC. We had a loose aim of saying, “We will put the call out. We need the press” and obviously everyone was jumping on—“250,000? Yes, great”. But we also know that if we had had a bigger lead-in time, and if partners that we had initially engaged with had delivered on the initial agreements, then that was a very real figure to reach. TeachFirst alone has 2,000 secondary school teachers, and if they had registered 50 to 100 each we could have had huge numbers.

We learned a lot from this year to know that the relationships with individual partners need to be managed well and that a greater lead-in time will help us do that. With Asda, for example, we were passed from person to person and it was not necessarily a really robust handover to Asda from an

internal perspective. By the time we got down to the crunch of what would happen, it was three weeks before National Voter Registration Day, so we knew it was not going to be as successful as we had agreed with them in September.

Oliver Sidorczuk: But I think crucially, what we proved was that there is the appetite there and there is the potential for this with the transition to IER and online registration. One of the things that we are most proud of is that, in terms of Twitter-speak, there is a 10 million reach online. You have described it yourself as a Victorian system, and we wanted to do it as this is something, as we move into 21st century-style registration, that can be huge. We could have ended every tweet with a register to vote, every promotional video with a link to the new Cabinet Office site. So next year it is going to be bigger and better.

Q210 Fabian Hamilton: I am going to come on to that in a minute, but just a thought about Asda. They are based in the city of Leeds, part of which I represent, so contact local MPs, because we have very good connections with Asda and we can cut through some of their bureaucracy.

You mentioned 16-year-olds earlier, Michael. Do you think that if 16-year-olds were allowed to vote—I know that is not what we are discussing—that would make any difference to voter registration throughout people's lives? I find when I go to schools there is a huge enthusiasm from 16 to 18-year-olds for voting and politics, and it is growing, yet they can't vote, as you rightly say.

Michael Sani: I am mixed on that. I think if there were steps put in place to ensure an engagement in political education early so that people from age 14 can begin to understand and gather excitement then, yes, votes at 16 could be a very good addition to our democracy. But until we crack that education, there are still far too many people who get to go through their whole education without it—I was one of them. I didn't register to vote until I was 27 years old, and I was a teacher for five years and none of my students were registered to vote. We are talking about schools where we have a high percentage of free school meals and the lowest level of attainment because of the league table situation, but there are far too many young people who get to float their way through without understanding what it means to have a stake in our society and to understand the obligations and the rights that come with that. We need to celebrate that. So votes at 16 could be fantastic if the education and the engagement was there to back it up.

Q211 Fabian Hamilton: Your original goal was 250,000. You have said that that was an ambitious goal. What prevented you from reaching that goal in the end? Was it just simply resources, funding?

Michael Sani: An element of both.

Oliver Sidorczuk: As we have touched on, there was time to get certain key partners on board and, as Michael has mentioned, some of them delivered in full and some of them didn't. If that had been done better earlier on we could have maybe reached more. But with the resources we had and the time we had, considering the size of the organisation we were, this was about making an impact now, in advance of the referendum, the general election and the May elections, to highlight this issue and say, "Look what we can do on a shoestring, when the ERS and the EC have been around for a long time now". We wanted to inject a shot in the arm for this Committee, for the House and for the rest of civil society.

Michael Sani: We saw that there was an appetite. To trend for nine hours on Twitter, up there with the floods and the Tube strike, for people to be tweeting about voter registration, was massive for

us. It was a big day, because many of us have worked on this sort of campaign for four years, right from when it was just an idea in a classroom, four walls in a classroom in Kent, and we have seen it turn into a national day when people were running events. To finalise, we were limited by resources. We don't have huge amounts of money, but we then concentrated on the areas we knew we were good at, which were the calls to action.

Q212 Fabian Hamilton: We know there are still millions of people missing from the electoral roll. Do you think it would be possible to expand, to scale up, the very innovative work that you are doing so that you can get not just a quarter of a million but millions back on to the register?

Michael Sani: Most certainly. We have already been approached by organisations keen to support for next year, including Virgin, and other supermarkets—obviously Asda was promoted, so now we have other supermarkets that want to be involved. The university side of things was a fantastic addition. The NUS were a really great partner and they did Voter Varsities, which lasted for a week's build-up to create a buzz about registering to vote. We definitely think it can be scaled up. Oliver has met with people at Ofsted who were really excited by our work, and hopefully we are going to take Ofsted to see The Basics, the session that we run in schools or young offenders and community groups. We would like them to maybe point to us as a model lesson when the curriculum changes this September. We have seen the various aspects that it will try to enhance: the role of Parliament and channels of communication. There is not a real in-depth reference to voter registration, mind you, and I think that was a mistake. Citizenship education could be ended with, "We can register now. Let our political journeys begin", regardless of whether we just want to dip our toe in the water and do little bits or get fully involved and join a party, but we need to start celebrating the rights we have here.

Q213 Fabian Hamilton: How is it going to be different next year?

Michael Sani: Digital.

Q214 Fabian Hamilton: Are you going to be completely digital, or much more digital?

Michael Sani: No—we are very aware we can't just be black and white. I think it is fantastic that we are moving to registering to vote online but, as we want to try to touch on later, it is important not to assume that is going to capture everyone and every school. We still need to be building personal relationships. I think the local authorities are best placed to be able to do that, to reach out to the schools in their area and say, "Yes, we have wi-fi; young people work on iPads daily here; we will register to vote online." Whereas at the same time we might have a school or a pupil referral unit that has some learning difficulties, where it might be best placed to pre-populate forms and go in. The key for us is the engagement, and we will use the digital angle to engage.

We have already had a whole host of YouTubers, these young people who have created an industry for themselves on YouTube. It is very popular with hundreds of thousands of followers and subscribers. We already have a whole host of these fantastic communicators who will put their cat in the bath and have 50,000 people watch that. We are going to try to say that we can do some public service announcements that end with the link straight to the Government portal to register. We think that that side of things could really spark interest and engagement.

Oliver Sidorczuk: Additionally, we are now forming better relationships with the best local authorities. There was a limited response to our outreach about the success in their local areas of the inaugural NVRD. The good ones are coming back to us and saying, "Help us improve, help our

EROs do better”, and we are happy to do that. As Mike mentioned, there is a mixture of things, but it is also about crystallising those relationships and ensuring that the people on the ground whose job it is to do this are performing as best as possible.

Q215 Fabian Hamilton: Local government, obviously—what about central Government? You have the website. As parliamentarians, do we have a role?

Oliver Sidorczuk: Yes. You may or may not have noticed, but we did e-mail you all several times about writing to schools and head teachers. Mr Allen, you did a fantastic letter and you personalised it, which I think was key. That is what we are after—coming at it from all angles. It is no surprise to you that if you are e-mailing head teachers, EROs are contacting, say, schools, having been trained and inspired by us, heads of councils and the Cabinet Office. We have parallel work and common goals. They could have helped more, and it would have been better if they had, but they did reach out. Moving forward, we would hope that they could do that. In a nutshell, bigger and better.

Michael Sani: We are the secretariat for the APPG on voter registration. We set that up last year and that is completely across parties, with fantastic Members in there who have been great advocates, writing to their individual Whips Office to promote NVRD. We created NVRD towards the latter part of September. We picked 5 February because our friends over in the United States, Rock the Vote, said you need a day of significance. The 1832 Great Reform Act increased the number of people who could register and the number of people who could stand, and it was 5 February 1833 when they first entered the Chamber, so we wanted to play on that. But this year we are going to start and hopefully engage with more parliamentarians, because I think if a head teacher receives a letter from their local MP saying, “This is a good initiative. We would love you to take part”, it does go a long way.

Q216 Fabian Hamilton: You probably don’t realise, and I am sure I speak for all of us, that we all go into schools and talk to 16 to 18-year-olds, whether they are politics or history classes or just general year groups, about what we do, why it is important to engage, voter registration and taking your part in whatever ballot it may be by the time you reach 18. I don’t know about my colleagues, but I find there is a huge amount of interest. You probably don’t know we do that, but we all do it and that, I hope, will help.

Michael Sani: Do you mean all of you in here or every MP?

Fabian Hamilton: No, I mean every MP. I can’t think of an MP who does not go into his or her local schools at some time or another, or regularly. I try to do at least one a week and talk to them about what we do and what Parliament and Government is about, and there is a lot of support from the school as well, from the staff.

Oliver Sidorczuk: Just on that point, as part of our written submission, it may be something that you think about. Obviously politically when you go in there you are a local representative but you are also a member of a party, if indeed you are. We think encouraging attainers to vote as soon-to-be voters as opposed to politics students is key. That is our only key suggestion going forward in terms of your outreach work. Of those MPs who took part in NVRD, that is a first—an MP going in saying, “Being on the register is in the public good. Whether or not you vote for me is up to you, but being on the register is key”.

Q217 Fabian Hamilton: I don't know about my colleagues but certainly I don't tell people to vote for my party. I just say, "It is more important you vote. Even if you don't vote for my party or for me, just make sure you vote". That is a very important message, and I am sure all of us do that.

Michael Sani: If this work is going on and MPs are going in as you say, why do we still have this huge problem of unregistered young people? What is not working?

Chair: I think the MP often would be the icing on the cake, so it would be a sort of conclusion of a process at school. From my point of view—and like Fabian and others, I see schools on a regular basis—the right to vote is part of a broader civic engagement. I always tell stories about the history of people in my city who were hanged on the steps of the shire hall, not quite in living memory but 170 years ago, for demanding the right to vote. I try to get it over to the young people that it is part of a civic duty, not just a vote.

Q218 David Morris: Good morning, gentlemen. The Cabinet Office has made £4.2 million available to maximise voter registration. So far £3.6 million is going to local authorities and just over £200,000 has already gone to a small number of projects run by charities. Do you have a view on where funding for maximising voter registration is best directed?

Michael Sani: I think the whole process has not been as well thought out as it could have been. Originally that £4.2 million was all supposed to be applied for. We spoke to various local authorities who applied for some of that funding and were turned down. It took a long time for them to get written reasons as to why they were turned down, and then in a huge U-turn the money was carved up and distributed anyway. It has not been thought out greatly. We didn't apply for the money because the terms of the tender were unworkable. We didn't want to relinquish ownership of our project or IP, we didn't want payment by results, and it felt as though the Cabinet Office had not thought through the tender with the organisations that were best placed to deliver. We know the BYC were also turned down; it is a huge network of young people. It felt as though it could have been better placed.

I think it is great that the money has now reached the local authorities. They are under a huge amount of pressure with the change to IER, and I think many of them are going to use that money to maximise their reach. We have already reached out to support that, sharing our games and resources with the different local authorities in the hope that in the new academic year, if many of them go and reach out to schools, they can go in and not have to be dependent on their own work but use the digital resources. Many young people have artists such as Tinie Tempah and Eliza Doolittle in the music library of their mobile phone, and next thing they are on the screen talking to you about having a stake in society. It is a nice USP that we want to share, because for individual EROs and local authorities sometimes it is a whole new world to walk into an environment where people already see politics as boring before they even know what it is.

Q219 David Morris: You think encouraging celebrities to enact in voting is a good thing, it is a good way forward. Do you see it that way?

Michael Sani: I think so. I think it is worthwhile if idols who are in the public eye can reach out and show a social conscience side about democracy and involvement, not necessarily pushing everyone to vote but to understand what it means to have a view and opinion and the channels of communication to influence. It has worked fantastically in the United States and we have seen trickles of it here with National Voter Registration Day and the artists that supported us. We only hope that that can increase. Obviously various celebrities have different views and opinions, but

you can try to steer clear of them and just talk about the act of involvement. That is what we are trying to do.

Q220 David Morris: The electoral registration officers have been encouraged to use the £3.6 million funding to support the Rock Enrol! programme. Do you support the decision to direct the majority of funding that has been made available for maximising registration to this particular initiative?

Oliver Sidorcuk: We meet with civil servants and, as we have alluded to, all of the Ministers since Mark Harper. When we most recently met with Greg Clark he made it clear to us that this is for EROs and local authorities to do with as they wish. We designed Rock Enrol! quite a long time ago now. It has been improved and it has been digitised, as Mike has mentioned, and it is no longer fit for purpose, in our eyes. It is the Government's product for them to do what they want with, but we would encourage EROs to look at what we have done in terms of 2.0. The Basics is a much better resource, much more popular with teachers, and it is something where we would say to them, "Have a look at what is out there. This is what we are doing". As Mike mentioned, it has the celebrity-backed educational resources and it is something that now is improved and fit for purpose.

Michael Sani: We try to feed back straightaway. As Oliver said, we designed those games, and we designed Rock Enrol!. The actual version you can download now on the *Times Educational Supplement* is not ours. When we were first approached, we were asked to be the people who created it because the Cabinet Office were very aware that they needed to brand to trial this. The trials were fantastic. We worked together for a series of months and we registered close to 5,000 people in 20 different locations of the UK. Then, in short, it just felt like they thought their work with us was done, and they said, "Thank you very much". We argued the case to say that we created this. They then tried to point at a contract and say, "What we pay for we own". It is water under the bridge, but we tried to reach back and say, "We are the ones doing this day in, day out. We are the ones learning. We are the ones that were told first-hand by groups of students that the name doesn't work because 'We don't listen to rock'." We went back to the Cabinet Office to say the name—

Chair: I thought it was so good.

Michael Sani: I know, it was a fantastic play on words when it was first created, but the reality is that you need to listen to the target market, the demographic. So they said, "No, the name doesn't work, we don't listen to rock". We said, "You are missing out..." So we tried to reach back, but then it felt like sometimes within the civil service it is a matter of ownership—"Oh no, this is ours". We tried to say, "But we have digitised it. We have these celebrities now. You can push these resources out". "Oh, no." We said, "Why are we competing? We should be collaborating" and the Minister said to us, "You are the ones who are competing". We found it very difficult to believe that, because we created it. It is our passion, we want to share what we learn, and we would think that the channels of communication would be open enough to listen and react.

I don't know if any of you have served time teaching or have teachers within your friendship circles or family circles. Who, as a teacher, is going to download an 11-page document for a 45-minute lesson? An Ofsted lesson plan is two pages. We tried to say that to the Cabinet Office—dismissed. That is why ours is four pages long, because we listen to the target market, not only the young people in particular but teachers. No teacher is going to download that much and read that, with the pressure they are under, which is why we said to the Minister that it is not enough that Rock Enrol! is out there. It needs to be more.

Q221 David Morris: In your opinion, what happened with the Cabinet Office was that they over-complicated a simple matter. I don't know if I should declare some kind of interest here, Chair. I used to be a songwriter in the 1980s and allegedly a pop star of some variety. We used to have a saying, "Keep it to three minutes", a three-minute hit single. What you are saying is that you should keep it down to four minutes so you can get the attention of your audience—in this case young people registering to vote or wanting to vote— and make them understand the process a lot quicker and obviously make it a more enjoyable process for the teachers to get that message across.

Oliver Sidorczuk: Teachers, or anyone who can run the session. The beauty of The Basics is that it can be run by a pupil, a student, someone in a youth club. That is how easy and simple it is to use. We have these planning meetings, and at the end of the day this sort of stuff is not rocket science. It is about showing people the power of being on the register and what that means, and then leaving it to them and sparking that initial engagement. That is what The Basics seeks to do, as you say, on four pages and 45 minutes.

David Morris: It is fascinating. Going on to another question, your written evidence calls for the implementation of a system similar to the Schools Initiative in Northern Ireland. How does this differ from the Rock Enrol! programme that the UK Government are supporting?

Michael Sani: Rock Enrol! is downloadable on the *Times Educational Supplement* and maybe pushed out a few other ways. There might be a stand at a teaching conference as well to promote it, but it is not reaching people as robustly as it should be. It should be on every teacher's tongue, "I teach 16-year-olds. I am going to run this session and celebrate it". The reason that we looked into the Northern Ireland regulations is because going digital with IER is fantastic—we celebrate that—but we can't be as black and white as saying that is going to reach everyone. We think the Northern Ireland initiative of allowing the local authorities to liaise with schools and public bodies to share information and, where necessary, pre-populate forms is fantastic, and it localises this effort of engagement. The local authority are best placed to liaise with the schools, pupil referral units and community groups in their area. They will know, as I touched on earlier, "Technology is thriving in this school. We are going to register people on their phones." Or, "Actually, this school isn't as up to date as others. I will take pre-populated forms in". That is why we think it is worthwhile not to just assume.

The Minister at the moment, Greg Clark, just looked at one of the legal representatives who is helping us write the regulations and said, "Why are you so pessimistic? Rock Enrol! is out there". Come on, let's not assume that just because we have a teaching resource out there, suddenly every 16-year-old is going to be registered to vote.

Oliver Sidorczuk: As we mentioned throughout the written submission that we made, we are worried. The Commission has admitted itself that there is likely to be a drop in the number of attainers. The two goals that run everything we do are that you have to make registration easy and you have to have the engagement. A lot of the things that the Government are suggesting and have created and promoted do only one, and sometimes do neither. As mentioned, this very simple initiative will only make the modernisation process easier still. But the school visits are key, and it is about engagement—having someone there, especially an official, maybe an expert on electoral law, like an ERO should be, to answer any questions they have, to crucially spark that engagement. If you don't have the engagement from the ERO, the teacher or whoever, you are not going to get the registration.

Q222 David Morris: Your focus has very much been on getting people on the electoral register so that they then can participate in elections, but a lot of our evidence has highlighted that low

voter registration and turnout is a manifestation of a wider problem of political disengagement. What are your views on the wider issue of political disengagement?

Michael Sani: We hear often that young people are apathetic and my response to that has been the same since the very first time I was asked. I don't think it is fair to call anybody apathetic unless you have given them all the information there is to know, and most of our young citizens are not told. They are just not told. It is no wonder that they just then float through and maybe care passionately about an issue but not think, "I'm really passionate about this, it is a national issue. My MP meets in my area once a week. I'm going to go down. Who wants to come with me?" Most people don't even know their MP meets in their local area.

This wider disengagement can easily be erased. I am not sure about the middle cluster of people, but that is why we are so passionate about starting early now. You might not see the results of our work for a decade, but what an exciting time when these 14-year-olds hit 24. At 16 they felt empowered to register to vote, and at 18 they were waiting to vote and play an active role, not just once at every election but in between, going through the communication channels to the right people to voice their views and take a stake in their society. It could be wonderful for our country.

Q223 Chair: Please don't think you are being picked on personally by the civil service. We all have stories of the sort you have, and you have some pretty hard case Back-Bench Members of Parliament around the table who know that you don't get anything unless you stick with it for a long time. I hope you draw comfort from the fact that we are on your team and you are on ours in that battle.

Your report on NVRD welcomed the introduction of individual electoral registration, which you have mentioned, but your written evidence highlights some of the dangers that might mean young people drop off the register. Can you tell us what you think the risks of IER are and, perhaps most important of all, how can those risks be overcome?

Oliver Sidorcuk: We have a fantastic case study in this area in Northern Ireland. It is as simple as that. We are not scaremongering here. We are not trying to say that just because our demographic is young people, we are especially worried about young people. It is almost a fact that we can say that this is going to happen. It is going to disproportionately affect younger voters. The ways that we seek to address that are multiple. As Mike mentioned, there is no one black and white problem. There is no black and white solution. The engagement needs to happen earlier and younger, but we would also suggest that there are certain policy things that we can do. We do suggest, like the Schools Initiative, better trained, more inspirational EROs doing the job that they are paid to do at the end of the day, and better support for civil society groups like us and encouragement to keep doing what we are doing. To recap, it is to have the policy side of the Schools Initiative and an engaging, inspiring, active citizenship curriculum.

Michael Sani: But also being able to hold local authorities and EROs to account, because the standards at the moment are not really upheld. It is a self-assessment form that an individual ERO has to fill in—"Did you reach out to marginalised groups?" "Yes." We would not run any other business like this, and we need to think that this is the gateway to democracy. There are clear links from being hands-on. Speaking with young people now for a long time in this area, we see that by not being engaged early there is fear-mongering and xenophobia, and it allows people's frustrations to breed. We need to give people information early.

The two games that we play in schools have very startling results. One of them looks at budgeting, and young people break down the country's budget. Every time we play it, more or less, people are very wary of putting money in the welfare and benefits section. Why? Because they say it is benefit scroungers. Where do they get that from? A certain part of the media. This is ludicrous. Then we

get the beautiful chance to say, “Guys, you’ve got your mobile phones in your pockets. You need to challenge common misconceptions. You need to do your research and base your decisions on your findings. The majority of that pot goes to pensions”. When you say that to them, suddenly they start to backtrack and they put a bit of money in.

We need to do this early and we need to do it right, because the fear is that our young people are fearful of people who arrive in their schools from different parts of the world rather than just saying, “We have lunch at one o’clock and we go up on the field. Come and join us”. We are forcing people to grow up far too quickly.

Oliver Sidorczuk: To add to my earlier comment about awareness and disengagement, there is the practical side of this as well. At the minute it is hard for the parliamentarians that we meet to get their heads around the fact that young people are not going to understand that there is this carry-over and staggered transition—it is happening in Scotland on a different date, and online is slightly separate and continuous—many young people are not going to understand it immediately.

In short, the registration process is cumbersome. The changes are good, and they are happening at the right time, but this has taken far too long. We are worried that we are not going to learn the lessons from Northern Ireland, and we really hope that the Committee echoes that in terms of its recommendations. It is such an easy ask and an easy change to make, especially with the orders going through the Houses right now. We have not touched on the Schools Initiative in too much detail yet. It is timely and easy, and we think the political capital might be there with your backing.

Michael Sani: Just to finalise it, it allows the local authority to act on a local level and understand, as we have said a couple of times now, their own demographics and what would work best.

Q224 Chair: I can use you guys to flag up some of those ideas to people who will be reading our evidence, among whom is the Association of Electoral Administrators who are going to come before us on 1 May. I am sure they will be thinking about those before they come and give evidence to us. Making elections more interesting and more exciting for everybody, but I would argue particularly for young people, is one of the issues that a number of colleagues have raised as we have gone through evidence-taking, and that may well be something that they have a view about. Also, perhaps, recognising the good in electoral registration practice and officers’ particular personalities. I would be very happy to personally commend those people and invite them here to meet the Committee or whatever in order that we can spread best practice. Is that something that might be helpful? Maybe we should do something together, I don’t know.

Oliver Sidorczuk: There are good ones out there.

Michael Sani: There are some fantastic ones, really great.

Q225 Chair: How does that get out? You are not the guys to ask, but how does that message get out to everybody else? Is there a bit of competition in the field—“We are better than them”, or “We’ve got a better idea”?

Michael Sani: Between EROs?

Chair: Yes.

Michael Sani: I wouldn’t know.

Oliver Sidorczuk: To be completely honest with you, it was only by reading one of Chris Ruane's answers that we found out the number of EROs that there were in the UK, because it is not evident anywhere on the Commission's website or AEA. That is the sort of level that we are at in engaging with the administrative side of this. We can manage the excitement, the engagement and the inspiration, but we would rely on you. We are happy to meet, if you could organise that.

Q226 Chris Ruane: I don't want this to sound like mutual congratulations, but thank you for the work that you do. You are one of the most positive, proactive groups that exist on a shoestring, and registering 35,000 young people at 25p a go is a service to democracy. There are further congratulations. You were discussing EROs and good EROs. One of the best in the country is Gareth Evans from Denbighshire County Council who has taken our registration up from 49,000 to 57,000. I would like to invite him before this Committee to say what he has done.

The question that has been delegated to me—and I want to bring in another one is as well—is that we were told by the director of 38 Degrees last week that the online registration system should be built with an open API so that organisations could build their own online tools and apps to register voters. Would you support that? Would that make your job, which you are doing on a shoestring, easier?

Michael Sani: Yes, it certainly would. I went to GDS and met one of the people who created it and asked if we could take this and turn it into our own. We don't want to store the information. We gather people's information by asking who wants to join the network, sign up to the newsletter, volunteer, subscribe to YouTube. It is not about holding that information. We are more than happy that the portal, in the same way the Government platform does, goes straight through to DWP. But the fact is, as clean and as simple as the Government's one does look, and it is easy, it still could be even more exciting for younger people and we would love the opportunity to do that.

I understood that in its first instance they want to test it and ensure it is secure, and that is why the APIs are not going to be distributed, but the hope from our side is that we will continue and hopefully measure how many people we can send from our website or our channels of communication to the Government portal, and then request, when they believe it is secure and are considering APIs, that we could get one. We do enjoy very much working with this demographic, and it would be fantastic to have our own built-in portal on our website rather than sending people away from our website and hoping that they will come back. We want our website to be a one-stop shop to find out how you can register, what the channels of communication are, and register there and then. We are aware of the limitations and we hope that in time it will be able to open up.

Q227 Chris Ruane: My next question is about the fact that the Electoral Commission has a tough job. It has to make sure that the registers are secure and that everybody who is on there should be on there. It also has to make sure that it is inclusive so that the maximum number of people are on the register. There are 6.5 million people who are missing off the register and have been for many years. Do you think that the Electoral Commission have got the right balance between these two things that they have to do? Do you think they are tough enough on electoral registration officers who do not do the job that they are supposed to do by law, like canvassing door to door for non-responders? Do you think there should be more prosecutions?

Oliver Sidorczuk: They have a tough job and, as we say to them when we meet them, we have almost the luxury of looking after or seeking to improve one area, which is young people and especially attainments. At the minute we don't think they have struck the right balance, otherwise we would not be sitting in front of you now. There is clearly a problem, and especially a problem around young people. One of the main things that we find interesting is that the output measure for their campaigns is measured on the number of people who see their campaigns, and on that basis

we are stellar. The number of people who saw NVRD was huge. 20 million people had some sort of insight to that campaign. That is something money can't buy, really. It is something that the Electoral Commission has not previously been able to do.

In terms of the balance about other groups, we can't really comment. With young people, they are finding it tough, but we are happy to help. All our resources are free, and in fact at the moment we are trying to get to a position where we can, with some sort of influence and input from them—it is not quite clear what it is—train local authority employees this summer. That may be EROs. We are hoping that other people from other departments come as well, so that they are in the best position possible for the new academic year, with the elections coming up and the referendum.

Q228 Chris Ruane: Are you aware that EROs are not subject to FOIs, freedom of information requests, and should they be? Is this a recommendation that the Committee could take forward?

Michael Sani: It does not seem right for them to not answer freedom of information requests, especially if they are the sole link between registrations and the community. We do think that they should have better standards and be held to account, definitely. One of the things that we have never had to do in all of our years working in registration among young people is ask someone to register to vote because there is a fine if you don't. We inspire them to want to do so, and that is far more beneficial. What do we want, a society that registers to vote so they can avoid a £1,000 fine or a society that registers to vote because they want to vote?

Q229 Chris Ruane: The Electoral Commission propose to stop political parties handling postal ballots. They also are proposing to force people to have photo ID before they can go down to the polling station to cast their vote. Do you think this will encourage more people to vote? Will it have a positive or a negative effect on turnout?

Michael Sani: I think turnout could be hit if we take away postal voting. There are a lot of people who rely on the ability to postal vote, so it does seem that, although we are going digital, we can't just assume that, "You are registering digitally now, we don't need postal voting".

Q230 Chris Ruane: They are not proposing to stop postal voting. They are proposing to stop political parties being involved in giving out postal ballot forms and taking them and then giving them to the ERO, and they are proposing photo ID for voting.

Oliver Sidorcuk: The Government's line about all this is that they are seeking to tackle fraud, which can only be a good thing. We are not sure how big that problem is. We would say the bigger problem is the lack of people, especially young people, on the register.

To turn to your point about ID, we talked a little bit about the Northern Ireland Schools Initiative. As part of the programme that they have crafted around this data sharing tool, there is a power for local authorities to share information with schools such as by arriving with pre-populated forms and issuing a voter registration card. That very neatly ties up the problem because it inspires them from day dot, and then they turn up on the day knowing, "I need my voter ID card". That is something that the Government or the Commission could explore here. We are not experts in ID and fraud, but it would be interesting to know the effect that it could have on turnout.

Michael Sani: Sorry to mishear your question earlier, Chris. Maybe they have a point about the political parties not doing the postal registrations. I have not been involved in the election process—Bite the Ballot started three weeks before the 2010 general election—but it is clear to see that there is a lot of mudslinging and there is a lot of stuff that the public are not quite interested in. It doesn't feel like 650 people are working for the greater good of society. It feels like bickering and stuff. They kind of do have a point if parties are relying on saying the right thing to the right group of people to get those postal registration forms. We need to be more inclusive. We need to ensure that people understand the full picture and are not just engaged by one party and registering to vote for them.

Chair: Michael, Oliver, thank you so much for your time this morning. I personally found that inspirational, and I think you are going to influence the Committee quite considerably with your very clear set of ideas. Thank you for coming by.

Oliver Sidorcuk: Thank you for inviting us.

Witness: **Dr Toby S. James**, Lecturer in British and Comparative Politics, University of East Anglia, gave evidence.

Q231 Chair: Toby, welcome. Thank you for coming to see us today. Is there anything you would like to start off by saying, or shall we jump straight into questions?

Dr James: I have a couple of opening remarks. First, thank you for inviting me to give evidence. The Committee is investigating a really important topic. Voter turnout has been recognised as a problem for a long time, and voter registration is perhaps something we are beginning to recognise as a problem now. My evidence that I submitted prior to now was about how electoral law can be modernised to put the voter first so that voting and registration is made as convenient as possible and there are no unnecessary barriers to voting.

To recap, the proposals were about Election Day registration; prompting citizens to register to vote when they interact with other Government services, so something like a British motor-voter law; and reviewing and strengthening the long-term funding of electoral registration officers. There is a lot of focus on the short-term solution of individual registration, but I think what happens after that is important. Although it was not so much in the written evidence, I would have a lot of support for continuing the performance standards that the Electoral Commission has continued to use. In some of the previous sessions there was support for weekend voting, which I would endorse as well. The final thing was internet voting, which I think I can give lukewarm support to. The evidence has not shown it bringing about a major increase in turnout yet, but times are changing and it is something we should certainly keep under review.

Q232 Paul Flynn: Bite the Ballot have 2,973 followers on Twitter. Russell Brand has 7 million followers on Twitter. Do you think young people are being persuaded by Russell Brand, and do you think we should examine why he is so influential?

Dr James: He is going to have an effect. Celebrities do have an effect on politics. It is worth saying I would not agree with Russell Brand that we should not go and vote. It is very important that everyone goes and casts their ballot. Russell Brand has a lot of people who like him but he also has a lot of people who don't like him and disagree with what he was saying. There is a section of people among whom his claim that there is no one worth voting for did resonate a little bit. I think there are issues there to do with wider disengagement that his views were supportive of.

Q233 Paul Flynn: In 1945 73% of the electorate voted, and that went down to 59% 10 years ago. Is there evidence that Governments are better if a larger percentage of the population votes?

Dr James: It is difficult to make the claim that Governments are better. Perhaps it is easier to make the claim that they are more representative of the public. We live in a democracy. Democratic ideals are that a Government should represent as many people as possible and that people should have Members of Parliament whose views most closely approximate those of the citizens, representing them in government. It is difficult to prove a link into the quality, but certainly we have more legitimate Governments if more people vote. We have more accountable Governments if more people vote, because people are going to the ballot box and holding them to account for their decisions. Representation is improved as well by more people going and voting.

Q234 Paul Flynn: Is there any evidence that the reluctant voters are any more enlightened than those who habitually vote? What I am suggesting to you is that those who are reluctant to vote might well be less motivated and probably less well informed than those who are dedicated voters.

Dr James: Not necessarily. I think the key thing is to encourage everyone to vote. Democratic ideals are not—

Paul Flynn: I am just curious about it. I know this is the conventional view, but Adolf Hitler was elected with 37% of the vote, which was enough to give him a majority over all other parties. I am just curious about whether there is any evidence that the quality of governments improve when a larger proportion vote. We all assume it does, but I am putting to you that encouraging less well informed people to vote might have a deleterious effect on the subsequent Government.

Dr James: People who are more interested in politics are more likely to vote. We know that, but in a democracy the purpose of elections is to hold Governments to account. In countries like United States, for example, they had literacy tests where they systematically tested and filtered out people who they thought did not have sufficient knowledge to vote, and there was a very significant racial element to that. Those are widely discredited in a democratic system. A fundamental principle of democracy is that we should encourage everyone to vote so that they are represented and they can hold the Government to account.

Q235 Paul Flynn: You have misgivings about individual electoral registration. What are these?

Dr James: We already have low registration rates in the United Kingdom. One in five people are not registered. In some ways that masks how bad the turnout problem is, because the way that electoral turnout is calculated in the United Kingdom is a proportion of the people who are on the electoral register. When less than 15% of people went to vote in the PCC elections in 2012, the actual figure was much lower than that when you consider how few people are on the register. So we already have a problem with low electoral registration rates in the UK, and there is every risk that this could make that much more substantial. We have seen the experience in Northern Ireland, where overnight there was a drop of 10% in the levels of electoral registration.

There have been a number of steps that have been put in place by the Government to try to prevent that happening. I did some research speaking to electoral registration officers on the likely effects that this would have and they pointed to how this would bring about a decline in levels of electoral registration, particularly among the young and mobile people. Individual electoral registration is more bureaucratic—it takes more time for the individual to go and add their name to the electoral register. They have to also remember their national insurance number, which is something that is

often forgotten and which does not come to hand for every citizen. So it is making it more bureaucratic. There were some good reasons for it, but we need to, alongside this, also have measures in place so that we maximise electoral registration as much as possible.

Q236 Paul Flynn: What do you expect the turnout to be next year in the general election? Do you think the Government's cutting of benefits to young people, who in the main don't vote, and giving more unneeded benefits to rich pensioners, who are more likely to vote, will be a major factor?

Dr James: It is difficult to forecast turnout. It was 65% at the last general election, so it is going to be similar to that, I think. One of the issues with those policies that you mentioned is the fact that they are policies that disproportionately affect different age groups. One thing that we need to be aware of is the fact that turnout and registration levels are very different across each of the age groups. Older people are much more likely to be registered to vote; younger people are much less likely to vote.

Going back in some ways to your earlier question about whether we get a better-quality Government when more people vote, I think that illustrates this tension. If a particular group or segment and part of the population are not on the electoral register and are not voting, it means that Governments may be less sensitive to their interests. It is very difficult to establish a clear link between those particular policies and the levels of voter registration and turnout.

Q237 Chris Ruane: On celebrity endorsement for electoral registration and turnout, through written questions the Electoral Commission say that they don't want to get involved in it because it might become party political. Do think there is a chance that they should be asked to do this or the Committee should ask them to endorse this approach? If they are concerned about party politicisation, we could have three or four endorsers, one from each of the main political parties, or the main political parties could say, "We all endorse this one person", in the spirit of Mandela and Emmeline Pankhurst—that higher moral duty to get involved in a democracy, to cast your vote, not leave it to Russell Brand to say, "No, don't vote, don't get involved".

Dr James: Yes, it has the potential to have a very positive effect. My colleague at the University of East Anglia, John Street, has written a lot about the effect that celebrities can have on politicians and how they shouldn't necessarily just be looked past. They can really engage with the electorate, entice the electorate to get involved in politics and in some ways speak for them, so they could have potentially a very positive effect. Certainly, if you look at the US 2008 presidential election, you saw a lot of celebrities being part of high-profile adverts there to go out and vote—the likes of Harrison Ford and everyone else.

I am not aware of particular evidence and studies that have tested that effect but, intuitively, it could be something worth looking at.

Chair: I have just been on Twitter and, to get this in perspective, Mr Flynn has more than 8,500 followers and someone called HM Queen has only 2,400. So I think that tells us all we need to know.

Paul Flynn: I shall send her some moral advice.

Q238 Mr Turner: How important do you believe improving electoral administration is to deal with the current low rates of registration?

Dr James: I think it is very important, and it is probably very often overlooked. We have 35 years or so of research on the topic from the United States that has always systematically shown the positive effect that making voting and registration more convenient can have.

Slightly more anecdotally, if you look at the 2010 general election, there was a report written by the Electoral Commission on the conduct of the election. They asked people, “Why did you not vote?”—obviously there was a significant amount of people who did not—and about one third of those, 31% of people, did not vote or they said that they did not vote because of something to do with their circumstances: they were too busy on Election Day; they were away; they didn’t quite get time; it didn’t fit with their work. A further 13% noted that their non-voting was something to do with administrative factors like not being registered to vote or not being sent a polling card or a postal ballot. Overall, that is 44% of people who did not vote at the general election. It is not everyone. There are lots of people who are disengaged with politics, and there is something else going on there. But clearly that is a very significant chunk of the number of people, and I think we can make a significant difference through making reforms.

Q239 Mr Turner: Would it be possible to allow people to vote elsewhere than at their home polling station in their constituency or, for that matter, would it be possible to vote anywhere in the UK, and what changes would be needed to make that possible?

Dr James: At the moment, we are quite restricted. There is postal voting, of course. We already have postal voting, and everyone can apply for that. We are restricted in terms of voting in two ways. One is that we are given a particular polling station to go and vote at. We could make changes so that people could perhaps vote anywhere within their local authority. That would require a significant change in terms of having something called electronic poll books. What that would mean is that it would allow poll workers across a constituency to convey to each other who has and has not voted, so that perhaps people could vote on the way home from work. That would allow that. That would make a difference.

Internet voting is the one that is in some ways the most extreme form of convenience voting. I think you heard from the President of the NUS earlier on in your sessions, who was explaining how many students live online. I guess that is how it is for many citizens, but especially younger citizens, and internet voting does offer that prospect. We have not yet seen considerable evidence that internet voting would make a big difference in voter turnout. We have had some pilots in the UK in 2003 or so, when I think about 15% of people took that up as an option and there was not necessarily a big increase in turnout there. But what we did see from those pilots was that where you had internet voting in place in consecutive elections, more people began to use it. If you had internet voting open until the close of poll, at 10 pm, more and more people would use it.

The same thing has happened in Estonia as well. There has not been a big jump in turnout there. I should say that Estonia is the one country in the world where internet voting has been used for binding parliamentary elections. There have been lots of pilots. Estonia is the key one to look at. There has not been much of an increase in turnout there, but gradually over time more and more people began to use it. When they first introduced it in 2005, only 1.9% of people used it. By the 2011 parliamentary elections there, a quarter of people cast their vote through that method. So I think it is something that people get used to, and it is a new time.

Q240 Mr Turner: Looking at registration, what proportion of those who are 16 to 18 are not entitled, by virtue of their overseas birth, to vote?

Dr James: I don't have that data. I don't know off the top of my head. I am happy to submit that as further evidence.

Mr Turner: Data of the whole age group from 16 or 18 to their death?

Dr James: I don't have that information off the top of my head, but I would be happy to submit it as further evidence.

Q241 Mr Turner: That would be great. Thank you. Do you think changing the day of voting would make a difference? Can you think of some additional problems and some additional benefits of changing that day?

Dr James: There is clear evidence that if you were to change the day of the election it would bring about an increase in turnout. One study looked at European elections across the whole of Europe and showed that where the day of the vote was on a Sunday, as opposed to a weekday, turnout was 10 percentage points higher, so straight away there is evidence that that effect would happen. Another study that looked at not necessarily European elections estimated that where it was on a Sunday, it would be about 6.8 percentage points higher. You have some variation in terms of what the research is saying there, but universally the evidence is that one positive effect would be, it seems, that more people would vote on a Sunday.

Q242 Mr Turner: You stressed other ways of improving voter engagement. Which changes do you think would make the most substantial difference to, first, registration and, secondly, turnout?

Dr James: I think the one that I have highlighted in particular in the evidence was Election Day registration. At the moment, citizens have to register 11 days in advance of an election. In 10 states in the US, you can just register on the day of the election. As I think I pointed out in the evidence, at the last US presidential election, in those states turnout was 10 percentage points higher. In some states, up to 17% of voters used that method, so 17% of people just turned up and registered and then voted.

Some of the other work I have done suggested that we would not quite get that 10% here in the UK. I think it is probably somewhere in the region of three to six percentage points, which is still quite a substantial increase, and with a move to individual electoral registration we are perhaps in a better position. One positive of individual electoral registration is that we might be able to do that more easily.

Q243 Mr Turner: That is perhaps partly because in the United States there is not a registration date—not in all parts of the United States, certainly.

Dr James: It varies by state around the country, and in some it is as much as 30 days. Here it is 11 days. You would expect the effect to be not quite as strong but still significant and worth doing.

Q244 Mr Chope: Can I focus on those who choose not to vote? We have had a number of tweets in response to this inquiry. One suggestion for a solution came from somebody who said, “Compulsory voting is not it, as it removes feedback information”. Somebody else said, “Offering voters a clear vision and a distinct proposition. Obsessing over who owns the centre ground is the problem”. Do you accept that not offering voters a clear vision is a reason why a lot of people are turned off and say, “Well, they’re all the same. It doesn’t make any difference,” and that may result in them not even bothering to register to vote or, even if they are registered, not bothering to turn out?

Dr James: Yes, absolutely. The written evidence that I submitted was mostly about changing the procedure so it is easier for people to vote. That takes us so far but of course, ultimately, it is also about politicians and parties. If you were to look at the general elections in recent years and the way in which the Labour Party over a number of years has perhaps moved towards the centre—not the Labour Party under Michael Foot, of course—there are a number of policy issues on which some parties have agreement.

The thing to bring in there as well is the role of the electoral system in terms of structuring the choice that voters have at Election Day. In most constituencies, citizens have a choice of two parties with a realistic chance of winning. The number of safe seats that there are in the country since the post-war period has gone up, so there are a lot of people who are having to vote within seats where their vote won’t make too much of a difference.

Q245 Mr Chope: Ironically, some of us who are lucky enough to have large majorities find we also have large turnouts, so there is a lot of interest. But leaving that on one side, in the Scottish referendum where there is no chance for a middle road—it is a yes or no—would you expect, as a result, to get a higher interest and a higher turnout?

Dr James: It is very difficult to compare a Scottish referendum to a general election. Typically for referendums, the turnout tends to be lower than it would be in the general election, but they are very different. The nature of the politics there is entirely different, so it is very difficult to compare.

Q246 Mr Chope: But if there is credence in the proposition that there is no clear vision, no clear choice, surely where there is a really clear choice, such as in a referendum, you would expect there to be a higher turnout?

Dr James: Intuitively, yes. I think that clear choice makes a difference.

Q247 Mr Chope: For the benefit of your students at East Anglia, are you predicting that there will be a higher turnout in the Scottish referendum than there was in the last general election in Scotland?

Dr James: It is very difficult to compare them. The initial Welsh devolution referendum was only around the 50% mark for turnout. When you have a starker choice, where it is full independence, you would expect turnout to be much higher than that. It is difficult to be more precise than that.

Q248 Mr Chope: In parts of the States and other countries, they combine a general election with specific local referendum questions. For example, a number of years ago there was a proposition 14, I think, in California. There you have clear propositions, yes or no. Is there any evidence that that helps increase the interest and therefore the turnout?

Dr James: When you combine different types of elections together, that increases turnout, and when you combine referendums with elections, that increases turnout as well. Had the police and crime commissioner elections in November 2012 been combined with local elections the following May, then there would have been a higher turnout in those because people would have gone to the polls anyway for those local elections. There is some evidence that shows that referendums in the US can have a positive effect on other types of elections if they are held simultaneously. So I think combining elections is a good idea and, of course, we have seen a kind of proliferation of different types of elections in the UK over the past 10 or 15 years or so.

Q249 Mr Chope: Would you accept that these issues about political interest in elections are more important in determining how many people turn out than technical issues centred around voter registration?

Dr James: There are all types of voters, different types of voters. Everyone is different and for each individual there are different things that influence them. My argument is that changing the voting procedures and the registration procedures will have a positive effect on a significant group of people and that, therefore, it is worth considering, but the things that I set out will not bring a 100% turnout. There will be people who don't vote because they don't feel engaged with any of the political parties or they don't feel that there is that stark choice—the “they're all the same” type claim.

Q250 Mr Chope: There is no need to risk having proliferation of electoral fraud for the greater good. We need to continue to keep tight control over voter ID. Would you agree with that?

Dr James: I don't think there is the evidence that electoral fraud is widespread. There are certainly lots of accusations that electoral fraud has taken place. We know that. But I think it doesn't necessarily follow on that we have actual cases of electoral fraud. The Electoral Commission did their review on electoral fraud and they seemed to be quite clear that electoral fraud wasn't widespread. If you look at the number of prosecutions then—

Mr Chope: But they are still suggesting that it would be a good thing for people to take photo ID along to the polling station.

Dr James: They are suggesting that, yes.

Mr Chope: They are suggesting that because if people don't, then there is a danger of electoral fraud.

Dr James: That is the argument it conveys. As it stands, there is not evidence of widespread fraud in the UK, and there is a risk of tightening up too far such that the bigger issue might be the number of people who are not on the electoral register or are not voting because of procedures being made too inconvenient for them. I refer back to that 44% in that Electoral Commission opinion poll from the 2010 general election who said that they didn't vote because of procedures or circumstances.

There is always risk. It is about getting a balance, and probably we have been moving in recent legislation towards making it more difficult to register to vote.

Q251 Mr Turner: Could you set out what is required to secure a conviction for voting irregularly?

Dr James: I would have to submit that as further evidence. I am happy to refer you back to that. I don't know off the top of my head.

Chris Ruane: Sorry, what was the question?

Mr Turner: The question was what is required to secure a conviction for voting irregularly.

Chris Ruane: I know I am not supposed to give evidence to the Committee but the actual cases are one between 2008 and 2012 for electoral registration fraud and seven for postal ballot fraud between 2003 and 2011.

Chair: You are quite right, Chris, you are not meant to give evidence.

Q252 Mr Turner: Is it not the case that there is evidence that does not stand up to the security of a conviction, but then there is a great deal of evidence below that?

Dr James: What I can say is that in the US they are a little bit ahead in some ways in the research on this. There is also a long history there of accusations of electoral fraud. There are lots of accusations of electoral fraud, but those accusations have been systematically studied. In a lot of cases, the cases of fraud tended to be things such as administrative error, administrative complexities, and very few cases of deliberate wrongdoing with the intention of winning an election.

Chair: Let's get back to the plot, if we can.

Q253 Chris Ruane: Do you think the Electoral Commission has enough powers or, if it has the powers, that it uses them sufficiently against EROs who continually break the law by not fulfilling their duties as set out in law? I am thinking particularly about priority 3, which is door-to-door canvassing. At one time there were 55 local authorities that did not do this. Some of those authorities have not done it for four or five years on the trot. Do you think the Electoral Commission should be harder on EROs, and do you think that EROs should be subject to freedom of information requests?

Dr James: To put it in context, one of the things that the Electoral Commission introduced was the performance standards scheme, so it now publishes information about whether electoral registration officers meet those standards. I think that has been an enormously positive development. I have published an article on that. It has meant that EROs have learned and shared good practice from each other. I think the scheme has been very effective through a kind of system of naming and shaming and has brought down the number of EROs who don't meet the various criteria over time.

Q254 Chris Ruane: Can I just challenge you on that? The number in 2008 was something was like 30 authorities that didn't do it, in 2009 it was 20, in 2010 it was eight, and then it went up to 55 authorities that did not fulfil priority 3. How does that square with the actual statistics?

Dr James: My point is that the system of naming and shaming has a positive effect. I think that why it has a positive effect is that EROs are concerned about their individual reputation, and there is an element of competition between the EROs: they know that someone else is not doing something or other. When I have interviewed EROs, things that have made a significant difference have been the Electoral Commission writing to the leader of the council, MPs putting individual pressure on those EROs and the media picking up on that data, and that has taken us a long way.

The question is, are we flat-lining at five? You could introduce more sanctions, if you like, but I think in some ways we also need to think about rewarding good EROs, because that is just as important. Imagine a scenario where we didn't have performance standards and the whole thing was run by the Electoral Commission, and we didn't know how many EROs were not doing annual canvasses. What we have is a very transparent system, and if it is just five out of all those returning officers, then that is not as low as it was.

Q255 Chris Ruane: On the issue of reward, do you think it would be a good recommendation from this Committee's report that the Cabinet Office, the all-party parliamentary group on registration or indeed this Committee could have parliamentary awards to recognise best practice for EROs or for individual campaigners like yourself or groups like Bite the Ballot?

Dr James: Yes. Electoral registration officers have been criticised and there are different types of electoral registration officers and some, as you say, have not met all of the standards, but many do extremely good, hard work and they face difficult challenges. The interviews that I undertook as part of my research show that those types of incentives do encourage people to work harder and to think innovatively. The key part that then takes place is how do you encourage them to share their good practice. What could happen is that where you identify excellent work from EROs, that work then needs to feed back into setting new performance standards for other electoral registration officers to take forward, so that the process is not just top down, it is bottom up as well, and people can learn from that.

Q256 Chris Ruane: Finally, the Electoral Commission are proposing to have photo ID if you are going to the polling station, and they are also proposing restrictions on the handling of postal ballots. Do you think the Electoral Commission should have waited for IER to bed down before it proposed these changes?

Dr James: From what I understand, the Electoral Commission has said very recently it is looking to do a modernisation, a kind of review again of electoral law. I think it should think very carefully about introducing photo ID, because there is a risk that that could affect turnout negatively when, as you said, individual electoral registration may have a negative effect on registration levels. So I think we need to be very careful in thinking about photo ID.

Chair: Toby, thank you so much for your time today. There are some very interesting points there that the Committee will follow up. As you heard me say earlier, it is our intention to produce a report that leads to activity, regardless of who wins the next general election, and make sure that we

have a shopping list of things that any incoming Government could readily enact. You have been extremely helpful in getting us to that point.

Dr James: Thank you for inviting me.

Chair: Thank you so much, and thank you, colleagues.