

# The impact of party name, description and emblem on the usability of ballot papers:

## Executive summary



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**Date:** August 2015

# 1 Executive Summary

## Background

Currently ballot papers in the UK can show a combination of different registered party identifiers. These are party **name**, **party description** and a **party emblem**. All party identifiers have to be approved by the Electoral Commission in order to appear on ballot papers (excluding parish and town council elections). The types of party identifier shown (and their relative positioning on the ballot paper) can vary depending on the type of election being held. For example, identifiers will be displayed in different positions on local government election ballot papers compared to EU parliamentary ballot papers.

The broad aim of this project was to investigate how voters respond to party identifiers on the ballot paper and how they understand these. The Electoral Commission's role in approving party identifiers requires an assessment as to whether they may confuse or mislead voters. The purpose of this research was therefore to show which identifiers people use when voting and whether similar identifiers can lead to confusion or miscast votes. The findings are intended to help inform future decisions around the registration of party identifiers and how these are used on ballot papers.

## Methods

This project involved testing ballot papers using cognitive interviewing. Cognitive interviewing methods explore what participants think about as they complete a task (in this case voting). During the interviews participants were shown a campaign flyer for a fictitious political party. The flyer included party identifiers and the name of a candidate standing at a local government election. The flyers were then removed and participants were asked to vote for the party whose flyer they had just read. Participants were asked to vote on both a local election style ballot paper and an EU parliamentary election style ballot paper.

The ballot papers provided included the details of both real and fictional political parties. The party name, description and emblem for each party were designed so that there were similarities with some of the other parties on the ballot paper.<sup>1</sup> Some had a similar name as the party that participants were asked to vote for (target party), some had a similar emblem, some had a similar description, some had a combination of similar identifiers and some had no similarities at all. Different versions of these ballot papers were given to different participants.

Information on what people were thinking about during the task was gathered using a combination of think aloud and probing techniques. For example, participants were asked about what elements of the ballot paper they looked at, how easy or difficult they found it to locate the party they had been asked to vote for and why this was. Eye-tracking methods were used to supplement a sub-set of interviews.

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<sup>1</sup> The use of variants on real party names was necessary for the purpose of the research. However, there was no relevance to which parties were used as a basis for which fictional party. So, for example, we used 'London Conservatives' but we could have used 'London Labour Party'.

Sixty-nine interviews were conducted in total. There was a spread of participants based on past voting behaviour, sex, age, highest qualification, social grade and ethnicity. Interviews were conducted in England, Scotland and Wales. The final sample included participants who spoke English as a second language, people who had self-reported difficulties with literacy and people who self-reported mild-moderate visual impairments. However, as is usual with qualitative research, the overall sample size means it is not statistically representative.

All interviews were audio-recorded. A summary of each interview was then written up into an analytical framework. This completed framework was systematically reviewed (alongside eye-tracking data) against the research questions.

## Research aims

The detailed aims of the research are set out in the table below, alongside the headline findings for each area and what lessons we can draw from this.

It should be noted that this study is not designed to address how often voting errors occur in practice. In our scenario participants were asked to vote for a party they were unfamiliar with. Therefore, slightly different interactions with party indicators could occur in a real-life voting context. Moreover, as the purpose of the research was to understand how voters respond to party identifiers, the ballot papers did not include names of candidates who may be standing independently rather than for a political party. Further research may be beneficial to investigate how familiar people are with their preferred party's identifiers and what impact this has on ease of ballot paper usage.

## Headline findings

The findings and implications on each research aim are summarised in the table below.

Research aim	Key findings	Implications
<b>1. Which party identifiers do people use when voting?</b>	<p>The party identifiers used varied from person to person.</p> <p>Party name<sup>2</sup>, party emblem, and candidate name were all successfully used as primary identifiers. Some people only looked at one type of identifier when voting whereas others looked at two (or more). Some people were looking at a second identifier to double-check the correct party had been located.</p>	<p>Having multiple identifiers (party name, party emblem and candidate name) on ballot papers is useful as different people use different identifiers when voting.</p> <p>Having multiple identifiers is helpful for voters who double-check they have found the correct party using a second identifier.</p>
<b>2. Which party identifiers do people consider helpful and unhelpful?</b>	<p>Participants' views on which identifiers are the most useful varied. Party name, party emblem or candidate name were all considered the most useful by some participants.</p> <p>Party descriptions were not successfully used as primary identifiers (i.e. the identifier they found most useful for finding a party on the ballot paper) by people who took part in this study.</p> <p>Overall, participants' views differed on whether party descriptions should be on the ballot paper at all. Some participants thought the descriptions were 'unnecessary' text that made the ballot paper harder to navigate. Others felt they may be useful for undecided voters who want more information on picking a party.</p>	<p>Party descriptions were not, compared to other identifiers, particularly helpful for participants trying to identify their target party in this study.</p>

<sup>2</sup> The legislation allows parties to use their party description as party name in certain elections. As part of this research NatCen tested party description used as party name on the ballot paper. In this scenario NatCen found that the party description was treated in the same way as a party name

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<p><b>3. Do people use identifiers in different ways depending on the ballot paper?</b></p>	<p>During the test some participants used different identifiers when voting on the local election ballot paper compared to the European parliamentary election ballot paper. This was because some people used candidate name as their primary identifier on the local election ballot paper during the user-testing. They were unable to use this on the European parliamentary ballot paper as they had not been provided with the party lists of candidate names for the European Parliament elections on the mocked up campaign flyer (the reasons for this are set out in section 2.4 of the main report). Participants who relied solely on the candidate name, for the local election ballot papers, could not always accurately recall any party identifiers.</p>	<p>This finding could have been a context effect of being asked to vote for an unfamiliar party. NatCen recommends further research to verify whether this also happens in a real life context.</p>
<p><b>4. Can similarities in party name lead to confusion or miscast votes?</b></p>	<p>In this study similarities in party name led to both confusion and miscast votes. Certain types of similarity were more problematic than others.</p> <p>The most frequent type of miscast votes observed was participants voting for the 'Conservative party' when they had been asked to vote for a fictitious party called 'London Conservatives.' Some of these participants incorrectly assumed that London Conservatives was a regional sub-group of the Conservative Party rather than a distinct entity (despite their having different names and emblems).</p> <p>Participants also expressed confusion over two party names containing the same ideological or political words (e.g. 'Liberals United' and 'Liberal Democrats').</p> <p>Overlapping non-ideological words did not appear to be as confusing.</p>	<p>Similarities between party names can result in both voter confusion and miscast votes.</p> <p>In this test the use of a geographical reference to distinguish between parties was particularly problematic. This suggests that using a geographic reference as the sole distinguishing feature is not sufficient to guarantee voters will be able to tell two parties apart (in the research this was an issue where participants were not using the candidate name as an identifier).</p> <p>Other forms of party name similarity could also cause confusion, particularly the overlapping use of ideological or political words.</p>

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<b>5. Can similarities in party description lead to confusion or miscast votes?</b>	Participants did not successfully use party descriptions as identifiers when voting.	In this test similar words in the descriptions of different parties on the EP ballot paper did not result in confusion or miscast votes as participants were not using these as identifiers.
<b>6. Can similarities in party emblem lead to confusion or miscast votes?</b>	<p>Similarities in party emblem led to some voter hesitation and one miscast vote.</p> <p>Pictures of the same object do not necessarily lead to confusion. Participants noted that two pictures of the same object can still look visually distinct. For example two parties having a tree emblem will not necessarily be confusing if the trees are dissimilar in terms of shape and style. In contrast two similar looking trees could be problematic.</p> <p>Similarities in the textual elements of an emblem can be problematic even if the pictorial element is distinct. For example, one participant miscast a vote because both the target party emblem and the non-target emblem contained the initials 'NC'. This occurred despite the fact one emblem used a picture of shaking hands whereas the other contained a picture of a torch.<sup>3</sup></p>	<p>Similarities in party emblems can lead to confusion and miscast votes.</p> <p>When determining whether emblems are too similar the Electoral Commission needs to consider both the pictorial and textual elements of the emblem.</p> <p>The Electoral Commission should consider pictures in terms of the shape and or style of the object depicted.</p> <p>Emblems including the same text (in this test - initials) were found particularly confusing.</p>
<b>7. Are certain types of similar identifier more problematic than others?</b>	<p>Evidence from this study suggests that similar party names and party emblems were more problematic than similar party descriptions (because descriptions were effectively not used as primary identifiers).</p> <p>Certain types of name and picture similarities were more confusing than others.</p>	<p>The findings suggest that the type of similarity should be taken into account by the Commission when making decisions about party registration.</p> <p>However, practically as long as descriptions can be used in place of party names on certain ballot papers they</p>

<sup>3</sup> Variant on a torch image were deliberately included as a result of past concerns around the use of the Conservative Party's previous emblem.

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		should be assessed against this higher bar.
<p><b>8. Are certain combinations of similar identifiers more problematic than others?</b></p>	<p>A single similar identifier, on its own, is enough to cause confusion and miscast votes. This is because some people will only refer to one identifier when voting.</p> <p>However, some people use multiple party identifiers when voting. These people look at a primary identifier first (e.g. party name) and then double-check their choice against a secondary identifier (e.g. party emblem) or vice versa. For this group a combination of similar party name and emblem may lead to more confusion than a single, similar identifier.</p>	<p>A single similar identifier can sufficient to cause confusion and miscast votes. The Electoral Commission, when assessing identifiers, should consider how each identifier could appear on its own as well as how they would work in combination.</p>