

The
Electoral
Commission

Standing for office in 2017

Analysis of feedback from candidates standing for election to the Northern Ireland Assembly, Scottish council and UK Parliament

November 2017

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The Electoral Commission is the independent body which oversees elections and regulates political finance in the UK. We work to promote public confidence in the democratic process and ensure its integrity.

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Executive summary

A central part of the Electoral Commission's work is to oversee elections and work to promote confidence and integrity in our democratic processes. In order to do this, it is important for us to understand the experiences of the people who stand for elections across the country. This report summarises and analyses the results of the post-election surveys with candidates at three polls in 2017 (the Northern Ireland Assembly election, Scottish council elections and UK Parliamentary General election) and provides an overview of attitudes to the electoral processes and issues they experienced.

Key findings

Our surveys indicate that **candidates are satisfied overall with the way polls are administered** and with their experiences of key stages in the poll, including nominations and the count. Across the three polls, nine in ten respondents to our surveys were satisfied with the administration of their election; down three percentage points since the previous Northern Ireland Assembly election, but up five percentage points from the last UK Parliamentary General election and up four percentage points from the last Scottish council elections. In line with the previous comparable polls, 88% said they felt the count was transparent.

The research highlighted specific areas where some action is needed. **In our UK Parliamentary General election survey, just over a fifth of respondents felt it was not easy to raise the deposit required to stand.** This was higher for independents and those with a disability or long term health condition. This underlines the Commission's earlier recommendation for the removal of the financial barrier of the deposit requirement at any poll.¹

Following the UK Parliamentary General election, **many raised concerns regarding the intimidation of candidates during the campaign.** Our research found this issue was raised unprompted by a few candidates at both the UK Parliamentary and the Scottish council elections. The Electoral Commission has responded to the call for evidence by the Committee on Standards in Public Life (CSPL) on the Intimidation of Parliamentary candidates, setting out our views. Our response can be read [here](#). The Commission has also encouraged the Scottish Government to review the rules on the publication of the candidates' home addresses and supports the Welsh Government's decision to explore this requirement.

The majority of respondents did not think there was a problem with electoral fraud, yet there remains a sizeable minority for whom it is a concern. This echoes the findings of our research with the public in 2017.²

¹ For more information, see the [Standing for office in the United Kingdom report of 2015](#).

² The Electoral Commission, [Voting in 2017](#) (October 2017).

We take these concerns very seriously. We have previously set out our recommendation for the introduction of an ID requirement for voters at polling stations in Great Britain, reflecting that which is already in operation in Northern Ireland. The UK Government has recently announced plans to pilot the requirement for ID at a number of local elections in May 2018, and the Commission will publish a full, independent evaluation of those pilots by summer 2018. We have also made a number of recommendations to the UK Government on how to reduce the risk of people voting more than once.³

Finally, it is clear from our survey results that the **demographic profile of candidates remains skewed away from women, younger people and those with a disability**, although there have been some positive changes in recent elections, particularly in terms of gender. A diverse and representative range of candidates is important to the health of our democracy and we will continue to work to ensure that there are no unreasonable barriers to those wishing to stand for election.

³ The Electoral Commission, [*Electoral registration at the UK general election 2017*](#) (July 2017).

1 Introduction

1.1 In 2017 candidates stood at several different polls across the UK. This report presents the key findings from research at three of them:

- the Northern Ireland Assembly election in March 2017,
- the Scottish council elections in May 2017,
- the UK Parliamentary General election in June 2017.⁴

1.2 Research was undertaken to gain insight into the views and experiences of candidates in a broad range of areas including standing and participating in an election, the administration of the elections, the availability of information on being a candidate and electoral integrity. A survey, comprised of closed questions and free text boxes, was issued following each of these three polls and 11 follow-up in-depth interviews were conducted. More information on the methodology can be viewed in Appendix A.

The Electoral Commission

1.1 The Electoral Commission is the independent body which oversees elections and regulates political finance in the UK. We work to promote public confidence in the democratic process and ensure its integrity by enabling the delivery of free and fair elections and referendums, focussing on the needs of electors and addressing the changing environment to ensure every vote remains secure and accessible. As part of this role the Commission makes assessments of how well UK elections are run and we have been publishing a series of reports on the 2017 polls.

- [Northern Ireland Assembly election March 2017: briefing paper](#)
- [Electoral registration at the UK general election 2017](#)
- [The administration of the Scottish council elections held on 4 May 2017](#)
- [The 2017 local government elections in Wales](#)
- [Voting in 2017](#)

⁴ The survey was not conducted at the English and Welsh local elections. The Commission conducts research with candidates and agents at the UK Parliamentary General elections and at elections to regional and devolved assembly/parliaments. The Commission received funding from the Scottish government to conduct a survey at the Scottish council elections.

2 The candidates

Key findings

- Approximately 70% of all candidates were male but the proportion of female candidates increased by 8 percentage points at the Scottish council elections and 3 percentage points at the UK Parliamentary General election.
- The most typical age to stand for office is 55-64. Compared to previous polls, the proportion of candidates aged 18-24 has seen an increase.
- The majority of candidates who responded to our survey identify as 'White', between 86% for UK Parliamentary General election candidates and 100% for Northern Ireland Assembly candidates.
- Data suggest people with a disability or health problem are under-represented in standing for office. In addition, of those respondents with a disability or health problem, 5% were elected, compared with 12% of those without.

2.1 In total, 6,104 candidates stood across the three polls covered by our survey. Compared to the previous equivalent polls, the number of candidates standing dropped by 17 percentage points at both the UK Parliamentary General and Northern Ireland Assembly election – the two snap polls - but increased by three percentage points at the Scottish council elections.

Table 2.1: Number of candidates standing at poll and response rate.⁵

Election	Candidates standing	Responses received	Response rate
Northern Ireland Assembly election	228	34	15%
Scottish council elections	2,572	743	29%
UK Parliamentary General election	3,308	780	24%

2.2 We received 1,557 survey responses, with response rates ranging from 15% to 29% (Table 2.1). Due to the lower volume of responses received from Northern Ireland Assembly candidates (34 questionnaires with 15% response rate), limited analysis by demographic and electoral characteristics could be conducted.

⁵ The number of candidates at previous equivalent election was: Northern Ireland Assembly 2016 – 276, Scottish council 2012 – 2,496; UK Parliamentary General election 2015 – 3,971. Response rate at previous surveys was: Northern Ireland Assembly 2016 – 25%, Scottish council 2012 – 40%; UK Parliamentary General election 2015 – 18%.

2.3 Survey respondents are self-selecting and there is limited available data on the demographic profile of candidates. Therefore it is not possible to be certain how representative the survey results are.⁶

2.4 However, where we can compare survey results to available data on candidates we find that survey respondents are broadly representative of the candidates standing – particularly for the UK Parliamentary General election and the Scottish council elections. For example:

- The gender split in our survey respondents for both polls (broadly 70/30 for men and women) is the same as the known gender profile of candidates;⁷
- The proportion of party and independent candidates is also very similar between the survey results and reality;
- The balance of those elected and not elected is similar;
- We see some differences in party political affiliation, for example slightly fewer survey responses from Conservative candidates and more from Liberal Democrats than the ‘true’ profile. However, there are no large discrepancies.

2.5 The data presented below should therefore be treated as indicative rather than entirely representative. Nevertheless it offers a good insight into the profile of candidates at these elections.

Profile

Political and electoral characteristics

2.6 Both our surveys and the official figures show that the majority of candidates at these elections stood for registered political parties, with the number of independents varying from 6% at the UK Parliamentary General elections to 19% at the Scottish council elections (table 2.2). Compared to the previous poll, the number of independent candidates increased by two percentage points at the UK Parliamentary General election and decreased by one at both Scottish council and Northern Ireland Assembly election.

2.7 Results from our survey indicate that the proportion of candidates without previous experience of standing for election ranged from 39% at the Scottish council elections (down five percentage points from 2012) to 19% at the UK Parliamentary General election (down fourteen percentage points from the last UK Parliamentary General election).

⁶ Candidates standing at elections are not required to provide demographic information.

⁷ House of Commons Library, [Women in Parliament and Government](#) (July 2017).

Table 2.2: Political and electoral characteristics.

Question	Answer	Election		
		Northern Ireland Assembly	Scottish council	UK Parliament
Party/Independent <i>(official figures)</i>	Party	91%	81%	94%
	Independent	9%	19%	6%
Experience	Experienced	70%	61%	81%
	1 st time	30%	39%	19%
Elected/Not elected ⁸	Elected	50%	54%	11%
	Not elected	50%	46%	89%

Demographic characteristics

2.8 Across all three elections, the majority of candidates were men (70% or over). Available data on candidates at the Scottish council elections and UK Parliamentary General election show there was an increase in the proportion of female candidates compared to the previous, comparable poll – up 3% points in the UK Parliamentary General and 8% points in Scottish council elections.⁹

2.9 The absolute number of female candidates at the UK Parliamentary General election fell compared to 2015 but the overall number of candidates also fell significantly (to its lowest level since 1992). The proportion of female candidates therefore increased to 29%, the highest proportion on record.¹⁰

2.10 Our survey suggests that the most typical age to stand for office remains 55-64. Comparing the 2017 surveys to those conducted at the previous equivalent polls indicates that the 18-24 age group, which is traditionally low, has seen an increase. Indeed it more than doubled between 2016 and 2017 in Northern Ireland, from 7% to 15%.

2.11 The vast majority of respondents to all surveys identified as being 'White': 86% at UK Parliament, 94% at Scottish council and all respondents for the Northern Ireland Assembly election. The number of respondents to the

⁸ Number of seats: Northern Ireland Assembly - 90; Scottish councils - 1,227; UK Parliament - 650.

⁹ Information on candidates' gender is not available for Northern Ireland.

¹⁰ House of Commons Library, [Women in Parliament and Government](#) (July 2017).

UK Parliamentary General election survey identifying as 'White' has dropped four percentage points compared to the previous poll.

Table 2.3: Demographic characteristics.

Question	Answer	Election		
		Northern Ireland Assembly	Scottish council	UK Parliament
Gender	Male	74%	70%	71%
	Female	26%	30%	29%
Age	18-24	15%	3%	4%
	25-34	8%	4%	11%
	35-44	23%	9%	17%
	45-54	19%	22%	23%
	55-64	23%	33%	27%
	65+	12%	29%	17%
Ethnicity	White	100%	94%	86%
	Indian	-	-	2%
	Pakistani	-	-	1%
	Bangladeshi	-	-	1%
	Black African	-	-	1%
	Other	-	6%	8%

Equality: disability and caring responsibilities

2.12 The Commission works to ensure there is no barrier for people with a disability when it comes to participating to the electoral process. In our survey, we asked respondents if they had any condition that limits their daily activities or the work they do, such as long term illness, health problems or disability.

2.13 Between 8% and 11% of respondents in 2017 said they had a health problem or disability which suggests they are under-represented in standing

for office. Data from the 2011 Census indicates that approximately 82% of the population in England and Wales did not identify as having a health problem or disability against 89-92% amongst respondents to this survey.¹¹ Additionally, just 5% of our respondents with a disability or health problem said they were elected in the 2017 UKPGE, compared to 12% of those without.

Table 2.4: Health problems/disability

Question	Answer	Election		
		Northern Ireland Assembly	Scottish council	UK Parliament
Health problem/ Disability	Yes	8%	11%	10%
	No	92%	89%	90%

2.14 The Elected Office Fund Scotland, initiated by the Scottish government, was used for the first time at the Scottish council elections 2017 with the aim of providing assistance to disabled people standing as a candidate and seeking internal party selection. Feedback from candidates was overall positive, but only 39% of respondents with a disability or health problem said they were aware of it. The Commission will continue to assist in increasing awareness of the Fund at future council and Scottish Parliament elections, and any other elections to which it is introduced.¹²

2.15 Additionally, we asked candidates whether they have caring responsibilities for anyone in their household - such as children under 18 or anyone with a disability or long-term illness. Across the three surveys, 18% to 23% said they are caring for someone else.¹³ This also suggests some under-representation as census data suggests that around 11% of people in England and Wales have some caring responsibilities and that excludes people who only have dependent children which would make the overall figure notably higher.

¹¹ The question in the [2011 Census](#) is worded slightly differently: 'Are your day-to-day activities limited because of a health problem or disability which has lasted, or is expected to last, at least 12 months?'

¹² For more detail on the Fund, please see report [Scottish council elections 2017](#).

¹³ Questions in this area are generally sensitive and not all respondents provided an answer. Compared to the main questionnaire, the maximum number of respondents answering any question in this section drops by 6% for UK Parliamentary election, 2% Scottish council elections and 21% Northern Ireland Assembly election. Of those who were willing to share this information we saw 70% or more of respondents to our 2017 surveys were men.

Candidates and agents

2.16 Within each type of poll, there appears to be a consistent number of respondents acting as both candidate and agent. In 2017, the percentage of respondents acting as both was lowest at the UK Parliamentary General election (15%) and highest at the Northern Ireland Assembly election (22%), with Scotland at 19%. These figures are similar in all cases to the figures obtained from the last equivalent poll.

2.17 The Commission has also published the results from the survey of agents at the UKPGE conducted by Brunel University.¹⁴ We have included relevant findings from that study in this report as appropriate.

¹⁴ The Electoral Commission/Brunel University, [*Attitudes of Electoral Agents on the Administration of the 2017 General Election*](#) (November 2017).

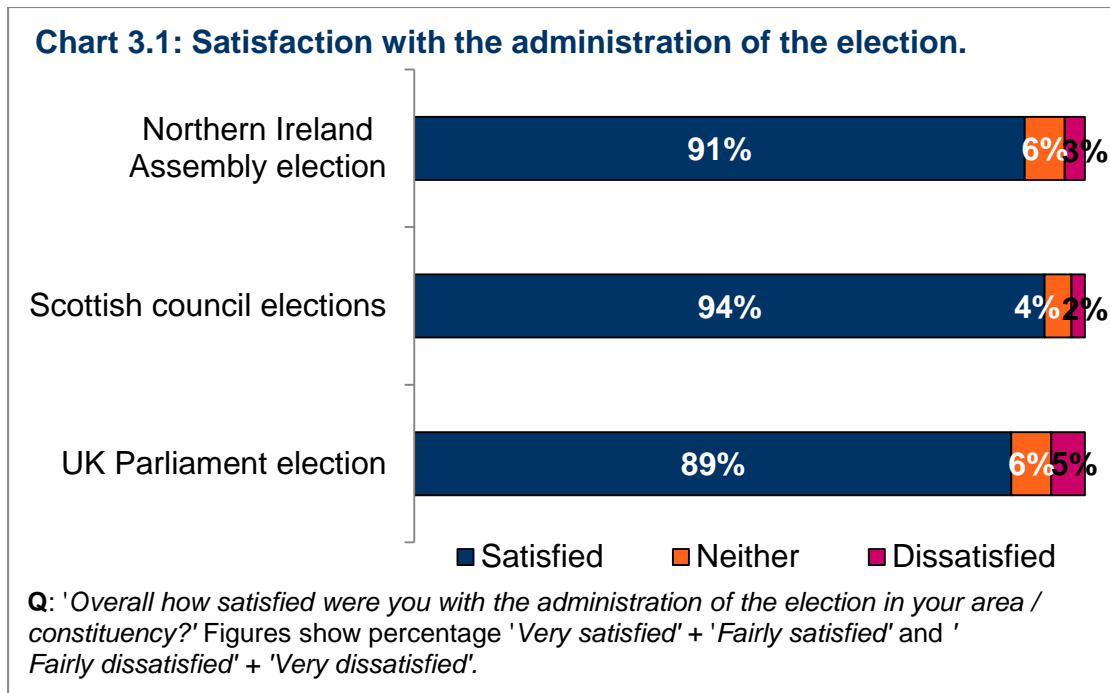
3 Experience of the poll

Key findings

- Candidates were satisfied with the administration of the election across all three polls, from 89% at the UK Parliament General election to 94% for the Scottish council elections.
- The vast majority of respondents found the nomination process to be easy and straightforward and the count to be transparent.
- Respondents found the collection of the required number of signatures to stand for election easy, but the requirement to raise the deposit at the UK Parliamentary General election was seen as problematic and a perceived barrier.
- A number of candidates reported experiencing threats and intimidation when standing for election this year. The Commission believes it should no longer be necessary to publish a candidate's home address in election literature.
- UK Parliamentary General election candidates were significantly less likely to agree that they found the spending and donations rules clear. This is understandable as the financial rules for the UK Parliamentary General election are more complicated than at the other two polls.
- One third of respondents did not directly use the Commission's advice and guidance. Among those who did, three-quarters found it useful.

3.1 Overall satisfaction with the administration of the elections remains high across the three different polls, with 89% or more of respondents saying they were satisfied. This is down three percentage points since the last Northern Ireland Assembly election, but up five percentage points from the last UK Parliamentary General election and up four percentage points from the last Scottish council elections.

3.2 The results shows no significant difference in reported satisfaction between candidates with and without experience or between elected and unelected respondents. Respondents with a disability or health problem were less likely to be satisfied with the administration of the election than those without (83% against 91% for the UK Parliamentary General election survey, 88% against 95% for the Scottish council).



Becoming a candidate

Nomination process

3.3 The vast majority of respondents were positive, across the three polls, about the process for becoming a candidate, including the availability of information on how to become a candidate, the rules and the nomination process (Chart 3.1). Results are in line with surveys from previous polls.

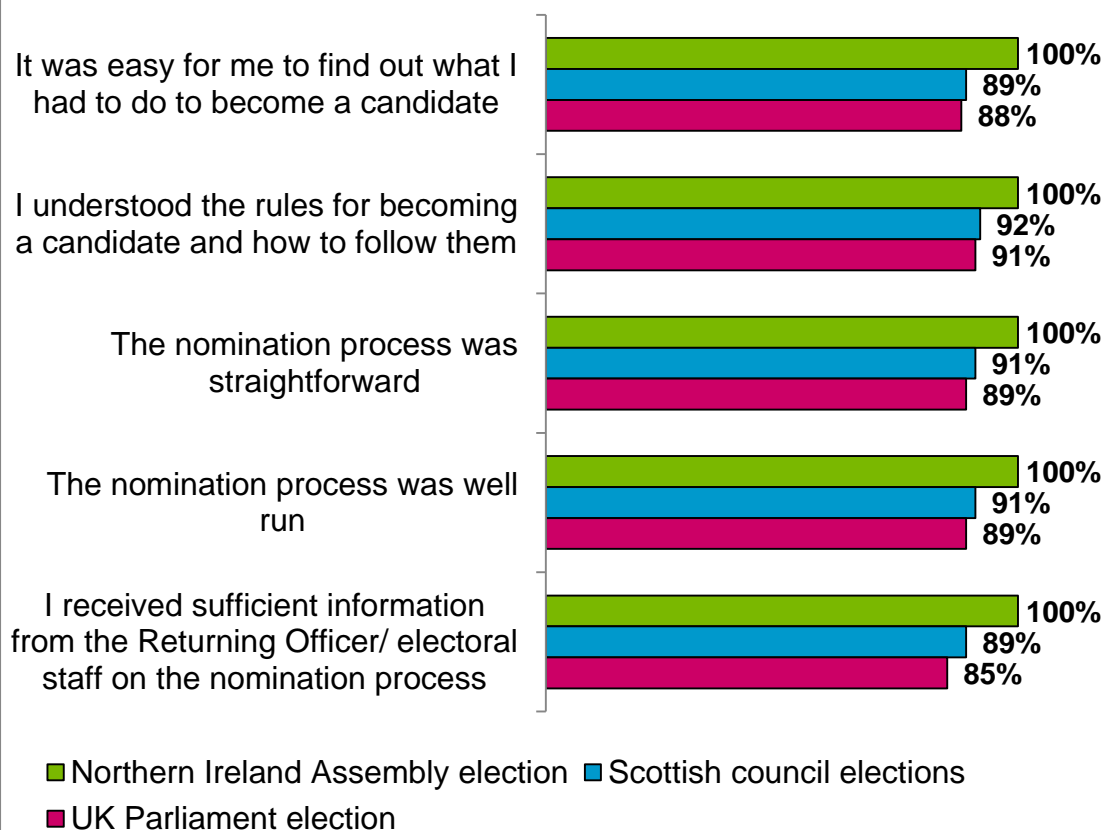
3.4 Party candidates at the UK Parliamentary General election were more likely than independents to agree it was easy to find out how to become a candidate (90% against 78%) and that the process was straightforward (90% and 86% respectively). The opposite was true at the Scottish council elections where independents were more likely than party candidates to agree with those statements (92% against 87% and 91% against 89% respectively). There was no difference at the Northern Ireland Assembly election.

3.5 Respondents with a disability or a health problem were less likely to say it was easy to find out what they had to do to become a candidate: 78% against 91% at the UK Parliamentary General election, 79% against 89% respectively at the Scottish council elections.

3.6 For all measures in Chart 3.2 results from the Northern Ireland Assembly survey were the same for male and female respondents. However in both the UK Parliamentary General and Scottish council elections surveys women were less likely to agree than men. Most differences are a maximum of four percentage points but women at the UKPGE were significantly less likely to say it was easy to find out what they had to do to become a candidate (83% against 92%).

Chart 3.2: The process for becoming a candidate.

Showing % saying 'Agree' + 'Tend to agree'



Q: 'Please indicate how much you agree or disagree with each of the following statements about participating in the election'.

Deposits and subscribers

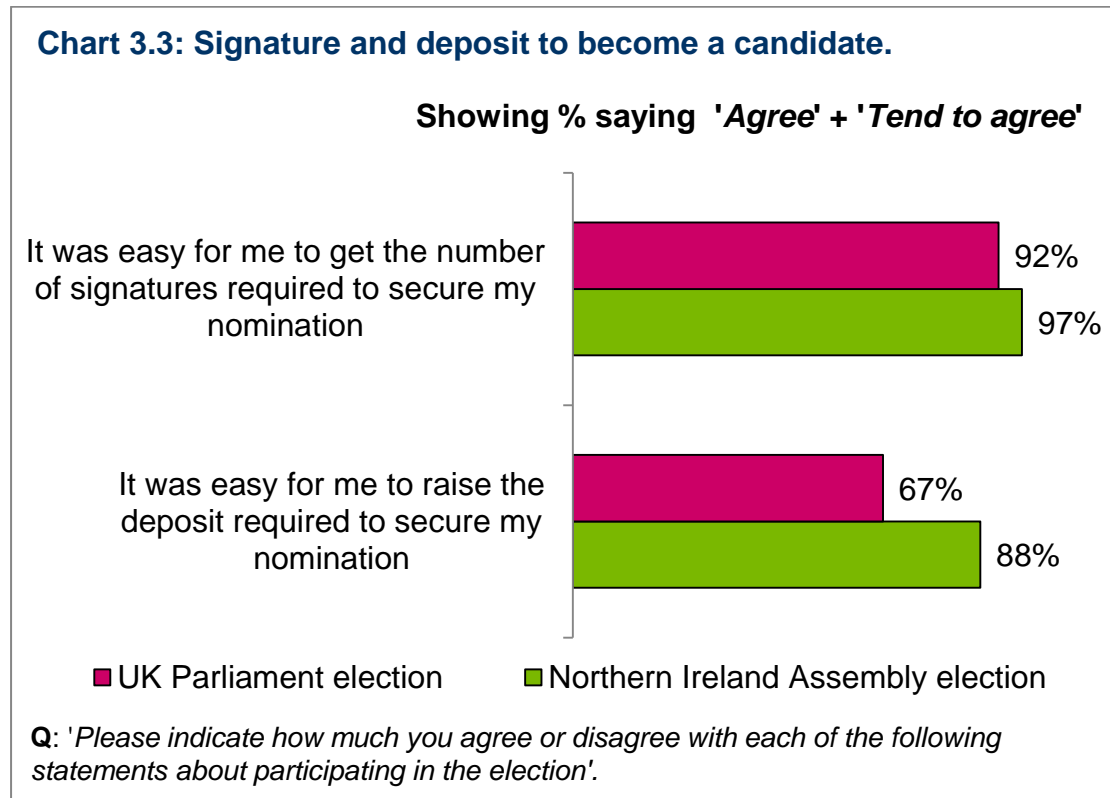
3.7 In order to stand at the UK Parliamentary General election and Northern Ireland Assembly election individuals are required to collect ten signatures and raise a deposit (£500 for the UK Parliamentary General election, £150 for Northern Ireland Assembly).¹⁵ These requirements do not apply to Scottish council elections.

3.8 Respondents to our surveys generally found the collection of signatures to be easy: 92% at the UK Parliamentary General election and 97% at the Northern Ireland Assembly election.

3.9 The Commission has recommended that the requirement for subscribers should be retained, to maintain trust that elections are being contested by serious candidates and to avoid ballot papers that are unwieldy for voters and difficult to administer. We have also recommended, however, that the number

¹⁵ More information on the requirements and our recommendations can be found in our [Standing for election in the United Kingdom: report and recommendations](#).

of subscribers should be reviewed for each election to ensure it is proportionate to the post for which the candidate is standing.



3.10 The requirement for a deposit was viewed more negatively, particularly at the UK Parliamentary General election where over a fifth of respondents (22%) disagreed it was easy to raise the required deposit (up four percentage points from 2015). Notably, one third of independent candidates disagreed (34%) against 21% of party candidates. One in four candidates with a disability or health problem also disagreed that it was easy.

3.11 Some respondents, in free text comments and in follow up interviews, said that the deposit was prohibitive for smaller parties and independents. In some cases they felt it was a question of fairness as the deposit requirement can mean that some candidates, without the resources, cannot stand for election.

3.12 The Electoral Commission has previously recommended the removal of the requirement to pay a deposit at all elections, as we do not consider that there should be a financial barrier to standing for election. This evidence

'[The deposit] is a barrier to democracy'

First time UK Parliamentary candidate, extract from survey return.

reinforces that recommendation.¹⁶

Candidate campaigning – Intimidation

3.13 Following the UK general election, many candidates and MPs have raised concerns regarding the intimidation of candidates during the campaign.

3.14 Our UK Parliamentary General election survey found this issue was raised unprompted by 4% of respondents.¹⁷ While some of this referred to behaviour by tellers or other campaigners at polling stations, false or damaging allegations in rival campaign literature, or vandalism of campaign materials, other comments related to more direct effects.

3.15 One response said a campaigner had been “assaulted”; another candidate claimed an individual was “rude and aggressive” to them at the count. Whilst these candidates didn’t experience physical violence they noted “hundreds of posters were ripped down” and that properties displaying their party’s posters were vandalised. They felt that this stifled debate, and that security concerns will deter supporters from displaying posters in future.

3.16 Some candidates had allowed their address to appear on the ballot paper as they felt other candidates would use the fact against them otherwise, but would have preferred to give just the town/village name instead.

3.17 Although our Scottish council elections research did not specifically seek to cover the issue of intimidation, a number of concerns were raised in interviews and when discussing whether respondents were content with their address appearing on a ballot paper.

3.18 One respondent said they experienced intimidating behaviour where a campaigner was threatened whilst out canvassing. In relation to addresses, another respondent had previously needed to involve the police over targeting resulting from their address being public, and another worried for his/her safety when a constituent arrived at his/her home during the night. There was appetite amongst respondents to have the same rights as Westminster candidates in choosing to omit their address.

3.19 This question has not been asked in Northern Ireland, but as

‘[The address in the public domain] has caused safety issues for me. [I had to] move out of home during the campaign due to threats received.’

Experienced UK Parliamentary candidate, political party extract

¹⁶ For more information, see the [Standing for office in the United Kingdom report of 2015](#)

¹⁷ Raised in free text areas of the questionnaire.

many do take advantage of not having to release their address publicly, this can make it more difficult to survey candidates.

3.20 In reports on elections in Scotland, we have recommended the Scottish Government reviews the rules on the publication of candidates' home addresses to find a balance between safety and transparency.¹⁸ Similarly, our Welsh local government report notes that the Welsh Government has suggested that it should no longer be necessary to publish a candidate's home address in election literature.¹⁹ The Commission supports the Welsh Government's decision to explore this requirement.

3.21 In September 2017, the Electoral Commission responded to the Committee on Standards in Public Life's (CSPL) call for evidence on the Intimidation of Parliamentary candidates setting out our views on a number of specific questions raised by CSPL. Our response can be read [here](#).

Complying with the rules

Donations and expenditure

3.22 The funding and spending of parties and candidates at elections are regulated, with different rules applying at different polls. The surveys asked respondents whether they found the rules on spending and donations clear.

3.23 Financial regulation rules are by their nature complex, and from the three polls considered here the UK Parliamentary General election rules are the most complicated. This is borne out in our survey findings, as Chart 3.4 shows, with respondents who stood in the Northern Ireland Assembly election most likely to agree that the rules on spending and donations were clear (97%) and candidates at the UK Parliamentary General election least likely to agree (68%).

3.24 At the general election there was little difference between party candidates and independent candidates (68% party against 69% independent). However independent candidates responding to the Scottish council elections survey were more likely to agree the rules on spending were clear than party candidates (88% against 79%). This may be partly because of a difference in wording in the Scotland survey where the question did not refer to donations, only to spending.²⁰

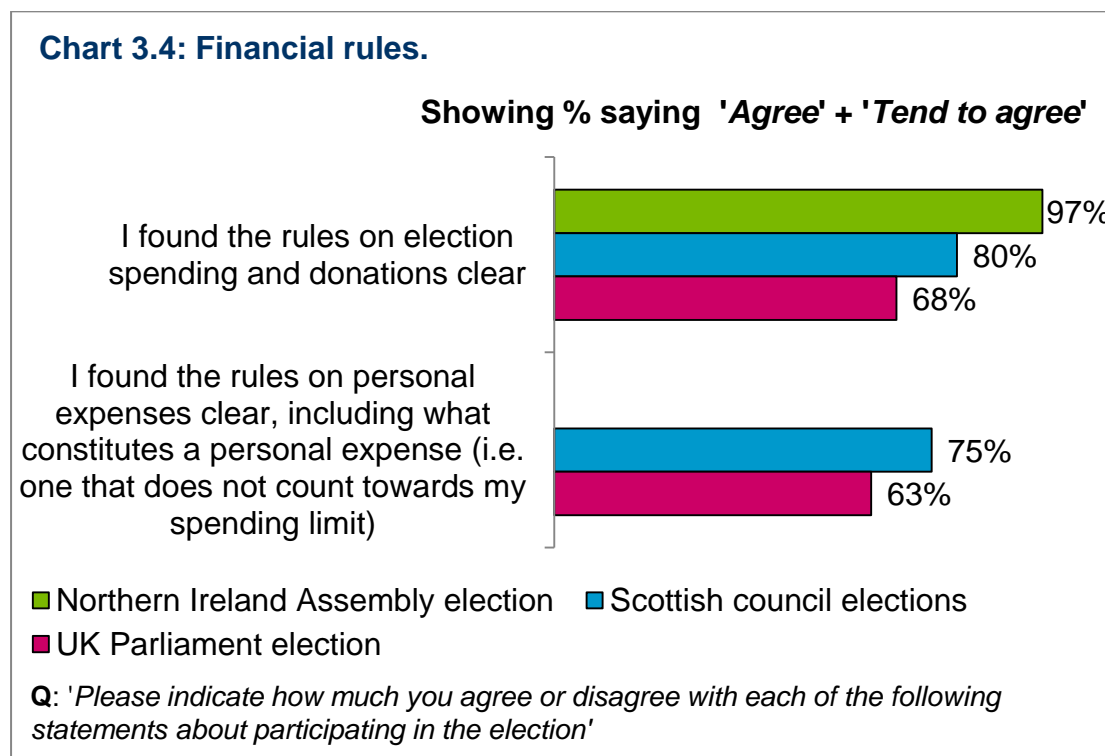
3.25 Our surveys at the UK Parliamentary General election and Scottish council elections also asked respondents whether they found the rules on

¹⁸ For more detail, please see our report [The administration of the Scottish council elections held on 4 May 2017](#) and [The 2016 Scottish Parliament election report](#).

¹⁹ For more detail, please see [The 2017 local government elections in Wales report](#).

²⁰ Candidates at these elections are not required to report donations in their spending return.

personal expenses clear, including what constitutes a personal expense.²¹ Three-quarters (75%) of respondents to the Scottish council survey agreed the rules were clear compared with 63% of respondents at the UK Parliamentary General election.



3.26 When breaking down agreement on the clarity of rules for both of these elections, independent candidates were less likely than party candidates to agree that the rules on personal expenses were clear (45% against 64%). This is likely to reflect, in part, the support that party candidates receive from their party, as well as the nature of the snap election which may have exacerbated the challenge for independent candidates.

3.27 In our Scottish council elections survey we also asked if the rules on expenses relating to a candidate's disability were clear (including how to report a disability related expense). Of those candidates and agents saying they had a disability or long term health problem 45% agreed that the rules were clear, although 29% said they did not know enough to agree or disagree.

3.28 Candidates will often have access to guidance, advice and support from experienced agents and the fact that 63% of UK Parliamentary General election candidates agreed that the rules on personal expenses were clear may not take account of the many candidates who felt they did not need to know the detailed rules because that was the role of their agent. In Brunel University's survey of agents at the UK Parliamentary General election, 81% of respondents agreed the rules on spending and donations were clear, an

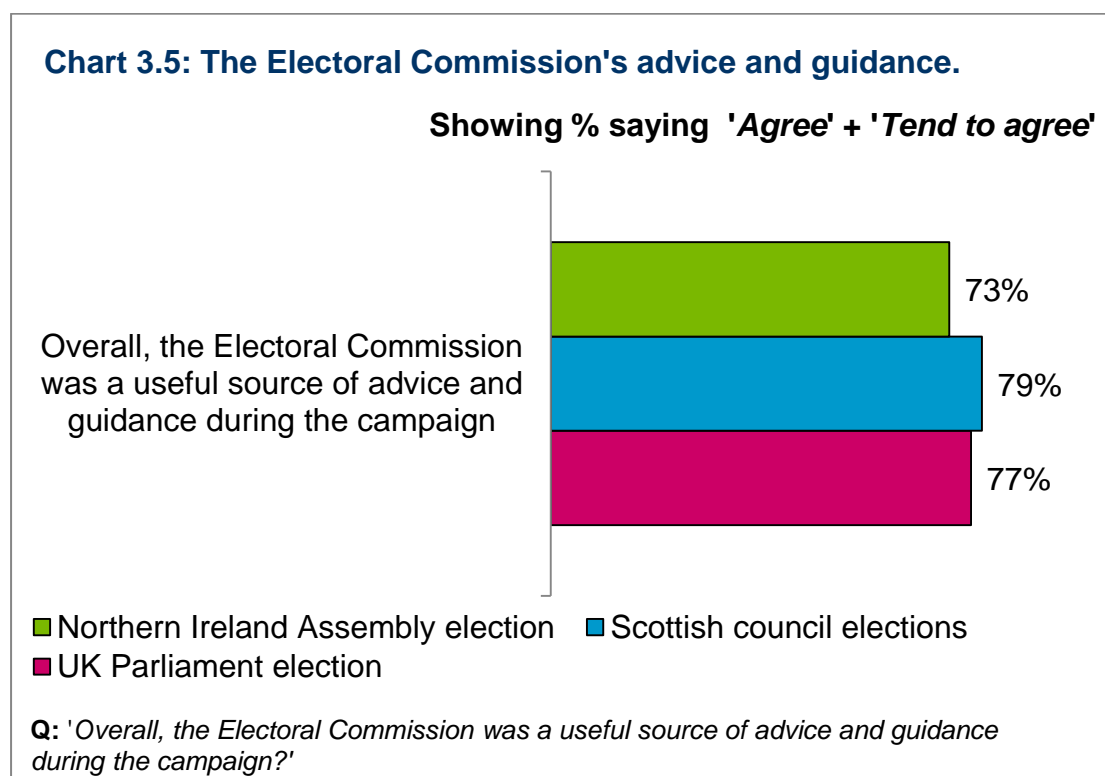
²¹ These rules do not apply to Northern Ireland.

improvement of four percentage points compared with 2015. At the Scottish council elections, 79% of responding agents agreed that rules on spending were clear.

The Commission as a source of information

3.29 The Commission provides advice and guidance to candidates who stand at elections. Individuals can also use other sources of information such as Returning Officers, their agent and their party, as well as relying on previous experience.

3.30 When asked if the Commission was a useful source of advice and guidance during the campaign, many respondents reported they 'did not use' the Commission guidance: 31% at the UK Parliamentary General Election, 36% at the Scottish council elections and 9% at the Northern Ireland Assembly poll). As noted above, this is unsurprising as there are other sources of information for candidates, and where they are using an agent it may have been the agent who directly accessed Commission guidance.



3.31 If we look at those who said they used the guidance we find that around two-thirds agreed it was useful: 77% at the UK Parliamentary General election, 79% at the Scottish council elections and 73% at the Northern Ireland Assembly. Respondents who had not stood for election before were as likely to say the Commission was useful as experienced candidates. Candidates with a disability or health problem were less likely to say they found it useful than those without: 71% against 80% respectively for the UK Parliamentary General election, 75% versus 81% for the Scottish council elections.

3.32 Brunel University's survey showed 68% of UK Parliamentary General election agents agreed the Commission was a useful source of advice and guidance. Data from respondents who acted only as agents in our Scottish council elections survey shows this measure as 78% agreement amongst those who used it.

3.33 The rating of the Commission as a useful source of advice and guidance should also be considered in the context of whether candidates have responded about the specific guidance issued by the Commission. As previously noted, candidates use a variety of sources of information and it is possible that where parties, agents or Returning Officers disseminate Commission guidance locally, or use Commission guidance to draft their own party guidance for candidates, it may not always be clear to respondents that the Commission is the original source.

3.34 The Commission is nevertheless considering the feedback on advice and guidance received from this research. We are planning to modernise our guidance and a key objective of this will be to improve navigability and ease of use. As part of this work we will be speaking further to candidates, as well as agents and political parties, to inform our approach.

3.35 We have already recommended that the Commission be given a statutory role in providing guidance for candidates and agents at council elections in Scotland. Currently we provide guidance on request from Scottish Government but our guidance on candidate spending in Scotland therefore has a different function from that in England and Wales, because we have no statutory role in advising candidates and agents. This means that the Scottish guidance cannot provide the usual assurance that where candidates and agents comply with it, they will normally be doing enough to comply with the law.

The count

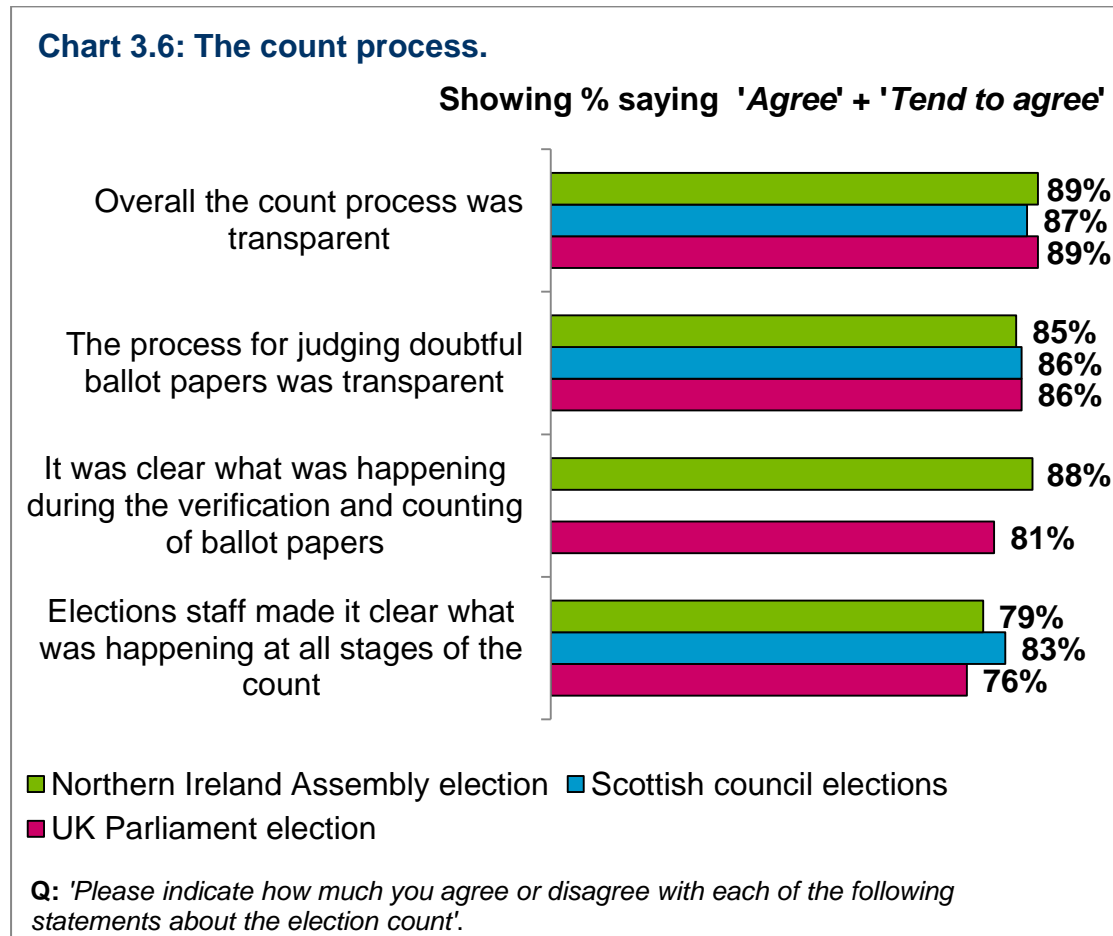
3.36 Candidates were positive about their experiences of counts at these polls in 2017. As Chart 3.6 shows, views on the transparency of the process were also fairly consistent between the polls.

3.37 Additional comments provided by respondents set out some potential areas for improvement, including issues related to specific count venues (layout, facilities, and the audio system). These appear to explain the lower, although still positive, results on whether election staff made it clear what was happening at all stages of the count. However, overall these issues appear to have been minor.

3.38 Candidates were more likely to have found the count process transparent in 2017 compared to the previous poll of each type. There have been concerns raised at previous Scottish council elections about the nature of a count using STV and how transparent and clear the process is for candidates, given the additional complexities of the system. Our 2017 survey shows an increase of three percentage points since 2012 on the question of

overall transparency, suggesting that although there is more to do, improvements since 2012 may have had some effect. Indeed, candidates at the Scotland council elections were the most likely to agree that election staff had made clear what was happening at different stages of the count.

3.39 For the UK Parliamentary General election we see little difference between experienced and first time candidates, with 87% and 89% respectively agreeing the count was transparent. There is a greater difference between those who were elected (94%) and not elected (87%), suggesting some link between satisfaction and electoral success.



4 Electoral integrity

Key findings

- Voting in general is perceived as safe by the majority of respondents but we note significant variation between UK Parliamentary General election candidates (74%) and Scottish council candidates (88%).
- Respondents to the Northern Ireland Assembly survey were the least likely to say that no fraud took place at the election (19%) and Scottish council elections respondents the most likely (40%).
- Compared to the previous UK Parliamentary General election, there has been a five percentage points drop (from 31% to 26%) of those saying fraud took place at the election.

4.1 The Electoral Commission plays an important role in detecting and preventing electoral fraud. We also conduct research with the public, candidates and other stakeholders to investigate perception of safety.²²

Voting in general

4.2 We asked candidates how safe they think voting is. Respondents to the Scottish council elections survey were most likely to agree voting is safe from fraud and abuse (88%). This is a five percentage points increase since 2012. Respondents to the UK Parliamentary General election survey were the least likely to agree that voting is safe from fraud and abuse (74%) and this has dropped slightly, by two percentage points, since 2015.²³

4.3 The most notable change from the previous poll is seen for the Northern Ireland Assembly, where agreement on whether voting is safe dropped ten percentage points between 2016 and 2017. This may be linked to media reports and complaints from some candidates about the increased number of proxy votes issued at the Northern Ireland Assembly election in 2017.

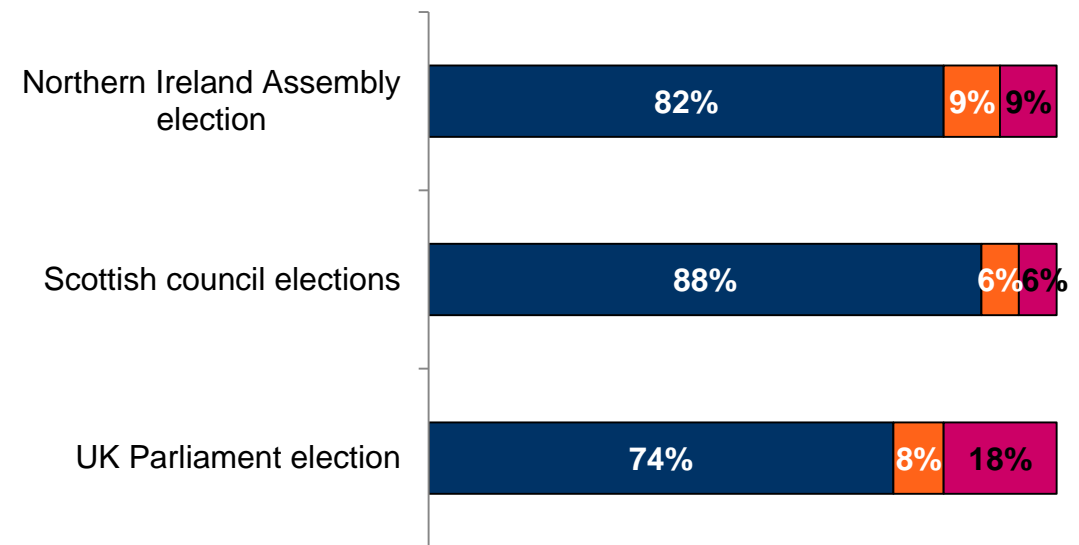
4.4 Confidence in the system appears linked to electoral success. In the UK Parliamentary General election survey, if a respondent had been elected they were more likely to agree that voting is safe from fraud and abuse: 86% of those elected felt so, compared to 73% of those not elected.

4.5 Respondents with a disability or health problem were less likely than those without to think that voting is safe from fraud and abuse: 66% and 75% respectively for the UK Parliamentary General election survey; 78% and 87% for the Scottish council elections.

²² Please see [Voting in 2017](#), page 21 onwards for analysis of public opinion on this topic.

²³ The survey did not specify a definition of electoral fraud for respondents here, however more can be found about the Commission's work on [electoral fraud on our website](#).

Chart 4.1: Is voting safe in general?



Q: 'In general, when it come to being safe from fraud and abuse, how safe or unsafe would you say that voting is?'

Fraud in your area

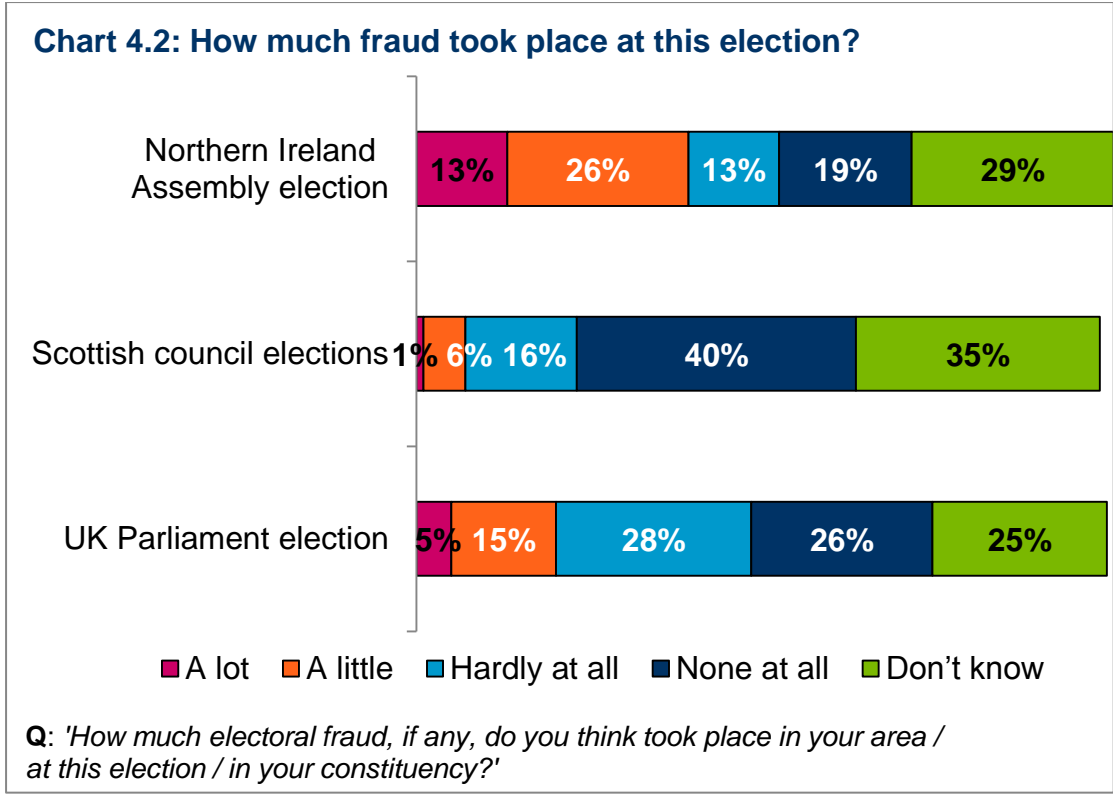
4.6 Our previous studies on perceptions of electoral fraud have found that a question about fraud 'in general' may produce a result influenced by a small number of media stories.²⁴ We therefore also ask how much respondents felt fraud took place in their area specifically. There is a similar pattern between the three polls in responses to this question.

4.7 Consistent with the responses on voting noted above, Northern Ireland Assembly respondents are least likely to say there had been no fraud in their area and the proportion saying there was no fraud has dropped 20 percentage points since the 2016 poll. Again, it seems likely that this change is a result of the increased focus on allegations around proxy voting in 2017.

4.8 Compared to the relevant previous polls, the figure for UK Parliamentary General election has dropped by five percentage points while the response to Scottish council elections survey has seen a small improvement (three percentage points). Overall, candidates in Scotland were much more likely to say that no fraud had taken place in their area.

4.9 At the UK Parliamentary General election, survey responses were again more positive from those elected, where 45% said 'none at all', compared with 24% of those not elected.

²⁴ The Electoral Commission, [Research report library, Electoral Fraud](#).



4.10 For the first time in our candidate research, the UK Parliamentary General election questionnaire asked respondents why they felt there was electoral fraud or abuse on election day.²⁵ A variety of concerns were raised which have been categorised and the main issues can be summarised as follows:

- perceived vulnerabilities of postal voting (32% mentioned);
- reports of double voting particularly amongst students (15%);
- undue influence – particularly in South Asian communities and care homes - (15%);²⁶
- the lack of photographic ID required (8%).²⁷

4.11 The Commission takes all these concerns very seriously, and is looking at ways to address them. We recently made a number of recommendations to the UK Government on how to reduce the risk of people voting more than once.²⁸ We have previously set out our recommendation for the introduction of

²⁵ A specific free text box question on fraud was included in the 2017 UK Parliamentary General election for the first time but not included in the 2017 questionnaires, or previous ones, for the Northern Ireland Assembly and Scottish council elections.

²⁶ More on our 2015 research in this area can be seen at [Elections, voting and electoral fraud](#) and [Understanding electoral fraud vulnerability in Pakistani and Bangladeshi origin communities in England](#).

²⁷ On the 2017 UK Parliamentary General election candidate survey, a further 4% of comments under 'any other issues' also call for voter ID.

²⁸ The Electoral Commission, [Electoral registration at the UK general election 2017](#) (July 2017).

an ID requirement for voters at polling stations in Great Britain, reflecting that which is already in operation in Northern Ireland. The UK Government has recently announced plans to pilot the requirement for ID at a number of local elections in May 2018, and the Commission will publish a full, independent evaluation of those pilots by summer 2018.²⁹

4.12 Our work and recommendations on preventing and detecting electoral fraud [can be accessed on our website](#).

²⁹ For more information, please see the [Electoral Commission's response to Sir Eric Pickles' review and recommendations on electoral fraud](#).

5 Conclusions

5.1 The findings from our 2017 surveys of candidates showed high levels of satisfaction with the administration of the polls and the process for becoming a candidate, but also highlighted specific areas where some action is needed.

5.2 Firstly, just over a fifth of respondents to our UK Parliamentary General election survey said it was not easy to raise the £500 deposit to stand, with independents even less likely to agree (nearly one third disagreed). Deposits are a financial barrier to standing for election and the Commission has previously recommended the removal of the requirement to pay a deposit at any poll.

5.3 A number of respondents to our surveys raised concerns regarding the intimidation of candidates during the campaign. The United Kingdom has a strong tradition of free elections, which are an essential part of a healthy democracy. The Electoral Commission believes that it is important that people should be able to stand for election and campaign without the fear of abuse or intimidation. The Commission has submitted evidence to the inquiry conducted by the Committee on Standards in Public Life (CSPL) on this issue.

5.4 Our 2017 report on public attitudes towards elections and voting – Voting in 2017 – highlighted that the majority of the public believe voting in general is safe from fraud and abuse but that concerns remain about vulnerabilities in the system. This is also the case among candidates, with the majority of respondents (74% at the UK Parliamentary General election and 88% at the Scottish council elections) saying they think voting is safe but a significant minority believing some fraud took place. The Commission has recommended a number of measures to tackle issues that concern candidates and the public such as double-voting and personation.

5.5 The survey results for the Northern Ireland Assembly election suggest an increase in concerns with 19% of respondents saying they thought no fraud had taken place at the March 2017 election. That was the lowest of the three surveys and a fall of 10 percentage points since the 2016 poll. This is probably related to allegations around proxy voting at the 2017 poll.

5.6 Finally, our results show that despite some positive changes, particularly in terms of gender, the demographic profile of candidates remains skewed away from women and younger people. People with a disability also remain under-represented. The Commission believes a diverse and representative range of candidates is important to the health of democracy and we want to ensure that there are no unreasonable barriers to those wishing to stand for election.

Appendix A: Background and methodology

The surveys were conducted to understand more about the views and experiences of candidates who stood at the Northern Ireland Assembly, Scottish council and UK Parliamentary General election in 2017.

All three surveys were conducted in-house and questionnaires were distributed via post shortly after the respective polling day. The postal questionnaires were distributed using addresses available from the Statements of Persons Nominated, published by relevant local authorities and the Electoral Office for Northern Ireland. Questionnaires for the Scottish council and UK Parliamentary General election were also distributed via email using addresses provided by Idox and Democracy Club respectively.

The questionnaire comprised closed questions and free text boxes, providing us with qualitative data and also giving candidates the opportunity to provide information on issues not raised by the questions, or elaborate on answers given. Marked up questionnaires are available in [Appendix B](#).

Although between 15-22% of respondents identify as being both a candidate and agent, for both waves of Scottish council elections, the research also surveyed those acting solely as electoral agents. These agent only responses are filtered out for this report.

We conducted 11 follow-up interviews with candidates who stood in either Scottish council elections or at the UK Parliamentary General election. This allowed us to find out in more detail why candidates had answered as they did, and enabled us to explore other issues not covered in the questionnaire.

Assumptions

Any reference in this report to a proportion of candidates – i.e. ‘most candidates,’ is, unless otherwise stated, referring to the candidates who returned our survey, and should not be taken to represent the views of all candidates.

Many questions on this survey asked whether candidates agreed with certain statements; unless otherwise outlined, the proportion said to ‘agree’ with something includes both those who agreed or tended to agree, and the proportion said to ‘disagree’ includes those who disagreed or tended to disagree. Similarly, where respondents are said to be ‘satisfied’ with a sentiment, this typically includes those ‘very satisfied’ and ‘fairly satisfied’ and so on.

Percentages given for some questions will not sum to 100% due to rounding, or in some cases multiple answers being possible, which where relevant is outlined.

Please note that data are unweighted.