Voting in 2017

Understanding public attitudes towards elections and voting

October 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 core area of the Electoral Commission's work is to promote public confidence in the democratic process. In order to understand public attitudes, following each set of elections we survey a nationally representative sample of the population in those areas where polls have been held. This report summarises and analyses the results of the post-election surveys conducted in 2017 and provides an overview of public attitudes to elections and voting.

Key findings

The elections in 2017 saw increased turnout compared to the last equivalent poll – most notably at the Northern Ireland Assembly and Scottish council elections. In addition, **the level of engagement among younger age groups at the UK general election appears to have improved since 2015** – our research suggests a greater turnout and an increased level of awareness among younger people of both the election itself and of the parties and candidates standing at the poll.

Nevertheless, we also found **strong evidence of a continuing lack of engagement, particularly among young people, with the local elections**. While turnout at these polls was up it remains relatively low. We asked people in England with local government elections if they felt they had enough information to make an informed choice on who to vote for – one third of all respondents, including nearly half of 18-34 year olds, disagreed. **More work must be done to ensure that all voters have access to information about these elections and who they can vote for, and that they use that access.**

Positively, we have again found that **most people believe elections in the UK to be well run** – with confidence even higher among those who vote – and that the vast majority of voters are satisfied with the process for casting their ballot. However, there is no room for complacency in this area and our research highlighted areas where we believe further work is needed.

While most people continue to be satisfied with the system of registering to vote **there is also support for improvement, with two thirds supporting the idea of automatically registering electors when they are issued with a National Insurance number**. We have recently published our assessment of the system of electoral registration and highlighted several areas for improvement.

Finally, **the perception of electoral fraud continues to be an issue at UK elections**. While the vast majority believe voting in general to be safe, there remains a level of concern, albeit based more on media coverage than direct experience. 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 conduct and publish a full, independent evaluation of those pilots by summer 2018.

1 Introduction: 2017 polls

1.1 In 2017 over 44 million votes were cast at six different polls:

- Local government elections **in England, Scotland and Wales**
- The inaugural Combined Authority Mayoral elections **in Cambridgeshire and Peterborough, Greater Manchester, Liverpool City Region, Tees Valley, West of England and the West Midlands**
- The snap Northern Ireland Assembly election **(NIA)**
- The snap UK Parliamentary general election **(UKPGE)**

1.2 Public engagement with a poll manifests itself most clearly in turnout. While turnout still lags behind pre-2000 levels, in 2017 it was higher than at the previous equivalent poll at every single election. In the case of the general election, the absolute number of votes cast was the largest since 1992. It is unclear to what extent these increases in turnout represent a sustained change or if levels will drop again at some stage. 2017 was unusual in both the overall volume and, in some cases, the nature of the polls. 2017 also followed on from two years of highly significant electoral events, notably the EU referendum.

Table 1.1: Elections held in 2017

Election	Date	Voting system[1]	Votes cast	Turnout
Northern Ireland Assembly election	2 March	STV	812,783	64.8%
English local government elections		FPTP SV	6,583,306	35.1%
Combined Authority Mayoral elections	4 May	SV	1,895,781	27.8%
Scottish council elections		STV	1,927,149	46.9%
Welsh local government elections		FPTP	895,943	42.0%
UKPGE	8 June	FPTP	32,294,928	69.0%
Total votes 2017			**44,409,890**	

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[1] Three voting systems were used in 2017: Single Transferable Vote (STV) at the Scottish council elections and the Northern Ireland Assembly election; the Combined Authority mayoral elections used the Supplementary Vote (SV) system; the UK general election and the English and Welsh local government elections used First Past the Post (FPTP).

This report

1.3   This report examines these polls from the perspective of those that voted at them, as well as those that chose not to. Chapter 2 focuses on turnout: who voted at each of the polls and why. Chapter 3 covers how much electors felt they knew about each of the polls and where they accessed information in order to be able to make an informed decision on who to vote for. Chapter 4 considers how confident the public are with the way that elections are run in the UK in general, and how satisfied they are with specific elements of the process.

1.4   This report is based primarily on the findings of a series of public opinion surveys undertaken by the Electoral Commission in 2017. Our post-poll surveys conducted in March, May and June comprised a total of 6,154 interviews. Information on methodology can be found in Appendix A.

The Electoral Commission

1.5   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.

1.6   As part of this role the Commission provides assessments of how well UK elections are run. Reports on the administration of the Northern Ireland Assembly election, the Scottish council elections and the Welsh local government elections have already been published.

- Northern Ireland Assembly election March 2017: briefing paper
- The administration of the Scottish council elections held on 4 May 2017
- The 2017 local government elections in Wales

1.7   Reports on the administration of the Combined Authority Mayoral elections and the June UKPGE will be published soon. Following the UKPGE in June we published a report on electoral registration ahead of the poll.

- Electoral registration at the June 2017 UK general election

1.8   Further reports relating to the UKPGE – on the experience of candidates standing for office in 2017 and on the accessibility of the UKPGE for people with a disability – will be published later this year.
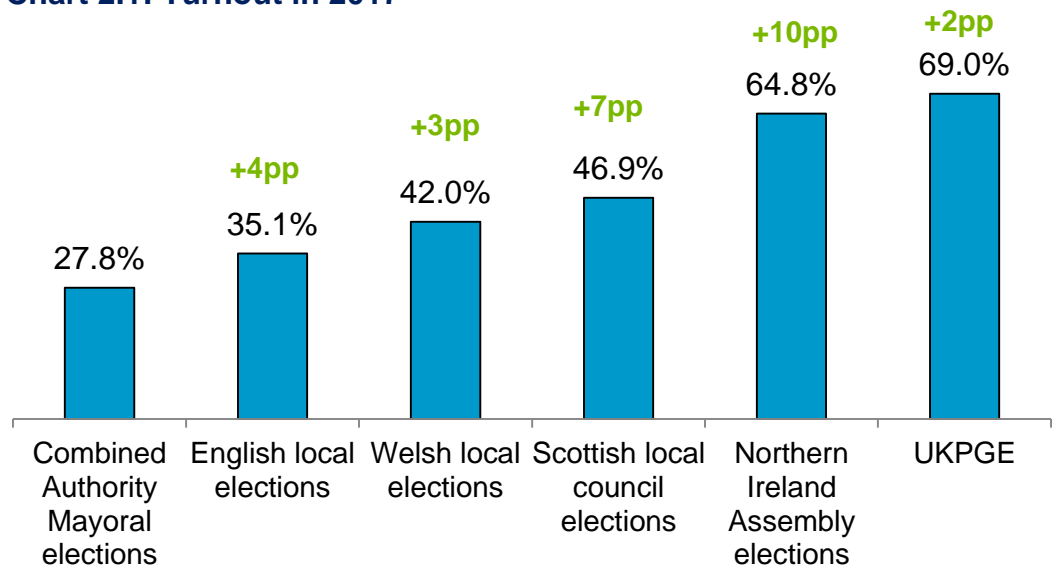
2   Engagement: turnout

Key Findings

- At every poll in 2017 turnout was up on the previous equivalent election, although lower at the scheduled local government elections in May than at the snap polls in March and June.
- Turnout at the Scottish council elections was higher than at the locals in England and Wales. However Scots were less likely to have voted at the UKPGE than their counterparts elsewhere in Great Britain.
- Our research suggests that turnout among young people at the 2017 UKPGE was significantly up on 2015; however we also found they remained significantly less likely than older age groups to have voted at the local government elections.

Turnout in 2017

2.1   2017 saw two 'snap' polls called outside of their scheduled cycle: the Northern Ireland Assembly election held on 2 March and the UKPGE held on 8 June. The Northern Ireland Assembly election turnout of 64.8% was the highest since the first Assembly election in 1998, and an increase of 10 percentage points on the previous Assembly election in May 2016.

Chart 2.1: Turnout in 2017

Election	Turnout	Change
Combined Authority Mayoral elections	27.8%	
English local elections	35.1%	+4pp
Welsh local elections	42.0%	+3pp
Scottish local council elections	46.9%	+7pp
Northern Ireland Assembly elections	64.8%	+10pp
UKPGE	69.0%	+2pp

pp figure indicates change from previous equivalent poll
Turnout = total of those registered to vote that turned out to vote

2.2   Similarly in June, the UK wide turnout of 69.0% was the highest seen at a general election since 1997 and an increase of over 2 percentage points on turnout in 2015. At 46.8 million, the electorate at the UKPGE was the largest

ever for a UK-wide poll, with approximately 500,000 more people on the register than at the 2015 general election.

2.3   Turnout at local elections is usually much lower than at national elections and 2017 was no exception. Turnout in May was significantly lower than it was in both March and June. It was however up on the previous equivalent polls, particularly in Scotland where turnout was 46.9%, over 7 percentage points higher than at the 2012 Scottish council elections.

2.4   At the UKPGE, however, turnout in Scotland (66.8%) was lower than in England and Wales and markedly lower than in Scotland at the 2015 UK general election (71.1%). This being said, after 2015, turnout in 2017 was higher than at any other general election turnout in Scotland since 1997. The very high turnout in Scotland in 2015 was no doubt at least in part a consequence of increased political engagement following the independence referendum held in September 2014.

Table 2.1: Turnout at UK Parliament general elections, 1997-2017

UKPGE	England	Wales	Scotland	Northern Ireland	United Kingdom
2017	69.3%	68.7%	66.8%	65.6%	69.0%
2015	66.2%	65.8%	71.1%	58.4%	66.4%
2010	65.7%	64.9%	63.9%	58.0%	65.3%
2005	61.5%	62.8%	60.9%	63.5%	61.6%
2001	59.4%	61.5%	58.2%	68.6%	59.6%
1997	71.6%	73.7%	71.4%	67.4%	71.6%

Who Voted?

Turnout and age

2.5   Our research has consistently found that age has a significant impact on the likelihood that a person is registered to vote, their attitude toward voting, and their propensity to turn out and vote at a poll.[2]
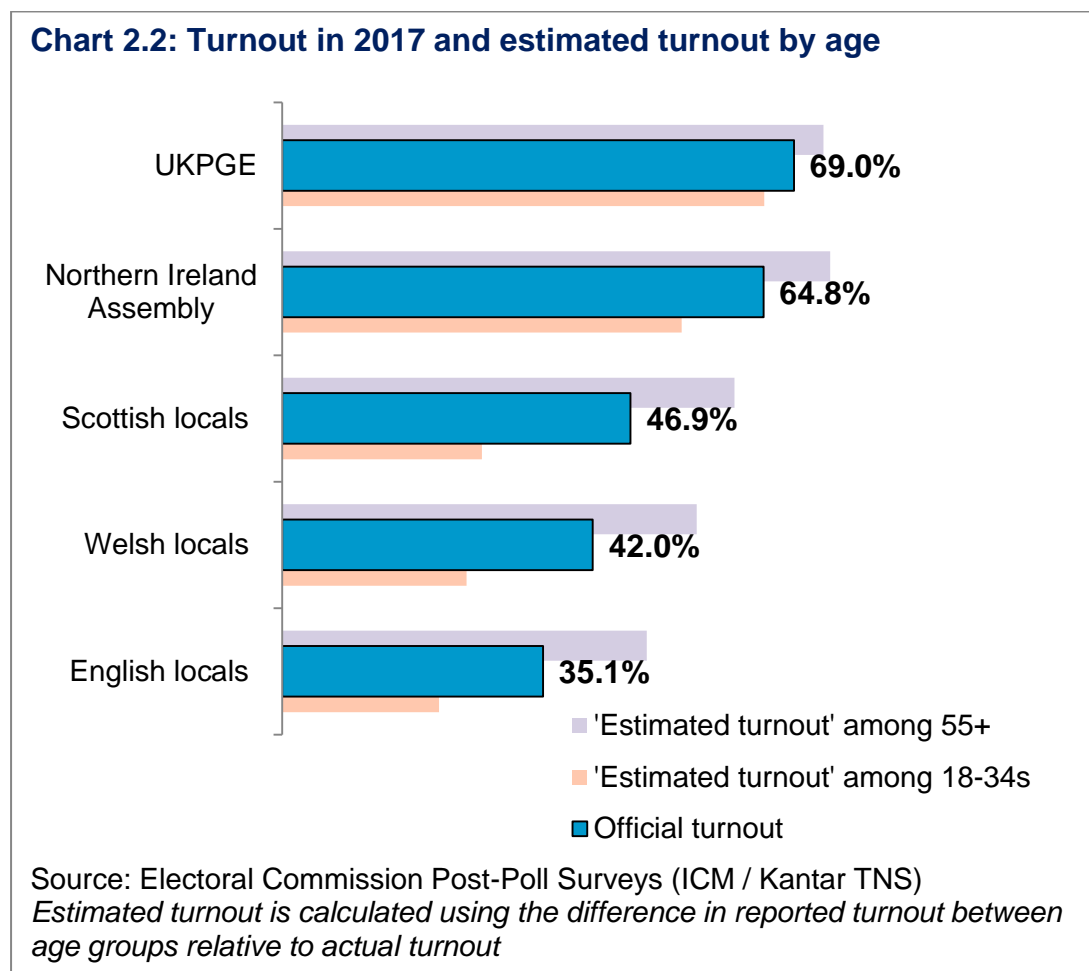
2.6   While our public opinion surveys are not designed to provide official turnout estimates, in a relative context the results can be used to indicate which age groups were more or less likely to have voted than others.

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[2] The Electoral Commission, *The December 201 electoral registers in Great Britain* (July 2016)

Corroborating the estimates that have been produced by others[3], our findings suggest turnout among under 34s was likely to have been around 11 percentage points higher in 2017 than in 2015, while turnout among over 34s was broadly stable. The gap in turnout between age groups at the 2017 UKPGE was therefore smaller than in 2015.

2.7   In line with the fact that turnout at the UKPGE in Scotland was lower than elsewhere in the UK, our results suggest that the turnout gap between age groups at the general election is likely to have been larger in Scotland than in England and Wales. In other words, young electors in Scotland were less likely to have turned out than their English and Welsh counterparts.

2.8   As chart 2.2 shows, our results also indicate that the turnout gap between younger and older age groups is likely to have been far smaller at the UKPGE than at the local government elections in May, where young people remained significantly less likely to have voted than older people.

Chart 2.2: Turnout in 2017 and estimated turnout by age

Category	Official turnout
UKPGE	69.0%
Northern Ireland Assembly	64.8%
Scottish locals	46.9%
Welsh locals	42.0%
English locals	35.1%

'Estimated turnout' among 55+
'Estimated turnout' among 18-34s
Official turnout

Source: Electoral Commission Post-Poll Surveys (ICM / Kantar TNS)
Estimated turnout is calculated using the difference in reported turnout between age groups relative to actual turnout

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[3] Ipsos Mori, How Britain Voted, https://www.ipsos.com/ipsos-mori/en-uk/how-britain-voted-2017-election

First time voters

2.9   Of those that said they voted at the UKPGE in June, 3% said that this was the first time they had voted in any election or referendum. 18% of 18-24s and 5% of 25-34s said that this was their first time voting. While 3% of the 18-24s said this was because they had not been eligible previously, this leaves 15% of 18-24s and the 5% of 25-34s claiming to have voted for the first time in June 2017 despite having been previously eligible.[4]

2.10 Overall, 4% of our respondents said they voted for the first time at the Scottish council elections. In contrast with the UKPGE the majority said that this was their first time purely because they had not previously been eligible, indicating that the May poll did not have the same motivating effect on younger previous 'non-voters' as the UKPGE. The 2017 Scottish council elections were the first set of scheduled council elections at which 16 and 17 year olds were eligible to vote, and this age group made up the majority of these first time voters. Of those 16 and 17 year olds voting in May, 43% reported that this was their first time voting.[5]

Attitudes towards voting

2.11 In each survey we ask respondents about their attitudes towards voting at UK general elections, as a way to understand how they feel about voting in general. Based on their answers, respondents are categorised into three groups: people that say they 'always vote', 'sometimes vote' and 'never vote'. We use attitudes towards general elections as our proxy for more general attitudes rather than any other type of election because they are the most consistent over time and they are also the most polarising; people tend to have the firmest opinions about whether or not they vote at general elections.

2.12 The 'always vote' group are most likely to turnout at any election.[6] They are likely to have comprised the majority of voters at the local government and combined authority mayoral elections in May. However it is worth noting that, even among this group, notably fewer claimed to have voted in May (74%) than in June (95%).

2.13 'Always voters' are more likely to view voting as a civic duty compared to 'sometimes voters', whose motivations change depending on the context of the poll. Our findings suggest that 'always voters' are more likely to be over 35 years old, white and from socio-economic group AB.

2.14 In contrast, 'sometimes voters' tend to be younger. The biggest variation in turnout from poll to poll is among the 'sometimes vote' group; whether or

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[4] You must be 18 to be eligible to vote at a UKPGE
[5] The extension of the franchise in Scotland means that some 17 year olds voting in May would have been eligible to vote in the Scottish Parliament elections in May 2016 and in any local government by-elections from May 2016.
[6] This refers to the proportion of people that tell us they have voted in our post-election research: we know that people are more likely to claim they have voted than actually turned out, due to social desirability bias.

not this segment of the population have been motivated to vote is what characterises a high or a low turnout poll. 'Sometimes voters' in England were the most different from May to June; in May only 21% claimed to have voted, compared with 66% who claim to have voted at the general election. In contrast, the 'sometimes vote' group in Scotland were the least likely to have claimed to have voted at the general election, 45% compared with 66% of English 'sometimes voters', and 63% of Welsh 'sometimes voters'. This corresponds with the fact that turnout in Scotland at the UKPGE was lower than in England and Wales.

2.15 Demographic characteristics have an impact on whether or not someone claims they never vote: ABs are less likely than C1/2s or DEs to fall into the 'never vote' category, and over 34s are less likely than under 34s to define themselves in this way. However, attitudes towards the political system have a far greater impact, with a third (33%) of 'never voters' saying it does not matter who is in charge of the country, compared with 3% of 'always voters'. Similarly, less than half (49%) of 'never voters' say that their life is directly affected by who runs the country, compared with 71% and 84% of 'sometimes' and 'always voters' respectively.

Motivations for voting or not voting

Stated reasons for voting

2.16 In our post-poll surveys we found the reasons people gave for why they chose to vote were broadly consistent across the polls in 2017.

Top 5 reasons given for voting by poll[7]:

Northern Ireland Assembly election – March
- It is important to vote / it is my civic duty (45%)
- I always vote (34%)
- I wanted to have a say (33%)
- To get a change (25%)
- I wanted to be part of the democratic process (13%)

Local government elections / CAM elections (GB) – May
- It is important to vote / it is my civic duty (46%)
- I always vote (22%)
- I wanted to have a say (22%)
- To support my party / candidate of preference (11%)
- To get a change (5%)

UKPGE – June
- It is important to vote / it is my civic duty (47%)
- I wanted to have a say (26%)

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[7] Respondents could provide multiple responses to this question.

- I always vote (17%)
- To support my party / candidate of preference (13%)
- To get a change (12%)

2.17 Across all three elections, a general belief that voting is an important duty tops the list of reasons people give for turning out. 'I always vote' was also a common response, although in June people were more likely to say they voted at the UKPGE because they wanted to have a say (26%) rather than just because they always do. This is perhaps a consequence of the fact that young people were more likely to have voted at the UKPGE: as explored above young people are more likely to say they are motivated to vote by having a say, and less likely to claim it is because they 'always vote'.

2.18 At the Northern Ireland Assembly election in March the desire 'to get a change' was given as a strong motivation for voting, and at higher levels than at previous Assembly elections. In 2017, 25% said they voted 'to get change', compared with just 6% and 7% at the 2016 and 2011 Northern Ireland Assembly elections respectively.

Stated reasons for not voting

2.19 Following the Northern Ireland Assembly election in March, there was an increase in the number of people who claimed they didn't vote because they were not registered to vote (16% compared to 5% in May 2016). This may be related to the number of people removed from the electoral register in December 2016. We addressed this issue in our report on the March 2017 Northern Ireland Assembly election.

2.20 More generally, we consistently find that people are most likely to attribute not participating in elections to circumstances – being too busy or being away on polling day – rather than to reasons related to dissatisfaction with the electoral process or political system. When asked why they had not voted at the UKPGE, 19% of non-voters in our survey said they had not had time or were too busy with work; a further 11% said they were away on polling day. Similarly, a quarter (24%) of those that did not vote at the May polls attributed it to a lack of time.

2.21 While not being able to find time to vote may be linked to a lack of motivation – it could be argued that people who really wanted to vote would have found a way to do so – this also highlights that ensuring that the process is as easy as possible will be key to participation for certain people.

2.22 Awareness of an election and the candidates is also an important factor in determining turnout and we explore this area further in the next chapter.

3   Engagement: awareness

Key findings

- Reported levels of awareness were highest at the polls with highest turnout.
- Awareness of the local government and Combined Authority Mayoral elections was particularly low; even many of those reporting that they felt informed about the election struggled to name accurately the body to which they were electing representatives.
- As with turnout, there was little difference in levels of awareness by age at the UKPGE compared with the local elections.
- This represented a change from 2015 when we found young people were less likely to report awareness of the poll. However, at the 2017 local elections young people continued to be much less likely to say they knew a great deal or a fair amount about the elections.

Awareness levels

3.1   Well-informed voters are fundamental to the democratic process. Feeling informed is closely connected to the decision to turn out and a lack of information is frequently cited as a reason for not voting or for feeling dissatisfied with the electoral process. Of course, motivation is important; those who want to vote will seek information as our findings below demonstrate. However ensuring information is as accessible as possible is crucial, particularly at local elections which are accompanied by much less sustained media coverage than a general election.

3.2   Following each poll we asked respondents how much they felt they knew about the election in question. As one might expect, awareness reflects turnout, with reported levels of awareness highest at the polls with the highest levels of turnout: see chart 3.1 below. This is likely to have been both a cause of the higher turnout at these polls and a consequence of it: given that a larger number voted at the Northern Ireland Assembly election and the UKPGE, it would follow that a larger proportion were aware than at the polls with lower turnout. It would also make sense that a larger proportion of electors feeling informed about the polls would have made them more likely to vote in the first place.

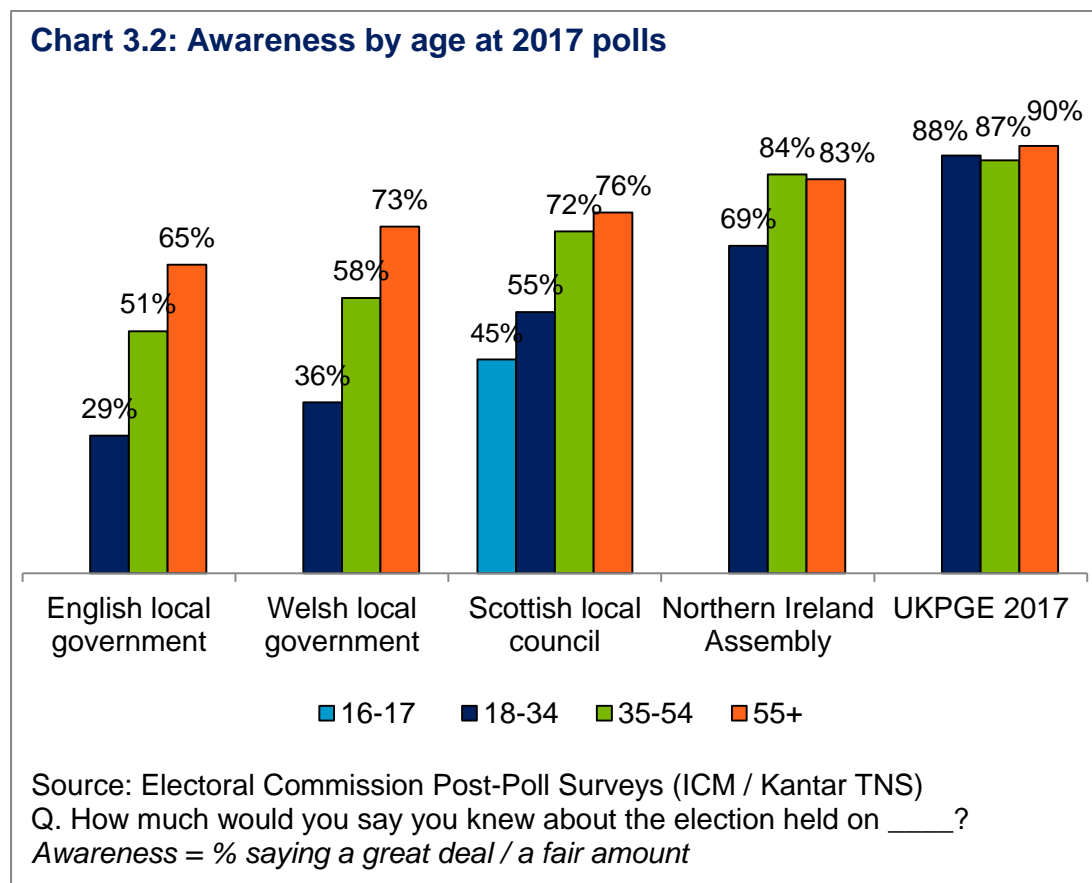In comparison, awareness of the local government and Combined Authority Mayoral elections held in May was far lower. Again reflecting turnout, it was highest in Scotland (67%) and lowest for the combined authority mayoral elections (47%). Even among those who claimed they knew a great deal or a fair amount about the elections in May, our findings indicate that real knowledge of the local government elections was limited.

3.3   This was particularly true in England, where the majority of polls held were county council elections; overall less than half (48%) were able to name correctly the council or authority to which they were electing representatives, with this figure at 53% among those who claimed to have voted and still only 56% among those who claimed to feel well informed about the election.

3.4   A similar pattern was true for those respondents eligible to vote in the inaugural Combined Authority Mayoral elections. In this case, 42% of respondents correctly named their combined authority area, rising to 50% among those that claimed to have voted.

Awareness and age

3.5   As noted above, the variation in turnout by age was most significant at the May polls; in line with this, we also found far greater variation in levels of awareness between age groups at the local government and Combined Authority mayoral elections. As chart 3.2 shows, at the UKPGE only three percentage points separate the age groups on awareness, while at the local government elections younger respondents were significantly less likely to say they knew about the polls than older respondents. Indeed less than a third of 18-34s in England felt they knew something about the local elections in their area.

Chart 3.2: Awareness by age at 2017 polls

Source: Electoral Commission Post-Poll Surveys (ICM / Kantar TNS)
Q. How much would you say you knew about the election held on _____?
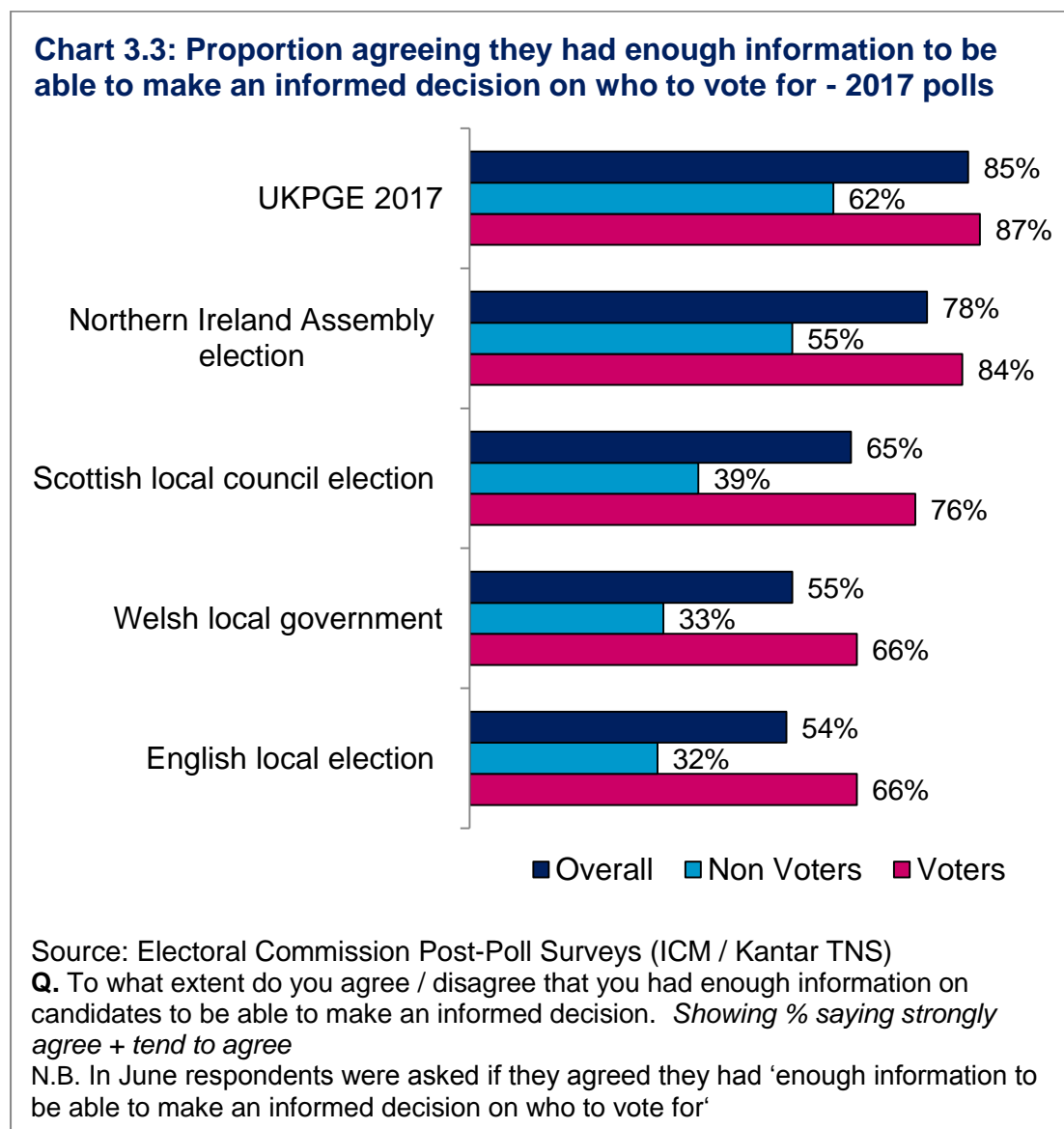*Awareness = % saying a great deal / a fair amount*

3.6   Reflecting the higher turnout among 18-34s at the UKPGE in 2017 compared with 2015, the level of awareness among under-34s (88%) also

represents a 7 percentage point increase on 2015 (81%). In 2015 the difference in awareness between 18-34s and 35-54s and over 54s was 9 percentage points and 10 percentage points respectively.

Access to and sources of information

Access to information

3.7   Across the UK, 85% agreed that they had enough information to be able to make an informed decision on who to vote for at the UK general election. At the Northern Ireland Assembly election in March, 78% agreed they had enough information to be able to make an informed decision.

Chart 3.3: Proportion agreeing they had enough information to be able to make an informed decision on who to vote for - 2017 polls

Election	Overall	Non Voters	Voters
UKPGE 2017	85%	62%	87%
Northern Ireland Assembly election	78%	55%	84%
Scottish local council election	65%	39%	76%
Welsh local government	55%	33%	66%
English local election	54%	32%	66%

Source: Electoral Commission Post-Poll Surveys (ICM / Kantar TNS)
Q. To what extent do you agree / disagree that you had enough information on candidates to be able to make an informed decision. *Showing % saying strongly agree + tend to agree*
N.B. In June respondents were asked if they agreed they had 'enough information to be able to make an informed decision on who to vote for'

3.8   At the local elections in May, fewer people felt they had sufficient information on who to vote for (54% in England and 55% in Wales). In Scotland, 65% agreed they had enough information on candidates. At every

poll voters were much more likely than non-voters to believe they had sufficient information. Further emphasising the link between information and turnout, the gap between voters and non-voters was largest at the local government and CAM elections.

Sources of information

3.9   Among those who felt they had sufficient information on candidates standing at the local government and CAM elections in May, the main source of information was leaflets from political parties and candidates. Those in Wales were most likely to say they accessed information on candidates via leaflets (75%), followed by Scotland (68%) and England (63%). A slightly smaller proportion reported accessing information on Combined Authority Mayoral candidates via leaflets (54%) with Combined Authority websites (19%) and the booklets on candidates produced by the Combined Authority (17%) also listed as key sources of information. Of those that felt sufficiently informed about candidates at the May polls, 20% said they used social media to access information.

3.10 At the UKPGE, respondents reported accessing information on who to vote for via a much wider range of channels[8]. The top five were: television interviews (48%), social media (37%[9]), articles in national newspapers (28%), online news sites (24%), and leaflets from political parties / candidates (23%). Electors in Northern Ireland were more likely than anyone else to say they accessed information via leaflets or flyers from political parties (34%, compared with 23% for the UK overall) – the second most cited source after television interviews (49%).

3.11 Across the UK, the difference between under- and over-35s was stark; over-35s were far more likely to point to TV and radio interviews compared with under-35s, who said they accessed information via social media channels and the websites of political parties.
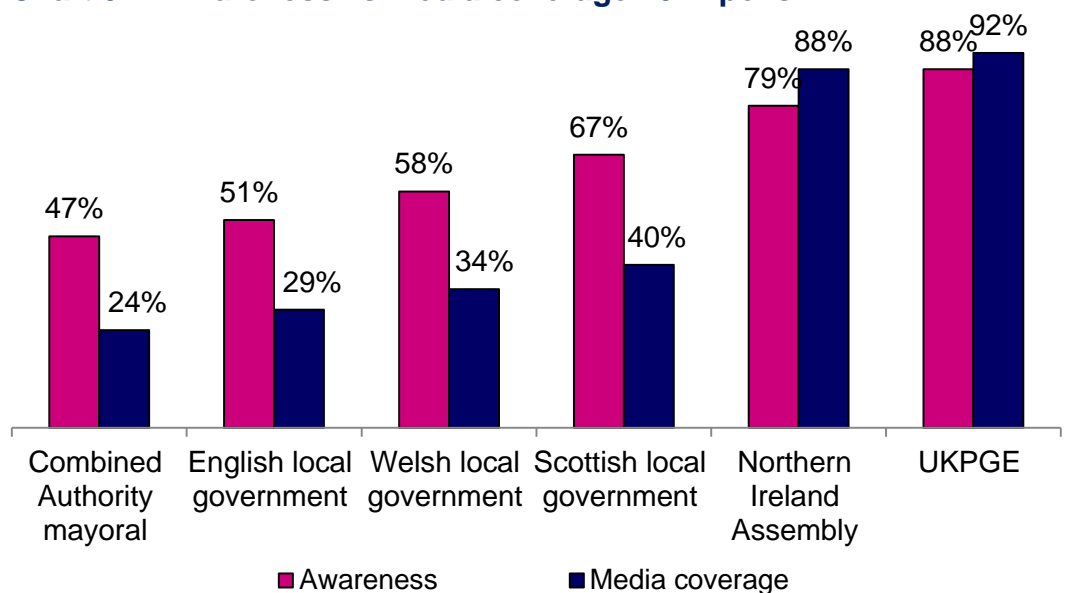
Media coverage

3.12 Our findings about sources of information correspond with the perceived level of media coverage at each of the polls, as shown in chart 3.4 below.

3.13 At the lower turnout local government and CAM elections, people were more likely to say that they knew about the polls than they were to say that they believed the election had received a lot of media attention. For the Northern Ireland Assembly and UKPGE the reverse is true. For the local elections, where there was less pervasive media coverage, those electors that felt informed relied on alternative sources of information to help them make a decision on who to vote for.

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[8] Respondents could list multiple channels
[9] 18% Facebook, 9% Twitter and 10% 'other social media'

Chart 3.4: Awareness vs media coverage 2017 polls

Source: Electoral Commission Post-Poll Surveys (ICM / Kantar TNS)
Q. How much would you say you knew about the election held on _____? *Awareness = % saying a great deal / a fair amount*
Q. Do you agree or disagree that 'there was a lot of media coverage on the ____election? *Media coverage = % saying strongly + tend to agree*

3.14 While the electorate was firmly of the view that there was a lot of media coverage on the June UKPGE (92% agreed), it was less convinced about the impartiality of this coverage. Only a third (34%) believed that 'the UK General Election was covered in a fair and balanced way in the media'. This is in line with the 37% that believed the coverage of the EU referendum was fair and balanced. The role of the media in relation to perceptions of electoral fraud is explored in Chapter 4.
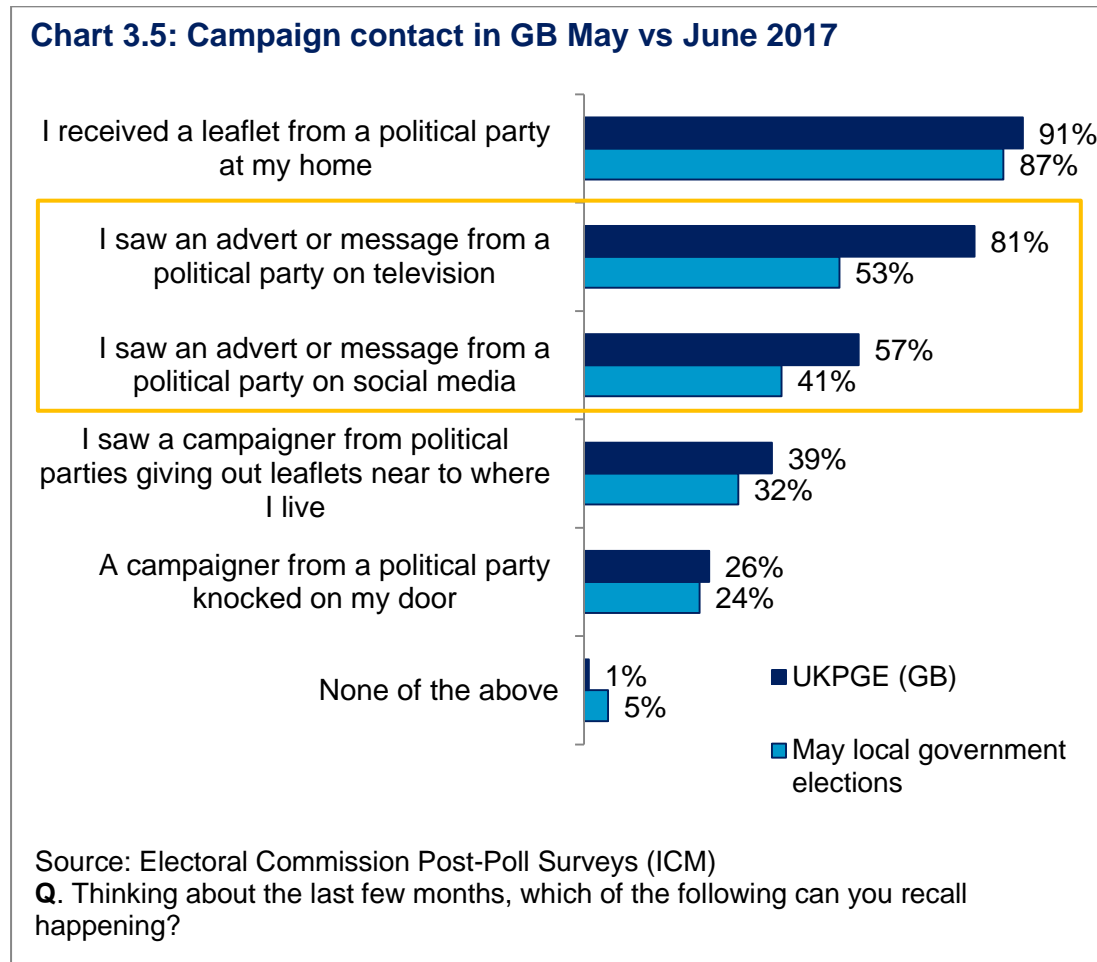
Campaign contact

3.15 In our surveys following the May and June polls, we asked people about recent contact from campaigners. The chart below shows the results for May compared with June.[10] It should be noted that the overlap between the two polls, with the general election announced during the campaign period for the May elections, is likely to have skewed the results for May. We might not expect to see quite such high levels of campaign contact at a 'normal' set of local elections.

3.16 The vast majority reported having some form of campaign contact, ahead of both the May and June polls. The primary differences between May and June are around the proportion of people who saw an advert or message from a political party, either on television or on social media. This corresponds

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[10] Shows GB figures for June to be comparable with May – this question was not asked following the Northern Ireland Assembly election in March.

with the findings on sources of information outlined in the previous paragraphs [3.9-3.11]: leaflets from political parties were the key source of information at the local government election, in the absence of the high profile television and social media campaigns that accompanied the general election.

Chart 3.5: Campaign contact in GB May vs June 2017

Category	UKPGE (GB)	May local government elections
I received a leaflet from a political party at my home	91%	87%
I saw an advert or message from a political party on television	81%	53%
I saw an advert or message from a political party on social media	57%	41%
I saw a campaigner from political parties giving out leaflets near to where I live	39%	32%
A campaigner from a political party knocked on my door	26%	24%
None of the above	1%	5%

Source: Electoral Commission Post-Poll Surveys (ICM)
Q. Thinking about the last few months, which of the following can you recall happening?

3.17 The importance of direct forms of communication and the work of parties and campaigners is further underlined by the significant differences in reported campaign contact between voters and non-voters at the May elections. 91% of voters in May said they received a leaflet to their home, compared with 79% of non-voters; 35% of voters saw campaigners giving out leaflets near their home compared with 27% of non-voters; and 28% of voters said a campaigner had knocked on their door, compared with 17% of non-voters.

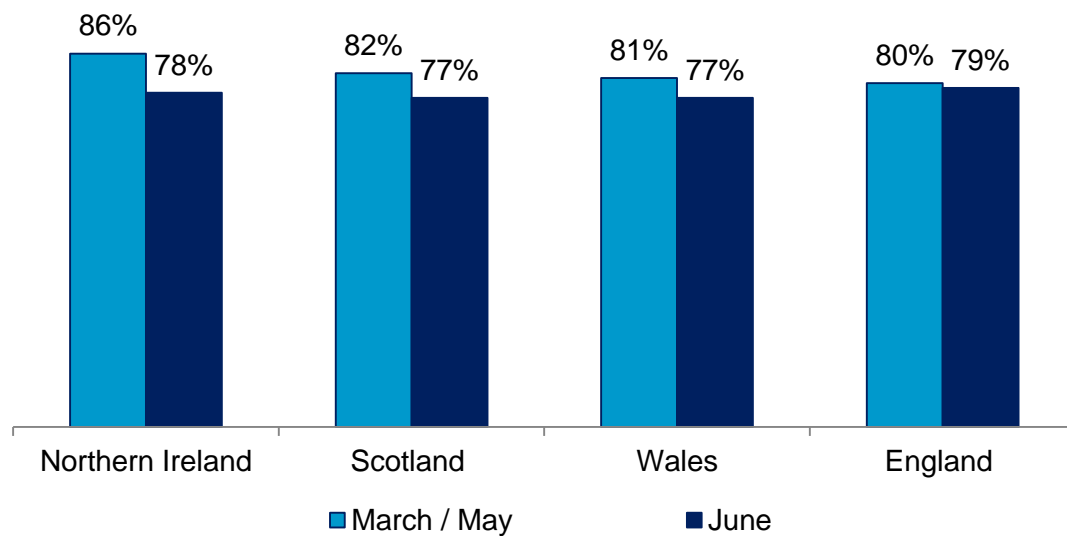# 4 Experience: confidence and satisfaction

> **Key Findings**
>
> - While satisfaction with the electoral registration system is high, there is also appetite for reform. Almost two thirds expressed support for automatic registration on receipt of a National Insurance number.
> - In Northern Ireland, our research found that satisfaction with the voting process dropped from March to June, and also from the 2016 Northern Ireland Assembly election to 2017. It is likely that this decline can, at least in part, be attributed to the political stalemate in Northern Ireland and may also indicate a degree of 'voter fatigue'.
> - The majority of the public believe that voting in the UK is safe from fraud and abuse; however, there continues to be a perception, among a sizeable minority, that some fraud occurs at elections, driven specifically by media stories rather than by direct experience or evidence of fraudulent activity.

Confidence that the elections were well run

4.1   Of those surveyed in Great Britain following the May local elections, 81% said they were confident the election was well run; similarly 79% were confident the UKPGE was well run. Northern Ireland differed from Great Britain in this respect, with an 8 percentage point gap between the proportion that believed the snap Northern Ireland Assembly election in March was well run (86%) and the proportion that felt this way about the UKPGE (78%).

4.2   As discussed in Chapter 3, access to information was one of the key differentiators for voters between the local government elections and the UK general election. This was reflected when we asked people why they were not confident that the elections were well run; among those *not* confident that the English and Welsh local elections were well run, 63% and 59% respectively attributed this to a lack of information. In contrast, 24% gave information as a reason for doubting the UKPGE was well run. Reasons related to mistrust of politicians and the political system (19%) and campaign or candidate issues (16%) were also cited as key reasons to doubt whether the UKPGE was well run. These featured far less prominently in the responses relating to the May polls.

Chart 4.1: Confidence elections were well run - 2017 Polls

Northern Ireland: 86% (March / May), 78% (June)
Scotland: 82% (March / May), 77% (June)
Wales: 81% (March / May), 77% (June)
England: 80% (March / May), 79% (June)

■ March / May   ■ June

Source: Electoral Commission Post-Poll Surveys (ICM / Kantar TNS)
Q. How confident, if at all, are you that the elections on the ___ were well run?
*Showing % very + fairly confident*

Registration

Great Britain

4.3   Given that the registration system operates all year round, it makes sense that attitudes towards it are largely stable. What differs is the level of engagement with the system, with more people registering to vote in the run up to an election than they do at any other time of the year.

4.4   As chart 4.2 shows, there was a small spike in applications in the run up to the May polls and then a much larger spike ahead of the UKPGE. This is a consequence of the fact that not all areas held elections in May and of the heightened attention and interest in the general election.

4.5   Despite the different levels of engagement with the system in May compared with June, satisfaction is consistent. When asked in May, 87% of those in areas holding elections said they were satisfied with the registration system; in June 86% of electors surveyed in Great Britain said they were satisfied. We found levels of satisfaction to be similar across demographic groups and among those that had registered in the final weeks and days before the deadline.

Chart 4.2: Applications to vote January - September 2017 Great Britain
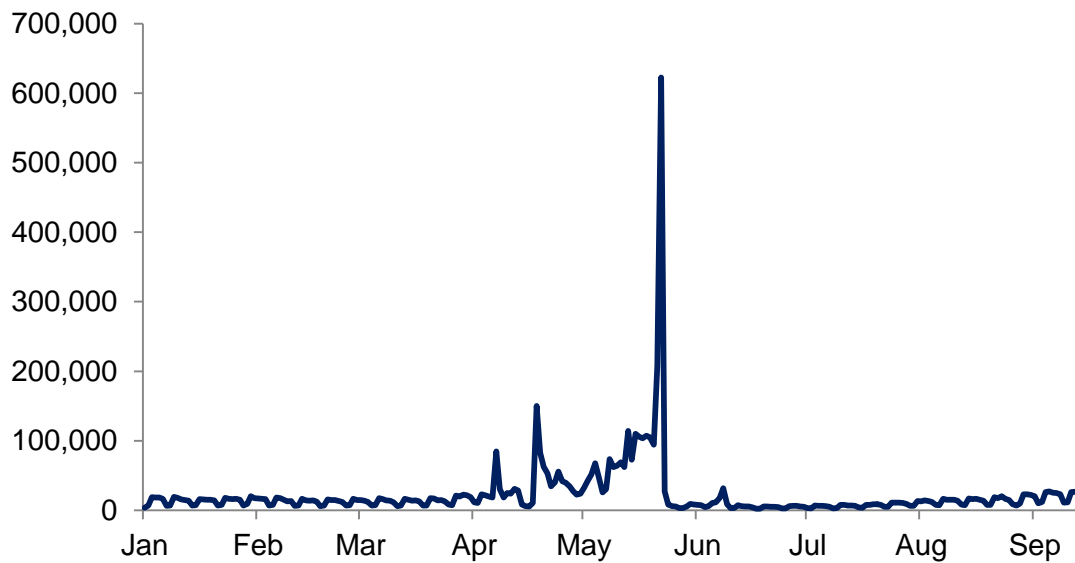
Source: www.gov.uk/performance/register-to-vote

4.6   Despite the fact that the majority say they are satisfied with the registration system in its current form, we also find that many express support for changes to it. In Great Britain, the highest levels of support were expressed for automatic registration when a person receives their National Insurance number: 58% of respondents thought this should be the case. 34% said that you should be able to register at a polling station on the day of the poll. In July, the Electoral Commission published a report on electoral registration at the June 2017 general election; this contains an overview of the Commission's recommendations on making electoral registration more joined up in response to growing public expectations.
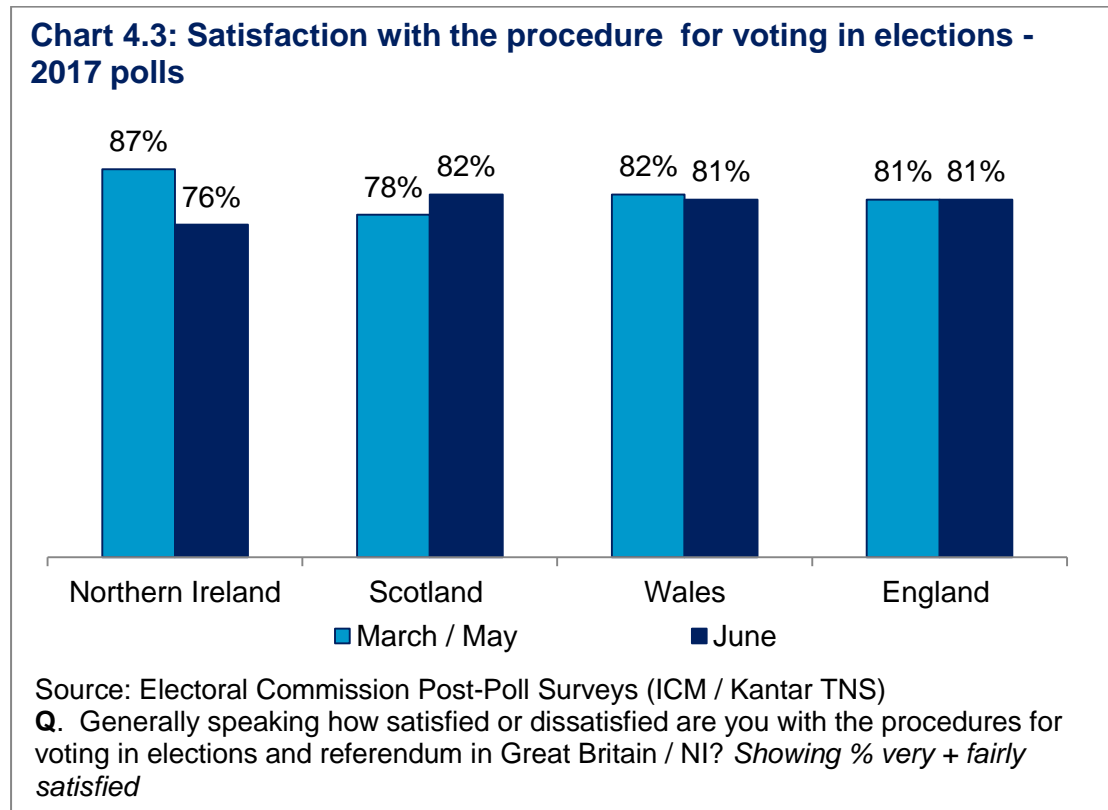
Northern Ireland

4.7   Our research found slightly lower levels of satisfaction with the registration system in Northern Ireland, where it is not yet possible to apply to be registered online. In our June post-poll survey, 78% said they were satisfied with the process, compared with 86% in Great Britain. In our March post-poll survey we found that 77% agreed you should be able to register to vote online.

4.8   Online electoral registration has transformed access to elections and referendums significantly easier for voters in Great Britain. As outlined in the Commission's report on electoral registration at the June 2017 UKPGE, the Chief Electoral Officer postponed the scheduled introduction of online registration following the announcement of the snap Northern Ireland Assembly election. This was understandable given that there were a number of technical challenges to be addressed prior to implementation, but we look

forward to the Chief Electoral Officer recommencing this work as soon as possible.

Voting

4.9   In England and Wales, satisfaction with the procedure for voting in elections remained consistent, and relatively high, from May to June (chart 4.3). The most significant differences between levels of satisfaction were found in Scotland and Northern Ireland.

Chart 4.3: Satisfaction with the procedure for voting in elections - 2017 polls

Region	March / May	June
Northern Ireland	87%	76%
Scotland	78%	82%
Wales	82%	81%
England	81%	81%

Source: Electoral Commission Post-Poll Surveys (ICM / Kantar TNS)
Q. Generally speaking how satisfied or dissatisfied are you with the procedures for voting in elections and referendum in Great Britain / NI? *Showing % very + fairly satisfied*

4.10 In Northern Ireland, satisfaction with the voting process dropped from 87% following the Assembly election in March to 76% following the UKPGE in June. Unfortunately, our sample of dissatisfied respondents in Northern Ireland[11] is not large enough to interrogate fully the reasons behind this decline. It does, however, mirror similar falls on other metrics. For instance while 86% were confident that the 2017 Northern Ireland Assembly election was well run, 78% said the same about the UKPGE in Northern Ireland. The fall also matches the downward trajectory on both of these measures from the 2016 to the 2017 Northern Ireland assembly election. We believe this may be, at least in part, related to increased negativity as a consequence of the political stalemate. It is also indicative of possible 'voter fatigue'.

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[11] N=60.

4.11 Our May post-poll survey in Scotland revealed that 16 and 17 year old voters were less satisfied than the overall population with both the procedure for voting and with the electoral registration system. This may be linked to their experience as first time voters and being less familiar with the system than older electors. Younger electors are also the biggest advocates of increased automation and digitalisation of the electoral process: 74% of 16-17s and 64% of 18-34s agreed that you should be automatically added to the register when you receive your National Insurance number. Two thirds of 16-17 year olds and 52% of 18-34 year olds said they would have been more likely to vote if they could have voted online instead. The Commission does not currently advocate online voting and believes any move towards it would need to be based on robust evidence and justification; yet these views do highlight the need for the system to keep up with modern society's expectations of public services.

Casting a vote

4.12 Three different voting systems were used across the polls in 2017; Single Transferable Vote (STV) was in use at the Northern Ireland Assembly election and the Scottish council elections; the new Combined Authority Mayoral elections were held using the Supplementary Vote (SV) system; and the UK Parliamentary general election and the English and Welsh local government elections used First Past the Post (FPTP). Voters in Scotland, Northern Ireland and the combined authority mayoral areas therefore used two different systems in polls held relatively close together.

4.13 Evidence from the polls across the UK indicates that preferential voting systems tend to return higher rates of rejected ballots than simple majority voting systems. A consequence of the fact that simple majority systems (FPTP) have simpler requirements is that voters have less opportunity to make mistakes.

4.14 The views of voters reflect the varying degree of difficulty in completing the ballot paper. In our survey following the Scottish council elections in May, 5% of voters said they found completing their ballot papers difficult compared with 2% at the Northern Ireland Assembly election and 1% or less at FPTP elections.

4.15 In Northern Ireland, the proportion of rejected ballots (1.16%) was in line with the proportion rejected at the May 2016 election (1.34%).[12] At the Scottish council elections, the proportion of rejected ballots increased slightly

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[12] A total of 6,836 ballots were rejected because a first preference was given for more than one candidate. Based on our observations at count venues this is because, in many cases, the voter had marked the ballot paper with multiple 'x's rather than using numbers. Whilst a single 'x' on a ballot paper could be considered as a valid first preference, once a second 'x' is placed on the ballot paper the voter's intention becomes unclear. https://www.electoralcommission.org.uk/__data/assets/pdf_file/0008/226970/Northern-Ireland-Assembly-election-March-2017-report-briefing-paper.pdf [page 5]

from 1.74% in 2012 to 1.95% in 2017. In our report on the administration of the poll we noted that an initial ward-level analysis suggested that the rate of rejected of ballot papers was higher in wards with greater levels of deprivation and unemployment[13]. However, these wards were also more likely to have multiple candidates from a single party standing, which may also have been a contributory factor. Further analysis is planned to attempt to identify causal factors underlying higher than average rates of rejected ballots.

Table 4.1: Rejected ballots and public views on difficulty

Poll	Voting system	Rejected votes (%)	% saying they found it difficult to complete their ballot paper
UKPGE		0.23%	1%
English local government elections	FPTP	0.26%	*%
Welsh local government elections		0.52%	1%
Northern Ireland Assembly election	STV	1.16%	2%
Combined Authority Mayoral elections	SV	1.34%	4%
Scottish council elections	STV	1.95%	5%

4.16 While our initial ward level analysis did not show higher levels of rejected ballots in areas with higher concentrations of young people, our post-poll survey suggests that age was a factor, at least in terms of people reporting finding it difficult to complete their ballot. Voters aged 18-34 were significantly more likely to say they found it difficult to complete their ballot paper (16%) than both 16-17 year old voters (7%) and those aged over 35 (2% among 35-54s and 3% among over 55s).

4.17 It is possible that the relatively lower levels of 16-17 year olds reporting that they found it difficult to complete their ballot paper is indicative of the work that the Commission and its partner organisations undertook to disseminate information on voting to this age group. The Commission ran a school based

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[13] Correlation analysis of rejected ballots and demographic variables at ward level found a positive correlation between rejected ballot papers and household deprivation and unemployment. The analysis identified a weaker correlation between rejected ballots and people with no qualification and renters, but no correlation between concentration of 16-29 year olds and levels of rejection. Further analysis will be undertaken to examine the relationship between concentrations of people in full time education and rejection rates. https://www.electoralcommission.org.uk/__data/assets/pdf_file/0006/233673/Scottish-Council-elections-2017.pdf

campaign #ReadyToVote to target 16-17 year olds with information about electoral registration and voting.[14]

4.18 While the results indicate that this campaign was successful, they also highlight the need to improve voter understanding of the electoral system for all age groups. The Commission outlined a series of recommendations about this in the report on the Scottish council elections[15].

Electoral integrity

4.19 Our research indicates that the public generally perceive elections in the UK to be safe from fraud and abuse. Following the UKPGE, 79% said that they believed that 'voting in general is safe from fraud and abuse'.
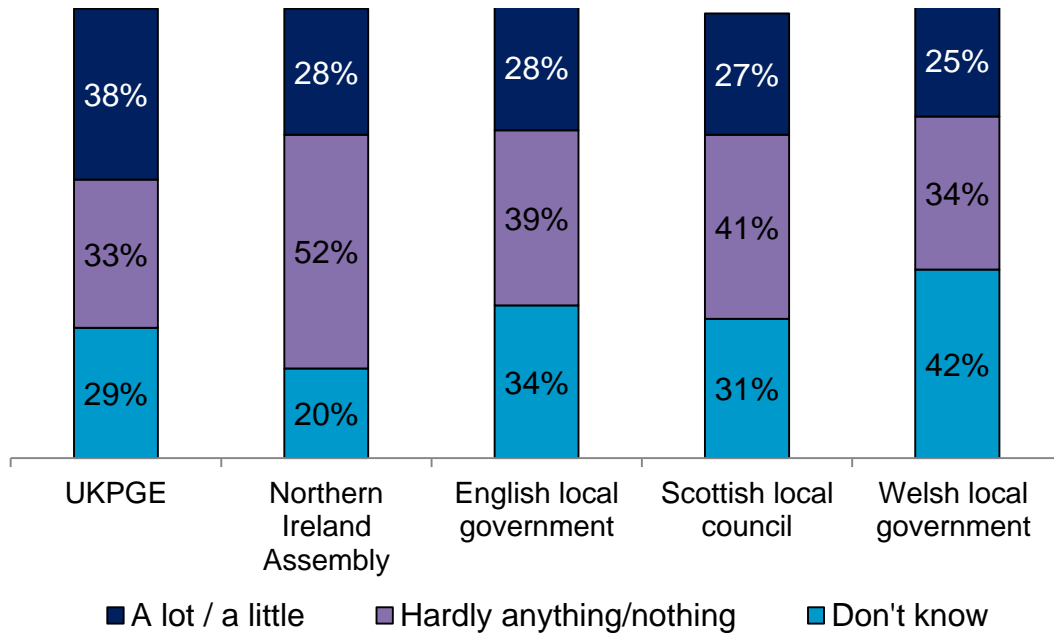
4.20 However, from poll to poll, perceptions that some fraud had taken place were also largely consistent, with around a quarter believing that some fraud had taken place. Perceptions that fraud had taken place at the UKPGE were higher (38%); this corresponds with the 2015 results when 35% believed that fraud had taken place at the UKPGE.

4.21 We typically find that public perceptions of fraud are much higher than any direct experience of it. We also find that people are more likely to believe that fraud has taken place at a UK general election than at a local election, which is likely to be a consequence of more sustained media coverage of issues related to UK general elections.

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[14] 293 secondary schools signed up to take part in the #ReadyToVote campaign which accounts for over 80% of all local authority secondary schools. You can read more about this work in the Commission's report on the Scottish Council elections.
[15] https://www.electoralcommission.org.uk/__data/assets/pdf_file/0006/233673/Scottish-Council-elections-2017.pdf See page 14 and 15

Chart 4.4: The extent to which people believed fraud took place - 2017

Category	UKPGE	Northern Ireland Assembly	English local government	Scottish local council	Welsh local government
A lot / a little	38%	28%	28%	27%	25%
Hardly anything/nothing	33%	52%	39%	41%	34%
Don't know	29%	20%	34%	31%	42%

Source: Electoral Commission Post-Poll Surveys (ICM / Kantar TNS)
Q. How much electoral fraud, if any, do you think took place at the __ election?
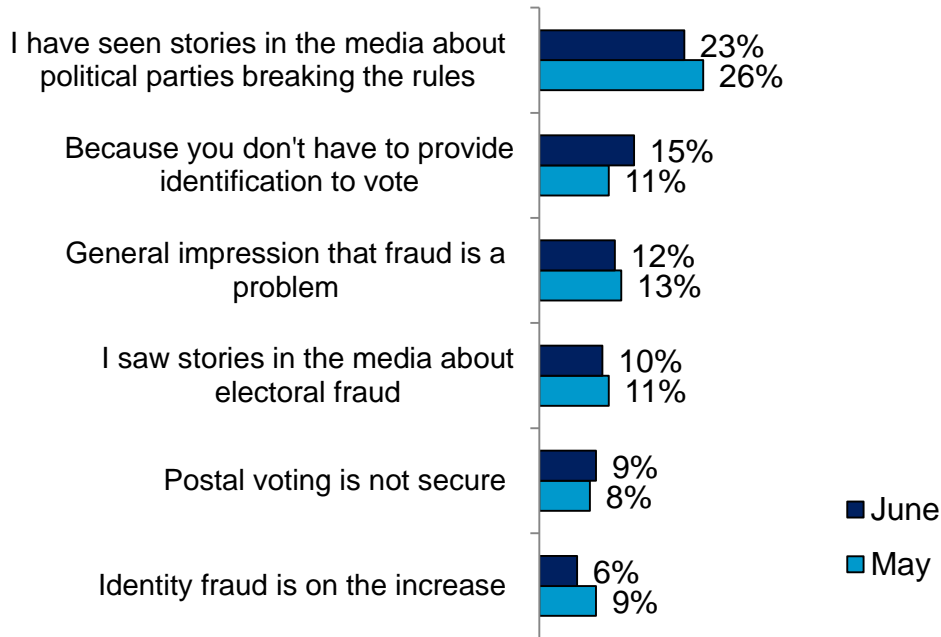
4.22 While a greater proportion believed that fraud had taken place at the June UKPGE compared to the Northern Ireland Assembly or local elections, the reasons underpinning perception were very similar across the different polls. When we asked the public why they believed that fraud had taken place the most common response, from a series of statements, was having 'seen stories in the media about political parties breaking the rules'. It is worth noting that media reporting of campaign spending offences dating back to the 2015 UKPGE was strong in May when our post-poll survey was in field.

4.23 In Great Britain, the fact that electors do not have to provide identification to vote partly drove the view that fraud had taken place in both May and at the UKPGE. In May 11% and in June 15% of those that said they thought fraud had taken place said the lack of ID had contributed to that belief.

4.24 In 2014 the Electoral Commission recommended that an accessible, proportionate voter identification scheme should be introduced in Great Britain, including a free voter card with a photo for those who do not already have photo ID.[16] We welcomed the Government's recent announcement of a pilot scheme for voters to show ID at polling stations at the May 2018 local government elections in England. We view this as a positive step towards implementing our recommendation.

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[16] Voters in Northern Ireland have been required to show photographic proof of identity since 2003, free voter ID is available in Northern Ireland.

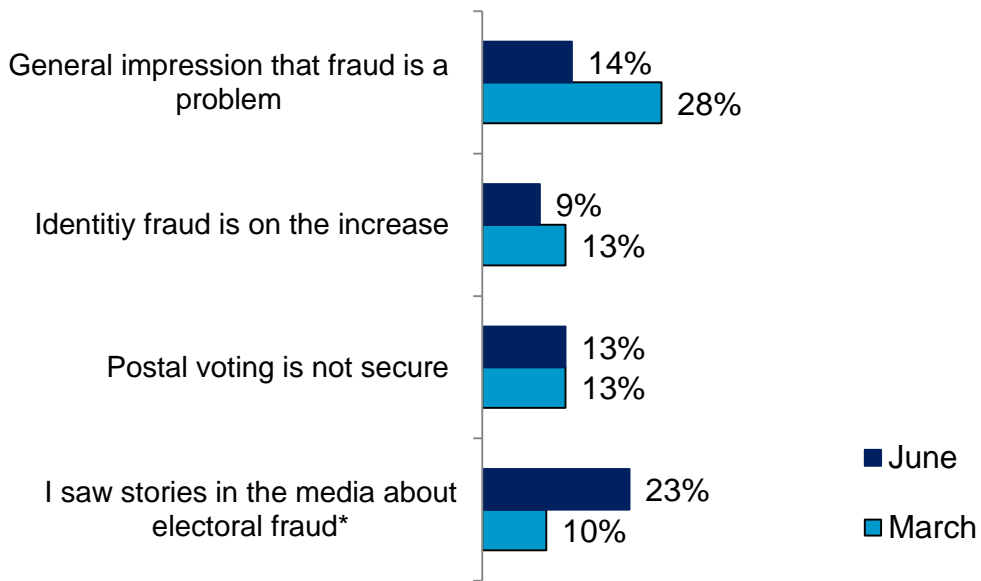**Chart 4.5: Top reasons for thinking fraud took place 2017 polls - GB**

Reason	June	May
I have seen stories in the media about political parties breaking the rules	23%	26%
Because you don't have to provide identification to vote	15%	11%
General impression that fraud is a problem	12%	13%
I saw stories in the media about electoral fraud	10%	11%
Postal voting is not secure	9%	8%
Identity fraud is on the increase	6%	9%

Source: Electoral Commission Post-Poll Surveys (ICM)
Q. Which of the following best describes why you think electoral fraud took place on the [elections date]? Showing top 6

4.25 At the Northern Ireland Assembly election, where voter ID is already required, the top reason for believing fraud took place was a 'general impression that fraud is a problem'. This overtook the concerns about increases in identity fraud and registration offences, which topped the list of reasons following the May 2016 Northern Ireland election. At the UKPGE in Northern Ireland, "stories in the media about electoral fraud" and "stories in the media about political parties breaking the rules" overtook 'a general impression' that fraud is a problem as the main reasons for believing fraud took place. This is likely to be a consequence of the media coverage following both the election in March and then again in June about potential fraud in relation to proxy voting and abuse of the ID system.

Chart 4.6: Top reasons for thinking fraud took place at the 2017 poll - Northern Ireland

General impression that fraud is a problem
- June: 14%
- March: 28%

Identitiy fraud is on the increase
- June: 9%
- March: 13%

Postal voting is not secure
- June: 13%
- March: 13%

I saw stories in the media about electoral fraud*
- June: 23%
- March: 10%

Legend:
- June
- March

Note: 'Stories in the media about political parties breaking the rules' was an answer option in June but not in March. In June 24% of respondents in Northern Ireland said this was why they thought fraud had taken place.

Source: Electoral Commission Post-Poll Surveys (ICM / Kantar TNS)
Q. Which of the following best describes why you think electoral fraud took place on the [elections date]? Showing top 4

5   Conclusions

Engagement and awareness

5.1   Public engagement with and attitudes towards the elections in 2017 provide many reasons to be optimistic about the democratic landscape in the UK. Public confidence in the system is generally high and turnout increased – most notably at the Northern Ireland Assembly and Scottish council elections. In addition, our results indicate an improvement in levels of engagement among younger age groups, who we have previously found to be less engaged than older age groups. We observed greater levels of both awareness and participation among under 34s at the 2017 UKPGE compared with 2015.

5.2   However, while this change is encouraging, we also note the strong evidence of a continued lack of engagement, particularly among young people, with local elections. While turnout was up on the previous equivalent elections, the gap between turnout at local and national polls remains large.

5.3   It is clear that awareness of a poll both drives and is driven by levels of participation. Our results show a stark difference in the extent to which people felt informed about the local government elections compared with the general election and Northern Ireland Assembly election. A third of electors felt they lacked the information to make an informed choice on who to vote for at the local government elections in May. Less than half (47%) said they felt they knew a great deal or a fair amount about the Combined Authority Mayoral elections, with this figure only rising to 56% among those that said they voted.

5.4   Motivation is important; those who want to vote will seek information. However, our findings also highlight a clear disparity in the levels of awareness at local elections, between older and younger electors and between those who are more and less electorally engaged, emphasising the need for clear information that is readily accessible to all.

5.5   The way in which voters accessed information on the local elections was different to the way in which they accessed information at the UKPGE. In the absence of the pervasive national media coverage that accompanies a general election, those electors that felt most informed about the local elections relied on leaflets from political parties and local government or combined authority websites to equip themselves with sufficient information to cast their ballot confidently.

5.6   The impact of awareness on participation is compounded by its impact on confidence in the electoral system. The majority of those that doubted the local elections were well run attributed this to a lack of information. Those that know more are more likely to vote and more likely to feel confident in the system. A lack of information is therefore problematic for both participation and for public confidence.

The system of registration and voting

5.7   It is positive that we have once again found that most people believe elections in the UK to be well run – with confidence even higher among those who vote. The vast majority of voters are satisfied with the process for casting their ballot. However our research also highlighted several areas where we believe further work is needed, emphasising the need for ongoing reform of the electoral process to ensure that it meets public expectations.

5.8   Firstly, while most people in both Great Britain and Northern Ireland continue to be satisfied with the system of registering to vote, they also express support for improvement. In Northern Ireland, three quarters support the introduction of online registration, a view shared by the Commission. UK wide, 59% support the idea of automatically registering an elector when they are issued with a National Insurance number. This view is even more prevalent among younger age groups. Two thirds (65%) of 18-34s voiced support for automatic registration. We have recently published our assessment of the system of electoral registration and highlighted several areas for improvement.[17]

5.9   Secondly, as previously noted in our post poll report, more votes were rejected at the Scottish council elections compared to other polls in 2017. There was also significant variation in the levels of rejection between different electoral wards.[18] Our survey results demonstrated that Scottish electors voting at the local council electors were more likely to find completing their ballot papers difficult than electors at any other poll. Our results also suggest that the #ReadytoVote work targeted at 16 and 17 year olds was successful in improving confidence among this group. We are carrying out further analysis in order to determine if there are more targeted voter information activities that would be valuable ahead of the next Scottish local government elections.

5.10 Finally, the perception of electoral fraud continues to be an issue at UK elections. While the vast majority believe voting in general to be safe, there remains a level of concern, more so at the UK general election than at the locals. We have previously set out our recommendation for the introduction of an ID requirement for voters at polling stations in Great Britain, reflecting that already in operation in Northern Ireland. The Government has recently announced plans to pilot, at a number of local elections in May 2018, how the introduction of an ID requirement could work and the Commission will conduct and publish a full, independent evaluation of those pilots by summer 2018.

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[17] The Electoral Commission, *Electoral registration at the June 2017 UK general election* (July 2017)

[18] The Electoral Commission, *Scottish council elections 2017* (September 2017).

Appendix A: Methodology

Data presented throughout this report is from our post-election surveys conducted after each poll. It also includes data from our campaign tracking research, conducted before and after the polls in May. Information on our public opinion research, reports and downloadable data can be found on our [website](#).

March 2017 – Northern Ireland assembly election

Fieldwork was conducted by Kantar Millward Brown who interviewed a total of 1,000 adults aged 18+ throughout Northern Ireland. All interviewing was conducted via telephone between 3 and 16 March 2017.

Quota controls were placed on the sample for age, gender, socio-economic grouping and area. Post survey weighting was then applied to ensure the representativeness of the sample.

May 2017 – Local elections in England, Wales and Scotland

Post-election survey

The survey was undertaken by ICM who conducted 2,004 interviews with adults aged 18+ across Great Britain between 5 May and 5 June 2017.

Interviews were conducted by telephone. Demographic quotas were applied and data were weighted to match the profile of the population of each country, taking into account the fact that not all areas of Great Britain were holding an election (e.g. England weighting excludes London).

England: 802 interviews were conducted in England, distributed as follows:

- 440 in areas holding local elections as well as 6 interviews in Doncaster where local elections were combined with the City Mayoral contest;
- 311 in areas holding inaugural Combined Authority Mayoral elections (CAMs)
- 40 in the Cambridgeshire County Council area, where county council elections were held as well as elections for the Cambridgeshire and Peterborough Combined Authority Mayor;
- 5 in areas with city mayoral elections only.

Scotland: 751 interviews were conducted in Scotland: 601 with adults aged 18+ and 150 among 16 and 17 year olds.

Wales: 451 interviews were conducted across Wales with adults aged 18+.

Campaign tracking research

Our campaign tracking research, also delivered by ICM, was conducted online. The research consisted of two waves in England and Wales, and three waves in Scotland. Nationally representative samples were drawn from across Scotland, Wales, and English areas that were holding elections.

In addition, the key target audiences of our campaign were boosted within each of the nations, to ensure there were enough 16/18-34s, recent home movers, private renters, students, and Black Asian Minority Ethnic groups (BAME) in the sample to allow for a reasonable level of analysis. Overall data was then weighted back to be representative of the areas holding elections.

This project was designed to measure the effectiveness of our public awareness activity ahead of the May polls, in England and Wales this focused on registration. The third, post poll wave, in Scotland reflects the additional voter information activity on the STV voting system undertaken ahead of the Scottish council elections.

Pre-wave fieldwork, carried out before the campaign launched, took place between 15 February and 7 March. Post-wave fieldwork started after the register to vote deadline, on 14 April in England and Wales and on 17 April in Scotland. We completed all post-wave fieldwork before Election Day (4 May). The total number of respondents across both pre and post campaign waves was 9,571. In Scotland a final wave was conducted following polling day.

June 2017 – UK Parliament general election

Our post-general election fieldwork was conducted by ICM who interviewed 3,519 adults aged 18+ across the United Kingdom: 1,518 in England, 750 in Scotland, 750 in Wales, and 501 in Northern Ireland.

Interviews were conducted by telephone. Demographic quotas were applied and data were weighted to match the profile of the population of each country.

Appendix B: Polls held in 2017

In 2017 over 44 million votes were cast across the UK at six different polls:

- Local government elections **in England, Scotland and Wales**
- The inaugural Combined Authority Mayoral elections **in Cambridgeshire and Peterborough, Greater Manchester, Liverpool City Region, Tees Valley, West of England and the West Midlands**
- The snap Northern Ireland Assembly election **(NIA)**
- The snap UK Parliamentary general election **(UKPGE)**

While turnout still lags behind pre-2000 levels; in 2017 it was higher than at the previous equivalent poll at every single election, and in the case of the general election, the absolute number of vote cast was the largest since 1992.

The electorate at the UK parliamentary general election (UKPGE) (46.8 million) was the largest ever for a UK-wide poll, with approximately 500,000 more people on the register than at the 2015 general election.

2017 also follows on from two years of highly significant electoral events: 2015 saw 30.8 million votes cast at the UKPGE and a further 19.5 million cast at English local elections; and in 2016 the EU referendum, devolved parliament / assembly elections, PCC elections and local government elections saw the total number of votes cast reach 54.7 million.

Elections held in 2017

Elections	Date	Voting system[19]	Votes cast	Turnout
Northern Ireland Assembly	02/03	STV	812,783	64.8%
English local government (including City Mayors)	04/05	FPTP SV	6,518,202	35.1%
Combined Authority Mayorals		SV	1,895,781	27.8%
Scottish council		STV	1,927,149	46.9%
Welsh local government		FPTP	895,943	42.0%
UK PGE	08/06	FPTP	32,294,920	69.0%
Total votes 2017			**44,344,778**	

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[19] Three different voting systems were using across the polls in 2017; Single Transferable Vote (STV) was in use at the Scottish council elections and the Northern Ireland Assembly election, the new Combined Authority mayoral elections were held using the Supplementary Vote (SV) system while the Parliamentary general election and the English and Welsh local government elections used First Past the Post (FPTP).