

UK Parliamentary General Election 2019

The Electoral Commission is required to report on the administration of each UK general election. We have looked at how the 2019 election was run, how voters found participating in the election, and how campaigners got their messages across to voters. This report sets out what we found and what we think should change for elections in the future.

Summary

The election was generally well-run, but there is new evidence showing challenges for the future

The 2019 UK Parliamentary general election was held on Thursday 12 December. More than 40 million people were registered to vote, and the turnout of registered voters was 67%. There were high levels of satisfaction with the processes of registering to vote and voting. These were similar to other recent elections in the UK.

Beneath this generally positive picture, however, we have also seen evidence about concerns and problems at this election. Some people did not receive the service they should be able to expect, and many were not confident that the election was well run.

Although more than two thirds of people said they were confident the election was well-run, a significant minority of nearly one in five people told us they were not confident. Many of these people selected reasons related to concerns about campaigning or the media to explain why they were not confident. Some people also selected concerns that related to the way the registration or voting process worked.

Our report describes how the UK's electoral administration structures are operating under significant strain, and shows that people have growing concerns about some aspects of election campaigns.

The report makes recommendations about how the running of elections may be improved. It precedes consideration of the full impact of the Covid-19 pandemic, which is only beginning to be felt at the time of publication. There may be further recommendations to ensure the effective delivery of future elections.

Challenges of delivering elections

- Electoral Registration Officers (EROs) were under pressure from large numbers of applications to register to vote made close to the deadline, and they had to spend time and effort at a critical point dealing with many duplicate applications
- Some overseas electors did not have enough time to receive and return postal votes before polling day, as has happened before, which meant their votes could not be counted
- The December timing of the general election brought specific challenges for Returning Officers (ROs), who found it harder to recruit staff and secure polling stations and counting venues

Challenges from evolving election campaign techniques

- Misleading content and presentation techniques are undermining voters' trust in election campaigns
- It is too often unclear who is behind digital election campaign material, and significant public concerns about the transparency of digital election campaigns risk overshadowing their benefits
- Some candidates experienced significant and unacceptable levels of threats, abuse or intimidation

Addressing these challenges ahead of the next UK general election

Many of the challenges described in this report are not new. We have seen similar issues arise at other recent elections in the UK. But the evidence we have seen after this election shows significant concerns from the public and electoral administrators.

There is an opportunity between now and the next scheduled general election to make real change, to protect confidence in how elections are run and increase trust in campaigns. Action needs to begin now, to help ensure confidence is not further damaged at future elections.

Our report sets out areas where governments, EROs, ROs, political parties, campaigners, social media companies and regulators need to work together to agree new laws, processes or standards of conduct. We will support this work, to ensure changes are workable and will benefit voters and improve public confidence.

Supporting EROs and ROs to meet voters' expectations

- The UK Government needs to identify improvements to the online register to vote service, electoral management software systems and the funding model for elections, to help EROs effectively manage large numbers of registration applications (including duplicate applications) ahead of major electoral events

- The UK Government should also explore reforms that would make it easier for people to register or update their details throughout the year, such as by integrating registration applications into other public service contacts
- The UK Government needs to consider innovative new approaches to improve voting for overseas electors, using evidence from other countries, particularly given its plans to increase the number of British citizens living abroad who are eligible to vote
- The UK's three governments need to set out how they will simplify and modernise electoral law, building on the comprehensive and well-supported recommendations by the Law Commissions

Supporting trust and confidence in election campaigns

- Campaigners, candidates and political parties need to take greater responsibility for the presentation and content of campaigns they run and the impact of their activities on public confidence in elections
- The UK Government needs to make progress on its planned consultation on legislation to ensure campaigners have to include information about themselves on digital campaign material
- Social media companies need to provide more detailed and accurate data about election campaigns and spending in ad libraries on their platforms so we and voters can see more information about who is campaigning

Supporting people who want to stand as candidates

- Political parties and other campaigners, the UK Government and social media companies should continue to take steps to tackle intimidation so that people are not discouraged from standing for election or campaigning because of the risk of abuse, threats or intimidation

Delivering the election

- People were very satisfied with the processes of registering to vote and voting at the 2019 general election, and thought that they had enough information about the election and how to register and cast their vote
- The number of registration applications made before the deadline was significantly higher than at the 2017 general election – 3.85 million people applied to register to vote, including 660,000 who applied on the last day to register
- Data from EROs shows that approximately one in three applications was a duplicate, submitted by someone who was already correctly registered, and in some areas the data suggests that the proportion of duplicates was even higher
- The most frequently mentioned concern in feedback from overseas electors was about not receiving their postal vote in time to complete it and send it back
- More than a third of electoral administrators who responded to our survey said that they or their teams were struggling with the demands of the role and the extra workload from unplanned electoral events in 2019

Electoral Registration Officers are under pressure from high volumes of applications at major electoral events

Public interest in major electoral events is increasingly driving electoral registration applications just before elections. An accessible online registration process means it is easy for people who want to make sure they can take part to submit an application, and to do so close to the deadline.

EROs and their teams were under pressure to process large numbers of registration applications during the period before the deadline in November 2019. The number of applications made before the deadline was significantly higher than at the 2017 election:

| 2017 | 2019 |
|---|--|
| 2.9 million people | 3.85 million people |
| applied between the Prime Minister's announcement of the election and the registration deadline | applied between MPs voting to approve the election and the registration deadline |
| 612,000 people | 660,000 people |
| applied on deadline day | applied on deadline day |

A large number of duplicate applications added unnecessary pressure for EROs and their teams. Data from EROs shows that many applications were submitted by people who were already correctly registered:

- Approximately one in three applications they received before the deadline was a duplicate
- In some areas the proportion of duplicate applications was even higher
- Only around half of all applications led to an addition to the register

We received feedback from 160 EROs, ROs or electoral administrators from across the UK. Nearly half (46%) of those who responded to our survey said that the volume of duplicate applications received during the election caused strain on resources and staff, who had to work significant additional hours to process them in time, alongside processing applications to vote by post and proxy.

“The duplicate process is a nightmare throughout the year but during a high profile election it becomes a huge drain on resources.”

“Number of duplicate applications is unacceptable and creates additional enormous workload for no benefit to the register.”

Feedback from electoral administrators

Additionally, the electoral registration and postal voting application deadlines fell on the same day in Great Britain, after Parliament changed the law; it passed the Early Parliamentary General Election Act 2019 in November, to make sure the registration deadline was the same across the UK. EROs and electoral administrators told us that they felt additional pressure at this election as they processed both types of application to the same deadline.

As a result of these pressures, EROs and their teams found it hard to provide the level of resource needed to process applications. In some cases this meant that voters didn't receive the service they should be able to expect. For example:

- In Plymouth, the ERO had included 1,451 people in the electoral register who had not completed an individual registration application. They identified and resolved this problem before polling day, but it meant that there was confusion about whether some people were able to vote in the election. There was limited time for the people who were affected then to apply to register correctly before the deadline. The ERO did not fully meet our performance standards.

- In Northern Ireland, the Electoral Office sent letters seeking required additional information from some people who had applied to vote, but some letters included an incorrect deadline for response. The Chief Electoral Officer confirmed that anyone who responded after this point but before the actual deadline would have had their registration processed correctly.¹

Electoral administrators also told us that the large number of registration and absent vote applications had an impact on their capacity to focus on running the election at a critical point.

“It was very challenging maintaining our level of processing to complete by close of business each day- many staff worked extra hours each night and at weekends to ensure we were up to date. We saw a sharp increase in levels of registration applications, Absent Vote applications and a corresponding sharp increase in numbers of Overseas elector applications. Additionally, 33% of applications in the period in the run up to the election were duplicate registration applications.”

Feedback from an electoral administrator

EROs need more support to help them continue to deliver the level of service that people should be able to expect before major electoral events. The UK Government should look at the funding model for future UK Parliamentary elections to ensure EROs can handle large numbers of registration applications. More fundamentally, it should also look at how the online register to vote service and electoral management software systems could be improved to reduce the number and impact of duplicate registration applications.

The UK’s governments should also explore reforms that would make it easier for people to register or update their details throughout the year, such as integrating applications into other public service contacts or more automatic forms of registration. This could help reduce the need for people to make new applications immediately before an election.

Overseas electors again faced challenges when voting

Some British citizens living abroad found it difficult to make sure their votes were able to be counted. Just over 230,000 people were registered as overseas electors, making up 0.5% of the total UK electorate.

Many overseas electors who chose to vote by post had a tight deadline to receive and return their postal ballot papers before polling day:

¹ Our power to set and monitor performance standards for electoral services does not apply in Northern Ireland. We continue to be of the view that our performance standards framework should be extended to Northern Ireland and will further engage with the Chief Electoral Officer and the Northern Ireland Office (NIO) to progress this.

- Returning Officers (ROs) could only begin printing ballot papers after the deadline for nominating candidates on 14 November
- This left less than four weeks to print and issue postal ballot packs, and for overseas electors to receive, complete and return their ballot papers before polling day
- People who registered or applied for a postal vote close to the deadline had only two weeks to receive, complete and return their postal vote

We received feedback after the election from more than 500 overseas voters. The most frequent problem they mentioned was not receiving their postal vote in time to complete it and send it back. Overseas electors were dependent on the speed of the postal service in the country where they live.

“My overseas postal vote arrived the day before the election. This left no time to send it back, and so I was not able to vote despite my desire to.”

“The ballot arrived Saturday afternoon. I paid \$35 for express shipping to get it back to the UK as soon as possible but it was still unlikely to arrive in time (letters normally take around a week). I don't know why it arrived so late.”

“IT DOES NOT WORK. My post was sent too late to arrive for me to return it, will not reach the UK in time. I have no vote.”

“My postal vote did not arrive until 5 working days before the election, making it impossible for my vote to be counted.”

Views from overseas electors

Some overseas electors also told us that they did not know they could ask someone in the UK to vote on their behalf by post (known as a ‘postal proxy’). This could have been more convenient for the proxy voter, rather than having to travel in person to a polling station that could be far from their own home.

More than half (53%) of electoral administrators who responded to our survey said that they had spent significant time dealing with queries from overseas voters who were experiencing issues with postal or proxy votes during the election. We also received large numbers of queries ahead of the election from people living overseas who wanted to know if, and how, they could vote.

This was not the first time that we have seen evidence of these problems for overseas electors. We highlighted evidence in our statutory reports on the 2015 and 2017 UK general elections, as well as following the 2016 EU referendum and the 2019 European Parliament election.

At the 2019 general election, the Cabinet Office and Royal Mail put in place a system for faster delivery of postal ballot packs to overseas electors. This does appear to have improved the experience for some electors, but there was still not enough time for overseas electors in some countries to return their votes in time for them to be counted.

Overseas electors should be able to expect that their vote will be counted. The UK Government should consider innovative new approaches to voting for overseas electors, using evidence from other countries. This could include the ability to download and print postal ballot papers or vote at embassies and consulates.

The UK Government plans to increase the number of British citizens living abroad who can register to vote, by removing the current time limit of 15 years since they were last registered to vote in the UK. As more voters will be affected by the issues identified with postal voting, it will be even more important to give overseas electors ways of voting that mean they can be confident their votes will be counted at future UK Parliamentary elections.

The timing of the election brought challenges for Returning Officers

The timing of the 2019 election was unusual; it was the first general election to be held in December since 1923, and polling day itself was less than two weeks before Christmas. This brought specific challenges for ROs and their teams.

The election process also began while the scheduled annual electoral registration canvass was still being carried out across Great Britain. Electoral administration teams had to complete their legal responsibilities to process canvass forms returned from households and invite new residents to register to vote, at the same time as setting up the administration of the election.

Feedback that we received from EROs, ROs or electoral administrators from across the UK highlighted some common challenges that they faced:

- Staff working in elections teams faced significant pressure and worked long hours to complete the annual canvass and deliver the election at the same time
- Some electoral management software systems had problems running election processes alongside the annual canvass
- ROs found it harder to recruit temporary staff, including polling station and counting staff, for an election held just before Christmas
- Some venues that ROs normally use for polling stations or for the count were already booked for seasonal events and were not available for this election
- Larger volumes of post during the Christmas period saw reported delays in issuing and returning postal votes in some areas

More than a third (38%) of electoral administrators who responded to our survey said that they or their teams had struggled with the demands of the role and the extra workload from unplanned electoral events in 2019. The early general election in December followed the May 2019 European Parliament elections across the UK which had remained scheduled in law, but had not been expected to take place. Scheduled local government elections also took place in many parts of England and across Northern Ireland in May.

“The pressure put on electoral administrators is untenable. This was our third all out election in a year, two of which were unscheduled. Our mental health is fragile at best. We are exhausted and completely fed up.”

Feedback from an electoral administrator

We saw evidence of printing errors on poll cards or postal ballot packs that caused confusion for electors in a small number of constituencies. Some ROs explained that they thought that the risk of printing errors was higher at this election because of the tight deadlines for checking proofs, combined with pressure on printer availability and capacity.

- In Waltham Forest, postal ballot packs were not initially sent to 1,470 postal voters because a data file was not sent to the printers. As soon as the problem was identified the postal votes were issued. Candidates and agents were told about this and information was put on the council’s website. However, because some postal voters got their postal vote very close to polling day, they might not have been able to fill it in and send it back in time for it to be counted. The RO did not fully meet our performance standards.

These competing pressures and errors also speak to the challenges of delivering elections within an outdated and increasingly complex electoral law framework, and indeed we have already seen similar problems at elections held at other times of the year, particularly when different elections are combined and held on the same day.

“Very difficult to follow. Disparate and some of later legislation contradicts earlier legislation and not in-keeping with current times and technology.”

Feedback from an electoral administrator

The Law Commissions of England, Wales and Scotland have now published the final report of their detailed review of electoral law. They have made recommendations to simplify and modernise the law that would help improve how elections are run. The UK’s governments need to commit resources and time to reform electoral law, building on these comprehensive and well-supported recommendations.

Voters continue to have positive views about how the election was run

After each election we carry out research with the public to find out what they thought about taking part in the election. Our research found that people were very satisfied with the process of registering to vote and voting at the 2019 UK general election:

- 78% of people were satisfied with the process of registering to vote
- 93% of people who voted at the election were satisfied with the process of voting

People also thought they had enough information about the election:

- 80% of people said that they knew a lot or a fair amount about the election
- 81% of people said they found it easy to access information on what the election was for
- 88% of people said it was easy to get both information on how to register to vote, and how to cast their vote

These are similar to positive levels of satisfaction that we have found at other recent UK-wide elections or referendums.

More than two in three people (69% of voters and non-voters) said they were either very or fairly confident the election was well-run (12% said they didn't know). This was similar to the level we found at the 2010 UK general election, but generally lower compared with other UK-wide elections or referendums in recent years, and ten percentage points lower than the 2017 result (where 79% were confident). However, our 2019 survey cannot tell us whether public confidence is returning to levels seen in the past or the start of a more significant decline.

A significant minority of people (18%) said that they were not confident the election was well-run. We asked these people to select reasons why they were not confident the election was well-run.

The most common reasons related to concerns about campaigning or the media, which are discussed in the next section of this report. Some people also selected concerns that related to the way the registration or voting process worked:

- 28% of those who were not confident the election was well-run said they thought that some people did not have the opportunity to vote or had the opportunity taken away
- 22% said they were not confident because the election was held at short notice
- 17% said they were not confident because they thought some people had difficulties registering to vote

More than 7 out of 10 of all voters and non-voters (72%) said that they thought voting in general is safe from fraud and abuse.

A very small proportion of people said they had direct or second-hand experience of electoral fraud at the election: 2% said that they knew someone who had committed electoral fraud; 1% said that they personally saw someone vote when they were not allowed to. Despite these low percentages, more than a third of people (38%) said they thought that some fraud had taken place at the election.

This is consistent with evidence about allegations of electoral fraud at the election. Data from police forces shows that they recorded 156 cases of alleged electoral fraud relating to the election. Of these cases, just over half required no further action following initial inquiries by the police, and one sixth were locally resolved. One third of the reported cases remain under investigation.

Campaigning at the election

- People were concerned about misleading campaign techniques from across the political spectrum, and bias in the media, and we received a large number of complaints raising concerns about the presentation, tone and content of election campaigns
- Transparency about who is behind political campaigns online at elections is important for people in the UK. In our research after the election, nearly three quarters of people agreed that it was important for them to know who produced the political information they see online, but less than a third agreed that they can find out who has produced it
- A significant number of candidates who responded to our survey said they experienced intimidation, with a sixth experiencing significant levels. Online abuse was the most common activity mentioned by those who had experienced problems
- The UK Government and other bodies monitored during the election period for risks to democratic processes from foreign interference and organised disinformation, and the UK Government has said that work to examine these aspects after the election is ongoing

Misleading campaign techniques risk undermining voters' trust

Democracies rely on campaigners being able to communicate with voters. In return, voters need to be able to trust the information that campaigners are giving them.

At the 2019 general election, voters were concerned about the use of misleading campaign techniques by campaigners from across the political spectrum. During the campaign period, we reminded campaigners that voters are entitled to transparency and integrity, and called on all campaigners to undertake their vital role responsibly.

Voters got information about candidates and parties at the election from a range of different sources. Over half the people who took part in our survey after the election said they saw campaign materials from parties and candidates, around a third said they got information from the televised leader debates or online sources.

- 55% of people who took part in our research after the election said that they got information from leaflets/flyers
- 32% from a party leader debate on television
- 29% from newspapers or news websites
- 24% from social media posts and adverts by campaigners

During the election period, voters raised concerns directly with us and other regulators about both printed and digital material that some campaigners were using at the election.

They were concerned about the presentation, labelling or layout of campaign material that they thought was misleading, and also about the messaging and content of some campaigns.

Public concerns about misleading campaign techniques

- Some campaigners branded their social media pages in ways that meant it wasn't clear who was responsible for them, or used misleading website links to encourage people to visit their sites; other examples used edited video clips to present their opponents negatively
- Information about who was responsible for printed campaign material wasn't always clear or easily readable; some digital campaign material didn't have any information about its source at all
- Some leaflets were designed to look like local newspapers; others used colours normally associated with other parties
- Some statistics were incorrectly quoted or presented in misleading ways and without important context

Campaigners should include information about themselves – called an 'imprint' – on their campaign material. The law already requires them to do this for printed material in Great Britain but not in Northern Ireland.

At this election there were issues with some campaigners' materials in Northern Ireland that didn't say who was responsible for them. The UK Government should update the law so that election campaigners in Northern Ireland have to put imprints on their printed materials.

There were also complaints from voters in Great Britain because some campaigners included imprints that were not clear on letters or leaflets. All campaigners should respect the spirit of the imprint rules and provide easily readable information about themselves.

There is evidence from our research after the election that concerns about truthfulness and transparency are having an impact on public trust and confidence:

- More than half of people (58%) agreed with the statement that, in general, "campaigning online is untrue or misleading"
- A similar proportion (60%) disagreed that "information available online about politics is trustworthy"
- Overall, nearly one in five people (18%) said they were not confident the election was well-run, and of these people nearly half (49%) selected as a reason that "campaigning was based on incorrect information/made untrue claims"
- When we asked people to prioritise their concerns about the election from a list of issues, two thirds of people (67%) said "media bias" was a problem and half (52%) said "inadequate control of political activity on social media" was a problem

We have signalled our concern about these issues before. If voters lose trust and confidence in political campaigning, democracy as a whole will suffer. Campaigners, candidates and parties themselves need to take greater responsibility for the presentation and content of campaigns they run and the impact of their activities on public confidence in elections.

We cannot afford to miss the window of opportunity between now and the next scheduled general election. There needs to be real change to protect trust and confidence in campaigns at future elections and the integrity of our democracy. It will take governments, parties, campaigners, social media companies and regulators to work together to agree new laws or standards of conduct. We will support this work.

The rules for campaigners need modernising for the digital age

New digital tools and channels have changed the campaigning landscape in the UK significantly in the last decade. Digital campaigning can be a force for good, by encouraging political dialogue and debate.

However, we are seeing evidence that concerns about transparency are beginning to overshadow these benefits. This is having an impact on public trust and confidence in campaigns.

Our research after the election confirmed that transparency about who is behind political campaigns online at elections is important for people in the UK:

- Nearly three quarters of people (72%) agreed that it was important for them to know who produced the political information they see online
- Less than a third (29%) agreed that they can find out who has produced the political information they see online
- Nearly half (46%) agreed that they were concerned about why and how political ads were targeted at them

The imprint rules only apply to printed material and don't cover digital material. This is a major gap in the rules that require campaigners to provide information about themselves on their campaign material.

The UK Government has confirmed that it will consult on new rules for imprints on digital campaigning; we will help develop these new rules so they provide transparency for voters and are workable for campaigners. The social media companies should make it straightforward for campaigners to put imprints on both unpaid and paid digital material when it is a legal requirement.

The UK Government should also set out plans to modernise the rules for campaigners to keep pace with the digital age. The law should tell campaigners and digital platforms the amount and type of information they need to give to voters, the media, other campaigners and regulators, including the Commission.

At this election, Facebook, Google and Snapchat published libraries and reports of the political advertising run on their platforms and channels during the election. They also required political advertisers to put '*Paid for by*' disclaimers on their political adverts.

These measures are a step in the right direction and they enabled us to see who is paying to place adverts. But they still don't provide enough information about digital campaigning.

Limitations of social media transparency measures and ways forward

- The social media companies each have different definitions of political advertising which do not completely align with election law. They should ensure their policies fit the legal definitions of election campaigning
- The 'Paid for by' disclaimers don't always make it clear who is behind advertising. Disclaimers should include the name of the person or organisation who authorised the election campaign advert, not just a campaign name or slogan
- The companies' policies don't require unpaid election campaign material to be labelled as political material, and this means they won't appear in the advert libraries. Their policies should cover unpaid election campaigning that campaigners publish to reach voters and to be shared by others
- Facebook and Google provide very broad information about where adverts were targeted. They should show which constituencies were targeted, if this is the case. This information should be embedded in the advert itself and in the advert libraries
- The advert libraries contain ranges of amounts campaigners spend. They should provide precise figures for amounts spent

These measures are voluntary, and not every company that runs political advertising has created special labelling or advert libraries. They should be a legal requirement so that we and voters can see more information about who is campaigning. Social media companies should be required to provide more detailed and accurate data about election campaigns and spending in their ad libraries so we and voters can see more information about who is campaigning.

The companies themselves have said that they would welcome clear and consistent requirements for how they should deal with campaign material. The UK Government should set out how it might be possible to achieve this, for example through the proposed new online harms regulatory framework.

But it is not just social media companies that need to provide greater transparency about campaign spending at elections; campaigners should also be responsible for increasing transparency about their campaigning. In 2018 we said they should have to provide more detailed information about their spending after an election.

We continue to recommend this and will talk with campaigners about how it could work in practice. The UK Government should include proposals for implementing this recommendation in its planned consultation on electoral integrity to refresh our laws for the digital age.

Tackling intimidation of candidates requires a holistic approach

Open political debate is an essential part of elections, but there has been increasing concern at recent elections about intimidating and threatening behaviour towards candidates and campaigners.

In response to these concerns, we asked candidates a wide range of questions about whether they had experienced, or had concerns about, threats, abuse or intimidation. This was the first time we have focused on this topic in our survey of candidates after the election.

Some told us that they experienced significant and unacceptable levels of threats, abuse or intimidation. Online abuse was the type of activity most commonly mentioned by those who had experienced problems.

We received feedback from 776 candidates, representing just under a quarter of the total who stood for election.

- Only a quarter of those candidates who responded (27%) said that they had no problem at all with threats, abuse or intimidation
- More than half (54%) of those candidates who gave us feedback said they had concerns about standing for election that related to threats, abuse or intimidation
- Three quarters of respondents (73%) said that they had experienced some abuse, threats or intimidation, and a sixth said they experienced significant levels. Some candidates felt there was co-ordinated abuse and intimidation by supporters of other parties or causes
- The most common type of abuse, threats or intimidation was online (mentioned by 82% of people who gave us feedback), but we also heard reports of verbal abuse and printed material
- Nearly one in ten who said they had experienced abuse (9%) said it had included physical abuse

Data provided by UK police forces after the election shows that just over half (54%) had received reports of threats, abuse or intimidation towards candidates or those campaigning on their behalf.

“In order to protect our democracy we need to be much more visible in dealing with intimidation and show a zero tolerance for what is at the end of the day election interference and trying to influence the outcome of an election.”

“It’s a more complex issue than it being ‘someone’s’ fault or responsibility. It’s a wider social problem encompassing democracy, respect for the democratic process and the undermining and constant hyena like obsession with finding fault and chastising those in public life.”

Feedback from candidates

Many candidates told us that they felt supported by their political party or the police when it came to combating intimidation or abuse. The majority of respondents felt well supported by their political party (57%) and around two-fifths (43%) by the police.

There was support to help candidates run respectful campaigns and to protect themselves from abuse online or at public events. This included guidance that we published jointly with the National Police Chiefs' Council Crown Prosecution Service and the College of Policing. There were also a number of initiatives that highlighted positive behaviours that candidates could pledge to contribute to a respectful election campaign.

During the election, some of the social media companies also provided guidance for candidates about online safety and set up a reporting channel to flag intimidating content. Despite this, nearly seven in ten candidates (69%) said that they did not feel supported at all by social media companies.

We agree with the conclusions of [a review](#) into intimidation in public life by the Committee on Standards in Public Life (CSPL) which recommended in 2018 that tackling intimidation of candidates and others needs a holistic approach. It is up to everyone involved in the political process to consider the effects of their behaviour on UK democracy.

- Political parties must continue to work together with the CSPL on the Joint Standard of Conduct for parties and their members that they have developed with independent support from the Jo Cox Foundation.
- The UK Government should continue with measures to tackle intimidatory behaviour. It should set out how it intends to create an electoral offence for intimidation of candidates and campaigners, and confirm whether it will place a duty of care on social media companies through its proposed online harms regulatory framework
- Social media companies themselves should actively take steps to limit intimidatory behaviour online; this includes taking forward the actions for social media companies proposed by the CSPL

Steps taken to secure the democratic processes must continue

Many people and organisations were and remain concerned about the risks of foreign interference or organised disinformation. Several bodies monitored these risks during the election.

- The UK Government put a coordinated structure in place to identify and respond to emerging issues and protect the safety and security of democratic processes, and we took part in this group
- A number of academic researchers and groups studied how people accessed and shared news about the election on social media like Facebook and Twitter; this included monitoring for evidence of junk news or disinformation

It is important not to be complacent about these risks and the UK Government has said that work to examine these aspects after the election is ongoing.

In 2018 we identified areas where election law could be improved to strengthen protections against foreign interference at future elections. The UK Government should set out how it will take these recommendations forward as part of its planned consultation on foreign interference:

- The law should be clear that spending on election or referendum campaigns by foreign organisations or individuals is not allowed
- The controls on donations and loans for political parties and campaigners should be improved, building on approaches for enhanced due diligence and risk assessment used in financial regulation

We will work with the government to consider how these proposed laws could be enforced and ensure they do not have a disproportionate impact on free speech.