Identifying the Determinants of Electoral Integrity in Advanced Democracies: The Case of Britain

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Abstract

Much discussion of electoral integrity focuses on new democracies. This paper seeks to identify determinants of electoral integrity in an established democracy: Britain. A novel measure of electoral integrity is brought together with comprehensive multi-level data on: the costs of electoral administration; whether concurrent elections were being held; size of electorate; number of constituencies administered; region; type of administration overseeing local electoral administration; and the number of staff employed on administering the electoral process. The results will establish a range of relationships to electoral integrity which will inform subsequent debates on election quality in other democracies, whether advanced or otherwise.
Identifying the Determinants of Electoral Integrity in Advanced Democracies: The Case of Britain

Understanding the integrity of the electoral process is a vital pre-cursor for understanding any other aspect of electoral politics. Recognition of its importance has led to the development of electoral integrity as a lively ‘new agenda’ in political science (Norris, 2013a). Much research in this area is often focused upon democratising countries, election observation missions and the manipulation of elections in authoritarian regimes. In advanced democracies, the focus has remained firmly on voting behaviour and party campaigns. Nevertheless a range of recent difficulties in electoral processes in advanced democracies have highlighted the need also for an examination of electoral integrity in such contexts (Alvarez and Hall, 2006; James, 2012; Wise 2001). In particular, it is important to establish variance in the integrity of the electoral process, and to understand what factors may drive or impede the delivery of high quality elections in such democracies.

The paper’s major contribution is to present a multivariate analysis of various aspects which might impact on election quality in advanced democracies. It approaches this through an index of election integrity derived from election administrators’ performance standards in the 2010 British general election. The index is brought together with a range of contextual data, such as geographical and socio-economic variables, to provide an exploratory analysis of which factors may be more or less important in driving election quality in advanced democracies. Britain is typical of many advanced democracies, notably the United States but also smaller democracies like Ireland, in that local electoral officials have the main responsibility for delivering elections. Consequently, there is considerable variation in standards of electoral administration. Britain is therefore an excellent case study for building both theory and knowledge about the relationship between electoral integrity and contextual variables. Moreover, this is the first time such a multivariate analysis has been undertaken in an advanced democracy in relation to a national parliamentary general election. This is important because evidence from such a case can be utilized comparatively to interrogate these issues in other advanced democracies.

The paper proceeds as follows. The first section introduces the broad concept of electoral integrity, before focusing more narrowly on the crucial aspect of electoral administration and its contribution to election quality. The second section discusses some potential contextual issues that may impact on the provision of high quality elections. These include, for example: the size of the electorate, a number of electoral structure variables, the amount spent on electoral administration, and regional and institutional variables. A range of hypotheses are derived from these ideas. The third section introduces the data utilised in this study, while the fourth section presents an analysis of these data. The conclusion reflects on the implications of these findings for both scholars and practitioners of electoral integrity.

Electoral Integrity and Electoral Administration

Practical issues around electoral integrity have long been a concern for policymakers and politicians, whether to help build legitimacy in democratising countries, or even to
manipulate the electoral process in more authoritarian regimes. Scholars are now beginning to catch up with the importance of such questions and how they may or may not affect electoral choice and competition (for example: Birch, 2011; Norris et al., 2014). Those studying democratisation and electoral autocracies have taken these questions most seriously. In potentially high conflict political situations, the integrity, fairness and transparency of the process can all be disputed and have the potential to lead to, at best, challenges to the legitimacy of results, or, at worst, widespread political violence (Birch, 2011). In contrast, in advanced democracies with long experience of running elections, the quality of the electoral process has tended to be taken for granted, apart from rare occasions when some major difficulty is highlighted. This largely remains the case, despite an upsurge of interest in the operation of the electoral process in the United States in the aftermath of the contested 2000 Bush-Gore presidential election (for example: Hasen, 2012; Montjoy, 2008; Wise, 2001). The only other advanced democracy to receive any sustained level of attention has been Britain (for example: Clark 2014a, b; James, 2012; 2013; Wilks-Heeg, 2009).

The concept of electoral integrity can be approached from either a broad or more narrowly defined perspective. Recent accounts define electoral integrity as being rooted in ‘international conventions and global norms, applying universally to all countries worldwide throughout the electoral cycle, including during the pre-electoral period, the campaign, on polling day and on its aftermath’ (Norris, 2013a, b). Such international norms emphasise fundamental freedoms, democracy promotion and human rights, without which elections cannot be classified as ‘free and fair’. In addition to these freedoms, four further key elements of electoral integrity have been identified as being: a legal framework that imposes checks and balances on the institutional structure; firmly entrenched protection mechanisms, such as independent observation; enforcement measures; and fair, transparent and equitable election administration (ACE Project, n.d.). Developing these ideas further, Birch (2011) suggests that democratically sound outcomes depend on inclusiveness, policy-directed voting, and the effective aggregation of the vote.

To narrow the focus, a distinction can be made between what have been termed first and second order malpractices (Norris, 2013a; Vickery and Shein, 2012). First order malpractices revolve around violations of generally accepted freedoms, which may end in political violence. Second order malpractices ‘characteristically involve more mundane issues of maladministration, lack of technical capacity or human error’ (Norris, 2013a). A difficulty with this distinction is that it is often such ‘second order’ administrative issues which can give political actors the excuse to claim electoral fraud, bring the democratic process into disrepute and ultimately lead to contested outcomes, whether through violent or other means (Minnite, 2010). The notion of mundane administrative ‘second order’ malpractices appears to downplay this. Electoral administration is therefore a crucial aspect of electoral integrity in both democratising countries and advanced democracies. Fair, transparent and equitable election administration, which provides an effective aggregation of the vote is therefore critical to providing electoral integrity (Electoral Commission, 2009a; Schaffer 2008).

Running elections for any level of office is a complex task. The demands on electoral administrators are often highly intensive, but also intermittent, with many aspects having to be organised to inevitably tight timescales. For a national election, the sheer scale of logistical and organisational tasks required to run the contest effectively is impressive. For
example, electoral administrators are required to comply with electoral legislation, recruit, train and manage large numbers of staff, the vast majority being non-specialists employed for the short-term conduct of the election, and also ensure that an up to date electoral register is compiled. They are also required to find locations for polling stations, ensure they are equipped and staffed properly, and, when polls close, arrange the counting and tabulation process.

There are many difficulties involved. Alvarez and Hall (2006) point to principal-agent problems in running elections. Mozzafar and Schedler (2002) highlight tensions between administrative efficiency, political neutrality and public accountability that election administrators must seek to balance. Others have suggested that the complexity of elections make them prone to what might be termed ‘normal accidents’, the propensity for complexity and pressure to deliver leading to errors in implementation each of which may, on their own, be relatively small but can multiply into a much bigger issue (Montjoy, 2008; Perrow, 1999). While this might appear to require central co-ordination and planning, in most advanced democracies, voting is, of necessity, something that occurs in voters’ local areas. Integrity, therefore, also depends on how elections are locally implemented. Poll workers in local areas administering elections can thus be seen as ‘street-level bureaucrats’ (Kimball and Kropf, 2006). Consequently, localised standards can vary considerably, rendering perceptions of the electoral process as, at best, not uniform, and, at worst, threatening the entire credibility of the process (Atkeson and Saunders, 2007; Hall et al., 2007).

A number of checklists have been proposed to allow an assessment of electoral administration within a country. Elklit and Reynolds (2001) highlight twelve steps in the electoral process and subdivide these steps into 47 different variables for observers to assess. For instance, in relation to counting and tabulating the vote, their steps include assessing whether there are clearly established counting procedures, the availability of results to party agents at the lowest level of counting immediately after the count, and the ability of interested parties to observe the count process. Elsewhere, Elklit and Reynolds (2005) extend this framework further to 54 variables, dividing their various steps into essential, important and desirable characteristics all of which are given weightings according to their importance in their schema. Pastor (1999) divides his checklist into pre-election, election and post-election phases with 22 indicators in total for application to developing countries. Taking a similar but distinct approach, Mozaffar and Schedler (2002) distinguish between a threefold categorisation of rule-making (i.e. the rules of electoral competition and governance), rule application (i.e. organising the election process) and rule adjudication (certifying results and resolving disputes).²

Implicit in many of these approaches is the idea that the administrative aspects of electoral integrity can be combined to provide an overall assessment of a set of elections (Elklit and Reynolds, 2005: 156). The utility of such an overall assessment has been strongly advocated by Gerken (2009). She argues that too little is known about the state of electoral administration, with much data either often difficult to collect or simply unknown. She proposes a ‘democracy index’ to provide a tool for both policymakers and voters to assess the performance and administration of their electoral process. Such an index would focus on the central issues of registration, balloting and counting. It would provide potentially both a national level assessment, and one which highlights variation between states and localities.
Elklit and Reynolds (2005: 155-6) highlight the utility of such an approach for cross-national comparisons and for different types of democracies. Such variation could be used to highlight best practice and to improve electoral processes in localities or countries showing substantial variation from best practice. Consequently, a democracy index would provide incentives which encourage the improvement of electoral administration. As Gerken (2009: 92) argues, such an index should:

help election administrators make the case for change … By providing a professional touchstone and making successful policies visible to election administrators and policymakers, the index should help push in the direction of more professional management and better policies.

Influences on the Quality of Electoral Administration

If the aim of such an index is to measure variation in election quality in advanced democracies, what factors may determine or be associated with higher or lower levels of performance in election administration? Despite the numerous checklists described above, analysts have little empirical evidence to suggest what may drive higher levels of performance in election administration in specific advanced democracies. A number of determinants can nevertheless be suggested.

The first group of determinants relate to the electoral structure of the local area the election is being administered in. Three things might conceivably impact upon the quality of electoral administration in this regard. Firstly, the size and concentration of the electorate being administered is important, with larger electorates arguably adding more pressures on electoral administrators, and smaller electorates easier to manage. Secondly, in many countries, elections to different levels of government are held concurrently. This certainly complicates things for political parties (Clark, 2012). It is also likely to add to pressures on administrators, to the detriment of election quality. Thirdly, in a number of electoral systems such as single member plurality (SMP) and mixed-member proportional (MMP), electoral administrators may be running more than one geographical constituency or area. Doing so is likely to add further complications for administrators and as a consequence, this may lead to lower levels of performance.

These electoral structure ideas therefore provide a number of hypotheses that can be tested against an index of election administration. These are that:

H1: Electoral management performance improves when smaller local electorates are being administered;

H2: Electoral management performance improves when only one round of elections is being administered;

H3: Electoral management performance improves when only one constituency or local area is being administered.
The second group of factors that may influence performance on any index of electoral administration or integrity relate to what might be termed organisational or institutional factors. These issues involve the administrative form the local authority administering the elections takes. It can also relate to the level of resources that local authorities employ on election administration. Firstly, practitioner analyses suggest that the type of local authority administering the elections can be associated with differential levels of performance on different aspects of election administration (Electoral Commission, 2009b; 2010). However, taking a broader public administration approach, Murphy et al. (2011) tested for differences between different types of local authorities on a performance assessment regime attempting to measure the Comprehensive Performance Assessment (CPA) of English local government between 2002-2009. They found little difference between different types of authority, arguing that variation occurred as much between as within different types of local government structures. Similarly, Andrews et al. (2005) found that poor performance in CPA was significantly influenced by exogenous factors such as social structure.

Secondly, the question of resources is often highlighted as crucial, albeit in a negative way. Birch (2011: 26) suggests a link between electoral mispractice which evolves from a lack of resources in her comparative study. Pastor (1999) argues that in developing countries, there is a causal chain between weak spending on public administration and poor performance in electoral processes. Such a link has also been made in advanced democracies. Hall and Tokaji (2007) and Gerken (2009: 118) both suggest that electoral administration in the USA is inadequately financed. The Chair of the UK Electoral Commission similarly notes inconsistencies throughout the UK in the amount available to fund electoral administration, indicating that this inconsistency impacts upon the service received by voters on polling day (Watson, 2011: 139; also James, 2013; Wilks-Heeg, 2009). Increasing demands from new legislation, technology and practices all stretch scarce finances and resources for electoral administration even further (Montjoy, 2010). Mostly these arguments are based on assertion, but, in a rare data-driven analysis, Clark (2014) suggests there is a positive relationship between spending on election administration and higher levels of performance in electoral management.

These institutional and organisational issues provide further hypotheses that can be tested against an index of electoral administration. These are that:

H4: There are differences in performance in electoral integrity between different types of local authority.

H5: Electoral management performance improves with more spending on electoral administration.

The final issue that might be examined is whether any potential influences may be exogenous in nature. In particular, it is possible that regional effects might exist, where groupings of neighbouring election administrators meet to exchange best practice and thereby drive up standards in their respective regions. Mooney (2001), for example, has demonstrated such regional policy diffusion in different policy areas in the US, while Matland (1995) suggests such regional effects are an example of ‘bottom-up’ implementation practices and
integrates them into his ambiguity-conflict model of policy implementation. These ideas provide a final hypothesis. This is that:

H6: There are regional effects evident in the quality of electoral administration.

**Electoral Integrity in Britain**

Insights into these broad theoretical questions can be provided by examining the performance of British electoral administrators. Britain is an excellent case for examining these questions because, like a number of advanced democracies, most notably the United States, British elections are administered by local authorities who have discretion, within statutory requirements, in determining how elections are implemented. Consequently, considerable variation is evident to test these ideas against. The toughest test for election administrators is a general election, where most voters are mobilised. Watson (2011: 129) observes that nearly 24 million votes were cast in around 40,000 polling stations in the 2010 general election, with 5.8 million postal votes also being cast. Alongside this a further 13.6 million votes were cast in local elections in various parts of England in 2010. Given the dearth of data available to assess and test issues of electoral integrity in advanced democracies, findings from a British general election can be utilised to interrogate election quality in other similar settings, and, arguably, also go on to inform debates in democratising countries.

Although British electoral administration has largely been taken for granted by scholars, two factors have recently changed this. Firstly, a number of high-profile difficulties in election administration in recent years have highlighted both the fragile nature of election quality in some places, and, as a consequence, underlined variation in practices across Britain. Examples include voters being turned away from some polling stations in a number of cities in the 2010 general election, an extraordinarily large number of invalid ballots in the 2007 Scottish elections, and in 2005, and election court judge likening the conduct and administration of postal voting in local elections in Birmingham to that of ‘a Banana Republic’ (Clark, Forthcoming; Denver et al., 2009; James, 2010; Stewart, 2006; Wilks-Heeg, 2009). Indeed, it is often local elections which have proved most problematic in Britain (Wilks-Heeg, 2009).

Secondly, since the Political Parties, Elections and Referendums Act (PPERA) 2000, the UK has had an Electoral Commission responsible for oversight of numerous aspects of the electoral process. This reports to parliament, but essentially operates independently, making it something of a hybrid in the standard classification of Electoral Management Bodies (EMBs) (Elklit and Reynolds, 2001). As part of the Commission’s work, increasing amounts of information about the conduct of electoral politics have become publicly available. The Electoral Commission was given the role of overseeing both election process spending and setting performance standards in the Electoral Administration Act (EAA) 2006. Their data now therefore include information on both performance standards for returning officers (ROs), and electoral registration officers (EROs). Electoral Commission data also includes spending on electoral administration. This notwithstanding, the delivery of electoral administration in Britain ultimately remains the responsibility of local government. The Electoral Commission has no formal powers of direction over the local ROs and EROs who
are ultimately responsible for delivering the elections. Consequently, there are inevitable variations in both practice and performance in delivering electoral administration which need explained (Clark, 2014a, b).

Data and Approach

Data for this study are drawn from a range of sources. The key source which provides evidence of variation in practice amongst electoral administrators is a survey of performance standards for returning officers (ROs) in the 2010 British general election. Returning officers are non-partisan civil servants who are responsible for the conduct of the election in their local authority. Data on performance standards were based on self-completed surveys of ROs collected by the Electoral Commission in the aftermath of the election. This survey had a high response rate of 372 out of 379 local council ROs who were responsible for running the 2010 general election in 632 constituencies. In other words, the analysis is undertaken at the level of these local authority returning officers, and based on a response rate of 98 per cent. These performance standards were used to report on performance in both the 2009 European and 2010 General elections (Electoral Commission 2009b; 2010). They revolve around three broad areas, from which seven measureable standards were derived. They are outlined in table 1.

Table 1: Performance Standards for Returning Officers in the 2010 general election

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Subject</th>
<th>Performance standard</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Planning &amp; organisation</td>
<td>1: Skills &amp; knowledge of returning officer</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>2: Planning processes in place for an election</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>3: Training</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Integrity</td>
<td>4: Maintaining the integrity of an election</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Participation</td>
<td>5: Planning and delivering public awareness activity</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>6: Accessibility of information to electors</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>7: Communication of information to candidates &amp; agents</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Sources: Electoral Commission, 2009a; 2010: 2.

The various frameworks described above tend to use ordinal scales to rate particular aspects of election quality. Elklit and Reynolds (2005), for example, adopt a four-point Likert scale to rank their variables of interest. The Electoral Commission adopt a similar approach, utilising a three-point ordinal scale of not meeting the standard, meeting the standard, and above the standard. In each performance standard, a range of criteria are specified that the RO must comply with. Thus, under performance standard two on planning processes, to fail to meet the standard ROs would have no written formal plan, relying instead on experience and informal interactions. To meet the standard, the RO would have a formal written plan which includes overall objectives, a risk register, staffing and organising venues for polling stations and the count and any contracts for outsourced material (e.g. printing) to be in place. To be above the standard, the RO has worked with external bodies (e.g. local media, community groups and other interested electoral officers) to develop their plans, and have an evaluation methodology to establish its effectiveness (Electoral Commission, 2009a).
The dependent variable utilised in this study is an index of election administration integrity. This is derived from the performance standards results reported in the 2010 general election, and inspired by debates around indexing election quality mentioned above. It is an additive index, created by summing the scores achieved by ROs on each of the seven performance standards, with values of 1 given to not meeting the standard, 2 given to meeting the standard and 3 given where ROs were above the standard. The resulting index therefore potentially varies between a minimum score of 7 and a maximum of 21. Reliability analysis achieved a Cronbach’s Alpha score of .765. This indicates that these standards are suitable for index construction (Pennings et al., 1999: 96-97).

It is worth noting that the Electoral Commission declined the opportunity to create such an overall index, claiming that this would ‘maintain transparency and simplicity ... aggregating the total number of standards not met, met or exceeded across all seven standards may not give an accurate picture of performance’ (Electoral Commission, 2009b: 8). Nevertheless, such an aggregate approach has been utilised in relation to performance standards data before in British local government, notably the 2002-09 Comprehensive Performance Assessment (CPA) (for example: Andrews et al., 2005). Such an approach is therefore accepted in assessing public administration in Britain.

The integrity index therefore offers a complementary and important advance on what is currently known about the performance of ROs in three key ways. It provides more variation than permitted by the performance standards as originally reported. It also permits an overall view of electoral administration to be obtained, while also enabling easier comparison of standards between different types of local government and areas within Britain than hitherto possible. Finally, it provides an indicator against which potential drivers of performance can be assessed.

A number of indicators are utilised as independent variables. Three electoral structure variables are deployed. Firstly, electorate density is a proxy variable for the size and concentration of the electorate served by each local authority. This is based on a ratio of the number of electors in the area administered divided by the local authority size in hectares and calculated from the electorate and hectare data in the Electoral Commission’s electoral costs data. Secondly, whether the local authority was administering local elections concurrently with the general election is assessed by a simple yes/no indicator (coded as a dummy variable 1-0). Finally, whether ROs were responsible for multiple constituencies is also measured by use of a dichotomous yes/no variable (also coded 1-0).

Two sets of independent variables are utilised for institutional and resource issues. There are a range of different council types in Britain. These are Scottish and Welsh unitary councils, London Boroughs, unitary county, unitary district, metropolitan district and two-tier district councils. These are each represented by dummy variables for each different type of council administration. Local authority level data on spending on election administration in 2010-11, which covers the period of the 2010 general election, are deployed as a proxy variable for the resources election administrators can bring to bear on running the election. This is a composite variable of the total amount spent by local authorities on electoral registration in the period, combined with the total amount spent on the actual practicalities of running the election. These electoral spending data are drawn from the Electoral Commission’s Financial Information Survey, which was designed to collect information on
the financing of elections across Britain. This was a full population survey of local authority election administrators with a high response rate (82.8 per cent; N=378).\footnote{The final group of independent variables relate to the region the local authority is situated. Britain is divided into eleven electoral regions. These are each represented by dummy variables in the analysis.}

As the descriptive statistics in table 2 demonstrate, scores on the index vary between 11 at the lower end of performance, to the maximum score possible of 21 at the top end of performance. The mean score on the index was 15.75, with a standard deviation of 2.167. This means that most ROs score somewhere between 13.6 and 17.9 on the index. In total, 38 ROs fall outside the standard deviation score at the bottom end of the index, while 82 ROs fall outside it at the top end of the index with eleven ROs achieving the maximum score of 21. In other words, more than half of ROs (191 or 51.3%) are located below the mean on the integrity index, while the remaining 180 or 48.7% perform above average. The modal value on the index is 14, with a median of 15. There is a slight positive skew of .489 in the index, but this does not appear to be serious. Consequently, the results can effectively be taken as a normal distribution and suitable for subsequent analysis (Andersen, 2004).

Table 2 also presents the descriptive statistics for the independent variables utilised in the analysis. Interval variables are set out in the top half of the table, while other variables are in the bottom half. In addition, dummy variables are utilised in the analysis for both type of local administration and for region.

At the bivariate level, relationships between the integrity index and some of the independent variables are evident. Taking the electoral structure variables first, responsibility for multiple constituencies did seem to have an impact in 2010. Around 154 ROs ran multiple constituencies and they recorded a mean of 16.16 on the index, compared with a mean of 15.45 for those only running one constituency. For multiple constituencies, ANOVA returned a statistically significant relationship at the p<0.01 level (.002), a between groups F-value of 9.858, and an eta value for the strength of relationship of .161. The other electoral structure variables did not have a statistically significant relationship to the integrity index.

With the organisational and resourcing variables, type of local administration did seem to make a difference to election quality in 2010. There is evident variation of performance between the different types of local authority. This ranges from a score of 16.68 for Scottish unitary councils at the high end of performance, to 15.39 for two-tier district councils at the bottom end. While strength of association is not strong, with an eta value of just .205, results assessing types of local authority return a between groups ANOVA F-value of 9.858, and an eta value for the strength of relationship of .161. The other electoral structure variables did not have a statistically significant relationship to the integrity index.

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Finally, a bivariate relationship was also evident when examining the performance of ROs by region. Scotland again performed best with a mean score of 16.68, with Eastern region providing the lowest score on the index at 14.79. Measures of association are relatively weak with an eta value of .238. However, regional analysis provides a between groups ANOVA F-value of 2.155, which is statistically significant at the p<0.05 (0.02) levels, again indicating that this is something more than just a chance pattern of performance.

Table 3 presents three exploratory OLS multiple regression models which begin to tease out which variables may be most important while at the same time controlling for
Table 3: OLS Regression on British electoral integrity index in 2010

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Variables</th>
<th>Model 1</th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th>Model 2</th>
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<th>Model 3</th>
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<td></td>
<td>b (S.E.) Beta</td>
<td>b (S.E.) Beta</td>
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<td></td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>Constant</td>
<td>15.584 .162</td>
<td>15.225 .243</td>
<td>15.451 .289</td>
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<tr>
<td>Electorate density</td>
<td>.006 .009 .043</td>
<td>-.010 .012 -.069</td>
<td>-.007 .009 -.052</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Multiple constituencies</td>
<td>.710 .238 .163***</td>
<td>.237 .322 .054</td>
<td>.362 .268 .083</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Concurrent elections</td>
<td>-.444 .248 -.103*</td>
<td>-.469 .282 -.108*</td>
<td>-.233 .271 -.054</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>EA spending</td>
<td>9.868E-007 .000 .137***</td>
<td>1.215E-006 .000 .169***</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Unitary Districts</td>
<td>.201 .406 .030</td>
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<td>London Borough</td>
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<tr>
<td>Unitary County</td>
<td>.117 .746 .008</td>
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<td>Metropolitan districts</td>
<td>.518 .500 .071</td>
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<tr>
<td>Scottish Unitary</td>
<td>.697 .440 .090</td>
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<td>Welsh Unitary</td>
<td>.075 .515 .008</td>
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<tr>
<td>Eastern</td>
<td>-1.082 .378 -.166***</td>
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<td>North East</td>
<td>-.792 .640 -.065</td>
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<tr>
<td>North West</td>
<td>-.691 .411 -.098*</td>
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<tr>
<td>South East</td>
<td>-.035 .333 -.006</td>
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<td>South West</td>
<td>-.145 .404 -.020</td>
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<tr>
<td>West Midlands</td>
<td>-.431 .439 -.054</td>
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<td>Yorkshire and Humber</td>
<td>-.235 .519 -.025</td>
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<td>R²</td>
<td>.034 .065 .082</td>
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<td>N</td>
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Note: b = Unstandardised regression coefficients; Beta = standardised regression coefficients; *** Statistically significant at the .01 level; ** statistically significant at the .05 level; * statistically significant at the .1 level.

Model one examines the electoral structure, with electoral density, and dummy variables included for concurrent elections and multiple constituencies. Model two adds institutional and resource issues in the form of council type and the amount spent on election administration to the analysis, with dummy variables representing the various different council types administering elections in Britain. Model three assesses regional performance in England, including dummy variables for each English region to the electoral structure variables. This third model is necessary because English regions cannot logically be included in model two because each English region includes examples of each type of local authority. Because of the relatively low N of 379, statistical significance is also tested for at the slightly more relaxed level of 0.1 in addition to the standard p<.01 and .05 levels.

Model one initially appears to highlight the importance of the electoral structure of the area that the RO is administering to levels of electoral integrity in the locality. Electorate density has no independent statistically significant impact, thereby underlining the point that electorate size is not necessarily a driver of election quality and permitting the rejection of hypothesis 1. Instead, and contrary to the bivariate analysis, both concurrent elections and running multiple constituencies have statistically significant relationships with the integrity index. The analysis suggests that hypothesis 2 can be confirmed. Running concurrent elections led to lower levels of performance on the index in 2010, a relationship which is statistically significant albeit at the slightly lower level of significance of 0.1. In short, this is suggestive of the fact that the addition of an extra round of elections, while often justified on the grounds of saving on election costs, actually has a hidden cost in terms of poorer quality elections given that ROs are managing two different sets of processes and votes over a longer period of time. Given that local elections have had many difficulties, this would seem to be a potentially significant finding. There are clear examples to illustrate this across the UK.
Election administration in Northern Ireland was heavily criticised in the 2011 Assembly elections for the time it took to sort, validate and count votes because this contest was being held concurrently with local elections and the UK referendum on the alternative vote (Electoral Commission, 2011). Similarly, in 2014 there were numerous problems in Tower Hamlets council in London, which appeared, in part, to be due to having to administer the count for several concurrent elections for the European parliament, the council and for local mayor (BBC, 2014).

Contrary to hypothesis 3, which suggests that higher levels of performance would be evident where only one constituency is being administered, running multiple constituencies has a positive relationship with the integrity index which is statistically significant at the p<.01 level. This underlines the bivariate finding. However, it is unclear why this might be the case. One possible reason might be that extra resources, for instance in terms of higher numbers of staff, are involved on election night leading to such a positive effect. This idea is supported by the fact that ROs with responsibilities for multiple constituencies were better financially resourced. They spent on average £730,943 on election administration in 2010-11, more than double the £344,320 for ROs who administered only one constituency. Indeed, it might be that the results from both electoral structural variables can be explained by resources or the relative lack of them. While ROs running concurrent elections also typically spent more than those not doing so, the magnitude of difference was much less, having only around 44% more resources whereas those running multiple constituencies had typically more than double the resources available to those only administering one constituency. Staffing issues, the key expenditure cost in electoral administration, are typically cited in such cases (BBC, 2014; Electoral Commission, 2011).

If this suggests that resources are crucial to the quality of election administration, then model two, which tests organisational and resource ideas, provides some evidence to support this. Taking the type of local authority administering the elections first, hypothesis 4 can essentially be rejected. There are no statistically significant relationships between the index and any of the different types of local authority which administer elections in Britain.

Importantly, in addition to the concurrent elections variable remaining statistically significant, the model also highlights the importance of spending on electoral administration for election quality. While the effect of EA spending is weak, it is nevertheless positively related to the integrity index, and this relationship is significant at the p<.05 level. This is an important finding, pointing to the assertion made by many scholars and election administrators that lower levels of spending harm election quality (Gerken, 2009; Hall and Tokaji, 2007; James, 2013; Montjoy, 2010; Watson, 2011; Wilks-Heeg, 2009). Given that the major part of election administration spending is on staffing (Clark, 2014c; Alvarez and Hall, 2006; Montjoy, 2010), this may also underline further, albeit in an indirect way, the points made above regarding staffing, multiple constituencies and concurrent elections.

Model three again highlights the importance of spending on election administration in improving election quality. In this model, the positive relationship remains but is stronger, and statistically significant at the p<.01 level. Hypothesis 5 therefore receives support in the two models to include election spending. There is also some evidence to support hypothesis 6, with the performance of Eastern and North West regions being statistically significant at the p<.01 and p<.1 levels respectively. However, rather than higher levels of performance
through a process of learning within regions (Mooney, 2001), it seems that the opposite is the case here. Both Eastern and North West regions scored lowest on the integrity index. Statistical significance indicates this more than just a chance result. Why this may be requires further investigation in both regions. It certainly suggests that challenges in electoral administration can go wider than just the local authority responsible for running elections in a particular locality.

**Conclusion**

This article has provided an important exploratory analysis of some of the factors which may drive election quality and integrity in an advanced democracy. This has been based on a unique multivariate examination of the performance of election administration in a national parliamentary election. The findings have established that, under certain conditions, a number of factors may have an impact on election quality. Administering multiple constituencies and concurrent multi-level elections both point towards the demands that electoral structure place on election administrators. While multiple constituencies are associated with higher performance, often because ROs have greater resources at their disposal, having to administer more than one round of elections concurrently leads to lower performance in electoral management. This suggests that there are hidden costs in terms of election quality to running multi-level elections simultaneously. Spending on electoral administration is also crucial. The more spent, the better the local authority performed in the 2010 general election. This supports Clark’s (2014a) argument, forwarded in the context of a ‘second order’ European election, that spending on election administration improves electoral management performance. However, for the first time, this article has tested the idea that spending matters against a national parliamentary election. It is unlikely that this would lead to major large scale change, although it would seem that increased spending might permit incremental improvements, whether employing a few more staff or some other change to practices. Finally, regional effects on election quality have also been detected, although these have suggested that instead of improving performance, there may be regional factors and reasons which impede higher level performance in some areas.

These findings are important for both practitioners and for scholars of electoral integrity. For electoral administrators, it suggests a number of issues that might be focused on to help improve the electoral process for voters, thereby contributing hopefully to increased satisfaction with the electoral process. For scholars, the importance of this research lies in the fact that this exploratory analysis has begun to unravel the drivers and determinants of electoral integrity in advanced democracies. In other words, it is a first step towards what Gerken (2009) has called for, increased information leading to a greater understanding of electoral administration and, ultimately, to improved electoral processes for voters, parties and candidates. Further data collection and research is nevertheless required in order to test these findings in other settings.
References


At least to this author’s knowledge, this is the case.

A useful recent overview of developments in this field is contained in Norris et al. (2014: Chs 2-5).


This excludes the 18 constituencies in Northern Ireland. It is exempt from these performance standards and has different arrangements with the province-wide Electoral Office of Northern Ireland responsible for administering most elections there. There is no obvious systematic pattern to the missing data, evident in a small number of councils across Britain.

For the full list of criteria for each standard, see Electoral Commission (2009a).

Consideration was given to weighting these standards. However deficiencies in any aspect can cause complications and difficulties with the electoral process. Many difficulties can be attributed to poor planning, while accessibility of information to electors would seem to be crucial for voters to be well informed about the process. In the absence of any accepted weighting standard, the approach adopted here has weighted each aspect equally.

Pennings et al. (1999: 96-97) note that a Cronbach’s Alpha score of .7 or over means that the component indicators of such an index are suitable and that creating an index from such variables ‘adds to the discriminating power of the theoretical concept’.

Data on concurrent elections was taken from the Guardian’s summary of the 2010 local elections, available at: http://www.theguardian.com/society/table/2010/may/07/local-elections [22/11/13].

While a council’s boundaries may overlap several constituencies, it is not necessarily the case that that council’s RO administers each of those constituencies as they may be run by neighbouring councils. It is often far from clear from council websites which constituencies they are responsible for administering where this is the case, since they often report the results for all the constituencies their residents may have parliamentary representation in. In the absence of precise numbers, this variable is a simple indicator of whether they are likely to be responsible for multiple constituencies or not. I am grateful to XXXX of XXXX (Blinded for peer review) for providing data in this regard for English councils. Data for Scottish and Welsh councils was estimated from their websites by the author.


It is recognised that there are difficulties with treating the dependent variable as an interval variable for OLS regression when it is essentially an ordinal 15 point scale. Nevertheless, the practice of using OLS under such conditions is widespread and broadly accepted, under certain conditions, in the quantitative and research literature (Andersen, 2004; Andrews et al., 2005). For the preliminary analysis at hand it is therefore appropriate, not least since the aim is an exploratory determination of the nature of relationships between various variables and election quality. In each model, missing values are replaced by the mean to increase the N available for analysis. The regressions were also run without this to corroborate the findings. These are not reported here due to space considerations, but corroborate the findings.

The reference category for council type is two tier districts.

The reference category for English regions is East Midlands. Model three only includes English regions, because the Scottish, Welsh and London regions are contiguous with the Scottish, Welsh and London council types reported in model 2.

Comparison of means shows this difference is statistically significant at the p<.01 level. Eta measures of association are mid-range strength at .574 and .329 respectively.

ROs running concurrent contests spent on average £620,363 while those running only the parliamentary contest spent £430,182. The difference is statistically significant at the p<.01 level, but the eta and eta-squared measures are weak at .282 and .080 respectively.