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Public Confidence in Elections  
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Introduction

Casting a vote on election day is one of the most important things we do as citizens in a democracy. Everyone who is entitled to should be able to register to vote and vote. We want people to know voting is as straightforward, accessible and secure as possible. We want to make sure people receive a consistently high-quality service wherever they live.

The 2010 UK Parliamentary general election was the first UK general election since my appointment as Chair of the Electoral Commission. International observers for the first time were officially allowed to observe a general election in the UK. What was striking to some of them was the culture and tradition of trust and honesty that underpins our election process.

Our system trusts that people are who they say they are when they turn up at the polling station. Hundreds of individual Returning Officers are trusted to deliver elections on the ground with no central authority managing them.\(^1\) Elections staff are trusted to transport ballot boxes from polling stations to count centres. All of this dates from a time when communities were closer-knit, and when mass participation was not sought or expected because far fewer people had the right to vote.

It is, therefore, a system overwhelmingly dependent upon those running elections on the ground. It is also based on complex layers of legislation as well as a multiplicity of elections and voting systems – all of which places greater strain on it. Maintaining public confidence in an electoral system based on trust takes a huge amount of hard work and commitment.

It also means, as we have witnessed, that it can take a long time to rebuild trust when things go wrong. In Scotland in 2007 there were...
a high number of rejected ballot papers, and across some parts of England in 2010 people were left standing in queues at some polling stations at 10 pm on polling day and were unable to vote. Fraud, although not widespread, also plays a part in undermining public confidence in the system. Without the right structure, systems and checks and balances, the risk of something going wrong is always there. You can’t therefore presume that a system built on trust will work in perpetuity. The UK is a successful, thriving democracy, with proud traditions on which to draw. But we must be realistic enough to ask how we can best keep that legacy secure in the future, and this year’s election gave us another warning that the question should not wait too long for an answer.

This chapter looks at the Electoral Commission’s assessment of the 2010 elections, including the challenges faced on polling day. It also provides an analysis of the levels of public satisfaction with, and confidence in, the electoral system – including perceptions of electoral fraud – as measured through Electoral Commission surveys.

Building on this assessment, it will consider the crucial issues which the Commission believes need to be addressed for the 2011 elections and beyond to make sure that the interest of voters comes first. These include effective management and coordination of Returning Officers, transparent funding of electoral administration, strengthening of security for postal votes, whether there is any role for advance voting and the potential for ID requirements at polling stations as in Northern Ireland. We also want individual electoral registration to be implemented across Great Britain in a way that ensures complete and accurate electoral registers.

The 2010 experience

Registering to vote

This was the first UK general election in which voters could register to vote after the election had been announced, following changes introduced in the Electoral Administration Act 2006 (EAA) and argued for by the Electoral Commission.² Previously, the deadline for new or changed registration applications had been up to a month and a half before polling day; a time when far fewer people are engaged with the impending election. This was also likely to be the last general election to be based on electoral registers created using the system of household registration across Great Britain. A system of individual electoral registration already exists in Northern Ireland and has done since 2002. We welcome the