

The Democratic Dashboard: A digital resource for engaging voters

In March 2016, *Democratic Dashboard 2.0* was launched, a web portal aimed at giving voters in the UK easily accessible information for the elections on May 5th. This was the culmination of several years of work and preparation by Democratic Audit UK, based in the LSE, seeking to engage voters in the increasingly active civic technology field. [Carl Cullinane](#) outlines the project's goals and impact.



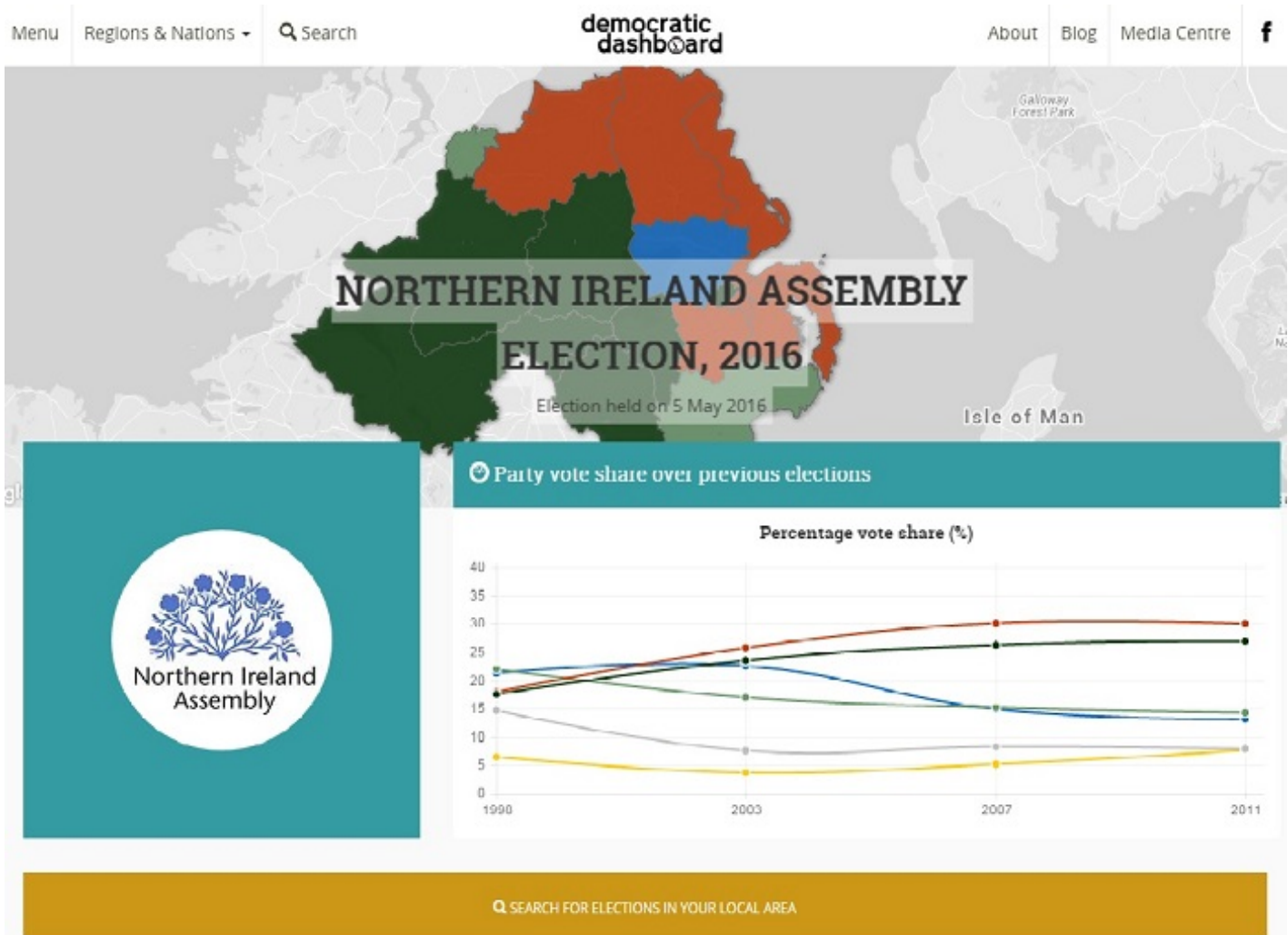
The basis for the establishment of the Dashboard lies in a [2014 report](#) by Prof. Patrick Dunleavy and Richard Berry on the topic of voter engagement and election information. The report identified two major problems: the huge gap in electoral participation between younger and older voters in the UK, recognised as the highest gap in the OECD in 2011; and the lack of a centralised and accessible resource of election information for citizens. The report concluded that addressing the latter may contribute to tackling the former.

In addition to being less likely to vote, young people are also increasingly geographically mobile, renting rather than owning more than ever before, and thus moving house and area frequently. Students are even more mobile, with a string of often very temporary living situations stretching across their late teenage years and early twenties. This mobility (which is increasingly stretching to older age groups) means people are less connected to their local communities, and less aware of their local political context – they may not know what constituency they're in, let alone who their MP is, or who is running in any particular election.

Added to this is the fact that democracy in the UK is a patchwork of different geographies, electoral systems and election types, an onerous task for even the most politically engaged. Traditional informal methods of absorbing local political information, through neighbours, or through the local press, have declined significantly, and democracy, particularly at a sub-national level, needs to adapt to these social developments or risk an even greater gap between institutions and the public.

The Democratic Dashboard was conceptualised as one way to help replace those old forms of election communication and provide information to citizens through the devices they use the most: their mobile phones, tablets, and laptops. As pointed out at a recent All Party Parliamentary Group on Democratic Engagement, the equation is a simple one: younger people have low electoral engagement, but they have high digital engagement. While the reality is not so straightforward, by making election information easily available in a one-stop-shop location, rather than hidden away in spreadsheets, pdfs and other documents spread across dozens of official websites, this has the potential to bring local democracy closer to people. While it is clear that lack of information is only one aspect of a much deeper problem of disengagement and alienation from electoral politics, it's nonetheless something that *can* be fixed, and removing barriers to participation can only help.

The prototype Dashboard launched in March 2015, catering for last year's General Election campaign. It combined information on candidates, including photos and social media links, alongside historical results information, up to date polls, forecasts, and a comprehensive data profile of each constituency. It aimed to provide a variety of information in an engaging and accessible way. Two of the pieces of information that piqued most interest were campaign spending breakdowns of which parties spent how much to secure your vote, and the [Voter Power Index](#), a comparison of how much your vote was worth depending on which type of constituency you happened to live in.



The Dashboard provides easily accessible information about all elections and campaigns in your area.

The major selling point of the Dashboard in 2015 was providing context for a voting choice constrained by the First Past the Post voting system. The choice faced by voters was very different depending on where they lived. In 2016, the landscape is different. There are nine different types of elections happening across the UK on May 5th, with every single area of the country covered by at least one election. The major contribution of the 2016 Dashboard is the fact that it now caters for every level of UK democracy. Just by entering a postcode or location, the Dashboard will instantly tell voters which of the Devolved Assembly, Mayoral, Police and Crime Commissioner, Local or Parliamentary by-elections they have in their area, who is running, how the electoral system works, and a history of past results and local info.

The Dashboard is just one part of a growing trend of digital engagement of voters in the UK. In December 2015, the Dashboard brought civic tech groups, local electoral administrators, NGOs and policymakers together to the LSE to discuss ways forward in the sector, providing a forum and a basis for cooperation across the variety of organisations and disciplines. The 2015 election was intensely covered by a variety of organisations, governmental and non-governmental, all offering a variety of different services, from Voter Advice Applications like [Vote Match](#) and [Vote For Policies](#), which matched voters to parties based on policy preferences, to [Democracy Club's](#) YourNextMP, which crowdsourced candidate information, to [Full Fact](#), which relentlessly fact-checked the claims of politicians on the campaign trail. The [Speaker's Commission on Digital Democracy](#) has also demonstrated a commitment on the part of government to do their share.

Following December's workshop, there have been renewed efforts to solve one of the biggest challenges for electoral information, which to date has evaded systematic, publicly available nationwide provision: local council elections. The Local Government Information Unit and Democracy Club's innovative [Out for the Count](#) project running on election night will be the first step in this process towards dragging local democracy in the UK into the twenty first century. It is a very encouraging time therefore, for harnessing the potential of digital media to fulfil the needs of citizens and engage them with democracy in modern and forward-thinking ways. The Dashboard is delighted to be able to play its part in this process.

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