

The cost of elections:
The effects of public sector austerity on electoral integrity and voter engagement

Abstract

The management of elections has received increasing attention worldwide. Concerns have been raised that insufficient funding has been affecting the delivery of elections in many countries. This article provides a case study of England and Wales from 2010-16. Using an original survey, it demonstrates that many local authorities saw major real terms cuts and were increasingly over-budget. There was some evidence that those subject to cuts were less likely to undertake public engagement activities. State efforts to encourage voter participation may therefore be a casualty of austerity. However, no effects were found on the completeness of the electoral register.

Keywords: electoral registration, electoral integrity, electoral management, political participation, voter engagement

Toby S. James

University of East Anglia

(t.s.james@uea.ac.uk)

Tyrone Jervier

Clearview Research

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The management of elections has received increasing attention by academics and policy makers. Faulty equipment and poorly designed 'butterfly' ballot papers in the 2000 US Presidential election (Wand et al. 2001), queues at polling stations at the UK 2010 general election (Electoral Commission 2010) and lost ballot papers in the Australian 2013 Senate elections all caught headlines (Lion 2013). New cross-national datasets have demonstrated considerable variation in the performance of electoral authorities in advanced democracies around the world (Norris, i Coma, and Gromping 2016). The consequence of these problems can be declining citizen confidence in the integrity of the electoral process (Claassen et al. 2012). Electoral management has therefore been placed high on policy agendas by international organisations (Global Commission on Elections 2012; International IDEA 2014; Venice Commission 2017).

It is increasingly thought that one cause of electoral mismanagement is the lack of available resources for electoral officials. Without sufficient staff and finances there is a strong risk that errors may occur, queues may form at polling stations and citizens may be unregistered. These problems have become especially apparent in Britain in recent years because of a combination of public sector austerity and major changes in the electoral process. However, there is relatively little information available on the funding that electoral officials receive to test this claim. Studies which have attempted to gather this information on a cross-national level have struggled because of hidden costs and different accounting systems and governance structures (López-Pintor and Fischer 2005). In Britain, the information is not routinely collected or published.

This article attempts to shed some light on this area through a case study that reveals the amount of money that local authorities in England and Wales budget for and spend on elections in England and Wales based on an original survey. It demonstrates that there is considerable variation in the money that is made available to run elections by local authority area. At the aggregate level, there has been slightly more money spent on elections in recent years, partly owing to short-term investments made by central government. However, budgets declined in real terms in nearly half of local authorities at a time when major changes in the electoral registration process have been made. Worryingly, the article provides evidence that local authorities are increasingly over budget. This suggests that there is considerable resource constraint for electoral administrators. Within an international context, this is rare data and an important insight.

The article also undertakes analysis of the *effects* of budgets and spending. The data suggests that those local authorities that have reduced their budgets are much less likely to have public awareness strategies or undertaken school visits to increase voter engagement. It therefore seems that cost cutting can have a direct effect on public engagement work. However, the analysis was not able to identify a clear relationship between spending and the completeness of the electoral register. For the completeness of the electoral register is one common measure of the quality of elections.

The first part of the article summarises what is already known about spending on electoral administration and why concerns have been raised. The second part explains how elections are funded in the UK. Part three explains the methodology used to collect information about spending before the main results are summarised in part four. The conclusions and recommendations are then made.

Existing research on funding electoral services

Research on elections has traditionally focused on trying to explain voting behaviour or the consequences of electoral systems. A new research agenda has been established on the *public administration and management of elections* (James forthcoming). This emphasises that elections are like other public services, such as schools and hospitals, which have differing levels of performance

and efficiency. The effects of policy tools, management structures and the use of resources amongst electoral management bodies should therefore be investigated (Alvarez, Atkeson, and Hall 2012a, 2012b; Clark 2015, 2016; James 2014a, 2014b, forthcoming; Montjoy 2008).

There has been little interest in the financing of electoral registration until recently. Claims that a lack of resources can lead to poorly run elections have become common, however, in cross national studies (Birch 2011, 26; Pastor 1999), studies of American elections (Gerken 2009; Hale and Slaton 2008; Highton 2006) and UK elections. In the latter case, a concern has been that electoral services departments have seen cuts to their budgets or lack the resources needed to organise elections and electoral registration properly. Interviewing electoral officials in 2011, it was found that a lack of resources and budget cuts were common (James 2014a). This research was undertaken in the context of expected local governments cuts, promised by the Coalition government facing a significant public deficit (Lowndes and Pratchett 2012). More recently, a survey of electoral officials working at the 2016 EU referendum reported that many had enough resources to do their jobs. Only 43% agreed that they did have sufficient funds for the poll and only 24% said that they had sufficient funds for their electoral registration work (Clark and James 2016).

The introduction of individual electoral registration is thought to have added to the cost-pressures by making it more expensive to compile the register. Under the new system, applicants need to have their records checked against other government databases before being added to the register. They also need to apply on an individual (as opposed to household basis). Although most applications (approximately 90%) are processed centrally, local authorities are required to process those that initially fail 'verification'. They are also required to undertake a two-stage canvass process, that a forthcoming study has shown increased postage, stationary and canvassing costs (James forthcoming). The simultaneous introduction of online voter registration without a system by which citizens can check their registration status has led to a large volume of duplicate, 'just in case,' applications being received (Clark and James 2016).

Does this matter for the quality of electoral management? There is evidence that funding levels effect the quality of delivery for elections. A correlation has been demonstrated between the funding that is provided to electoral officials and the frequency with which they meet the performance standards that they were set by the Electoral Commission (Clark 2014, 2016).

It should be noted that there have also been concerns about inefficiencies within electoral services. Cost efficiency is an important measure of success for any public service, elections included (James forthcoming, 2014a). There has been public concern expressed in Scotland about the amount of money that has been paid to Returning Officers to run elections, when they already earn a high salary from their role as Chief Executive. This has led to the Scottish Parliament Select Committee on Local Government and Communities (2017) launching an investigation that recommended that returning officers should not be paid for their work.

Research has been stifled by the lack of data on budgets and spending. A UNDP project encountered problems ascertaining and comparing spending across countries because of different reporting methods (López-Pintor and Fischer 2005). In the UK, information on how much money is spent is not routinely reported, however, the Electoral Commission undertook an earlier financial survey of the cost of running elections after it developed a bespoke accounting method (Electoral Commission 2012a). This enabled Clark (2014, 2015, 2016) to undertake the first studies that actually used real data on spending. The Electoral Commission has also reported on the costs of the AV referendum (Electoral Commission 2012b) and plans to publish information about the costs of the EU referendum.

There is information in the relevant Fees and Charges order, a piece of secondary legislation published by Parliament for each election, on the *maximum* money that a returning officer can claim for their services or expenses. The amount that they subsequently do claim and how this money is spent, however, is not regularly available. In this respect, the UK is not entirely alone.

How elections are funded in Britain

There is a large variety of organisations involved because of an increase in the number and type of elections that are held (James 2015; James 2014c). The arrangements for funding elections across the UK, as a result, are complex. Costs can be categorised into two broad camps; electoral registration and the election itself. Funders therefore vary by country but also election type. In addition to the information detailed here, the UK government's Cabinet Office and Electoral Commission have provided additional occasional funds. For example, the Cabinet Office provided substantial additional funding for the implementation of individual electoral registration in Britain. It also provided funding to 40 local authorities for the administration of overseas electors and communication work in the run up to the EU referendum (AEA 2016, p. 24-5; Electoral Commission 2012a, p. 9).

Research Questions and Methods

This article seeks to address five questions:

- How much money is provided to local authorities to run elections and compile the electoral register?
- Is there any evidence that funding has fallen during times of public sector austerity?
- Is there any evidence that local authorities are underfunded?
- What are the effects of funding levels on the quality of the delivery of elections?
- Is there evidence of variation in cost efficiency in electoral services?

Collecting accurate data about the budgets and spending of electoral organisations involves many methodological challenges. For example, often resources are pooled and shared between staff and organisations working in areas that do not directly relate to elections (International IDEA 2014, 207-29; López-Pintor and Fischer 2005). In this study every local electoral organisation in the UK involved in compiling the electoral register and running elections was contacted and asked for information about their funding and expenditure on electoral administration. Data on their funding sources, the number of registered electors, the voter engagement strategy and any outreach activity with schools was also requested. The response rate was 57.9 per cent. This response comprised of 207 out of 353 English authorities replied and 10 of 22 Welsh authorities replied, although some authorities did not respond to every question. The response rate for the different local authority types varied between 23.2% for English Unitaries to 63.2 per cent for English districts (see table 1 below). The Scottish response rate (12.5 per cent) was much lower so this was dropped from the analysis, partly because of the more complex organisational arrangements.

There are some limitations on the inferences that can be drawn from the dataset. Unlike the financial surveys that were undertaken by the Electoral Commission, a distinction was not made between the money that was spent on electoral registration and the poll. No single accounting method was set for the respondents meaning that some may have included some items that others did not. Some organisations have 'Electoral Services' departments and 'Democratic Services' departments with the latter undertaking a wider range of work. It is possible that some authorities included this wider activity and others did not. The advantage of this simple approach was that it would encourage a

higher response rate. Year-on-year analysis is still possible for the same local authorities because we can assume that the same accounting method would have been used in each year. The data was reliant on self-reporting, but this is a problem with all types of social analysis. However, the dataset remains important because it is the only data available of the trends in funding under the Coalition and Conservative governments. This was an important period of time because of the introduction of individual electoral registration and public sector cuts. It is therefore an important first step in identifying underlying patterns and developing methodologies for analysing these.

Adjustments were made to the data to account for inflation in some calculations. When this has been done, it is explicitly stated below. The adjustments were made using the methods proposed by the House of Commons Library (Thompson 2009) which involved calculating the HM Treasury GDP deflator index (HM Treasury 2016). The names of individual local authorities were not given in the analysis since the purpose of the research was not to 'name and shame' local authorities but to identify wider trends and contribute towards a discussion about the use of resources in elections.

Results

The uneven budgets for running elections

How much money is made available to run elections in Britain? The survey revealed that the average budget to organise elections and compile the electoral register was £340,000 for 2015-16. Local electoral organisations have very different sizes and areas to cover, however, so we should expect considerable variation between each type. Table 1 illustrates how larger and more urban authorities do have a larger budget.

[insert table 1 about here]

Was there a fall in the budgets? The average budget for local authorities for the period 2010-11 to 2015-16. According to the data, there was a small decline in overall budget during the first four years, but then a noticeable increase in the last two periods. In fact, the average change in the annual budget for a local authority over the period was an increase by £33,400. When inflation is adjusted for, over the period 2010-2011 to 2015-16, the mean increase in budget was only £10,200. We would expect that more money would have been invested in when elections are held and as a result, more money would have been allocated to 2015-16 because it was a general election year. However, there was still an increase in 2010-11, which also contained a general election. It therefore seems as if there was an overall increase in the money available to run elections.

However, the aggregate data masks two important patterns. Firstly, there were major local variations. The budget increased in many authorities (57 per cent), but there were real term cuts, often major ones in many others (43 per cent). This suggests that electoral services have had very different experiences across the country and actually reinforces the picture from earlier research about *some* authorities being underfunded.

Secondly, the rise in funding for 2015-16 can be partly explained by a substantial investment from the Cabinet Office to help the additional costs involved in implementing individual electoral registration. Separate information from the Cabinet Office indicates that they provided £6.8 million to local authorities according to levels of under-registration. This equates to an average of £18,134 for authorities in England and Wales.

Increasingly over-budget: spending in local authorities

The budget made available for elections does not give a complete picture of the cost pressures within local authorities, since elections may have become more expensive to run. One reason why this might occur would be if changes were made to the way the register was maintained which required more resources. As noted above, there is evidence that individual electoral registration had this effect because it requires applications to be checked against government databases and for local authorities to process those cases that failed central verification. There are also more substantial staff, IT and postage costs (James forthcoming). It is therefore worth continuing to explore whether electoral services are under financial strain.

One calculation that might help would be to calculate how much money was spent as a proportion of the available budget. Should electoral services have money left remaining in their budgets, or be within their ceiling, then we could imply that they had sufficient resources. If, however, they were substantially over-budget then this might suggest tougher economic conditions.

Looking at the percentage of the budget that was spent by local units over the periods of study, we found that electoral services were usually within their budget for the first four years, but this situation worsened over time. In 2015/16 the average spending was 129% of the annual budget. There is therefore strong evidence of many electoral services being financially stretched.

The effects of funding

To what extent does the amount of funding provided to administrators affect the frontline services offered to citizens? Does the amount of money spent make a difference or are other factors important? A range of methods have been developed to measure the quality of electoral administration (for a review, see: James forthcoming) but doing so at a sub-national level poses particular challenges. Sub-national expert surveys that have been used in the US (Norris et al. 2016) are not available for the UK and the performance benchmarks used by Clark (2014, 2015, 2016) are not available for the whole period in question. This article therefore looks specifically at whether attempts by the state to engage voters has been affected by funding cuts. While this is not a complete assessment of the electoral process – it focuses attention clearly on an important one.

The explanatory model is as follows. A decline in levels of funding would be likely to reduce activities undertaken by administrators to engage voters. This type of work might be considered as being beyond 'core activities' so it might be first to fall. The effects of funding on whether local authorities has an outreach strategy to engage citizens or proactively visit schools is therefore assessed. Following on from this we might expect levels of participation to fall. An analysis of this is undertaken by looking at the effects on the completeness of the electoral register. In theory, we would expect those authorities that provided more resources to their staff to have more complete electoral registers as that they would be missing fewer voters. Earlier research, after all, found that greater funding for electoral registration was associated with electoral officials undertaking the activity necessary to meet the performance standards (Clark 2014). A discussion of the efficiency of electoral services is also included as this is another indicator in James' (2014a) framework for evaluating performance.

The effects on outreach strategies

As part of the survey, local authorities were asked to provide copies of the Electoral Registration Officer's public engagement strategy. There were 148 responses to this with 84 per cent providing one from the period 2010-11 to 2015-16 or clearly stating that there was a strategy in place. 16 per cent said that there was no strategy.

Although most do undertake this type of work, it is a concern that many do not have one in place or seem to consider this not a priority. Some responses were not particularly reassuring about the importance given to public awareness. For example, according to one:

'The previous Electoral Registration Officer has left the authority and we are unable to find any other documents.'

There was good evidence that the absence of a strategy could often be explained by a lack of funding. One measure that can be used to suggest this was the real budget change from the period 2010-11 to 2015-16. The mean budget change for those with a strategy was £13,580 increase. For those without a strategy it was -£50,952.

Some qualitative replies that accompanied the survey further confirmed the relationship between funding and outreach activity. According to one:

'Resources are stretched and there is no formal public engagement strategy for electoral registration. Activities have largely been limited to an 'as required' basis and have reflected / reacted to national / regional campaigns, which have themselves been reflective of evolving national policy / direction.'

In short, when budgets fall or resources become strained, public awareness strategies become the first to go.

Effects on School visits

Only a relatively small number of local authorities (n=66) responded to say whether or not they visited schools during 2014-15 or 2015-16 to promote voter registration and citizenship among young people. There have been concerns about levels of political participation among young people and this represents an important measure of whether the state is being proactive in trying to reach the next generation of citizens. The vast majority of local authorities (nearly 60 per cent) said that they did not undertake any visits, but some undertook as many as seven in a single year. The mean number of school visits was 1.03 and the standard deviation was 1.63. School visits were more commonly undertaken in larger areas (Metropolitan, London boroughs and unitary authorities) than smaller areas (district and Welsh unitary). A Pearson's correlation revealed a -.372 association which was statistically significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed).

There was a smaller relationship between spending and whether school visits were undertaken. The real terms mean budget change from 2000-11 to 2015-16 was £7,133 for those local authorities who did not undertake any school outreach. It was higher for those (£19,133) for all authorities who did. The average spend per citizen was £2.86 for local authorities who did not undertake visits, compared to £3.36 for all of those who responded to the survey. In short, despite the small sample size, there is some evidence that spending does affect whether school visits are undertaken.

The effects on the completeness of the register

Being on the electoral register is a prerequisite for voting. Yet many countries have many voters missing from their registers. It has been estimated that the UK's December 2015 electoral register, which is being used for the boundary review for Westminster elections, had up to 8 million missing electors (Electoral Commission 2016, 1). The completeness of the electoral register, that is, the extent to which every person who is entitled to be registered is registered, varies enormously across local authorities in England and Wales. For this study, this was calculated by dividing the registered electorate provided in response to our survey, by the estimated eligible electorate. The estimated eligible electorate was itself calculated as the over 18 population from the mid-2015 population

estimate from the Office of National Statistics. The weaknesses of using this as a measure of completeness is that it does not account for any inaccurate or duplicate entries. However, it is only the available measure of completeness available for all authorities. Using this measure, the mean completeness rate on 1 December 2015 was 91.5 per cent with a standard deviation of 4.38.

Does funding affect the completeness of the register? No obvious relationship was identified using bivariate analysis. However, there are a variety of factors other than *financial* information that might affect completeness and these need to be accounted for more rigorously check for an underlying relationship.

Previous research has suggested that the electoral register is more difficult to compile when there is *a mobile population* (James, 2014). A higher level of international and internal migration is therefore likely to lower completeness. The completeness of the electoral register has also been shown to be higher amongst home owners than private renters because they remain in their premises for a longer period of time (Electoral Commission, 2016: 10).

A third cluster of factors fall under the *socio-economic profile* of a local authority. Turnout and registration is usually lower amongst lower socio-economic groups (Smets and van Ham 2013) and previous research has found completeness to be lower amongst them (Electoral Commission, 2016: 10). We might also expect a lower population density to reduce completeness since previous research has noted how canvassing rural properties can be more expensive and time-consuming (James, 2014).

Table 2 presents four OLS regression models with completeness of the register in December 2015 as the dependent variable. Data was collected from the 2011 Census on levels of internal and international migration into each authority, home ownership, the proportion of residents in lower socio-economic groups and calculations were made to estimate the elector density. Tests for multicollinearity were undertaken which led to student population being dropped. One case was dropped because it was an outlier.

The models show that migration levels and home ownership are statistically significant drivers of levels of completeness. Elector density is also significant in model 3 but this effect disappears in model 4 when all factors are controlled for. Most importantly for this study, however, is that spending (along with socio-economic factors) was not found to have any statistically significant effect on completeness. This was also the case when the real term change in funding was used as an independent variable.

These counter intuitive findings could be sceptically interpreted as being the result of weaknesses with the measure of completeness used. A local authority with low levels of funding, might have a high number of entries on the register because they are accumulating an inaccurate, incomplete register. Completeness was not based on a full canvass of households. One response to this, however, is that other relationships found in the literature do hold: mobility is a clear driver of completeness. Nonetheless, more research is needed on this important topic.

[Insert Table 2 about here]

At this point it is worth noting, however, that the effects of public awareness work on completeness were also found to be mixed. School visits appear to considerably strengthen the completeness of the electoral register. A Pearson's correlation revealed a -0.429 association with the completeness of the June 2016 electoral register which was statistically significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed). We might expect that completeness rates would be higher where there was a strategy in place. But there was not a noticeable difference. This might be the result of a relatively small sample size. It might also

suggest that the strategies that were place, which were often modelled from an Electoral Commission template, may not be the most effective way of increasing engagement. An alternative explanation is that investments in national campaigns by the Electoral Commission and the civil society organisation Bite the Ballot (who hold annual National Voter Registration Days) may be more important than local strategies. This may therefore partly explain why funding cuts have not affected the completeness of the electoral register. Outreach activities have been pulled back because of funding, but because these activities were not affecting the completeness of the register, little was lost.

Cost efficiency in electoral registration

This article has so far established that there are many over-budget local authorities in need of further funding, although the effects of this on the quality of elections are mixed. Is there also evidence that authorities have more resources than they need? In other words, could they be more efficient with their existing resources to increase voter registration rates and the quality of service to the voter? Cost efficiency has been identified as a measure of electoral administration quality because no public service is able to command infinite resources (James 2014a, forthcoming).

It is possible to provide a very crude measure of efficiency in each organisation by mapping resources spent in a given year by the number of registered voters in each area. Electoral registration is chosen because it provides a clear measurable outcome that local authorities are solely responsible for undertaking and funding. Figure 1 does this for spending data in 2015-16 and the number of electors that were registered on 1 December 2015. We would expect that as spending goes up, so does the number of electors. A line in the middle of the graph charts a best line of fit against the data. One-way of establishing variation in efficiency is to consider those above this line as being under-efficient, and those below the line as being over efficient.

[insert figure 1 about here]

This is a helpful step towards identifying those authorities which might be more efficient and where best practices can be learnt. This simple distinction would be unfair to some organisations that had other challenges because of their geographical area or demographic characteristics (James 2014a). For example, as already noted, a large but sparsely populated area may legitimately require additional resources because of the need to canvass properties that were far apart. Yet this might be a useful first step in identifying the most resource efficient organisations and the types of factors that might need to be taken into consideration about when and why further resources may be required. With greater availability of data, similar organisations could be compared to identify 'best in the class' local authorities.

Conclusions

Elections remain the principal way in which citizens participate in the democratic process. Their smooth and efficient organisation is absolutely essential for democracy, decision making and governance. In order for elections to be run effectively, administrators require sufficient resources and capacity, yet concerns have been raised that these have not been provided in Britain, echoing concerns elsewhere. These concerns seem to be well founded. There are considerable variations in the budgets of local authorities, many have seen major real terms cuts and there is an increasing trend to being over-budget.

Has this been shown to matter? There was some evidence that funding and resource pressures has an effect on democratic engagement activities. Notably, however, this did not seem to feed through

and impact on the completeness of the electoral register. One explanation for this is that the public awareness strategies being used are not themselves boosting voter registration.

Further research would be vastly advantaged by the more routine publication of spending on electoral services. This would also allow local authorities to be held to account for their budgeting and spending by ensuring that sufficient resources are allocated for an indispensable public service. Alongside transparency and identifying best practices, there are other measures that could be explored to relieve the financial burden on electoral administrators. In the UK context pilots of automatic re-registration provide an important opportunity for cost savings. By using other data sources to re-enrol citizens, there is an opportunity to save funds from the annual canvass and focus on the unregistered. A logical extension, however, is to pilot automatic registration, which may further save money. The provision of a website in which citizens could check their registration status would be likely to reduce the number of duplicate registration applications, which can overwhelm many officials (Clark and James 2016). More widely, there should be a fundamental review of the financing of elections and electoral registration in the UK and in many other countries. This article hopes to have made a step towards that.

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Local government type	Mean 2015-16 Budget	N	Minimum	Maximum
Metropolitan District	£585,000	16	108,000	1,589,610
London Borough	£468,000	15	124,630	1,204,042
English Unitary Authority	£510,000	29	46,900	3,857,000
District Council	£259,000	127	2,500	2,713,900
Welsh Unitary	£248,000	10	82,715	658,163

Table 1: Average budget by local authority type, 2015-16

	Model 1		Model 2		Model 3		Model 4	
	Beta	S.E.	Beta	S.E.	Beta	S.E.	Beta	S.E.
Spending Migration	-.015	(.135)					.030	(.087)
Home Ownership			-.302**	(13.027)			-.552**	(22.165)
Lower social class			.557**	(0.030)			.486**	(.058)
Electoral density					-.102	(0.41)	-.215	(-.215)
Constant	91.602**	(.574)	75.441**	(2.446)	94.786**	(1.042)	84.466**	(5.991)
Adjusted R²	-.007		.534		.302		.588	
N	140		177		178		139	

Table 2: OLS Regression analysis where completeness of the electoral register in December 2015 is the dependent variable. Beta is the standardised coefficient. **Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed). *Correlation is significant at the 0.05 level (2-tailed).

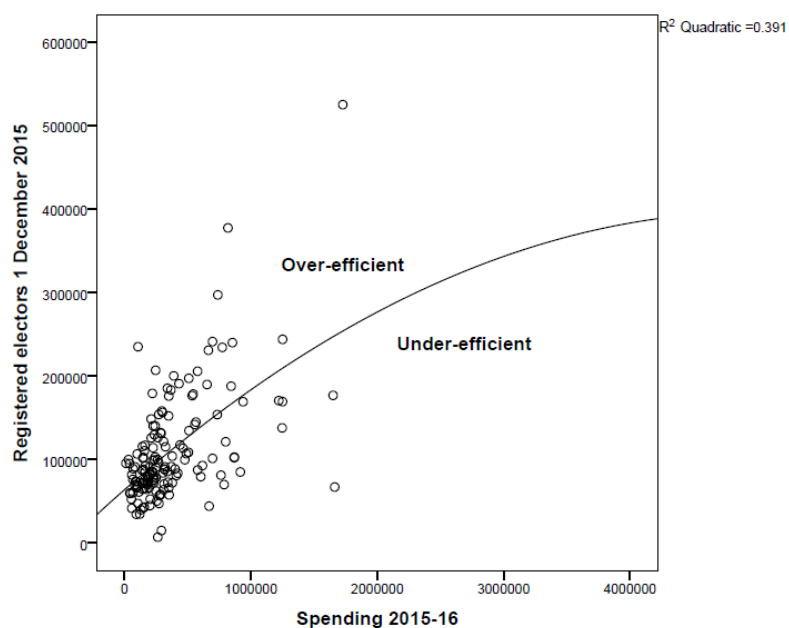


Figure 1: Variations in cost efficiency across local authorities

Impact Statement

Well run elections require sufficient resources. There is barely any information published, however, on the amount of resources that electoral officials have. A survey of electoral officials in England and Wales shows that many have become over-budget between 2010-6. Cutbacks to voter outreach work have taken place as a result. The effects of these cutbacks, however, were unclear with the completeness of the electoral register unaffected. Going forward, the article recommends that the budgets of electoral officials worldwide are routinely reported to allow best practices to be identified. Measures could be introduced to make administrative processes more efficient such as automatic electoral registration.