

## Electing Police and Crime Commissioners – an important milestone in expanding control by elected representatives? Or a disaster in the making?

*An encouraging opinion poll this weekend suggests that turnout in this Thursday's Police Commissioner elections may be only slightly lower than in local elections, whereas other informed estimates have been below 10%. [Patrick Dunleavy](#) explains that this is the first time the Supplementary Vote will be used across England and Wales, but criticizes the low level of effort by the Electoral Commission to get information about candidates across to voters.*



This week voters across England and Wales outside London have the opportunity to choose who they want to serve as Police and Crime Commissioners across each of the police force areas, ranging from the massive Thames Valley Police Authority area to the smallest county forces. For many weeks sceptical voices have argued that an autumn election with possibly poor weather and a brand (little explained) new office, that of Police and Crime Commissioner, would combine to produce very low voter interest and turnout.

However, these gloomy forecasts have been put in doubt by a [You Gov poll](#) on Sunday, which found that the proportion of people who said they were 'certain to vote' in the Police Commissioner elections was 28 per cent. This would be only slightly below turnout in the normal local government elections held each year in May, and if YouGov is right would be a considerable vindication of the government's decision to go ahead with this radical reform. We shall have to wait and see if the poll proves erroneous, but for now the auguries have greatly improved.

### A nationwide test for the Supplementary Vote

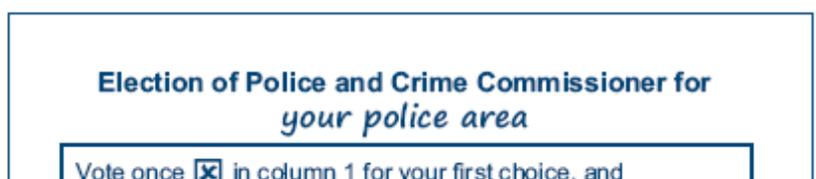
If citizens do go to the polls in near-usual numbers then this will also be an important occasion for British election systems, being the first nationwide use of the Supplementary Vote system (or SV). SV has been used very successfully in London to elect the Mayor since 2000, and on each of the four occasions has helped to produce a very clear and widely accepted outcome, twice for Ken Livingstone and twice now for Boris Johnston – whose consequent fame has made him a leading candidate to be the next Conservative party leader.

The Supplementary Vote has also been very successfully used in all the other English cities and towns that elect their mayor. On Thursday Bristol voters will be first in the country to have two chances to use SV on the same day, choosing their brand new Mayor and the Avon and Somerset Police Commissioner using the method.

The great attraction of the Supplementary Vote is that it is very familiar and easy for British voters to use. My Figure below shows a simplified view of what the SV ballot paper looks like. Voters simply have to mark an X against their most preferred candidate in the first choice column, and then (if they wish) an X in the second choice column.

### Figure 1: How the Supplementary Vote ballot paper for electing Police Commissioners will look

The SV counting process is also straightforward. We begin by counting the first preference votes. If anyone has more than 50% of the votes cast then they are elected straight away, and the counting ends



there. However, if no one has majority support then the top two candidates go into a run off stage, and the candidates placed third, fourth, fifth etc are all eliminated at the same time. We then look at the second preference votes of people who voted for one of the eliminated candidates. If any of these voters cast a second choice vote for either of the two candidates still in the race then these votes are added to their piles. Whichever of the two top candidates now has the most votes then wins.

Vote once  in column 2 for your second choice

	Column 1 first choice	Column 2 second choice
Candidate A	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Candidate B	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Candidate C	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Candidate D	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>

This process of knocking out low ranked candidates and redistributing their voters' second choices

ensures that the largest feasible number of votes count in deciding who is elected as the mayor or police commissioner. It does not always completely guarantee that the person elected has a majority of votes cast. But in repeated London elections the winning mayor has had nearly three fifths support amongst votes counted – a very clear result that greatly enhances the legitimacy of the office-holder.

### Poor publicity about who is standing to be Police Commissioner

The really substantial problem that voters face on Thursday is not the voting system being new to them, but rather in finding out who is standing at the PCC elections. The [Electoral Commission](#) has completely failed to ensure that any information about candidates reaches voters in a reliable and equal way – confining its activity here to linking to a website that shows [who is standing in which area](#) and issuing a [minimal PDF leaflet](#) for the public. We will have to wait until the autopsy to see how much of a barrier this is to voters going out to the polls. Then we will need to add up how many people actually went to the officially recommended websites from different parts of the country, and how far this correlates with turnout.

But the Commission's (and perhaps the government's) apparent penny-pinching here is already perhaps the most signal betrayal of its duty to handle all citizens equally by a UK public authority. The Commission must know that over a fifth of UK voters do not have internet connections. And they will be fully aware that only a tiny proportion of those with internet access will have gone to the PCC pages showing who candidates are. The Commission seems to be completely happy and complacent that millions of voters are likely to show up to the PCC elections and glean what little information they can about candidates from just the ballot paper itself – which shows only the person's party label and area of residence.

By choosing not to issue election booklets, nor to compel police authorities or coalitions of local authorities to do so, the Electoral Commission has shown that it cares not a fig for elections or electoral accountability. It remains obsessed as ever by its responsibilities on regulating party finances, and as careless as ever about its far more important mission of providing full, fair and prompt information to citizens about every aspect of the UK elections.

To coincide with this Thursday's election, we are also reissuing [The LSE's Simple Guide to UK Voting Systems](#) in a now fully updated form, which provides an accessible account of the five main voting systems used to choose elected representatives across the country.

*Note: This article gives the views of the author, and not the position of the British Politics and Policy blog, nor of the London School of Economics. Please read our [comments policy](#) before posting.*

## About the author

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3. [Despite the problems that have beset the elections for Police and Crime Commissioners we must still take them seriously \(49.2\)](#)
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