

# Voting for Police and Crime Commissioners could mean last minute elections on the cheap

Apr 4 2012

*If the new office of the Police and Crime Commissioners (PCC) is to be a success, the elections for that office must be a success too. **Toby James** argues there are a number of significant issues still to be resolved in planning for these elections.*



The public will have the opportunity to elect their own police and crime commissioners (PCC) in November this year. The PCCs will have powers to set police force budgets, policing priorities and hire and fire chief constables to manage police forces. The government has argued that electing this official will democratise the police and increase accountability. Not everybody wants them, though. Critics argue that it will be expensive and politicise the police.

For better or worse, PCCs are on the way, it seems. The next issue is therefore *how* to elect them and run those elections. We know that they will be elected on the basis of a supplementary vote electoral system, like mayoral elections. However, there are some other details which have been overlooked but which are also important. These have received more recent focus following the [Electoral Commissions response](#) to a Home Office consultation on the mechanics of November's election. It raised a number of issues including the dangers of implementing elections on the cheap, and publishing regulations for electoral officers too late. Both are a cause for concern, although only the former has received public attention.

## Electing Police Commissioners on the cheap?

In most UK elections, including the mayoral elections that will be held on the same day as the PCC elections on a 'super Thursday', candidates are entitled to have leaflets sent out to the electorate free of charge (well, at the expense of the tax payer). Not so with PCC elections. The government expects the public to become aware of the candidates through one central website.

The Electoral Commission has raised concerns that this will leave those without internet access without the information they need to cast their vote. According to them, 7 million citizens in England and Wales have not used the internet in the last 12 months. The underlying digital divide in the UK will disadvantage a significant number of potential voters. The Commission have not been alone in voicing concerns. John Prescott and Lord Condon, amongst others, have argued that independent candidates will struggle to get themselves known without the free publicity. The free campaign material is important for creating a level playing field amongst candidates.

One further fear about the PCC elections is that there might be a low turnout. A reasonable turnout is important for PCC elections because it may undermine the mandate of the Commissioners and also allow extremist candidates to win power on only a small proportion of the vote. The UK has increasingly had a problem with low turnout, especially in 'second' or 'third' elections. The 2009 European elections saw 34.8 per cent of the registered UK electorate cast their vote, but turnout was as low as 30.5 per cent in Wales and 28.6 per cent in Scotland. Mayoral election turnout was around the 40 per cent mark last year.

Will the decision to not provide free direct-mail canvassing (as political scientists call it) make a difference to turnout? There is [some evidence](#) that such campaign material can cause a *marginal* increase voter turnout amongst minority voters [African-American](#) and [Native American](#) voters. However, personal canvassing may be the only way for independent candidates without the campaign machinery that political parties have, of communicating effectively.

One reason why direct mail canvassing may have only a limited effect on turnout is that citizens are already overloaded with information from candidates, parties, and interest groups at most elections. Canvassing methods may therefore diminish in effectiveness when they are, in effect, competing for each other. [Political Scientist Donald Green](#) has therefore suggested that direct mail canvassing may be more important in 'second order' elections in which the public have little other information about the candidates. The PCC elections are new elections which fit such a category. They could therefore be a useful source of information for the public and encourage participation.

### Late guidelines, late planning?

There are other issues with the election. Firstly, there are questions about the readiness of the electoral register for an election in November. A provision for rolling registration was introduced by the New Labour government in 2010, however most amendments to the electoral register still come through the annual canvass. By the time that the elections run in November, this may be out of date. A November election is also during the canvass when many elections departments have their resources stretched.

Secondly, the planning for the election is a cause for concern. It is well known that the coalition government delayed the elections from May to November 2012. It is less well known that the government has also delayed the laying out of the secondary legislation which would set out the statutory framework for the elections. John Turner, Chief Executive of the Association of Electoral Administrators, issued warnings in February that key issues about the mechanics of the election had not yet been resolved. The Electoral Commission has also starkly warned that guidelines for election staff in local authorities must be published early enough to allow them to prepare.

The lack of detailed guidelines can make planning for elections very difficult for electoral officials. These are the conditions under which errors are made by administrators and voters. Printing ballot papers, booking and planning polling stations and making the necessary software changes to run new elections, all take time. I have recently interviewed over 70 electoral administrators as part of a wider [project on the challenges that face electoral administrators in the UK](#) and one core theme is the late issuing of guidance and the complexity of elections. To quote a couple administrators:

*'the single biggest problem [we face is]... is late legislation.'*

*'you get the impression that the legislators or the political classes seem to think that computers just sort themselves at the press of a button.'*

In 2007 the [Gould Report](#) reviewed problems in the Scottish parliamentary elections in May of that year, after a high number of ballot papers had been rejected. The report blamed 'fragmented and late legislation' for many of the problems. It recommended a mandatory six month cut-off date for any changes to be made to the regulations for elections. According to the report 'This would serve to minimise, if not avoid, many of the problems encountered at the May 2007 elections.'

The PCC elections are now six months away. If the new office of the PCC is to be a success, the elections for that office must be a success too. A number of significant issues are still to be resolved.

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*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.*

### About the author

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