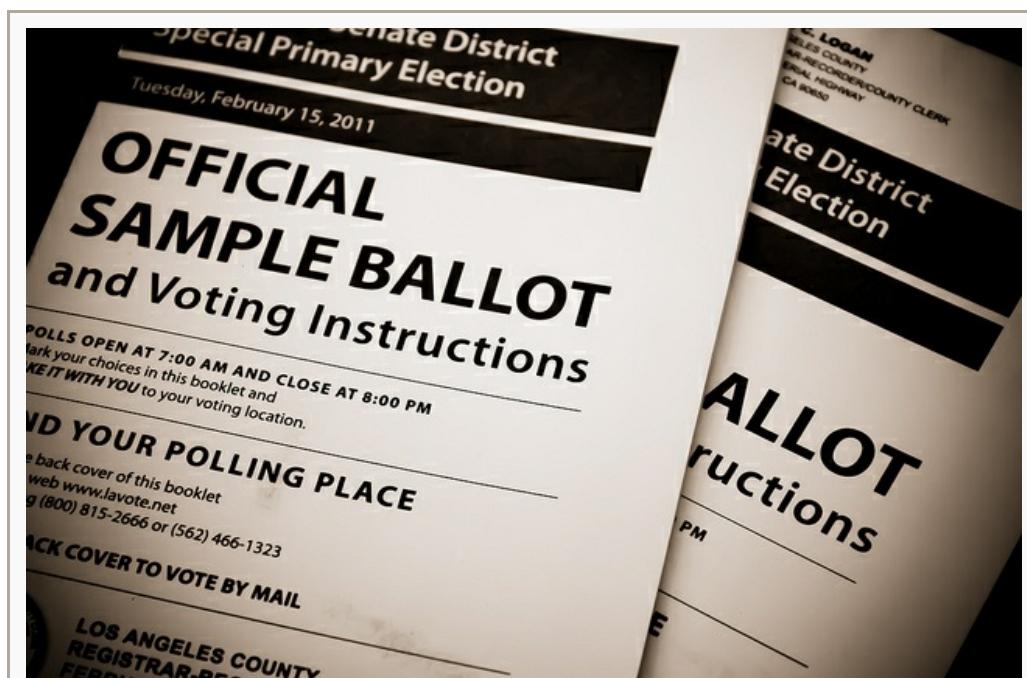


Money or signatures: which is a larger barrier to new parties trying to contest parliamentary elections?

By Democratic Audit UK

A crucial part of any democracy is allowing new parties to form and contest elections. However, there is a consensus that the state may set barriers in order to do so. This implies a tricky balancing act between excluding 'frivolous' candidates whilst allowing 'serious' new parties to run without undue difficulty. Here, **Max Goplerud** outlines a working paper that examines this issue. It finds that new parties will likely find signature-based barriers harder to overcome and that 60% of British electoral administrators surveyed would prefer a more restrictive regime than the one currently in force.



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Existing research generally suggests that raising either common type of barrier (deposit or signatures) corresponds to fewer new parties. However, it is tricky to normalise those barriers across countries, and there are standard issues of correlation not implying causation. Yet, it is clear that a common solution to those problems, e.g. running a 'proper' experiment that varies the restrictions, is not viable. My paper used an alternative strategy of surveying electoral administrators in Britain.

I contacted these individuals because they are comparably knowledgeable about the impact of these barriers, and they likely lack any systematic biases. The paper contends that we can infer something about how actual changes would affect new parties based on the aggregated opinions of people who have experience dealing with these organisations and candidates.

This survey used a form of experimentation called 'conjoint analysis' that asked these administrators to compare pairs of hypothetical combinations of deposit requirements, signatures, and thresholds (of return for the deposit). It asked them to rank which one was 'more restrictive to new parties and independent candidates' as well as assign a score from 1 to 10. From this, it is possible to extract information about the importance of each barrier.

Money or Signatures?

As it stands now, candidates in Britain must provide a deposit of £500 (returned if they get at least 5% of the vote) and provide 10 signatures from electors in the constituency. Parliament has raised the deposit once since 1918

(from £150 to £500 in 1985), and it is not indexed for inflation. The value of £500 in 1985 is roughly £1,400 today.

To outline the initial results, consider tripling each barrier; this is roughly the difference between the change in 1985 and the amount needed to undo the effects of 30 years of inflation on the current level of the deposit. Moving the deposit requirement from £500 to £1500 would make the regime around 8% more difficult for new parties, and moving the signature requirement from the (quite low!) 10 to 30 would make it 11% more difficult.

A second result is that the threshold at which the deposit is returned seems to be much less important in determining the restrictiveness of the profile. Moreover, the threshold does not become more important as the value of the deposit increases, as one would expect if it were a strong deterrent to new parties. This suggests that whilst the deposit itself deters new parties, we might view it as a ‘fixed cost’ of contestation, because most new parties likely expect to lose their deposit(s)—at almost any level of the threshold.

Finally, the survey asked electoral administrators to put down their preferred regime. The modal response was, indeed, the current regime; however, around 60% of administrators thought the regime should be more restrictive for parliamentary future elections, i.e. they listed a regime that received a higher restrictiveness score than the current one.

Conclusions

Despite being a somewhat roundabout way of investigating the issue, this paper’s policy implications are fairly clear. If one wishes to deter new parties, signature barriers are probably the best way. Indeed, one would certainly hope that each of the major parties could get 30 people willing to endorse its candidate in each constituency, but this may prove to be quite challenging for some smaller parties with different programmes and policies that are less ‘mainstream’.

However, before thinking that we should make the regime more restrictive to new parties, it is worth considering that no new parties have been able to contest all British seats at a general election and thus the current rules might strike the right balance.

This piece is an extended version of a piece that was presented at the EPOP conference entitled “Money or Signatures? An Experimental Test of Ballot Access Restrictions”. It represents the views of the author, and not those of Democratic Audit or the LSE. Please read our [comments policy](#) before posting.

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