

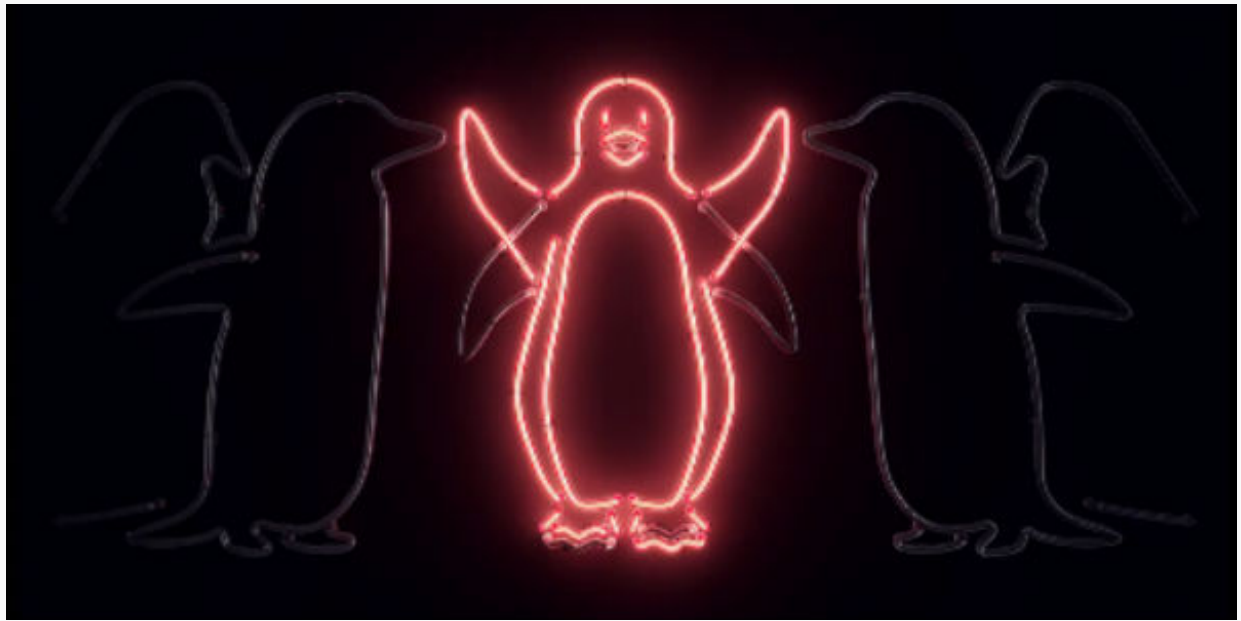
We need to make it easier for people to vote, not harder – and registering is still a big problem

 [democraticaudit.com /2017/02/01/we-need-to-make-it-easier-for-people-to-vote-not-harder-automatic-registration-would-help/](https://democraticaudit.com/2017/02/01/we-need-to-make-it-easier-for-people-to-vote-not-harder-automatic-registration-would-help/)

By Democratic Audit UK

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*Despite the voter ID pilot next year, most people believe voter fraud isn't a problem in the UK. But a significant minority want changes to the election system – notably more financial transparency and information about their candidates. And while relatively few want online voting, registering to vote, even though it can now be done online, is confusing for some younger people. **Josiah Mortimer** looks at how we can make the system even more robust and asks whether automatic registration is the answer.*



'A really, really shiny penguin.' The Electoral Commission's penguin encourages younger voters to register before the EU referendum.
Photo: [Electoral Commission](#). Used with permission

To judge by Donald Trump's claims of voter fraud in the US, and the government's plans for [voter ID trials](#) in the UK next year, you might gain the impression that our democratic system is being widely abused. So it's interesting to see [new research](#) from the Electoral Commission, which shows that – despite the anecdotal claims behind Sir Eric Pickles' review into alleged voter fraud – the public don't actually believe electoral malpractice is widespread where they live.

73% believe voting is currently safe from fraud and abuse, and just 8% say that they believe electoral fraud is very common where they live. Meanwhile, under a third of voters believe 'It would be easy to get away with electoral fraud in Great Britain/NI' – against 44% who disagree. What is an issue however is that people don't know how to report alleged electoral fraud, with only 31% of voters aware of how they'd file a complaint (FYI, you'd contact your local [Electoral Registration Office](#) or dial 101).

So, rather than making it harder for everyone to vote (through mandatory voter ID), better informing the public about how they can report concerns about elections would seem like a good first step in tackling alleged fraud. Vigilant citizens and well-trained polling clerks are surely the first port of call for protecting the integrity of the ballot.

Overall, the news is good. Three quarters of people are confident that elections are well run in Great Britain and

Northern Ireland, compared to 66% in 2015. A ten-point leap in a year is a sign that the increased turnout of the EU referendum paid off – the more people engage with the process, the more public faith in it increases. But there are things that can be done. From the report (p8):

“When asked what change would most increase their satisfaction with the voting process, the most popular suggestion was for more information on the parties and candidates standing and their policies (31%), followed by a proportional voting system (23%), online voting (17%), and increased security against electoral fraud (17%).”

Considering few people could disagree with having more information about their candidates, it's an encouraging vote of confidence in the push for PR that the second most popular policy among the public for improving elections is a change in the electoral system. Another change that would improve trust in the process is **increased transparency around political parties and their financial arrangements**, with 40% saying this would help. We'd certainly back any moves around that. Those aren't the only reforms on the table, though.

For instance, while levels of satisfaction with the registration system have increased to 80%, up from 75% in 2015, those levels aren't universal – not least given the technical glitches we saw last year, when the website couldn't handle the pre-referendum rush. Young people in particular have worse experiences with registering to vote. According to the Electoral Commission: '63% of 18-24s (16-24s in Scotland) and 77% of 25-34s say they are satisfied with the registration system', compared with a whopping 89% among over-65s. This probably comes down to the fact that, despite improvements in recent years (with the introduction of online registration in 2014), signing up to vote still faces a number of issues.

For example, **nearly 40% of applications to vote in the run up to the EU referendum were from people already on the register**. The fact that they couldn't check their registration status meant millions of people were trying to sign up again 'just in case'. Even we had calls from people trying to check their status (just for clarity – we don't do that stuff).

There are other ways around this. One is to switch to more automatic or 'direct' forms of registration – something that 56% of the public back when given a list of options. That could include either automatically registering people when they reach voting age, or updating the register when someone moves home (20%).

But this research bodes well for our political process in the UK – and offers sound words from voters on how to make it even better. The overall picture is this:

1. **People believe that elections are well-run in the UK. But...**
2. **They want more information on candidates and parties, and many would like to see a proportional voting system**
3. While they don't view voter fraud as a huge issue, it would make sense to **give voters and polling staff the advice and training they need** to spot and report any alleged instances
4. Despite high levels of confidence in the registration system, voters – and young people in particular – want to see **moves towards automatic registration**.

So the news isn't all grim. Now we know there's support for practical reforms – and we can start putting them in place to build a better democracy.

This post represents the views of the author and not those of Democratic Audit.

Josiah Mortimer is Communications Officer at the Electoral Reform Society.

