

# To engage younger people in voting the UK must provide far more integrated and accessible information about elections

 [democraticaudit.com /2014/03/07/to-engage-young-people-in-democracy-the-uk-needs-more-comprehensive-integrated-and-accessible-sources-of-information-about-elections/](http://democraticaudit.com/2014/03/07/to-engage-young-people-in-democracy-the-uk-needs-more-comprehensive-integrated-and-accessible-sources-of-information-about-elections/)

By Democratic Audit UK

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*The quality and accessibility of information about elections in the UK needs to be improved in order to enhance voter engagement, especially among young people, argue Democratic Audit's **Richard Berry** and **Patrick Dunleavy**. In an extract from Democratic Audit's [new report](#), they discuss the weaknesses of existing sources of pre- and post-election information and, drawing on good practice overseas, consider what changes are required.*



Do voters get the information they need before and after elections? Credit: [Danny Birchall](#), CC BY-NC-SA 2.0)

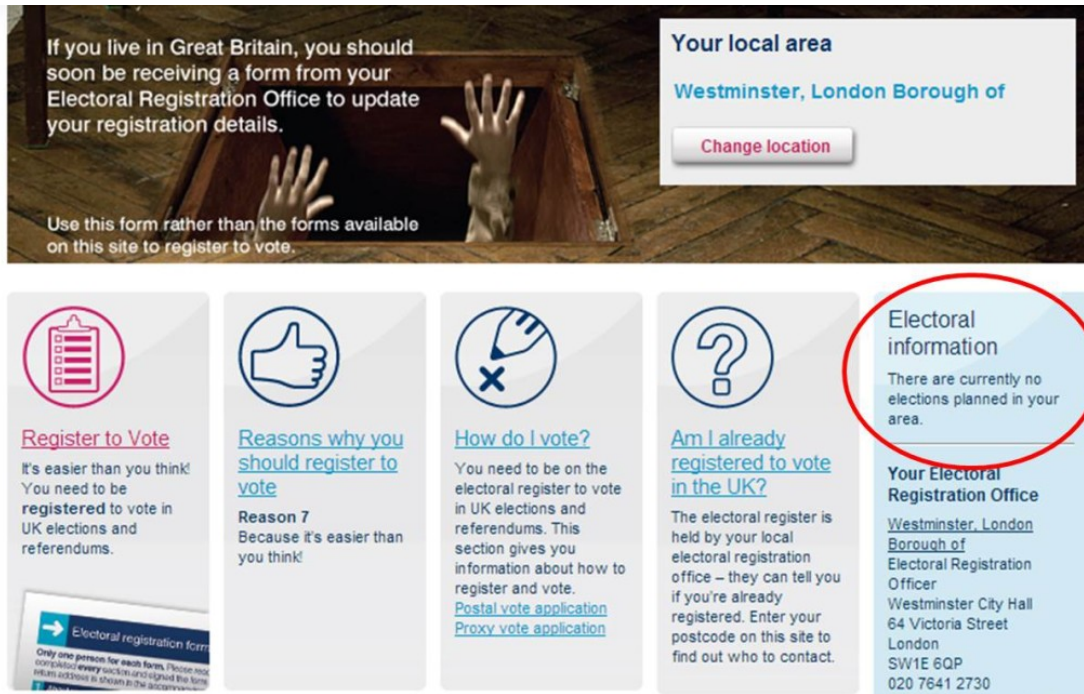
Improved online resources about elections could play a vital role in reaching out to better engage young citizens. We know that young people are much more likely to access news online than older generations, and so accessing election information would be a natural progression. Online sources are also particularly suitable for a geographically mobile group who are least likely to be able to tap informal sources of information in the local community.

## Upcoming elections

If we look at information given to voters online about *upcoming elections* (apart from by political parties) the UK has conspicuously weak provision compared with other countries. The Electoral Commission runs an [About My Vote](#) website that is supposed to give people this information, but it is very limited. For instance, in 13 February 2014 we entered a Westminster postcode into this site and received the message, “*There are currently no elections planned*

in your area". This information is misleading: the forward dates of the City of Westminster, European Parliament, Mayor of London, London Assembly and House of Commons elections for this area are all known, but not listed. Elections to Westminster borough and for London MEPS will take place on 22 May 2014, yet the Electoral Commission website is failing to inform voters about them.

Figure 1: About My Vote information on upcoming elections



[www.aboutmyvote.co.uk](http://www.aboutmyvote.co.uk) screenshot after search for postcode WC2A 2AE, 13 February 2014. Highlight added.

## Election results

The provision of information about election results in the UK is also unreliable. An extreme example was the Police and Crime Commissioner (PCC) elections in November 2012 across England and Wales. The official Home Office election website [Choose My PCC](#) provided very limited links to candidate's websites before the election, with no attempt at presenting information in easy to use fashion. It then gave no information whatsoever on the numbers or shares of votes received by candidates after the election. Little wonder that turnout on this occasion was just 15 per cent.

In the past the BBC has been the best public-facing source for individual constituency results for some types of election, and it provides reasonable general election coverage. However, the BBC is providing a news service. While comprehensive information is provided about the national result and individual Westminster constituency results, there is no integration between different types of election. And BBC coverage online has sharply declined in recent years. A user could not, for instance, enter their postcode on the BBC and find out about other recent elections in their area (even though some useful information may get published for a while somewhere on the BBC website) or anything about upcoming elections. The same is true for the Electoral Commission website, which also has pages showing individual constituency results, but in less detail and with a less sophisticated search function.

Table 1 below looks at the major public and private sources of UK election results. Our analysis above shows the fragmentation of election results reporting in the UK.

Table 1: Online sources of election results



TYPE OF ELECTION	Source of information				
	Electoral Commission	BBC	Local authorities	The Guardian	Other
House of Commons	Webpage with detailed constituency results.	Webpage with detailed constituency results	Results for constituencies within the council area	Webpage and spreadsheet with detailed constituency results	Parliament publishes a PDF with a summary of constituency results
Scottish Parliament	Webpage with detailed constituency results	Webpage with detailed constituency results	Results for constituencies within the council area	Webpage and spreadsheet with summary results for constituencies	Scottish Parliament: webpage and spreadsheet with detailed constituency results
Welsh Assembly	Webpage with detailed constituency results	Webpage with detailed constituency results	Results for constituencies within the council area	Webpage and spreadsheet with summary results for constituencies	Welsh Assembly: webpage with detailed constituency results
Local authority (council overview)	None	Webpages showing seats held by each party (no vote numbers or shares)	Webpages showing seats held by each party (no vote numbers or shares)	Webpage and spreadsheet showing seats held by each party (no vote numbers or shares)	
Local authority wards	None	None	Webpages or PDFs showing detailed results for each ward	None	GLA publishes full details of London borough elections
Greater London Authority	None	Webpage with detailed constituency results	Results for constituencies within the council area	Webpage with detailed constituency results	GLA: Webpage and spreadsheet with detailed constituency results
European Parliament	Webpage with summary results for each region (no losing candidates)	Webpage with summary results for each region (no losing candidates)	Results for constituencies within the council area	None	
Police & Crime Commissioner	None	Webpage with summary of constituency results (no vote numbers)	Results for constituencies within the council area	Webpage and spreadsheet with detailed constituency results	The Home Office 'Choose My PCC' website gives the names of winning candidates (no vote numbers or shares)

Shading: **Blue indicates detailed results are available; red indicates postcode search is available.** Further notes below.

Key problems with the provision of election results online are:

- Each type of election is currently reported in a different manner.
- Results reporting is fragmented across many different sources. Voters would need to have a PhD in British political science to know why one particular institution has a remit to publish particular results and others do not.
- There are no standard formats for the publication of results; variation occurs between different sources for the same election, and between types of election at the same source.
- Many different sources provide only summary results with no links to locally specific details that voters need to have about their ward or constituency area.
- Postcode search is not widely available, often requiring users to find the name of their ward or constituency (if

known) by scrolling long lists. Of course, new residents and young people are least likely to know such highly esoteric names.

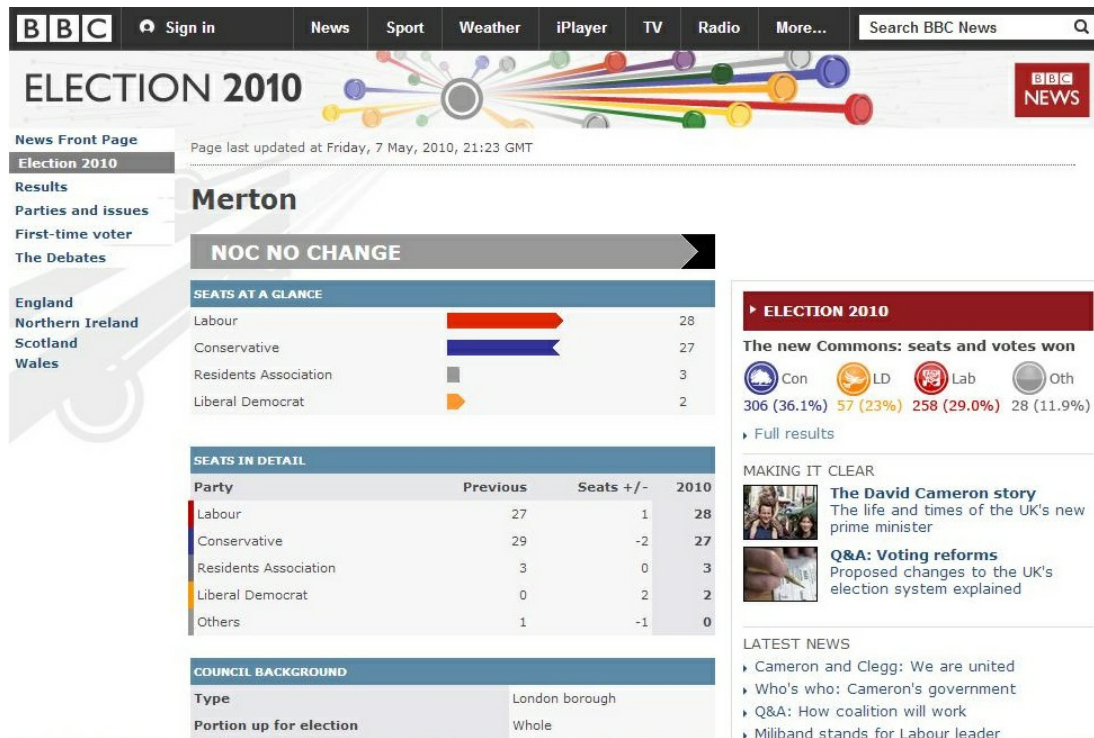
- Sources do not integrate different types of election so they are all easily accessible in one place; for instance someone inputting their postcode on the BBC would not bring up both the general election and the local election.

## Local election results

Information about annual local elections is particularly poor, in two respects:

- There is *no central source of ward-level election results*. The BBC and other media outlets only publish summaries of results for each council, while the Electoral Commission does not publish any local election results. Citizens can only find out the results of a ward contest by visiting the website of their local council, and in many cases these sites are not user-friendly (some council only publish ward results by scanning a copy of the handwritten declaration form and posting it as a PDF).
- For councils with no majority party, it is very difficult for citizens to find out which party or parties are in power locally. Election results published by the BBC and other sources invariably list these councils as being under 'No Overall Control' (NOC). Very few councils that are NOC will provide clear information on their website about which parties have formed the Cabinet. Figure 2 shows an examples of this practice from the BBC.

Figure 2: BBC election result page for London Borough of Merton, 2010



## International comparisons

We have examined how other countries publish local election results centrally. There are a number of examples of much more detailed, local results being published by national or regional bodies in several:

- Ireland: the Department of the Environment, Community and Local Government document (PDF format) with a complete set of local election results for every local authority, including the votes for every candidate in every ward.
- India: the Election Commission publishes a spreadsheet with full results for every constituency in the 29

regional elections. This also indicated whether candidates were male or female.

- Australia: Regional bodies publish full results including every ward for local elections in their area. For instance the Western Australia Electoral Commission publishes webpages with results for over 100 local authorities, while the New South Wales Electoral Commission publishes results for about 150 local authorities in PDF documents.
- Bangladesh: the Election Commission publishes webpages with detailed results for three tiers of local government.

## The importance of information

Most of us do not engage in behaviours where we are uncertain what is at stake, and where we get no feedback on our actions or participation after being involved. Yet UK central government and local authorities currently provide no easy access to information about who is standing at elections before voting takes place, and make very inadequate provision to inform voters about what happened in their specific ward or constituency as a result of their going to the polls. Yet, as Figure 3 shows, providing voter information and feedback is crucial in any democracy to encouraging and sustaining voting.

Figure 3: Voter information feedback loop

Opinion research has consistently indicated that information provided to UK voters is insufficient. Following the 2013 local elections, 53 per cent of voters and non-voters to an [Electoral Commission survey](#) said they knew 'not very much' or 'nothing at all' about the election. [European Commission research](#) has found that 83 per cent of UK citizens think that better information would increase turnout at European Parliament elections.

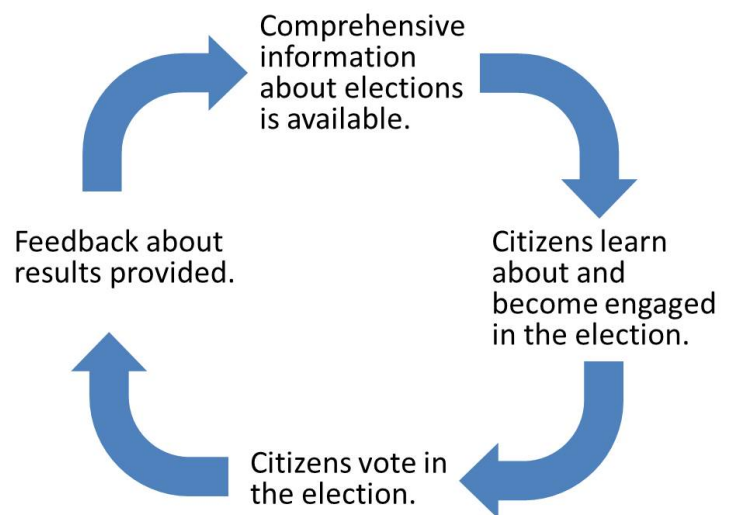
The information provided by public authorities has become particularly vital as local media outlets have declined. [Recent research in Denmark](#) has shown that coverage of local elections in the local media has a significant impact on voter turnout. However, in the UK the number of local newspapers and their overall levels of circulation have both been [falling for many years](#), and are now at serious levels. The displacement of local newspapers by free sheets orientated only to advertising has had serious adverse impacts on local information provision.

## Conclusions

Current arrangements in the UK only give very poor, fragmented and old-fashioned feedback to voters about what effect their participation has had, and what election outcomes were. Yet providing good information to voters before elections, and timely feedback afterwards on what happened, is fundamentally important for attracting and sustaining participation.

Different elections are publicised in very different ways and places, often after long delays. The poor online availability of election data in the UK is now something of a scandal. Taxpayers pay a lot for electoral administration and yet reporting standards and the provision of easy-access information to citizens are very uneven across the country.

More comprehensive and accessible online and digital sources of information need to be developed to reach all

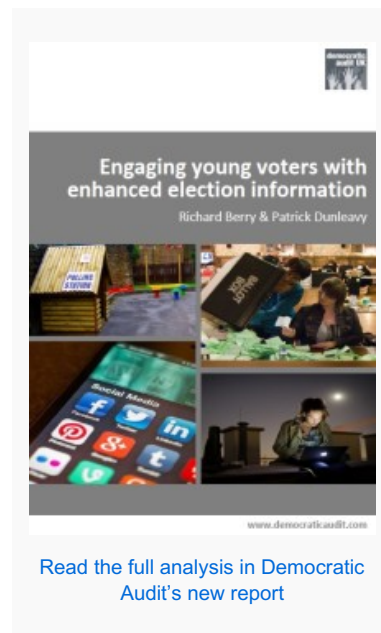


voters. Yet the need is especially urgent for younger voters in their 20s and 30s. Younger voters are more geographically mobile for university and work reasons, and through private renting. They are especially cut off from the diffuse local channels of political information that work better for older voters, who use public services more and are long established in a community. Improved provision could easily be implemented speedily and at low cost, in time for the 2015 general election.

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This post is an edited extract from Democratic Audit's new report, [Engaging young voters with enhanced election information](#), based on our submission to the House of Commons Political and Constitutional Reform Committee [inquiry](#) into voter engagement.

*Note: This post represents the views of the authors, and does not necessarily give the position of Democratic Audit or the LSE. Please read our [comments policy](#) before commenting. Shortlink for this post: [buff.ly/111sS41](http://buff.ly/111sS41)*



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Notes from Table 1:

- The Electoral Commission publishes 'electoral data' for other elections, covering turnout, spoilt ballots, and so on.
- Local authority columns represent a general summary of practices. Individual council websites may differ.
- Some individuals have also published ward results on personal websites, with differing levels of comprehensiveness.
- The Guardian website has a map intended to show 2009 European Parliament election results, but it currently (21 February 2014) has no past results on it.