

Running elections is a professional privilege

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Parliament has been dissolved and the campaign has begun but the work of acting returning officers, their deputies and electoral services managers across the country started well before this latest announcement.

In London we are relatively lucky because, barring a small number of local authority by-elections, we are only dealing with the parliamentary elections across the 73 constituencies. Colleagues elsewhere in the country will also be managing the complex task of dealing with parish council, local authority and mayoral elections.

This is my 22nd election. They have all been different. Running elections is a professional privilege; they are the pulse of our representative democracy whether local or national.

The running of elections requires acute attention to detail and close managerial oversight and control. Chief executives may get appointed for their strategic approach but as returning officers they are expected to be conscientiously focused on the detail of how paper is to be printed, folded and handed to electors and with the precise way in which votes should be counted and aggregated.

Above all, our job is to ensure that the elections are administered with integrity. This includes ensuring that appropriate measures are in place to avoid electoral fraud. Minimising opportunities for fraud is important but so too is detecting fraud when it happens.

The Electoral Commission recently published an analysis of more than 100 cases of alleged electoral fraud recorded in 2014. UK elections have very low instances of fraud but when they occur they stain democracy. Voting offences made up the majority of allegations in 2014. This offence broadly relates to personation, breaches of secrecy, tampering with ballots and other alleged undue influence.

In the run-up to 7 May, election staff must put measures in place to minimise this risk. The upsurge in postal votes over the past years has made this task a bit more difficult. Even within the polling station itself it is important to prevent fraud and be alert to detecting fraud.

There is a debate around the introduction of a requirement to take a proof of identity to a polling station. This is already a requirement in Northern Ireland where electoral administrators have produced an identity card for those who do not have a driving licence or passport.

I am told this is particularly popular with 18-year-olds who view it as a method of entry to their local nightclub as well as their local polling station. Arguably the introduction of individual electoral registration should help improve the security of the electoral register but the introduction of some ID requirement may be something we will see soon.

In 2014 the Metropolitan Police reported 33 campaign offences across the capital. These ranged from the technical (absence of promoter's name from election material) to the more blatant (false statements about the personal character or conduct of a candidate or their expenses).

In London, we had examples of individuals destroying campaign material and someone publishing exit poll information prior to the deadline. Acting returning officers need to ensure that parties and registered campaigners are aware of the guidelines published by the Electoral Commission.

The 2015 general election will be the first election in the whole of the UK since the national rollout of individual electoral registration and this is set to have a big impact on voters who may not even be aware of the changes. Local authorities have been working hard to conduct data matching exercises and hold voter engagement events to ensure that as many voters as possible have moved successfully over to the new register.

Those who were on the old register will still be able to vote but they will not be eligible for a postal vote so we may have some disappointed voters around polling day if we do not get this right. However, despite the difficulties for electoral registration officers nationally, the design of the new system should help eliminate some of the cases of electoral registration fraud that were reported in 2014.

Voters will now have to be automatically matched to their given address through their National Insurance number or they will need to provide further proof of identity before they can be added to the register. The national online registration system has been a success in branding and marketing and may point the way to how registration should be managed in the future.

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