UK GENERAL ELECTION

JULY 2024
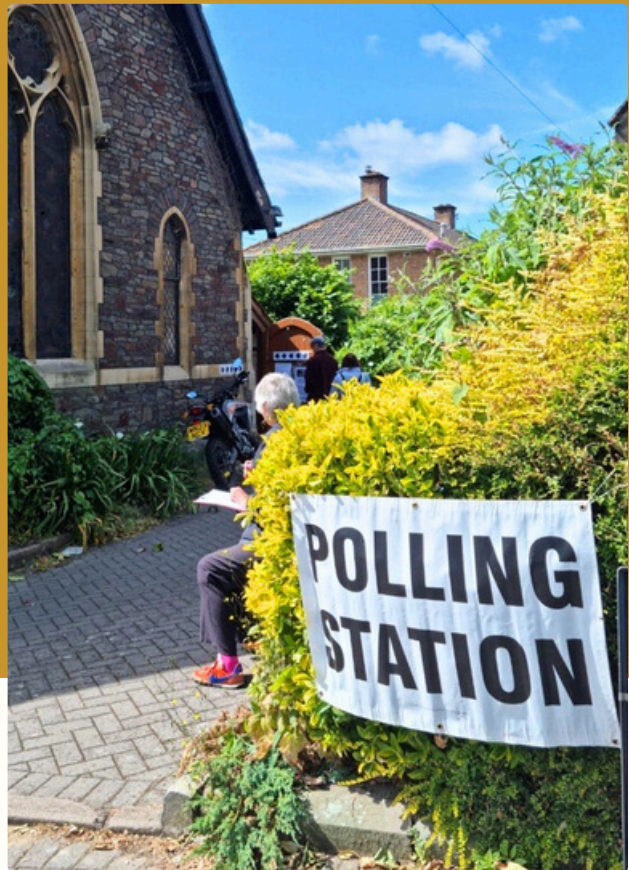
Final Report

CPA BIMR Election Assessment Mission

CONTENTS

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

- The Commonwealth Parliamentary Association British Islands and Mediterranean Region (CPA BIMR) conducted an Election Assessment Mission to the UK General Election in July 2024.

- The **legal framework** for UK elections was revised in 2022, with substantial changes to voting arrangements, voter identification requirements and electoral offences. While taking on board some of the recommendations made by the Law Commissions, these legal changes did not comprehensively reform the electoral law.

- Ahead of these elections, **a review of electoral boundaries was implemented**, aligning constituency sizes with statutory requirements and international standards. Interlocutors praised the Boundary Commissions for their impartial and consultative work.

- **The administration of UK elections is highly decentralised**. Stakeholders had a high level of confidence in the professionalism and efficiency of election officials. The Electoral Commission could have an increased role in collecting and publishing national data.

- There is a legal provision for **citizen and international election observers**, and they are accredited by the Electoral Commission at the national level. There is a lack of awareness among election officials about the role of election observers in the UK.

- **Postal voting continues to be used widely and is increasing**, however short electoral timeframes pose a challenge for the printing, delivery and return of ballot papers. The Mission repeatedly heard concerns about delays in the delivery of postal ballots.

- **Voter registers** are maintained by local authorities and interlocutors generally had confidence in their accuracy, although groups, such as young voters, are underrepresented. Whilst convicted individuals in prison are not able to vote, **prisoners on remand** are eligible and measures should be in place to facilitate this.

- Political parties register with the Electoral Commission whilst **candidate registration** is decentralised to Returning Officers at the constituency level. **A record 263 women were elected**, although the Mission heard that harassment and personal attacks during the election campaign were more common against women candidates.

- In a campaign that largely took place online, interlocutors highlighted a high level of hostility and anger that sometimes marred the proceedings. How the **democratic process is protected and safeguarded for future elections** should be considered.

- The Mission observed the opening of polls in 18 locations, voting through the day in 263 polling stations and closing at 17 locations. In the vast majority of observations, the Mission **assessed the overall process as good or very good, with particular praise for the officials**. Concerns were raised around incidents when **ballot secrecy was at risk and when 'family voting'** took place.

- The Mission **observed the count** in eight constituencies and assessed the overall process positively in all those cases.

INTRODUCTION TO THE MISSION

CPA BIMR conducted an Election Assessment Mission to the UK General Election[1] on 4 July 2024. The Mission was present in the UK from 29 June until 6 July 2024. The CPA UK branch organised the BIMR Mission and has previously organised observations of UK General Elections in 2015 and 2017.[2]

The Mission was composed of **29 Commonwealth Parliamentarians, 2 election analysts and 24 members of staff** from CPA UK, the British Group Inter-Parliamentary Union and the UK House of Lords. The Head of Mission was Hon Dr Otiende Amollo MP (Kenya) and the Deputy Head of Mission was Hon Ryan Callus MP (Malta). The election analysts were Stefan Szwed (Poland) and Vasil Vashchanka (Sweden).

The Commonwealth parliamentarians were drawn from the following jurisdictions:

Alderney	Guernsey	Malawi	Saint Kitts & Nevis
Anguilla	Jersey	Malta	Seychelles
Australia	Kenya	Mauritius	Sri Lanka
Grenada	Lesotho	Saint Lucia	Turks & Caicos.

Observers before their deployment around the UK.

The Mission conducted an independent assessment of the UK General Election against international legal standards, commitments and obligations as well as UK laws. It focused on the observation of Election Day and selected aspects of the pre-election environment. Due to its short duration, the Mission was not in a position to comment on aspects of the election requiring a

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[1] Officially termed the UK General Parliamentary Election.
[2] CPA UK observed UK General Elections in 2015 and 2017. Links to the final reports with recommendations can be found on CPA UK's election page: Elections (uk-cpa.org). In addition, in 2010, CPA UK partnered with the Royal Commonwealth Society to conduct a small-scale observation with seven parliamentarians and four civil society officials from across the Commonwealth.

longer observation, such as the media environment and coverage of the campaign, campaign finance and electoral dispute resolution.

After two days of training, the observers were deployed to eight constituencies across the UK. These constituencies provided a broad sample of locations, covering a variety of demographics, regions and voting patterns. Prior to Election Day, observers met key stakeholders, including election officials, candidates and a wide range of civil society organisations. On Election Day, the Mission visited 263 polling stations, as well as 18 locations at the opening of polling stations, 17 locations at the closing and the counting centres in these eight constituencies.

The constituencies visited were Birmingham Ladywood, Brighton Pavilion, Bristol Central, Glasgow East, Ilford South, Liverpool Walton, North Northumberland and North West Cambridgeshire.

CPA BIMR Election Missions are independent in their composition, findings and conclusions, adhering to the Declaration of Principles for International Election Observation and Code of Conduct for International Election Observers signed at the United Nations in 2005.

POLITICAL BACKGROUND

On 22 May the Prime Minister called the General Election for 4 July, with Parliament dissolved on 30 May. Many stakeholders did not anticipate the election to be held until the autumn. Since the last General Election in December 2019, the UK has had three prime ministers, and saw the passing of the longest-reigning British monarch, HM Queen Elizabeth II, who was succeeded by her son, HM King Charles III. The UK completed the withdrawal process from the EU in January 2020. Like other countries, from early 2020 onwards the UK faced the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic.

Local elections were held in England and parts of Wales in May 2024, with the Labour Party securing the highest number of mayorships and council seats. The public discourse in the runup to the General Election was marked by expectations of a considerable shift in the UK's electoral map, including significant gains for the hitherto opposition Labour Party, speculation about close results in some constituencies, and the likely effects of voters' tactical behaviour.

Observers participating in training before deployment around the UK (left) and a stakeholder meeting underway in London (right).

LEGAL FRAMEWORK

UK general elections are regulated primarily by the Representation of the People Act (1983) and Political Parties and Elections and Referendums Act (2000), with relevant provisions also found in other legislation. The electoral legal framework has been described by the Law Commissions as "complex, voluminous, and fragmented" due to each type of election being regulated by separate legislation, regulatory policy of detailed prescription, and the introduction of new electoral systems into the old regulatory framework.[3]

Recent amendments to electoral law introduced with the Elections Act (2022) made substantial modifications to voting arrangements, including postal and proxy voting, new voter identification requirements, campaigning, and electoral offences. The restriction disenfranchising overseas voters who resided outside the UK for more than 15 years was removed. Sanctions for breach of ballot secrecy and undue influence of voters were further toughened by the Ballot Secrecy Act (2023). **Mission interlocutors largely welcomed these legislative changes, although many were concerned that the new photo identification requirement could discourage or be a potential obstacle to the participation of some voters.**

While taking on board some recommendations, the legal reforms of 2022 and 2023 have not amounted to a comprehensive overhaul of electoral law, as recommended by the Law Commissions in their 2020 report. In particular, the Law Commissions recommended consolidation of electoral law in a "holistic", modern, pan-electoral legislative act that would cover fundamental aspects of conducting all elections in the UK, leaving detailed administration of polling to secondary legislation and guidance developed by the Electoral Commission. The Mission sees value in this direction of reform and encourages the legislator to consider how the legal framework may benefit from this approach, facilitating its better understanding and implementation by stakeholders, as well as a consistency of voter experiences across the UK.

> *Recommendation 1: Consider the Law Commissions' proposal for a legislative act that will consolidate UK electoral legislation, clearly setting out the fundamental provisions applicable to all elections and facilitate their consistent and uniform implementation.*

ELECTORAL SYSTEM AND BOUNDARY DELIMITATION

The House of Commons' 650 members are elected in single-mandate constituencies through the "first past the post" electoral system, whereby the candidate who obtains the most votes wins.[4] Votes cast for all other candidates have no effect, which may result in political parties obtaining a substantial vote share in the UK overall but winning few or no seats.[5] The Mission noted that proportional electoral systems have been introduced for some elected offices in the UK, and smaller parties included change of the electoral system for the House of Commons in their

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[3] See Electoral Law: a Joint Final Report, Law Commission of England and Wales (No. 389) and Scottish Law Commission (No. 256), 16 March 2020, paras 2.7 – 2.12.
[4] In this Report, the term "electoral system" refers to the set of rules which translate the votes cast in the election into seats in the elected body.
[5] Indeed, the 4 July election was described by some pundits as "the most disproportional in British electoral history"; see e.g. https://www.bbc.com/news/articles/c886pl6ldy9o.

manifestos. These developments illustrate that public debate regarding the optimal electoral system for UK general elections is ongoing.

Ahead of this General Election, a review of electoral boundaries was undertaken by the Boundary Commissions in the constituent nations, which aligned constituency sizes with the statutory requirements and international standards on equal suffrage.[6] The Mission was informed that this was the first review enacted since 2007, while it is a recognised good practice to carry out such review at least every 10 years.[7]

The Boundary Commissions have conducted the process in an independent, open and consultative manner and were praised by many Mission interlocutors. The resulting constituencies appear to have been broadly accepted by political parties and have not been challenged in courts. At the same time, some of the election administrators and candidates met by the Mission noted that they had to adapt to challenges posed by new constituency boundaries for electoral preparations and campaigning, while some voters were unaware of the changes.

By law, constituency boundaries are drawn based on the numbers of registered voters. While the rationale for using these numbers, rather than population figures, is plausible, the Mission is also mindful of the fact that elected representatives are called upon to act in the interests of all constituents, including minors and those not enrolled as voters. This consideration speaks in favour of **having regard also for population sizes in constituencies**.

ELECTION ADMINISTRATION

The **administration of a general election is highly decentralised**, as a function of historical legacy and the electoral system, with returning officers, who are senior administrators in their respective local government, playing a central role managing the process at the constituency level. **Most interlocutors met by the Mission praised the professionalism of Returning Officers and other election officials. The work and conduct of the administrators were assessed positively, despite exceptionally tight deadlines and partially related staffing problems, including some reports of high turnover rates shortly before Election Day.** Several stakeholders, including election administrators, worried that although training ensured that staff were versed in new procedures, their novelty, tight deadlines and staffing challenges could adversely affect the voting process.

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[6] Since 2020, the law permits no more than 5 percent deviation from the average constituency size. Article 25 of the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR) provides for elections to be held by universal and equal suffrage. The Council of Europe's Venice Commission has recommended that deviation from the average constituency size should not exceed 10 percent (see Code of Good Practice in Electoral Matters, Guidelines, para 2.1.iv).

[7] See the Venice Commissions Code of Good Practice in Electoral Matters cited above, Explanatory Report, p. 23.

WHO'S WHO IN UK ELECTIONS:

In England and Wales, the **Returning Officer** is a ceremonial position, with most duties discharged by the Acting Returning Officer who is normally a senior officer of the local authority. In Scotland, there is no Returning Officer with a ceremonial role, the Returning Officer is the person managing the process. In Northern Ireland, the Chief Electoral Officer acts as the Returning Officer, supported by Assistant Returning Officers. Returning Officers are independent, even from the local authority from which they are drawn, and they are accountable to the courts.

Electoral Registration Officers are responsible for maintaining the registers of electors. They are in most cases the same as Acting Returning Officers.

At the polling station level, the process is supervised by **presiding officers**, supported by **polling clerks**.[8]

The **Electoral Commission** is an independent statutory body set up by and accountable to the UK Parliament. Unlike most of its counterparts in other jurisdictions, it does not run elections, but provides advice and assistance on electoral matters to all those involved in elections. It also conducts voter education programmes, such as the 'Your vote is yours alone' vote secrecy campaign, available in English and Welsh, and in several languages spoken by minority communities.

A high level of **public confidence extends to the Electoral Commission**, which oversees general elections at the national level, registers political parties that wish to field candidates, regulates aspects of political and campaign finance, as well as organises voter education campaigns. However, it does not run general elections. While the Electoral Commission evaluates the performance of the election administration and the implementation of aspects of the process, it does not collect certain data that could be useful, notably information about the candidates or election administrators, including their attributes such as gender. The absence of this data does not support the formulation of public policy that addresses women's and other underrepresented groups' needs.[9]

> *Recommendation 2: Consider the Electoral Commission having a greater role in collecting and publishing data, including providing centralised information on candidates, such as gender and age.*

The Electoral Commission's independence has become a topic of a debate in light of 2022 amendments which, in an effort to foster accountability, introduced a provision for the UK

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[8] The Electoral Commission recommends that for polling stations with up to 1,250 voters there are up to 3 persons, i.e. the Presiding Officer and up to two clerks, and for stations with up to 2,250 voters there are up to 4 persons, i.e. the Presiding Officer and up to three clerks.

[9] Such information was made available by Elect Her, a CSO, on social media. See the 1989 General Recommendation No. 9 adopted by the CEDAW Committee (A/44/38) and Goal 17.18 of the UN 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development adopted in 2015. See also Paragraph 40.13 of the 1991 OSCE Moscow Document that commits participating States to "ensure the collection and analysis of data to assess adequately, monitor and improve the situation of women". Some CSOs continued to champion the passage of Section 106 of the 2010 Equality Act that would require data collection and disaggregation by public actors.

Government to designate a Strategy and Policy Statement setting out the Electoral Commission's priorities. The Electoral Commission is required to follow what is laid out in the statement and report to the Speaker's Committee for the Electoral Commission on how it is meeting the government's objectives. In February 2024, a policy statement was designated to the Electoral Commission by the Secretary of State for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities. While the content of the statement was seen as unobjectionable, in the Electoral Commission's view, the provision for a statement itself is inconsistent with its independent mandate and should be abolished.

> *Recommendation 3: Review the rationale for the Electoral Commission's Strategy and Policy Statement and consider the Commission's view that the statement be abolished to safeguard its independence.*

Shortly after the 4 July Election, the UK Information Commissioner's Office reprimanded the Electoral Commission over online security lapses in mid-2021 that compromised data concerning some 40 million voters. No significant incidents in the area of cybersecurity were reported to the Mission during the 2024 General Election.

ELECTION OBSERVATION

The legal framework provides for the accreditation of citizen and international observers to specifically observe the processes of the issuance and return of postal ballots, as well as voting and verification and counting procedures. However, it makes no mention of other parts of the pre-election period. The Electoral Commission's list of accredited observers includes 31 organisations and some 2,000 individuals.[10]

Among the several observation and assessment efforts underway were a 200-strong team of citizen observers from Democracy Volunteers (a civil society organisation) and a team of experts from the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe's Office for Democratic Institutions and Human Rights (OSCE ODIHR). Another international observer group told the Mission that it was unable to engage in observation due to the absence of an official invitation from the UK authorities. This could suggest a potential need to review how the UK facilitates the observation of its elections by additional observer organisations.[11]

Polling staff were not always familiar with the role of election observers, as the observers found on arrival at polling stations. This highlights a need for additional awareness-raising and training on the role of observers and what they may and may not do.

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[10] The latter figure includes cases of multiple accreditations of a single individual. Observers are accredited for a period of several years. It is unclear which groups or individual observers were conducting observations of the 2024 General Election.
[11] For instance, as a signatory of the 1990 OSCE Copenhagen Document, the UK has committed to inviting observers from other OSCE/ODIHR participating states, with a procedure in place to facilitate this process. A similar invitation could be issued to the Commonwealth Secretariat and its election observer unit.

> *Recommendation 4: Revise the existing provisions to explicitly facilitate the observation of the entire election process and the option of extending invitations to observer groups. Train election administrators in the roles and responsibilities of election observers.*

PROXY AND POSTAL VOTING

Apart from casting the ballot in-person at a polling station on election day, voters both in the UK and abroad have the option to vote by proxy or by post.

Voters who are unable to vote in their polling station on election day can apply to authorise someone (a proxy) to vote on their behalf, specifying the reason for doing so. Such application can be made for a specific election or an extended period of time. A proxy who is unable to vote for someone in person can apply to do so by post (this is known as "postal proxy"). The Elections Act 2022 enabled online applications for certain types of proxy voting and introduced a limit on how many people one proxy may serve, namely up to two voters residing in the UK and additionally up to two overseas voters.

Any eligible voter in the UK and abroad may opt for a postal ballot and the number of voters who use this voting method has been steadily growing since 2001 when it became possible to obtain a postal vote on demand.[12] A number of Mission interlocutors thought that the holding of the General Election during the summer, coinciding with school holidays in some areas such as Scotland, was a contributing factor to the increase in postal voting.

The Elections Act 2022 introduced online applications for postal voting. Rules on handling postal ballots also changed, with restrictions on political campaigners and on the number of postal ballots that may be handed in to polling staff in polling stations on election day.[13] **These changes were positively assessed by the Mission's interlocutors,** even as some of them pointed out that the **risks of undue influence on voters associated with casting ballots outside the controlled environment of a polling station cannot be eliminated entirely**. The number of rejected postal ballots in this election is not yet known, but in past UK general elections it has tended to be higher than the number of invalid votes in polling stations.[14] The 2017 CPA UK Election Assessment Mission recommended additional measures to educate voters and simplify postal voting statements and instructions, to minimise the number of incorrectly completed postal votes.

Short electoral deadlines posed a particular challenge for postal voting. The Electoral Commission has previously pointed out that overseas voters risk being disenfranchised because of the insufficient timeframe for them to receive and return their ballots.[15] Regrettably, data on the extent of such problems nationwide does not appear to be available, but **the Mission repeatedly heard concerns about delays in delivery of postal ballots to voters within the UK,** prompting fears that some of the returned ballots may not reach the electoral authorities within the statutory deadline of 10 pm on election day in order to be included in the ballot count. In response, several

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[12] See e.g. https://commonslibrary.parliament.uk/postal-voting-in-the-uk/
[13] Political campaigners are now banned from handling postal votes. Any voter may hand in no more than five postal votes in a polling station, in addition to their own.
[14] As referenced in the 2017 Election Assessment Mission Final Report in paragraph 3.09.
[15] The Electoral Commission, Report on the UK Parliamentary General Election 2019, pp. 7 – 8.

Mission interlocutors shared that a statutory requirement to include in the count all ballots mailed by a specific deadline could be considered.

> *Recommendation 5: Consider further measures to reduce the risk of voter disenfranchisement due to delays in processing of postal ballot applications and ballot delivery. Explore the feasibility of other arrangements such as early voting, an extension of proxy voting, or alternatives for the delivery and return of postal ballots, particularly for overseas voters.*

THE RIGHT TO VOTE AND VOTER REGISTRATION

Individuals aged 18 or over by election day have the right to vote in UK general elections if they are British, Irish, or qualifying Commonwealth citizens resident in the UK. British citizens living overseas who have previously been either registered to vote or resident in the UK, as well as service personnel stationed abroad, are also eligible to vote.

Eligible voters need to register in order to be able to exercise their right to vote. As of December 2023, there were over 49 million registered voters in the UK.[16] Registers of electors are maintained by local authorities, and the law provides for proactive measures to encourage eligible voters to register and update their data as part of an annual canvass conducted by the registration offices. **Mission interlocutors generally had confidence in the accuracy of voter registers**. In 2023, the Electoral Commission assessed accuracy of voter registers in Great Britain at 86 percent and in Northern Ireland at 83 percent.[17]

When it comes to the completeness of voter registers, the Mission learned that the rates of registration are lower for young voters as well as voters belonging to socially disadvantaged groups, which is a concern.[18] In this respect, **the Mission was pleased to hear about various local initiatives which encourage young voters to register, as well as pilot programmes with automatic pre-registration of voters using data from other public services**. On Election Day, Mission observers reported instances of some people leaving the polling station without being able to vote in nearly 41 percent of polling stations visited. In more than a third of these observations, such individuals were not on the list of registered voters.

> *Recommendation 6: Continue efforts to improve the accuracy and completeness of voter registers, including trialling initiatives to target underrepresented groups.*

By law, convicted individuals detained in prison and mental health hospitals are not eligible to vote in UK general elections. This prohibition does not apply to prisoners who are awaiting trial or sentencing (remand prisoners), as well as those in prison for failure to pay fines or debts, or for contempt of court. Offenders on home detention curfew or released on temporary licence may

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[16] Some 41 million voters are registered in England, 4.2 million – in Scotland, 2.4 million – in Wales, and 1.4 million – in Northern Ireland. See electoral statistics data from the Office for National Statistics.
[17] The Electoral Commission, 2023 report: Electoral registers in the UK.
[18] For example, while 96 percent of eligible voters aged over 65 are registered to vote in Great Britain, the figure for voters aged 18 to 19 is only 60 percent. See The Electoral Commission's 2023 report cited above.

register to vote.[19] While remand prisoners are entitled to vote, they face barriers in practice. **Mission observers visited one remand prison and found no measures in place to inform detainees of their right to vote or enfranchise them**.

Recommendation 7: Review the measures in place to facilitate the voting of remand prisoners in the UK.

PARTY AND CANDIDATE REGISTRATION

The Electoral Commission registers the political parties that aim to field candidates in parliamentary elections.**[20] Candidates are then in turn registered by the Returning Officer in their respective constituency.** Candidates can stand as party nominees or independents, and must all submit a £500 deposit, refundable to those who obtain more than 5% of the vote. They must be eligible voters, but individuals in some professions, such as members of the police or armed forces, civil servants and judges, as well as those subject to bankruptcy restrictions in England and Wales, who have had their estate sequestered in Scotland or been adjudged bankrupt in Northern Ireland, are not eligible to stand.

Although it is illegal to stand in more than one constituency, the **decentralised process does not facilitate an automatic crosscheck of names of candidates** standing in different constituencies: a problem laid bare in the case of Niko Omilana who convinced a number of individuals to legally adopt his name and register as candidates in ten constituencies, in addition to his own candidacy in a constituency where he competed against the outgoing Prime Minister.[21] While the matter was investigated by the police and no wrongdoing was found, it highlights potential benefits of a more coordinated approach or centralised information gathering in the process.

The process was inclusive overall, and no concerns were expressed by any of the Mission interlocutors. Of the 4,379 candidates running – the highest number ever in UK general elections – 923 stood as independents (some 21 percent), with five parties fielding candidates in close to 90 or more percent of the 650 constituencies.[22]

Some parties moved to prioritise women candidates, including by fielding them in the so-called winnable seats, but none reached parity in the numbers of women and men candidates.[23] Similarly, while more women than ever stood for election in 2024 overall, their share as candidates fell as compared to the last General Election in 2019. The outgoing legislature was the first in which women constituted more than a third of the membership.[24] There are no special measures in the

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[19] For detailed information on the issue of prisoners' voting rights in light of judgments by the European Court of Human Rights, see a research briefing by the House of Commons Library.

[20] Political parties can be included in separate registers for Great Britain and/or Northern Ireland.

[21] The outgoing Prime Minister Rishi Sunak won the seat for Richmond and Northallerton in North Yorkshire.

[22] The Labour Party nominated candidates in 631 constituencies, the Conservative and Liberal Democrats parties each in 630, Reform UK in 609, and the Green Party and the Scottish Green Party together nominated 618 overall (574 and 44 each respectively).

[23] According to Elect Her, a CSO that supports women candidates, some 30% of the candidates nominated by political parties were women. Among the parties, Labour nominated the highest number and share overall (46%), followed by Greens (43%), SNP (35%), Conservatives (34%), Liberal Democrats (28%), Plaid Cymru (25%) and Reform UK (16%).

[24] A total of 220 women were elected in 2019.

law to promote women in politics at any level in the UK, although legislative work on quotas was until recently underway in the Welsh *Senedd*.[25] **Several Mission interlocutors claimed that harassment and personal attacks, especially online, are more common against women, thus potentially also discouraging women candidates.**

Nonetheless, a record number of women were ultimately elected to office, with 263 winning seats on 4 July for a 40.5 percent share of the House of Commons.[26] Women make up nearly half of the new cabinet, including the prominent positions of Chancellor of the Exchequer and Deputy Prime Minister and Secretary of State for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities.[27]

Unlike in previous general elections, no scheme to facilitate the participation of candidates with disabilities was in place for the 2024 General Election, which some interlocutors described as negatively affecting the diversity and inclusiveness of the process.

> *Recommendation 8: Continue efforts by political parties and state actors to ensure that women and underrepresented groups do not face undue barriers and are able to meaningfully exercise their full franchise rights, including to stand as candidates, with the aim of fostering inclusive participation.*

CAMPAIGN

Campaigning may take place at any time, but the formal campaign period starts 25 days before election day. Most political parties published their manifestos in June and used them as the basis for their campaign messaging. Offline, parties and candidates campaigned door-to-door, leafletting and participating in hustings organised by a wide range of actors. Many used the provision afforded to candidates to send a limited number of their flyers to voters through the mail free of charge. Mission observers remarked on the relative invisibility of the outdoor campaign, which many interlocutors argued had increasingly moved online.

While television has long displaced print media as the main source of information in the UK, individuals now increasingly go online for news, including on social media platforms, which are especially popular with young people. Although political parties spent significant portions of their campaign budgets on online political advertising, mainly on social media, they also used organic content messaging to address voters.[28]

The Office for Communications (OFCOM), an oversight body for broadcast media, has specific rules in place to help ensure a level playing field for candidates, which includes measures to safeguard 'due impartiality.' Meanwhile, print and online media are largely unregulated. The 2022 legislative amendments extended the imprint requirement to online political advertising and organic content

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[25] Plans for a women's quota in the Welsh *Senedd* were postponed until the 2030 Elections in light of concerns about the bill's compliance with UK equality legislation.
[26] In 2019, 220 women were elected, for a 34 percent share of the House of Commons.
[27] Women hold more than half of the ministerial posts overall.
[28] Organic content is material shared by users on social media free of charge, as opposed to advertising that has been paid for.

published by or on behalf of a candidate.[29] However, legislation aimed at protecting the public from online harm, in particular the Online Safety Act, was not yet in effect for the 2024 General Election.

Although paid political advertising is not permitted on television and radio, both public and private media aired candidates' campaign broadcasts free of charge. Broadcasters organised candidate debates in line with OFCOM's rules and their own guidance, in the main tied to the level of past electoral support. **Several stakeholders representing new or small political parties, including those with representation at local government level, expressed dissatisfaction with both the impartiality formulas in place and the level of coverage they received in the media.**

Mission observers heard from many interlocutors about a **high level of hostility and anger marring the 2024 campaign.**[30] Some of the incidents reported in the media included physical violence against candidates, their staff and potential voters, including those that resulted in hospitalisation; vandalised offices; a bomb scare; and racist slurs at campaign events. Loud and at times aggressive demonstrations have in some instances drowned out campaign events, thus potentially violating the candidates' right to present their platforms.

According to interlocutors, **derisive speech and abuse, including death threats, were even more prevalent online.** While all candidates are potential targets, many held that women, minorities and the LGBTQ+ community were their prime targets. Media reported that some candidates opted out of participation in events due to growing concerns about their personal safety. In at least one case, a candidate requested police protection as part of their campaign activities.[31] Other candidates were said to have engaged private security services during their campaigns, e.g. when appearing at hustings. Some independent candidates were concerned about the requirement to include an address on the imprint – a problem that candidates nominated by political parties could bypass by designating the party HQ location.

What the new Home Secretary the Rt Hon Yvette Cooper MP described as an 'alarming rise' of threats and intimidation of candidates and politicians has continued to fuel a national conversation. Several politicians and civil society groups have called for a review of the scale of the problem, as well as both greater security measures for candidates and politicians, as well as more targeted attention directed at the root causes of the aggression.

> *Recommendation 9: Make concerted efforts to address growing concerns about violence, threats and intimidation during election campaigns, with the aim of protecting the democratic process and ensuring unhindered participation by all stakeholders.*

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[29] Imprints are specific details that need to be provided on certain campaign materials showing who is publishing it. The purpose of an imprint is to increase transparency for voters.

[30] For instance, the Mission heard a candidate's concerns about what she described as an Islamophobic attack on her in a local newspaper; several candidates said they had been accosted by members of the public during their campaign events, leading some to stop attending meetings with voters; another candidate claims to have been heckled in such a manner at an event that they henceforth sought police protection when meetings groups of voters. Several interlocutors described the ways in which the war in Gaza was fuelling discord and tensions across their local communities. Some non-government organisations (NGOs) also claimed that gender identity issues were at times addressed by candidates or prospective voters in ways that sowed discord. Conversely, the Mission learned of several efforts by civil society organisations to foster dialogue and improve community relations, including during the election campaign.

[31] Media reported some candidates' claims that police protection was not always forthcoming.

Conversely, some **stakeholders shared that their earlier concerns about the spread of disinformation, so-called deepfakes and foreign interference in the campaign, had not materialised so far** to the expected degree.

ELECTION DAY: OPENING

The Mission observed opening in a total of 18 polling locations. In some of these locations there were multiple polling stations in the same premises. They all opened on time at 7am with all staff, materials and relevant display notices in place, after performing the required verifications and checks. Ballot boxes were shown to be empty and then sealed, as witnessed by Mission observers in all but four cases. While unauthorised persons were present in three observations, none interfered with the process. The observed polling locations were accessible to voters with limited mobility, but some access ramps were not always stable, and several polling locations did not have the equipment in place to facilitate independent participation of voters with visual or hearing disabilities. Although one Mission team rated the polling staff's knowledge of procedures and management of opening as bad/poor, **all thought the process was very good (12) or good (6) overall.**

Polling stations open for voters in various parts of the UK.

ELECTION DAY: VOTING

Voting was observed at 263 locations.[32] Polling stations were clearly marked, in all but nine cases. In one instance a polling station was found to have moved location, with a small number of voters claiming that they had not been notified of the change.[33] In a small number of cases, Mission observers found the polling station premises to be too small for the number of voters present, and the level of noise and activity in the space risked disturbing the flow of voters or compromising ballot secrecy.[34]

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[32] The statistics presented here are the returned responses from the field. Observer teams visited 263 polling locations overall, however not all teams returned answers to all questions. The small number of minor discrepancies between the aggregated and disaggregated figures occurred when observers did not return responses to some questions and/or sub-questions on their observation forms. They do not impact the overall findings.

[33] A Mission observer team learnt that in one case prior to Election Day a decision had been made to no longer use a synagogue as a polling station due to security concerns, and to move the polling station to another location. Some voters carried polling cards that erroneously instructed them to vote on the premises of the synagogue.

[34] For instance, in some cases the polling stations were in entrance halls to public buildings, with users passing through the corridors in groups or on the phone, which could be disturbing.

Although queues of voters were witnessed in most cases, they generally included only a few voters. Party agents were on site in more than 20 percent of the observed polling stations (56 polling stations in total): most represented the Greens (36) and Labour (28). Observers other than Mission teams were seen in only three percent of observations.
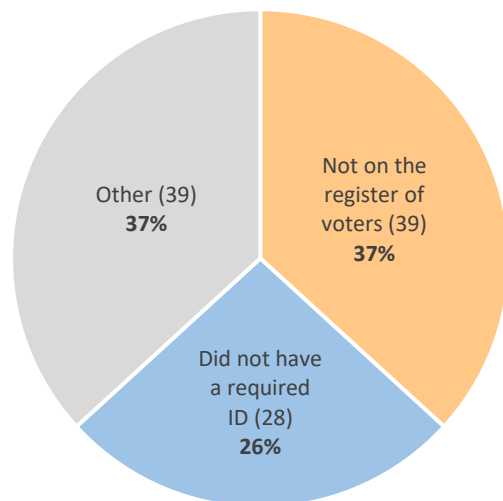

Observers recording their findings after observing the polling station proceedings.

Individual procedures were applied correctly in nearly all the polling stations visited by the Mission. Voter ID was checked in all but one case. In some 41 percent of the polling stations, observers witnessed at least one voter being turned away, for the most part because they were not on the register (reported from 39 polling stations), in several instances because they were unaware of their ineligibility to vote, or because they did not have a required photo ID (28 polling stations).

Polling stations where at least one person was turned away:

At least one person turned away (107)
41%

No one turned away (155)
59%
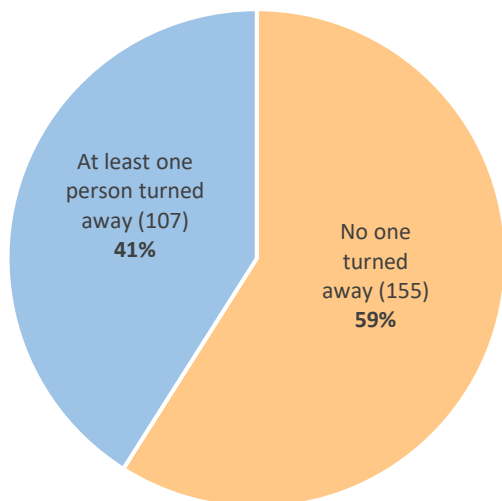
Reasons for being turned away from polling stations:

Other (39)
37%

Not on the register of voters (39)
37%

Did not have a required ID (28)
26%

In several locations, voter information notices were available in languages other than English or Welsh (in Wales), among others in Arabic, Gaelic, Mandarin, and Polish, but also in pictorial form. The inconsistency in the availability of such materials was reportedly down to the guidance

provided and materials issued by different Returning Officers. One team remarked that forms meant to capture data for the evaluation of the voter ID requirement were in several cases either not present or polling staff did not know about them.

In a number of locations, Mission observers saw the voter registers in an electronic format, with polling staff using tablets to process electors, which also allowed them to partly complete parts of the closing process automatically. While observers reported that the use of the tablets was welcomed by polling staff because it increased efficiency and minimised opportunities for errors, at least one team remarked that it may reduce transparency.

Secrecy of the ballot was not upheld in some 17 percent of observations. Where violations occurred, this was in the main because of poor layout (18 polling stations) or voters' poor handling of the ballot (15), e.g. failure to fold it.

Polling stations where the secrecy of the ballot was not upheld on at least one occasion:

Violations of secrecy (44)
17%

No violations of secrecy (217)
83%
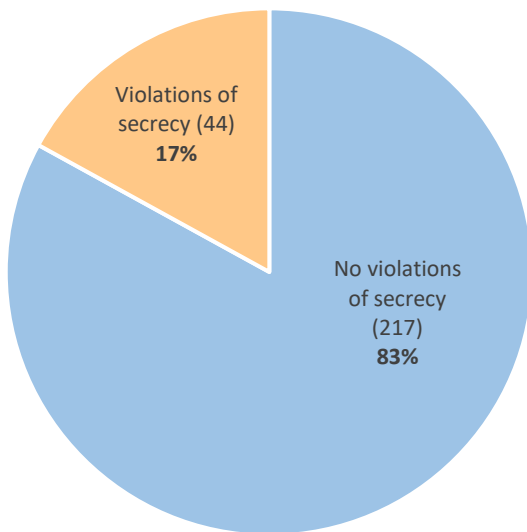
Reasons for the secrecy of the ballot not being upheld:

Other (12)
27%

Poor layout (18)
40%

Voters' poor handling of the ballot (15)
33%
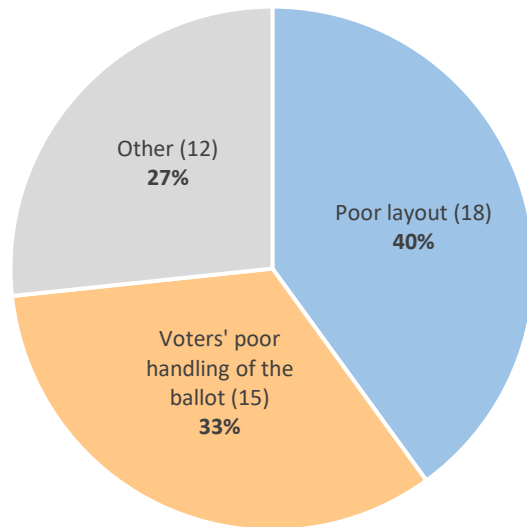
Cases of 'family voting', i.e. where more than one person entered the voting booth, were witnessed by the Mission in some 35 observations (14 percent). Together, these findings suggest deficits that require further attention of the authorities.[35] Concerns about secrecy of the vote and family voting were raised by previous CPA Missions observing UK General Elections in 2015 and 2017, in both cases with topical recommendations.[36]

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[35] This was the first general election since the adoption of the 2023 Ballot Secrecy Act, which criminalises some violations and establishes a list of sanctions. While some interlocutors expected it to have some effect, the above finding suggest a need for greater effort to stem secrecy of the vote irregularities and the practice of family voting.

[36] Secrecy of the vote is addressed in recommendation No. 6 in the Final Report from 2017, and recommendation No. 5 in the Final Report from the 2015 observation.

> *Recommendation 10: Continue actions to avoid violations of ballot secrecy and incidences of family voting, including through the training of polling station staff and awareness-raising campaigns for voters.*

The vast majority (92 percent) of the observed polling stations were accessible to voters with reduced mobility, though this was not always clearly marked. Tools to aid voters with hearing or visual impairments were found in a similar share of locations. Assistance was provided to voters who needed help casting their ballot in accordance with procedures in most cases, except in just under 4 percent of observations.[37]

Overall, Mission observers deemed the administration of the process to be very good or good in 154 and 86 observations respectively (94 percent), and bad in 15 observations (6 percent). Several observer teams noted the Presiding Officers' excellent managerial and people skills, which greatly facilitated the process. Voters' understanding of the procedures was overwhelmingly very good or good in 155 and 93 cases (98 percent), and bad in 6 cases (2 percent). The process was transparent or very transparent in all but three cases (1 percent), with **the overall impression of the voting process assessed as very good and good in 157 and 90 cases respectively (over 96 percent), and bad in 10 (less than 4 percent).**

Some of the Mission observers remarked that the lived experience of voting was sometimes remarkably different from one polling station or constituency to the next, highlighting the decentralised nature of the administration of UK general elections.

ELECTION DAY: CLOSING, VERIFICATION AND COUNT

The Mission observed closing in 17 polling locations and assessed the process positively in all but three of these.[38] Polling stations closed on time in all cases except for one, which closed 10 minutes too early. Polling staff were mostly familiar with the closing procedures and did not have issues with the ballot paper account and other forms. Ballot boxes were sealed and kept safe for transportation. The process was carried out swiftly and efficiently. The Mission observers' three negative assessments were primarily due to polling staff not following the procedures properly, such as closing the polling station before 10 pm (one case, as above), leaving the ballot box unsealed and out of sight during the closing process (one case), as well as difficulties with filling the ballot paper account and other forms (one case).

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[37] The Mission witnessed voters requesting assistance in 148 of the 263 observations of voting at polling stations, with procedures correctly followed in 139. Most instances when procedures were not followed were cases of 'family voting' with persons accompanying voters and providing assistance informally.

[38] In some of these locations there were multiple polling stations in the same premises.

Observers outside a polling station (left) and present at a counting centre (right).

The process was assessed positively in all eight verification and count centres visited by the Mission observers. Transparency was ensured for the candidates' agents and the process was well organised. In one count centre the Mission observers were initially asked to remain on the balcony and had to negotiate their access to the count floor. The count of votes began within four hours of the close of polls, in keeping with a general requirement, in all but one instance.[39]

In all observations the ballots were first counted and reconciled with the ballot paper account. The Mission observers noted that ballot boxes were not routinely shown to be empty during this process. In three count centres, Mission observers noted that instances of discrepancies in polling station accounts were found by the counting staff; these were followed by re-counts and further addressed in accordance with the prescribed procedures. During counts, doubtful ballots were adjudicated in a transparent, consistent and fair fashion. No complaints were made in any of the count centres during the Mission observation.

Observers in Westminster Hall in the UK Houses of Parliament on the day after Election Day.

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[39] In one counting centre the count began at around 2.15am, roughly 15 minutes later that the four-hour timeframe to begin the count.

RECOMMENDATIONS

1. **LEGAL FRAMEWORK:** Consider the Law Commissions' proposal for a legislative act that will consolidate UK electoral legislation, clearly setting out the fundamental provisions applicable to all elections and facilitate their consistent and uniform implementation.

2. **THE ROLE OF THE ELECTORAL COMMISSION:** Consider the Electoral Commission having a greater role in collecting and publishing data, including providing centralised information on candidates, such as gender and age.

3. **THE INDEPENDENCE OF THE ELECTORAL COMMISSION:** Review the rationale for the Electoral Commission's Strategy and Policy Statement and consider the Commission's view that the statement be abolished to safeguard its independence.

4. **ELECTION OBSERVATION IN THE UK:** Revise the existing provisions to explicitly facilitate the observation of the entire election process and the option of extending invitations to observer groups. Train election administrators in the roles and responsibilities of election observers.

5. **POSTAL VOTING:** Consider further measures to reduce the risk of voter disenfranchisement due to delays in processing of postal ballot applications and ballot delivery. Explore the feasibility of other arrangements such as early voting, an extension of proxy voting, or alternatives for the delivery and return of postal ballots, particularly for overseas voters.

6. **VOTER REGISTERS:** Continue efforts to improve the accuracy and completeness of voter registers, including trialling initiatives to target underrepresented groups.

7. **VOTING OF REMAND PRISONERS:** Review the measures in place to facilitate the voting of remand prisoners in the UK.

8. **INCLUSIVE PARTICIPATION:** Continue efforts by political parties and state actors to ensure that women and underrepresented groups do not face undue barriers and are able to meaningfully exercise their full franchise rights, including to stand as candidates, with the aim of fostering inclusive participation.

9. **PROTECTING THE DEMOCRATIC PROCESS:** Make concerted efforts to address growing concerns about violence, threats and intimidation during election campaigns, with the aim of protecting the democratic process and ensuring unhindered participation by all stakeholders.

10. **SECRECY OF THE BALLOT:** Continue actions to avoid violations of ballot secrecy and incidences of family voting, including through the training of polling station staff and awareness-raising campaigns for voters.

CPA BIMR Election Observation Services

The first objective of the BIMR Strategy is to strengthen parliaments and the skills of their members. As part of this work, CPA BIMR facilitates election observations when invited to do so.

For more information about these services, please contact the CPA BIMR Secretariat at:
cpabimr@parliament.uk.

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