

# FINANCING ELECTORAL MANAGEMENT BODY AND ELECTORAL ACTIVITY COSTS IN THE UNITED KINGDOM

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## 1. HISTORICAL, POLITICAL AND ECONOMIC CONTEXT

The United Kingdom is a constitutional parliamentary monarchy, with King Charles III as the head of state. There are elections for the main legislature, the House of Commons, from which the government is drawn. The second chamber, the House of Lords, consists of life peers (currently 667)—who have been appointed by the government, whether the current or previous administrations—as well as hereditary peers (89) and bishops (24).

Elections to the House of Commons operate on a single-member district basis for 650 parliamentary seats. Elections must take place every five years, but can take place earlier if the government of the day asks the monarch to dissolve parliament early. There has been a considerable move towards devolution in the UK, however, and this has created new elected bodies. In 1998, the Scotland Act established a parliament in Scotland, which uses the additional member system (also known as mixed member proportional) to elect Members of the Scottish Parliament. In the same year, the Government of Wales Act established a Welsh Assembly, which subsequently came to be called the Senedd, where an additional member system is also used. A Northern Ireland Assembly was established by the Northern Ireland (Elections) Act 1998. However, the Assembly has been suspended for protracted periods (2002–2007, 2020–2022 and 2022–2024) because of political problems. The Scottish and Welsh governments have seen their powers and responsibilities grow since being first established. There is no parallel system for English devolution.

Local government has been a permanent feature of UK governance and democracy. In its modern form, it is often dated to the middle of the 18th

century, when municipal boroughs and corporations were created in towns and cities to deal with the pressing problems of law and order, health and overcrowding that came with industrialization. In the period after 1945, municipal boroughs and corporations were also responsible for delivering key parts of the welfare state (Stoker 1991). Their structure and role have changed significantly in recent years, however. The organizational structure also varies enormously across the UK. There are 317 local authorities in England, across five different types (county, district, unitary, metropolitan and London boroughs) (Department for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities 2023a). There are 22 unitary authorities in Wales (Welsh Government 2021), 32 unitary authorities in Scotland (Scottish Government n.d.) and 11 local authorities in Northern Ireland. There are also community-level units beneath all of these authorities. The electoral cycle, electoral system and governance arrangements vary across all these bodies.

The UK was one of the earliest countries to democratize and to introduce democratic electoral reforms, according to many accounts of the history of democracy and elections. Historically, international assessments of the UK have long rated the UK as a high-quality democracy—throughout the 20th and early 21st century. However, increased concerns have been raised in recent years about the quality of democracy in the UK (James 2023).

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Historically, the UK has been categorized as a highly developed country economically. However, the UK was severely affected by both the 2007–2008 global financial crisis and the subsequent Great Recession. The economy went into recession during 2008–2009. Gross domestic product (GDP) shrank by more than 6 per cent and it took the economy five years to return to its pre-recession size (ONS 2018). The policy response from the national government elected in 2010 was to focus on reducing public expenditure, which meant cuts to overall budgets for local authorities and many other public bodies (Berry 2016). In 2020, the UK's departure from the European Union (Buigut and Kapar 2023) and the Covid-19 pandemic (ONS 2020) created further economic shocks, and the economy entered recession again that year. The Ukraine war caused record-breaking levels of inflation in the UK during 2022–2023 (Harari 2022, 2023). Government debt levels have been a key concern of central government policy.

The combination of these developments has created huge financial pressures on local government, which plays a central role in delivering elections. It has been estimated that local government spending power was reduced by 31 per cent between 2009/10 and 2021/22 (Atkins and Hoddinott 2023). This was before the inflationary pressures arising from the Russian invasion of Ukraine. Cost pressures from a growing population, a rising demand for services, and disputes over equal pay have all added additional pressures. In September 2023, Birmingham, one of the UK's largest councils, issued a Section 114 notice (meaning that a local authority is about to incur expenditure that is unlawful because it would exceed their budget, and this is not allowed) to central government, effectively declaring itself 'bankrupt' because of an GBP 87 million funding gap (Sandford 2023).

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## 2. ELECTORAL MANAGEMENT BODY RESPONSIBILITIES

Elections have historically been run by returning officers (ROs), who are appointed by local authorities. They are responsible for the conduct of the poll and have some discretion over the timing of the count. An electoral registration officer (ERO) is responsible for compiling the electoral register. Both ROs and EROs are local government employees but are independent of both the central and local governments with respect to their electoral duties. They are instead accountable to the courts system as independent statutory officers, and can be prosecuted for being in breach of their duties.

EROs and ROs implement elections according to electoral law, which is passed by the UK Parliament (for UK parliamentary elections and many other elections). In practice, these laws are shaped by the UK Government. Central government is supported by government departments. At the time of writing, the Department for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities holds responsibility for elections. In 2000, the Electoral Commission was set up in the UK, to provide advice and guidance on election administration and to regulate the financing of political parties. The Electoral Administration Act 2006 amended the Political Parties, Elections and Referendums Act 2000 to give the Electoral Commission the power to set performance standards for ROs, EROs and referendum counting officers. These have been an important way for the Electoral Commission to manage electoral administrators, without having formal control. The Electoral Commission does not, however, directly intervene in the funding of elections, although it is responsible for overseeing any referendums. The Electoral Commission's formal independence was removed by the Elections Act 2022, making it subject to a strategy and policy statement set by ministers from the UK Government outlining the priorities of the government relating to elections, referendums and other matters of which the Electoral Commission has responsibility.

There are some important electoral management variations across the UK. In England and Wales, the ERO and RO role is often performed by the same person working within the same local authority. However, in Scotland, electoral registration is organized by Valuation Joint Boards, which undertake the task of valuing properties for the purpose of local taxation. The assessor in charge of the Valuation Joint Board is therefore the ERO. In Northern Ireland, a chief electoral officer acts as both the RO and ERO. They are supported by the Electoral Office for Northern Ireland and appointed by the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland.

The Scottish Parliament and the Senedd have the legal capacity to alter the electoral laws for elections to their own institutions, but also for local government elections within their nations. New electoral organizations in Scotland and Wales have recently been established to help coordinate elections within their territories. Scotland was the first, with the Electoral Management Board for Scotland. This was created by the Scottish Government in the Scottish Parliament (Local Electoral Administration (Scotland) Act 2011), with the aim of supporting local authorities and promoting best practice. It is

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**The Electoral Commission does not directly intervene in the funding of elections.**

convened by an RO, who is appointed by ministers. The Electoral Management Board for Scotland has a statutory power of direction over local ROs in local government elections. In Wales, the Elections Planning Group (comprising the Welsh Government, the Electoral Commission, representatives of the political parties and ROs) meets to agree on uniform approaches to local and Welsh Assembly elections, such as the timing of the count. The group has no statutory power. However, legislation is under consideration to establish a Welsh electoral management body with statutory powers—thus consolidating the body (Welsh Government 2023).

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### 3. THE PUBLIC FINANCIAL MANAGEMENT FRAMEWORK

How are elections funded? There are an increasing range of organizations involved in funding elections in the UK because of an increase in the number and type of elections held. The arrangements for funding elections are therefore complex.

Expenditure is categorized into two broad categories—electoral registration and the election itself. Tables 1 and 2 detail the typical costs that are involved for each category, and the respective funder. As Table 1 shows, electoral registration is funded by the respective local authority in England and Wales; Valuation Joint Boards in Scotland and the Chief Electoral Officer for Northern Ireland in Northern Ireland—the organizational form varies across the UK (as noted in section 1).

**Table 1. Funders of electoral registration across the UK**

Typical costs	Nation	Funder
• Staffing cost for the core team	England	Local authorities
• Mail	Wales	Local authorities
• Canvassing	Scotland	Valuation Joint Boards
• Designing and printing	Northern Ireland	Chief Electoral Officer for Northern Ireland
• Queries and appeals		
• Publicity and outreach		

Source: Author, based on: James, T. S. and Jervier, T., *The Cost of Elections: Funding Electoral Services in England and Wales* (London: ClearView Research, 2017a).

The funding of elections varies, as Table 2 shows, with the UK Government paying the costs of running an election to the UK Parliament, for example. In practice, the expenditure is incurred by the local authority but then reclaimed from the government department after the election. Ahead of each election, the government passes a piece of legislation making financial provision for

the election. This will contain the ‘maximum recoverable allowance’ (MRA) for each RO—an upper limit on the expenditure that they can reclaim from the government, classified as their expenses. In addition to the direct costs involved in running elections, legislation allows the RO to claim charges for their services rendered. This is a payment for the work that they undertake, reflecting also their personal liability for the election.

There have often been additional resources made available by the respective national and devolved governments and the Electoral Commission for specific issues or for the implementation of specific reforms. For example, UK central government through the Cabinet Office provided substantial additional funding for the implementation of individual electoral registration in Britain after 2014. A New Burden fund was established to help cover the costs of new voter identification and accessibility requirements that arose from the Elections Act 2022 (Department for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities 2023b).

**Table 2. Funders of elections across the UK**

Typical costs	Election type	Funder
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Staffing</li> <li>• Designing and printing of electoral stationery, such as ballots and poll cards</li> <li>• Hiring premises for polling stations and counting venues</li> </ul>	Westminster parliamentary	UK Government
	European parliamentary	UK Government
	Scottish parliamentary	Scottish Government
	Welsh Government	Welsh Government
	Local government	Local authority
	London Mayoral and Assembly	Greater London Authority
	Police and Crime Commissioner elections	UK Government
	Parish and community	Parish or community council

Source: Author, based on: James, T. S. and Jervier, T., *The Cost of Elections: Funding Electoral Services in England and Wales* (London: ClearView Research, 2017a).

#### 4. EXPENDITURE DATA ON ELECTIONS

Expenditure on elections in the UK is not published in a full and comprehensive way. This is partly the result of the complex and disaggregated funding systems, but also because organizations have been slow or reluctant to proceed with this and have not prioritized the publication of this information.

The UK Government has published reports on expenditure involved in the 2014 European parliamentary elections (HM Government 2016), 2015 UK parliamentary election (HM Government 2018) and the 2016 Police and Crime

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Commissioner elections (HM Government 2022). These reports provide detailed breakdowns of expenditure for electoral areas. With regard to the 2015 UK parliamentary election, Table 3 summarizes the cost by area and Figure 1 provides a pie chart of the proportion of the overall costs involved.

**Table 3. Expenditure at the 2015 UK parliamentary election by election area**

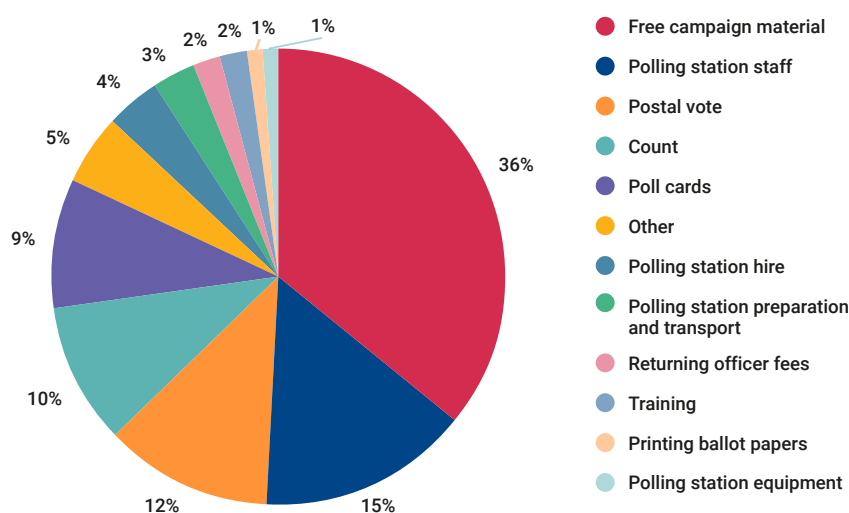
<b>Area</b>	<b>Expenditure (GBP)</b>
Free campaign material	41,610,000
Polling station staff	17,257,635
Postal vote	14,247,489
Count	11,688,320
Poll cards	9,847,173
Other	5,336,771
Polling station hire	5,195,895
Printing ballot papers	3,026,868
Polling station preparation and transport	2,898,804
Returning officer fees	2,444,944
Training	2,317,547
Polling station equipment	1,310,447

Source: Author, based on data in: HM Government, *The Costs of the 2015 UK Parliamentary General Election* (London: HM Government, 2018), <[https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/media/5b1e95cf40f0b634d557afc6/The\\_Costs\\_of\\_the\\_2015\\_UK\\_Parliamentary\\_General\\_Election.pdf](https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/media/5b1e95cf40f0b634d557afc6/The_Costs_of_the_2015_UK_Parliamentary_General_Election.pdf)>, accessed 22 February 2024.

For more recent elections, only the MRA published in legislation is available. For example, the Parliamentary Elections (Returning Officers' Charges) Order 2019 details this by parliamentary constituency for the 2019 UK parliamentary election. The amounts allocated by local government units for local elections are not available.

There have been some specific research projects collecting information to plug the gaps. The UK's Electoral Commission published a report on the cost of electoral administration more broadly in 2012. It collected data from EROs and ROs, at the end of each financial year from 2007/08 to 2010/11. It reported expenditure of GBP 106.7 million on elections in 2010—also the year of a UK parliamentary election. Spending on voter registration was more consistent across the four reported financial years—increasing from GBP 81.1 million in 2007/08 to GBP 85.5 million in 2010/11 (Electoral Commission 2012: 11).

**Figure 1. Expenditure at the 2015 UK parliamentary election by election area (percentage)**



Source: Author, based on data in: HM Government, *The Costs of the 2015 UK Parliamentary General Election* (London: HM Government, 2018), <[https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/media/5b1e95cf40f0b634d557afc6/The\\_Costs\\_of\\_the\\_2015\\_UK\\_Parliamentary\\_General\\_Election.pdf](https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/media/5b1e95cf40f0b634d557afc6/The_Costs_of_the_2015_UK_Parliamentary_General_Election.pdf)>, accessed 22 February 2024.

Voter registration data was also reported in academic and civil society reports on funding elections (James and Jervier 2017a, 2017b). Most recently, Democracy Volunteers used freedom of information requests to survey local authorities. It reported that the average budget for election services teams was GBP 257,070 in 2021 for local authorities in England (Democracy Volunteers 2021).

## 5. NEGOTIATING THE PUBLIC FINANCIAL MANAGEMENT FRAMEWORK

The dispersed nature of election funding in the UK means that there is no single place where budgets are decided and set. Government ministers and civil servants in the respective administrations play a critical role in setting the budgetary framework for elections and are therefore the crucial actor. A range of other actors seek to influence the budgetary process at a general level by pushing for more money to be allocated for elections. The Department for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities, as the relevant government department, is likely to receive representations from organizations such as the Association of Electoral Administrators, Solace and the Local Government Association, who have publicly pointed to the need for more money to be allocated. However, there is no formal negotiation or consultation process. At the UK level, the figures are simply announced in legislation. The value of the MRA is emailed to local officials once it is set. The mathematical formula or method used to calculate the figures is not publicly available. The approach

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taken is to base the figure on a previous settled expenditure for the same type of poll in turn uplifted to account for a number of variables, such as inflation, postal price changes, size of electorate, number of postal voters etc. Econometric analysis shows that levels of funding are related to the number of ethnic minority voters and regional effects rather than socio-economic and political factors (Clark 2023).

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### **Budgets for electoral registration are determined at a local level.**

As noted above, budgets for electoral registration are determined at a local level. Negotiations therefore tend to be internal to a specific local authority. Electoral services departments are usually set a budget by the local authority based on the budget for the previous year. Often, this does not account for population growth, which can create more electors and costs. The budget can also be reduced slightly if the local authority is looking to save costs across the whole of its jurisdiction. The practice can vary by area, but typically the Head of Legal Democratic Services would discuss the budget with the financial team within the local authority. This would not always include the electoral services team. The ERO and RO are often not directly involved, and it is exceptionally rare for elected councillors to be involved. However, despite instruction to not exceed a budget, overspends are common and officials often operate on the principle that elections must be delivered and if the cost is higher then additional funds are made available. Councils may trigger internal scrutiny processes if there is an overspend that needs to be justified and accounted for.

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## **6. PRESSURES ON AND CONCERNS ABOUT UK ELECTORAL FUNDING**

There are a number of pressures on and tensions in the funding system for elections across the UK.

### **Transparency concerns**

Expenditure on voter registration is not routinely published. It has only become available because of ad hoc research projects undertaken by civil society groups and academics, who have relied upon freedom of information requests (Democracy Volunteers 2021; James and Jervier 2017a, 2017b), since the Electoral Commission's research on the topic has been irregular (Electoral Commission 2012). Information about the expenditure on elections is also very irregularly published by the respective UK, Welsh and Scottish governments.

There have also been concerns raised that ROs in large authorities have been receiving high fees because of the size of the regions and the increased frequency of the elections. It has been unclear how much of the MRA for services has been reclaimed by the RO as a personal income, and how much has been used to employ other staff. See Figure 2 for an overview of MRA in specific local authorities in 2019 where a standalone parliamentary election was held. The payment is in addition to their staff salary, which is usually high since they hold senior positions within the council (Local Government and Communities Committee 2017). Greater transparency could allay any concerns.



**Figure 2. Parliamentary Elections (Returning Officers' Charges) Order 2019**

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SCHEDULE		Articles 3(1), 4(1) and 5	
Overall maximum recoverable amounts and maximum recoverable amounts for specified services and specified expenses for each constituency where a parliamentary election is a standalone poll			
1	2	3	4
<i>Constituency</i>	<i>Maximum recoverable amount for the specified services</i>	<i>Maximum recoverable amount for the specified expenses</i>	<i>Overall maximum recoverable amount</i>
Aberavon	£2,500	£135,553	£138,053
Aberconwy	£2,500	£96,928	£99,428
Aberdeen North	£2,988	£207,300	£210,288
Aberdeen South	£3,124	£208,064	£211,188
Airdrie and Shotts	£3,085	£215,943	£219,028
Aldershot	£3,664	£145,798	£149,463
Aldridge-Brownhills	£2,903	£115,427	£118,330
Altrincham and Sale West	£3,521	£186,044	£189,565
Alyn and Deeside	£3,030	£117,654	£120,684
Amber Valley	£3,273	£159,928	£163,201
Angus	£3,070	£185,704	£188,774
Arfon	£2,500	£81,212	£83,712
Argyll and Bute	£3,233	£269,200	£272,433
Arundel and South Downs	£3,822	£152,164	£155,986
Ashfield	£3,754	£187,309	£191,064
Ashford	£4,202	£198,235	£202,437
Ashton-under-Lyne	£3,254	£128,765	£132,019
Aylesbury	£3,969	£163,198	£167,167
Ayr, Carrick and Cumnock	£3,426	£189,944	£193,369
Banbury	£4,031	£244,761	£248,792
Banff and Buchan	£3,251	£168,495	£171,746
Barking	£3,704	£186,386	£190,090
Barnsley Central	£3,087	£168,383	£171,470
Barnsley East	£3,328	£162,099	£165,427
Barrow and Furness	£3,341	£131,527	£134,868
Basildon and Billericay	£3,325	£122,725	£126,050
Basingstoke	£3,937	£170,102	£174,039

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Source: Parliamentary Elections (Returning Officers' Charges) Order 2019, 4 November 2019, <<https://www.legislation.gov.uk/ukxi/2019/1454/contents/made>>, accessed 9 April 2024.

### Rising costs

There is evidence that the cost of running elections and voter registration has increased in recent years.

One cause of increased costs has been new legislation. The introduction of individual electoral registration along with online voter registration increased costs substantially after it was introduced in Great Britain in 2014 because it made the registration process more bureaucratic (James 2019). This was reduced considerably by a reformed canvass process, which enabled the automatic re-registration of electors whose details could be verified using other data sources (Cabinet Office 2016).

More recently, the Elections Act 2022 removed the 15-year limit for overseas electors, potentially increasing the number of overseas electors whose applications would need to be processed and whose ballot papers would need to be posted overseas. The Act required postal votes to be renewed every three years instead of five. The Act also introduced voter identification requirements for the first time. This has resulted in requirements for additional staff to be employed at polling stations to check identity documents. The full effects of these measures on costs are unknown at the time of writing.

There has also been a long-term increase in the number of postal votes and postal vote applications since the system was introduced at the beginning of the 21st century. In the May 2023 local elections, 19 per cent of electors were issued with postal votes (Electoral Commission 2023). The administration of postal vote applications is covered by local authorities under voter registration activities and therefore came from their budgets.

There can also be substantial increases in the number of electors within an electoral district, as a result of new building and planning developments. This brings increased costs in terms of electoral registration activities and the number of polling staff and stations required. The UK saw population growth of 6 per cent from 2011 to 2021 (ONS 2022).

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### Delays and disputed claims

Electoral officials have often raised concerns that their claims take a long time to be reimbursed by central government—or they are not fully reimbursed at all. This has left local authorities paying some of the real costs of parliamentary elections. If equipment is bought, under the claims process, it has to be proven that it was bought solely for the reason of the specific election. For example: The 2019 UK parliamentary election was held in winter. Torches and heating items were required for some polling stations, which would not normally be needed for an election held in May when UK general elections are conventionally held (when it is warmer). Claims for reimbursements were declined in many local authorities because torches could be used at other elections—therefore a reimbursement will only cover an element of the cost.

Disputes about who should cover costs have increased, partly due to the blurring of the distinction between electoral registration costs and election

costs. Electoral registration has increasingly become seasonal in nature. Seasonal voter registration has become the reality, as a result of a move to online voter registration in 2014, combined with a large number of people missing from the electoral rolls (roughly 8 million people are estimated to be not registered or incorrectly registered in the UK). This means that hundreds of thousands of voter registration applications can be made in the period immediately after a major national election has been called—up to just days before the election itself. Consequently voter registration work increases substantially when there is an election. The Association of Electoral Administrators has therefore called for a mechanism for funding electoral registration where it can be demonstrated those costs can be recovered, as well as a more efficient system for reimbursing councils (AEA 2023).

### Civil society contributing

There are a variety of services to voters that are typically provided by statutory bodies in many democracies, but in the UK are provided by civil society groups (James and Bernal 2023). Voter registration drives and voter outreach work are commonly undertaken by civil society groups, such as the Politics Project. An online tool to provide voters with their polling station location is provided by Democracy Club. On the one hand, this illustrates a rich civil society, but it also demonstrates that civil society is being forced to plug important gaps in state provision at elections. The lack of availability of resources is commonly cited as one reason why public organizations are not providing these services.

### Insufficient resources

As a result of the above factors, local authorities have often flagged that they do not receive enough funds to run elections. For example, only 43 per cent of local authorities agreed that they had received sufficient funds to run the Brexit referendum in 2016 and 24 per cent agreed that there was sufficient funding for voter registration (James and Clark 2020: 196). There has been increasing evidence of local authorities' expenditure going over budget. This matters because the volume of financial resources allocated has been directly linked to meeting performance standards that local officials have been set (Clark 2014, 2017). Areas that have been subject to budgetary cuts have also cut voter outreach activities (James and Jervier 2017b). As one senior official put it:

The Council is obligated to put its resources at disposal of their Returning Officer to deliver the election. However, local government resources are increasingly under pressure and simply there's not the free resources in most cases now to deliver or to support the election. Councils can't afford to divert resources away from day-to-day activity to go and operate the election, so increasingly there's a pressure on the delivery of elections and returning officers.

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## 7. CONCLUSION

The system for funding elections in the UK is fragmented, complex and in need of reform. There are a huge number of organizations and types of elections involved. There is a lack of transparent and regularly accessible data about how much money is being spent. There is evidence that many parts of the electoral system are under-funded and in need of greater investment. The electoral system relies greatly on civil society in-kind contributions, and there are parts of the system that are under strain and are at risk of not successfully delivering a high-profile election. Given the ‘winner takes all’ nature of many UK elections, this could be catastrophic and create a contested election.

The UK electoral system has Victorian origins and there has been no root and branch review of election funding since it was first established. Instead, a greater volume and variety of elections, electoral rules and new organizational bodies have been layered on top of the system. There is undoubtedly more that existing bodies—such as government departments, the Electoral Commission and the respective local officials—could do to report their election expenditure through new regular reporting mechanisms. However, the absence of legal requirements to do this means that it is unlikely to be done. A serious review and reform of the system is therefore long overdue.

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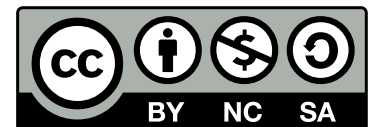
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