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# BRITAIN: POSTPONEMENT, COMPLEXITY AND SUB-NATIONAL ELECTIONS IN THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC

Case Study, 29 April 2022

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## INTRODUCTION

Given the novelty of the coronavirus and uncertainty about its spread, Covid-19 was always likely to hit social, economic and political interaction hard. Most countries due to hold elections early in 2020 either made rapid changes to voting methods and processes, or rescheduled them for later in the year (International IDEA 2020; James and Alihodzic 2020). Towards the end of March, England eventually followed suit, postponing a range of local and other elections by one year (from May 2020 to 6 May 2021) despite a recommendation from the UK Electoral Commission that the postponement be shorter. This can be seen as considerably out of step with international practice. However, the new schedule was adhered to, and with elections for the devolved parliaments in Scotland and Wales also held in May 2021, in line with a fixed five-year basis, the whole of Britain was at the polls on the same day a year and a half into the pandemic.<sup>1</sup>

This case study reviews the UK Government's decision to postpone the May 2020 sub-national elections in England, placing it in international context, and discusses the challenges that electoral administrators and policymakers faced in preparing for major elections in England, Scotland and Wales in May 2021. The account proceeds as follows. The second section considers how British elections are run, before moving on to discuss the process leading to postponement of England's May 2020 local elections in the third section. The fourth section examines the plans to hold these major elections across Britain in May 2021. The fifth section goes on to assess whether the preparations

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<sup>1</sup> This paper discusses elections in Great Britain i.e. Scotland, Wales and England. The UK is distinct from Great Britain, however, and also comprises Northern Ireland. There were no elections in Northern Ireland during the period discussed. Consequently, Northern Ireland is not covered by the discussion here.

put in place successfully preserved some key aspects of electoral integrity. To do so, we draw from the results of a survey of poll workers undertaken at the May 2021 elections, which we undertook in collaboration with the Electoral Commission. This covered England, Wales and Scotland and included responses from upwards of 4,000 officials. The conclusion reflects on lessons learned more broadly for electoral integrity under difficult, uncertain and changing circumstances.

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## **BACKGROUND: ELECTORAL SYSTEMS IN BRITAIN**

British elections are decentralized. They are run by returning officers (ROs) who are responsible for delivery, alongside local authorities who muster the resources and personnel and have discretion within statutory requirements for how elections are implemented. Electoral registration is run by Electoral Registration Officers (EROs) in local authorities.<sup>2</sup> An independent Electoral Commission was established in the Political Parties, Elections and Referendums Act 2000 to regulate party finance and advise on electoral conduct. The Commission would become the Chief Counting Officer for referendums. It can also set performance standards for EROs and ROs and penalize them for poor performance (James 2013). The government department with responsibility for elections at the time the pandemic began was the Cabinet Office, although in late 2021 responsibility was moved to the department overseeing local government and communities. For elections to the Scottish and Welsh parliaments, electoral law has been devolved to those institutions, which can set their own franchises and establish different electoral practices to those of England. Scotland has its own EMB (the Electoral Management Board for Scotland), established after difficulties in elections in 2007, which has power of direction over Scottish electoral administration and acts as a coordinating body in running Scottish Parliament and local elections. A non-statutory Welsh Electoral Coordination Board was established in 2017.

The cycle of sub-national elections is messy and confusing in England. In most of England there is a four-year cycle of local elections. Twenty-six county councils have whole council elections every four years, as do 131 district councils and 38 unitary authorities. Thirty-three metropolitan district councils elect a third of seats annually, missing every fourth year, as do 54 district councils and 17 unitary authorities. Seven district councils elect by halves every two years (Clark and Middleton 2022). Directly elected mayors are elected separately to councils and under a different electoral system, the supplementary vote. Police and Crime Commissioners in England and Wales are elected for a four-year term. Scotland and Wales are less complex, having five-year fixed term elections to their respective parliaments, conducted under mixed member proportional systems.

<sup>2</sup> In England. In Scotland EROs are located in bodies called Valuation Joint Boards, which represent groups of local councils.

After a considerable amount of indecision as the virus spread throughout the UK's constituent counties, its initial lockdown was announced on 23 March 2022 in a national televised address by Prime Minister Boris Johnson. The delay in doing so has subsequently been argued to have cost many lives.<sup>3</sup> The first UK-wide lockdown began to be lifted in May 2020, but a second was imposed on 5 November 2020, with a third following quickly in January 2021. This began to be lifted in late March 2021 (Institute for Government 2021).

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## POSTPONEMENT IN 2020

A range of sub-national elections were scheduled in England and Wales for 7 May 2020. These included: the local elections for scheduled councils, the London mayoral and assembly elections, elected mayors for local authorities and combined authorities, and also Police and Crime Commissioners (PCCs). On the afternoon of Friday, 13 March, the UK Government finally agreed to postpone the English local and mayoral elections due in May 2020 (including in London), following advice from medical advisors. The elections were postponed for a full year, and would be held alongside the next scheduled local elections in England in May 2021. The move came only after the government had earlier in the day seemed to refuse a request from the Electoral Commission, and also separately from the Association of Electoral Administrators (AEA), for a delay to the polls.

British electoral administration faced this challenging and uncertain context after having been through a torrid few years prior to the pandemic, with two unplanned general elections in 2017 and 2019, a major referendum in 2016 on the UK's membership of the EU, and the introduction of major reforms to electoral registration.

The AEA's letter to the Minister for the Constitution, Chloe Smith MP, cited a range of potential difficulties in holding the elections under the circumstances prevailing in March 2020 (see Buchan 2020). These included:

- that potential candidates might not be willing to visit council premises to deliver their nomination papers;
- difficulties in polling stations, from the numbers of voters passing through, to problems recruiting staff;
- worries about the virus being spread via postal votes;
- supply chain difficulties if, for example, ballot paper printers were forced to close because staff had been infected; and
- the impact on those running council elections if they were infected.

In support of the AEA's position, and various other bodies involved in running elections, the Electoral Commission's letter of 12 March requested a delay until the autumn. It argued that:

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<sup>3</sup> See for instance: BBC News, <<https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-politics-52955034>>, accessed 23 March 2022.

Clearly any decisions to delay elections which are due is significant and would not normally be desirable; however, we are in unprecedented times. The risks to delivery that have been identified are such that we cannot be confident that voters will be able to participate in the polls safely and confidently, nor that campaigners and parties will be able to put their case to the electorate.

(Electoral Commission 2020a)

The UK Government, via the Prime Minister's spokesperson, initially announced that the elections would go ahead (Tolhurst 2020). The London Mayor, Sadiq Khan, was also reported as having been led to believe that they would proceed as planned with little risk. As mentioned, the UK Government eventually bowed to the inevitable and postponed the polls. It is unclear both why the request was refused in the first place, and why the change was eventually made while also ignoring the Electoral Commission's recommendation that the postponement be only until the autumn. The length of the postponement has never been adequately explained by the UK Government. At the time, staff who had previously worked for the 'Leave' campaign in the 2016 EU Referendum were central to the UK Government. They had little sympathy for the Electoral Commission, having clashed with it on numerous occasions. Moreover, confusion in messaging, prioritization and decision-making was endemic throughout the UK Government's response to Covid-19 (Freedman 2020).

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The delay did not resolve all issues around running impending elections in Britain. Numerous local authorities were still having to deliver local by-elections, for instance. Several were planned for the following week. There was no clear legislative route for those to be delayed, until the Coronavirus Act 2020 became law on 25 March 2020 after a single day's parliamentary scrutiny. This provided retrospectively for various obligations on returning officers—such as running by-elections—to be legally put aside, and also provided legal cover for the postponement of the local and mayoral elections in England until May 2021.

There was some precedent: in 2001, English local elections were postponed for a month because of foot-and-mouth disease (Tempest 2001). Policymakers were undoubtedly in an unenviable position. No-one could know how the Covid-19 trajectory would play out in practice. A year, however, was a long time, and out of step with international practice. There are at least two reasons to think that delay until autumn, as recommended by the Electoral Commission, might have been preferable.

The first was political. Local elections are ultimately seen through the prism of national politics. Delay until May 2021 meant that Johnson's Conservative administration effectively had an 18-month period where it remained untested and unaccountable at the ballot box.

Covid-19 followed swiftly on the heels of UK parliamentary elections in 2019 fought around Brexit. This was a major constitutional change agenda that brought appeals to plebiscitary legitimacy into conflict with a range of existing systems. Before any Covid effects on freedoms of expression and assembly, written and unwritten constitutional checks and balances had therefore already come under pressure. It could be argued that in these circumstances, all available mechanisms of accountability acquired renewed importance, subnational elections included.

Secondly, delay until May 2021 meant that there would be a bumper set of polls taking place at the same time. There would be elections for: English councils, PCCs, the London mayor, the London assembly, regional mayors and local mayors. In addition, the Scottish and Welsh parliaments would be holding their next scheduled elections in May 2021. In other words, the whole of mainland Britain would be at the polls. While Covid-19 was a clear threat to electoral administration, research into British election administration suggests that holding different rounds of elections at the same time leads to lower performance, while those councils running only one election demonstrated higher levels of performance (Clark 2017). Therefore, the additional combination of polls in May 2021 necessitated by the delay was likely to lead to further stresses on electoral administrators.

Electoral Commission research suggested that there was likely to be a considerable increase in postal vote applications, but that most people felt safe voting in polling stations, providing appropriate distancing and Covid-19 measures were in place. Therefore, in England, 71 per cent would feel safe voting in a polling station under those conditions, although 21 per cent would feel unsafe, while anything up to 69 per cent could be registered for a postal vote. For Scotland, a November survey suggested that 77 per cent of eligible voters would feel safe voting in a polling station, 16 per cent would feel unsafe, and around half of all voters would apply for a postal vote if encouraged to do so. The figures in Wales showed similar patterns (Electoral Commission 2020b).

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## PREPARING FOR 2021

Scotland was the first country to publicly share any of its thinking about holding elections under Covid-19 circumstances. The Scottish Parliament Information Centre (SPICe) published an article outlining likely necessary mitigations to the May 2021 Scottish Parliament elections in June 2020 (Atherton and Clark 2020). Behind the scenes the Scottish Electoral Management Board, government and Electoral Commission were beginning to plan for what would be complex elections. Among many issues likely to need planning for were changes to postal vote deadlines (to accommodate more applications for the expected increased levels of postal voting, up to and including an all-postal election); locations to hold election counts that could accommodate distancing; the potential for extending the voting period; and

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the need for Covid-19 mitigation in polling places. Scotland was the only part of Britain that had any experience in holding pandemic elections; a handful of council by-elections had been permitted and held successfully at the end of 2020, having been postponed from earlier in the year (Democracy Volunteers 2021a; see also Electoral Commission 2021a).

Contingency legislation, the Scottish General Election (Coronavirus) Bill, was introduced to the Scottish Parliament on 16 November 2020. The aim was for the Scottish Parliament election to go ahead as planned, but with increased postal voting, and with potential contingencies already legislated for. Scrutiny on the bill was limited. A call for evidence by the parliamentary committee scrutinizing the bill was only open for a week, and contributions to plenary debates in parliament were limited. The Act legislated to bring forward the Scottish postal vote deadline to 6 April 2021, two weeks sooner than normal. This was (a) to make dissolution only one day in duration in case further electoral legislation needed to be passed; (b) to give ministers the power to hold an all-postal election, and to have polling over several days if necessary; (c) to give added flexibility to reconvening parliament post-election; and (d) to give the current Presiding Officer the power to postpone the election by up to six months under particular circumstances (meaning that any election had to be held by November 2021 even if postponed) (Scottish Parliament n.d.).

The need to hold an all-postal election was one circumstance under which postponement would have been necessary, given the logistical challenges involved and the need to maintain the integrity of the postal vote system. A key question was whether the postal vote deadline had been timed optimally. An earlier deadline would help administrators process increased numbers of applications, but, if voters missed that deadline, they would have to either vote in person, potentially undermining the social distancing aim, or nominate a proxy. The Act became law on 29 January 2021 after being passed 117-0 on a cross-party basis at the end of December 2020.

Neither Wales nor England seem to have been as prepared. The Welsh Government established an Elections Planning Group in June 2020 to begin planning, but the complication in Wales was that it would be running the Police and Crime Commissioner (PCC) elections concurrently with those for the Welsh Parliament (each with different franchises, electoral systems, and electoral boundaries). While Wales could legislate for its own parliamentary elections, it could not do so for PCCs which were run by the UK Government. Therefore, if postponement for the Senedd Cymru (Welsh Parliament) was deemed necessary by Welsh ministers, Welsh election administrators might still find themselves having to run elections on 6 May if the UK Government did not agree to postpone PCC elections, and then follow this up by holding separate Senedd elections.

The Welsh Elections (Coronavirus) Bill was introduced to the Senedd on 27 January 2021, and passed—by 36 votes to 5, with 9 abstentions—on 10 February 2021. This provided for potential postponement by up to six months, and permitted a day's dissolution but, crucially, did not change the postal voting

deadline or introduce scope to extend voting. This reflected the limitations the concurrent PCCs imposed on election administration in Wales. (Similarly, the 2021 Senedd elections would be the first to extend the vote to 16- to 17-year-olds and also introduce resident voting, but these franchise extensions did not apply to PCCs).

While administrators in England had been preparing as best they could throughout 2020, there was largely silence from the UK Government about its intentions. In November a story appeared in the *Municipal Journal*, a specialist local government newspaper, stating that elections would go ahead (Jameson 2020)—but this seemed very far from being a robust, national announcement or commitment. As will be discussed below, a debate commenced in early January 2021 about whether the elections should go ahead given new variants of Covid-19. There were contradictory reports about whether elections would be postponed, with journalists seemingly being briefed differently. It was only a month after this debate commenced, on 5 February 2021, that the UK Government finally published what it called a ‘delivery plan’ for the local elections (Cabinet Office 2021). This did not add much detail and was not accompanied by any primary legislation. Although the UK Government claimed to be ‘taking steps to support an increase in capacity to process postal votes’ (Cabinet Office 2021), there was no change to deadlines for either postal votes or emergency proxy votes. Those infected by Covid-19 could apply for the latter up to 17:00 on polling day. A short section set out what to expect in polling stations. This included social distancing, masks worn by staff and voters, regular sanitization, and the opportunity for voters to use their own pens/pencils, which had always been the case. There was a promise to cover some Covid-19 mitigation costs, with a figure of GBP 31 million put on this. In short, the delivery plan offered minimum changes to the administration of the English elections when they were set to be considerably more complex and difficult for administrators than usual.

Much of this took place against the backdrop of a debate conducted in the media of whether or not the May 2021 elections should go ahead. This debate took place separately in England, Scotland and Wales but the arguments for postponement were similar in each country. It was claimed that parties could not campaign properly. Electoral administrators could not find polling station staff to work at the polls, nor find locations for polling stations or counts, because many were already being used for Covid-19 testing or vaccination efforts. Further, it was said that postponement for a few months would not make any difference, because the risk of contagion was too high, particularly with more transmissible variants. While electoral administrators had done considerable work on thinking about the challenges, it was clear that political parties and their activists seemed unwilling to adapt their campaign strategies, even with a year’s lead time to consider what was necessary.

The three countries were in different places with regard to postponement of the May 2021 polls. Scotland and Wales had yet to postpone any elections since none had been scheduled for 2020. Any postponement was therefore arguably more serious in England, which had already postponed for a very

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long period. By comparison with international practice this made England something of an outlier, where democratic rights had clearly not been prioritized by the government during the pandemic. The postponement agenda was highly politicized. In Scotland, it seemed to be promoted by the opponents of the ruling Scottish National Party (SNP), particularly Labour and the Conservatives. In England, while there were certainly cross-party voices calling for postponement, there was a perception that elements of the Conservative Party were behind some postponement calls (see e.g. Labour MP Cat Smith's remarks in: Hansard 2021). It also became apparent that a section of the local government community, which would in practice be running the elections, were also in favour of postponement, and that some of the briefing around this was coming from the Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government (Hill 2021; Savage 2021).

An urgent question on the elections was granted in the House of Commons on 13 January 2021. The Minister, Chloe Smith MP, indicated that while the situation remained under review, 'there should be a high bar for any delay' (Hansard, 13 Jan 2021, Col. 312). However, there seemed little appetite for delay among MPs, highlighting a gap between parliamentary debate on the issue and that being conducted through media briefings and social media. By the start of March, the UK Government announced that campaigning could commence from 8 March, and changes had also been made to the candidate nomination process to make it Covid secure by reducing the number of signatures needed per candidate (see UK Government 2021). Interestingly, a paper for the Welsh Government released around the same time had concluded that holding elections as close to the lifting of lockdowns as possible was the best way of avoiding elections contributing to the spread of the virus (Technical Advisory Group 2021).

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## CONDUCT OF 2021 ELECTIONS

### Campaigning

As mentioned, there was much concern about how parties would campaign. Advocates of postponement had been concerned that parties would not be able to go door-knocking in communities to identify and mobilize their vote. Restrictions were eased towards the end of March, thereby enabling some local canvassing to take place, although this appears to have been in very small groups instead of the larger ones that would descend on localities previously. In Scotland, street stalls and physical hustings were not permitted at any point (Scottish Government 2021).

Otherwise, the expectation was that campaigning would look different, with fewer in-person rallies and events, more media work from senior party figures and more online campaigning (Clark 2021). It is possible to get some sense of how campaigning was affected by examining campaign spending returns for the Scottish and Welsh parliament elections. Regulated and published



by the Electoral Commission in both countries,<sup>4</sup> these documents show a considerable increase on the previous round of election spending in 2016: by GBP 1.7 million across all parties to a total just over GBP 5 million in Scotland, and by GBP 553,827 to GBP 1.8 million in Wales.

In Scotland unsolicited mail to electors (e.g. direct mail) accounted for more than GBP 1 million of the overall increase in campaign spending. Media spending increased more than ten-fold from GBP 7,559 to GBP 95,864, while transport spending increased three-fold from around GBP 48,000 in 2016 to GBP 157,000 in 2021. Spending on rallies and events remained the same at around GBP 70,000 while that on manifesto material almost halved to GBP 36,256. In Wales, unsolicited material spending increased by around 60 per cent to just under GBP 1.1 million, while spending on advertising tripled to GBP 365,748. By contrast, spending on rallies and events fell to only GBP 2,563 from around ten times that five years earlier. Causation is difficult to show, not least since in Scotland this election was highly motivated by the issue of Scottish independence. Nonetheless, these are suggestive patterns in line with the more remote campaigning expected during Covid circumstances.

### Voter participation

Table 1 examines turnout by comparison with the previous rounds of non-pandemic elections for each of the levels of election contested. It also reports levels of postal voting, expressed as a percentage of the electorate. On the basis of aggregate turnout, voters do not seem to have been discouraged from participating in these elections. With most of the local elections in England the level of turnout, although low, was marginally higher than it had been in the previous round for the councils and seats at stake. The only exception to this was the London mayoral contest, where turnout decreased to 42.9 per cent. Elections to both devolved parliaments in Scotland and Wales set record high turnouts against a backdrop of constitutional conflict running concurrently with the Covid-19 pandemic.

Turnouts were undoubtedly helped by increased levels of postal voting, which saw an increase of around 4 per cent in the local and London mayoral election, and by 5.6 per cent in the Scottish Parliament election. Postal voting levels did not come close to the levels suggested by Electoral Commission research in the early days of the pandemic, however. Provision for emergency proxy votes for those isolating made very little difference in either the English or Scottish Parliament elections. For example, in the English local elections, those using this emergency proxy facility amounted to only 0.01 per cent of the electorate (Electoral Commission 2021b).

Aggregate turnout, however, cannot provide a complete picture of these elections conducted under very difficult circumstances. For this, data from election administration is also helpful. A poll worker study therefore provides another way to consider whether participation was hit by the pandemic.

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<sup>4</sup> The Electoral Commission does not regulate campaign spending for English local elections.

**Table 1. Turnout and postal voting**

Body	Turnout (%)		Postal voting (%)	
	2016	2021	2016	2021
County council	35.0	36.6	16.0	19.0
Local council	33.8	35.6	17.0	21.0
Police and Crime Commissioners (England)	26.0	33.0	16.0	18.0
London Mayor	46.1	42.9	15.0	19.0
Scottish Parliament	56.0	64.0	18.1	23.7
Senedd Cymru (Welsh Parliament)	45.6	46.8	17.6	19.2

Source: Electoral Commission (reports of each separate election available at <<https://www.electoralcommission.org.uk/who-we-are-and-what-we-do/elections-and-referendums/past-elections-and-referendums>>, accessed 2 March 2022).

### The parliamentary election in Scotland helped to maintain a high turnout.

Table 2 presents data from a survey of poll workers, conducted by the Electoral Commission in collaboration with the authors. This suggests that turnout was affected, albeit in a moderate way. In England and Wales, 5.8 per cent of poll workers agreed that citizens were showing a hesitancy to vote because of a fear of Covid-19; the figure was 4 per cent in Scotland. More tellingly, 23.8 per cent of poll workers in England and Wales said that turnout was lower at the polling station than expected. This compares to 4 per cent in Scotland. This suggests that the importance of the parliamentary election in Scotland helped to maintain a high turnout, while the mainly local elections in England were an insufficient draw to increase turnout significantly beyond normal levels.

Table 2 also suggests that the safety measures put in place caused problems for some voters with disabilities. This was flagged as a problem by 11.8 per cent of poll workers in Scotland and by 7.5 per cent in England and Wales.

## HEALTH AND SAFETY

All jurisdictions had difficulties in recruiting sufficient staff to work in polling stations. One important shift was in training for those volunteering to serve on election day: instead of in-person sessions, this training was delivered online.<sup>5</sup> For polling day, the Covid mitigation measures that were introduced in polling stations were similar across Britain (Cabinet Office 2021; James 2013) and included:

- social distancing in polling stations;

<sup>5</sup> A discussion (podcast) on this between International IDEA's Erik Asplund and AEA's Peter Stanyon is available at: <<https://www.idea.int/news-media/podcasts/uk-2021-local-elections-role-association-electoral-administrators>>.

- a reduced number of people allocated to polling stations;
- increased physical sizes of polling stations;
- floor markings;
- personal protective equipment for polling station staff;
- mandatory masks for voters in polling stations;
- use of hand sanitizers;
- recommendations that citizens brought their own pen; and
- protective Perspex screens for use between staff and voters (and at counts).

Data from the survey of poll workers working in the polling stations suggests that the measures were effective (Table 3): only 1.7 per cent of respondents in England and Wales disagreed or strongly disagreed that the safety of voters from Covid-19 was adequately provided for. The figure was slightly higher in Scotland at 3.2 per cent, but still very low. Importantly, the guidance and procedures put in place were largely followed. Only 1.1 per cent of poll workers in England and Wales raised concerns about voter compliance with mask-wearing in polling stations, and only 1.8 per cent did so in Scotland. Candidates and party agents were reported to have followed the guidance. The level of information provided to the public was also largely thought to be adequate. Overall, poll workers unanimously said that they felt safe.

One consequence of these procedures were queues; 38 per cent of poll workers in England and Wales said that electors had to wait longer than usual to access the polling station because of social distancing requirements—the figure was higher in Scotland at 54.4 per cent. Polling station queues were reported in some areas in Scotland and Wales at close of poll. One polling station in Newport, Wales, closed a full 2 hours and 45 minutes after the normal time (22:00). Another reason given for longer queueing times in Wales

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**Table 2. Perceptions of participation and accessibility**

<b>(Key: combined figures for England and Wales, Scotland in italics)</b>	<b>Strongly disagree</b>	<b>Disagree</b>	<b>Neither agree nor disagree</b>	<b>Agree</b>	<b>Strongly agree</b>
Voters showed hesitancy to vote because of fear of Covid-19	25.3 <i>28.2</i>	44.1 <i>49.8</i>	24.9 <i>17.8</i>	4.1 <i>2.2</i>	1.7 <i>1.8</i>
Turnout was lower at the polling station than expected	11.7 <i>38.0</i>	31.0 <i>35.2</i>	33.6 <i>19.8</i>	17.4 <i>5.5</i>	6.4 <i>1.6</i>
The safety measures introduced at the polling station for Covid-19 caused problems for voters with disabilities	33.2 <i>26.5</i>	46.5 <i>47.0</i>	12.8 <i>14.7</i>	5.7 <i>9.0</i>	1.8 <i>2.8</i>

Source: Poll worker survey, authors/Electoral Commission.

**Table 3. Mitigation measures: perceived compliance and effectiveness**

(Key: combined figures for England and Wales, Scotland in italics)	Strongly disagree	Disagree	Neither agree nor disagree	Agree	Strongly agree	No. of participants
The safety of voters from Covid-19 was adequately provided for by the changes introduced	0.7 <i>1.1</i>	1.0 <i>2.1</i>	2.7 <i>3.5</i>	46.5 <i>53.4</i>	49.0 <i>39.8</i>	3,625 819
The polling station had sufficient public information for voters to understand what new measures in response to Covid-19 had been introduced	0.6 <i>1.0</i>	1.0 <i>3.8</i>	3.1 <i>5.7</i>	46.2 <i>54.2</i>	49.1 <i>35.3</i>	2,483 819
Voters wore face masks inside the polling station	0.5 <i>0.6</i>	0.6 <i>1.2</i>	1.6 <i>1.7</i>	37.6 <i>43.2</i>	59.7 <i>53.2</i>	3,625 819
Voters followed the distancing restrictions outside the polling station	0.7 <i>0.6</i>	1.4 <i>3.3</i>	14.2 <i>27.4</i>	41.8 <i>39.7</i>	42.0 <i>29.1</i>	3,625 819
Voters had to wait longer to access the polling station because of social distancing requirements	12.5 <i>6.3</i>	30.9 <i>18.8</i>	18.6 <i>20.5</i>	27.4 <i>36.9</i>	10.6 <i>17.5</i>	3,625 819
The polling station staff had access to the necessary safety and hygiene equipment and supplies e.g. sanitizer, masks and screens	0.5 <i>1.0</i>	0.7 <i>1.8</i>	0.9 <i>1.8</i>	29.5 <i>34.1</i>	68.4 <i>61.3</i>	3,625 819
There were sufficient staff working at the polling station	1.0 <i>3.8</i>	2.8 <i>10.1</i>	2.0 <i>3.3</i>	33.1 <i>37.7</i>	61.2 <i>45.1</i>	3,625 819
I felt safe working in the polling station	0.5 <i>0.9</i>	0.6 <i>1.7</i>	2.7 <i>4.6</i>	35.3 <i>42.2</i>	60.9 <i>50.5</i>	3,625 819
Candidates, political party members and agents followed the distancing restrictions around the polling station	0.5 <i>0.5</i>	1.0 <i>2.0</i>	35.1 <i>23.8</i>	31.3 <i>42.6</i>	32.0 <i>31.1</i>	3,625 819

Source: Poll worker survey, authors/Electoral Commission.

was that some of the usual polling places were unavailable because they were being used for another pandemic purpose.<sup>6</sup>

### Election observation

There were concerns internationally that election observation might be more difficult during the pandemic. In the UK, legislation allows anyone over 16, including those from outside the UK, to apply to be an election observer, provided that they are impartial. International observation has become common at UK general elections since 2005, with the Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe observing all general elections from then until 2017

<sup>6</sup> For discussion of these queues at close of poll, see the Electoral Commission's reports on each of the separate elections available at <[www.electoralcommission.org.uk](http://www.electoralcommission.org.uk)>.

**Table 4. Perceptions of transparency and accessibility**

(Key: combined figures for England and Wales, Scotland in italics)	Strongly disagree	disagree	Neither agree nor disagree	Agree	Strongly agree	No. of participants
Accredited observers were still able to observe in the polling station despite Covid-19 restrictions being in place	0.6 <i>0.7</i>	0.7 <i>0.4</i>	41.1 <i>28.2</i>	30.1 <i>39.8</i>	27.2 <i>30.9</i>	3,625 <i>819</i>

Source: Poll worker survey, authors/Electoral Commission.

(there was only a needs assessment mission in 2019). International missions are rare for sub-national elections. However, a recently established domestic group, Democracy Volunteers, deployed small teams to each of the different election types in 2021.

Data from the poll worker surveys (Table 4) suggests that observation efforts were largely unhindered—with only 1.3 per cent of respondents disagreeing that observers were prevented from observing.

## STRAIN ON ELECTORAL OFFICIALS

There have been concerns in recent years about the pressures placed on electoral officials in the UK. Research has found that many were put under pressure and considered leaving the profession following the introduction of individual electoral registration in 2014 (James 2014). Stress and burnout has been a major concern for officials (James 2020). There has been increasing complexity in the law which has made elections more difficult to administer (Law Commissions 2016; House of Commons 2020). There is also evidence that authorities have had to operate with limited budgets (Clark 2019; Democracy Volunteers 2021b; James and Jervier 2017). The professional association therefore further raised concerns about how the pandemic might affect electoral officials' ability to deliver the election without sufficient further support.

Figure 1 below illustrates answers from poll workers about whether they found these elections under Covid-19 circumstances harder to deliver than in previous years. The picture was very mixed—with a relatively even distribution of answers. This suggests that many were able to accommodate the pandemic and 'take it in their stride' as they delivered elections. However, it also suggests that many others were put under very serious strain—nearly 10 per cent of the polling workforce in each of the nations. Given the very decentralized nature of the UK electoral administration, this picture is not surprising but is a cause for concern.

**Data from the poll worker surveys suggests that observation efforts were largely unhindered.**

## CONCLUSIONS AND LESSONS

With local elections scheduled in May 2020, England was one of the first countries to be faced with questions about whether and how to deliver elections during the pandemic. A number of lessons are suggested by the British cases reported here, relevant to both the UK and other countries.

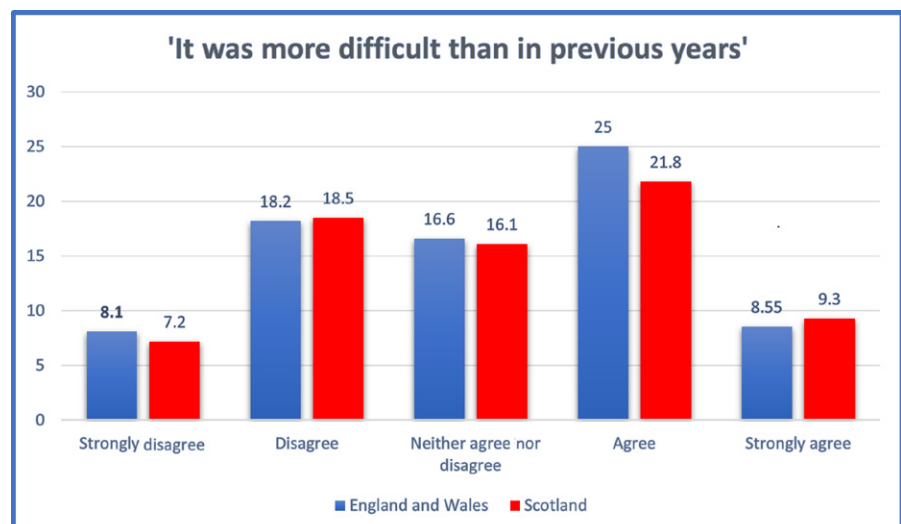
**The British cases reconfirm that elections can be held safely during a pandemic.**

Firstly, the importance of early preparations. After the initial decision to postpone elections in England in 2020, there seems to have been a long lapse in time before there were public signs of preparations. This meant that by the time the elections were imminent many options, such as early voting, became practically impossible. While pandemics by nature bring uncertainty, there was greater scope for early risk management and introduction of more inclusive voting practices. Scotland, by contrast, appeared more prepared in its thinking, and legislated early for a range of potential contingencies in a way that England and Wales, for various reasons, did not.

Secondly, the British cases reconfirm that elections can be held safely during a pandemic. Although epidemiological data is not presented here, the sense among poll workers was that good organization and resources helped to ensure safe conditions for voters and elections staff. This was made possible by compliance with the regulations, but also by the fact that the elections were held quite soon after the lifting of lockdowns, meaning that spread had already been curtailed in advance of the main electoral processes getting underway.

Thirdly, while other cases have suggested that turnout might be affected negatively by the pandemic, these cases show that (a) second order effects in turnout clearly remained under pandemic circumstances in Britain: lower turnouts continued to be found in local elections, and higher turnouts for

**Figure 1. Perceived difficulty of running the 2021 elections**



the more powerful devolved parliaments; and (b) turnout was nevertheless bolstered by the drive towards increased postal voting. Understanding how special voting arrangements such as postal voting might work in pandemic circumstances is therefore crucial.

Fourthly, pandemics will continue to create severe pressures for electoral officials. This reinforces the importance of early planning, but also the early availability of funds so that procurement is not delayed.

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