

How low can you go?

Projecting turnout for the Police and Crime Commissioner Elections

Key Findings:

- The 15 November 2011/2 Police and Crime Commissioner (PCC) elections are set to have the **lowest voter turnout of modern times** – projected at **18.5%**.
- The stated purpose of electing Police and Crime Commissioners was to improve accountability and reconnect the public and the police - an aim which is clearly undermined by a painfully low turnout.
- Current Home Office planning will serve to effectively drive turnout down, creating a perfect storm in the November elections.
- Extremely low turnout could unfairly advantage extremist candidates who would never succeed in winning over a bigger proportion of the electorate.
- The current record holder was local elections in 1998, with turnout of **25.2%** in Metropolitan councils, a turnout of **28.9%** in the non-Metropolitan/Shire districts. Overall turnout was 28% in England in 1998, but this also includes London which has much higher local election turnouts and where there will be no PCC election.

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Introduction –

In 1998 voter turnout in Metropolitan Council elections outside London hit 25.2%. It was the lowest turnout figure in modern times. The approaching Police and Crime Commissioner (PCC) elections now threaten to break that record.

The elections in November will cost a whopping £75m¹ but evidence suggests that we can only hope for a turnout of around 18.5% (see calculations below).

From the start the PCC elections have been marred by controversy and now it seems that the Home Office is shirking its responsibility to provide voters with even the most basic information that the elections are taking place.

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The Home Office's 5 point plan to drive turnout into the ground

1. Do not conduct a mail out with information about the elections and the candidates
2. Only provide information online so that the 7m people on the electoral roll who don't regularly access the internet are unlikely to know its happening
3. Set up a helpline but don't activate it until 23 days before the election is due to take place
4. Hold the election in November when no other elections are taking place (research shows that winter elections have significantly lower turnout than those held in summer months³)
5. Include no provisions for information in accessible formats for people with sight difficulties or in any other languages.

Wider failings

Despite the fact that independence and diversity were proclaimed as important features of PCC candidates, unrealistic eligibility rules have meant that strong independent candidates with minor misdemeanours in their teenage years could be excluded. This is in addition to the fact that independent candidates were already hampered by the lack of a funded mail out as unlike party candidates they will have no network of campaigners or party resources behind them to help them reach out to large constituencies.

Conversely an extremely low turnout could unfairly advantage extremist candidates who would never succeed in winning over a bigger proportion of the electorate.

Calculations

	Turnout	Rationale	Source
Baseline figure	c. 34%	<i>Recent local election turnouts are in this region</i>	
Turnout Variable 1 Election in November	-6%	<p>The Police Commissioner Elections are set for Thursday 15 November 2012</p> <p>Rallings and Thrasher research indicates that turnout in council by-elections fell by an average of 6.6% when held in November compared to May comparisons. Rounded down due to lower turnouts. The Rallings and Thrasher research accounts for both season and an 'electoral fatigue' effect (caused by voters not enjoying being asked to vote repeatedly at relatively close intervals)</p>	Rallings, Thrasher and Borisyuk (2003) <i>Seasonal Factors, voter fatigue and the costs of voting Electoral Studies</i> Volume 22 Pages 65-79.
Turnout Variable 2 No mailout	-5.5%	<p>The Home Office is refusing to fund mail-outs. This can only result in a large decline in the amount of candidate literature sent out.</p> <p>There will be a website available though this ignores the 7 million largely elderly and rural adults who are estimated to have not used the internet in the last 12 months (Electoral Commission). A print to order service will be available on request.</p> <p>Evidence suggests that turnout is boosted by almost 1/3rd when candidates receive mailings from both incumbents and main challengers. This has been revised downwards to 20% because some candidate mailings will still be available and some voters will seek out the website. In addition the Electoral Commission is planning an information pack for all households on the electoral roll though it appears this will not feature candidate information.</p> <p>The figure has also been adjusted to accommodate the fall in turnout from holding the election in November.</p>	<p>Electoral Commission Report: http://www.electoralcommission.org.uk/data/assets/pdf_file/0006/147129/PCC-elections-Secondary-Legislation-Briefing-March-2012-FINAL.pdf</p> <p>Research: Gerber, AS, Green, DP and Green, M. (2003) <i>Partisan mail and voter turnout: results from randomised field experiments Electoral Studies</i> Volume 22, Pages 563-79.</p>
Turnout Variable 3 Party Political Broadcasts	-4%	<p>There will be no PPB's in this election (Electoral Commission).</p> <p>Despite PPBs being generally derided in Westminster there is significant evidence that they actually increase support for political parties.</p> <p>A 1985 study by Ian McAllister found that most voters were influenced by PPBs of the party they already supported, however this suggests a mobilisation effect of driving up turnout amongst supporters.</p> <p>Similarly a 2003 report by Paul Whiteley and Patrick Seyd found that the probability of a voter who saw a PPB voting was the most important single mobilisation effect on voters, with PPBs roughly equalling the combined effects of local campaigns is roughly equal to that of watching a PPB.</p> <p>As these pieces of research suggest that voters are more likely likely to be effected by PPBs by their own parties it seems reasonable that these voters would be more likely to not vote at all than for other parties. No article provides a figure for the direct impact on turnout of PPBs, and as every election since 1951 has had one this is a difficult ask. However, given the sheer weight of evidence it is logical that a reasonably large effect must be present and therefore we have assigned a weighting of -4% to the lack of a PPB. Given the weight of evidence this may actually be a conservative estimate.</p>	<p>Electoral Commission: http://www.electoralcommission.org.uk/data/assets/pdf_file/0010/149824/PCC-Media-Handbook-final.pdf</p> <p>McAllister, Ian (1985) <i>Campaign Activities and Electoral Outcomes in Britain in 1979 and 1983 Public Opinion Quarterly</i> Volume 49 Issue 4 Pages 489-503</p>
PROJECTED TURNOUT	18.5%		