

"Review of the Political Parties, Elections and Referendums Act 2000" consultation - Response of the Centre for Computing and Social Responsibility, De Montfort University

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This is a response to the 2003 UK Electoral Commission consultation entitled "Review of the Political Parties, Elections and Referendums Act 2000"
(http://www.electoralcommission.gov.uk/files/dms/FinalPPERAREviewforweb_7756-6820__E__N__S__W__.pdf)

Consultation Issue

We responded to the 2002 review of the Political Parties, Elections and Referendums Act 2000 (Fairweather, 2002), suggesting that any amendment to PPERA takes account of the possible implementation of electronic voting. As a members of the research team commissioned by, inter alia, the Electoral Commission to research the Implementation of Electronic Voting, we were pleased that there were explicit questions about relevant issues in the consultation on Ballot Papers.

This response covers some related issues within this consultation. Dr Fairweather has also prepared a separate personal response

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(<http://www.ccsr.cse.dmu.ac.uk/staff/Ben/ppera2000-2-personal.html>) on issues that are outside the scope of the Centre for Computing and Social Responsibility.

Q2

In our response to the consultation on ballot papers (Fairweather, 2003, Q5(b)), we argued for allowing candidates who would not otherwise have a registered emblem to be allowed to register emblems.

Since personal votes normally represent a very small proportion of those cast (eg Butler & Kavanagh, 1992, p340; Rallings et al 1998, p121), the presence of an informative description and emblem whenever possible, provided it is not misleading, is of great importance in meeting the Commission's aim of making ballot papers more user friendly.

Given that candidates with wildly contradictory aims in different (but perhaps neighbouring) local authorities could seek to use the same description and/or emblem, it appears to us that the Electoral Commission needs to register most descriptions and emblems.

Our suggestion is that candidates can use any description or emblem that was registered with the Electoral Commission at least three months prior to the polling day.

We also argued in our response (Fairweather, 2003, Q5(b)) to the consultation on ballot papers that to reduce the frequency of candidates without an emblem and reduce the administrative burden on candidates and agents, it should be possible for a candidate to use the emblems of a party without signed authority from the party, *provided* that party has no other candidate in that division. This could apply equally to descriptions, although to avoid candidates with wildly contradictory aims using the same description and emblems, it may be necessary for there to be a period of repudiation, during which those who have registered the description and emblem can take action to prevent their use by the unauthorised candidate.

Q3

Returning officers should be authorised to accept nominations with a non-registered description from independent candidates, provided voters are not confused. Given that few voters choose how to vote on the basis of individual identity rather than party, an informative description of the political alignment of independent candidates may be useful to voters. An 'independent conservative' could reasonably be expected by voters

to be very different in political outlook from an 'independent Scottish nationalist', or in Northern Ireland an 'independent unionist' very different from an 'independent nationalist'.

It appears that any suitably short description (that is not offensive, etc) prefixed with 'independent' could be accepted by returning officers without risk of confusion. Other descriptions and modifications of a party name (such as 'socialist Labour') may well prove more confusing to voters, if not prefixed with 'independent', although returning officers could be allowed to authorise other descriptions provided they were not liable to lead to confusion (returning to the position under the Registration of Political Parties Act 1998).

Q7

If informal groups without any *significant*¹ financial backing or any corporate organisation wish to use a description on a ballot paper that assists voters, they should not be prevented from doing so, even if they are not registered as political parties.

References

Butler, David and Kavanagh, Dennis 1992 *The British General Election of 1992* (Houndmills, Basingstoke: Macmillan).

Fairweather, N.B. (2002) "*Review of the Political Parties, Elections and Referendums Act 2000' consultation - Response of the Centre for Computing and Social Responsibility, De Montfort University*" online at (<http://www.ccsr.cse.dmu.ac.uk/resources/general/responses/ppera2000.html>), accessed 2003-03-07

Fairweather, N.B. (2003) "*Review of Ballot Paper Design' consultation - Response of the Centre for Computing and Social Responsibility, De Montfort University*", online at (http://www.ccsr.cse.dmu.ac.uk/resources/general/responses/ballot_paper.html), accessed 2003-03-07

Rallings, C., Thrasher, M. and Gunter, C. 1998 *"Patterns of Voting Choice in Multi-member Districts" Electoral Studies*, Vol. 17(1).

1. A threshold in the region of £500 per year may be appropriate.