

TOWARDS BETTER LOCAL ELECTIONS IN THE UK

By Democracy Club¹

UNITED KINGDOM - 2016 DEMOCRACY CLUB

In May 2016, one of the most varied elections in history took place in the United Kingdom: positions of mayors, local authorities, parliamentarians from Wales, Northern Ireland and Scotland, and police commissioners, were elected. In this context, Democracy Club led an initiative aimed at helping the electorate have more information to decide their votes.

1. CONTEXT

Elections took place across the UK in May 2016. They were the most varied set of elections seen in the country for decades. Everyone had a vote in at least one of the following elections: local authorities, devolved assemblies (the National Assembly for Wales, the Northern Ireland Assembly and the Scottish Parliament), police and crime commissioners and mayoral elections.

The other side of this scenario was the enormous number of candidates that contested for the different elections, which amounted to 13,000 approximately. It is important to consider that there is no national UK record of when local elections are happening, and it is also hard to predict how many seats are in each ward. An important feature of these elections was the impact of the then impending European Union Referendum that took place in June 2016, thus casting a shadow over the May elections, which received sparse media coverage.

2. OBJECTIVES OF THE INITIATIVE

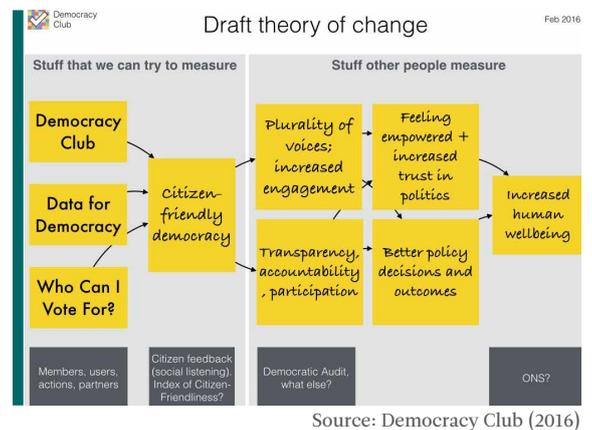
The initiative aimed to increase the awareness and knowledge of 100,000s of voters so they would make more informed decisions at the elections.

3. DESIGN OF THE INITIATIVE

The project considered four main components:

1. This document adapts and complements a previous and more comprehensive systematization effort of this initiative by Democracy Club available at [Democracy Club's 2016 report](#).

- i. **Finding and identifying local elections.** Democracy Club created an open database of elections.
- ii. **Building a database of candidates.** Once Democracy Club had a database of elections, it then crowdsourced the data on candidates for each election – all 13,000 of them.
- iii. **Creating a polling station finder.** One of the most searched questions online was ‘where do I vote’ – Democracy Club created a prototype online finder.
- iv. **Recording the results.** Many third parties asked the organisation for results data – Democracy Club prototyped a results recorder to gather this data.



4. GOVERNANCE AND ALLIANCES

The core team was made of two full-time coordinators – one leading on technical development – who worked with a range of partners and volunteers.

The activities described in section 3 were developed in collaboration with various actors:

- [The Electoral Commission](#) helped out by making requests to councils on Democracy Club’s behalf and by linking to the site for many of the elections.
- [NUS Wales](#) helped establish the partnership with the Welsh Government and convince councils to open their data, and promote the site to students.
- [LocalGovDigital](#), a group of civil servants that helped the initiative with local government contacts and by writing supportive blog posts on the issue.
- Councils. Several staff at councils across the country pushed their institutions to publish their polling location data openly so that Democracy Club could use it for the polling station finder.
- [Local Government Information Unit](#) (LGiU) and the [Open Data Institute](#) helped create the results recorder and record results on the night.
- The London School of Economics’ project [Democratic Dashboard](#), as well as BuzzFeed and the [Daily Telegraph](#), all made use of various of the initiative’s open databases to inform their readers.

5. FUNDING OF THE INITIATIVE

In January 2016, with small grants from [Google.org](#) (\$30,000) the [Rowntree Trust](#) (\$30,000) and [Bethnal Green Ventures](#) (\$10,000), the two Democracy Club’s coordinators began to work full-time on the project. The organisation subsequently received a grant from the Welsh Government through NUS Wales (\$30,000) for additional support to Wales. Finally, Democracy Club won an Open Data Institute Showcase grant (\$8,000) (with the Local Government Information Unit) to assist with the results work. Overall, the funding came to be \$100,000.

Moreover, the project was supported by the work of 2,000 volunteers across the UK, who dedicated hours to write codes, provide feedback, scan websites and social media profiles, collect information, and input data related to the project. These volunteers largely managed themselves, with support from the coordinators via Slack, twitter and email.

6. IMPLEMENTATION

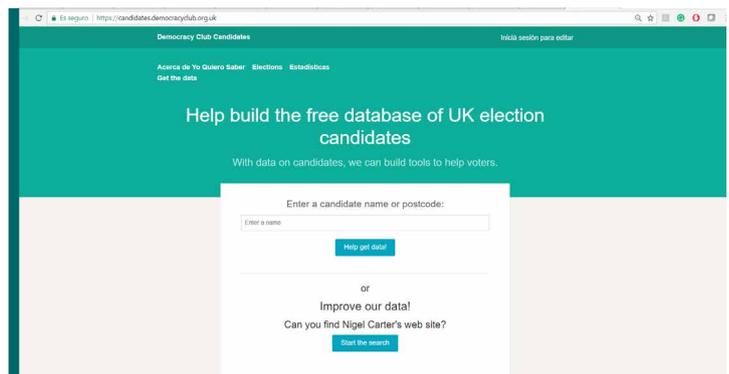
Finding and identifying elections (December 2015 – February 2016)

At first Democracy Club tried to crowdsource the elections with the ‘[Every Election](#)’ tool, but before long had awoken a rich seam of election experts who kept their own records and were keen to share. A significant issue was the unavailability of spatial data for recent boundary changes, which was only solved at the last minute

when the data was released. Democracy Club also designed a [robust system for issuing election identifiers](#), which allowed anyone in the UK to get information about their local elections.

Building a database of candidates (March – May 2016)

In 2015, volunteers crowdsourced 4,000 candidates in advance of the publication of the Statement of Persons Nominated (SOPN). Once the SOPNs were published, a smaller number of volunteers worked to find the information, scattered across hundreds of council websites. Once found, volunteers transcribed the data into online forms displayed alongside the election pages of the candidates crowdsourcing website. Most of the data was crowdsourced from the official statements and then checked by another volunteer before being ‘locked’. Through this process, Democracy Club achieved full coverage of the elections, resulting in a total of 13,068 candidates in the database by the polling day.



Source: Democracy Club (2016)

Creating a polling station finder (January – May 2016)

After initial efforts, acquiring, checking and cleaning the data for a broad base of councils in the UK proved to be significantly challenging. In this scenario, Democracy Club decided to focus on the coverage in Wales. For this purpose, and with the support of NUS Wales and the Welsh Government, Democracy Club started a regular exchange with the 22 councils, orienting them on how to provide the data in the ideal formats. While many were keen to help and provided the data quickly, others found it hard or provided only partial data, and some councils did not respond at all. Outside of Wales, there were a small number of councils who already provided the data, and some who got in touch with in the weeks before the election to include their data. Where Democracy Club did not gather polling station data, users were served with a phone number for their council.

Recording the results (May 2016)

For the local elections in England, Democracy Club partnered with the Local Government Information Unit (LGiU) and the Open Data Institute to produce [open election results data](#), collecting results data at an individual ward level: votes per candidate, winner, spoil ballot and turnout recorded. Everyone had the chance to add data, which was then verified by a team of volunteers and staff at LGiU.

7. RESULTS

Comprehensive database and wide coverage

Democracy Club tools were used by over 180,000 people directly (at WhoCanIVoteFor.co.uk). In the case of Wales, the polling station finder, achieved coverage for 47% of the electorate. In total the effort covered ten councils in Wales, seven in England and one in Scotland. Moreover, Democracy Club achieved the best national coverage of candidates ever published before a UK election, particularly at the local level. Before the polling day, all 13,068 candidates – probably every election in the country – were in the database. For those 13,068 candidates, the team of volunteers also found 1,637 profile photos, 1,649 email addresses, and 1,766 links to Facebook or Twitter accounts.

Partnerships to widen impact

Several partners made use of the data for information, widening the impact. For instance, the database was used by the [LSE's Democratic Dashboard](#), helping reach at least another 70,000 people. An adapted version was also used to tell [Buzzfeed's](#) readers which elections they could vote in, reach other 7,500 people. The polling station tool was included in the WhoCanIVoteFor website and provided as a micro-site for NUS Wales. The tool was also embedded in one council's website and linked to by several other councils via their election webpages.

A chain of beneficiaries

Voters going to the polls benefited from the availability of accurate information related to the elections. Secondary beneficiaries were the partners themselves, who got access to the data for free and provided useful content to their audiences (thus gaining advertising income). Councils and government also benefited from increased trust in the system and a more participatory public.

Open results data

A dedicated team at LGiU produced data on council control in near real-time and in some instances quicker than national media. An interactive map created from this data was embedded into the [Telegraph online](#) election liveblog on election night and received over 70,000 views. Nearly all votes data was entered by a huge number of volunteers. Verification of the data against an official council source was completed by June 2016, reaching 99%. This was the first time that open elections data was accessible on such a granular scale. It can be accessed via [the results page of candidates.democracyclub.org.uk](http://the.results.page.of.candidates.democracyclub.org.uk).

Government commitments

Thanks partially to DC efforts, the UK Government committed to develop a common data standard for reporting election results in the UK faster and more efficiently, and develop a plan to support electoral administrators to voluntarily adopt the standard. This was [commitment #7](#) in the UK's National Action Plan as part of the UK's membership of the Open Government Partnership.

KEY RESULTS

- Over 180,000 people used DC tools directly.
- Coverage reached ten councils in Wales, seven in England and one in Scotland.
- It was the best national coverage of candidates ever published before a UK election, particularly at the local level.
- Before polling day, all 13,068 candidates were in the database.
- Several partners made use of the data for information, widening the impact.
- It was the first time that open elections data was accessible on such a granular scale.
- The UK Government committed to develop a common data standard for reporting election results in the UK faster and more efficiently.

8. CHALLENGES

Size of the database and data gathering

Acquiring, checking and cleaning the data for a broad base of councils in the UK was significantly challenging and time-consuming. Data was provided in many different formats and at many different levels of quality. Also, the data needed to feed a polling station finder could be difficult for councils to provide. There were also a number of councils who were not supportive and did not immediately see the value in this tool. Some councils maintained their own polling stations finders. Moreover, depending on other stakeholders to build the database made it hard to get it ready on time before the elections.

Low number of data partners

The number of data partners was smaller than hoped, both in terms of media re-use and use by campaigners to engage with candidates. Part of this challenge can be explained by the time it took Democracy Club to build the database. Several organisations might have spent time and money building their own closed databases, or simply not been able to run campaigns that required such data.

Lack of interest

In 2015, Democracy Club similar candidate search site, YourNextMP, received over a million unique visitors. For 2016, the organisation estimated a 90% less traffic, due to the probable lack of interest and media coverage, primarily due to the United States presidential primaries and the European Union referendum that were dominating politics news. This lack of interest and coverage became more apparent over the months in advance of the elections.

Low funding

The overall funding came to be \$100,000. This was considerably less than what Democracy Club believes they need to raise to conduct this work sustainably – estimated in USD 350,000.

Measuring impact

A downside of making the data open is that people and organisations are not required to inform if they use it, limiting the ability to measure impact. An innovative methodology to survey this is still needed. The use of Application programming interface keys (API keys) is being explored to that end.

9. LESSONS

A USER NEED FOCUS

Democracy Club's work is directed by user need. User needs can be identified by examining Google searches and tweets on and around polling days. For instance, on the day of the general election in 2015, every one of the top ten Google searches related to the election. This provided robust evidence that tens of thousands of people were trying to engage in the democratic process and seek more information to do so.

ELECTORAL TIMING

Crowdsourcing of data and partnership building should start earlier. While it is difficult to know how far in advance candidates for local or regional seats are chosen, it can be assumed that to provide campaigners, journalists and academics with useful data about upcoming elections, the crowdsourcing platform needs to be up and running sooner. One year earlier would be ideal.

THE PUBLIC WANTS TO KNOW MORE

The most consistent comment left as feedback by visitors to WhoCanIVoteFor suggested that they seek more than simply a list of names of candidates and their social media links. They want to know where their candidates stand, their manifestos and their policies, as well as the results after the elections. In future, Democracy Club can link to party manifestos, but voters may be seeking information on individual plans and policies, particularly at the local level. In the days before the election Democracy Club tested a short survey for candidate whose email address it had, who provided their policy priorities. This shows, that there are possibilities to meet user needs at WhoCanIVoteFor in future.

RAISE MORE AWARENESS

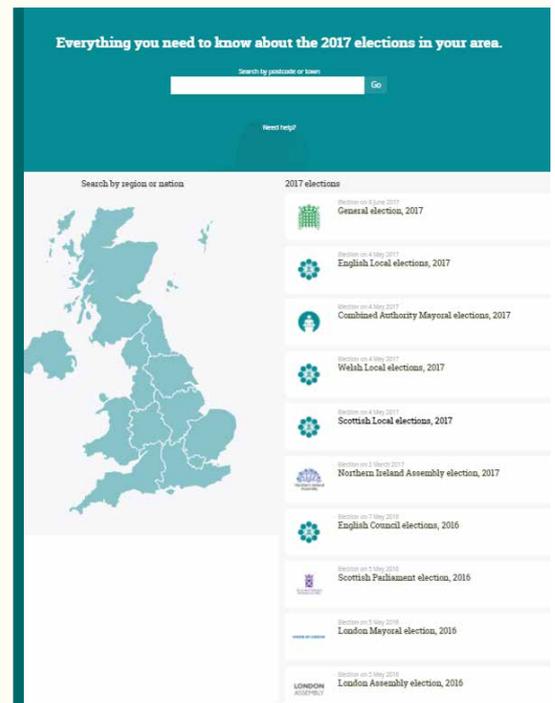
Democracy Club could to let people know that the data will exist, and encourage activists and campaigners to join together to update a single open database, rather than maintain their own. Getting data earlier would contribute to this effort.

HORIZONTAL AND SPONTANEOUS COLLABORATION

For the entire project to be successful, it was important to count on every user that left feedback, tweeted or emailed Democracy Club, every candidate that updated their profile, and twitter followers who help disseminate the news, blog posts and services to a wider audience.

GOVERNMENT SUPPORT

Open data should be seen as a public good. This suggests that the simplest and most transparent support mechanism for open data projects is financing by the central government.



Source: Democratic Dashboard (2016)

REFERENCES

Democracy Club. (May 2016). *Towards better elections. Report on Democracy Club's work on the May 2016 elections and the future of digital services for democracy*. Retrieved from: www.democracyclub.org.uk/report_2016

Democracy Club – United Kingdom

Democracy Club aims to make the process of democracy better for everyone. Democracy Club's vision is of a society in which democracy thrives through knowledge, participation and openness. DC's mission is to use open data, design and technology to give every citizen the information and participation opportunities they need, in a way that suits them. DC is non-partisan and works openly.

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