

# Why do they make it so hard?

I recently ran as an independent candidate for Reading West & Mid Berkshire. This article is not about the result – that’s just democracy as it stands today.

This is about barriers that exist but really should not. They only exist because they suit the party-political system we have.



## Recognition

Unless you happen to be famous, the number-one issue any independent faces is name recognition. Combining this with the PM being able to call and select a date whenever it suits, means you have six weeks max to do everything.

So, the first two things that would bring back some democracy are

- Bring back the Fixed-term Parliament Act.
- Allow candidates to register and have access to the electoral register up to a year in advance of the election day.

As name recognition is a major issue for any independent candidate, accessing the electoral register is essential. This allows for a more even playing field against the political parties. It allows candidates to know who is registered to vote in each household. It also means you can be more polite when introducing yourself and it makes it possible to record those who are not interested in voting, so you don’t disturb them again or waste time sending leaflets.

## Branding



My own campaign started in January 2024 as I (and others) were expecting an election to be called around November. I used a logo with hands shaking as a brand to demonstrate cooperation and that I wanted to represent the people, not a party. However, the rules that apply “only to independents” are

- You can’t have your logo on the ballot paper.
- You can’t describe yourself other than with the word “Independent”.

In the constituency I stood in there were two independents. I was running a campaign that revolved around “Party Politics is Broken”, while Aide who stood to help promote “Action Against Hard Drugs and Knife Crime”. In the voting booth, no one would see this, just that we were both independent.

These rules make no sense whatsoever and are just another anti-democratic barrier.

## Communicating

The media (especially radio and TV) are the next issue. Although Ofcom clearly states there should, at a local level, be equal coverage of all candidates, that’s not how the BBC works. BBC Radio Berkshire ran what it called “debates” – they can’t be called hustings because, if so, you must invite all candidates.

The other candidates flagged to me that they were going to be at a BBC hustings and asked if I was going. That allowed me to contact the editor and find out why I was not invited. To quote him, “It’s against BBC Policy”.

I'll be the first to say there could be situations where there are so many independents it would not work – but in this case, there were just two of us. For this non-husting, Aide could not be contacted by the BBC and Reform did not bother to turn up anyway.

The Ofcom rules also say independents should have something different to say. Well, both Aide and I were saying something none of the party candidates were. It came down to the entrenched connection between party politics and the political editors in our mainstream media. It's not even though people had not been getting the party line constantly anyway. Other than introducing themselves, the questions were all about what the party would do if they won. It added nothing new to the debate and suppressed other positions.

This is a case where editors should simply follow the existing rules. It's not for them to decide who people should hear from.

Printed and online media were better at this, but there were several examples where editors and journalists focused only on party candidates, ignoring the independents.

## **Mailing**

Next is the Royal Mail. You are allowed to send every voter one A5 piece of communication with the postage covered by the electoral commission. Each candidate must pay for the production, stuffing of the letter into an envelope, and delivery to the local mailing office.

What you are not told, until after you have had your artwork approved by the Royal Mail and until after you have your date from your mailing house for delivery to the sorting office, is that the Royal Mail can simply say they are too busy and will get to your delivery at a date that suits them. Even after delivery to the sorting office, they can take three to five working days from receipt to delivery.

Why is that a barrier? 20% of all votes are now cast by postal vote. Those go out approximately two weeks before election day and most people who have this type of vote complete it within 24 hours of receipt.

To make the most of your one-time letter, you need it to arrive with people just before the postal vote form so it's fresh in people's minds. Therefore, because of Royal Mail, you really need to get your letter to them at least five working days before the postal vote. Because all the parties know this, they are also pushing to get Royal Mail to accept their delivery at this optimum time.

In my case, Royal Mail started saying they were too busy and could not accept my letter until approximately a day before the postal vote landed. Therefore, it would not have been delivered until two to four days *after* this date and thus after many people would have voted.

I concede that this affects all parties equally. However, for an independent this service is of far more significance than it is for the parties. Elections don't happen that frequently so it's hard to see why Royal Mail can't make a bit more of an effort to accommodate the interests of democracy.

## **Timing**

Let's now go back to when an election is called. The Prime Minister chooses the date. The party they represent has the clear advantage of being able to plan all this in advance and make sure their messages get prime slot.

As an independent, who has this sprung on them at no notice, you therefore have less than three weeks to get everything done. During that time, you also need to collect your nomination signatures,

appoint your agent and request your copy of the electoral register (which you won't get until you are an approved candidate)

This brings me back to another barrier. Remember, you don't have access to the electoral register. But you are required to check the voter ID against your signatures before you or your agent hand deliver your nomination paper. This is within the first ten days of the process. At that time the voter cards have not gone out to those people you're asking to nominate, so they won't have their voter ID yet and neither will you. Therefore, the only way to check is to ask officers at the council to check for you. Its why Aide scraped in with just an hour to spare with his nomination.

## **Funding**

Next funding. I'm not talking about being able to afford to run as an Independent, but rather what you can spend as an Independent. It's not the same as what a Party can spend. A Party contesting every seat gets to spend up to £34,134,320 over the seats they contest across England, Scotland and Wales. That's over and above what the party candidate can spend (which is the same as an Independent).

All parties have target seats, so they tend to focus this extra money on those seats. As an example. Even though the Lib Dems stood 630 candidates in this latest election, their target list was much much smaller, fewer than 100 in reality. So, they were able to spend  $(£54,010 \times 630) \div 100 = £300,000$ -plus per target seat. Their only real barrier is fundraising.

## **The consequence...**

Given all the above, it's not a surprise we get fewer than one percent of MPs as independents. The whole system is designed for party politics.

The House of Commons library says just 60% of people who registered to vote bothered. That's the third lowest since 1918. But it ignores those that could have registered but did not. The BBC were saying the day before the deadline to register that millions of people had yet to bother! *Millions...*

Whichever way you look at it, even if it's just *one* million, that's another worrying statistic.

The system we have, and the lack of real choice, point towards democracy failing. Strangely, the only party I see being able to make enough noise is Reform. That's because of who leads them and that person's ability to get voter recognition: which leads me back to where I started...

I hope you have found this interesting

Adrian Abbs  
Independent