



UK Election Candidates

Application to Joseph Rowntree Charitable Trust, August 2018

Who are you?

Democracy Club C.I.C. is a non-partisan non-profit registered in 2015. Volunteers ran a first iteration of the project in 2009-2010. Our vision is of a thriving democracy in the UK and we use digital to increase opportunities for democratic engagement. We are three full-time staff and a significant number of volunteers.

What do you want to do?

UK Election Candidates is a programme of work to broaden and deepen our collection, publication and maintenance of UK election candidate data, in order to help more voters take part in an informed way. This will include candidate data for all scheduled and unscheduled elections at district council level and above. This is likely to cover 50,000 candidates for over 10,000 elections. It will also cover any general elections in the programme period (Feb 2019 - Feb 2022).

Elections are the zenith of civic power for the average citizen, a chance to hold politicians accountable. At the ballot box, electoral systems aside, we are all politically equal. This programme will help empower voters with information. The work will also support other JRCT-funded organisations, such as 10:10 and Bite the Ballot, who have used our candidates data to connect voters with candidates, or to report on individual candidates or themes.

We believe that this programme will:

1. advance education on the UK's democratic processes;
2. increase electoral participation;
3. increase the numbers of people voting in an informed way; and
4. increase trust in the election process.

We know from online search data that candidate information is in great demand from citizens. A 2017 survey by The Electoral Commission found that one-third of people in England, rising to one half of 18-35 year-olds, '*did not feel they had enough information to make an informed choice on who to vote for*'. This was particularly true for local elections.

The UK Election Candidates programme aims to significantly and sustainably increase the availability and accessibility of candidate information for elections at the district council level and above. It will:

1. Improve our ability to crowdsource more and better candidate data;
2. Publish candidate data in more accessible ways;
3. Help more organisations to use candidate data for their audiences; and
4. Improve our direct-to-voters information website (WhoCanIVoteFor.co.uk).

We expect to help around 250,000 to 500,000 people to access information about their candidates throughout 2019; another 750,000 people in 2020, and up to one million people in

2021. In the event of a general election during the programme, we expect to assist around five million people.

What will you actually be doing?

The UK Election Candidates programme will build upon some existing successes. We outline the core aspects of the programme below, but it is important to note that we work according to an Agile methodology. That means that we do not plan all our work in advance (the route to many expensive IT failures). Instead we engage in a constant process of reviewing the needs and priorities of our community, our shared understanding of impact, and what is immediately technically feasible.

1) Crowdsourcing more and better data

We already successfully crowdsource data on election candidates' names and party affiliations. We are sometimes able to source photos, contact details and statements, but we want to go much further to meet demand for more information. We can do this by improving the quality of the crowdsourcing software and website, improving the volunteering experience and by making it possible to absorb similar datasets from other sources (e.g. single issue campaigns or political parties themselves).

2) Getting candidate data to the people

In order to have impact, the data needs to reach people in useful ways, by both pushing the data to places they already use, know and trust — and by providing a place they can visit specifically for this task.

While many organisations already use our data, there is more we can do to improve the documentation, available data formats and technical support. For example, to ensure Google Search uses the data to reach tens of millions of users (as it did in 2015), we need to serve the data to modern standards and improve the documentation explaining how to use it.

We also plan to significantly improve our direct-to-voters service at WhoCanIVoteFor.co.uk via user-research led redesign and improved information architecture.

3) Overarching aspects of the programme

Throughout the three-year programme we will need to ensure uptime, security and privacy for all volunteers and users. We will also be maintaining a state of 'election readiness' in case a snap general election is called.

4) Ensuring sustainability in year four and beyond

By February 2022, we will have a plan that ensures that candidates data is provided in a sustainable way for the future. Over the course of this programme, we will test a range of approaches, which could include: crowdfunding, sales or adoption of the service by a state institution. The information will always remain free to the voter at the point of use.

ii. Why?

We are driven by a belief that digital technology can reduce barriers to engagement in the democratic process, resulting in a more equal distribution of power.

This is a critical time for democracy. The UK's democratic way of life is under threat, not only from external state interference or the unintended consequences of online social networks, but, most seriously, from a growing gulf between the way people live now and the way they are expected to engage in democracy. There is a risk that democracy comes to be seen as unfit for purpose and that calls grow to replace it — a situation that could result in dramatically bad consequences for some groups in society. The rise of populist politicians, the divisiveness of the EU referendum and the World Values Survey data that shows that the younger someone is, the less likely they are to believe that it is 'essential' to live in a democracy (around 30% of GB citizens born in the 1980s, compared with 70% of those born in the 1930s) all suggest urgent action must be taken to update the way we engage in democracy.

The UK Election Candidates programme represents around half of Democracy Club's planned work over the next three years. Our approach is to take small, iterative steps to remove barriers to information/ participation as per citizens' needs. We started with elections because the demand is greatest there. Our other programmes include an online polling station finder, data on elections and results, and efforts to create a community of non-partisan digital volunteers for democracy.

Our work sits within a field known as civic technology. Our work provides a platform upon which people and organisations can build tools to boost civic engagement. For example, Sam Jeffers, who works to monitor Facebook advertising by political campaigns, said this of us:

"Thank heavens we have @democlub in the UK. Just got quoted \$8,000 a month for US midterm candidate data. I know nothing is free, but that's a huge barrier to making things to help people vote."

Similarly, the popular SchoolCuts website, which received 3m views before the 2017 general election, made use of our candidates data in order to connect users with their candidates to discuss school funding. It won digital campaign of the year at the Sheila McKechnie Awards.

iii. Who?

We currently have three full-time staff: one developer, one developer/coordinator and one coordinator. We are aiming to grow the organisation by making new hires over the next three years as outlined in the budget attached. This will provide a full complement of digital skills, including user research, design and coding, as well as organising skills. This can be scaled up or down depending on the success of fundraising efforts.

We are also fortunate to have many technologically adept volunteers who will be able to provide advice, support and, due to the open-source nature of the work, directly make product improvements too.

Democracy Club is led by two co-executive directors. Sym Roe has oversight and responsibility for technology and has 15 years experience in open data, government and

technology for organisations such as the Government Digital Service. Joe Mitchell has responsibility for non-technical elements and has a decade of experience in advocacy, communications and marketing, including with the UK Civil Service. Democracy Club is overseen by a board of directors with decades of experience in local government, journalism, public engagement and digital innovation, at places like Nesta, BBC and The Guardian.

iv. Impact?

We make stringent efforts to openly document our work. We plan and prioritise our work using open to-do lists (Trello) and we discuss challenges and questions through regular blogs and tweets. We invite public feedback, comments and direct involvement. We publish an annual report in various formats, share usage statistics from all our sites and speak regularly at events. The code that creates our products is open source: anyone with some coding knowledge can review it, make suggestions, download it, edit or contribute to it. The data we create is open and is used by hundreds of individuals and organisations.

Our work reaches millions of people with previously inaccessible information. We believe that this programme will: increase the likelihood that people will vote at all; increase the number of people making an informed decision; increase awareness, knowledge and understanding of elections; and increase trust in the UK's democratic process.

It is difficult to fully monitor the effects of open data, because by its nature it cannot be tracked, nor can users be forced to complete a survey before accessing the data. However, as part of the programme, we plan to try new approaches to better understand who is using the data and to what impact. We also plan to make better use of existing tracking surveys of democratic engagement (such as the Audit of Political Engagement and The Electoral Commission's Winter Attitudes Tracker).

One digital politics commentator suggested that our work in 2017 may have helped over 180,000 vote when they otherwise could not have done so. One campaigner referred to us as the most successful voter enfranchisement effort in the country.

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The next few years could be pivotal for the state of the UK's democracy. We have good reason to believe that our UK Election Candidates programme will have a very high impact-to-cost ratio. We have an excellent core team, a board dedicated to democracy, strong existing partnerships to get data to voters, and our methods get results. We now need to expand our team to make significant improvements in the candidate data we provide in order to help boost engagement in the democratic process. We hope Rowntree will support this programme.