

Getting the missing millions back on the electoral register

A vision of voter registration reform in the United Kingdom

March 2016

Draft Report

DRAFT REPORT

This report does not reflect the settled view of the APPG or its Members

Foreword

“It is a pleasure to open this report as the Liberal Democrat Co-Chair of the APPG on Democratic Participation, not least because it is a genuine ‘all-party’ initiative that happens to be the only Group to include representatives from every party and the Crossbenches.

The strongest Groups are reliant on a strong team of interested organisations and individuals to ensure its work makes an impact. I therefore wish to congratulate Bite The Ballot and Dr Toby James for their hard work on this report, and in the area of electoral registration policy more widely.

This draft report highlights the fact that voter registration is an issue that should transcend party politics. An effective, accurate and comprehensive registration system is exceptionally important for democracy, and, though the UK has a strong system, there is clearly room for improvement.

I must also thank those who attended a roundtable discussion on proposals for reform, which I found to be very constructive. Their ideas and suggestions raised were insightful, original and, crucially, solution-focussed.

I sincerely hope, therefore, that the sensible and achievable proposals in this report will move the debate on this crucial topic forward, so that we - in the UK Parliament - are able to strengthen UK democracy for the long-term.”

Lord Rennard MBE

Peer and Former Chief Executive of the Liberal Democrats

“Urgent action is needed to make elections more accessible to the public and to convince people that it is worth voting - no matter who they vote for!

Turnout of registered voters for the last general election was 66%, meaning that almost 16 million voters chose not to participate. Millions of people are not even registered to vote. This is not an acceptable state of affairs for a modern democracy.

Maintaining an up-to-date and accurate electoral register is vital. We need to do more to increase registration for those people who are under-represented on the register, including young people, British citizens living overseas, Commonwealth and EU citizens and members of some BAME groups.

This draft report is a much needed addition to the debate around voter registration policy, and I look forward to the conclusions we can draw from it.”

Graham Allen MP

Chair, Political and Constitutional Reform Select Committee, 2010-15

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Executive summary

Despite advantages gained from the transition to individual electoral registration (IER), registration levels in Britain have dropped. In 2014 it was estimated that up to 7.5 million eligible voters were missing from the electoral register. The gap between those who are eligible to vote - and those who have their names on the electoral register - is growing.

The UK Government can and must do more to encourage citizens to join the electoral register. Despite the efforts of groups such as Bite The Ballot, this report outlines legislative changes for to systemic reform that are needed to modernise, stream-line and simplify registration.

However, a number of avenues for reform may be acted upon immediately. Political parties, Local Authorities and other stakeholders have the capacity to make positive changes now, without a drawn out legislative process. They should therefore read this report, and act as soon as possible.

This report also assesses the impact that the change from household to IER has made to UK democracy. It specifically aims to inform Members of the All-Party Parliamentary Group on Democratic Participation - and elected officials across the UK - in the following areas:

- the system of IER and its impact on voter registration in the UK
- potential reforms to the the UK's voter registration processes, and
- the need to act now in order to improve UK registration levels for the long-term.

Written by Bite The Ballot and Dr Toby James, this report includes twenty-four recommendations, separated into short- and long-term objectives. The authors now hope to work with, and through, the APPG, key decision-makers and the UK political parties to take these recommendations forward.

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Recommendations for reform

Short-term

1. Replicate the Northern Ireland ‘Schools Initiative’ in Great Britain
2. Coordinate specific registration drive to target 14, 15, 16 and 17 year-old ‘attainers’ across the UK
3. Register students when they annually enrol in college or university
4. Reassess ‘block’ registration in care homes and halls of accommodation
5. Encourage recipients of National Insurance number notification letters to register online
6. Open up the online ‘Academy’ proposed by John Penrose MP
7. Publish a detailed evaluation of innovations designed to improve the completeness of the register
8. Ensure that EROs are aware of the powers and data-sets that are open to them
9. Support the Law Commission’s proposals to consolidate electoral law
10. Government funding and support for National Voter Registration Drive
11. Strengthen the funding of electoral registration services
12. Include civil society groups and academics in Government reviews on registration
13. Assess whether reforms designed to reduce fraud will impact negatively on the completeness of the register
14. Nudge citizens to register online when they access government services

Long-term

15. Introduce a national programme of political education in schools, colleges and sixth forms
16. Introduce a website to allow citizens to check their registration status
17. Reintroduce National Insurance number cards and an option to request a National Insurance number online
18. Widen registration criteria via alternative forms of permissible registration I.D. beyond the National Insurance number identifier
19. Ongoing powers for the Electoral Commission to direct EROs’ activities
20. Monitor the resources and workplace experiences of staff working within electoral services
21. Pilot election-day registration
22. Pilot electronic poll-books
23. Review the need for a single national electronic register
24. Introduce an automatic system of registration

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An electoral registration crisis?

The number of eligible voters missing from electoral registers has grown dramatically in the post-war period. In the 1950s, it was estimated that over 96% of people were on the voting registers. By 2014, this had dropped to 85% with up to 7.5 million people missing.¹ As Figure 1 illustrates below, the gap between those who are eligible to vote and those who have their name on the register is growing.

The causes of declining levels of registration are complex. Research on the challenges that Electoral Registration Officers (EROs) face² suggests that EROs include the public's increasing disinterest in politics and elections as a challenge, alongside the significant practical challenges in keeping the electoral register up to date. These include:

- perceptions of increased crime and problems with urban geography that have made conducting the annual canvas difficult
- citizens increasingly thinking that they are already on the electoral register because they pay tax or access other government services
- huge population churns in inner-city areas
- increased immigration
- financial austerity and budget cuts to electoral registration services, and
- changing employment patterns which make it more difficult for electoral registration officers to contact citizens.

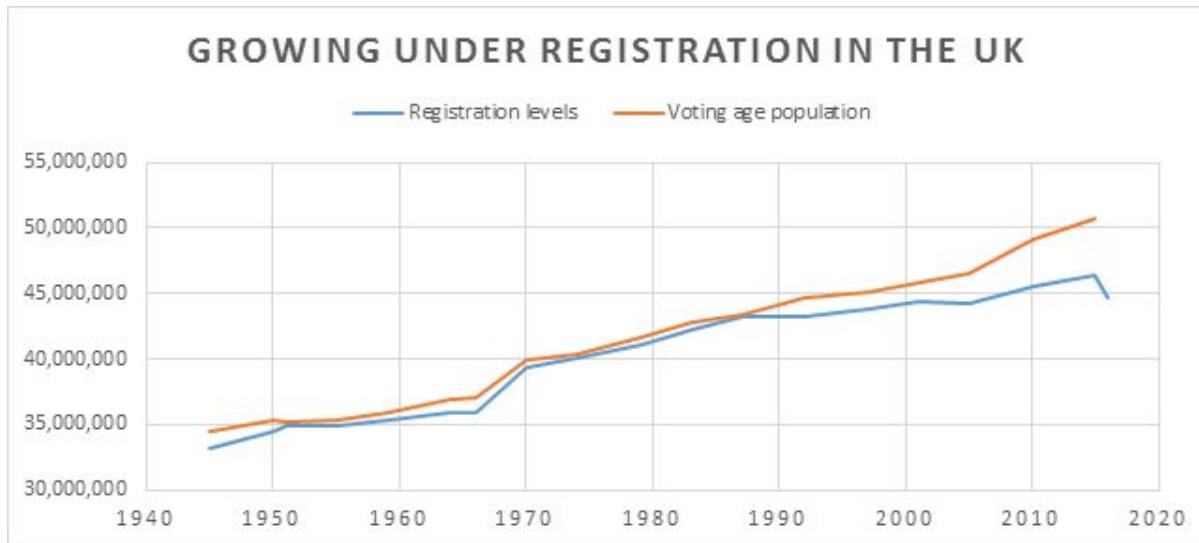


Figure 1: The gap between eligible voters and levels of electoral registration. Source: authors based on data in International IDEA (2016): <http://bit.ly/1D7WEyw>.

The effect of Individual Electoral Registration

Recent reforms have led to a further decline in the completeness of the register. In June 2014, the Government began the transition to Individual Electoral Registration (IER), which was completed in December 2015. This was the largest reform to the way that the electoral register was run in a century. The reform put an onus on each individual to register themselves and provide a National Insurance number when applying to register. Only once their name had been checked against government databases would they be added to the register. Prior to this change to IER, a 'head of household' could register everyone living in each address.

¹ Electoral Commission, 'The quality of the 2014 electoral registers in Great Britain', July 2014, <<http://bit.ly/1YbEZiz>> accessed 3 March 2016.

² James, T.S, 'Electoral Management in Britain', (2014) in Pippa Norris, Richard W. Frank and Ferran Martinez i Coma, 'Advancing Electoral Integrity' (Oxford University Press, New York), p. 320.

It was long forecasted that this reform may lead to a further decline in the completeness of the electoral register. The logic is that the easier the registration process is, the more likely that citizens will register. One academic study predicted that the change to IER would lead to a decline in levels of voter registration, especially among young people.³ This was presented to Parliament in 2011,⁴ while concerns were also raised by groups such as Bite The Ballot, Operation Black Vote, British Youth Council, National Union of Students⁵ and Hope not Hate⁶. The Select Committee on Political and Constitutional Reform also expressed concerns in a report in 2014⁷. In response to these concerns, the Government introduced measures to encourage voter registration such as the introduction of online registration. However, it has insisted that all names being removed are 'ghost voters' or duplicates.⁸

Now that the transition to IER has been completed, the actual effects of IER more clearly assessable.⁹ Despite some positive reforms, the evidence is that the registration crisis has worsened.

- A comparison of the electoral register before and after the implementation of IER revealed that there were 1.4 million fewer names in it. The decline was especially depressing for 'attainers' (14, 15, 16 and 17 year-olds who will attain voting age during the period in which the register is in force). There were 281,535 attainers on the 1 December 2015 register, compared to 471,295 on 1 December 2013. This is a fall of 189,760. Over 40% of our next generation of voters have been therefore been removed from the electoral register.¹⁰
- A report by the Electoral Commission concluded that 770,000 names were removed on 1 December 2015 as a result of the accelerated transition to IER.¹¹
- Early findings from a new survey of electoral administrators by researchers at the University of East Anglia provides new evidence, revealed here for the first time.¹² The survey found that two-thirds of administrators agreed that the accuracy of the register had increased. However, two-thirds also agreed that citizens had complained to them about the registration process being bureaucratic. Roughly half of respondents thought that the completeness of the register had declined. This survey suggests that the transition to IER has had a dramatic effect on the staff of those running elections. Moving to IER has involved major organisational and technological change in the context of major cuts to the funding of local government. Half of electoral administrators said that they had thought about leaving their job at some point in the last year.

³ James, T.S, 'The Spill-over and Displacement Effects of Implementing Election Administration Reforms: Introducing Individual Electoral Registration in Britain', *Parliamentary Affairs*, (2014) 67 (2): pp281-305.

⁴ Political and Constitutional Reform Committee, *Individual Electoral Registration and Electoral Administration - Volume II*, 4 November 2011, HC 1463, 2010-12, Ev w4, <<http://bit.ly/1YbXAer>> accessed 3 March 2016.

⁵ Political and Constitutional Reform Committee, *Individual Electoral Registration and Electoral Administration - Volume I*, 4 November 2011, HC 1463, 2010-12, p12, para 35 <<http://bit.ly/1TwmiHG>> accessed 3 March 2016.

⁶ HOPE not hate, 'Individual Electoral Registration and the Boundary Review', 2015, <<http://bit.ly/1NpiyEy>> accessed 3 March 2016.

⁷ Political and Constitutional Reform Committee, *Voter Engagement in the UK - Volume I*, 14 November 2014, HC 232, 2014-15, <<http://bit.ly/1qWmYU5>> accessed 3 March 2016.

⁸ Letter from John Penrose MP to Bite The Ballot, 12 February 2016, available online: <http://bit.ly/1L7vExa> accessed 3 March 2016.

⁹ Although an Electoral Commission study in the summer of 2016 will provide further information.

¹⁰ James, T.S, 'The Growing Electoral Registration Crisis', University of East Anglia, 26 February 2016, <<http://bit.ly/1p3HfN5>> accessed 3 March 2016.

¹¹ Electoral Commission, 'Assessment of December 2015 electoral registers in Great Britain', February 2015, <<http://bit.ly/1RPSvpy>> accessed 3 March 2016.

¹² The online survey was based on approximately 270 replies. A full analysis of the data will be provided in James, T.S, (forthcoming), 'Comparative Electoral Management: Performance, Networks and Instruments', (London and New York: Routledge).

Why does this matter?

Under-registration is a serious problem because it can decrease the representativeness of Parliament. Studies show that many citizens think that they are on the register because they pay their council tax and assume that the Government 'knows about them'. Worryingly, many would-be voters were turned away from the polls at the 2015 General Election because they were not registered. Two-thirds of polling stations turned away at least one would-be voter at the 2015 General Election because they were not on the electoral register.¹³

With upcoming boundary changes, the electoral register has assumed an even more crucial role as it will form the basis of the electoral map for future General Elections. Groups who are underrepresented on the register, such as young people, are now far less likely to be accurately represented in the House of Commons.

What should be done about it?

Short-term solutions

There are a number of policy solutions that could be undertaken to help fix the problem in the immediate and short-term.

1. Replicate the Northern Ireland Electoral Office's 'Schools Initiative' in Great Britain so that registration may be incorporated into school life

In Northern Ireland, under a 'Schools Initiative', the staff of the Chief Electoral Officer (CEO) visit schools and colleges in the autumn to engage with young people and encourage them to register. The scheme has been highly successful. In the Northern Ireland CEO's report of March 2015, he recorded that over 10,000 young people were registered and issued with electoral I.D. cards through the 'Initiative'.¹⁴ Moreover, in 2014, the CEO noted that "the 'Initiative' is the most productive aspect of [his] community engagement programme and is likely to remain so."¹⁵ The 'Initiative' has improved the rate of registration of young people, one of the largest under-registered groups, and it is directly responsible for adding an average of 10,500 young electors to the Northern Ireland register each year.

To expand, Northern Ireland's registration rate among 18-19 year olds is much higher than the Great Britain average. Drawing on the ONS mid-year population estimate for 2014,¹⁶ 83% of 18-19 year olds were registered in Northern Ireland in June 2014. An Electoral Commission report on the quality of the 2014 registers in Great Britain, however, assessed that 76% of 18-19 year olds were registered. This result has been achieved without the availability to register online, which is due to be introduced in 2016 in Northern Ireland. As an immediate stepping stone to this policy, the Government should issue special guidance to EROs in Great Britain reminding them of their power to go into (and work with) schools in the same way that the Electoral Officer for Northern Ireland does.

2. Coordinate a specific registration drive to target 16 and 17 year-old 'attainers'

National Voter Registration Drives have been enormously successful in registering new voters (see, below). However, there is scope for strengthening this with a specific focus on schools, colleges and sixth-forms as this would boost the registration rates of 'attainers'. This could also be done in coordination with youth offenders institutes, secure training colleges, JobCentre Plus centres,

¹³ Clark A., & James T.S, 'The Unsung Heroes of Electoral Democracy: Poll Workers and Electoral Integrity in Britain', Paper for the Pre-APSA Workshop on Electoral Integrity, San Francisco, 2 September 2015, <<http://bit.ly/21cdHsi>> accessed 3 March 2016.

¹⁴ Chief Electoral Officer for Northern Ireland, 'Report of the Chief Electoral Officer for Northern Ireland 2014-2015', 12 June 2015, 4 November 2011, HC 453, 2014-15, <<http://bit.ly/1L7wKCK>> accessed 4 March 2016.

¹⁵ Letter from Mr Graham Shields (CEO, Northern Ireland) to Lord Roberts of Llandudno, 10 October 2014, <<http://bit.ly/1TUR4cC>> accessed 4 March 2016.

¹⁶ Electoral Register: Northern Ireland: Written Question - 13739, (HC Deb 28 October 2015 c 13739W), <<http://bit.ly/1TldPXi>> accessed 4 March 2016.

apprenticeship and traineeship providers and large employers. A national scheme of student 'champions' in higher educational establishments could be established. Student champions could be recruited, trained and resourced to promote voter registration amongst their peers and to reach out into schools (to fit together with universities' mandated outreach and community engagement activities).

In the immediate short-term, with elections in May 2016 and the EU referendum, Education Departments and agencies should issue urgent guidance to schools, colleges and sixth-forms across the country. This guidance should ensure that these institutions are aware of the dramatic fall in 'attainers' on the register following the transition to IER, and request that they welcome their ERO to assemblies or classes before the deadline to register to vote in May's elections.

3. Prompt students to register to vote when they annually enrol at their Further Education, Higher Education or university

Students are one of the most under-registered groups on the electoral register. They are also likely to have been among the most directly affected by the move to IER. Prior to this, many students would have been automatically registered by their university administration because they lived in university accommodation. As one of the most mobile populations, students represent a real challenge for electoral administrators to keep them on the register. Yet students annually have to complete paperwork to (re-)enrol on their courses so that the university has up-to-date contact details. University registration could easily be designed to incorporate an opt-in for voter registration. The University of Sheffield has pioneered an 'outstanding' initiative along these lines¹⁷¹⁸, which could be replicated across higher education institutions.

4. Reassess the options of 'block' registration in, for example, care homes and university halls of accommodation

A further option is to return to 'block' registration for young people in educational establishments and vulnerable people in other forms of shared accommodation.

5. Encourage recipients of National Insurance number notification letters to register to vote online

A National Insurance number is needed in order for citizens to register to vote. Many people may not know their National Insurance number and the process of finding it is often inconvenient and challenging. Electoral officials have said that it is often people's experience with bureaucracy that discourages them from registering.¹⁹ 'Attainers', one of the most under-registered groups, are sent their National Insurance numbers in a letter from HMRC just before their sixteenth birthday. With the necessary details at hand, this could become an important point at which they are also asked to register to vote, with amendments made to the letter.

6. Open up the online 'Academy' proposed by John Penrose MP to allow input from civil society involved in registration drives and academics researching best practice

The Government recently announced the launch of an online 'Academy' to promote best practice in electoral services. This is a promising development which offers the opportunity for electoral officials to learn from best practice, be provided with training and enable peer-to-peer learning. However, there is considerable scope for this to be extended. Civil society groups such as Bite The Ballot and the National Union of Students increasingly play an important role in voter registration. They regularly work with the Cabinet Office and Local Authorities. They are often able to better connect with hard-to-reach groups. It

¹⁷ Blomfield P, 'How to get students registered to vote – and why it matters by Paul Blomfield MP', Higher Education Policy Institute, 11 March 2015, <<http://bit.ly/1La2IU4>> , accessed 7 March 2016

¹⁸ Universities UK, 'Student Voter Registration in UK Universities', 17 July 2015, <<http://bit.ly/1La2bMk>> , accessed 7 March 2015

¹⁹ James, T.S, 'The Spill-over and Displacement Effects of Implementing Election Administration Reforms: Introducing Individual Electoral Registration in Britain', Parliamentary Affairs, (2014) 67 (2): pp281-305; James, T.S, 'Electoral Management in Britain', (2014) in Pippa Norris, Richard W. Frank, and Ferran Martinez i Coma, *Advancing Electoral Integrity* (Oxford University Press, New York), p.320.

is vitally important that they are also involved in the online academy so that they too can learn best practice from each other. Similarly, there is a new wave of academic research on electoral administration in the UK. This has been funded by organisations such as the British Academy, ARHC, ERSC, Nuffield Foundation and Leverhulme Trust. It is vitally important that this and future research is incorporated into efforts to improve the management of elections.

7. Commission and publish a detailed evaluation of innovations in Local Authorities designed to improve the completeness of the register

The Minister has announced that Local Authorities are currently piloting innovative ways to use data to improve levels of electoral registration.²⁰ This news is welcome. It is important that these innovations are evaluated and the results are made widely available to inform best practice elsewhere - and that the data is available for independent research. Piloting innovations is an important way in which ideas can be tested to see if they work. The Government undertook many electoral pilots between 2000-2007 with schemes such as text message voting, weekend voting and all-postal ballots.²¹ These experiences offered important insights into what worked and what didn't. The pilots took place in the Local Authorities that were willing to participate and inferences that can be made from them are undermined. It is therefore important to include social scientists into the design of piloting schemes, as they can independently suggest the criteria for choosing places to innovate and write independent assessments.

8. Ensure that EROs are aware of the discretionary powers they have, and data-sets that may be open to them, in building an accurate and complete register

There is evidence of variation in the quality of registers and organisation of elections across the UK. Some Local Authorities are more widely using their discretionary powers and datasets to build an accurate and complete register than others.²² Increasing the awareness of EROs of their powers could result in them making vital steps in improving levels of registration. Meanwhile, the continued use of the Electoral Commission's performance standards have been demonstrated to be effective in encouraging EROs to act.²³

9. Support the Law Commission's proposals to consolidate electoral law and provide a modern legislative framework for the conduct of elections, so that electoral officials are not slowed down in their effort to provide high quality services to voters

UK electoral law is fragmented, complicated and causes electoral administrators to make errors in the running of elections. The Electoral Commission has estimated that there over 35 primary pieces of legislation and over 100 pieces of secondary legislation that they must have regard to when running elections. There is evidence that electoral administrators therefore make errors or take time to double check the law.²⁴ Thankfully, the Law Commissions have developed proposals to modernise and consolidate the law. This involved extensive consolidation and their proposals were published on 4 February 2016. Supporting this work could lead to better run electoral services.²⁵

10. Funding and support for National Voter Registration Drive

²⁰ Penrose J, 'Vision for Electoral Registration', Speech, 23 October 2015, <<http://bit.ly/1oW5qfO>> accessed 3 March 2016.

²¹ James T.S, 'Fewer Costs, More Votes? United Kingdom Innovations in Election Administration 2000–2007 and the Effect on Voter Turnout', *Election Law Journal: Rules, Politics, and Policy*. March 2011, 10(1), pp37-52.

²² Clark A, 'Public Administration and the Integrity of the Electoral Process in British Elections' *Public Administration*, March 2015, 93(1), pp86-102.

²³ James T.S, 'Fixing U.K. Failures of Electoral Management', *Electoral Studies*, December 2013, 32(4), pp597–608.

²⁴ James T.S, 'UK electoral law is fragmented, convoluted and causing errors in the running of elections. It needs to be consolidated' LSE Politics and Policy Blog, 20 September 2012, <<http://bit.ly/21O8zgp>> accessed 3 March 2014.

²⁵ Law Commission, Scottish Law Commission & Northern Ireland Law Commission, 'Electoral Law: A Joint Interim Report', 4 February 2016, <<http://bit.ly/1LFmNvQ>> accessed 3 March 2016.

For each of the last three National Voter Registration Drives, support has been offered from a variety of politicians and party officials, Local Authorities, EROs and individuals across the political spectrum. However, to date, the UK Government and Electoral Commission has not funded the project specifically, despite repeated calls and requests to do so.²⁶ As an efficient and cost-effective campaign, NVRD should be supported through more than warm words.

11. Strengthen the short- and long-term funding of electoral registration services, so that they are sufficiently resourced to provide high quality services to citizens

Research is clear that a significant amount of variation in the quality of the performance of electoral officials is the amount of money spent.²⁷ It is also clear, from the recent University of East Anglia survey that the introduction of IER has meant considerable extra expenditure on postage, new staff, IT equipment and canvassing. One Local Authority reported a 50% increase in expenditure.²⁸ It is therefore vitally important that electoral services are given the necessary additional funding in the short-term, but also that the longer-term sustainability of electoral registration is evaluated.

12. The inclusion of civil society groups and academics in government reviews, consultations and working groups relating to registration

Civil society groups like Bite The Ballot are playing an increasingly important role in registering voters. Across three years, they have registered 626,975 people during just three coordinated weeks of campaigning. It is therefore proposed that they, alongside similar groups and academics undertaking research on electoral administration, are more consistently included in the decision-making process on voter registration.

13. Assess whether any future reforms designed to reduce electoral fraud will impact negatively on the completeness of the register

The recent focus of Government legislation on electoral law has been a concern with levels of electoral fraud.²⁹ This has followed high profile cases of fraud such as Birmingham in 2004 and Tower Hamlets in 2014. The best available evidence, however, is that the while such cases are extremely concerning, they are very isolated and localised problems and the loopholes for fraud have closed. There is no evidence of widespread electoral fraud in Britain.³⁰ Government legislation and resources should therefore switch from efforts to focus to reduce fraud to the worsening problem of under-registration. Any proposals to reform electoral law should consider the consequences for electoral participation and levels of voter registration.

14. Nudge citizens to register to vote online when they access government services such as paying Council tax, renewing car taxes or registering for benefits (drawing lessons from the USA's 'Motor Voter' registration via driver's licences)

A successful scheme was introduced in the USA in the 1990s whereby citizens are asked to register to vote when they renew their driving licences and this has been enormously successful, studies have

²⁶ Political and Constitutional Reform Committee, *Voter Engagement in the UK - Volume I*, 14 November 2014, HC 232, 2014-15, pp27-28, para 59, <<http://bit.ly/1qWmYU5>> accessed 3 March 2016.

²⁷ Alistair Clark (2014) finds that spending on electoral registration was a particularly effective tool in improving the quality of elections in Britain, while in additional work demonstrates the positive impact of spending on electoral administration more generally for election quality. See: Clark A, 'Investing in Electoral Management' (2014) in Pippa Norris, Richard W. Frank, and Ferran Martinez i Coma, *Advancing Electoral Integrity* (Oxford University Press, New York) p.320; Clark A, (forthcoming) 'Identifying the Determinants of Electoral Integrity and Administration in Advanced Democracies: The Case of Britain' European Political Science Review 2016, In Press.

²⁸ James T.S, 'Comparative Electoral Management: Performance, Networks and Instruments', (forthcoming), (Routledge, London and New York).

²⁹ Cabinet Office, 'Sir Eric Pickles to Examine Electoral Fraud', Press Release, 13 August 2015, <<http://bit.ly/1X0iBaQ>> accessed 3 March 2016.

³⁰ Clark A, & James T.S, 'The Unsung Heroes of Electoral Democracy: Poll Workers and Electoral Integrity in Britain', Paper for the Pre-APSA Workshop on Electoral Integrity, San Francisco, 2 September 2015, <<http://bit.ly/21cdHsi>> accessed 3 March 2016.

shown, in increasingly levels of registration.³¹ A similar system could be introduced in the UK whereby citizens are prompted to register to vote when they pay their council tax, renew their car tax, apply for a driver's licence or apply for state benefits.

Long-term solutions

There are also a number of policy solutions that could be investigated and scoped out with a view to strengthening UK democracy in the long-term.

15. Introduce a national programme of education in schools, colleges and sixth-forms regarding the benefits of voter registration

By educating young people about democracy, voting and electoral registration whilst they are still in an atmosphere of learning, it is possible to ensure that this generation, and all future generations, grow up engaged and informed about how to take part in UK politics. If a central purpose of each of the UK's devolved education systems is to prepare students for life after school, students should be empowered with the skills, knowledge and confidence to fulfil their roles as active citizens - including the opportunity to register to vote (and incorporating the benefits of registering in terms of jury service, credit rating and identity). Whilst teachers have the freedom to innovate, they are also in position to inspire students to register whilst they are still in school.

16. Introduce a national website so that citizens can check their own registration status online

A system of online voter registration was introduced in 2014. However, for people to check whether they are on the electoral register, they need to contact their Local Authority. These enquiries can slow down the work of EROs and their staff. People may therefore register online again online, 'just in case', which then creates further work for the EROs. It would be more efficient for the would-be voter and electoral services if citizens could check their own registration status online. Such a system was introduced in Ireland (see, www.checktheresister.ie) in 2006.³²

17. Reintroduce National Insurance number cards when notifying 15 year-olds of their number; enable the option to request a number (or a reminder of a number) online

As noted above, National Insurance numbers are required in order to register to vote. In order to make it easier for young people to remember and access their number, they could be issued with a card (as was common practice in the UK until 2011³³) or have the option to retrieve it online.

18. Widen registration criteria via alternative forms of permissible registration I. D. beyond the National Insurance number identifier

Given that some citizens may experience problems accessing and remembering their National Insurance number, other identifiers could be used to verify the authenticity of registration applications. For examples, students could be allowed to register with their UCAS or university I. D. number.

19. Ongoing powers for the Electoral Commission to direct EROs' activities

The Performance Standards scheme organised by the Electoral Commission, which allows them to identify best practice and then measure whether Local Authorities comply, has led to improvements in electoral registration.³⁴ During referendums, the Commission can issue direct instructions to electoral officials.³⁵ This too has led to many improvements, but could be improved and adapted to maximise

³¹ James T.S, 'Elite Statecraft and Election Administration', (edn), (Palgrave, Basingstoke, 2012), pp25-61.

³² James T.S, 'Elite Statecraft and Election Administration', (edn), (Palgrave, Basingstoke, 2012), p188.

³³ This is Money, 'National Insurance Cards to be Scrapped', 29 June 2011, <<http://bit.ly/1oWEXPp>> accessed 4 March 2016.

³⁴ James T.S, 'Fixing U.K. Failures of Electoral Management', Electoral Studies, December 2013, 32(4), pp597-608.

³⁵ James T.S, 'Centralising Electoral Management and Electoral Integrity: Lessons from Britain', Paper for the 64th Political Studies Association Annual International Conference, 14-16 April 2014, The Midland Hotel, Manchester.

success. The use of these schemes should continue in coordination with the best practices identified through the online 'Academy', academic research and the ongoing experience of civil society groups.

20. Systematically monitor the skills, pay, resources and workplace experiences of staff working within electoral services

A provisional analysis of a survey from the University of East Anglia suggests significant variation in the pay and workplace experience of electoral officials. In February 2016, half of staff had considered leaving their post during the last year. The constant flow of staff can lead to a loss of knowledge and experience and a decline in the quality of service to the voter. Following a further analysis of this data,³⁶ recommendations should be made as to how the workplace can be improved for electoral officials.

21. Pilot election-day registration

Citizens are currently required to register eleven days in advance of a General Election. Election-day registration would mean that citizens could register on the day of the election, at the point of voting. This would mean that people who had forgotten or had become interested in the election late on could still exercise their right to vote. As noted above, two thirds of polling stations turned at least one citizen away at the 2015 General Election.³⁷ Election-day registration is currently practiced in fourteen states (plus the District of Columbia) in the USA.³⁸ Research on election-day registration have consistently shown that it can increase registration rates.³⁹ In the 2012 US Presidential election, those states that had election-day registration had turnout rates of 10 percentage points higher than other states.⁴⁰ It should be expected that the effect on the UK would also therefore also be very positive. This measure would require long-term planning, however, and initial piloting.

22. Pilot 'electronic poll-books' that would give citizens choice of where they could vote

Citizens are currently required to vote in a particular polling station - one located near to where they live. However, this is often not convenient for voters. The system of having a paper-based register in poll stations prevents citizens being able to vote in any polling station, such as one near to their workplace, university or school. In Chicago, however, citizens can vote in a variety of polling stations because electoral officials have an electronic version of the register.⁴¹ This allows them to mark off a voter who casts their ballot. Such a system would require capital investment in the UK, but deserves to be piloted.

23. Review the need for a single national electronic register

There is no single electoral register in the UK. Instead, each ERO has their own register. This makes it difficult to check for duplicates and missing entries across jurisdictions. In many other countries around the world, there is a single electoral register, often because a single population register is used.⁴² In Canada, a single national electoral register is constructed from a variety of other databases and the country boasts a completeness rate of 92.4%.⁴³ A project to create a single electoral register in the UK was abandoned in 2011 because of cost concerns⁴⁴ - as were plans for a single national identity card.⁴⁵

³⁶ A full analysis of the data will be provided in James T.S, 'Comparative Electoral Management: Performance, Networks and Instruments', (forthcoming), (Routledge, London and New York).

³⁷ Clark A, & James T. S., 'The Unsung Heroes of Electoral Democracy: Poll Workers and Electoral Integrity in Britain', Paper for the Pre-APSA Workshop on Electoral Integrity, San Francisco, 2 September 2015, <<http://bit.ly/21cdHsi>> accessed 3 March 2016.

³⁸ National Conference of State Legislatures, 'Same Day Registration', 2 June 2015, <<http://bit.ly/10legHT>> accessed 3 March 2016.

³⁹ James T.S, 'Elite Statecraft and Election Administration', edn, (Palgrave, Basingstoke, 2012), pp25-61.

⁴⁰ Demos (2013), 'Same Day Registration' (New York, Demos), <<http://bit.ly/21gyfjt>> accessed 3 March 2016.

⁴¹ Thometz K, 'Chicago's Board of Election Commissioners Introduces Electronic Poll Books', Chicago Tonight, 12 March 2014, <<http://bit.ly/O2TXsQ>> accessed 4 March 2016.

⁴² Ace Project, 'Elections and Technology: Impact of Voter Registration Methods', <<http://bit.ly/1Sp695j>> accessed 3 March 2016.

⁴³ Elections Canada, 'Description of the National Register of Electors', <<http://bit.ly/1LFRnW8>> accessed 3 March 2016.

⁴⁴ Cabinet Office, '£11 million saved as Electors Database Plan Abandoned', Press Release, 18 July 2011, <<http://bit.ly/1QwPDPi>> accessed 3 March 2016.

However, given that many credit agencies have copies of a national electoral register, it is worth evaluating the possibility of national register in the longer term. A possible framework for such a project could be taken from the Office for National Statistics, who carry out census⁴⁵ in the UK. Their findings are used to estimate rates of electoral registration⁴⁶, but the process of collating data for the census is both separate to and different from the methodology used to get people onto the electoral register.

24. Introduce an automatic system of electoral registration

Given the low levels of registration, the assumption that many voters have about already being on the register and the resources that are used chasing voters, there is one obvious solution: citizens could be automatically added to the register. This would involve the Government and public bodies working together, creating a system that is truly convenient for citizens by integrating national and local datasets.

This could mean that an individual's address would be automatically updated according to trusted datasets, which would collate information at each point when a citizen interacts with the state - whether that is school, paying a tax, receiving a benefit, using the NHS or claiming a pension. For 'attainers', this could be done initially when they are sent their N. I. number, for example. In a similar fashion, Oregon has recently enacted a law that automatically adds citizens to the register when they obtain or renew their driver's license.⁴⁷

A system of automatic registration would provide tangible administrative benefits. Currently, when changing address, citizens have to individually re-register to re-verify their identity. However, this is out of step with many public services, including the Department for Work and Pensions, which already provides an online mechanism for individuals to notify of change of address without having to re-register. Change of address for access to NHS services is also more straightforward, especially when moving within the same area. This tangled process could explain why groups with a high turnover of accommodation, such as students, are missing from the register in such numbers.

The administrative data of this type of system could notify EROs immediately of a change of address, which, in turn, would make the task of identifying those not on the register much easier, building a far more accurate records of the electorate, and of confidence in the system. Ultimately, this ought to be the end goal of a truly effective, fair, accurate and comprehensive registration system.

⁴⁵ BBC News, 'Identity Card to be Axed Within 100 Days', BBC, 27 May 2010, <<http://bbc.in/21cCfBC>> accessed 3 March 2016.

⁴⁶ Electoral Commission, 'The quality of the 2014 electoral registers in Great Britain', July 2014, <<http://bit.ly/1YbEZiz>> , accessed 7 March 2015

⁴⁷ Secretary of State of Oregon, 'Oregon Motor Voter Act FAQ', <<http://1.usa.gov/1R6kE9o>> , accessed 3 March 2016.

CASE STUDY: National Voter Registration Drive 2016

History

Born out of a desire to make their voices heard in their community, Bite The Ballot was established by students and staff in a Dartford classroom in 2010. Four years later, and learning from a successful scheme in the USA, that same desire to empower young people as active citizens culminated into the UK's first National Voter Registration Drive.

NVRD 2014 took place in early February, coinciding with the anniversary of the first sitting of newly elected MPs following the passage of the Reform Act 1832. Working with partners and grassroots organisations, NVRD 2014 registered 50,652 people to vote using a paper-form system. This was achieved at a campaign cost of £0.18 per registration, whereas - at the time - the most cost-efficient registration drive coordinated by the Electoral Commission stood at £6.00. The following year, BTB coordinated the most successful registration drive (per capita) of any Western democracy. In total, 441,696 people registered to vote in one coordinated week of campaign action, including 156,369 on one day alone. The number and scale of partnerships increased, as well as a targeted social media campaign including a promoted trend (worth £30,000) from Twitter, and a UK-wide Facebook newsfeed reminder.

NVRD 2016

NVRD 2016 confronted a different kind of challenge from the previous two campaigns. It was no longer a new initiative, and nor was it in a General Election year benefiting from the looming presence of a major democratic decision in the next few months. However, BTB again addressed the problem of reaching hardest-to-reach groups in numerous ways.

1. Grassroots: Community Engagement Officers (CEOs) are trained to work with youth organisations and Local Authorities, engaging young people and marginalised groups by facilitating sessions of BTB's educational resource 'The Basics'. They are the frontline of Bite The Ballot's work, visiting schools, colleges, students' unions, universities, youth clubs etc. to engage and register as many young people as possible. There were seven young, local CEOs working across 11 Local Authorities - complemented by the work of Bite The Ballot's youth advisory board, 'BTB10' - over the 2016 campaign engaging other young citizens in the democratic process and encouraging them to register too.

For example, Bite The Ballot CEO Josh wanted to engage young women in the political process in Barnet. Therefore, he ran four sessions of 'The Basics' with 25 young women each time, and registered participants to vote through a direct 'call to action'. Ashar Smith, another CEO, made an appearance on BBC2's *Daily Politics* to highlight the problems that visually impaired voters face when voting, and how the usual processes of local ERO-led registration can often overlook them, leaving them off the register and without a say in democracy.

2. Digital: This year, Bite The Ballot's graphics and Twitter hashtags were projected on to the Welsh Senedd.⁴⁸ Bite The Ballot also formed a partnership with UNILAD to create short videos for their Facebook page (which has 12.3 million 'likes'). Covered topics were as diverse as war and conflict, mental health, housing and education. BTB ensured that each of these videos included the 'call to action' to register to vote (via a link to the GOV.uk portal). Together, the four videos BTB and UNILAD created had a total of 3,237,767 views, 22,747 likes and 5,033 shares. Bite The Ballot's main Twitter hashtags were #TakePower and #NVRD and through Twitter alone, over 2.6 million people viewed the tweets that were tweeted during the 2016 campaign. More than 8,500 people engaged with these tweets, meaning they either clicked on the tweet or the hashtags, retweeted it, 'liked' the tweet or followed Bite The Ballot's Twitter. The Twitter profile of #NVRD was further boosted by numerous endorsements and retweets by major public figures.

3. Advocacy: Bite The Ballot were able to gain the support of decision-makers from across the the UK, and important figures from every mainstream political party. Parliamentary support for NVRD 2016

⁴⁸ The campaign also gained video endorsements from Mhairi Black MP (SNP), Chris Leslie MP (Labour), Caroline Lucas MP (Greens) and Chloe Smith MP (Conservative).

included an Early Day motion (1002)⁴⁹ and Siobhain McDonagh's Ten Minute Rule Bill motion in the House of Commons. In her motion, she hailed Bite The Ballot's efforts during NVRD and argued that, in the long run, 'it should be the responsibility of the Government, not charities, to register voters'.⁵⁰ Also, Welsh Assembly Member Simon Thomas and Bethan Jenkins' Statement of Opinion encouraged support for NVRD in Wales.⁵² APPG Chair Chloe Smith also called on⁵⁴ the Government to persuade Westminster City Council to repeat NVRD 2015's successful ballot box projection onto Elizabeth Tower. The Council refused, despite the success of the 2015 projection and the support of Speaker Bercow and the House Authorities.

Outcomes

After another highly successful NVRD, this year 134,627 citizens registered to vote. Almost 100,000 registered to vote online, and the remainder via paper forms. The registration rate of NVRD 2016, taking into account expenditure on staff time, digital resources, and campaign materials, was £0.23 per person. BTB also used NVRD to continue to press for reforms to the UK registration system. The Times published an open letter to the Prime Minister, signed by over fifty politicians, academics and campaigners.⁵⁵ The letter highlighted the work of NVRD, but placed it in the wider context of the overall drop in registration levels. It called on the Government to reform voter registration policy to address the decrease.

Challenges

The achievements of NVRD 2016 were made despite a lack of media interest and engagement in the issue of voter registration. The fact that BTB, a charity with comparatively small resources, are able to increase awareness and registration levels by such huge amounts demonstrates that with just a little effort, real change is possible.

Even though BTB did receive some support from politicians during NVRD 2016, the campaign this year would have been more effective if all politicians had supported it as this is an issue that should be placed above party politics. If more politicians had supported NVRD 2016, it would have enabled BTB to inspire more citizens to register to vote.

Partners who were involved in NVRD 2015 - and who ran registration campaigns in the run-up to the 2015 General Election with the aid of Cabinet Office and other funding sources - were not able to get involved in this year's campaign as effectively as previous years. The financial assistance some of our partners needed was not available ahead of the 2016 campaign, and - due to capacity constraints - NVRD partners were unable to participate as effectively or fully in 2016.

BTB was offered the opportunity to access an electoral registration heatmap by credit reference agency, Experian. This would have allowed BTB to allocate resources more effectively by hyper-targeting NVRD activities in communities where registration is estimated to be low or had recently dropped. However, the Electoral Commission informed BTB that Experian 'could not disclose any information' due to legal restrictions that restrict credit reference agencies from sharing copies of their register.⁵⁶

BTB also sought feedback from individuals who ran registration activities during NVRD. Many of them noted difficulties in helping others register. A lack of information about the impact of politics on citizens' lives, and a negative public perception of politicians, were the two most frequent hurdles that made

⁴⁹ Calling on 'calls on all MPs to promote and participate in NVRD 2016 by joining events run by local community changemakers and BTB partners to encourage voter registration and democratic engagement'.

⁵⁰ EDM 1002, *National Voter Registration Drive, 2015-16*, <<http://bit.ly/1UGkaf>> accessed 4 March 2016.

⁵¹ HC Deb 3 February 2016 c964 <<http://bit.ly/1UGkD15>> accessed 4 March 2016.

⁵² National Party of Wales, 'Written Statement of Opinion: Tabled on 27/01/2016', <<http://bit.ly/1Rtz9E2>> accessed 4 March 2016.

⁵³ National Party of Wales, 'Assembly Members back National Voter Registration Drive', 28 January 2016, <<http://bit.ly/21OGISF>> accessed 4 March 2016.

⁵⁴ HC Deb 27 January 2016 c249 <<http://bit.ly/1ROBLPB>> accessed March 2016.

⁵⁵ Political Studies Association, 'The Silent, Growing Crisis of Voter Registration', 11 February 2016, <<http://bit.ly/1Xm3pWk>> accessed 4 March 2016.

⁵⁶ Regulation 114, Representation of the People (England and Wales) Regulations 2001.

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This report does not reflect the settled view of the APPG or its Members

young people in particular less willing to engage with the registration element of the campaign. In spite of the massive efforts of campaigners, registration rates continue to drop at alarming rates. In the long term, the Government must take on more responsibility for this growing democratic crisis. It must both work more closely with Bite The Ballot, and other interested groups, and use its own enormous resources to tackle this problem.

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Call to action

This report suggests that the current system of voter registration is ripe for reform. Building upon the ideas, suggestions and solutions presented in this document, the 'next steps' are clear.

UK Parliamentarians should now take the above recommendations forward by:

- sharing the report with colleagues in the UK Parliament, devolved legislatures and Party HQs to inform future policy-making (including in advance of manifestos for elections in May 2016)
- raising the report through Parliamentary Business to engage the UK Government and Electoral Commission in adopting these suggestions
- taking action locally by working with schools, youth clubs, academics, employers, Local Authorities etc. to maximise registration ahead of May 2016 and June's EU referendum
- acting to ensure that the 'easy wins' are realised without delay, and
- working together in calling for - and incorporating proposals into - any future legislation on electoral practice.

What is needed now is united action, not from one political party, but every party, to take these recommendations forward. The signs are encouraging, as the leaders of the Labour, Green, Plaid Cymru, UKIP and Liberal Democrat parties recently joined their voices together, calling on the UK Government to act.⁵⁷

Without all-party action to address the problems of declining registration, British democracy will suffer. This report urges every decision-maker, educator, electoral administrator, campaigner and academic to radically improve our registration system and strengthen UK democracy for the long-term.

⁵⁷ 'Letters: Generals Shouldn't Play Politics when Britain's Security Depends on NATO, not EU', The Telegraph, 25 February 2016, <<http://bit.ly/1oCjStg>> accessed 4 March 2016.

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Authors' information

This report has been written ahead of an APPG on Democratic Participation meeting of 8 March 2016, following a roundtable meeting of interested stakeholders on 1 March 2016. It aims to present an assessment the impact of the end of the transition to IER and recommend potential avenues for reform in the 2015-20 Parliament.

It does not reflect the views of individual MPs, Peers - or the Group itself. It is a draft report, intended to assist in the framing of any future reports of the Group.

It has been authored by Bite The Ballot (BTB), Dr Toby James (UEA) and in collaboration with ClearView Research. Dr Toby James is a Senior Lecturer in British and Comparative Politics at the University of East Anglia. BTB is a youth democracy charity and acts as Secretariat to the APPG. ClearView Research is a youth-led research consultancy.

These initial contributions have been gratefully received from Members of APPG, Universities UK and participants from the roundtable, including Dr James Sloam (Co-Director, Centre for European Politics, Royal Holloway), Katie Ghose (CEO, Electoral Reform Society), Josiah Mortimer (Communications Officer, Electoral Reform Society), Elisabeth Pop (Voter Registration Campaign Manager, HOPE not hate) and Joseph Dunton (Principal Projects and Policy Officer, London Borough of Lewisham).

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