CITIZENSHIP AND CIVIC ENGAGEMENT

Evidence to

The House of Lords Select Committee on Citizenship and Civic Engagement

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Introductory remarks and overview

1. The committee has invited evidence on the changing nature of citizenship and civic engagement in the twenty-first century. This is an important and timely issue because of the challenges that the committee flags in its terms of reference.

2. Being a citizen involves more than just voting at elections. However, elections are the primary mechanism through which citizens can give their democratic voice and hold governments to account. Participating in elections is therefore an essential component of being a citizen. There is a civic duty for every individual to take part in the electoral process. But there is also a duty upon central and local government to make it as easy and convenient for citizens to take part in the electoral process as possible. Societal changes mean that many individuals may lack the time to navigate through difficult bureaucratic hurdles to register and cast their vote.

3. I am a Senior Lecturer at the University of East Anglia whose research focuses on how electoral administration and management can be reformed to increase civic engagement at the ballot box. My research has been funded by many organisations (ESRC, AHRC, Nuffield Foundation, Electoral Commission, British Academy and the McDougall Trust) over many years. I am currently the Lead Fellow on Electoral Modernisation to the All Party Parliamentary Group on Democratic Participation and co-author of the group's report on *Getting the missing millions back on the electoral register: a vision for voter registration reform in the UK*.[1] I am therefore submitting evidence to the committee based on my research and will comment specifically on the questions where I have unique findings that may assist the committee.

4. In summary, this submission argues that the committee could improve citizenship at the ballot box by recommending concrete reforms to continue to modernise the electoral process to keep it in line with the twentieth-first century.

Question 4: 'Do current laws encourage active political engagement?... Should changes be made to the voting process or the voting registration process?'

5. Being a citizen involves much more than taking part in the electoral process by casting a vote. However, this is an essential component of it. Without active participation at the ballot box then the results of elections may not be representative of the views of the population and there is a much less rigorous check on the accountability of decision-makers, at national, local and mayoral elections.

6. Turnout at UK elections remains low, especially amongst young people. At the 2017 general election, 54 per cent of 18-24 years olds voted. Overall, 68.5 per cent voted. This was a reversal of the long decline in turnout in UK general elections and the gap between young and old narrowed considerably. There

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[1] James, T.S., Bite the Ballot and Clear View Research (2016) 'Getting the missing millions back on the electoral register,' the All Party Parliamentary Group on Voter Registration, April 2016, with Bite the Ballot.

remains a large gap, however.[2] Turnout is also much lower in other types of elections. Turnout in the 2017 Metropolitan Mayoral elections ranged from 21 to 32.9 per cent.[3] There remains a democratic deficit.

7. There are many reasons why citizens do not vote. This includes a general level of disengagement and cynicism about politicians and the 'establishment'. One reason why many people do not vote, however, is that the process of casting a vote was designed in the Victorian era and require a fundamental re-think for the twenty-first century. Society has become more complex with individuals and families having different working patterns and lifestyles. The electoral process has not kept pace with this. Studies show that making it more convenient for the citizen to vote can increase the chances that they will cast their vote.[4]

8. Those policies, which have an evidence base, that the committee could consider are as follows:

- **Voting at any polling station.** Citizens are currently required to vote in a designated polling station - one located near to where they live. However, this is often not convenient for many voters. The system of having a paper-based register in polling stations prevents citizens being able to vote in any polling station, such as one near to their workplace, university or school. In many countries, however, citizens can vote in a variety of polling stations because electoral officials have an electronic version of the register. 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. It would also address concerns about electoral fraud.

- **Extended voting hours including weekend voting.** Elections are held on a Thursday in the UK out of tradition rather than a rational analysis. Turnout might be higher if elections were held at weekends or advance voting was available. There were some limited pilots of this between 2000-2007, but mixed evidence on the effects. It deserves further piloting.[5]

- **All-postal elections.** Experiments with all-postal elections in the UK between 2000-2004 suggested that this could have a significant positive effect on turnout in local and European elections. In many cases turnout rose by 50 per cent on the previous election.[6]

9. To take part in the electoral process citizens need to be registered to vote. The evidence is that there are millions of people missing from the electoral register, however. This is a problem that has developed over several decades as society has changed and reforms have not been to made the electoral

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[2] Toby S. James (2017) 'How strong is the democratic integrity of the UK elections? And are turnout, candidacies and participation being maximized?' in Patrick Dunleavy (eds) The Democratic Audit of 2017. London: Democratic Audit.

[3] House of Commons Library (2017). 'Turnout', Research Paper SM02633.

[4] Toby S. James (2012), *Elite Statecraft and Election Administration*, Palgrave, Basingstoke.

[5] Toby S. James (2011) 'Fewer "costs", more votes? U.K. Innovations in Electoral Administration 2000-2007 and their effect on voter turnout', *Election Law Journal*, 10(1), p.37-52,

[6] Toby S. James (2011) 'Fewer "costs", more votes? U.K. Innovations in Electoral Administration 2000-2007 and their effect on voter turnout', *Election Law Journal*, 10(1), p.37-52,

registration process to keep up with this. The latest systematic estimate is that there were around 8 million people missing from the electoral register in December 2015, around 16% of the adult population.[7]

10. Levels of electoral registration are also highly uneven. The evidence is that the register is less complete in urban areas (especially within London), amongst recent movers and private renters, Commonwealth and EU nationals, non-white ethnicities, lower socioeconomic groups, citizens with mental disabilities and young people. This matters more than ever before because this is the register on which the boundaries for future general elections will be drawn. These groups will have less representation in the UK Parliament than others. Democracy will suffer as a result.[8]

11. Registration rates are also declining sharply among some groups. Table 1 charts out the proportion by age groups between the 2014 and 2015 register. Less than half of 'attainers' – the next generation of voters – are on the register, but nearly everyone over-65 is. But this is a situation which has worsened during the implementation of individual electoral registration ('IER') – a system that made it an individual's responsibility to register to vote and asked them to provide their National Insurance number. Registration rates increased amongst older voters, but declined among younger voters.[9]

Age group	Completeness of the electoral register (%)		
	2014	2015	Change during introduction of IER
16-17	51	45	- 6
18-19	76	65	-11
20-24	70	67	-3
25-34	74	70	-4
35-44	85	82	-3
45-54	91	90	-1
55-64	93	93	0
65 plus	95	96	+1

Table 1: Changes in registration rates after the introduction of IER. Source: author based on data in Electoral Commission (p.45)

[7] Toby S. James (2017) 'How strong is the democratic integrity of the UK elections? And are turnout, candidacies and participation being maximized?' in Patrick Dunleavy (eds) The Democratic Audit of 2017. London: Democratic Audit.
[8] Toby S. James and Oliver Sidorczuk (2016) 'Missing Millions', *Fabian Review*, 2 August 2016.
[9] Also see: (2014) 'The Spill-over and Displacement Effects of Implementing Election Administration Reforms: Introducing Individual Electoral Registration in Britain', *Parliamentary Affairs*, 67 (2): 281-305; Toby S. James (forthcoming), *Comparative Electoral Management: Performance, Networks and Instruments* (Routledge: London and New York).

12. Although it is in large part an individual's responsibility to ensure that they register to vote and are on the electoral roll, there is evidence of confusion among behalf of the public. Research shows that:

- Citizens regularly attend polling stations to vote but are turned away because their names are not on the electoral register. At the 2015 general election, two-thirds of polling stations turned away at least one voter.[10]
- Citizens often don't register because they think that the government knows about them because they pay their council tax and access other government services.[11]
- There are a large number of duplicate applications that overwhelm electoral officials. Unsure whether they are registered, citizens register again and again, 'just in case'.[12]
- Electoral officials are generally under-resourced and this is affecting their voter outreach work.[13]

13. There are many reforms which could make the registration process easier for the citizen, but which could also potentially save substantial amounts of time and resources for electoral officials (please also see the report on *Getting the Missing Millions Back on to the Electoral Register* for more information)[14]:

- **Support voter outreach work in schools.** New research shows that when local electoral officials visit schools to speak about voter registration and elections, voter registration rates among young people increase. However, funding cuts to local authorities has meant that these now happen less frequently.[15]
- **Prompt students to register to vote during university enrolment.** Students are one of the most under-registered groups. A provision in the Higher Education Research Act means that universities will have to take any steps set out by the Office for Students to register their students. These steps are subject to ministerial guidance. An easy way to improve voter registration rates among students is to prompt them to register to vote at university enrolment each year. This should therefore be set out in clear directions from the Minister of State.[16]

[10] Alistair Clark and Toby S. James (2017) 'Poll Workers' in Pippa Norris and Alesandro Nai (eds), *Watchdog Elections: Transparency, Accountability, Compliance and Integrity*. Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press.

[11] Toby S. James (2014) 'Electoral Management in Britain' in Pippa Norris, Richard Frank and Ferran Matinez I Coma (eds) *Advancing Electoral Integrity* (New York: Oxford University Press).

[12] Alistair Clark and Toby S. James (2017) 'Fair and Free? Electoral Administration in the 2016 EU Brexit Referendum,' Paper prepared for the Midwest Political Science Association Conference, Chicago, and the UK Political Studies Association Conference, Glasgow, April 2017, with Alistair Clark.

[13] Toby S. James and Tyrone Jervier (2017) 'The cost of elections: The effects of public sector austerity on electoral integrity and voter engagement,' *Public Money and Management*, volume 37(7).

[14] James, T.S., Bite the Ballot and Clear View Research (2016) 'Getting the missing millions back on the electoral register,' the All Party Parliamentary Group on Voter Registration, April 2016, with Bite the Ballot.

[15] Toby S. James and Tyrone Jervier (2017) 'The cost of elections: The effects of public sector austerity on electoral integrity and voter engagement,' *Public Money and Management*, volume 37(7).

[16] Toby S. James, Josh Dell and Lord Rennard (2017) 'Too late for GE2017 – but now universities will have to play a role in registering students to vote,' Democratic Audit, 2 May 2017.

- **Encourage recipients of National Insurance number notification letters to register to vote online.** A National Insurance number is needed for citizens to register to vote. Many people do not know their National Insurance number and the process of finding it is often inconvenient and challenging. As noted above, 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.

- **National civic engagement forums.** There are a variety of venues for electoral officials to work with stakeholders to identify emerging threats for electoral fraud and best practices to prevent it such as the annual Electoral Integrity Roundtable. There is no similar forum for civic engagement and voter registration. This could be an annual event organised by the Electoral Commission or Cabinet Office to which grassroots campaign organisations, political parties, academics, electoral officials and other stakeholders are invited to share best practices.

- **Assess the impact of voter ID proposals.** There is a risk that government proposals to require citizens to provide voter-ID could negatively affect voter participation.[17]

- **Voter registration website.** 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 election officials and their staff. People may therefore register online again online, 'just in case', which then creates further work. 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.checktheregister.ie) in 2006.[18]

- **Prompt citizens to register to vote when accessing other government services.** When a citizen pays their council tax or car tax, they could be asked to register to vote.[19]

- **Pilot election-day registration.** Citizens are required to register in advance of an election, but many miss-out because they register after the deadline.

- **Review the need for a single national electronic register.** There is no single electoral register in the UK – but hundreds of local registers which hinders the ability to improve accuracy and completeness. This is a technical reform – but makes many other reforms possible.

- **Automatic registration.** Citizens could be automatically registered to vote. In practice, automatic registration would probably need to focus

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[17] Toby S. James (2017) 'Voter ID is a risky reform when 8m people are already missing from the electoral register', Democratic Audit, 28th December.

[18] Caroline Lucas and Toby S. James (2017) 'Why isn't the electoral registration process fully online?', Open Democracy, 29th March 2017.

[19] Toby S. James (2012), *Elite Statecraft and Election Administration*, Palgrave, Basingstoke.

on specific such as attainers who receive their National Insurance card. The principle could be piloted and expanded, however.

Question 7: How can society support civic engagement? What responsibility should central government, devolved and local governments, third sector organisations and the individual have for encouraging civic engagement? What can the Government and Parliament do to support civil society initiatives to increase civic engagement?

14. Please see my comments in relation to question 4. Central and local government should play a key role in promoting civic engagement. The evidence is, however, that local government has been less proactive in this task because of funding cuts. Visits to schools are therefore becoming less common than they once were.[20]

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[20] Toby S. James and Tyrone Jervier (2017) 'The cost of elections: The effects of public sector austerity on electoral integrity and voter engagement,' *Public Money and Management*, volume 37(7); Toby S. James and Tyrone Jervier (2017) The Cost of Elections: Funding Electoral Services in England and Wales, ClearView Research: London, with Tyrone Jervier, June 2017.