Electoral registration: the need for reform

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Summary

The UK's electoral registers are the basis on which people may vote in elections and referendums – they are the practical expression of the franchise and therefore fundamental to democratic participation. The accuracy and completeness of electoral registers are central to the health of our electoral system as a whole. Evidence about the accuracy and completeness of the registers helps provide an indication as to the overall effectiveness of the current system. Our study of the December 2015 Great Britain registers (those published at the end of the transition to Individual Electoral Registration) indicated that the local government registers were 91% accurate and 84% complete, with the parliamentary registers being 91% accurate and 85% complete. These figures meant that an estimated eight million people were missing from the electoral registers.

Intro

Our research confirms the correlation between certain demographics and lower or higher levels of completeness, with age and mobility still found to be the variables with the strongest impact: the young and those more likely to move home are less likely to be registered. Reform of the annual canvass should help Electoral Registration Officers tackle under-registration by enabling better targeting of resources in areas of greatest need, leading to more effective identification and registration of eligible electors. However, more far-reaching reforms of the electoral registration system are needed to fully address the challenges of achieving accurate and complete registers.

The current system of electoral registration

The UK's electoral registers are the basis on which people may vote in elections and referendums – they are the practical expression of the franchise and therefore fundamental to democratic participation. Electoral registers are also used elsewhere in the electoral system – for example, they are used to allocate voters to polling stations and to draw electoral boundaries. For these reasons, the accuracy and completeness of electoral registers are central to the health of our electoral system as a whole. There is no national electoral register for the United Kingdom. A total of 371 separate electoral registers are compiled and maintained by Electoral Registration Officers (EROs) 4 in Great Britain, and one register for Northern Ireland is compiled and maintained by the Chief Electoral Officer. A system of Individual Electoral Registration (IER) has operated in Great Britain since 2014, and a similar system has been used in Northern Ireland since 2002. Individuals are responsible for applying to register to vote individually, and must supply identifying information (namely date of birth and National Insurance number) as part of their application. Their identity is verified using this information before their names can be added to the electoral register. An online registration application service was introduced in Great Britain at the same time as IER in 2014 and in Northern Ireland in 2018. Individuals can apply to register online at any point during the year at the register to vote website , or by completing and returning a paper application form. In either case, although data from registration applications are verified against Department for Work and Pensions (DWP) records, each application is determined locally by individual EROs. Each ERO in Great Britain is still required by law to conduct an annual canvass of all properties in their registration area to audit their electoral register entries and to identify individuals who have moved or were not previously registered. EROs must publish a revised register by 1 December each year, with further updates published on the first working day of each month outside of the canvass period and before elections. In 2006

the annual canvass was abolished in Northern Ireland and replaced with a process of continuous registration (although a complete canvass must be conducted in Northern Ireland at least every 10 years, with the next scheduled for 2020). Since 2006, the Electoral Office for Northern Ireland (EONI) necessarily has relied much more on information from other public authorities to maintain the electoral register. The EONI currently receives data from seven data sources for the purposes of identifying eligible citizens and updating information on the register, including the Business Services Organisation (data received quarterly), General Register Office for Northern Ireland (data received weekly) and DWP (data received annually, and quarterly in the case of people turning 16 in the previous quarter). Challenges in electoral registration Annual canvass of electors In recent years it has become increasingly clear that the traditional household canvass in Great Britain has become less efficient and more expensive for EROs to conduct. The Electoral Commission has highlighted the risk of continuing with the current, largely paper-based and costly approach to the canvass at a time when local authority budgets are tight. We have therefore welcomed the UK, Scottish and Welsh Governments' plans to reform the annual canvass, which should give EROs the tools with which to implement a more data-driven, targeted and efficient approach to canvass activity, focusing their efforts increasingly at those properties which have reported a change in composition. Reform of the annual canvass represents an important first step in modernising the electoral registration system, but there is more that should be done to ensure we have an effective, joined-up and year-round registration process. While successful implementation of canvass reform is a clear priority over the short to medium term, the universal embedding of a more data-driven approach offers considerable scope for reforming the system further. This should aim to reflect people's changing expectations in a digital society by building on the increasing use of data across the public and private sectors to the benefit of citizens and the delivery of efficiencies. Accuracy and completeness of the registers We undertake research to measure the quality of the electoral registers on a periodic basis. Evidence about the accuracy and completeness of the registers helps provide an indication of how effective current methods of maintaining the register are. Our study of the December 2015 Great Britain registers (those published at the end of the transition to IER) indicated that the local government registers were 91% accurate and 84% complete, with the parliamentary registers being 91% accurate and 85% complete. These figures meant that an estimated eight million people in Great Britain were missing from the electoral registers. Our research on the electoral registers in Great Britain confirmed the correlation between certain demographics and lower or higher levels of completeness, with age and mobility still found to be the variables with the strongest impact: the young and those more likely to move home were less likely to be registered. Although evidence suggests that the accuracy of the electoral registers in Great Britain has improved significantly since the introduction of IER (91% accurate as at 1 December 2015, an improvement of four percentage points during the transition to IER), we estimated that there were still between 4-4.5 million inaccurate entries on the local government electoral registers. Our research on the electoral register in Northern Ireland indicated that the local government registers were 87% accurate and 79% complete, while the parliamentary registers were 87% accurate and 81% complete. The study found that the main drivers of completeness were, as in Great Britain, age (with young people aged 18-34 significantly less likely to be registered), recent home movement and whether someone rented their home from a private landlord. The evidence suggests that current methods employed to

maintain the registers are not necessarily working as effectively as they could, particularly in relation to capturing traditionally under-registered groups. Canvass reform should help EROs tackle under-registration by enabling targeting of resources in areas of greatest need, leading to more effective identification and registration of eligible electors. However, more far-reaching reforms of the electoral registration system are needed to fully address the challenges of achieving accurate and complete registers. Duplicate registration applications The online registration system currently allows people to submit an application to register even if they are already registered to vote. There is no direct link between the online registration service and the electoral registers, which are each held separately on local databases using a range of different Electoral Management Software (EMS) systems. The different systems cannot currently communicate directly with each other and it is therefore not possible to automatically detect and prevent duplicate applications. Estimates by EROs of the proportion of duplicate applications received ahead of the 2017 UK general election ranged from 30% of the total submitted in some areas to 70% in others. At the 2016 EU referendum, 38% of electoral registration applications made during the campaign were duplicates. EROs have highlighted the significant administrative impact of processing duplicate applications ahead of electoral events. Each individual application must be carefully checked to confirm whether or not they are a duplicate, although some EMS systems used by EROs can help manage this workflow more efficiently. There would be benefit in exploring the extent to which the online registration system could check automatically whether a person was already correctly registered to vote before submitting a new application. Similar facilities are already offered to voters in other comparable democracies, including Australia, New Zealand and the Republic of Ireland. A more joined-up electoral registration system In our report on electoral registration at the 2017 UK Parliamentary general election we argued that it is time for the UK to evolve the current system, which relies solely on electors taking steps to register themselves, to make electoral registration more joined up with other public services. The use of data is already beginning to revolutionise the provision of services across the public and private sectors, to the benefit of citizens and the delivery of efficiencies. There is considerable potential to explore how existing public data could be utilised to support further reform to our voter registration system. In the following chapters we summarise various ways in which the further modernisation of the electoral registration process might be delivered, drawing on the findings of the feasibility studies we conducted over the past year. Related content Reforming electoral law Find out about electoral law and the changes we want to see A modern electoral register Find out about the changes we want to see to the electoral registration system in the UK Transparent digital campaigning Find out about digital campaigning and the changes we want to see of elections Find out about the accessibility of elections and the changes we want to see