

You are in the Our research section Home Our research Currently reading: of 3 - Show page contents On this page Background Key findings Conclusions Summary This report looks at how the canvass was run, what the register of electors looks like at the end of the canvass, and what lessons can be learned for the future. Across the summer and autumn of 2021, a full canvass of electors took place in Northern Ireland. A canvass must take place at least once every 10 years. During the canvass period, every eligible elector is required to apply to register to vote – even if they are already registered. The last canvass before this one was in 2013; the next is scheduled for 2030, and then in every tenth year following that. The canvass started on 1 July 2021 and ran until the revised electoral register was published by the Chief Electoral Officer on 1 December 2021. It contained a total of 1,368,091 entries, representing approximately 93% of the eligible electorate. It is a significant achievement that the electoral register is the largest ever recorded in Northern Ireland, with over 1.36 million people registered to vote. However the canvass in its current format is not an efficient tool for helping to maintain an accurate and complete electoral register - both for the Chief Electoral Officer and for electors. As such we recommend that the Government should reform the canvass and wider electoral registration process in Northern Ireland.

Background

Across the summer and autumn of 2021, a full canvass of electors took place in Northern Ireland. A canvass must take place at least once every 10 years. During the canvass period, every eligible elector is required to apply to register to vote – even if they are already registered. The last canvass before this one was in 2013; the next is scheduled for 2030, and then in every tenth year following that. Across the summer and autumn of 2021, a full canvass of electors took place in Northern Ireland. The canvass was originally scheduled for 2020, but was delayed owing to the coronavirus (Covid-19) pandemic. In 2006, the annual canvass in Northern Ireland was replaced with a process of continuous electoral registration. Under this system, registered electors only have to re-register if their personal details change – such as a change of name or address. Provisions were also included which required that a canvass must take place at least once every 10 years. During the canvass period, every eligible elector is required to apply to register to vote – even if they are already registered. The last canvass before this one was in 2013; the next is scheduled for 2030, and then in every tenth year following that. The Chief Electoral Officer for Northern Ireland can also make a recommendation to the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland that a canvass should take place sooner than the ten year threshold. The Chief Electoral Officer, supported by the Electoral Office for Northern Ireland (EONI), is responsible for managing the canvass. As part of the canvass, the EONI contacted every household, encouraging all eligible electors to respond to canvass by registering to vote.

Context

Accuracy and completeness

In 2018 we carried out an analysis of the accuracy and completeness of the electoral registers in Northern Ireland. That research showed that over one in four eligible voters in Northern Ireland were not correctly registered at their current address. The parliamentary register was 74% complete and 80% accurate. The local government register was 73% complete and 80% accurate. We highlighted in that report that the scheduled canvass would be a timely opportunity to improve the quality of the registers.

Online electoral registration

This was the first canvass carried out since the introduction of the online electoral registration system in Northern Ireland in 2018. Online registration provides an additional channel for people to respond to the canvass and

is a much easier and quicker process. However, paper applications continued to be available for anyone wishing to apply to register to vote this way. Retaining names on the electoral register The law allows the Chief Electoral Officer, in certain circumstances where there has been no response to the canvass or the response was incomplete, to retain entries on the electoral register. If the Chief Electoral Officer is satisfied that available data accurately places the person at the correct address, then their entry can be retained for a period of up to two years. Since the last canvass, the EONI has expanded its use of and the range of data sets for data matching. The EONI have access to a range of databases from agencies including the Business Services Organisation, the Department for Work and Pensions and the Northern Ireland Housing Executive. This data is also used by the Chief Electoral Officer to verify information provided in applications to register to vote. High Street Voucher Scheme The 'High Street Scheme' was delivered by the Department for the Economy, as part of a series of Covid-19 recovery schemes. The scheme offered people in Northern Ireland a 'Spend Local' £100 prepaid MasterCard to spend in local businesses. The scheme was not connected to the canvass or registering to vote, but some Northern Ireland Executive Ministers linked eligibility for the scheme to being registered to vote. While being on the electoral register was not part of the eligibility criteria, the electoral register was one of a number of data sets used to check applications. Delivering the canvass The canvass of electors in Northern Ireland started on 1 July 2021 and ran until the revised electoral register was published by the Chief Electoral Officer on 1 December 2021. The EONI, led by the Chief Electoral Officer, is responsible for managing the canvass. The Electoral Commission supported the canvass by running a voter registration campaign. Ahead of the canvass opening, the EONI sent an information leaflet to all households in Northern Ireland, to raise awareness of the coming canvass. After the canvass opened on 1 July, the EONI contacted all households through another information leaflet encouraging people to register to vote online at the [gov.uk/register-to-vote](https://www.gov.uk/register-to-vote) website. A number of mailshots continued through to September 2021 to raise awareness of the need to register during the canvass. Alongside this, in July, pre-populated registration forms were sent to Northern Ireland Housing Executive tenants and electors aged over 75, to support paper-based registrations. The EONI also set up registration support services in a number of local council areas to assist both online and paper applications. This included digital kiosks placed in council facilities and registration clinics where EONI staff were available to answer queries and assist in completing applications. For those people who did not respond to the household leaflets, the EONI sent personally addressed letters to all individuals from September. At the same time, canvassers visited households to encourage registration applications from non-responders and these visits continued throughout October. A further personally addressed letter was sent at the end of October to all remaining non-responders that EONI had identified as potential removals from the electoral register. Alongside this, the EONI worked with the Council for the Curriculum, Examinations & Assessment, the Regulation and Quality Improvement Authority and a range of education and voluntary sector organisations to encourage registration among traditionally under-registered groups. Electoral Commission In parallel to EONI's activities, we ran a multimedia voter registration campaign from 1 July to 23 October 2021 to support the canvass. Our campaign reminded everyone that the register was being updated and that they shouldn't ignore the canvass - even if they had been registered before. Our advertising ran on TV, billboards, video on demand (catch-up TV), radio, websites, press and social media. The digital aspects of our campaign were delivered in four

bursts, with the campaign reviewed and optimised using live data on response rates provided by the EONI. We also worked with a range of partners to target those groups we know are less likely to be registered and those who face additional barriers to registering.

Key findings

On 1 December 2021 the revised electoral register contained a total of 1,368,091 entries, representing approximately 93% of the eligible electorate. The constituency with the highest estimated registration rate was Foyle at 96.5% and the lowest was Belfast South at 76.4%. Levels of registration generally increase with age with under 20s having the lowest estimated levels of registration at only 57%, compared with 88% and over for all other age ranges.

The new electoral register

On 1 December 2021 the revised electoral register was published by the Chief Electoral Officer. It contained a total of 1,368,091 entries, representing approximately 93% of the eligible electorate. This calculation is made using the available estimate for the population aged 17 and over although it cannot account for other eligibility criteria, such as nationality. The calculation also assumes that, at the conclusion of the canvass, the register had a very high level of accuracy (nearly everyone on the register was registered at their correct, current address). This approach, used for the purposes of assessing levels of registration in this report, is therefore not a precise estimate of register completeness but it serves as a rough proxy for levels of registration in Northern Ireland at the conclusion of the canvass.

At the conclusion of the canvass, 162,067 registered electors had not responded to any of the contacts from the Chief Electoral Officer. Non-response varied across constituencies with the lowest level (9.8%) in Lagan Valley and the highest (16.2%) in Belfast South. Of the total non-responders, 48,553 (30% of non-responders) were removed from the Northern Ireland register. These were entries where no response was received and no match could be found for the individuals in the other government administrative data sets available to the Chief Electoral Officer. The remaining 113,514 non-responding electors could be matched using available data sets and have been retained on the register, with further follow up contacts from the Electoral Office to try to encourage response before the end of the two-year period they can be retained for.

Responding to the canvass

The number of applications made to register to vote during the canvass varied substantially over time. As would be expected, variation in applications correlated with key events and activity that took place during the canvass. This included EONI communications to households, and announcements surrounding the 'Spend Local' £100 prepaid MasterCard. Applications also correlate with our advertising campaign which delivered significant reach across Northern Ireland, with the average adult having more than 12 opportunities to see or hear it.

Figure 1: Number of applications to register to vote, 1 July 2021 to 13 October 2021

As figure 1 shows, there were over 215,000 online applications to register to vote during the first seven days of the canvass. During this time, EONI sent an information leaflet to all households encouraging them to register online, and the Electoral Commission's advertising campaign ran across TV, radio and online channels. Following this initial period of activity, online application figures declined, stabilising for the next three weeks at mostly below 10,000 daily applications. On 29 July there was a spike in applications, with over 51,000 applications made in one day, the largest daily figure for the canvass to that point. This rise in applications occurred on the same day the Economy Minister announced that the 'Spend Local' £100 prepaid MasterCard voucher scheme would launch in September and that applications would be checked against the electoral register. Over the next two weeks, almost half a million online applications to register to vote were made, more than the total number of online applications for the first four

weeks of the canvass. The sustained rise in applications from 29 July to 12 August correlates with significant media commentary surrounding the scheme, EONI contacting households for a third time with an information leaflet and the Electoral

Commission's advertising campaign running on TV, online and outdoor channels. From the end of August targeted mailshots and door-to-door canvassing of non-responders to the canvass resulted in a steady stream of applications to register with just over 225,000 applications made throughout September. Who is on the new electoral register

Variations in registration The constituency with the highest estimated registration rate was Foyle at 96.5% and the lowest was Belfast South at 76.4%. For local authority areas, the highest registration rate was Derry and Strabane (97.1%) and the lowest Belfast (86.7%). Figure 2: Percentage registration rate per constituency (17+)

Table: Percentage registration rate per constituency (17+)

Constituency	Percentage
Foyle	96.5%
West Tyrone	96.3%
Belfast West	96.2%
South Down	95.7%
Newry & Armagh	95.1%
Strangford	94.8%
South Antrim	94.7%
North Down	94.5%
Mid Ulster	94.0%
Fer. & S. Tyrone	93.9%
Lagan Valley	93.9%
East Antrim	92.8%
Belfast North	92.2%
North Antrim	91.6%
Upper Bann	91.6%
Belfast East	90.8%
East Londonberry	89.9%
Belfast South	76.4%

Key findings - part 2 The estimated registration rate at constituency and local authority level masks some more significant variation at ward level. By ward, the percentage of the electorate estimated to be registered varies from approximately 31.1% in the Botanic ward in Belfast South to 108.4% in the Ballycolman ward in the West Tyrone constituency. There are 46 wards where the estimated registration rate is over 100% and this highlights the limitations of this method of calculating registration rates.

The population figures provided by the 2011 census are estimates and may over- or understate the true population from area to area. However, while the specific percentage registered figure should be treated with caution, the figures are useful in illustrating the overall range. Age profile Data held on electors' dates of birth allow for an analysis of the age profile of the registered electorate. As figure 3 shows, consistent with previous research, levels of registration generally increase with age. As with other analysis in this report, the use of estimated population figures means that some percentages are greater than 100%. Therefore the percentages should be treated with caution and are most useful for illustrating a trend, not establishing specific levels of registration. Figure 3: Percentage registration rate by age

Table: Percentage registration rate by age

Age	Percentage
90+	90%
85 to 89	98%
80 to 84	98%
75 to 79	102%
70 to 74	98%
65 to 69	101%
60 to 64	101%
55 to 59	96%
50 to 54	93%
45 to 49	91%
40 to 44	96%
35 to 39	94%
30 to 34	89%
25 to 29	88%
20 to 24	88%
17 to 19	57%

Key findings - part 3 While the trend is similar to previous findings it is worth noting that the estimated levels of registration are higher for many age bands than those seen after the 2013 canvass. For example, in 2013 the estimated registration rate only rose above 80% at age 30 and above. Similarly, registration levels of 90%+ were seen among the 50+ age groups in 2013 compared to 35+ in 2021. However, the estimated level of registration for the under 20s was higher in 2013 (64%) than we see in 2021 (57%). Retained and removed electors The number of retained electors, as a proportion of the 1 December electorate, also varied across constituencies. The largest proportions were retained in the Belfast West and Foyle constituencies with 11% and 10.8% retained. The smallest proportions were in Lagan Valley and East Antrim with 6.2% and 6.5% retained respectively. At ward level, there were two wards where 20% of the December 2021 register were retained – Botanic ward in Belfast South and Ballysaggart in Fermanagh and South Tyrone. There was also variation in the proportions removed from the

register with the largest proportion removed in Belfast South (6.2% of the July 2021 register) and the smallest in Mid Ulster (2.6%). In five wards (three in Belfast South) more than 10% of the July 2021 register was removed when the December 2021 register was published. This likely reflects the higher population movement in these areas. The overall split between retained and removed non-responders was 70% to 30% but this was different for EU citizens where the split was 60% retained and 40% removed. The difference could likely be the result of less data being held on EU citizens some of whom may be only temporarily resident in Northern Ireland.

Conclusions It is a significant achievement that the electoral register is the largest ever recorded in Northern Ireland, with over 1.36 million people registered to vote. However the canvass in its current format is not an efficient tool for helping to maintain an accurate and complete electoral register - both for the Chief Electoral Officer and for electors. As such we recommend that the Government should reform the canvass and wider electoral registration process in Northern Ireland.

Lessons from the canvass It is a significant achievement that the electoral register is the largest ever recorded in Northern Ireland, with over 1.36 million people registered to vote. While it may be assumed that levels of register accuracy and completeness will have improved, we are not currently able to outline the exact impact the canvass has had. We will carry out a full analysis of the registers at the end of this year and report on our findings in 2023. It is not possible to isolate the impact of specific public communications tactics on the response to the canvass. While EONI's communications with households and the Electoral Commission's advertising campaign will both have encouraged many people to register to vote, the 'Spend Local' scheme may have had the most significant impact. What is clear, however, is that the canvass in its current format is not an efficient tool for helping to maintain an accurate and complete electoral register - both for the Chief Electoral Officer and for electors. The Chief Electoral Officer has advised us that the total cost of the canvass was approximately £3.23m. The majority of these costs were driven by the fact that EONI was required to contact and receive a response from all eligible electors, even if they were registered before the canvass and their details had not changed. As we outlined in our assessment of the 2018 electoral registers, it seems likely that the current registration system continues to struggle with population movement in the period between each canvass. This is evident from the fact that many of the wards with the lowest registration rates are in areas with the most mobile populations, such as the Botanic ward in Belfast South, with an estimated registration rate of only 31.1%. The findings also show that age remains a significant factor in rates of registration, with under 20s having the lowest estimated levels of registration at only 57%. These trends are seen across much of our research across the UK, including our recent assessment of the 2018 electoral registers in Northern Ireland. As such we continue to recommend that there should be fundamental changes to modernise the registration system in Northern Ireland. There are a number of ways this may be achieved, including: making better use of data for more targeted canvass activity integrating electoral registration into other public service transactions automatic or automated registration Making better use of data for more targeted canvass activity The Chief Electoral Officer already has access to a number of good quality databases from agencies including the Business Services Organisation, the Department for Work and Pensions and the Northern Ireland Housing Executive. Access to this data currently allows the Chief Electoral Officer to verify information provided in applications to register to vote, as well as to identify people whose personal details may have changed or who are not on the

electoral register. The Chief Electoral Officer has advised us that by comparing data from the BSO and DWP against the electoral register, a name and address match could be made with 85% of electors already on the register before the canvass commenced. This is largely consistent with results from the reformed data matching process that has been used for the annual canvass in Great Britain since 2020. For example, from July to September 2021, 75% of properties received a match where the Electoral Registration Officer (ERO) was satisfied that there are no changes needed and had no reason to believe that there are any additional electors to be added. In Great Britain, in such circumstances, contact is made with the residents of the matched household inviting them to provide information about any changes to the people who are resident at that address. If there are no changes then no response is required. This allows EROs to target their canvass activity towards properties where the data suggests there may be a change to the information the EROs currently holds. If the data suggests there has been a change, a response is required and the EROs must make a minimum of three attempts to obtain a response. While there are some differences in legislative and administrative processes for electoral registration in Northern Ireland the data held by EONI could potentially be used in a similar way to that in Great Britain. For example, allowing the Chief Electoral Officer to carry out a pre-canvass match between the electoral register and the available datasets would be a simple but effective way to reform and improve the process. This would also enable more targeted canvass activity that could allow resources to be better used to reach under-registered groups. It could also transform the canvass process by ensuring eligible electors can be retained on the register without increasing the risk of inaccuracy. In doing so this would remove the requirement to re-register for the majority of electors who remain eligible and whose personal details have not changed. This would contribute to a more cost-effective canvass that delivers improved value for money. We therefore recommend that the Government should reform the canvass process in Northern Ireland. The use of data already plays a key role in the provision of services across the public and private sectors, to the benefit of the public and in the delivery of efficiencies. There is opportunity to explore – with the support of the Chief Electoral Officer, the Commission, data providers and the wider electoral community – how making better use of the existing data already available to help manage the register could improve the delivery of canvass. Integrating electoral registration into other public service transactions Integrating electoral registration into other public service transactions would make it easier for individuals to keep their registration details up to date and accurate when they change their name or address. It would help to address the challenge the current system has in dealing with population movement, as it would provide opportunities for those who have recently moved to complete an electoral registration application simultaneously as part of, or alongside, accessing other public services. Our findings from a series of feasibility studies , published in 2019, explored how electoral registration reforms could be delivered in practice. We examined the extent to which electoral registration applications could be made simultaneously as part of or alongside accessing other public services – for example, by allowing a person to apply to register to vote when making a driving licence or passport application. We found that this would increase the number of channels available to citizens and improve the accessibility of the process. Our studies highlighted for example that in Canada, most government forms feature an optional checkbox for eligible voters to share information with Elections Canada, while in the USA voter registration is integrated with driving licence application, renewal, and change of address

processes. Automatic or automated registration Alongside this we continue to recommend that the UK Government explores options for introducing automatic or automated registration. Automatic registration would see individuals added to the electoral register, or have their details updated, based on trusted data and without them being required to take any active steps. A system of automated registration would see reliable data providing the basis of an individual's electoral registration application, but would still require individuals to take some steps to complete the process. More automated and automatic forms of registration could be used to address the challenges of encouraging registration amongst those less likely to be correctly registered, such as the under 20s, the group identified in this report as the least likely to be registered. For example, EONI could be enabled to use available data from schools and colleges, alongside data from the Department for Work and Pensions, to automatically register young people when they are given their National Insurance number. Our feasibility studies concluded that both automated and automatic registration could be implemented in technical terms, without radically altering the structure of the current electoral registration system. Related content Modernising elections research This qualitative research looks at public attitudes to voting and the information available around elections. Electoral law is out of date. Find out where we want to see improvements Testing the EU referendum question Find out about our testing of the EU referendum question