



DEBATE PACK

Number CDP-00131, 24 June 2016

Automatic registration in UK elections

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Summary

This pack has been prepared ahead of the Westminster Hall Debate initiated by Owen Thompson MP on Wednesday 29 June 2016, 4.30pm - 5.30pm.

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The House of Commons Library prepares a briefing in hard copy and/or online for most non-legislative debates in the Chamber and Westminster Hall other than half-hour debates. Debate Packs are produced quickly after the announcement of parliamentary business. They are intended to provide a summary or overview of the issue being debated and identify relevant briefings and useful documents, including press and parliamentary material. More detailed briefing can be prepared for Members on request to the Library.

1. Background

In Great Britain the administration of electoral registration is handled at local authority level by statutory officers, Electoral Registration Officers. A new system of individual electoral registration (IER) was introduced in 2014 to address concerns about electoral fraud and the integrity of the register. Electoral registration in Northern Ireland has been on an individual basis since 2002. There continues to be concern about the completeness of the register and there have been some calls for automatic electoral registration. Automatic registration would probably require a central electoral register. A centralised registration system, including software and administration, is likely to be difficult and costly to develop. Central registration was attempted some years ago, the CORE system, but this was abandoned. The Labour Government had attempted to create a locally compiled but centrally held electoral registration database in 2005, but the project was abandoned by the Coalition Government in 2011. The provisions relating to CORE in the *Electoral Administration Act 2006* and *Political Parties and Elections Act 2009* were repealed by the *Electoral Registration and Administration Act 2013*.

There have been concerns about personal data being collected centrally; the ONS conducted some research into public attitudes towards providing population statistics and the use of administrative data in 2014. It found that people generally did not object to data being held by other government departments being shared but there were objections about privacy and security. Another potential issue with automatic registration is that there will always be some citizens who do not want to be registered to vote and participate in the democratic process. Some may also view automatic registration as a step towards compulsory voting, which has been resisted in the UK.

The Electoral Commission published an [*Assessment of December 2015 electoral registers in Great Britain: End of transition to Individual Electoral Registration*](#) in February 2016. The report commented on the continuing challenge of increasing population churn in producing an accurate and full register and some of the new challenges, including getting attainees to register now that the onus is on them to register under IER. In chapter 6, 'Looking ahead', the Commission commented on the Government's plans to pilot schemes to improve the efficiency of delivering electoral registration under IER:

Options under consideration include more effective use of local and national data to capture population churn and amending the annual canvass process by removing certain stages (e.g. the requirement to send a second reminder), or encouraging online responses [see para 6.21].

The Commission said that it welcomed the principle of alternative approaches through piloting but it warned:

The aims and objectives of the schemes must be well-defined and clearly stated, and include clear evaluation criteria to enable a proper assessment of their impact on the completeness and accuracy of the electoral register; the convenience of electoral registration for electors; and the costs of the electoral registration process. It will be important to build a coherent strategic framework of pilot schemes, and minimise the risk of uncoordinated schemes which deliver little by way of evidence and learning. [para 6.23]

The draft [*Electoral Registration Pilot Scheme \(England\) Order 2016*](#) was laid before the House of Commons on 26 May 2016. The Order establishes a pilot scheme giving Electoral Registration Officers (EROs) in specified areas of England wider discretion over the manner in which they conduct the annual canvass of electors under section 9D of the *Representation of the People Act 1983*. EROs in the pilot areas will still be under a duty to conduct an annual canvass of electors but for the period of the pilot they will have the freedom to determine how they wish to do so.

Overseas, automatic voter registration is not widespread. Where there is automatic registration this is mostly done using population registers, often mandatory, or census information and some are only part automatic. For example, in Canada voters can opt out of central automatic registration, but those that do have to register manually for each election. In Denmark, the computerised electoral register is based on information already available in the national civil registration system (administered by the Ministry of the Interior) and voter registration is automatic.

2. Parliamentary material

2.1 Parliamentary questions

[Electoral Register](#)

Asked by: Mackintosh, David

To ask the Minister for the Cabinet Office, what assessment his Department has made of the potential effectiveness of auto-enrolment onto the electoral roll for all UK citizens eligible to vote.

Answering member: John Penrose | Department: Cabinet Office

I have considered a range of proposals from local authorities and civil society organisations that could change how registration is currently delivered.

We are keen to explore further possibilities in this area but are concerned there may be tension between some forms of automatic registration and the principles underpinning Individual Electoral Registration, namely individual responsibility and ownership over registering to vote.

09 May 2016 | Written questions | PQ 35763

[Electoral Register](#)

Asked by: Morris, Grahame

To ask the Minister for the Cabinet Office, whether the Government plans to introduce or pilot a system of automatic electoral registration.

Answering member: John Penrose | Department: Cabinet Office

I have considered a range of proposals from local authorities and civil society organisations that could change how registration is currently delivered. The Government is committed to further modernising and improving electoral registration, building on the successful transition to Individual Electoral Registration (IER).

We are keen to explore further possibilities in this area but are concerned there may be tension between some forms of automatic registration and the principles underpinning IER, namely individual responsibility and ownership over registering to vote.

18 Apr 2016 | Written questions | PQ 33032

Topical Questions to the Cabinet Office

9 December 2015

HC Deb 9 Dec 2015 c980

The Chancellor of the Duchy of Lancaster (Mr Oliver Letwin):

What plans does the Minister have to ensure that groups who are under-represented on the electoral roll register to vote?

The Chancellor of the Duchy of Lancaster (Mr Oliver Letwin): We are fully committed to bringing more under-represented groups into electoral participation. That is why we are working with Operation Black Vote and other such groups to bring people in from the black and minority ethnic communities. I also draw my hon. Friend's attention to the very interesting experiment being tried at Sheffield University to nudge the student population to sign up for an automatic registration system. We are looking very carefully at that.

HC Deb 09 Dec 2015 c981

Electoral Register: National Insurance

Asked by: West, Catherine

To ask the Minister for the Cabinet Office, what steps his Department is taking to link National Insurance numbering systems with voter registration to improve registration levels.

Answering member: John Penrose | Department: Cabinet Office

Under Individual Electoral Registration (IER) applicants provide two personal identifiers including a national insurance number which are checked against Government records to help verify the person is who they say they are. As part of the transition to IER in 2014, 87% of the existing electorate was automatically re-registered under the new system after being data matched against Government and local authority data. Data matching continues to be integral to IER, in verifying new applications, but also locally in identifying and verifying applications from eligible electors. We will keep under review the scope for data to further improve voter registration.

03 Jul 2015 | Written questions | PQ 4204

2.2 Debates

EU Referendum: Voter Registration

Motion to approve the draft European Union Referendum (Voter Registration) Regulations 2016

[HC Deb 9 Jun 2016 c1370-1](#)

Stephen Gethins (North East Fife) (SNP): The hon. Gentleman makes an excellent point that ties into the one raised by my hon. Friend the Member for Edinburgh East (Tommy Sheppard). My hon. Friend the Member for Midlothian (Owen Thompson) and other SNP Members have wondered whether we should start looking at automatic registration. We want to encourage people to register, and we do not want this problem in future. Automatic registration works in other countries, and it can be a better and cheaper system. Will the Minister commit to considering automatic registration when he conducts that post-match analysis? In conclusion, the SNP welcomes the extension to the registration period, and we encourage as many people as possible to take part in the important decision in two weeks

Voter Registration – urgent question

[HC Deb c8 Jun 2016 c1192-1204](#)

Gloria De Piero (Ashfield) (Lab): To ask the Chancellor of the Duchy of Lancaster if he will make a statement on the problems with the gov.uk voter registration website just before the deadline for voter registration for the EU referendum. [.....]

Owen Thompson (Midlothian) (SNP): I would like to echo the comments by the hon. Member for Norwich North (Chloe Smith). The “Missing Millions” report made many recommendations, including on automatic registration. May we have a commitment today that following this example of poor practice and failure, automatic registration proposals will be brought before the House?

The Minister for the Cabinet Office and Paymaster General

(Matthew Hancock): We will look into the use of alternative sources of data, but we are not yet persuaded on the case for automatic registration. Most importantly, right now we are concentrating on ensuring that people who want to and are eligible to vote will be able to.

Scotland Bill - committee of the whole House

[HC Deb 15 Jun 2015 c23-150](#)

Mr Graham Allen (Nottingham North) (Lab): I should like to speak to amendments 46 and 47, if I may. I am sure that colleagues will know that the largest amount of public consultation ever achieved by a Select Committee was on the “Voter engagement in the UK” report that the Political and Constitutional Reform Committee produced just before the last general election. The report covered a raft of ways in which we as a House and as politicians—and politics in general—could re-engage with people out there.

The Committee did some technical stuff, and I want to talk this evening about the amendments relating to automatic registration and online voting.

Automatic registration can be achieved using a number of devices. I am going to ask the hon. Member for Meon Valley (George Hollingbery) some questions about this afterwards, so I hope he is paying attention. I hope that it could be achieved through registration with the Department for Work and Pensions, for example, or through credit ratings or council tax forms. It is entirely possible to make registration almost automatic. I see the distinguished members of the Political and Constitutional Reform Committee nodding eagerly in approval of what I am saying.

The Parliamentary Secretary, Cabinet Office (John Penrose): [...] Amendments 46 and 47 on electoral registration and voting were tabled by the hon. Member for Nottingham North. Members will be aware that the hon. Gentleman was Chair of the Political and Constitutional Reform Committee in the previous Parliament—indeed, he was waving around one of the Committee’s reports earlier. I thank him for his Committee’s work on the important issue of registration. His amendments relate to automatic registration and online voting. The Bill transfers order-making powers in clause 4—the new section 12—that provide Scottish Ministers with powers regarding the conduct of Scottish Parliament elections and the registration of electors at those elections. The Government consider that these will be sufficient for Scottish Ministers to provide, should they wish, for both automatic registration and electronic voting at Scottish parliamentary elections. The Government therefore consider the amendments unnecessary and beyond the remit of the Bill.

2.3 Political and Constitutional Reform Select Committee

Political and Constitutional Reform Select Committee – Inquiry into voter engagement

[Political and Constitutional Reform Committee announce inquiry into voter engagement, 16 January 2014](#)

Background

Since 1945, turnout for general elections in the UK has fallen from a high of 83.9% in 1950 to a low of 59.4% in 2001. Turnout for the 2010 general election was 65.1%—higher than the previous two general elections, but still the third lowest since the introduction of universal suffrage. Turnout at the last general election was also low compared with turnout at the last parliamentary elections in other European Union countries.

There is also evidence that a significant number of people in the UK are not registered to vote, with the most recent estimates indicating that the electoral register was between 85 and 87% complete. This would mean that approximately 6.5 million people are missing from the electoral register.

In light of this, on 16 January 2014, the Political and Constitutional Reform Committee agreed to conduct an inquiry into voter registration and turnout in the UK.

Political and Constitutional Reform Select Committee – Reports

Voter engagement in the UK, Fourth Report from the Political and Constitutional Reform Committee, 14 Nov 2014, [HC 232 2014-15](#)

7. Proposals to improve voter turnout - [Automatic registration](#)

143. We have previously recommended that "it would be desirable to identify a system whereby those eligible to vote could be automatically registered", [320] and we have heard some further arguments that this would be desirable. Dr Maria Sobolewska told us: "Automatic enrolment would be the ideal-world scenario in my mind, but that would be a very costly and very big step in terms of reform." [321] Sheffield for Democracy's written evidence also called for automatic registration, stating that this could be linked to "something like the National Insurance number". [322] The Government's response to our suggestion that automatic registration would be desirable was:

The Committee's proposal for automatic registration would represent a significant shift away from the present system of elector-led application and voluntary registration, to a system of automaticity with an opt out. Such a system would present a number of issues for the electors. As well as the cultural change this would entail, it would also present potential challenges in terms of ensuring the accuracy of the electoral register and its security against fraud, which would require very careful further consideration. [323]

144. We reaffirm our view that voters should ideally be registered to vote automatically. The fact that the latest parliamentary electoral registers were only 85.9% complete and 86% accurate makes a strong case for a system of automatic registration, which could include the use of the National Insurance number. We recommend that in its response to this Report the Government clearly set out its view on moving to a system of automatic registration. Such a system could operate alongside Individual Electoral Registration.

Voter engagement in the UK: Government Response to the Committee's Fourth Report of Session 2014–15, Fourth Special Report of Session 2014-15, 5 Feb 2015, [HC 1037, 2014-15](#)

Letter from Sam Gyimah MP, Minister for the Constitution, Cabinet Office to the Chair of the Political and Constitutional Reform Committee

I am writing on behalf of the Government to respond to your interim report. Thank you to you and your Committee for its thorough work.

The Government agrees with the Committee that improving voter engagement is vital to the long term well-being of democracy in the UK and welcomes this report. At the same time the Government notes that this is response to an interim report for public consideration and looks forward to the publication of the final report on National Voter Registration Day on 5 February. Whatever the Committee's final report recommends, it will certainly stimulate the debates on this issue that will take place ahead of the General Election in May.

Hopefully this response, along with others, will help the Committee shape its final recommendations, particularly by highlighting work that is already under way to encourage participation in the democratic process, both through education and practical changes, such as being able to register to vote on-line in three minutes. The references to paragraphs in this response relate to paragraph numbers in the report's interim conclusions and recommendations.

Voter engagement in the UK: follow up, Sixth Report of the Political and Constitutional Reform Committee, 5 Feb 2015, [HC 938, 2015-4-15](#)

5. Improving electoral registration - [Automatic registration](#)

51. We have previously recommended that registration should be automatic—meaning voters would be registered automatically using information already held by the state, rather than requiring people to apply to register—and we restated this in our interim report.[104] The Electoral Commission has since highlighted the possibility for "direct registration"—where public sector data is used to identify potential electors and then to add them to the register without requiring them to complete an application form—noting that the Australian Electoral Commission was pursuing this at present, and stating that it would "welcome the opportunity to explore the feasibility and implications of such an option with the Government." [105] The idea of automatic registration was also supported by several other responses to our consultation.[106] The Government told us that it believes registering to vote "is a civic duty and that individuals should take responsibility for their own vote", stating that this was one of the fundamental

underpinnings of the new system of IER and that this belief was "incompatible with a system of automatic registration." [107]

52. We reaffirm our view that voters should, ideally, be registered to vote automatically, using data already held by the Government. We are pleased that the Electoral Commission would welcome the opportunity to explore direct registration with the Government. The Government feels that automatic registration is incompatible with the idea that registering to vote is a civic duty and that people should take responsibility for their own vote. Automatic registration would supplement the efforts of citizens who register themselves, and Electoral Registration Officers who invite them to do so. Having such a system run alongside IER would certainly increase levels of registration, and thereby the number of people who could then take responsibility for their vote—having been registered and enabled to do so. We recommend that the Government take this offer up, and clearly set out its view on moving to a system of automatic registration early in the next Parliament, so that changes can be implemented as soon as practicable. Such a system could operate alongside Individual Electoral Registration.

Political and Constitutional Reform Select Committee - Debates

Westminster Hall debate on Voter Engagement

[HC Deb 5 Feb 2015 c145-92WH](#)

Mr Graham Allen (Nottingham North) (Lab): [.....] The third of the Select Committee's recommendations is automatic registration. If we could think about registration with a blank piece of paper, we would think that registering to vote and then voting in a general election, or any kind of election, is a strange process. Members of all political complexions go knocking on doors asking people whether they have registered, sent in their postal vote or whatever. Why on earth can we not have a system of automatic registration? We are halfway there with the cross-referrals to the Department for Work and Pensions and other institutions. We can use that public information to say, "Mr Blogs lives at such-and-such an address", and put it on the register.

It would be up to the political parties to take it from there—nobody is saying that this is a matter for the Government. I would like that information, because I would like to go knocking on people's doors so that I can say to them, "You are on the electoral register and you are thinking about voting. What will make you vote? What do you think about politics at the moment? What are the local issues?" We all know the patter, because we all do it. It is about getting people to want to be part of our political society, our democracy and our civic society.

We must use all the means available to us. Technologically, it is a no-brainer to put people's information on the electoral register when they register for something or interact with a public body. I do not think that that is the most controversial of our proposals. Again, the Political and Constitutional Reform Committee is wisely saying that the Government should consider and plan for automatic registration. They should consider whether and how it should happen. [.....]

Chris Ruane (Vale of Clwyd) (Lab): [.....] On registration, it is a sensible suggestion to have automatic registration when a citizen interfaces with a public body, whether it is the Driver and Vehicle Licensing Agency, the Department for Work and Pensions or housing benefit organisations. Whatever public institutions are out there, if they interact with the public, they should have a form for people to sign. There should also be block registration for pensioners living in homes, and definitely for students living in halls. [...]

The issue is important. As I said, a decision will be taken in June—possibly by the Minister, if he is still in power—whether to drop the additional 5.5 million unregistered people from the register altogether. It will have a massive impact on the boundary freeze date of 1 December 2015, because that 5.5 million will be added to the 7.5 million to make 13 million people missing from the register. The Government-recommended 75,000 people per seat is almost the equivalent of 200 MPs missing from Parliament. That is the nature of the game. We will become a laughing stock. That is why I say it will be a constitutional coup if that decision is made.

2.4 Legislation

Automatic Electoral Registration (School Students) Bill [HL] 2016-17

Private Members' Bill (Starting in the House of Lords)

Lord Roberts of Llandudno

A Bill to make provision for the automatic electoral registration of school students who have reached the age of 16; and for connected purposes.

[1st reading \(Hansard\): House of Lords 9 June, 2016](#)

[HL Bill 41 \(as introduced\) | PDF version, 63KB](#)

Automatic Electoral Registration (No. 2) Bill 2015-16

Private Members' Bill (under the Ten Minute Rule)

Siobhain McDonagh

A Bill to impose certain duties upon Her Majesty's Government to ensure the accuracy, completeness and utility of electoral registers; to make provision for the sharing of data for the purposes of electoral registration; and for connected purposes.

[1st reading: House of Commons 3 February, 2016](#)

[Bill 127 2015-16, as introduced | PDF version, 90KB](#)

Automatic Electoral Registration Bill [HL] 2015-16

Private Members' Bill (Starting in the House of Lords)

Baroness McDonagh

A bill to impose certain duties upon Her Majesty's Government to ensure the accuracy, completeness and utility of electoral registers; to make provision for the sharing of data for the purposes of electoral registration; and for connected purposes.

[1st reading: House of Lords 9 June, 2015](#)

[HL Bill 35 2015-16 \(as introduced\) | PDF version, 79KB](#)

3. Press articles

'I felt like giving up': EU referendum registration fiasco reaction, Guardian, Carmen Fishwick, 8 June 2016

Calls to simplify the process or to follow the US approach of automatic voter registration will be given renewed energy after the technical failure. Sidorczuk (director of Bite the Ballot) said the government's flexibility in offering extra time was positive and showed that the mood was changing.

The Tories are removing twice as many people from the electoral register in Britain's poorest areas as the richest: The policy could disenfranchise the poorest parts of the country, Independent, Jon Stone, 20 October 2015

[.....] Katie Ghose, the chief executive of the Electoral Reform Society, said the Government's move was a "worrying issue for our democracy".

"The fact that 1.9 million people risk being excluded by the government's wrong-headed early shift to complete individual voter registration – against Electoral Commission advice – is a scandal. We should be looking at automatic registration, as happens in many other countries - otherwise millions of people could lose their voice," she told the Independent. [.....]

3.1 Blogs

As people register for EU vote, is it time to consider automatic registration?, Left Foot Forward, Josiah Mortimer, 6 June 2016

If the ballot box is a social leveller, there are inequalities in how we vote

Tomorrow is the deadline to register to vote in the EU referendum. In most of Europe, that concept would be considered strange. Every election we see the same thing: a huge rush to register a day or two before the deadline. And it will be no less the case today. On Friday alone, 186,000 people applied to register to vote online, according to government data. That compares with the usual 10-15,000 a day we'd see outside of elections.

This arbitrary approach to the right to vote is fairly unique in the developed world. Why? Because most European countries have ensured that, as a citizen, you are automatically able to vote. After all – if you have a passport, are registered for council tax and have a National Insurance number already, they've already got enough info to just stick you on the voter database.

There are huge issues of under-registration in this country, though we don't even know how severe the extent of the problem is. At any one point, around 15 per cent of those entitled to vote are not on the register. Electoral Commission data suggests a figure of 7.5m people not on the register who should have been in 2014. And of course it varies hugely by demographic, too. The least-registered groups are

largely the most mobile – young people – and those from already marginalised backgrounds.

If the ballot box is a social leveller, there remain huge inequalities in how we vote – even before we get to the voting booth.

Turnout is already a major issue when it comes to political equality. As Professor Matthew Flinders noted before the last General Election: 'In the 1987 general election...the turnout rate for the poorest income group was 4 per cent lower than for the wealthiest. 'By 2010 the gap had grown to a staggering 23 points.' It's a similar picture for the 'generation gap': 'In 1970 there was an 18-point gap in turnout rates between 18–24-year-olds and those aged over 65; by 2005 this gap had more than doubled to over 40 points.'

If this is the case, having an individualist approach to voter registration can't be helping the situation. Of course, there are philosophical issues at stake. Britain has always had an individualist approach to voting – non-compulsory, highly localised, and voting for candidates rather than party lists. And we've just made it even more individualist – shifting from Household Registration to Individual Electoral Registration.

Indeed, the US state of Oregon recently introduced 'Motor Voting' – where anyone who registers for a driving license is automatically registered to vote – in a move that some on the Right described as a move from 'individual convenience to government coercion'.

But as one American campaigner put it, 'I don't have to opt in to my right for free speech, why should I have to opt in to my right to vote?'

Working in Belgium, colleagues were shocked when I told them how many young people weren't registered to vote in the UK. But not for the reason I'd guessed: 'What, you have to register?' was the response I often heard.

The All-Party Parliamentary Group on Democratic Participation has spoken out on the impact of a voluntarist approach to registration, with Lord Rennard, Toby James and Oliver Sidorczuk pointing out in an article for Democratic Audit that at the last General Election, 186,000 applied after the deadline, while 'others may think that they're already registered and turn up at the polls anyway.'

And people already assume we have automatic registration: 'Many citizens think that they are on the register because they pay their council tax and expect those running the election to 'know about them'.

Two thirds of polling stations turned away voters who thought that they were on the electoral register but were not.'

Of course, there are wider issues at stake. Fully automatic registration would require a national database – something many are averse to. For many it raises the prospect of ID cards, although this isn't inevitable.

But the current last-minute rush for registration puts huge strain on the (perhaps bizarrely) devolved council registration offices – 400 or so of them – across the UK.

The Electoral Commission doesn't know the extent of the problem in part because we have such a fragmented database.

All this is compounded by the lack of a comprehensive program of citizenship education in the UK, meaning democratic habits aren't ingrained from a young age. After all, if young people were registered in schools in citizenship classes, perhaps all this would be less of a problem.

And in the meantime, the APPG on Democratic Engagement have published an excellent report on the 'missing millions' with lots of practical reforms we can make now.

Oregon was the first to introduce Motor Voting in the US, and it looks like it could now spread. As we enter yet another huge rush to sign up before tomorrow's deadline, perhaps it offers lesson for the UK.

Let's stop the last minute registration rush: It's time for a complete and inclusive electoral register for Britain, Democratic Audit UK, 3 June 2016

As the deadline for registering for the EU referendum looms, Lord Rennard, Toby James and Oliver Sidorczuk highlight the problem with last minute scrambles and argue that the UK should draw on lessons from abroad to achieve a comprehensive electoral register.[...]

Earlier in the year, a report from the All-Party Parliamentary Group on Democratic Participation on the 'Missing Millions' presented tried and tested solutions from experiences at home and abroad. This is an issue that's often kicked into the long grass in the UK. The system was devised in 1918 and remained largely unchanged until 2014. Having undertaken major changes to reduce opportunities for electoral fraud, now is the time to focus on creating a stronger, more inclusive democracy by keeping up momentum, and aiming for a complete register.

Automatic re-registration in Britain?, Toby James blog, 23 October 2015

We should have a system of automatic electoral registration in Britain to combat the crisis of millions of people missing off the electoral roll. That was one of our core messages last week when we sent a report on elections in Britain to the government.

Most polling stations turned away would be voters at the 2015 general election, research from Alistair Clark and I showed. On Radio 4's Today Programme and Radio Norfolk I explained that many citizens think that they are on the register because they pay their council tax, renew their car tax and register for other government services. But unlike many other countries, they still need to do more to register to vote.

Earlier this week John Penrose said that he is considering a form of automatic re-registration. This is excellent news for democracy.

I flagged the problem of low levels of voter registration and how individual voter registration would worsen this in a report to Parliament in 2011. I have long argued that using methods used in other countries such as registering citizens when they use other government services would improve registration levels and turnout. This was based on my book and an article on electoral administration.

John Penrose's announcement is therefore very welcome news but there is a more to be done. Automatic re-registration stops names dropping off and might save local authorities time and resources. But what of those not currently in the register? Upto 10 million could be missing from the register in December. And that is the register on which the boundaries for the 2020 general election will be fought.

Minister points to database checks for voting, UK Authority.com, 22 October 2015

The government is considering the possibility of councils compiling electoral rolls from data sources they hold rather than requiring voters to register

A government minister has indicated that voters may no longer be required to register every year as town halls use their own data to check they are legitimate.

Minister for Constitutional Reform John Penrose has suggested the annual canvass to update the electoral rolls is outdated and unnecessary, querying why the process is so "difficult" – in contrast with benefit claims.

During a Commons debate on individual electoral registration (IER), Penrose said: "We should ask ourselves why we ask all those people to re-register every single year, once they have made their individual decision to register to vote.

"We do not ask them to re-register for their tax credits, their TV licence or their benefit claims every single year."

Councils' preference

Penrose said a "large number of local authorities" had told him they were "itching to use" other data they hold to avoid re-registering most voters.

He added: "We could effectively do nine tenths of the annual canvass automatically in a trice just by running some cross-matching between existing databases and the electoral register. We could prove that 90% of people have not moved and are in the same situation.

"We could then focus our annual canvass efforts on the 10% who do not match up and who are causing the problem, on under-represented groups or on places that seem to have empty houses when we know that people are living there."

The comments came as Penrose strongly defended the controversial decision to complete the switch to IER – which will replace the old

system of one person being able to register every voter in a household – in December. This goes against the recommendation of the independent Electoral Commission that the transition should not take place until December 2016, partly because software problems left it unable to spot the areas with most ‘missing’ voters.

Labour warning

The Labour Party argued that “close to a million people would drop off the register as a result, which would be “disastrous”.

But Penrose said he was confident that all “genuine voters with a pulse” would be identified and switched over from the old household register. He insisted: “Then the only entries left will be the people who are no longer there - the people who have moved, died or were never there in the first place because they were fraudulent.”

The minister said that the missing voters – 1.9 million in total – would have been contacted “up to nine times over the past 18 months, in some cases more”.

He added: “They will have had their doors knocked on and their phones rung, and they will have had letters and emails. At the end of that process, the chances of a genuine voter with a pulse who lives in a particular area being disfranchised are vanishingly small.”

Although the Electoral Commission has opposed the plan for a December 2015 switchover to IER, it was supported by the Association of Electoral Administrators, Penrose pointed out.

Electoral fraud isn't the biggest problem at British polling stations..... it's the electoral register, Political Studies Association, By Toby S James and Alistair Clark, 14 October 2015

Last week Dominic Grieve, the former attorney general, claimed that electoral fraud is a 'growing phenomena' in British elections. It is a problem, he suggested, that was predominantly 'where there are high levels of inhabitants from a community in which there is a tradition of electoral corruption in their home countries'.

He is not the first person to claim this. Richard Mawrey QC has previously suggested that postal voting allowed 'industrial scale fraud' and Conservative Councillor Peter Golds has suggested that personation and undue influence was common at polling stations. The commonly proposed remedies are the abolition of postal voting and voter ID requirements. As Eric Pickle's review of electoral fraud closed last week, these ideas will no doubt be considered.

But there should not be a rush to introduce either voter ID or abolish postal voting. Often allegations of fraud are partisan in nature, designed to discredit opponents. Both of these proposals would be likely to impact negatively on turnout at British elections, which is already low. Our new study, also shows that electoral fraud is not the biggest problem faced at elections.

We conducted a survey of poll workers at the 2015 general election - the first of its kind in Britain. We have provided a summary of this to Eric Pickles' commission for consideration as evidence.

This found that elections were actually very well run. Poll workers were highly experienced, well trained and had confidence in the electoral process. Elections owe much to the 'unsung heroes' on the frontline of democracy.

There were some poll workers who were concerned about electoral fraud. Roughly 1 per cent were concerned that there might have been a problem in their polling station but those that gave more detail stressed that this could have been due to a lack of understanding rather than a deliberate attempt to manipulate the process. Roughly 5 per cent said that they were uncertain about at least one person's identity in their poll.

But by far the widespread problem was people asking to vote who were not on the register, presumably because they were not registered or had gone to wrong polling station. Over two thirds of polling stations turned away at least one citizen from voting because their name was not on the electoral register.

This points to how electoral fraud is not the only problem that needs to be considered when this review makes recommendations. Levels of electoral registration have been in long-term decline: from an estimated 96% in the 1960s to 82% in 2011. The introduction of individual electoral registration has recently been implemented, which has tightened up opportunities for electoral fraud in registration process. But it has long been forecast that it will lead to lower levels of electoral registration. If the transition is fast-tracked to December 2015, we may see more people being turned away in 2016's elections.

We therefore recommended to Eric Pickles that the voting and registration process is not made more difficult for citizens unless other measures to redress crisis levels of participation and registration are introduced. In particular, we suggest that feasibility of automatic registration and allowing citizens to vote at other polling stations is investigated. This could be done on a pilot basis initially, if necessary.

Unlike politicians, citizens do not think about elections and electoral registration every day of their lives. Research that I have done elsewhere shows how many people think that they are already on the electoral register because they pay council tax. At the same time, electoral services departments are under pressure because of lack of resources, while the elections petition system is not fit for purpose. The polling and registration process needs to be made simple, convenient and properly resourced.

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4. Further reading

4.1 Commons Library briefings

[Individual Electoral Registration](#)

This Commons Briefing Paper provides information about the introduction of the new system of electoral registration (IER) in Great Britain and funding both for the transition period and to support a range of initiatives to increase the level of voter registration among under-registered groups, including students. Registration in Northern Ireland has been on an individual basis since 2002.

24 Feb 2016 | Commons Briefing papers | SN06764

[Compulsory voting](#)

This Note examines the arguments for and against legislation to require voters to cast their votes and whether it is a citizen's duty, as well as a right, to vote.

10 Feb 2015 | Commons Briefing papers | SN00954

4.2 All-Party Parliamentary Group on Democratic Participation

[**Getting the 'missing millions' on to the electoral register: A vision for voter registration reform in the UK**](#), Bite the Ballot and Dr Toby James, Clear View Research, April 2016

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: eligible 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.

4.3 Electoral Reform Society

[**It's time to talk about automatic voter registration**](#), Electoral Reform Society, Josiah Mortimer, 7 June 2016

The All-Party Parliamentary Group on Democratic Participation have spoken out on the impact of a voluntarist approach to registration, with Lord Rennard, Toby James and Oliver Sidorczuk pointing out in an article for Democratic Audit that at the last General Election, 186,000 applied after the deadline, while "others may think that they're already registered and turn up at the polls anyway." And people already assume we have automatic registration: "Many citizens think that they are on the register because they pay their council tax and expect those running the election to 'know about them'. Two thirds of polling stations turned away voters who thought that they were on the electoral register but were not."

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