

Monitoring the introduction of individual electoral registration: our proposed approach

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Introduction

1.1 The electoral registration process underpins the right to vote in elections. Great Britain's system of electoral registration has remained largely unchanged since the Victorian period, and is one of the only systems in the world not based on registration by individuals. Instead, one person in each household is responsible for registering everyone else living at that address.

1.2 But the assumption that electoral registration is the responsibility of a 'head of household' is increasingly outdated. Individual electoral registration ('individual registration') is more suited to today's society, where people are used to applying personally for other public and private services. Individual registration may also strengthen democratic engagement, as individuals are given direct responsibility for registering to vote.

1.3 The system of household registration has come under criticism in recent years because of its potential vulnerability to fraud. In Northern Ireland, concerns about electoral fraud led to the replacement of household registration with individual registration in 2002. The requirement for an annual canvass in Northern Ireland ended in 2006, when a system of continuous registration was introduced.

1.4 The Political Parties and Elections Act 2009 ('the 2009 Act') makes provision for the introduction of individual registration in Great Britain. This would involve Electoral Registration Officers asking people to provide three additional pieces of 'identifying information' (signature, date of birth, and national insurance number), although they will also be required to make clear that, during this initial phase, the provision of this information is not obligatory for individuals to be included in an electoral register. Any move in future to a system where people are required to provide these additional identifiers, and would not be able to register to vote until they provided them, would need to be approved by the UK Parliament following a recommendation by the Electoral Commission.

1.5 This welcome change has cross-party support. We are aware that the Coalition programme includes a commitment to speed up the introduction of individual registration and this would need to be considered by Parliament.

Principles for implementing individual registration

1.6 Moving to a system of individual registration will represent a major change to the electoral registration system in Great Britain. This change must be managed carefully and implemented in a way which recognises the fundamental importance of voters participating in electoral and democratic

processes. The key principles that we believe should underpin this change to the registration system are set out below:

- The system should not prevent anyone who is eligible to take part in elections in Great Britain from registering to vote.
- The system should ensure that anyone who is not eligible to vote is not included in an electoral register.
- These changes to the system should be easily explained to, and understood by, electors.
- The system should ensure that all personal data is properly managed and protected.
- The system should be capable of being implemented efficiently and without a detrimental impact on the existing duties and responsibilities of Electoral Registration Officers (EROs).

Our role during implementation

1.7 Once the provisions of the 2009 Act have been commenced, the Commission will be required to monitor and assess the implementation and operation of the initial phase of individual registration. The Commission must assess:

- The state of the electoral registration system in Great Britain.
- The effectiveness of Electoral Registration Officers (EROs) in Great Britain in ensuring the completeness and accuracy of electoral registers.
- Whether any changes to the registration system for Great Britain would be needed in order to implement on a permanent basis an individual registration system where people are required to provide additional identifiers.

What we will be monitoring and assessing

The completeness and accuracy of electoral registers

1.8 The completeness and accuracy of electoral registers underpins the electoral and democratic process and forms one of our corporate objectives. Our research programme into the completeness and accuracy of the electoral registers will assess the impact of the move to individual registration on the quality of electoral registers. Our definitions of completeness and accuracy are set out in the box below.

Completeness: 'every person who is entitled to have an entry in an electoral register is registered'

Accuracy: 'there are no false entries on the electoral registers'

Voters

1.9 The interests of voters should be central to any change to the electoral registration process. We will monitor how people respond to the request to provide personal identifiers when registering to vote. This includes taking into account:

- The proportion of people who report that they would be willing to provide identifiers should this become a requirement of registering to vote.
- The proportion of people who provide their identifiers when requested to do so.
- The reasons behind people's willingness or unwillingness to provide identifiers.
- Public perceptions of the security and integrity of the electoral registration process and levels of public satisfaction with this process.

1.10 Alongside an assessment of the response of the electorate as a whole, we will also review whether the move to individual registration is likely to have a differential impact on certain groups and whether there are satisfactory plans in place to address this. This will include monitoring:

- Which groups are more or less likely to provide identifying information.
- The challenges that may be faced by different groups when supplying identifiers and how the system can respond to this.

1.11 We expect that the system should not prevent anyone who is eligible to vote from registering to vote. Consequently, any concerns raised about the registration process will be examined and reported on. This includes whether adequate provision is made to prevent otherwise eligible people from disappearing from electoral registers or being unable to vote.