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Contents

	Foreword	1
	Executive summary	3
1	Introduction	9
2	State of the electoral registers: 1950–2010	17
3	Accuracy and completeness of April 2011 electoral registers	22
4	Explaining trends in electoral registration	38
5	Changing the electoral registration system	48
6	Conclusions	54
	Acknowledgements	60
	Appendices	
	Appendix A	61
	Appendix B	68
	Appendix C	69

Foreword

This research is a well-timed addition to our understanding of the quality of electoral registers in Great Britain and we are pleased that the Cabinet Office has funded this study. The national estimates presented in this report are the first for the completeness of the electoral registers since those made for the 2000 England and Wales registers and they are the first for the accuracy of the registers since 1981.

Last year we reported the findings from a series of case studies on the accuracy and completeness of a sample of May 2009 electoral registers. Our report highlighted evidence which suggested that registration rates were not likely to have improved since a marked decline in the early 2000s, and that there may be widening local and regional variations in registration levels.

The evidence presented in this new report confirms that the current approach to electoral registration in Great Britain is struggling to achieve historic levels of accuracy and completeness. The civic importance of accurate and complete electoral registers, not only to enable people to vote in elections but also to determine fair electoral boundaries and draw juries, means that this report must prompt action from all of us who care about democracy in the UK.

Great Britain is about to make a significant change to the way electoral registers are compiled and managed, by moving to a system of individual electoral registration (IER). This change is right in principle but needs to work in practice, to provide a more secure electoral register and to move away from the outdated notion of registration by the head of a household.

But the wide consensus about the need to change to IER means that there is also now a critical opportunity to address weaknesses in the current registration system. The evidence and analysis presented in this report will be an important contribution to the debate about how to ensure IER is introduced successfully.

This analysis also points to key lessons for the UK Government, for Electoral Registration Officers (EROs) and local authorities, for the Electoral Commission and for campaigners, to ensure that changes are delivered in a way which recognises the fundamental civic importance of electoral registration for participation and trust in our democratic processes:

- EROs must ensure they are well prepared for the implementation of IER, by taking all available steps – including canvassing and the use of local data to identify potential electors – to improve the accuracy and completeness of electoral registers in 2012 and 2013, before the new registration process begins.
- Local authorities must ensure that funding is available to EROs to ensure they are able to take the steps needed to deliver high levels of registration.

The UK Government must also ensure that in the longer term its approach to funding the implementation of IER is effective and sustainable.

- The Commission will monitor electoral registration data and performance standards assessments by EROs before and during the transition to IER. We will press EROs to make changes where effective implementation is at risk and we will report regularly on standards of performance; however, we have no power to compel action or change.
- The UK Government must ensure that the efforts of EROs are not undermined by allowing people to 'opt out' from further contact by EROs, changing the existing context of registration as an important civic duty.
- The UK Government must ensure that the timing of the household canvass and individual application activities during the implementation of IER are designed to ensure registration rates do not decline further.
- The UK Government must put in place appropriate mechanisms to ensure that key registration activities are delivered to a consistent standard by EROs, and that there is a power of intervention where standards are not being met.

Finally, we must also acknowledge the wider context behind the declining estimates of completeness, including lower levels of engagement and participation in traditional electoral politics. This changing environment makes it increasingly challenging for EROs and other electoral practitioners to do their job of maintaining complete electoral registers. Technical policy changes can help improve access to the electoral registration process and the security of registers, but cannot ultimately address the motivation of individuals to participate. Candidates, political parties and campaigners will continue to play a vital role in encouraging participation.

We will be carrying out further research in 2013, to give a picture of levels of registration before the implementation of IER. This will form part of our wider programme of research into electoral registration changes, which the report sets out in more detail.

Jenny Watson
Chair, Electoral Commission

Executive summary

This research report relates directly to the Electoral Commission's objective of well-run elections, referendums and electoral registration. High-quality electoral registers underpin the achievement of this objective. If participation in the electoral process is to be maximised and electoral malpractice minimised, it is essential that the registers used at elections have high levels of accuracy and completeness.

Our definitions of accuracy and completeness are provided in the box below.

Definitions of accuracy and completeness

Accuracy: 'there are no false entries on the electoral registers'¹

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

Our approach

This report is based on the findings of a nationally representative study, funded by the Cabinet Office, into the accuracy and completeness of the electoral registers in Great Britain and analysis of other data relating to electoral registration. The study builds on the methodology used in previous case study research, published by the Electoral Commission in 2010, which provided estimates of the accuracy and completeness of a small sample of local authority registers.²

This research provides the first national estimates of the **completeness** of the electoral registers since estimates of the 2000 England and Wales registers³ as well as the first national estimates of the **accuracy** of the registers since 1981.

However, the findings of this report, based on the registers in place around election time, **cannot** be compared directly with most previous estimates,⁴

¹ Our definition of accuracy excludes minor errors, such as the misspelling of an elector's name, which would not prevent an eligible elector from being able to vote.

² The Electoral Commission, *The completeness and accuracy of electoral registers in Great Britain* (March 2010)

www.electoralcommission.org.uk/_data/assets/pdf_file/0018/87111/The-completeness-and-accuracy-of-electoral-registers-in-Great-Britain.pdf

³ The Electoral Commission, *Understanding electoral registration: the extent and nature of non-registration in Britain* (September 2005)

www.electoralcommission.org.uk/_data/assets/pdf_file/0020/47252/Undreg-FINAL_18366-13545_E_N_S_W_.pdf

which were based on the registers published immediately following an annual canvass.⁵ This is because the accuracy and completeness of the registers decline between annual canvass periods. The findings in this report therefore **should not** be compared directly with previous estimates, which were based on the registers published immediately following an annual canvass.⁶

Key findings

National levels of completeness

- The completeness estimates are in line with the Commission's 2010 report and other data collected on the registers, which indicate a decline in the quality of the registers in the early 2000s with a subsequent stabilisation, but not recovery, from 2006.
- The April 2011 parliamentary registers⁷ were 82.3% complete; the comparable figure for the local government registers was 82.0%.⁸
- This equates to approximately 8.5 million unregistered people in Great Britain as of April 2011.⁹ However, this does not mean that these registers should have had 8.5 million more entries, because many, but not all, of those not registered correctly may still have been represented on the registers by an inaccurate entry (for example, at a previous address).
- The estimates provide a snapshot of the state of the registers at a particular point in time. Previous research has shown that the completeness of the registers generally declines after the registers are published on 1 December. We would therefore expect these April estimates to be lower than previous national estimates, which have been based on registers published immediately following the annual canvass.
- Using data gathered during the study, rough estimates of the completeness of the December 2010 registers were produced. These estimates indicate that the completeness of the December 2010 registers

⁴ The 1981 Office of Population Censuses and Surveys (OPCS) study (J.E. Todd and B. Butcher, *Electoral registration in 1981* (HMSO: London, 1981)) contained an estimate for levels of registration in April 1981. This found that 89% of people whose address could be found on the register were registered. The studies using the 1991 and 2001 censuses produced only a December estimate for completeness.

⁵ Local authorities undertake an annual canvass each autumn to update the registers. See paragraphs 1.26–1.27 for more information.

⁶ Excluding some findings from the 1981 OPCS study which were for the April register.

⁷ For more information on the differences between the parliamentary and local government registers see paragraphs 1.22–1.25 of this report. The parliamentary register is used for UK Parliamentary elections, rather than for elections to the Northern Ireland Assembly, Scottish Parliament or National Assembly for Wales.

⁸ This data is from a representative house-to-house survey, not from a census, and as with any representative survey, data is subject to margins of error.

⁹ This figure is approximate because it uses the 2010 mid-year estimate for the 18+ population of Great Britain. These estimates do not take account of eligibility and we would therefore expect the eligible population to be smaller.

was somewhere in the range of 85–87%. This is lower than the December 2000 estimate for England and Wales, which suggested that 91–92% of people were registered.¹⁰

- These estimates suggest that the number of unregistered people in Great Britain has risen from approximately 3.9 million¹¹ in December 2000 to at least 6 million in December 2010.¹²
- A high proportion (44%) of those not on the registers in April 2011 incorrectly believed that they were registered.
- April 2011 completeness levels were noticeably higher (89%) among those who had not moved since the time of the 2010 annual canvass. Only 14% of those who moved into their home since the 2010 canvass were on the registers in April 2011.

National levels of accuracy

- The April 2011 parliamentary registers were 85.5% accurate; the comparable figure for the local government registers was 85.4%.
- The last comparable national estimate found that the April 1981 registers were between 86.5% and 89.6% accurate.
- Accuracy levels were significantly lower at those addresses where the current resident had moved in since the annual canvass. Only 27% of register entries at those addresses were found to be accurate.

Population differences

- Levels of completeness vary significantly for different age groups. The lowest percentage of completeness is recorded for the 17–18 and 19–24 age groups (55% and 56% complete respectively). In contrast, 94% of the 65+ age group were registered.
- Levels of completeness also differ by ethnicity, with 86% registered among White communities and 77% among Black and Minority Ethnic communities.
- There is very little difference in levels of completeness between socio-economic groups, as was the case with our 2010 case study research. The research therefore suggests that there is no significant difference in the likelihood of different social groups being registered.

¹⁰ Note that the estimate for 2000 was derived using a different methodology to the current study (checking the details on the registers against the information gathered by the 2001 census) and concerned England and Wales only.

¹¹ This assumes the 8–9% non-registration rate for England and Wales in December 2000 could be applied to Scotland. The 3.9 million figure is therefore made up of 3.5 million unregistered in England and Wales and an estimated 0.4 million unregistered in Scotland.

¹² This figure is approximate because it uses the 2010 mid-year estimate for the 18+ population of Great Britain. These estimates do not take account of eligibility and we would therefore expect the eligible population to be smaller.

- However, there is a clear relationship between levels of accuracy and completeness and housing tenure. For example, completeness ranged from 89% among those who own their property outright and 87% among those with a mortgage, to 56% among those who rent from a private landlord. In relation to accuracy, the rate of ineligible entries at privately rented properties was four times that found at owner occupied addresses.

Reasons for change

- The reasons behind the declining estimates for completeness are likely to be numerous and varied.
- Interest in politics is an important driver of registration, yet participation in traditional politics has been in decline: all types of UK election have recorded record low turnouts between 1998 and the present day.
- There have also been relevant population changes, including a modest, but steady, increase in population mobility between the 1981 and 2001 censuses, and there is no sign that this trend has changed since then. The more mobile the population, the greater the challenge of maintaining the accuracy and completeness of the registers.
- Certain eligible but traditionally under-registered groups, specifically Commonwealth and EU citizens, have grown because of increased immigration during the last decade. This may have negatively affected completeness levels.
- Reduced canvass response rates may also contribute to the modest decline in the quality of the registers. For example, response to the annual canvass decreased from an average of 97% in 1994–96 to 93% in 2007–10.
- One consequence of the reduced canvass response rate is an increase in the use of the carry forward facility.¹³ This change since the 1990s is likely to have had an impact on the accuracy of the registers.
- Data suggests some decrease since the 1980s and 1990s in two practices previously believed to increase response rates: door knocking at the annual canvass and issuing a third reminder to non-responding households.
- However, the overall response rate for the canvass continues to be high. This research highlights the importance of the annual canvass and shows the relationship between the accuracy and completeness of the registers and population movement between annual canvasses. The canvass remains the main mechanism for maintaining the registers – the take-up of rolling registration is limited.

¹³ For an explanation of the carry forward facility see paragraphs 4.36–4.38.

Implications for the electoral registration system

- The current approach to registration has become less effective in light of changing levels of public engagement and patterns of mobility.
- The research identifies a range of issues to be addressed under the current registration system as well as challenges to be tackled during the move to individual electoral registration (IER).
- A key challenge is to ensure that electoral registers are as accurate and complete as possible not just when they are first published each year but also at the time at which they are used at elections.
- The accuracy and completeness of the registers are at their highest immediately following the annual canvass; the greater the amount of time that elapses between the canvass and an election, the worse the quality of the registers is likely to be by polling day.
- This decline in quality is due to the low take-up of rolling registration, which also relates to low public awareness of this provision.
- The research highlights the importance of beginning the transition to IER from as strong a base as possible; this requires registers that have high levels of accuracy and completeness.
- In order to achieve this there needs to be effective targeting of home movers, as well as of the other groups identified by the research as less likely to be registered.
- Increasing the levels of public awareness about the registration process and the requirements when registering to vote will become critical during the implementation of IER. This will include engaging with those members of the public who currently rely on other members of the household putting them on the electoral register.

Based on the research findings and the implications set out above, our Foreword to this report sets out key lessons for the UK Government, Electoral Registration Officers (EROs), local authorities, the Electoral Commission and campaigners in relation to the registration system and transition to IER.

Future research

The Electoral Commission will deliver a programme of research to monitor the impact of a move to IER on the quality of Great Britain's electoral registers. This includes producing two assessments of the accuracy and completeness of the registers: a 'before' measure using the December 2013 registers; and an 'after' measure using the December 2015 registers. This will allow for a comparison between the quality of the registers compiled during the final canvass under the current system and those compiled under the first full IER canvass.

In addition to this, the Commission will be monitoring how the public respond to the changes through public opinion research that tracks, for example, levels of satisfaction with, and confidence in, the system of electoral registration, plus any difficulties encountered by the public when providing personal identifiers.

The Commission will also be collecting data on a regular basis from each ERO on levels of response to the annual canvass, the proportion of names retained on the registers through secondary checking or carry forward, and the provision of personal identifiers.

In addition to this research the Commission will be looking at how we use our performance standards to monitor the preparedness of EROs for the introduction of IER, and to provide early warning signs where EROs may not have the capability to deliver.

This report

This report is made up of the findings from the national survey of the registers in Great Britain, plus a wider analysis of the latest data related to electoral registration. The report starts by setting out what was known about the state of the electoral registers based on published literature and existing data sources. It goes on to present the estimates for the accuracy and completeness of the April 2011 registers. Possible reasons for the trends in registration levels are then considered. The report looks at the implications of these findings for the system of electoral registration and particularly for the proposed move to IER. It concludes with a summary of the findings and the Commission's programme of future research into the registers.

1 Introduction

1.1 This report sets out our most recent research into the accuracy and completeness of the electoral registers in Great Britain.¹⁴ This has involved a nationally representative survey of the accuracy and completeness of the electoral registers, as well as a detailed analysis of a range of other data on the registers and the practices used to compile them.

1.2 This research is important because electoral registration underpins the democratic process and the most recent national estimate of the completeness of the registers is now 10 years old. Understanding the accuracy and completeness of the electoral registers is also particularly relevant at this time because the way in which the electoral registers are created is changing.

1.3 The Electoral Commission supports the introduction of individual electoral registration (IER) as an important improvement in how people register to vote. The Commission has been calling for IER to be implemented in Great Britain since 2003, principally because the current household registration system is vulnerable to fraud as there is no requirement to provide any evidence of an individual's identity to register to vote. This undermines trust in the system, and raises fears of undue influence on the outcome of elections.

1.4 Great Britain's system of electoral registration has remained largely the same since the Victorian period, and is one of the few 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 – they may fill in the form inaccurately for the whole house, they might miss off someone who should be registered or add an entry which may not be valid. The system is outdated.

1.5 Additionally, a 'household' registration system means there is no personal ownership by citizens of a fundamental aspect of their participation in our democracy – their right to vote. Ownership of the right to vote is too important to be left to anybody other than the individual citizen.

1.6 However, in order to achieve these objectives – and particularly to guard against the risks brought about by such a major change to our electoral registration system – it is vital that the change is managed and implemented carefully and with full consideration to identify the best approach. The

¹⁴ Northern Ireland, where a system of individual electoral registration is already in operation, is not covered by this report. A separate programme of research is in place to monitor the Northern Ireland register.

Commission's research programme will allow us to monitor this change and to ensure that any issues that do arise are identified and addressed.¹⁵

The uses of the electoral registers

1.7 Electoral registers underpin elections by providing the list of those who are eligible to vote. Those not included on the registers cannot take part in elections. However, the registers are also used for other public purposes. For example, the various Boundary Commissions use the registers to calculate electoral quotas when they review parliamentary and local government boundaries.

1.8 The registers are also used as the basis for selecting people to undertake jury service and for certain law enforcement and crime prevention purposes. Credit reference agencies are also able to purchase complete copies of the registers, which they use to confirm addresses supplied by applicants for bank accounts, credit cards, personal loans and mortgages.

Defining accuracy and completeness

1.9 The quality of the registers is considered in two main ways: their accuracy and their completeness.

1.10 By **accuracy** we mean that 'there are no false entries on the electoral registers'.¹⁶

1.11 The accuracy of the electoral registers is therefore a measure of the percentage of entries on the registers which relate to verified and eligible voters who are resident at that address. Inaccurate register entries may relate to entries which have become redundant (for example, due to home movement), which are ineligible and have been included unintentionally, or which are fraudulent.

1.12 By **completeness** we mean that 'every person who is entitled to have an entry in an electoral register is registered'.

1.13 The completeness of the electoral registers therefore refers to the percentage of eligible people who are registered at their current address. The proportion of eligible people who are not included on the register at their current address constitutes the rate of under-registration.

¹⁵ See paragraphs 6.16–6.19 for more information on our monitoring plans.

¹⁶ Our definition of accuracy excludes minor errors, such as the misspelling of an elector's name, which would not prevent an eligible elector from being able to vote.

Our research programme

1.14 We undertake research into electoral registers in order to:

- provide an overview of the accuracy and completeness of Great Britain's electoral registers
- inform our guidance for Electoral Registration Officers (EROs), based on an assessment of good practice across the country
- assist with the identification of types of authorities whose registers need to be improved, in order to complement our performance standards work
- provide up-to-date information on those groups that are more likely to be under-registered and thereby inform our approach to public awareness activity
- provide ongoing tracking of how electoral registers change in response to legislative developments, administrative change or population change and use this tracking to inform our role in scrutinising proposals and policies to revise the registration system.

1.15 Since 2004, we have become the principal body in the United Kingdom undertaking research into the electoral registers. Following the publication of our 2005 report, *Understanding electoral registration*,¹⁷ much of this work has been focused on the piloting and testing of new techniques for assessing accuracy and completeness. This concern with developing new methods has arisen from the limited scope to produce reliable estimates using existing approaches in the periods between the census of population, which takes place every 10 years.

1.16 Initial pilot research was carried out into the accuracy and completeness of the registers in Greater London in 2007.¹⁸ Further research was conducted in 2009 on eight local authority registers. These case studies involved door-to-door interviewing at a sample of addresses in each area in order to produce estimates of the accuracy and completeness of each register. The findings were published in our 2010 report, *The completeness and accuracy of the electoral registers in Great Britain*.¹⁹

¹⁷ The Electoral Commission, *Understanding electoral registration* (September 2005)

¹⁸ GfK NOP Social Research, *Completeness and accuracy of the electoral registers in Greater London – a pilot study* (2007)

www.electoralcommission.org.uk/_data/assets/electoral_commission_pdf_file/0015/16206/Methodological-report-NOP-2007-10-17-V07-final_27634-20340_E_N_S_W_.pdf

¹⁹ Completeness across the local authorities ranged from 73% to 89% (and accuracy from 77% to 91%) – significantly lower than the 2000 England and Wales estimate of 91–92%. The Electoral Commission, *The completeness and accuracy of electoral registers in Great Britain* (March 2010)

1.17 Since 2004, we have also commissioned a series of studies examining the state of the registers in Northern Ireland,²⁰ where IER has been in place since 2002.

Producing accuracy and completeness estimates

1.18 There are various methods used to assess the quality of the electoral registers, which differ mainly by the frequency with which they can be used and the reliability of the results. These approaches are set out below, while Appendix C outlines each of the approaches in more detail and considers their strengths and limitations.

1.19 **Using large-scale national surveys:** this is the approach that has been adopted to produce estimates of the April 2011 registers. It is the first time the method has been used to assess both the accuracy and completeness of the registers at a national level, although the main elements of the methodology were tested in our previous case study research.²¹

1.20 **Comparing Office for National Statistics (ONS) electoral statistics (number of entries on the registers) with mid-year population estimates:** these two datasets can be used to provide relatively crude estimates of the annual registration rates at national and subnational levels, although they cannot be used to report on the accuracy of the registers.

1.21 **Matching census records against the electoral registers:** a sample of census returns or data from the Census Coverage Survey can be cross-matched against the electoral registers to derive estimates of accuracy and completeness, although this exercise can be repeated only every 10 years.

The current registration system

The franchise for parliamentary and local government registers

1.22 Not every resident in the United Kingdom can register to vote. Entitlement to register comes from the entitlement to vote. As the entitlement to vote differs according to the type of election, there are now two types of register in place – the parliamentary registers and the local government registers. To be on either of the registers, a resident is required to have British, Irish, Commonwealth or

²⁰ For instance, The Electoral Commission/PricewaterhouseCoopers, *Electoral Registration in Northern Ireland: Accuracy and Comprehensiveness Research Report* (September 2008) www.electoralcommission.org.uk/_data/assets/pdf_file/0009/64872/Accuracy-and-Comprehensiveness.pdf

²¹ The Electoral Commission, *The completeness and accuracy of electoral registers in Great Britain* (March 2010)

European Union (EU) citizenship. Since 1999 EU citizens have been eligible to vote at local and European Parliamentary elections and are therefore entitled to be on the local government registers. However, as they are not eligible to vote at UK Parliamentary elections they are not entitled to be on the parliamentary registers.

1.23 Table 1 sets out entitlement to vote by citizenship. Those not listed here are not eligible to be on either the parliamentary or the local government registers.

Table 1: Franchise for citizenship and elections

Citizenship	Elections			Register
	UK Parliament	EU Parliament	Local government	
British	√	√	√	Parliamentary and local government
Commonwealth*	√	√	√	
Irish*	√	√	√	
European Union*	×	√	√	Local government

Notes: *Citizens resident in the UK who either have leave to remain or do not require such leave.

1.24 The age at which citizens become entitled to vote is 18, but the electoral registers also include records of ‘attainers’ – 16- and 17-year-olds who will turn 18 during the period in which the register is in force.

1.25 There are a small number of specific exceptions to these general rules. For instance, all convicted prisoners currently lose their right to vote, as do some people detained in institutions due to severe mental illnesses. Anyone convicted of electoral offences will also be disqualified from voting for a specific period.

Creating and maintaining the registers – the role of Electoral Registration Officers

1.26 Local authorities undertake an annual canvass each autumn to update the registers. The vast majority of EROs begin their canvass between mid-July and mid-September, with the bulk starting in August. At its simplest, the annual canvass involves delivering a canvass form to each household and following up, via postal reminders and door knocking, with those households who do not respond. In addition, some households where no change is required to entries are able to confirm their details by telephone, the internet or text message (although not all these methods are available in all local authority areas). Revised registers are then published on 1 December.

1.27 The annual canvass is intended to ensure that the registers remain as accurate and complete as possible. But electors can also register to vote outside the canvass period. They can do so by completing a ‘rolling registration’ form, which is available from either the ERO for the local authority in which they live or the Commission’s aboutmyvote.co.uk website, and submitting it to their

ERO. This allows those who are not on the register or who have moved home since the time of the annual canvass to register to vote at any time, including in the run-up to an election – as long as the form is submitted by 11 working days before an election.

Monitoring and guidance – the role of the Electoral Commission

1.28 The Electoral Commission oversees the workings of the electoral registration system through its guidance materials and performance standards framework. We issue guidance for EROs to support them in the delivery of their statutory functions under the Commission's powers under Section 10(3) of the Political Parties, Elections and Referendums Act 2000 (PPERA). Since July 2008, the Electoral Commission has set performance standards for EROs in Great Britain.

1.29 Our standards aim to ensure that there is a consistent approach to registering voters locally across Great Britain. Currently there are 10 performance standards for EROs which measure performance in four key areas: planning; maintaining accuracy and completeness; ensuring electoral integrity; and promoting public awareness.

1.30 The Commission reports annually on how well EROs are performing against these standards. The Commission has put in place processes to ensure that those officers who have reported performing below a particular standard in each of the last three years do not do so in future.²² However, there is no formal legal mechanism available to us to make EROs take steps to meet the standards as no sanctions are available to be used against those EROs who do not comply with the standards. This limits the Commission's ability to ensure consistent practice across the country.

Proposals for change

1.31 Great Britain currently has a household system of registration. A statutory framework for introducing a system of IER was set out by the previous Labour Government in the Political Parties and Elections Act 2009. The Coalition Government's *Programme for Government*, published in May 2010, included a commitment to 'reduce electoral fraud by speeding up the implementation of individual voter registration'.²³ Any change to the current framework for the implementation of IER would require further primary legislation and the Government is expected to introduce a bill into Parliament in 2012. The current

²² www.electoralcommission.org.uk/_data/assets/pdf_file/0017/133433/ERO-report-2011-07-20.pdf

²³ HM Government, *The Coalition: our programme for government* (2010), p.27
www.cabinetoffice.gov.uk/sites/default/files/resources/coalition_programme_for_government.pdf

Government has indicated that, in terms of implementation, it intends to depart from the previous Government's approach in the following ways:

- the abolition of the 'voluntary phase' (when personal identifiers could be provided but would not be needed for registration) and therefore the earlier full implementation of the policy (previously 2015 for new registrations, now 2014)
- the removal of the statutory requirement for the Commission to make a recommendation about whether to proceed to the full implementation of IER based on an assessment of the state of the registers

1.32 These proposals were set out in the recent government White Paper on IER, which was considered by the Political and Constitutional Reform Committee. The Commission provided evidence to the committee and published a full response to the proposals in the White Paper. A copy of this response can be found on our website.²⁴

1.33 Under IER each elector is to become responsible for registering to vote, rather than one member of the household registering all those who live at a property. Electors will also be required to provide personal identifiers when registering to vote (expected to be date of birth and national insurance number under the new proposals).

1.34 The proposed changes to the registration system are addressed in more detail in Chapter 5, which considers what existing research tells us about the current registration system and what issues should be addressed when moving to IER.

This report

1.35 This report is based on the findings from the national survey of the registers in Great Britain, plus a wider analysis of the latest data related to electoral registration.

1.36 The remainder of the report is divided into five chapters:

- Chapter 2 sets out what we currently know about the state of the electoral registers based on published literature and available data sources.
- Chapter 3 outlines the approach adopted for estimating the accuracy and completeness of Great Britain's April 2011 registers and the findings from this research.

²⁴ The Electoral Commission, *The Electoral Commission's response to the Government's White Paper and draft legislation on Individual Electoral Registration* (Cm 8108) www.electoralcommission.org.uk/_data/assets/pdf_file/0003/141294/Electoral-Commission-IER-White-Paper-Response-2011-10-14-FINAL.pdf

- Chapter 4 explains the trends in registration levels, examining public engagement, population changes and registration practices.
- Chapter 5 looks at the implications of the research findings for the system of electoral registration, and particularly for the proposed move to IER.
- Chapter 6 summarises the research and outlines the Commission's proposals for monitoring the changes to the registration system.

2 State of the electoral registers: 1950–2010

Introduction

2.1 This chapter reviews existing data on electoral registration and what it can tell us about the state of Great Britain's electoral registers over recent decades. The analysis focuses in particular on 1991–2010, outlining the gradual decline in the completeness of the registers during this period.

Key points

- The number of entries on the registers is higher than ever, with approximately 44.7 million entries on Great Britain's parliamentary registers in December 2010.
- Despite this, registration levels have not kept pace with a rising population. The parliamentary registers have increased in size by 5% between 1991 and 2010 while the estimated 18+ population has increased by around 11%.
- Research suggests that the completeness of the registers was at its highest in the 1950s and 1960s.
- Completeness was declining by the early 1980s, but post-canvass registration levels are likely to have stabilised at around 91–93% during the 1990s.
- Despite a shortage of research during 1998–2004, there are grounds to suggest that registration levels fell in this period.
- While completeness levels appear to have stabilised since 2006, they do not seem to have recovered the losses of the preceding years.
- The last reliable national estimate of accuracy relates to the April 1981 registers. This suggested that between 10.4% and 13.5% of the names on the April 1981 registers were inaccurate.

Existing estimates of completeness

2.2 Any estimate of completeness represents a 'snapshot' at a particular moment in the lifecycle of the registers. In previous years, the snapshot has tended to be provided in the period immediately following the compilation and publication of the annual registers – when the completeness of the registers was at its highest.

1950–91

2.3 The highest recorded levels of completeness were produced in the 1950s and 1960s, when the registers were found to be 96% complete at the end of the canvass

period (1950 and 1966) and up to 93–94% complete on the day of the registers' publication the following February/March.²⁵

2.4 National estimates of completeness have been produced irregularly, and the next estimates were undertaken using the 1981 census (based on the 1980 registers); they found that 6.5% of eligible people were not registered at the end of the canvass period.²⁶

1991–2010

2.5 The next estimates were produced using the 1991 census (on the 1990 registers) and the 2001 census (2000 registers). These estimates pointed towards a gradual long-term decline in the completeness of the registers, with non-registration estimated at 7–9% in 1990 and 8–9% in 2000.

2.6 The total number of entries on the parliamentary registers grew from 42,423,972 in 1991 to 44,654,056 in 2010. This represents an increase of 5% in 20 years. The local government registers have grown by 5% since they were first introduced in 1999, containing 45,765,439 entries in December 2010.

2.7 The difference in the size of the two registers (due to the different franchises – see Table 1 above) has become more marked in recent years. This is likely to be a consequence of EU enlargement, which granted people from new EU member states freedom of movement within the EU. The difference in the size of the two registers is now over 1 million electors, reflecting the growth in the population of EU citizens who are resident in Great Britain.

2.8 However, while there are more entries on both the parliamentary and local government registers in 2010 than ever before, they do not appear to have kept pace with population growth.

2.9 Each year the Office for National Statistics (ONS) publishes estimates of the size of the total population.²⁷ These estimates cannot be used to provide robust data on the completeness of the registers – the reasons for this are set out in Appendix C. However, when compared against the total number of entries on the registers the estimates can be used to point to trends in the quality of the registers; doing so confirms the pattern of gradual decline that has emerged from the national studies referenced above.

2.10 Figure 1 compares the growth of the estimated population aged 18 and above in Great Britain and the number of entries on the registers from 1991 to 2010. As the

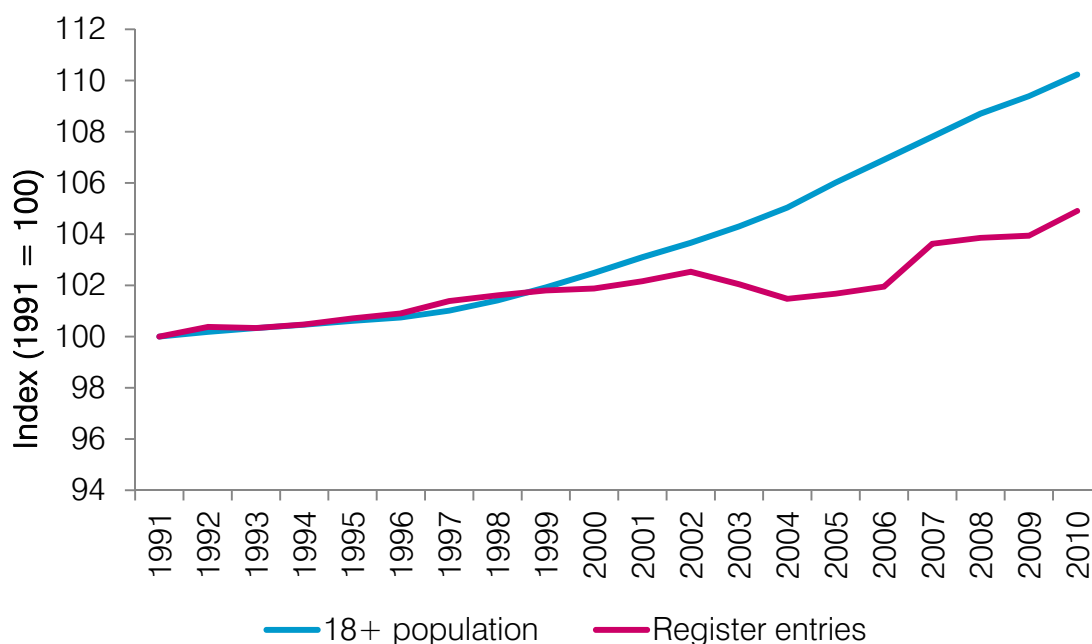
²⁵ P.G. Gray and A. Gee, *Electoral registration for parliamentary elections: an enquiry made for the Home Office* (HMSO: London, 1967). At this time the registers were published in the February following the canvass rather than in December.

²⁶ Todd and Butcher, *Electoral registration in 1981* (1981) (referred to as the 1981 OPCS study). Between these two estimates there was a change to the franchise in the UK with the minimum age at which a person can vote being lowered from 21 to 18. The 1981 OPCS study estimated that while some of the decline in registration between the 1966 and 1981 estimates could be attributed to this (because young people are less likely to be registered) there was a decline not associated with the change.

²⁷ The estimates for a year are published the following year so the most recent estimates relate to 2010.

figure shows, for most of the 1990s, population growth and the size of the registers were closely aligned, but between 2002 and 2006 the population grew faster than the registers. In fact, the absolute numbers on the registers fell between 2002 and 2004. In our 2010 report we suggested that there may have been a link between this fall and the increased use of all-postal canvasses from the early to mid-2000s (see Chapter 4 for more information on these practices). There has been some stabilisation in this relationship from 2006, although the gap has not been closed.

Figure 1: Growth in the estimated population aged 18 and above and growth in entries on the parliamentary electoral registers, Great Britain, 1991–2010 (1991=100 indexed)



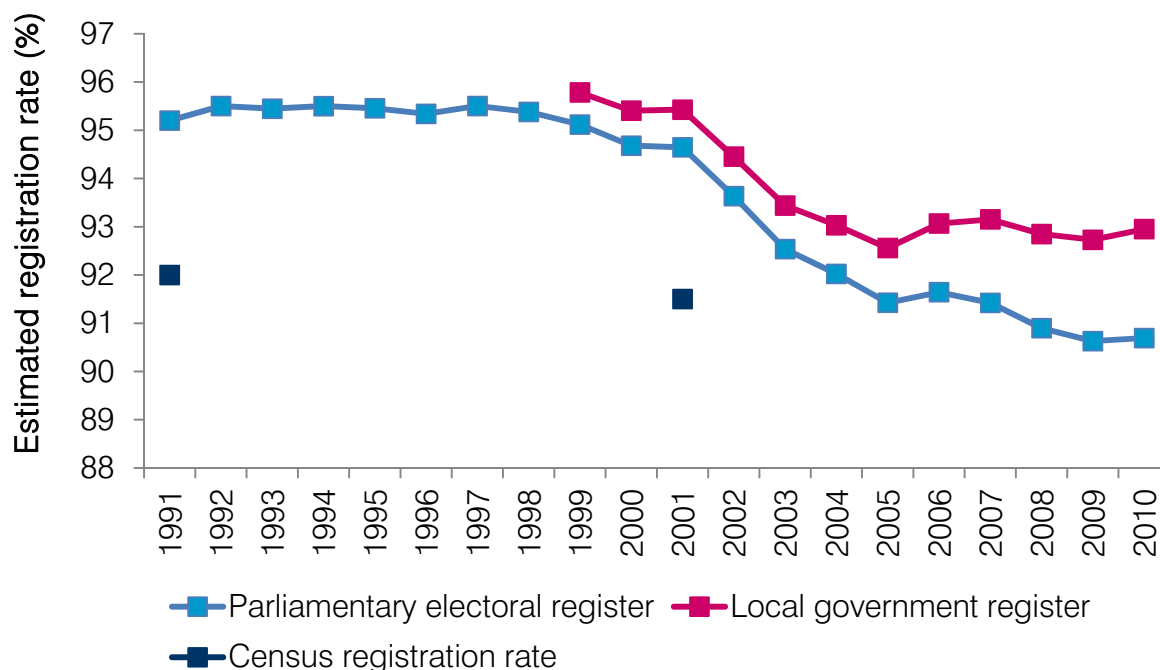
Note: This figure shows the change both in the population aged 18 and above and in the number of register entries from 1991 onwards. It does this using a common scale based in indexed numbers. The indexed numbers are calculated by using 1991 as a 'base year', at which both of the two variables are set at a value of 100. The data for each subsequent year then measures the percentage change in each variable against the base year.

2.11 The figure below shows a crudely calculated²⁸ registration rate for 1991–2010. While this is crude it nonetheless supports the data that indicates that there has been a decline in the registration rate since the levels recorded in the 1950s and 1960s. In line with the figure above, the most notable declines are in the late 1990s and the early 2000s. The rate falls from a level of around 95% for much of the 1990s to 92–93% by the mid-2000s.

²⁸ This calculation uses the estimated 18+ population for Great Britain produced annually by the ONS and the number of entries on the registers. However, the population estimate is not a measure of the population eligible to register (that data is not available). The number of entries on the registers is not a direct measure of the number of correctly registered people as it will include inaccurate entries. See Appendix C for more information on this calculation.

2.12 However, the registration rate appears to have stabilised since 2006 (although it has not returned to the level where it had been prior to that). The figure also shows the completeness estimates for the 1990 and 2000 registers, derived from research with census data. **These estimates, which are considered more reliable, are both around 3% lower than the crudely calculated registration rate.**

Figure 2: Estimated registration rate in Great Britain, 1991–2010²⁹



Source: ONS electoral statistics and mid-year population estimates.

Notes: Registration rate for parliamentary registers from 1991–2010, plus local government registers 1999–2010.

2.13 It is also worth noting that the lower registration rate for the parliamentary registers is inevitable using this method, as the population estimates include those residents who are eligible to register on the local government registers.

Existing estimates of accuracy

2.14 As with completeness, any estimate of accuracy represents a ‘snapshot’ at a particular moment in the lifecycle of the registers. There are no recent national estimates of the accuracy of the electoral registers. A full national estimate for the accuracy of the registers was last produced using 1981 census data.³⁰

²⁹ Figures for the local government registers are available from 1999 when EU citizens could vote for the first time for the European Parliament from another EU country.

³⁰ Todd and Butcher, *Electoral registration in 1981* (1981). The 1991 OPCS study also considered redundant entries on the registers in Great Britain at the time of the 1991 census. This study found that between 6.0% and 7.9% of the names listed at addresses which were occupied at the time of the census did not correspond with people living there at the time. However, unlike the 1981 study, an estimate for

2.15 The 1981 Office of Population Censuses and Surveys (OPCS) study set out estimates for the accuracy of the registers for April 1981 and used these estimates to calculate what the accuracy of the registers may have been at the time of the qualifying date for the canvass (October 1980). The study found that between 10.4% and 13.5% of the names on the April 1981 registers belonged to people who, by that time, were not living at the address listed in the registers.

2.16 The OPCS also estimated that the proportion of names on the registers that were inaccurate at the October 1980 qualifying date was between 6.1% and 9.4%. As rolling registration was not in place when this study was undertaken, no updates would have been made between the time of the qualifying data and the April estimates; the OPCS would therefore not have had to take into account any subsequent changes to the registers when producing their estimates.

Conclusions

2.17 The analysis of trends in electoral registration presented in our 2010 report remains current: the registers are growing in size but the registration rate has fallen since its post-war peak in the 1950s. The most recent data suggests that the stabilisation we identified since around 2006 has continued.

2.18 The next chapter sets out the findings from our study of the April 2011 electoral registers. It reviews the quality of the registers used at election time and differences among completeness levels for certain demographic groups.

the percentage of names on the registers that were listed at addresses which were unoccupied at the time of the census was not added to this percentage. Consequently, the figures do not represent a complete picture of the possible scale of inaccuracies on the registers. S. Smith, *Electoral registration in 1991* (HMSO: London, 1993).

3 Accuracy and completeness of April 2011 electoral registers

Introduction

3.1 This chapter sets out the findings of the research conducted across Great Britain in order to estimate the accuracy and completeness of the April 2011 electoral registers. A summary of the approach taken as well as all the detailed findings are presented below.

Key points

- The completeness estimates are in line with the Commission's 2010 report and other data collected on the registers, which indicate a decline in the quality of the registers in the early 2000s with a subsequent stabilisation, but not recovery, from 2006.
- The April 2011 parliamentary registers were 82.3% complete; the comparable figure for the local government registers was 82.0%.
- The April 2011 parliamentary registers were 85.5% accurate; the comparable figure for the local government registers was 85.4%.
- The completeness estimate equates to approximately 8.5 million unregistered people in Great Britain as of April 2011. However, this does not mean that these registers should have had 8.5 million more entries, because many, but not all, of those not registered correctly may still have been represented on the registers by an inaccurate entry (for example, at a previous address).
- The estimates provide a snapshot of the state of the registers at a particular point in time. Previous research has shown that the completeness of the registers generally declines after the registers are published on 1 December. We would therefore expect these April estimates to be lower than previous national estimates, which have been based on registers published immediately following the annual canvass.
- Using data gathered during the study, rough estimates of the completeness of the December 2010 registers were produced. These estimates indicate that the completeness of the December 2010 registers was somewhere in the range of 85–87%. This is lower than the December 2000 estimate for England and Wales, which suggested that 91–92% of people were registered.
- These estimates suggest that the number of unregistered people in Great Britain has risen from approximately 3.9 million³¹ in December 2000 to at least 6 million in December 2010.
- A high proportion (44%) of those not on the registers incorrectly believed that they were registered.

³¹ This assumes that the 8–9% non-registration rate for England and Wales in December 2000 could be applied to Scotland. The 3.9 million figure is therefore made up of 3.5 million unregistered in England and Wales and an estimated 0.4 million unregistered in Scotland.

- April 2011 completeness levels were noticeably higher (89%) among those who had not moved since the time of the 2010 annual canvass. Only 14% of those who moved into their home since the 2010 canvass were on the registers in April 2011.
- Accuracy levels were also significantly lower at those addresses where the current resident had moved in since the annual canvass. Only 27% of register entries were found to be accurate at those addresses.
- The Commission's 2010 report illustrated the variation in the accuracy and completeness of registers across Great Britain; the national figures presented in this report mask differing levels of accuracy and completeness between local authority areas.
- Local variations partly arise from the socio-demographic mix of communities in a given local authority. The findings show how completeness varies across age and ethnic groups, for example.
- There is also a clear relationship between levels of accuracy and completeness and housing tenure.

Methodology

3.2 The approach taken to delivering this research builds on the work published by the Commission in 2010 which looked at the accuracy and completeness of eight local authority electoral registers.³² The findings from that study indicated how accuracy and completeness can vary across local authority registers. For example, accuracy ranged from 77% to 91% and completeness from 73% to 89% across the local authorities.³³ But the data could not be used to provide national estimates of accuracy and completeness. In contrast, this research used a nationally representative sample to provide an estimate of the accuracy and completeness of the registers across Great Britain. However, the approach required to produce national estimates does not allow for estimates of registration at the local authority level.

3.3 As with the 2010 study, the research involved house-to-house surveying by trained interviewers with the aim of gathering information from residents which could be checked against the details held on the electoral registers.³⁴ Ipsos MORI were commissioned to undertake the work.

3.4 We are confident that the findings from this study are reliable, but this was a survey and not a census of everyone in the country. As with any survey, the results are therefore subject to confidence intervals.³⁵ Appendix A contains detailed information on

³² The Electoral Commission, *The completeness and accuracy of electoral registers in Great Britain* (March 2010)

³³ Please note that these ranges are for seven of the eight case studies and exclude Knowsley. This is because the Knowsley fieldwork was carried out on the February register whereas the other seven used the May registers and are therefore more comparable to these current figures.

³⁴ Where a property was found to be unoccupied this was recorded in order that these empty properties could be included in the subsequent analysis. For example, if an address unoccupied at the time of the fieldwork was found to have register entries, they would be classed as inaccurate.

³⁵ It must be remembered that a sample of addresses, and not every address across Great Britain, has been selected for interview, and that fieldworkers were not able to obtain an interview at every selected

the approach to obtaining this information, response rates across the sample, the confidence intervals and any applied weighting.

Context

3.5 The findings of this report, based on the registers in place around election time, cannot be compared directly with most previous estimates,³⁶ which were based on the registers published immediately following an annual canvass,³⁷ because the accuracy and completeness of the registers decline between annual canvass periods.

3.6 The most recent previous completeness estimate was produced in 2005 when the Commission published *Understanding electoral registration*.³⁸ This estimated that between 8% and 9% of people were not registered. However, comparing those figures and the new estimates is problematic because the 2005 figures:

- relate to England and Wales only
- were estimates of 1 December registers (in 2000), when the registers would have been at their most complete
- were derived using a different methodology (checking the details on the registers against the information gathered by the 2001 census)
- did not include an estimate of the accuracy of the registers

Accuracy and completeness

3.7 The research looked at the local government and parliamentary registers separately (see paragraph 1.22 for an explanation of the differences between these registers). The research found that **the completeness of the 1 April 2011 parliamentary registers was 82.3% and the completeness of the local government registers was 82.0%**. Consequently, the difference between the completeness levels of the parliamentary and local government registers was found to be negligible. The difference between the accuracy of the two registers is also negligible – **85.5% accurate for the parliamentary registers and 85.4% for the local government registers**. Except where stated, this chapter outlines the figures as they relate to the

address. In consequence, the figures obtained may not be exactly the same as if everybody had been interviewed (the 'true' values). There are two distinct elements to this. The addresses selected might not have been representative of all addresses ('sampling variation'), and within the sample those addresses where an interview was achieved might have differed from those where there was no response ('non-response error'). The size of any non-response error to a survey is unknown, but it can be minimised by achieving a high response rate and by compensating for it by weighting. The likely size of the sampling variation in a random probability survey such as this one is calculable, however, and is expressed as a 'confidence interval', sometimes informally referred to as the 'margin of error'.

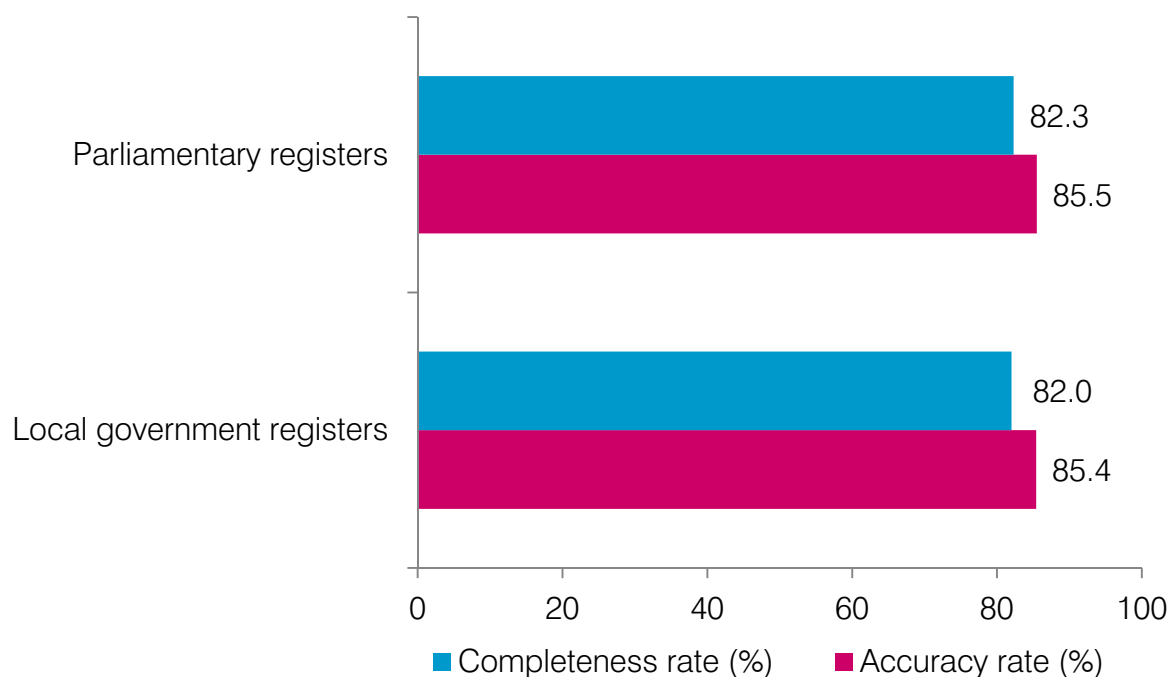
³⁶ Some findings from the 1981 OPCS study (Todd and Butcher, *Electoral registration in 1981* (1981)) are, to an extent, comparable. This study contained April estimates for levels of registration and for the accuracy of the registers. This found that 89% of people whose address could be found on the registers were registered in April 1981. The studies using the 1991 and 2001 censuses produced only a December estimate for completeness.

³⁷ Local authorities undertake an annual canvass each autumn to update the registers. See paragraphs 1.26–1.27 for more information.

³⁸ The Electoral Commission, *Understanding electoral registration* (September 2005)

parliamentary registers only as there are no significant differences in the estimates for the parliamentary and local government registers.

Figure 3: Accuracy and completeness of 1 April 2011 registers³⁹



Base (unweighted): Completeness – 9,944 for parliamentary registers; 10,151 for local government registers.

Base (unweighted): Accuracy – 9,492 for parliamentary registers; 9,680 for local government registers.

3.8 The completeness estimates equate to approximately 8.5 million people⁴⁰ missing from the electoral registers in April 2011. However, this does not mean that these registers should have had 8.5 million more entries, because many, but not all, of those not registered correctly may still have been represented on the registers by an inaccurate entry (for example, at a previous address).

3.9 The estimates above fall into the middle of the range of both accuracy and completeness found in the case study research published by the Commission in 2010. The local authority areas chosen as case studies were not representative of Great Britain as a whole, but the research was undertaken using registers at a similar stage in their cycle (May 2009 registers). Accuracy across the local authorities ranged from 77% to 91% and completeness from 73% to 89%.⁴¹

³⁹ All percentages quoted in this chapter are based on weighted data.

⁴⁰ This figure is approximate because it uses the 2010 mid-year estimate for the 18+ population of Great Britain. These estimates do not take account of eligibility and we would therefore expect the eligible population to be smaller. Note that the previous 3.5 million estimate was worked out using the estimated 16+ population but all population statistics used for this report are based on the 18+ figures.

⁴¹ Please note that these ranges are for seven of the eight case studies and exclude Knowsley. This is because the Knowsley fieldwork was carried out on the February register whereas the other seven used the May registers and are therefore more comparable to these current figures.

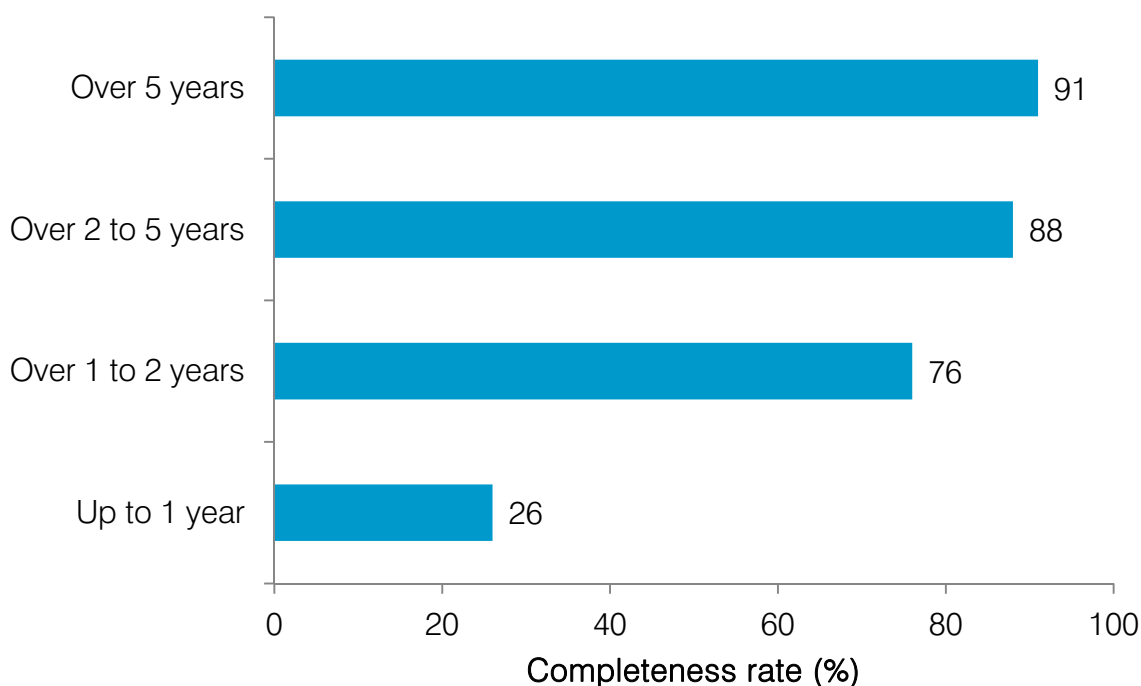
3.10 This supports the view that there is a varying picture of accuracy and completeness across the country, partially dependent on the nature of local areas and the practices used to create and maintain the registers. The sections below look at how levels of accuracy and completeness vary according to a variety of socio-demographic and other factors.

Home movement

3.11 All of the Commission's previous research has highlighted the impact of population movement on the accuracy and completeness of the registers. An analysis of the findings from this study reinforces this view.

3.12 The completeness of the registers is strongly associated with the length of residence at a property. As the figure below illustrates, completeness levels are 91% for those who have been resident at their property for over five years. However, this drops to 76% for those who have been resident for one to two years, and down to 26% for those resident for up to one year.

Figure 4: Completeness – length of residence



Base: unweighted (9,944).

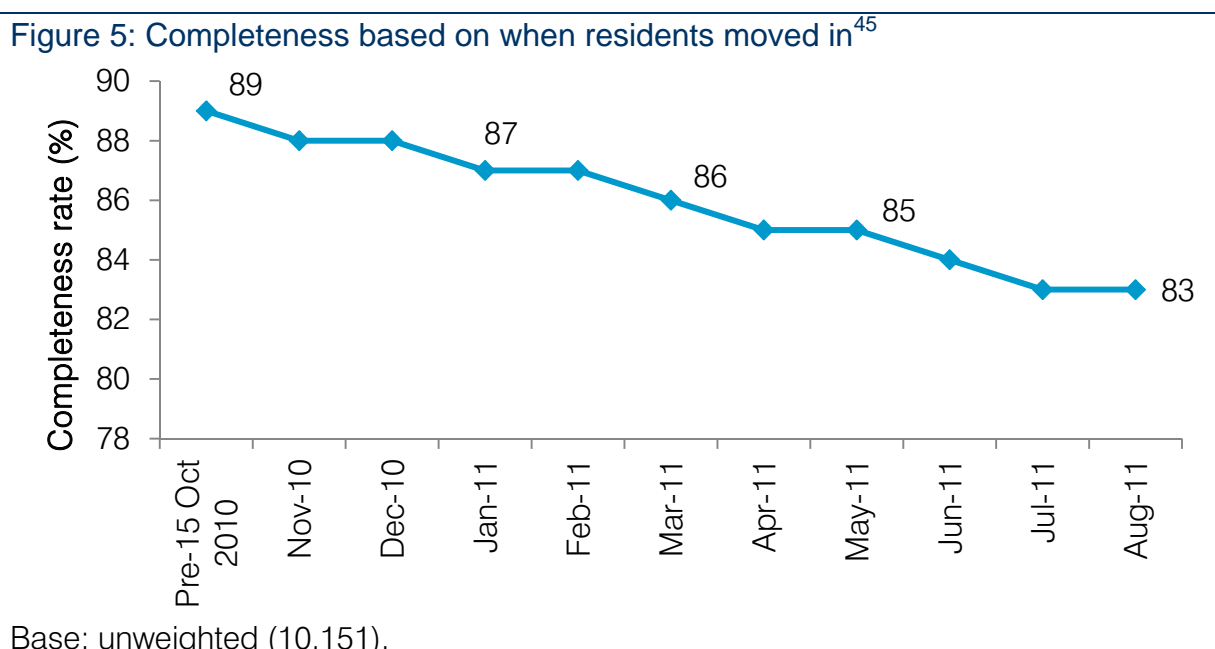
3.13 These figures support the assessment that rolling registration⁴² does not mitigate effectively the effects of home movement on the completeness of the registers. By far the lowest levels of completeness are recorded for those who have lived in the property for less than one year (many of whom will not have been resident at the time of the canvass).

⁴² See paragraph 3.18 for more information on the impact of rolling registration.

3.14 To understand more about this, we asked respondents who had moved within the last year whether they were resident at their current address at the time of the qualifying date for the 2010 annual canvass (15 October 2010). This allows us to show how completeness levels differ between those who moved into their property before the qualifying date for the canvass and those who moved in after the qualifying date.

3.15 Eighty-nine per cent of respondents who were resident at the same address on 15 October 2010 were registered correctly.⁴³ This compares with only 14% of those who had moved into their home after that date being registered correctly.

3.16 The figure below further illustrates this by showing how levels of completeness decline according to the date on which residents moved into their current address. So, when only those who moved in before 15 October 2010 are included, completeness is estimated at 89%. Once everyone who has moved in up to March 2011 is included, the overall completeness level falls to 86%. Finally, if we include everyone who has moved in up to August 2011, completeness declines to 83%.⁴⁴ Clearly, as more recently moved households are added to the base, the levels of completeness decline steadily.



Accuracy

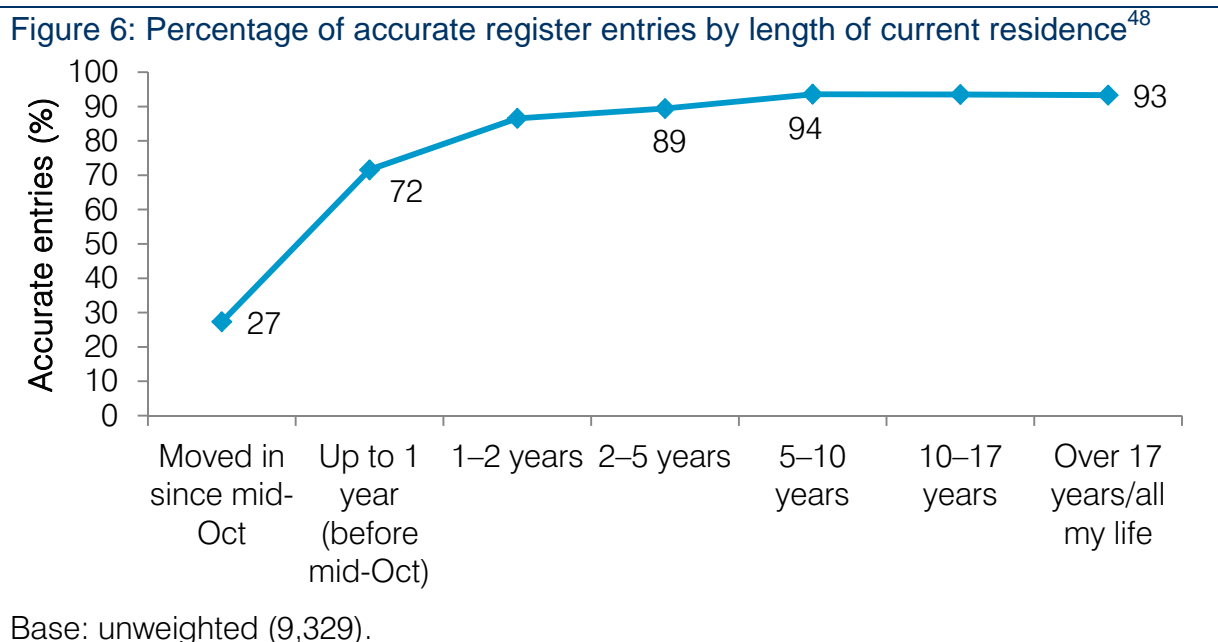
3.17 Length of residence relates to accuracy in much the same way as it does to completeness: the longer the current resident has been living there, the less likely it is

⁴³ This does not mean that the register was 89% complete at this point as that would assume that the people who moved between the canvass deadline and our fieldwork (who our research did not reach) were just as likely to have been registered at their old address as the average. But this assumption is unlikely to be correct as people who move more frequently are more likely to have moved since October and people who move more frequently are less likely to be registered.

⁴⁴ Note: the completeness level does not reach the headline figure of 82.3% because this calculation does not include all households in the sample – only those for which we have data on when the residents moved in.

⁴⁵ Note: this figure uses the data relating to the local government registers.

that inaccurate register entries will be found at that address.⁴⁶ Indeed, the vast majority (just over four-fifths) of inaccurate register entries relate to people not living at an address rather than the current residents.⁴⁷ The figure below shows the percentage of accurate entries found for an address by the length of residence of the current resident. For those addresses where the current resident has moved in since 15 October 2010, only 27% of register entries are accurate.



Rolling registration

3.18 As the fieldwork took place over a series of months, we wanted to ensure that the take-up of rolling registration⁴⁹ was captured (the sample was drawn from the April registers but most of the interviewing took place between June and August). To accomplish this, we checked the details of any apparently unregistered respondent who had moved into their property since January 2011 against the monthly register updates for May, June, July, August and September. The results show that a very small number of people had registered under rolling registration during that period: the equivalent of a 0.5% improvement to completeness.

3.19 We also asked all respondents whether they thought they were registered to vote at their current address. **A large proportion (44%) of those eligible respondents who were not registered thought that they were.** This partly helps to explain the low levels of rolling registration take-up. If many unregistered people think they are on the register, they are unlikely to actively seek out the opportunity to register (at least in the absence of an election).

⁴⁶ Note: this analysis does not include addresses with more than one household (as we cannot tell which is the household linked to the inaccurate entry) or to properties unoccupied at the time of the fieldwork.

⁴⁷ The remainder of the inaccuracies related to those still resident at the address who either were ineligible to be on the register due to nationality or for whom a first name or surname was wrongly marked on the register.

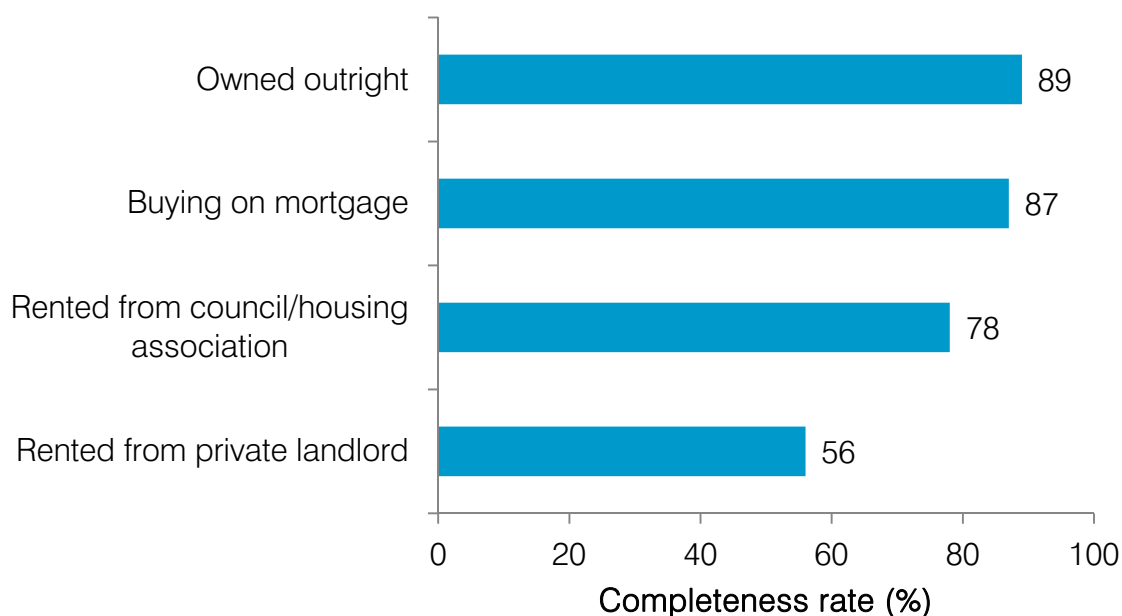
⁴⁸ Note: this figure uses data relating to the local government registers.

⁴⁹ See paragraph 1.27 for more information on rolling registration.

Tenure and property

3.20 The Commission's research has previously suggested that housing tenure is linked to registration rates and these findings also support that. The figure below shows the varying levels of completeness among respondents by tenure.

Figure 7: Completeness – housing tenure



Base: unweighted (9,944).

3.21 To a large extent, tenure is linked to home movement because home owners are less likely to move home frequently than those who are renting from a private landlord. Indeed, findings from a 2009–10 Survey of English Housing found that 33% of private renters had lived at their address for less than one year.⁵⁰ This compared with 2.5% of owner occupiers and 8.4% of those renting from a council or housing association. Even once other factors were controlled for, such as demographic differences, the research results suggested that private renters were less likely to be registered.⁵¹

Accuracy

3.22 Tenure is also relevant in relation to the accuracy of the registers, with the rate of ineligible entries at privately rented properties four times that found at owner occupied addresses. Figure 8 illustrates that the percentage of accurate entries is substantially lower at privately rented properties than for all other tenure types.

⁵⁰ Department for Communities and Local Government, *English Housing Survey: Household Report 2009–10* (July 2011)

⁵¹ Regression is a statistical analysis technique which takes a key variable of interest, in this case completeness or accuracy, and measures the correlation this has with a variety of other variables in the data (or the ability to predict the key variable by knowing the other variable), assuming that all other variables are constant.

Figure 8: Accuracy – tenure

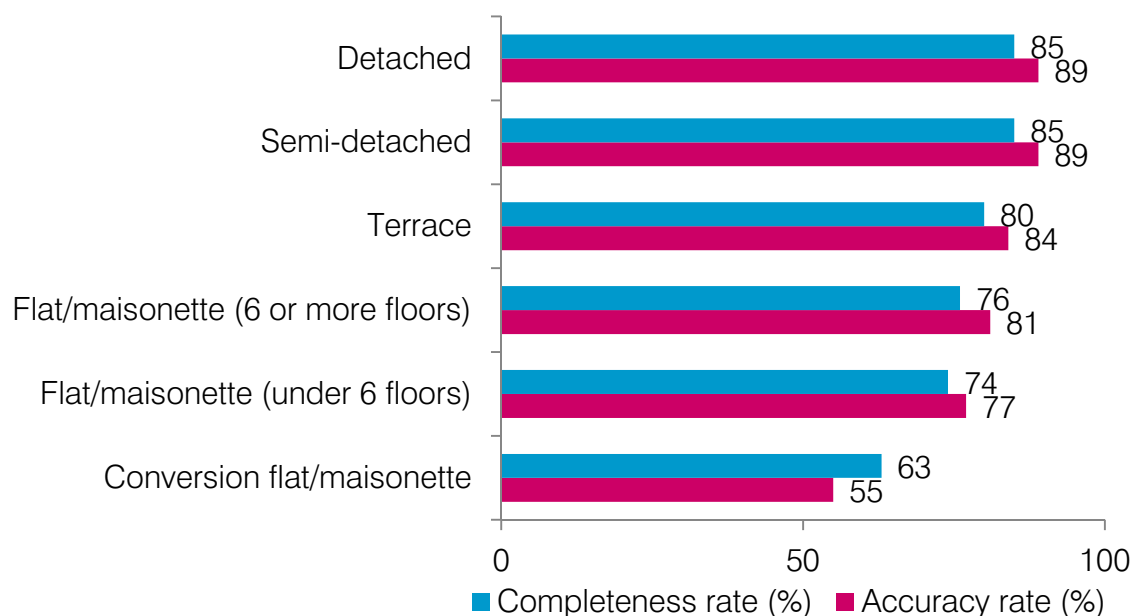


Base: unweighted (9,492).

Property type and condition

3.23 Both accuracy and completeness vary significantly by different property type, as the figure below demonstrates. At least part of this variation can probably be explained by the different types of tenure common to these property types. For example, detached and semi-detached houses are more likely to be owner occupied than rented⁵² and it is not therefore surprising that they record the highest levels of both accuracy and completeness (both 89% and 85% respectively).

Figure 9: Accuracy and completeness – property type



Base: unweighted (9,944 for completeness; 9,492 for accuracy).

⁵² Department for Communities and Local Government, *English Housing Survey: Housing Stock Report 2009* (July 2011)

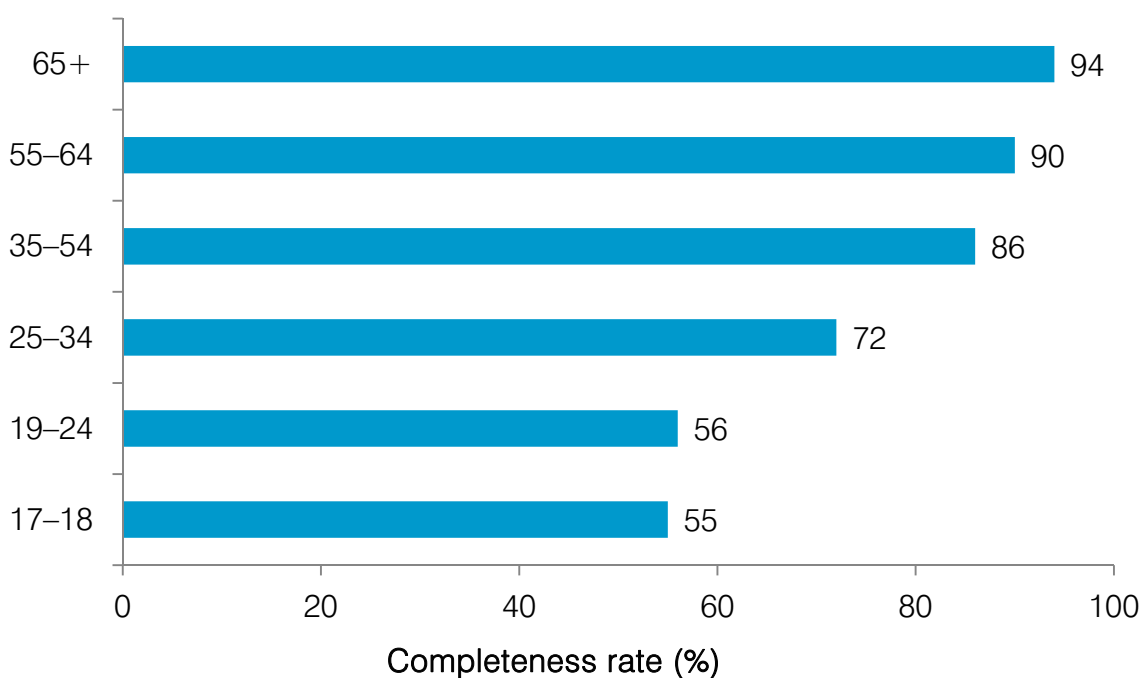
3.24 The physical condition of a property is also relevant to the likelihood of registration. Fieldworkers were asked to record whether a sampled address was in a better, worse or the same condition as others in the same area. Nearly three-quarters (74%) of those whose property was in a worse state than others in the area were found to be accurately registered, compared with nearly nine in 10 (87%) of those where the property was in a better condition. A similar pattern is seen for completeness – 85% were registered in properties in a better condition compared with 75% in a worse condition.

3.25 These differences are likely to be directly related to tenure, as privately rented dwellings are more likely to have faults on the exterior of the property than other dwelling types.⁵³

Age

3.26 Completeness levels differ by age group, with those aged 35 or over being more likely than other ages to be on the electoral registers. Those aged 65+ are the most likely to be registered, with completeness levels as high as 94%. The figure below shows the percentage of respondents included on the registers by age band.

Figure 10: Completeness – age



Base: unweighted (5,122).

3.27 The lowest percentage of completeness is recorded by the 17–18 and 19–24 age groups (55% and 56% complete respectively). Young people are more likely to be private renters and to move house frequently. Given the findings above, it is therefore unsurprising that they are the least likely to be registered to vote. However, even when

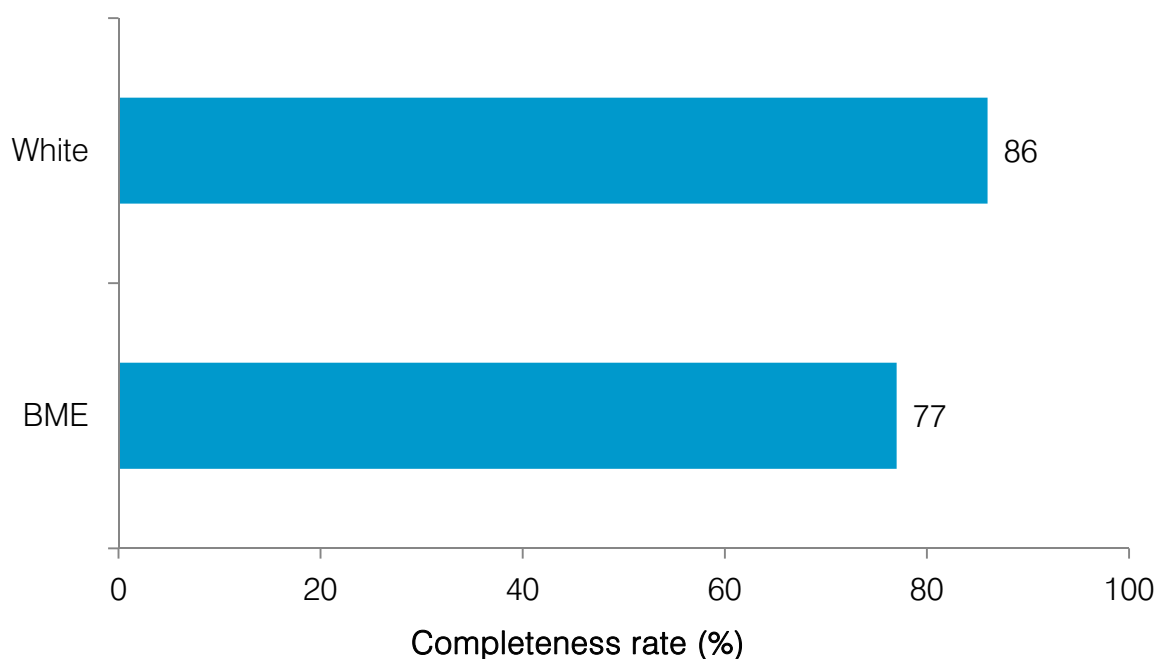
⁵³ *ibid.*

home movement and other factors were controlled for, there was still a correlation between age and likelihood of being on the registers.

Ethnicity

3.28 Findings from a range of previous research projects have indicated a difference in registration rates between the White and the Black and Minority Ethnic (BME) communities. As the figure below shows, this is also the case in the current study.

Figure 11: Completeness – ethnicity



Base: unweighted (5,122).

3.29 It is important to note that this is a single figure for all BME groups. This data only allows for a breakdown into Asian and Black communities⁵⁴ and the levels of completeness are very similar for both groups. However, previous research has suggested some variation in registration rates between different BME groups.

3.30 The Ethnic Minority British Election Study⁵⁵ found that 28% of Black African respondents were not registered compared with 17% of Black Caribbean and Indian respondents. However, the real difference in non-registration between these groups will be smaller as these estimates do not take account of eligibility and the research found that the Black African community included a greater proportion of ineligible people than other communities.

⁵⁴ This is due to the small base sizes involved in a more detailed breakdown of ethnic groups.

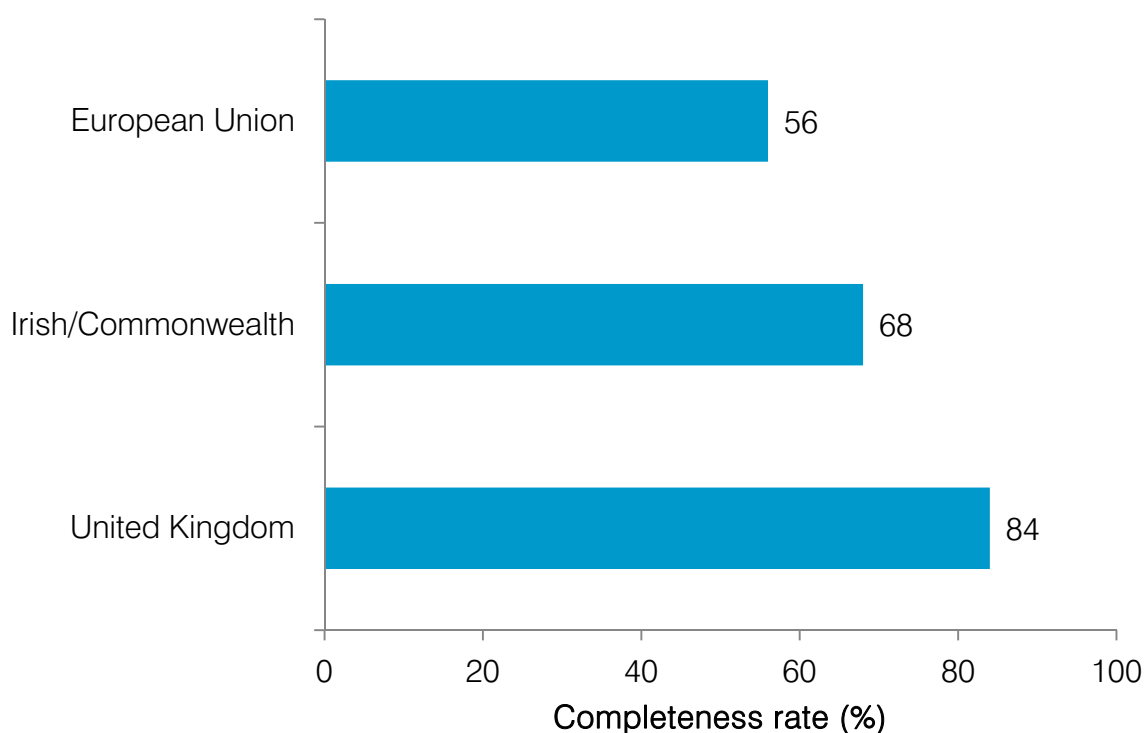
⁵⁵ The Ethnic Minority British Election Study (EMBES) was funded by the Economic and Social Research Council. The Electoral Commission is project partner for the EMBES survey.
www.humanities.manchester.ac.uk/socialchange/research/projects/BritishElectionStudyEthnicMinoritySurvey.html

3.31 The Ethnic Minority British Election Study also found that nearly three in 10 BME respondents (28%) reported that they were not registered because they did not believe they were entitled to vote. While it is likely to have been true that certain respondents were not entitled to vote, others may have been unaware of eligibility for Commonwealth nationals.

Nationality

3.32 Previous research has suggested that registration rates are lower among eligible non-UK nationals. The findings from this study support that view. The figure below shows that 68% of Irish/Commonwealth citizens and 56% of EU citizens were found to be registered, compared with 84% of UK nationals.

Figure 12: Completeness – nationality⁵⁶



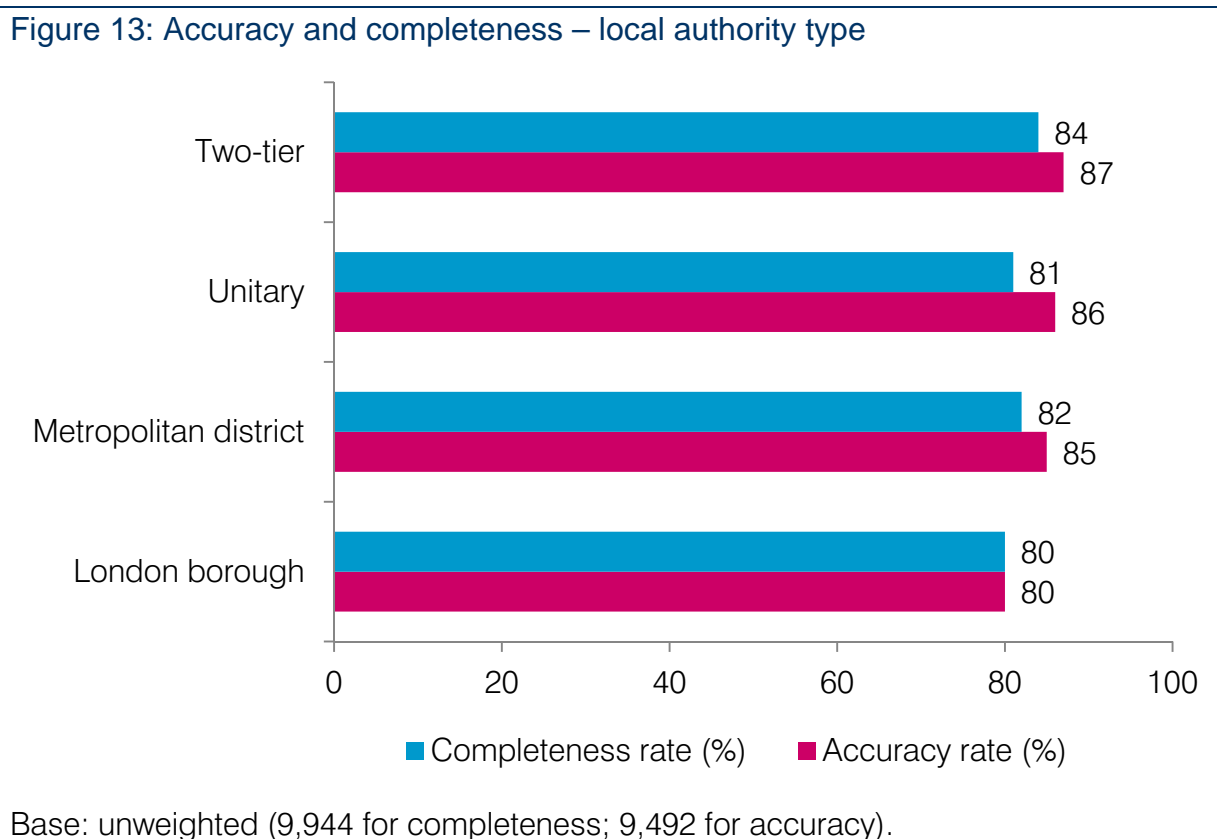
Base: unweighted (10,150).

Type of local authority and area

3.33 The study shows very little difference in levels of completeness between the different types of local authority, although some variation in levels of accuracy. However, this is likely to be a result of the categorisation of authorities, which masks significant differences between authorities of the same type. So unitary authorities in this case include all unitaries in England, Scotland and Wales – some of which are large, predominantly rural unitary counties (Wiltshire, Shropshire, Herefordshire), while others are urban areas (Bristol, Luton).

⁵⁶ Note: unlike the rest of the data presented in this chapter, this figure uses survey data related to the local government registers – the only registers EU citizens are eligible to be included on.

3.34 These findings do not therefore contradict previous findings which suggest that certain places, such as large urban areas, can have lower levels of registration.



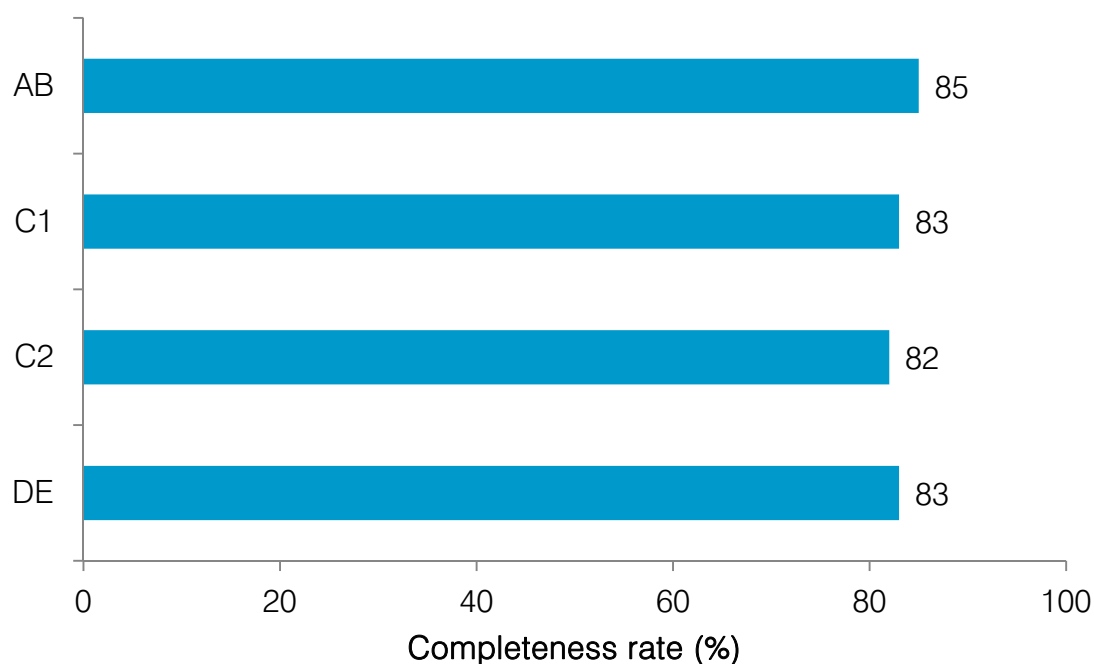
3.35 So, although the study found no difference in levels of accuracy or completeness between metropolitan and non-metropolitan areas in England, this is also likely to be because of significant variation within these two broad categories. As set out in our 2010 report, we would expect some non-metropolitan areas, such as coastal towns, to have lower levels of registration than other non-metropolitan areas with fewer second-home owners and less seasonal variation in population.

3.36 The data does indicate that two-tier authorities (all of which are in England) record the highest levels of both accuracy and completeness. This is perhaps unsurprising given the lower levels of population movement in most of these areas. Conversely, London records the lowest levels of both accuracy and completeness. This is also to be expected as it is likely that London (particularly Inner London) saw the highest levels of population movement between the time of the canvass and the research fieldwork.

Socio-economic group

3.37 The findings from this research suggest very little difference in completeness by the main socio-economic groups. These findings are similar to those we observed in our 2010 case study research, where social groups D and E recorded the lowest levels of registration but not by a large margin.

Figure 14: Completeness – socio-economic group



Base: unweighted (9,944).

Estimating completeness for December 2010

3.38 As set out above, the headline findings from this study are a snapshot of the registers in force on 1 April 2011 and therefore are not easily compared with previous December estimates. However, the data collected during the survey, alongside knowledge of how the population changes over time, allows us to make an estimate of how complete the registers are likely to have been on 1 December 2010.⁵⁷

3.39 This estimate takes into account two key variables – changes to the population and changes to the registers since the 15 October 2010 qualifying date to be on the December registers.⁵⁸ A full explanation of the calculations required and assumptions used to reach this estimate is available in Appendix A.

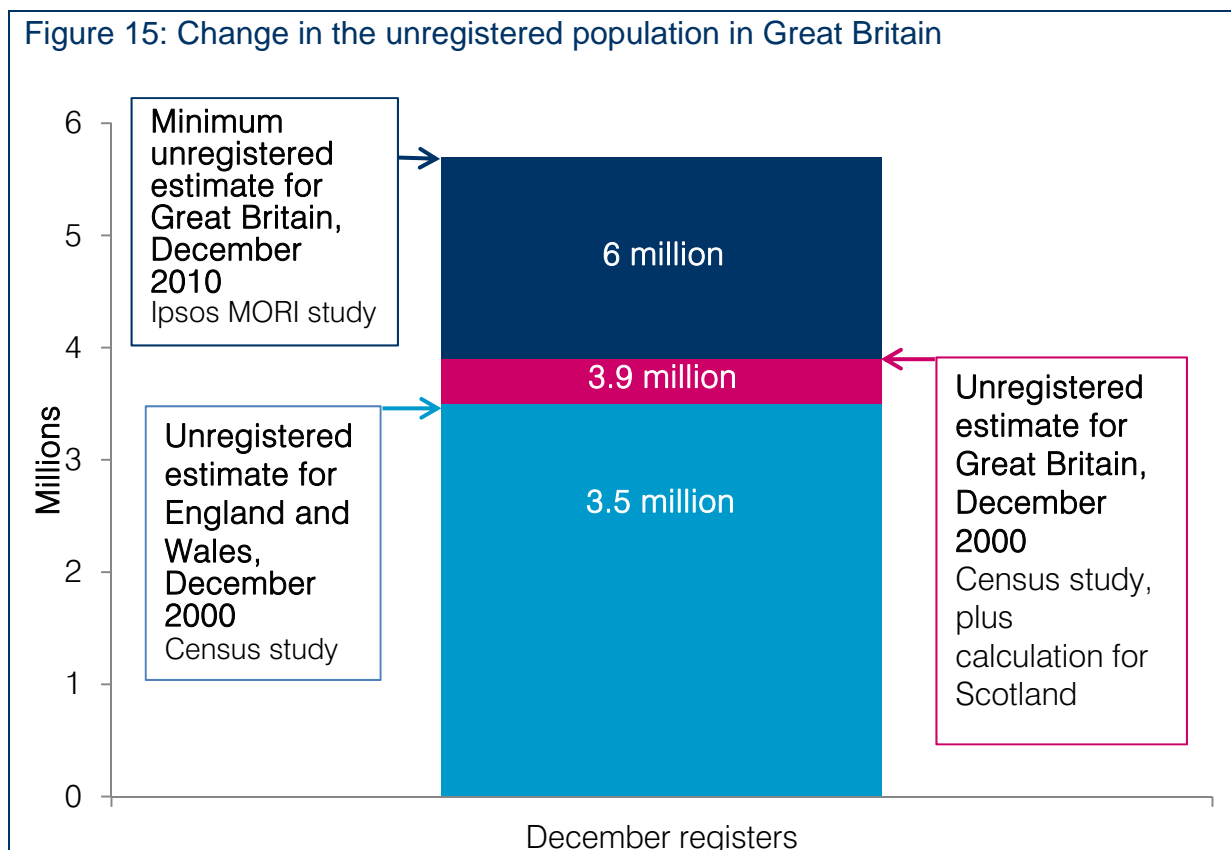
⁵⁷ It is not possible for equivalent estimates of the accuracy of the registers in December 2010 to be produced. This is because, while completeness is a measurement related to identifiable individuals, accuracy mostly relates to register entries where no characteristics of the individuals can be identified (because the person is no longer resident at the address in order to be interviewed).

⁵⁸ The estimate for the levels of completeness of the December 2010 registers is based on the qualifying date for those registers – 15 October 2010. For simplicity we will refer to this as an estimate for December and there is likely to be a negligible difference between the overall level of completeness on 15 October 2010 and on 1 December 2010.

3.40 Based on available evidence, we expect the completeness of the 1 December 2010 registers to have been between 85% and 87%. This equates to at least 6 million electors missing from the 1 December 2010 registers.⁵⁹

3.41 This is clearly lower than any previous estimate for the completeness of the registers at this time of the year. However, it is in line with the estimated decline in registration rates outlined in Chapter 2. Although we believe the registers have stabilised since 2006, there was still a fall during the early 2000s – shortly after the previous estimate of 91–92% completeness was made.

Figure 15: Change in the unregistered population in Great Britain



3.42 The figure above illustrates how the figure of a missing 6 million electors should be seen in the context of what previous estimates have told us. Although the estimate for 2000 is often quoted as showing 3.5 million missing from the registers, this was a figure for England and Wales. If the same rate of registration (91–92%) was applied to the estimated population of Scotland in 2000, the number unregistered in Great Britain would have been approximately 3.9 million.

3.43 The difference between the 85–87% range for December 2010 and the completeness estimate for April 2011 also highlights the degradation of the registers after the annual canvass. Completeness may have declined by up to 5% between the qualifying date for the December 2010 registers and April 2011. This reinforces the finding in previous Commission research that the completeness of the registers can be

⁵⁹ This figure is approximate because it uses the 2010 mid-year estimate for the 18+ population of Great Britain. These estimates do not take account of eligibility and we would therefore expect the eligible population to be smaller.

expected to decline, on average, by around one percentage point a month from the completion of the canvass.⁶⁰

Conclusion

3.44 This chapter has shown the quality of the registers in force on 1 April 2011; in so doing, it has provided national estimates of the accuracy and completeness of the registers around election time. The findings confirm that accuracy and completeness levels are at their highest immediately following an annual canvass, and decline month by month until the next annual canvass, illustrating the clear relationship between the quality of the registers and home movement. The chapter has also shown that registration trends identified in earlier studies continue to apply to current registers. For example, the relationship between age and ethnicity and the likelihood of being on the register.

3.45 An estimate for the completeness of the 1 December 2010 registers has also been made, which shows a decline in completeness from the previous estimate, which related to 1 December 2000. It indicates that at least 6 million people were not registered to vote in December 2010.

3.46 The next chapter considers the reasons behind the change in the registration rate identified here, examining public engagement, population changes and registration practices used to compile the registers.

⁶⁰ The Electoral Commission, *The completeness and accuracy of electoral registers in Great Britain* (March 2010)

4 Explaining trends in electoral registration

Introduction

4.1 The comparison between the new estimates for accuracy and completeness, presented above, and the previous national estimates supports the evidence that suggests registration rates fell during the early 2000s and then stabilised. This chapter looks at the possible reasons for this change in registration levels. There are three broad areas considered: public engagement; population changes; and the registration practices used to compile the registers.

Key points

- The reasons behind the declining estimates for completeness are likely to be numerous and varied.
- Interest in politics is an important driver of registration, yet participation in traditional politics has been in decline: all types of UK election have recorded record low turnouts between 1998 and the present day.
- There have also been relevant population changes, including a modest, but steady, increase in population mobility between the 1981 and 2001 censuses, and there is no sign that this trend has changed since then. The more mobile the population, the greater the challenge of maintaining the accuracy and completeness of the registers.
- Certain eligible but traditionally under-registered groups, specifically Commonwealth and EU citizens, have grown because of increased immigration during the last decade. This may have negatively affected completeness levels.
- Reduced canvass response rates may also contribute to the modest decline in the quality of the registers. For example, response to the annual canvass decreased from an average of 97% in 1994–96 to 93% in 2007–10.
- One consequence of the reduced canvass response rate is an increase in the use of the carry forward facility.⁶¹ This change since the 1990s is likely to have had an impact on the accuracy of the registers.
- Data suggests some decrease since the 1980s and 1990s in two practices previously believed to increase response rates: door knocking at the annual canvass and issuing a third reminder to non-responding households.
- However, the overall response rate for the canvass continues to be high. This research highlights the importance of the annual canvass and shows the relationship between the accuracy and completeness of the registers and population movement between annual canvasses. The canvass remains the main mechanism for maintaining the registers – the take-up of rolling registration is limited.

⁶¹ For an explanation of the carry forward facility see paragraphs 4.36–4.38.

4.2 Our 2010 report set out possible reasons for the fall in registration levels it described. As noted in that report, the explanation for declining levels of registration is complex and there is no single and convincing reason. However, a range of contributory factors are explored in further detail below. Taken together, they highlight the difficulties faced in trying to produce levels of completeness as high as those reported in the 1950s and 1960s, when the registers were 96% complete.

Public engagement

4.3 The Commission's public opinion surveys find that people most commonly register to vote for reasons associated with a desire, right or civic duty to vote. In our 2010 survey, around four in 10 people said they registered because they wanted to have a say or felt it was important or simply wanted to vote, while one in five registered because they felt it was their right or 'civic duty' to vote.⁶²

4.4 However, 'civic duty' as a reason for voting is in decline. The 2010 British Social Attitudes survey found that fewer people now think it is everyone's duty to vote: 58% in 2009 against 68% in 1991. This decline was particularly marked amongst both young people and those who say they have little or no interest in politics.⁶³

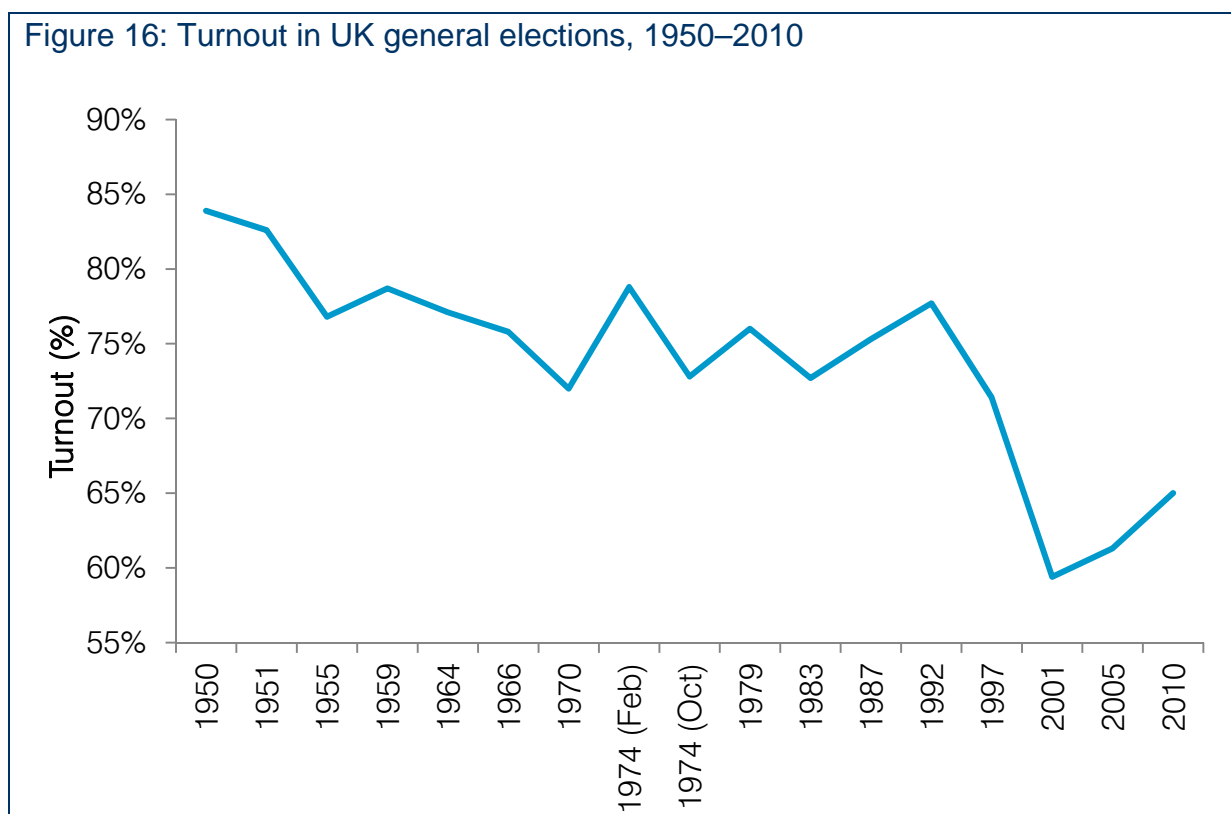
4.5 The 2010 British Election Study found that the proportion of the population expressing very strong identification with one of the political parties was just 9%, having fallen steadily from 45% in 1964.⁶⁴ The apparent decrease in both civic duty to vote and interest in traditional party politics is reflected in the declining turnout at all elections since the late 1990s. All types of UK election have recorded record low turnouts during the period 1998–2011. The figure below shows the clear decline in the turnout for general elections over the last 60 years and the sharp fall since 1992.

⁶² Ipsos MORI/The Electoral Commission, *Post-election survey* (May 2010)

⁶³ National Centre for Social Research, *British Social Attitudes: The 26th Report* (Sage: London, 2009)

⁶⁴ D. Sanders, H. Clarke, M. Stewart and P. Whiteley, *The British Election Study*, <http://bes2009-10.org/>

Figure 16: Turnout in UK general elections, 1950–2010



4.6 Although it is not possible to quantify its impact, decreasing electoral participation is likely to be one of the key factors affecting electoral registration.

4.7 However, it is likely that other non-political motivations are also involved. In our 2010 report we suggested that electoral registration levels could be influenced by patterns of credit and debt, given the use of the registers by credit reference agencies. This reasoning might seem to indicate that increasing levels of personal debt would suggest a corresponding increase in levels of registration, but it is also possible that an increase in the number of people defaulting on their debt payments would prompt a fall in registration levels, particularly where individuals seek to evade detection by debt collection agencies.

4.8 Another financial reason for non-registration is likely to be the receipt of council tax discounts. A reduced council tax rate is offered to people living alone but there is anecdotal evidence from some local authorities to suggest that people claim this discount at an address where several people are resident and so residents may remain off the registers in order to avoid the possibility of invalidating this discount.⁶⁵

⁶⁵ In addition to anecdotal evidence from local authorities, the link between the single person council tax discount and the electoral register is also the subject of the Audit Commission's National Fraud Initiative (NFI). The NFI analyses council tax and electoral register data to assess fraudulent claims for the single person discount. They have been able to demonstrate that many people falsely claim the discount by finding more than one person at a given address on the electoral register. Although the NFI is only able to find those who both falsely claim the discount and register more than one person at an address, the scale of the problem suggests that there will be many others who are also fraudulently claiming but have not registered all the residents in the household as they are aware that checks between the register and council tax records take place.

www.audit-commission.gov.uk/fraud/nfi/public-sector/case-studies/Pages/counciltaxcasestudies.aspx

A changing population

Mobility

4.9 Previous research by the Commission has suggested that many of those missing from the registers are home movers who have not updated their registration details through rolling registration. A decline in headline levels of registration since the 1950s and 1960s is likely to be linked to a corresponding rise in population movement.

4.10 Measuring internal migration is difficult as there is no compulsory system within the UK to record movements of population. The annual mid-year estimates produced by the Office for National Statistics (ONS) are based on a combination of data from the National Health Service Central Register (NHSCR), the Patient Register Data Service (PRDS) and the Higher Education Statistics Agency (HESA). However, calculated in this form, the dataset goes back only to 1999, not far enough to see long-term trends in population mobility.

4.11 However, each census provides a snapshot of population mobility in the year preceding it by asking respondents if they lived at the same address 12 months previously. The data from this shows that there has been a modest, but steady, increase in the proportion of the population who moved during the previous year (9.6% in 1981; 10.2% in 1991; 12.1% in 2001). Comparable data from the 2011 census is not yet available.

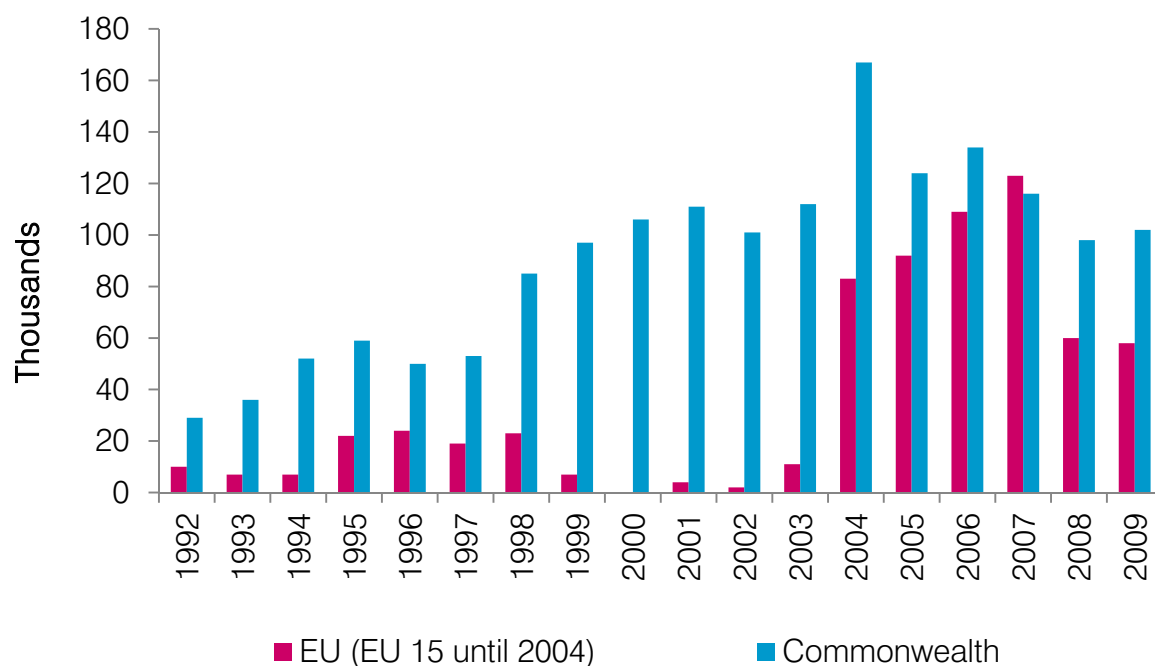
4.12 Mobility levels are higher among certain parts of the population – such as students (who have high levels of mobility and the right to register at two addresses (term and home)). The number of students in the UK has increased significantly in recent years; from just over 600,000 in the early 1970s to over 1.5 million in the mid-1990s and 2.5 million by 2010. While the student population is too small to account for all the changes to the registration rate, it is likely to be a contributory factor.

Immigration

4.13 Migration into Great Britain is an important element of population movement and immigration from both the EU and the Commonwealth has shown a noticeable increase in the last 10–15 years. As the figure below indicates, the most significant increases occurred from the late 1990s in the case of the Commonwealth and from 2004 in the case of the EU.

4.14 Commonwealth citizens are eligible to be on both the parliamentary and the local government registers, whilst those from the EU are eligible to be on the local government registers (see Table 1 in Chapter 1). The increasing difference in the size of the parliamentary and local government registers (see paragraph 2.7) highlights the role that immigration can play in the number of registered electors – in that case the increased immigration from EU member states.

Figure 17: EU and Commonwealth immigration, Great Britain, 1992–2009



Source: ONS immigration figures.⁶⁶

4.15 The implications for overall levels of registration are not clear-cut but Chapter 3 shows that Commonwealth and EU citizens are less likely to be registered than UK nationals. Additional research suggests this may be partly due to many eligible citizens not realising they can register to vote in the UK (see paragraph 3.32 for more details).

4.16 However, despite recent increases, the number of Commonwealth and EU migrants is too small, in relation to the population as a whole, to offer a single explanation for any drop in registration levels. Yet, as with mobility and a growing student population, it is likely to be one element among several.

Registration practices

4.17 The Commission has gathered detailed registration data from Electoral Registration Officers (EROs) across Great Britain since 2007. Until 1996, similar information was collected annually by the forerunner of the ONS, the Office for Population Censuses and Surveys (OPCS). In the period between 1996 and 2007, data was collected only sporadically. There is not, therefore, an unbroken dataset available for research into the practices used to compile the registers. However, there is sufficient data to provide an indication of how the system has changed over time and to consider what impact this may have had on levels of accuracy and completeness.

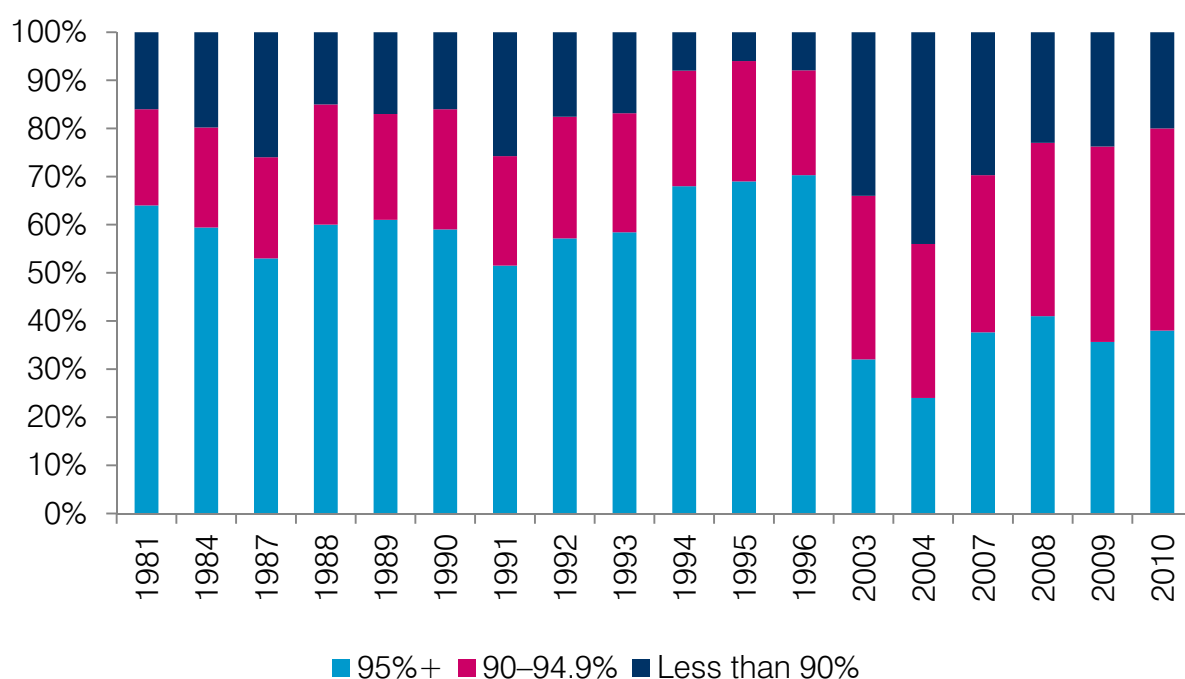
⁶⁶ ONS immigration figures include people aged 15 and below and are for the whole UK rather than Great Britain only.

Response to the canvass

4.18 Comparing data held by the Commission for the period 2007–10 with historic data gathered by the OPCS and others shows a clear picture of declining levels of response to the canvass.⁶⁷ The level of response to the canvass does not equate to a registration rate for an area but it is a useful proxy measure.⁶⁸ The average canvass response rate for 1994–96 (the most recent previous period for which a national average is available) was 97%. For the period 2007–10, the national average was 93%.

4.19 The figure below shows the percentage of EROs recording final canvass response rates in three bands. The figures suggest that the effectiveness of the canvass has decreased over time. In 1996, 71% of EROs responding to the OPCS survey indicated that they had achieved a canvass response rate of 95% or more. In 2010, only 38% of respondents could do the same.

Figure 18: Canvass response rates, 1981–2010



Source: D. Devore, *Compiling the Electoral Register 1996* (HMSO: London, 1997), LGC Local Elections Centre, University of Plymouth, The Electoral Commission electoral registration data.

⁶⁷ An unbroken dataset does not exist from the 1980s to the present. The final OPCS study was carried out in 1996. Equivalent data was not gathered again until 2003 and 2004 when Professors Rallings and Thrasher carried out a survey. The next set of comparable data was gathered by the Commission, beginning in 2007. The most recent available data is for 2010. (See Figure 18 sources for references.)

⁶⁸ Canvass response equates to the percentage of households about which EROs have obtained information through the canvass. This can be as a result of a new registration via a completed canvass form or a confirmation of existing registration(s) or from other local data (e.g. council tax) consulted during the canvass.

4.20 These figures show that, within the period for which we have data, the canvass was particularly effective in the mid-1990s. For example, in 1994–96 only 6–8% of authorities recorded canvass response rates below 90%. In 2003–04 and in 2007–10 that figure was 20% or higher. The data further supports the view set out in the preceding chapters that there was a decline in registration in the early 2000s.

4.21 As well as falls in final response rates, there is a clear decline in the response achieved at the first stage of the canvass. For example, in 2010, the average response across all authorities at the first stage of the canvass (after the initial delivery of forms) was 58%. This is a fall of 10 percentage points from the 1995 and 1996 canvasses, when the average response was 68%. There has been a 12 percentage point fall in English metropolitan districts (65% to 53%) and in London (from 58% in 1996 to 46% in 2010).⁶⁹

Explaining response rates

4.22 The past research carried out by the OPCS and the Commission's 2010 report concluded that a wide range of demographic factors could influence the response to the canvass. These factors included larger proportions of traditionally under-registered groups in an area, including Black and Minority Ethnic (BME) communities, students and the unemployed. In addition, various other aspects of the area are related to response rates, including the population density and the proportion of households in rented accommodation.

4.23 In addition, the OPCS reports concluded that various canvass processes that EROs did or did not follow could affect the response. These included:

- the number of reminder stages
- using personal canvassers (and paying them by result)
- warning of fine or prosecution

4.24 **The conclusions of these previous reports remain accurate, although there is no simple correlation between a single influencing factor and the level of response to the canvass in a particular area.** For example, areas with a similar estimated population density can have significantly different canvass response rates.

4.25 For some practices, such a high proportion of authorities now take so many of the steps identified by the OPCS that it is difficult to assess how response rates differ between them and the small number who do not. For example, our 2010 survey indicated that 91% of EROs warn households of potential prosecution or fine for not responding to the canvass and 100% provide either a verbal or written briefing to canvassers. However, the available data still supports the connection between some of the good practices identified by the OPCS and canvass response.

Reduced personal canvassing

4.26 A key finding from analysis of this data is the change in practices from the 1987–96 period and the importance of different contact methods in different areas.

⁶⁹ Within London there was a clear split in 2010 between the inner boroughs, which recorded an average 41% response at this stage, and the outer boroughs which achieved 50%.

The main change is an increased use of postal reminders overall and a corresponding decrease in hand delivery and door knocking.

4.27 In 2010, approximately 23% of EROs used door knocking at the first reminder stage compared with 26% in 1996 (it was as high as 48% in 1987). The percentage using entirely personal canvassers at the second reminder stage was also lower than in previous years (52% compared with 70% in 1996).

4.28 The data, from both 2010 and previously, also illustrates an increasingly clear variation in practice depending on the type of area, with London boroughs and English unitary authorities the most likely to solely use door knocking to reach residents at this first and second reminder stage.

4.29 Our 2010 report also commented on the likely impact of the temporary move to all-postal canvasses in the early 2000s. This saw many local authorities rely solely on posting forms to residents and not employing personal canvassers to door knock at non-responding properties. Unfortunately this occurred during the period for which there is no significant dataset on canvass response rates, but anecdotal information indicates that these changes led to a fall in response rates and may have been directly linked to the drop in registration levels in this period.

4.30 Subsequently, the Electoral Administration Act 2006 introduced specific actions that EROs are required to take in order to maintain the registers, including door knocking and multiple reminders for non-responding properties. It is likely that these measures contributed to the stabilisation in the relationship between the registers and population growth from 2006.

Fewer third reminders

4.31 The OPCS analysis of the 1995 and 1996 canvasses highlighted the positive impact on response rates of having at least three reminder stages. However, the prevalence of the third reminder stage has declined significantly between the last OPCS study in 1996 and the Commission's survey in 2010. **In 1996, 92% of EROs had a third reminder stage. In 2010, only 48% used a third reminder.** In the 1987–96 period, the percentage with a third reminder stage never fell below 75%.⁷⁰

4.32 In 2010, the average final response rate for those authorities without a third reminder stage was 91%. For those with a third reminder this rose to 94%.

Secondary checks

4.33 EROs are able to access other locally held information, such as council tax records, in order to assist in compiling the registers. This process, known as secondary checking, is used to determine whether a resident is still living at an address in order to keep them on the register.⁷¹ Often this is done in the event of the ERO not receiving a

⁷⁰ The Commission's 2010 survey used the same structure as the previous OPCS surveys in order to ensure consistency. However, it is possible that different EROs would interpret the stages of their canvass in different ways. Some may therefore consider a particular activity to represent a third reminder stage while others would see it as an element of a previous stage. The difference between 1996 and 2010 reported above should therefore be seen as indicative.

⁷¹ The Commission has collected data on the use of these checks from 2008.

direct response to the canvass, although an ERO does not need to wait for a response in order to use the data. The recent figures on canvass response (2007–10) include responses via secondary checking but response rates from previous years do not.⁷²

4.34 The use of secondary checking therefore points to some EROs making substantially less direct contact with residents than in previous years. The extent to which this impacts on the accuracy and completeness of the registers is unknown but will depend largely on the quality of the local information used in the checking, the level of mobility in the area and whether the local authority chooses to retain all register entries for a property if one member of the household could be found on other records consulted or whether it retains only the name of the actual person found on other records.⁷³

4.35 Eighty-nine per cent of EROs indicated that they made some use of secondary checking in 2010.⁷⁴ The volume of electors dealt with in this fashion is significant in relation to our earlier analysis of response to the canvass. This is most striking in Scotland; the average percentage of households dealt with in this way is 10% (it can be as high as 17% in individual Scottish authorities) whereas the average in Great Britain is 4% (2% in London boroughs). There may also be other implications, during the transition to individual electoral registration (IER), for those authorities that make greater use of secondary checking.

Non-response: the carry forward

4.36 Where an ERO receives no response to the canvass from a household, and has not been able to confirm their details using other data, they may retain the electors' details on the new register through the process of carry forward for one year. The carry forward was designed to give EROs the option of avoiding disenfranchising some residents as a result of their non-response to the canvass.

4.37 On average across Great Britain, between 3% and 4% of the electors on the 1 December registers have been carried forward. However, this varies significantly from area to area. In 2010, for example, it ranged from 0% to 17%. It also varies by authority type, with the median figures for 2007–10 ranging from 2.6% in English two-tier districts to 6.1% in Scotland. There has been an increase in the use of carry forward everywhere except London, which already had a higher than average rate. In 1995 and 1996, 1% of the registers had been carried forward compared with 3% in 2010.

4.38 The impact of the carry forward on the accuracy and completeness of the registers will vary depending on the level of home movement. In settled areas it may be

⁷² However, it is likely that this practice was limited during the period of the OPCS studies and has increased steadily as technology has made the process more straightforward.

⁷³ The Commission's 2010 survey of EROs asked about secondary checking practices. Forty-eight per cent of EROs indicated that they retained only the names they could find on another data source, while 43% of EROs said they would retain all register entries for a property if one of them could be found on the other records consulted (and of these EROs, 57% imposed no limit on the number of years for which a record could be maintained on the register by secondary checking).

⁷⁴ The Electoral Commission's survey of ERO practices.

www.electoralcommission.org.uk/_data/assets/excel_doc/0015/102255/Survey-of-ERO-practice-2010-FINAL.xls

sensible, in the event of non-response, to assume that most registered electors are still resident. However, in large urban areas this is less likely to be the case and average levels⁷⁵ of carry forward in excess of 10% in areas such as Bolton, Glasgow, Luton, Redbridge, Rhondda Cynon Taf, Slough, Sunderland and Tower Hamlets is likely to lead to some inaccuracies on the registers. The scale of such inaccuracies will also depend on whether carry forward is being applied for one year only or if it is extended beyond one year.

Conclusions

4.39 There is no single, simple and convincing reason for the difference in the levels of electoral registration observed between the last national estimate of completeness for 2001 and our new research in 2011. However, there are a range of likely contributing factors that, together, offer a plausible explanation for the gradual decline shown.

4.40 The public's attitude to traditional party politics and civic engagement is an important driver of registration, as evidenced by our own survey findings. Although the registers have other uses, the desire to vote is crucial to the desire to register. But there has been a clear decline in interest and engagement with traditional politics, particularly over the last 15 years or so. Financial motivations are also relevant and the link between the number of residents at a property and council tax discounts is likely to negatively affect registration levels.

4.41 Demographic reasons such as increased population mobility and greater numbers of traditionally under-registered groups are also likely to decrease levels of completeness, although the numbers involved are too small, on their own, to account for shifts at the national level.

4.42 Finally, in line with the decline in headline rates of completeness, there has been a drop in the response to the annual canvass. And there is evidence that changes in registration practices can contribute to changes in levels of registration. Data suggests that there has been some decrease since the 1980s and 1990s in two practices previously believed to increase response rates: door knocking at the annual canvass and issuing a third reminder to non-responding households. In addition, there has been an increase in the use of the carry forward to retain non-responding households on the registers.

4.43 It is not possible to say with any certainty what the balance is between these various factors in terms of impact. Therefore it is also not possible to reliably quantify to what extent a decline or an increase in a particular factor will lead to an increase or decrease in national levels of completeness. Further research is needed in this area. However, from the research findings presented in this report it is possible to identify a range of implications for the electoral registration system in Great Britain and for how the transition to IER should be managed. These are considered in the next chapter.

⁷⁵ The median canvass response rate for the period 2007–10.

5 Changing the electoral registration system

Introduction

5.1 The findings outlined in this report have implications for the electoral registration system in Great Britain and how the transition from household to individual electoral registration (IER) should be managed. The research sets out the challenges facing our registration system, so it is vital that any changes are implemented carefully. This section considers the key implications for the current system and issues to be considered for the implementation of IER.

Key points

- The accuracy and completeness of the registers are at their highest immediately following the annual canvass. The greater the amount of time that elapses between the canvass and an election, the worse the quality of the registers is likely to be by polling day.
- However, the ability to register to vote up to 11 working days before polling day means that many of those intending to vote at a given election who are not registered have the chance to put themselves on the register.
- Those eligible to register need to be aware that the provision for late registration exists. Registration campaigns in the run-up to recent elections have helped to address low public awareness and ensure a significant proportion of those who want to vote are registered.
- Increasing the levels of public awareness about the registration process and the requirements when registering to vote will become critical during the implementation of IER.
- To reach as many of the public as possible during the transition to IER, the request for identifiers should use the most up-to-date registers possible as the basis for sending out the IER request forms.
- In order to achieve this there needs to be effective targeting of home movers, as well as of the other groups identified by the research as less likely to register.
- Research has found that many of the public would not object to providing identifiers when registering to vote – but consideration also needs to be given to those who would have concerns. It will be important to carefully communicate the reasons for the change and to provide reassurance as to how the data will be used and stored.

The current system

The annual canvass and rolling registration

5.2 As the research findings have shown, at present most of the changes to the electoral registers occur during the canvass, with the registers being updated substantially each autumn (the number of changes tends to vary depending on population movement in a given area, for example). Far fewer updates occur during the remainder of the year.⁷⁶ Rolling registration is therefore not maintaining the quality of the registers to the same extent throughout the year.

5.3 Nonetheless, rolling registration does play an important role in allowing those who may not be registered to get on the register in the run-up to an election and so helps to ensure that those who wish to vote are not disenfranchised. For example, just over half a million people registered to vote in the run-up to the 2010 general election. Data on the number of people who tried to register after the deadline – those who wanted to cast a vote but were unable to do so – has also been collected. Although the figures are only indicative due to the process involved in collecting this type of information,⁷⁷ they appear to show that the majority of those who tried to register in the run-up to the 2010 general election managed to do so in time to vote (half a million compared with at least 75,000 who contacted their Electoral Registration Officer (ERO) after the deadline for registering).

5.4 Publicity around late registration provisions has influenced the take-up of late registration in the run-up to elections. It is worth noting that while a majority of people were found in a public opinion survey undertaken by the Commission outside election time to be aware that they are able to register or change their registration details at most points during the year (58%), a substantial minority did not believe this was the case (13%) or reported that they did not know (29%).⁷⁸

5.5 Low awareness of the registration system and the ability to register throughout the year is likely to be an important factor in explaining the low take-up of rolling registration (when the impetus is often on the elector to contact the registration office rather than the ERO contacting the elector). However, many local authorities attempt to mitigate this in the run-up to certain elections by directly contacting those who they believe to be home movers (a 'mini-canvass'). Another alternative to holding a mini-canvass may be to minimise the time between the canvass and an election, by holding the canvass later than in the autumn.

⁷⁶ Data collected by the Electoral Commission indicates that in 387 local authorities, at least 70% of all additions to the registers within a 12-month period were as a result of the canvass. The Britain-wide average is 82%.

⁷⁷ It can be difficult for EROs to maintain accurate records of those who contact them to register after the deadline. Additionally, data on those who tried to register after the deadline was not provided by approximately one-fifth of EROs in 2010.

⁷⁸ Ipsos MORI/The Electoral Commission, *Winter tracker* (December 2009)

Public awareness and concerns

5.6 In addition to a proportion of the public being unaware that they can update their registration details at any time, public opinion research has also found low levels of awareness of the system in general. These findings are important in understanding how the public currently interact with the registration process and what issues may need to be considered in advance of any change to the registration process.

5.7 For example, 43% of the public believe that you are automatically registered to vote if you are 18 or over.⁷⁹ This may be a consequence of many of the electorate not directly engaging in the registration system, as their details are updated by another member of their household. Similarly, over three in 10 (31%) think that you are automatically registered to vote if you pay council tax.⁸⁰ Communication will therefore be an essential element of ensuring that people are aware that they are actively required to register.

Lessons for the transition to IER

Provision of personal identifiers

Confusion about current requirements

5.8 The low public awareness set out above also relates to the public's awareness of what information is currently required when registering to vote. Public opinion research has found that 77% of the public currently believe that in order to register to vote at the moment, everyone must provide their date of birth.⁸¹ There were similar levels of misunderstanding (although not quite as high) about the requirement to provide their signature (46% believed this was the case) and their national insurance number (35% believed this was the case). Only 11% of the public correctly answered that a date of birth is not required when registering, 40% for their signature and 41% for their national insurance number.⁸²

Impact on likelihood of registering

5.9 This indicates that the move to collecting identifiers may not be outside the expectations of a significant proportion of the public. Moreover, when asked whether they would be able to provide their national insurance number for official purposes, 95% reported that they know it from memory or could easily find it.⁸³

5.10 Respondents were also asked whether a requirement to supply personal information would make them more likely to register, less likely, or if it would make no difference. There are obviously a range of factors that may affect how people respond in a real-life setting, rather than when responding to a question of this kind in a survey. Nonetheless, the survey findings indicate the broad strength of feeling on the provision of identifiers. A vast majority of the public reported that a requirement to provide their

⁷⁹ Ipsos MORI/The Electoral Commission, *Post-election survey* (May 2010)

⁸⁰ *ibid.*

⁸¹ Ipsos MORI/The Electoral Commission, *Winter tracker* (December 2009)

⁸² *ibid.*

⁸³ *ibid.*

date of birth or signature would make no difference to their likelihood of registering (87% and 84% respectively). With regard to providing their national insurance number, 18% reported that it would make them less likely to register to vote, 74% said it would make no difference and 6% reported that it would make them more likely to register.⁸⁴

5.11 Qualitative research can help us to understand the concerns of some of those who indicated they may be reluctant to provide their national insurance number. Research carried out by Ipsos MORI for the Electoral Commission on the collection of personal identifiers found that most would be happy to submit additional personal information, including their national insurance number, when registering to vote. Crucially, however, they wanted to receive information on how their data would be stored, who would have access to this data and how, by linking them with their details, their vote would be made more secure.⁸⁵

Communicating the change

5.12 Consequently, it will be vital that the change to IER and the requirement to provide identifiers are carefully communicated to the public. The reasons for the change and guarantees as to how the data will be used and stored will be essential for reassuring those who have expressed concerns about the provision of additional personal information.

5.13 An essential element of such communication will be a nationwide public information campaign – which could make the most efficient use of resources. Previous research has shown the impact of such campaigns in raising awareness of electoral registration matters. However, for the campaign to have maximum impact, it is important that local authorities adopt similar timescales for the collection of identifiers during the transition to IER.

Canvassing during the transition period

Timing of the canvass

5.14 The current intention, as set out in the Government's White Paper,⁸⁶ is for the last household canvass to take place in autumn 2013. The collection of identifiers would then begin during 2014, with local authorities sending an IER form to those who are already on the electoral register. In addition to the individually addressed IER forms, household enquiry forms (HEFs) are due to be sent out in 2014 to all properties where no electors are registered.

5.15 Under these proposals, those who are already on the 2013 registers will not be required to supply their identifiers in order to stay on the register; those who are not on the register where they live (e.g. those who have moved home since the last canvass or those who qualify as attainders) will, however, be required to provide identifiers in order to get onto the register. As will anyone who wants a postal or proxy vote (regardless of whether they are currently registered for one).

⁸⁴ *ibid.*

⁸⁵ Ipsos MORI/Electoral Commission, *Research into the collection of Personal Identifiers* (2010) www.electoralcommission.org.uk/_data/assets/pdf_file/0004/99760/PI-collection-report.pdf

⁸⁶ HM Government, *Individual Electoral Registration* (Cm 8108) (June 2011) <https://update.cabinetoffice.gov.uk/sites/default/files/resources/individual-electoral-reform.pdf>

5.16 This report has set out the relationship between mobility and the quality of the registers. By July 2014 as many as 2–3 million people across Great Britain could be no longer resident at the address recorded on the December 2013 registers – and would therefore not receive an IER form in July 2014. It is therefore important that the request for identifiers uses the most up-to-date registers possible as the basis for sending out the IER request forms. If this is not the case, there is a risk of disenfranchising an important subsection of the population, as illustrated by the findings in Chapter 3. The Government’s own IER impact assessment suggests that as many as 20% of people eligible to register under IER may not receive an initial invitation to register in 2014.⁸⁷ A full household canvass in 2014, followed by an individual write-out to collect identifiers, would help to mitigate this risk. This two-stage approach would also allow for further opportunities through which to communicate the changes to the registration system and the new requirements for electors.

Use of canvassers and other data sources

5.17 This report has shown the importance of using canvassers and their role in driving up response rates for the annual canvass, particularly among those who are hard to reach or less likely to respond to postal forms. Canvassers should therefore be a key feature for the transitional phase and for the collection of personal identifiers during the 2015 canvass.

5.18 Similarly, as Chapter 4 has shown, some EROs are more reliant on secondary checking to drive up their response rates at the final stage of their canvass. Maintaining entries on the registers if they are found on other data sources will not, however, be possible during the move to IER, when each individual is required to provide their personal identifiers. This increases the scale of the challenge that authorities will face in achieving high response rates for the canvasses in 2014 and 2015 and further underlines the need for personal canvassers to be utilised and for a national public awareness campaign to support the transition to IER.

Beyond IER

Updating the registers

5.19 The canvass currently captures most of the changes to the registers. This explains why the registers are at their most accurate and complete immediately after the canvass and gradually decline month by month over the course of the year. The extent of the decline of any local register will, however, depend on factors that include the level of population movement in that area.

5.20 Draft legislation for the move to IER includes the provision to end the annual canvass in Great Britain, ‘replacing current arrangements with limited canvassing or alternative methods for obtaining information in order to update the electoral register’.⁸⁸

⁸⁷ HM Government, *Individual Electoral Registration: Impact Assessment* (Cm 8109) (June 2011) www.cabinetoffice.gov.uk/sites/default/files/resources/individual-electoral-reform-impact-assessment.pdf

⁸⁸ HM Government, *Individual Electoral Registration* (Cm 8108) (June 2011) <https://update.cabinetoffice.gov.uk/sites/default/files/resources/individual-electoral-reform.pdf>

The central role of the canvass at present underlines the importance of any move to end the canvass being fully consulted on and considered by the UK Parliament.

5.21 The decision to end the canvass will need to take into account the usefulness of other options available for updating the registers. Two main approaches to updating the registers are adopted in other countries. Some, including many European nations, have access to full population or civil registers from which to create their electoral registers. This resource is not available in Great Britain and is unlikely to be created in the near future.

5.22 The other main alternative makes use of data gathered by other government agencies in order to maintain the electoral registers. The value of this within Great Britain is currently being explored through data-matching pilots that have been set up by the Government and which the Electoral Commission is evaluating. The usefulness of national datasets and how they can be utilised by EROs at a local level will be a key element in any review of the future of the canvass and any other activities that may be required at a local or national level to ensure accurate and complete electoral registers across Great Britain.

Conclusion

5.23 This chapter has outlined the challenges facing Great Britain's electoral registration system and issues to be addressed in advance of, and during, the transition to IER. The evidence points to the importance of continuing to review the approaches used for compiling the registers once IER is firmly established. In advance of that, the timing of the household canvass, the role of canvassers, and the extent of public information provided about the registration system are all areas to be addressed.

5.24 The next chapter considers the key findings from the research set out in this report and what further monitoring will be undertaken in coming years.

6 Conclusions

Introduction

6.1 This report has reviewed what is known about the quality of Great Britain's electoral registers. The April 2011 study has allowed us to report on the accuracy and completeness of the registers at a national level. To achieve national estimates requires sampling from a broad and representative selection of local authorities; but the relatively small number of interviews in each area means that no estimates can be produced for the quality of the individual local registers.

6.2 This study is the first time that house-to-house interviewing has been adopted for producing national estimates of the completeness and accuracy of the registers, although the Commission's 2010 case study research also used a house-to-house approach to produce local estimates. The sections below summarise the key findings from the research and the implications for the registration system. The chapter then sets out the Commission's longer-term programme of research for monitoring the move to individual electoral registration (IER).

What the research has shown us

6.3 The study of the accuracy and completeness of Great Britain's April 2011 electoral registers confirms earlier findings that point to a dip in registration levels from the late 1990s with a subsequent stabilisation of the electoral registers from 2006. While the number of entries on the registers is now higher than ever, registration levels have not kept pace with a rising population.

6.4 Most previous national estimates of the quality of electoral registers have been based on the registers published immediately following the annual canvass (the December registers). In contrast, the estimates produced for this study relate to the registers in place in April. Comparisons with most previous national estimates must therefore be treated with caution as evidence consistently points to the month-by-month decline of the quality of the registers between annual canvass periods. This illustrates that inaccuracies and incompleteness on the registers are strongly associated with population movement.

6.5 Nonetheless, using the April registers allows an understanding of the accuracy and completeness of the registers used at election time; in this instance, for the May 2011 elections and the parliamentary voting system referendum. In so doing, it highlights the challenge of ensuring that the registers are fit for purpose for elections.

National study findings

6.6 The findings from the national study show that in April 2011 the parliamentary and local government registers were both approximately 82% complete. This equates to

approximately 8.5 million people missing from the registers.⁸⁹ However, while completeness levels were noticeably higher (89%) among those who were resident at their property at the time of the qualifying date for the canvass, estimates of what the overall completeness rate may have been at the time when the registers were published in December are slightly lower than this figure, falling into a range of 85–87%. This is somewhat lower than previous estimates produced for the completeness of the 1980, 1990 and 2000 registers. Based on the 85–87% range, it is likely that at least 6 million people were missing from the registers published in December 2010.

6.7 Unlike the completeness estimate, there is no recent comparable estimate for the accuracy of the registers at their time of publication. The national study found almost no difference in the accuracy of the parliamentary and local government registers (85.5% and 85.4% respectively). The impact of home movement is shown to be closely related to levels of accuracy, with only 27% of register entries accurate for those addresses where the current resident had moved in since the canvass qualifying date.

6.8 As the Commission's 2010 case study report⁹⁰ showed, the national estimates for accuracy and completeness mask a range of variation across local authority registers and socio-demographic make-up. Although the 2011 findings cannot be used to illustrate the extent of variation of local authority registers, they do set out how completeness levels differ by age, ethnicity and socio-economic group.

6.9 In particular, the research has shown a close relationship between age and likelihood of being on the register. The lowest levels of completeness can be found not just among attainers and those recently eligible to vote (the 17–18 age group) but also those aged 19–24 (55% and 56% respectively). Moreover, it is apparent that even the 25–34 age group is significantly less likely to be registered than older age groups. This report considers various explanations for this; and it is clear that lower registration rates among the younger age groups poses a specific and long-term challenge to the registration system.

Implications

6.10 The research indicates that a household approach to registration is becoming less effective in light of changing levels of public engagement and patterns of population mobility. It also points to the impact of registration practices on the accuracy and completeness of the registers. In so doing, the research identifies a range of issues to be addressed under the current registration system as well as setting out the various challenges that should inform the approach to moving from a household system to one of IER.

⁸⁹ This figure is approximate because it uses the 2010 mid-year estimate for the 18+ population of Great Britain. These estimates do not take account of eligibility and we would therefore expect the eligible population to be smaller.

⁹⁰ The Electoral Commission, *The completeness and accuracy of electoral registers in Great Britain* (March 2010)

6.11 One key challenge for the registration system is to ensure that electoral registers are as accurate and complete as possible at the time at which they are used at elections. As the research has shown, the amount of time that elapses between the canvass and elections has a noticeable impact on the quality of the registers in use. Rolling registration has not, to date, managed to maintain the accuracy and completeness of the registers on a year-round basis. Instead, the canvass continues to be essential to the provision of high-quality electoral registers.

6.12 Low public awareness of the registration system is likely to play a role in the low take-up of rolling registration. Increasing levels of public awareness about the registration process and the requirements when registering to vote will become critical during and after the implementation of IER. At present, a significant proportion of the electorate have no engagement with the registration system as they are reliant on others registering them on their behalf. This will no longer be permissible after 2015.

6.13 Moreover, each individual will need to provide personal identifiers under the new system – an additional requirement. While there are positive indications in relation to how the public may respond to this, there is nonetheless an additional challenge facing administrators, specifically to reach every individual in order to obtain registration details, not just one member of each household.

6.14 The findings from this study indicate the scale of the challenge this will present for administrators and therefore highlight the importance of beginning the transition to IER from as strong a base as possible. At present, the Government's proposal is for the last household canvass to take place in autumn 2013;⁹¹ this research points to the importance of a 2014 canvass to underpin the subsequent collection of personal identifiers.

6.15 However, in the longer term the role played by the annual canvass in updating the registers will need to be reviewed. A system that works well when based on the household and addresses may become less effective when attempting to reach each individual. Any changes to the annual canvass, and the use of alternatives such as data matching, will be closely monitored by the Commission. The section below sets out in more detail our approach to monitoring the implementation of IER and assessing the impact on the quality of the electoral registers. We are aware that the move to IER provides an opportunity to review how the system is working and take steps to ensure the registers are as accurate and complete as possible.

⁹¹ HM Government, *Individual Electoral Registration* (Cm 8108) (June 2011)
<https://update.cabinetoffice.gov.uk/sites/default/files/resources/individual-electoral-reform.pdf>

Next steps

Estimates of accuracy and completeness

Producing 'before' and 'after' measures

6.16 The approach adopted for this research study has proved to be effective at measuring the accuracy and completeness of electoral registers at the national level. The Commission intends to continue to review the state of the registers through house-to-house surveys.

6.17 More specifically, the Commission will use house-to-house surveys to assess the accuracy and completeness of the registers compiled under the final household registration system. Based on current expectations, this research will be reporting on the quality of the December 2013 electoral registers. This study will provide us with a baseline measure for assessing the impact of changes to the registration system on the quality of Great Britain's electoral registers.

6.18 A subsequent, and comparable, study will be undertaken using the first registers to be fully compiled under the system of IER. Based on current expectations, this study will use the December 2015 registers. Taken together, the research on the 2013 and 2015 registers will provide a clear indication of the immediate impact of the move to IER on the state of the registers.

Removal of entries on the registers – 2015 canvass

6.19 It is feasible that the absolute number of entries on the registers may decline after the first full IER canvass in 2015, as was the case in Northern Ireland when IER was introduced in 2002. However, this may not necessarily equate to a fall in the completeness of the registers if the entries that are being removed represent those who are no longer resident at the address at which they are registered (thereby making them inaccurate entries). Consequently, in addition to the research outlined above, the Commission will conduct a national survey to determine how many of those who may be removed would still have been eligible to be registered at that address. The study will also provide information on the demographic characteristics of those removed from the registers but still resident at their property – and therefore show whether certain groups are not being captured under the new system of registration.

Estimates based on a census register check

6.20 The Commission is currently working with the Office for National Statistics, the General Register Office for Scotland and the Northern Ireland Statistics and Research Agency to plan for a repeat of the previous census register check (which resulted in the findings published in the Commission's 2005 study, *Understanding electoral registration*). The findings from this study will relate to the December 2010 and April 2011 registers. The study will provide breakdowns for England, Wales, Scotland and Northern Ireland, as well as the English regions. It will also allow for detailed demographic breakdowns on registration levels, for example for different Black and Minority Ethnic (BME) communities. We anticipate that the findings from this project will not be available until 2013–14. The census data cannot be used to provide immediate

'before' and 'after' measures of the accuracy and completeness of the registers as the census is conducted only every 10 years.

Northern Ireland

6.21 In addition to producing estimates for Northern Ireland's registers based on the census register check, the Commission also intends to undertake a national study on the accuracy and completeness of Northern Ireland's registers in 2012. This will allow us to assess how the quality of the registers has changed since the last such study was undertaken by the Commission in 2007–08.⁹² We expect that the findings from this study should help inform longer-term reviews of what the consequences may be for the registration system in Great Britain if the annual canvass is not continued after the introduction of IER.

The public's response to proposals

6.22 The Commission will use annual public opinion surveys to monitor the levels of public satisfaction with, and confidence in, the system of electoral registration. This will include gathering data on, for example, the requirements to provide identifiers and any challenges that may be faced when doing so.

6.23 The Commission will also gather the views of the public through focus groups and interviews to explore certain issues or identifiable trends in more depth. For example, if there is a poor response to the requirement to provide identifiers, such research may be used to understand the reasons behind this poor response and how this could be addressed. The timing of this research will depend on what additional information is required before, during and after the implementation of IER.

Levels of registration-related malpractice

6.24 The Commission currently manages, in collaboration with the Police National Information and Coordination Centre (PNICC), an annual survey of police forces in the UK to gather information on reported cases of alleged electoral malpractice. We intend to use the data collected from this survey on registration-related offences in order to assess the impact of IER in reducing electoral fraud.

Data on canvass response and rolling registration

6.25 The Commission will also be collecting data on a regular basis from each Electoral Registration Officer (ERO) on, for example: levels of response to the canvass; the proportion of names retained on the registers through secondary checking or carry forward; and the number of entries added or removed through rolling registration, including those taking advantage of late registration provisions. During the implementation of IER, the Commission will also request data from EROs on the proportion of entrants on the registers who are providing personal identifiers.

⁹² The Electoral Commission/PricewaterhouseCoopers, *Electoral Registration in Northern Ireland* (September 2008)

Approaches to delivery – performance standards for EROs

6.26 Since July 2008, the Commission has set performance standards for EROs in Great Britain, covering: planning; maintaining accuracy and completeness; ensuring electoral integrity; and promoting public awareness. The Commission has reported annually on how well EROs are performing against these standards.

6.27 The Commission will be looking at how we use performance standards to monitor the preparedness of EROs for the introduction of IER, and to provide early warning signs where EROs may not have the capability to deliver. The Commission's approach to supporting and monitoring the performance of EROs will need to be adapted to reflect the new legislative and practical requirements of IER. We have begun the process of reviewing the current standards and will undertake public consultation on proposed revisions once the legislative framework is clear. We intend to publish the revised standards and supporting guidance well in advance of the implementation of any new processes, and will monitor and report on EROs' performance against these revised standards during 2014 and 2015.

6.28 However, while there is, currently, no formal mechanism in place for the Commission to ensure that EROs meet the standards, Section 52 of the Representation of the People Act 1983 gives the Secretary of State a power of direction over EROs. However, this power is seldom used and not well understood. It is therefore not conducive to timely interventions of the kind that might be necessary during the implementation of IER and we do not believe it will ensure a consistently high-quality service to electors.

6.29 Instead, there needs to be an effective, straightforward and timely method for ensuring individual EROs deliver the transition to IER effectively and manage the risks that it involves. We have recommended to the Government that the Commission's existing powers to set and monitor performance standards for EROs should be strengthened, with appropriate sanctions to enable us to intervene to ensure that EROs take steps to meet the agreed standards. Such a power would be used as a last resort, in cases where there is an unacceptable risk that electors may not receive a consistently high-quality service.

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Dr Sarah Birch	Reader in Politics, University of Essex
Neil Bowie	General Register Office for Scotland
Dr Rosie Campbell	Senior Lecturer in Politics, Birkbeck College, London
Richard Cracknell	Head of Social Statistics, House of Commons Library
Professor Ed Fieldhouse	Director, Institute for Social Change, University of Manchester
Karen Jochelson	Director of Research, Equality and Human Rights Commission
Professor Charles Pattie	Department of Geography, University of Sheffield
Alison Whitworth	Senior Methodologist, Office for National Statistics
Stuart Wilks-Heeg	Senior Lecturer in Social Policy, University of Liverpool

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Appendix A: Our approach to the national study

The national study presented in Chapter 3 was conducted together with Ipsos MORI. The table below provides an overview of the different phases of the research project. More detail on the methodology is available from the Electoral Commission.

Table A1: Phases of the national study

Dates	Research task	Lead agency	Research objectives
April–May 2011	Obtaining and formatting December registers and monthly updates from January to April.	Electoral Commission	To create complete electoral registers of the local authorities selected in the sample.
June–September 2011	House-to-house interviews in selected local authorities.	Ipsos MORI	To collect data for producing estimates of the accuracy and completeness of the registers.
July – September 2011	Collate register updates for May to September.	Electoral Commission	To allow Ipsos MORI to check whether those respondents who have moved between April and the time of the interview had updated their registration details.
September 2011	Despatch of postal questionnaire to non-responders.	Ipsos MORI	To receive responses from those households from which interviewers were unable to receive a response.
September–October 2011	Data processing and data analysis.	Ipsos MORI	To check the information gathered from the interviews against the entries on the electoral registers and use this to produce accuracy and completeness estimates.

Methodology

The approach taken to delivering this research builds on the work published by the Electoral Commission in 2010 which looked at the accuracy and completeness of eight local authority electoral registers. The findings from that study indicated how accuracy and completeness can range across local authority registers, but the data could not be used to provide national estimates of accuracy and completeness. In contrast, this

research used a nationally representative sample to provide an estimate of the accuracy and completeness of the registers across Great Britain. However, the approach required to produce national estimates does not allow for estimates of registration at the local authority level.

The approach to sampling built upon the lessons learned from the previous case study research. The key difference was the need to create a sample which could be relied upon to deliver nationally representative findings at a reasonable cost.

Sampling

The sample was a multi-stage probability ('random') sample. Ipsos MORI selected 50 local authorities across Great Britain (i.e. England, Scotland and Wales, but not Northern Ireland); within each of these local authorities they selected five local government wards. Within each of these wards they selected 31–32 addresses (totalling 7,845) from the small-user postcode address file (PAF);⁹³ this was designed to yield on average about 20 interviews per ward, or a total of 5,000 across Great Britain.

The 50 local authorities were selected randomly for inclusion in the research. The selection of local authorities was stratified by nation/English region, local authority type and population density; the selection of wards within local authorities was stratified by social class composition. (Stratification helps to ensure that the sampling points chosen are evenly distributed across different regions and different population types, which can reduce the 'margin of error' in the survey findings.)

The full list of the selected local authorities is: Ashfield; Bexley; Birmingham; Bracknell Forest; Burnley; Calderdale; Castle Point; Cheltenham; Cheshire West and Chester; Chichester; Denbighshire; Dudley; East Hampshire; Edinburgh; Elmbridge; Falkirk; Fenland; Hackney; Hounslow; King's Lynn and West Norfolk; Kirklees; Leeds; Manchester; Mendip; Newham; North East Lincolnshire; North Kesteven; North

⁹³ This approach differed slightly from that used in the earlier case study research conducted by Ipsos MORI for the Electoral Commission in 2009. In the case study research, the sample was split between two sample sources: 50% was drawn from the electoral register and 50% from PAF. This approach was used because as well as serving to gauge the accuracy and completeness of the electoral registers, it protected against the possibility of PAF being incomplete or of residential addresses in PAF being incorrectly classified as business addresses only, which might otherwise distort the findings. However, it had the disadvantage of being somewhat inefficient in terms of the precision of the estimates that could be made from a given number of interviews; because it created differences in probability of selection between people living at those addresses sampled from PAF and those sampled from the electoral registers, it required corrective weighting which widened the confidence intervals of the findings for a given sample size (i.e. at any given sample size, it measured with less precision than a survey using a sample drawn from a single source would have done).

In the case studies we found that, although there were a small number of addresses which appeared in the electoral registers and not in PAF, addresses not included in PAF were not sufficiently different from those that were included, in terms of the accuracy and completeness of the registers, to make any significant difference to the overall findings, while the necessary design weighting lowered the effective sample size. Ipsos MORI therefore concluded that, although the use of a dual-source sample had been a sensible precaution to take when doing this type of research for the first time, it had proved unnecessary, and therefore we did not continue with it in the national survey.

Somerset; North West Leicestershire; Nottingham; Nuneaton and Bedworth; Oldham; Perth and Kinross; Plymouth; Redbridge; Redcar and Cleveland; Rhondda Cynon Taff; Shropshire; South Lakeland; South Lanarkshire; Southend-on-Sea; Southwark; Stafford; Sunderland; Tendring; Tonbridge and Malling; Trafford; Tunbridge Wells; Wiltshire; Worthing.

House-to-house survey

As with the 2010 study, the research involved house-to-house surveying by trained interviewers with the aim of gathering information from residents which could be checked against the details held on the electoral registers. The house-to-house survey took place between 8 June and 7 September 2011.

Small amendments were made to the questionnaire for the 2011 study. These included a more detailed set of questions to identify who had moved to the address after the canvass deadline (15 October 2010), questions to establish the relationship of each resident to the householder, and an additional follow-up question to identify those who usually live away from the address, such as students and members of the armed forces.

A postal questionnaire for self-completion was also sent out to those addresses where interviewers could not achieve a face-to-face interview but did not receive a refusal. This 'non-response' survey was a four-page self-completion questionnaire, containing many of the survey questions, with the aim of gathering data for as many addresses as possible. These responses disproportionately benefit the initial survey's reliability, given that they are likely to be from respondents who are ordinarily harder to reach.

Fieldworkers attempted to access the head of household or their partner to participate in this research, as they were best placed to give answers on behalf of the household; however, any permanent resident of the household aged 17 or over could take part, if the head of household or their partner was not available. Interviewers were allowed some flexibility to conduct the interviews with someone other than the head of household or their partner if they felt that it would result in a more successful interview. For example, in some households a son or daughter may speak better English and may therefore be more likely to fill in forms, and therefore more appropriate to participate in the research on behalf of the household.

Ipsos MORI received responses from 5,259 of the sampled addresses and with members of 5,287 households. These addresses encompassed 9,329 register entries and 8,306 adults eligible for inclusion on the electoral registers were found to be living there.

Table A2: Sample breakdown

Target number of interviews	5,000
Sample issued (addresses)	7,845
<i>Final outcomes:</i>	
Interviews completed (including postal questionnaires returned)	5,259
<i>(Postal questionnaires returned)</i>	166
Refused	953
No interview achieved, other than refusal (e.g. some contact but no interview/no contact etc.)	975
Property ineligible (e.g. vacant, derelict, not found, business address, holiday home etc.)	542
Other	116
<i>Response rates (including postal questionnaires returned):</i>	
Unadjusted	67.0%
Adjusted*	72.0%
<i>Source: Ipsos MORI</i>	

*Having removed ineligible properties.

Confidence intervals and weighting of the data

We are confident that the findings from this study are reliable, but this was a survey and not a census of everyone in the country. Therefore, as with any survey, the results are subject to confidence intervals. For a random probability survey we can predict the variation between the sample results and the 'true' values from knowledge of the size of the samples on which the results are based and the number of times that a particular answer is given. The confidence with which we can make this prediction is usually chosen to be 95% – that is, the chances are 95 in 100 that the 'true' value will fall within a specified range.

If, as in this research, the sample is clustered or if it is necessary to weight the data, this causes design effects, which means that the precision of an estimate is lower and that the **effective** sample size for calculating the confidence intervals is smaller than the real sample size. In the case of this research, there is likely to be high clustering of inaccuracies and omissions by household (in other words, households' entries will tend to be all accurate and complete or entirely inaccurate and/or incomplete), which causes a high design effect.

In addition to these necessary 'design weights', which correct for unequal probability of selection, it was necessary to correct for non-response. The response rate was considerably higher in some areas than in others, and in particular it was higher in some local authority areas than in others. The purpose of the survey is to measure the

accuracy and completeness of the electoral registers, which are compiled by local authorities, so there might be systematic differences in what we are trying to measure between one local authority area and another. Consequently, it was important that differing response rates between local authorities should not be allowed to distort the data – if no corrections were made, then the findings from a local authority area with a low response rate would have less impact on the national total than ought to be the case. Ipsos MORI therefore weighted the data to equalise the effective response rate in all 50 of the local authorities included in the survey. (In fact, the impact of this weighting on the national estimates was small.)

The table below shows the confidence intervals to be associated with the estimates of accuracy and completeness for the whole national sample and for several key groups.

Table A3: Confidence intervals (figures based on parliamentary registers)

	Completeness		Accuracy	
	Estimate (%)	CI (+/-)	Estimate (%)	CI (+/-)
Overall	82.3	1.7	85.5	1.6
Age (participants only):*				
17–18 **	54.8	19.0	89.5	14.6
19–24**	56.3	7.6	93.5	4.3
25–34	72.2	3.5	96.7	1.8
35–54	85.0	2.0	97.7	1.0
55–64	90.4	2.8	98.1	1.2
65+	94.1	2.1	99.0	0.9
Tenure:				
Owned outright	89.0	2.6	92.3	2.9
Buying on mortgage	86.6	1.7	90.9	1.5
Renting from council/housing association	78.1	3.6	85.9	2.2
Renting from private landlord	55.5	3.9	65.0	5.0
Length of residence:				
Up to 1 year	25.7	4.2	94.4	3.3
Over 1 year up to 2 years	75.8	4.2	97.9	1.4
Over 2 years up to 5 years	88.2	2.7	96.2	2.0

	Completeness		Accuracy	
	Estimate (%)	CI (+/-)	Estimate (%)	CI (+/-)
Over 5 years	91.0	1.8	98.1	0.6
Property type:				
Detached	85.3	3.5	88.7	4.0
Semi-detached	85.4	2.1	88.5	1.8
Terrace	79.9	2.5	83.9	2.2
Flat/maisonette: under 6 floors	74.0	4.6	77.2	4.7
Flat/maisonette: 6 or more floors	76.3	12.3	81.1	8.1
Conversion flat/maisonette	62.6	11.0	54.8	12.3

*The confidence intervals for age were amended on 2 February 2012.

**These figures present the completeness rate for those who completed the survey (participants only). The completeness rate for 17–19 years old included in the sample (all residents) was 53.0% and the confidence interval for this figure is 5.2%.

The report does not include estimates for accuracy based on personal demographics such as age. The data for such demographics cannot be obtained for the majority of inaccurate entries – which are inaccurate precisely because they do not refer to current residents and therefore demographic information cannot be collected.

Estimating completeness for December 2010

Ipsos MORI used the data collected from households in 2011 to produce a rough estimate of the completeness of the registers when published in December 2010. However, the survey had been designed to estimate the accuracy and completeness of the April 2011 registers rather than the December 2010 registers, so the estimate for December 2010 should be treated with caution.

For the purposes of making this estimate, the original survey findings have been treated as if they were an exact measurement – rather than survey measurements subject to sampling error in the normal way. The margin of error allowed for in this estimate is in addition to, and does not take account of, any sampling variation of the main survey findings as indicated by the confidence intervals.

Also, due to home movement between the canvass qualifying date (15 October 2010) and 1 December, the estimate is not strictly for the completeness of the registers on 1 December (by which time they had already become less complete because of changes that would have occurred during those six weeks) but for the **completeness of the list that was to become the December registers on the reference date in mid-October.**

Producing the estimate

To estimate the completeness of the registers in October from the current data, two changes needed to be allowed for – changes to the eligible population since October and changes to the registers since October. Three groups of eligible adults needed to be considered in turn – those known to have been at the same address since the canvass deadline (about 90% of the total), those known to have been living somewhere else, and those for whom the information is missing.⁹⁴

With caveats, Ipsos MORI reached an estimate of October completeness for that part of the eligible population represented by the 90% of the sample still resident at their October address. The remaining 10% divides into roughly 7% who are known recent movers and 3% who have missing data.

Of the 3% who have missing data, the vast majority are non-respondents (i.e. household members on whose behalf a respondent is answering, rather than household members answering for themselves), and in all but a few of these cases the respondent himself/herself had been living at the relevant address since before the canvass deadline. While other household members might have moved in since the respondent, they might equally have moved in before. All in all, if it were to be assumed that the whole of the missing data group were in fact resident in mid-October, it would probably be over-estimating but only slightly so. It was therefore assumed that 92% of the missing data cases were in fact resident at the canvass; the remaining 8% will be treated together with the rest of the recent movers.

For the 7% of known recent movers we have no direct information about completeness from the survey, since they were not resident at their current address at the canvass deadline and Ipsos MORI were not able to check whether they were registered at their previous address. (Only 14% of them are registered now, but this is only a measure of their use of the rolling update provisions, not an indication of whether they were correctly registered in October.) It is unlikely that completeness among this group would be as high as the 89% found among all those who had not moved, given that frequent movers (who we know are less likely to be registered) will be over-represented among the group that moved in any particular period. Equally, many will have been at their previous address for a substantial period, and registration is unlikely to be as low as the 57% at which it stands among those in their first year at their current address who had already moved in by the canvass deadline. Consequently, 60% was taken as the likely worst case scenario and 80% as the highest likely figure.

Combining these assumptions, Ipsos MORI reached an estimate that the December register as compared with the eligible population on the canvass qualifying date was **between 85% and 87% complete**.

⁹⁴ This was because of 'don't know' answers to the relevant questions, refusals to answer etc.

Appendix B: Regression analysis

Ipsos MORI used the responses from the survey to undertake regression analysis. Regression is a statistical analysis technique which takes a key variable of interest, in this case accuracy or completeness, and measures the correlation this has with a variety of other variables in the data (or the ability to predict the key variable by knowing the other variable), assuming that all other variables are constant. The Electoral Commission can provide more information on the approach adopted for the regression models outlined below.

Accuracy

A logistic regression model was constructed to model the probability that an entry would be classified as being accurate. Data on both respondents and non-respondents was used. Register entries not referring to current residents were included in the model provided we had data on those currently living at the relevant address.

Variables such as ethnicity, nationality and age were not included in the model as these were available only for respondents, and would not be relevant to other register entries recorded at the same address.

The logistic regression was carried out in SPSS using the complex samples module. Sample weights and clustering information were included in the modelling, but the stratification information was not. This is because we wished to include the main stratum variable, Government Office Region, in the model.

Completeness

A logistic regression model was constructed to model the probability that a respondent would be on the electoral register. Non-respondents were excluded before the modelling, and some respondents with a large amount of missing data were also excluded. Respondents with missing data on a small number of variables had responses imputed.

The logistic regression was carried out in SPSS using the complex samples module. Sample weights and clustering information were included in the modelling, but the stratification information was not. This is because we wished to include the main stratum variable, Government Office Region, in the model.

Appendix C: Measuring accuracy and completeness

This section reviews our definitions of accuracy and completeness of the registers and outlines how the research has classified various forms of entries on the registers. The section considers the impact that population movement can have on the accuracy and completeness of the registers, as well as the different approaches used for producing estimates of accuracy and completeness.

Accuracy

Our definition of accuracy is that 'there are no false entries on the electoral register'. Under this definition inaccuracies ('false entries') may include:

- register entries which become redundant because an elector has moved or died since the canvass was conducted
- the inclusion on the register of people ineligible to vote, or information which incorrectly renders a voter eligible or ineligible to vote – this includes incorrect dates of birth for attainers and incorrect information relating to nationality
- duplicate registrations, where the same person is registered more than once on the same local register – either at the same address or at different addresses
- fraudulent entries resulting from deliberate attempts to register multiple times, to register ineligible or 'ghost' voters, or to register voters at addresses at which they are not resident – for the purpose of committing electoral, financial or other forms of fraud

Since Electoral Registration Officers (EROs) update registers each month using updates of recorded deaths from the local registrar, redundant entries relating to deceased voters are minimal. As a result, the cause of the great majority of redundant entries will be a combination of:

- those electors who have moved out of or within the local authority after the annual canvass but have not notified the relevant ERO that they have done so, and
- those electors who have moved before the annual canvass, and whom an ERO opts to 'carry forward' from the previous register in the absence of a response to the annual canvass

Unintentional inaccuracies relating to eligibility or duplication may arise from the misunderstanding or errors on the part of the person completing the form or errors made by the electoral administrator processing the form. By contrast, fraudulent entries would involve either the submission of intentionally false information by a householder or other individual, or the intentional inclusion of false information by an electoral administrator. While court cases have found evidence of the former in isolated cases, in modern times there has never been a proven case of fraud perpetrated by a UK electoral administrator.

The following would not be classified as inaccuracies:

- Register entries where the spelling of an elector's name or address is incorrect or there is a slight error in the recording of the address – neither of these would affect an elector's eligibility to vote and they are therefore defined as 'minor errors'.
- Register entries relating to electors, such as full-time students and second-home owners, who are entitled to be registered at two different addresses and are not currently at the address listed on the register – although such cases may prove to be difficult to verify in practice and are therefore counted as inaccuracies.

Completeness

Our definition of completeness is that: 'every person who is entitled to have an entry in an electoral register is registered'. Under this definition, incompleteness (under-registration) includes voters who either:

- do not appear on any electoral register
- are registered only in a local authority in which they are no longer resident, or
- appear on the register in the local authority in which they live, but not at the address where they are currently resident

Producing accuracy and completeness estimates

There are various methods used to assess the quality of the electoral registers; they differ mainly on the frequency with which they can be used and the reliability of the results. These approaches are presented below.

Using large-scale national surveys

Large-scale, representative or random social surveys can be used to produce reliable estimates of the completeness of the registers. Such surveys tend to use the postcode address file (PAF) as a sampling frame and cross-check information on eligible residents against actual entries on the electoral registers to account for 'false positives' (i.e. people who think, or say, they are registered when they are not). This approach is useful in producing reliable estimates at regular intervals.

This is the approach that has been adopted to produce estimates of the accuracy and completeness of the April 2011 registers. It is the first time the method has been used to assess both the accuracy and completeness of the registers at a national level. The main limitations of using this approach are that:

- large sample sizes are required, meaning surveys are expensive to conduct
- non-response to the surveys is likely to be highest among those who are eligible but not registered (this is particularly the case where telephone or internet-based surveys are used, which is why a house-to-house approach was adopted for the 2011 research)

- survey approaches offer no obvious means of estimating the number of duplicate entries across local registers, although they can report on the accuracy of the registers

Comparing the Office for National Statistics (ONS) electoral statistics (number of entries on the registers) with mid-year population estimates

These two datasets can be used to provide relatively crude estimates of the annual registration rates at national and subnational levels. Under this method, the registration rate is calculated by using ONS statistics for the total number of entries on the electoral registers as the numerator and dividing this by the ONS estimates for the population aged 18 and above as the denominator. This method is useful for producing regular, approximate estimates of registration levels and seeing emerging trends in registration rates.

However, the method has many limitations:

- The approach cannot be used to report on the accuracy of the registers.
- It is not possible to derive a figure from the population estimates for the proportion of the population whose nationality means they would be ineligible to vote.
- The accuracy of population estimates is likely to decline each year after the census on which they are based.
- ONS electoral statistics represent entries on the electoral registers, not individual electors. It is not possible to quantify the number of entries that are duplicates⁹⁵ or that are ineligible using this approach. This means that the ONS figures are likely to over-state the number of registered electors.

Matching census records to the electoral registers

A sample of census returns or data from the census coverage survey can be cross-matched against the electoral registers to derive estimates of accuracy and completeness. This approach is useful for providing reliable national estimates with detailed demographic breakdowns. Using census records allows additional analysis of the relationship between registration levels and key variables such as age, housing tenure and residential mobility, as well as scope to identify variations by Black and Minority Ethnic (BME) groups and by region. Variants of this approach were used in relation to the 1965, 1980, 1990 and 2000 registers.⁹⁶ However, this approach also has two key limitations:

⁹⁵ An individual can have a second entry on the register if he/she spends half of the year in a second accommodation (i.e. holiday home or student accommodation).

⁹⁶ Gray and Gee, *Electoral registration for parliamentary elections* (1967); Todd and Butcher, *Electoral registration in 1981* (1981); Smith, *Electoral registration in 1991* (1993); The Electoral Commission, *Understanding electoral registration* (2005)

- The exercise can be repeated only every 10 years.
- Where census records are matched against register entries, there is a high probability that many of those missing from the registers are also missing from the census.

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