

Electoral registration in Northern Ireland

Summary of research update – August 2005

This is the third update summarising the findings of research reports produced on behalf of The Electoral Commission by PricewaterhouseCoopers (PwC). This update provides an analysis of overall trends in the register and assesses the effect of the reinstatement of electors onto the electoral register ahead of the May 2005 elections. The findings confirm that without active intervention, there is an underlying downward trend in the register.

Background

The Electoral Fraud (Northern Ireland) Act 2002 was introduced primarily to combat perceptions of electoral fraud that had existed in Northern Ireland for many decades. The Act introduced fundamental changes to the voter registration process in Northern Ireland by abolishing household registration and replacing it with a system of individual registration. Under the new system, all eligible persons have to complete an individual form on an annual basis.

In December 2003 the Commission produced a report on the workings of the Act,¹ which found that although it had been largely successful in eliminating perceptions of electoral fraud, it tended to impact negatively on registration rates among certain disadvantaged and marginalised groups in society. These included young people, people with disabilities and those living in areas of high social deprivation. In its first report, PwC highlighted the fact that registration rates across all 18 Parliamentary constituencies

in Northern Ireland had declined since the introduction of the Act.

Trends in the electoral register

In the two annual canvasses that have been conducted since 2002 (the 2003 and 2004 canvasses) the new register has declined by 2.6% compared to the previous register on which the canvass had been based. This decline was largely offset through the process of rolling registration. The annual canvass is based primarily on the previous electoral register and, as with any canvass, there will be an element of non-response. One reason for this is that people who move address between canvasses tend not to inform the Electoral Office for Northern Ireland (EONI). Consequently, approximately 3–4% of the addresses contained in the register on which the annual canvass is based will be incorrect. This has implications for any decision to move away from an annual canvass. For example, a register compiled every three years could contain an inaccuracy rate of 10–12%.

The abolition of the annual canvass will place greater emphasis on the need for people to register during the canvass period, especially if it is to be every three or four years. This will require extensive outreach work on the part of the Commission, the EONI and other key stakeholders to ensure that those groups currently under-represented on the register are able to access the democratic process.

Rolling registration (the process that allows eligible persons to register outside the canvass period) has acted to offset this 'negative canvass' effect. However, this relies to a considerable extent on the

'looming election' effect, which was present ahead of elections in 2003, 2004 and 2005. Political parties, particularly those in nationalist areas, put resources into ensuring potential supporters are registered in the build-up to elections. Without the prospect of an election, the likelihood is that the negative canvass effect would not be offset.

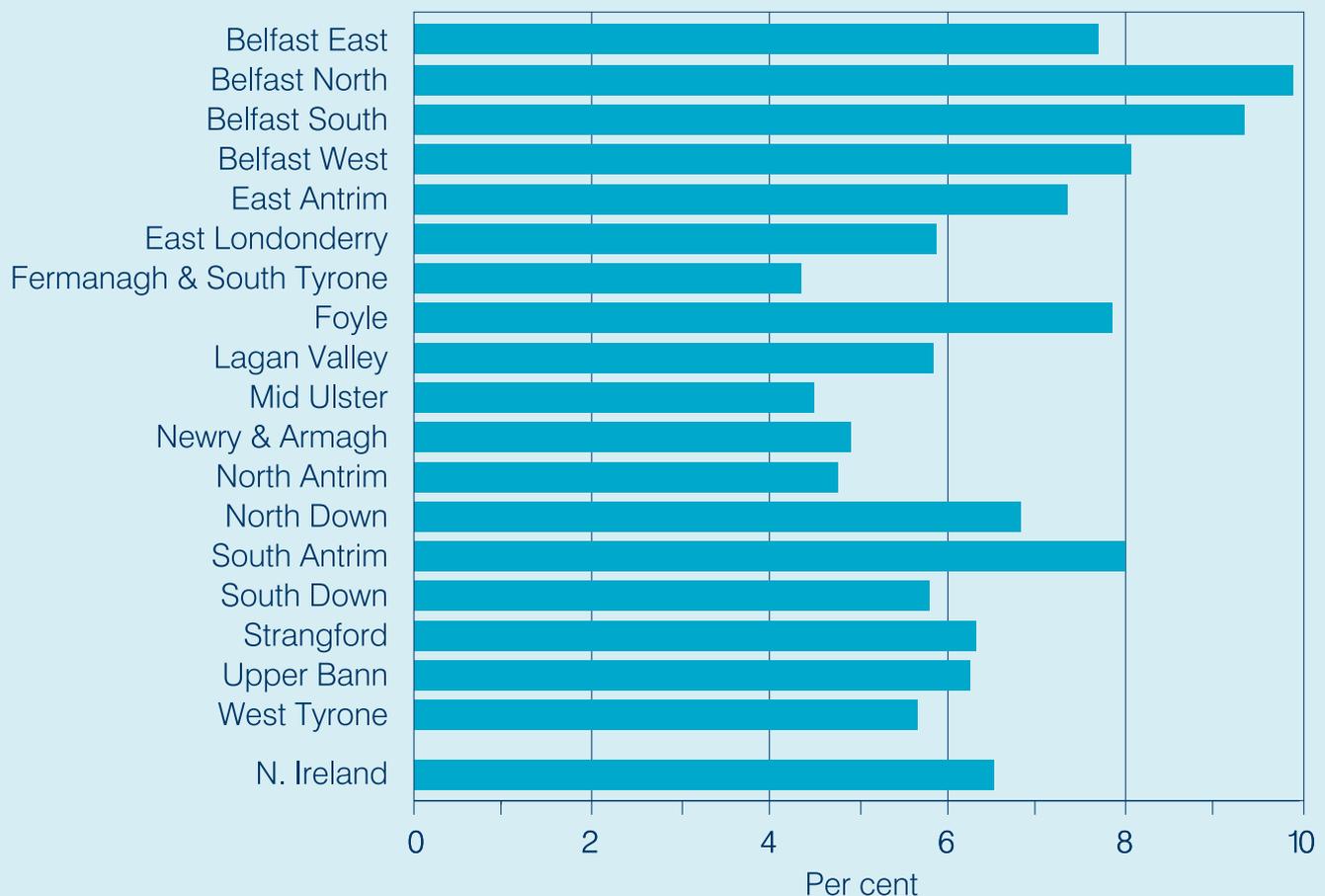
Addressing the decline in registration

In response to concerns regarding the decline in registration rates, Parliament introduced the Electoral Registration (Northern Ireland) Act 2005. This legislation

reinstated onto the register published on 1 April 2005 all persons who failed to re-register during the 2004 annual canvass but whose names appeared on the register published on 1 September 2004. This had the effect of reinstating approximately 70,000 electors, increasing the number of people registered to 1,148,486 (91% of the eligible electorate) in time for the May 2005 elections. In the absence of the reinstatement the registration rate would have been 84%.

The Act also reinstated the carry-forward for the 2005 annual canvass and gave the Secretary of State the option to use it again in 2006.

Figure 1: April 2005 – reinstated, by Parliamentary constituency
Per cent of September 2004 register



Source: EONI.

The reinstatement effect Constituency level

The reinstatement of electors had a significant effect on the number of people registered in each of the 18 Parliamentary constituencies in Northern Ireland. As a percentage of the September 2004 register, those reinstated in April 2005 ranged from 9.9% in Belfast North to 4.4% in Fermanagh & South Tyrone. The geographical pattern in the reinstatement effect reflects a strong urban/rural contrast. The largest effects occurred in the more urban constituencies, most notably the four Belfast constituencies along with Foyle. The impact was lowest in the

more rural constituencies of Fermanagh & South Tyrone, Mid Ulster, Newry & Armagh and North Antrim. Since the introduction of individual registration, rural constituencies have tended to have higher registration rates than predominantly urban constituencies.

The reinstatement also had the effect of narrowing the difference in registration rates between constituencies. In the absence of reinstatement, and excluding Belfast South,² registration rates would have ranged from 80% in Belfast North to 92% in Mid Ulster. As a result of the reinstatement, this gap was reduced to 9%, from

88% in Belfast North to 97% in Mid Ulster.

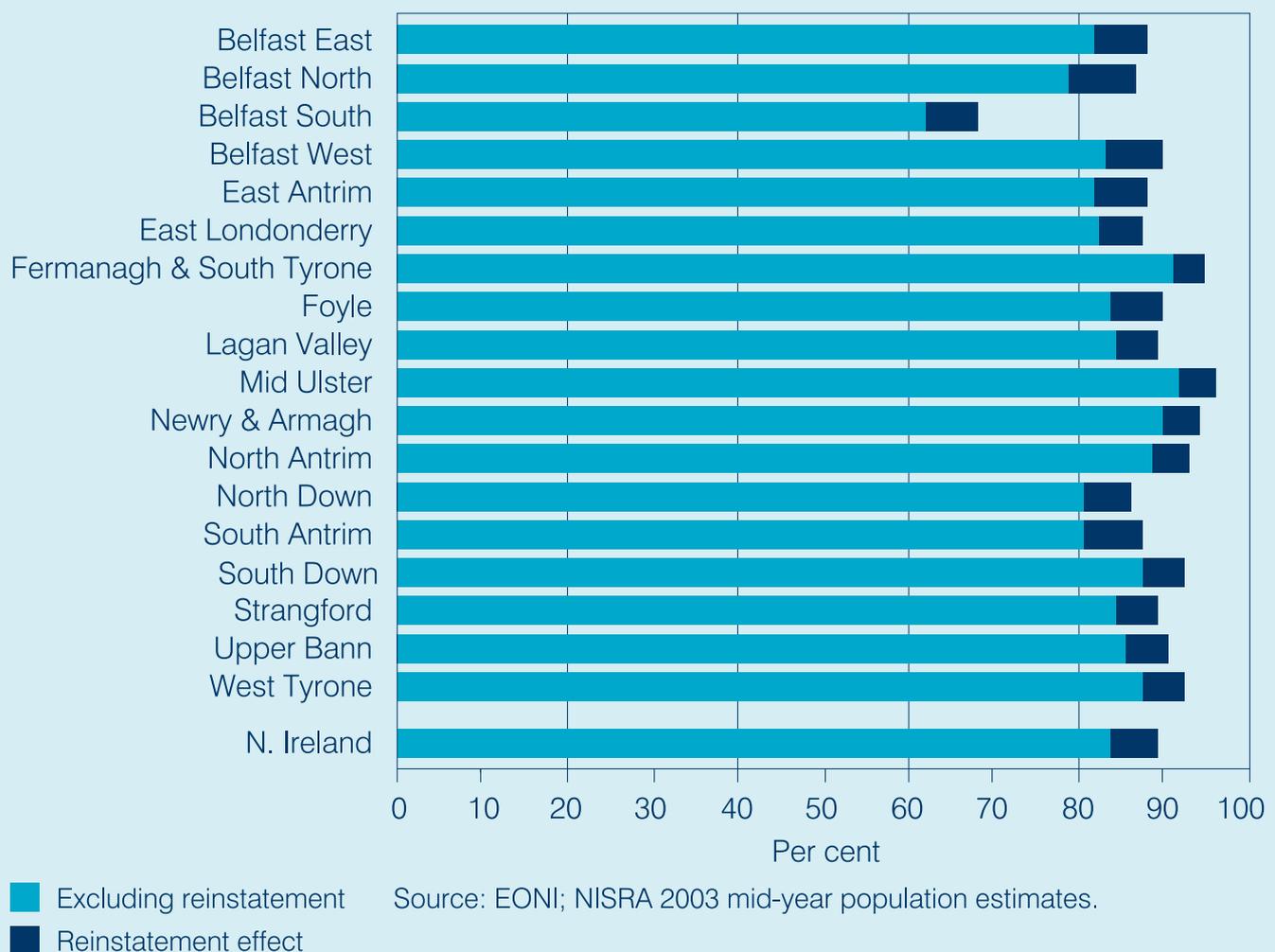
Ward level

There was significant variation in the reinstatement effect at ward level, ranging from 15.5% of the September 2004 register in the Shankill ward of Belfast West, to just 1.1% in the Craigywarren ward in North Antrim. The urban/rural contrast was again present, and was largely in keeping with the variations at constituency level.

Conclusions

The latest findings from PwC confirm that without active intervention, there is an underlying downward trend in the electoral register under

Figure 2: Registration rates by Parliamentary constituency, June 2005



individual registration. The single most important reason for this is that, during the annual canvass, a significant proportion of those who have been on the pre-canvass register do not re-register. In the autumn 2004 canvass, 7.5% of those who had been on the September 2004 register did not return a registration form. This 'negative canvass' effect can be offset by a 'looming election' effect, which was particularly strong in March 2005 given the anticipation of a combined election. However, as there are no planned elections in 2006 the 'looming election' effect is likely to be absent.

The April 2005 reinstatement addressed the decline and contributed directly to the objective of a more comprehensive register. However, the impact on the accuracy of the register depends on why people do not re-register in the course of the annual canvass. If it is because they have changed address, either by relocating within Northern Ireland or because they have moved outside Northern Ireland, the reinstatement will have the effect of making the register less accurate when measured in terms of the proportion of incorrect addresses on the register.

The Northern Ireland Elections Bill, announced in the Queen's Speech on 17 May 2005, will amend the current electoral registration system by abolishing the annual canvass but retaining individual registration. The Commission intends to monitor the impact of any new system put in place.

On 5 August 2005 the Government published its proposals on the future of electoral registration in Northern Ireland.³ The Northern Ireland Office requested comments on the proposals by 30 September 2005.

1 The Electoral Commission (2003) *The Electoral Fraud (Northern Ireland) Act 2002: an assessment of its first year in operation*.

2 Belfast South is excluded because of the large student population. Many of these students are likely to be registered at their home address.

3 See www.nio.gov.uk/media-detail.htm?newsID=11971 for further details.

Further information

The full report is available from:
www.electoralcommission.org.uk

The Electoral Fraud (Northern Ireland) Act 2002 – an assessment of its first year in operation is also available online and as hard copy from The Electoral Commission.

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