
Understanding electoral registration

The extent and nature of non-registration in Britain

The Commission sees the electoral registration process as the lynchpin of the electoral system and, as such, it is vital that we have robust evidence on the extent of non-registration. This research is the first systematic and comprehensive analysis of registration rates in Britain since 1993 and includes a detailed analysis of the reasons for non-registration today.

We have drawn on a statistical 'register check' conducted on our behalf by the Office for National Statistics (ONS), public opinion research by MORI and evidence collected by the Commission from eight local authorities.

Democracy matters

About this research

The 'register check' involved constructing a sample of records for England and Wales using the 2001 Census and the Labour Force Survey (LFS), and then comparing population with registration data having taken eligibility into account (we are working with ONS to scope similar analysis for Scotland). Use of the LFS provided us with greater scope for determining eligibility and a broader range of variables for analysis purposes.

Such an approach was necessary to produce robust estimates of non-registration overall and among different groups and parts of the country. At the same time, however, our estimates are inevitably a snapshot and there is some evidence of recent falls in registration rates, including analysis among a sample of local authorities that found an average percentage return of registration 'Form As' of 89% following the 2004 canvass, down on the 91% return in 2003.

The extent of non-registration

According to ONS, the best estimate for non-registration among the eligible household

population in England and Wales at 15 October 2000 (the qualifying date for the February 2001 register) lies **between 8% and 9%**. This compares with 7–9% in 1991. This means that in the region of 3.5 million people across England and Wales were eligible to be on the register at their main residence but were missing from it in 2000.

Our 'register check' with ONS enabled us to estimate levels of non-registration among different socio-economic groups and in different areas (summarised in the table on page 2). In 2000, non-registration was higher in metropolitan areas, particularly inner London. Young people, especially attainers,¹ were less likely to be registered, as were those who lived away from home resulting, partly, from their greater mobility. Among all age groups, men were less likely to be registered than women.

People from some minority ethnic groups had a relatively high likelihood of non-registration, but rates among Asians (those from Indian, Pakistani and Bangladeshi communities) and black Caribbean people were similar

Estimated non-registration among selected groups, 2000

| Group | % not registered | Base |
|--|------------------|--------|
| 16–17-year-olds | 28 | 479 |
| 18–24-year-olds | 16 | 2,211 |
| Inner London | 18 | 985 |
| West Midlands | 4 | 2,498 |
| Indian | 6 | 413 |
| Black Caribbean | 9 | 225 |
| Black African | 37 | 116 |
| At same address six months prior to qualifying date | 6 | 22,794 |
| At different address six months prior to qualifying date | 33 | 1,169 |
| Students | 22 | 575 |
| Own property outright | 3 | 6,979 |
| Renting from private landlord or letting agency | 27 | 1,269 |

Source: ONS (study sample, England and Wales).

to those for white people. The level of non-registration among Asian people fell between 1991 and 2000.

Mobility was a key factor. Non-registration declined with length of time at the address in question: it was 35% among those resident for two to three months and 2% for those resident for 10 or more years (see figure on page 3). Non-registration was also highest among private renters, the unemployed, those without qualifications and those in non-permanent employment.

Explaining non-registration

ONS found that the majority, 52%, of non-registrants in 2000 came from just three groups:

- those living with parents (in particular, attainers);
- those having moved within the six months prior to the qualifying date; and

- those renting from a private landlord.

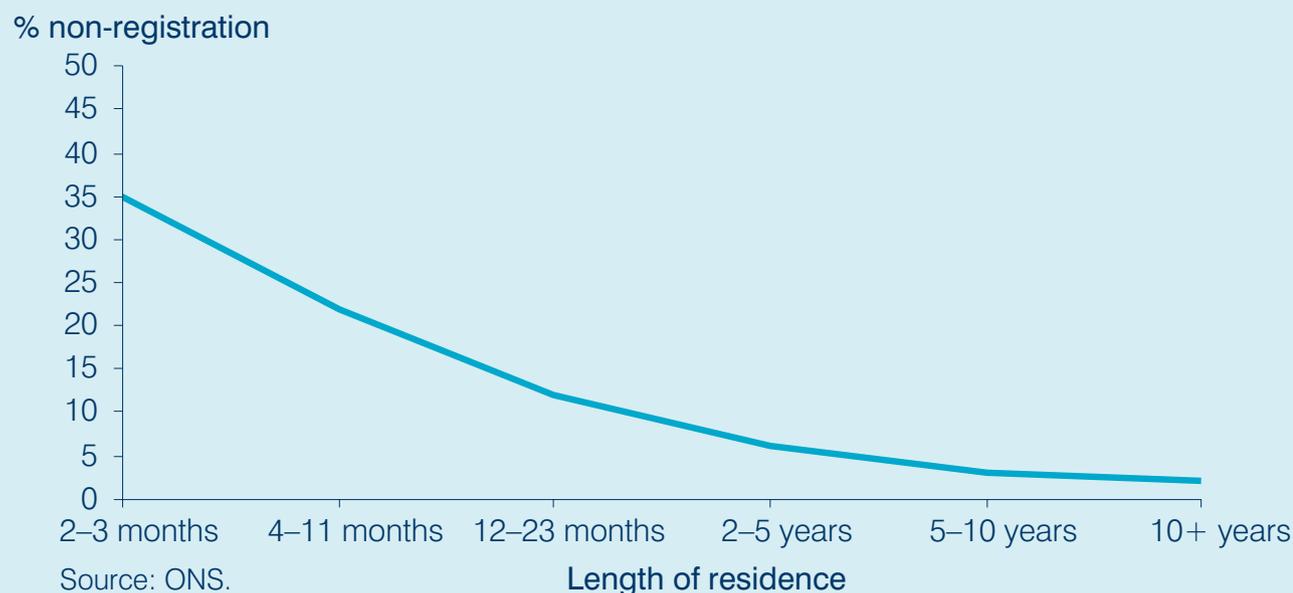
Further statistical analysis confirms strong associations between non-registration and **age, sex, ethnicity, tenure and mobility**. These findings are similar to those of 1991 although there have been some changes: ethnicity, for example, was less significant as an explanatory variable in 2000 than it was in 1991 and was also found to be strongly conditioned by nationality and length of residence in the UK.

In 2000, the eligibility and mobility of the **head of household**,² as well as the eligible individual's relationship with the head of household, were important predictors of non-registration. The analysis by ONS points to the central role of the head of household, in both positive and negative terms, for example:

- The head of household was significantly more likely to be registered than other eligible household members.
- Being unrelated to the head of household at an address reduced an individual's likelihood of being registered.
- Being an eligible person in a household where the head of household was registered was a strong predictor of registration.

According to ONS, it would seem that 'the presence and actions of the head of household increased the likelihood of registration for many groups...', but it has not been possible to '...quantify such an effect, so we cannot determine whether it may have outweighed any negative effect on registration rates caused by a failure on the part of the head of household to recognise eligibility in others'.

Non-registration by length of residence



This is only part of the explanation of non-registration in 2000: the research by ONS and our subsequent public opinion research with MORI (see box below), has highlighted the importance of **situational reasons**, relating to people's individual and household situation and circumstances, and **attitudinal reasons**, including perceptions of the principle and practice of electoral registration and,

ultimately, attitudes towards voting and politics. While some non-registration is unintentional, some is quite deliberate and MORI found that among some non-registrants there was 'a conscious decision not to register, for ideological reasons... they simply wish to play no part in [politics].'

Our research also found some significant gaps in people's

awareness and knowledge of the registration process and, in some cases, this might militate against registration. At the same time, however, it seems likely that low knowledge is, in part, related to a lack of enthusiasm for registering to vote: i.e. low knowledge can be an effect, as well as a cause of, non-registration.

The impact of **administrative practice** on registration rates in 2000 is hard to evaluate – not least because it is likely that innovative methods were used disproportionately, and more intensively, in areas where registration was already most difficult. Similarly, it is difficult to definitively assess the impact of **rolling registration**, but most of our eight case study authorities took the view that it had not had a significant impact on registration rates, but had increased the accuracy of the register.

Public opinion and registration

- Common top-of-mind associations with registering to vote included 'old-fashioned', 'time consuming', a 'chore'.
- There is a broad consensus that registration is not a priority.
- There is no depth to knowledge about the registration process.
- Some people falsely assume they are registered when they are unlikely to be so.
- Ineligibility and disinterest in voting are the most common explanations for not being registered.
- Few non-registrants see benefits to being registered.

Source: MORI (2005) *Public opinion research (winter 2004–5)*.

Summary

This research provides analysis of the extent and nature of non-registration including commentary on the best predictors of non-registration. Our estimates are inevitably a snapshot and registration rates in 2005 may well be different.

It is also the case that the evidence presented in this report – including the link between the presence and actions of the head of household and non-registration – raises a number of questions worthy of further enquiry.

Finally, in our view, this research again highlighted the difficulties involved in collecting robust evidence on registration given current arrangements and also the importance of building effective evaluation mechanisms into any future reforms of these arrangements.

- 1 Attainers are 16- and 17-year-olds who will attain voting age (i.e. become 18) during the 'life' of the register (in this case, from the qualifying date of 15 October 2000 up until February 2001). They are legally allowed to register, but cannot actually vote unless their eighteenth birthday is on, or before, the day of the election.
- 2 Both the LFS and the 2001 Census identify a 'head of household' as the person selected for survey purposes, often the household member who has lived at an address for the longest period or who owns the property/is the main tenant (and, of course, this person may also be disproportionately likely to complete the household's Form A).

Further information

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

Understanding electoral registration is also available in hard copy from The Electoral Commission.

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