
Individual electoral registration and the future of representative democracy

In December 2011, a British Academy Forum discussed the government's plans to introduce Individual Electoral Registration in the UK, and to feed in comments and concerns ahead of the publication of a Bill in early 2012. The British Academy Forum was attended by the Minister for Political and Constitutional Reform, Mark Harper MP, and experts from academia, the media, the civil service, local government and other public sector organisations. In this article, Professor Ron Johnston FBA and Professor Iain McLean FBA examine what this change in the way we register to vote would mean and, in particular, how it would impact on constituency boundaries and the nature of British representative democracy.

HOW WE REGISTER to vote in Great Britain has been debated extensively over the past few months. In June 2011, the government published draft plans to switch from the current system of household registration, where one person is asked to name all those eligible to vote in a property, to one where individuals are responsible for registering themselves and will have to provide proof of identity to register. The three main political parties and organisations such as the Electoral Commission are all supportive of the principle of individual electoral registration (IER), but some have raised concerns about how it will be implemented and, in particular, whether it should be compulsory to register.

Household registration – an archaic system

The system of household registration that we currently have in Great Britain, introduced in the 19th century, is seen by many proponents of IER as archaic. It doesn't reflect people's different living situations today, such as flat and house shares, bedsits and student accommodation; the concept of a 'head of household' is obsolete. Very few countries, certainly among established democracies, still use this system. Canada and Australia both moved from house-to-house enumeration to some form of continuous registration in the 1990s, and Northern Ireland introduced individual registration in 2002.

Why electoral registration matters

Electoral registration not only establishes people's right to vote, but it is also used to define the areas in which people vote for their representatives – wards and county divisions for local government, constituencies for the House of Commons – and to identify those eligible for jury service.

The British electoral system means that where you are registered to vote and which ward and constituency you vote in matters, and the United Kingdom is one of a small number of countries which defines these areas using the registered electorate rather than the enumerated population. Having a complete and accurate electoral register is therefore crucial to ensure a fair electoral system. The introduction of IER is likely to have a considerable impact on how representative constituencies are, and therefore on the fairness of the British electoral system.

Redrawing the electoral map

The potential impact of IER is greater than it might otherwise have been because of new rules for the definition of constituency boundaries laid down in the *Parliamentary Voting System and Constituencies Act 2011*, which require each constituency to contain a similar number of registered electors. The four Parliamentary Boundary Commissions in England, Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland review all Parliamentary constituency boundaries every five years. Under the new rules the Boundary Commissions are required to propose constituencies (with four exceptions) with a number of registered electors that is not more than 5 per cent higher or lower than the national electoral quota. Previously, constituency electorates had to be as close to the quota (national average) as practicable, but this was only a secondary criterion – aligning constituency boundaries with communities and not making disruptive changes unless they were necessary were given greater weight under the rules that were in place from 1958 until 2011.

The Boundary Commissions have recently published draft proposals for public consultation, in their first review under the new rules. These involve a substantial redrawing of the UK's electoral map, much more so than at previous

reviews – a condition exacerbated by the reduction in the number of MPs from 650 to 600. Many communities have been split and many of the proposed new constituencies – which must be submitted to Parliament by October 2013 in order to be in place for the 2015 general election – bear little resemblance to those currently represented in the Commons, a situation that is unlikely to change much after the statutory public consultation process.

The ‘missing millions’

Introduction of these new rules was the subject of considerable Parliamentary debate, partly because of concerns about the electoral register’s accuracy and completeness. Recent research published by the Electoral Commission¹ has shown that the country’s electoral registers now capture only some 85 per cent of the eligible electorate, which means that at least 6 million people in Great Britain are not registered to vote. Those ‘missing millions’ are concentrated among particular population groups (such as the young, students, members of some ethnic minorities, those who rent their homes, and recent movers), which could lead to an under-representation of urban areas in the new electoral map.

The Commission’s research shows that whereas some 94 per cent of those aged 65 and over are on the current register, this percentage falls to 72 per cent among those aged 25-34, and 55 per cent among those aged 18-24. In respect of housing tenure, 92 per cent of those who either own their own homes or have a mortgaged home are on the register, compared to 86 per cent of those in social housing and 65 per cent of those in privately-rented properties. And in respect of dwelling type, whereas 89 per cent of those living in detached and semi-detached homes are on the register, only 55 per cent of those living in converted properties are. Opinion research reported at the Forum showed that older people were much more likely to agree that it is a civic duty to vote at elections than members of the youngest adult generations.²

The impact on urban Britain

Some proponents of IER have argued that its implementation would produce a more complete and accurate register, so implementation of the new rules should await its introduction. That did not happen, however, and urban areas are subsequently experiencing the largest drop in their number of MPs in the current round of proposals. Furthermore, the Boundary Commissions are now required to undertake

a full review of constituencies every five years, and the next set of proposals must be delivered to Parliament by October 2018, ready for the 2020 general election. That review will start in 2015-16, when the electoral register may well be the first produced using IER in England, Scotland and Wales.

The 2015 register

If, as many at the British Academy Forum suggested, the 2015 register differs significantly in its completeness and accuracy from the current one, it could have a major impact on the next new map of constituencies. If, as a first approximation, we assume that the percentages outlined above from the Electoral Commission’s research apply across the whole of the United Kingdom, then we can estimate the number of seats that would be allocated to each country and region should the introduction of IER produce a complete register for the 2015-16 review of constituencies. The first column in Table 1 shows the number of seats allocated to each country and region in 2011, and the next three columns indicate the likely numbers if they were allocated according to each area’s age, housing tenure or dwelling type structure. There are small but, in the local context, relatively important changes in the number of seats allocated to Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland and – apart from the simulation when dwelling type is used to allocate seats – little change in England’s allocation. However, within England there is one major change whatever population characteristic is used to allocate seats – an increase in the number of seats allocated to Greater London. The UK’s capital has the greatest concentration of young people and of households living in privately rented, high-density, converted dwellings. They are the least likely to be on the electoral register (in part because they are the most mobile groups within society: the Electoral Commission’s data shows recent migrants as the least likely

Table 1. Seat allocations

| Country/region | 2011 | Simulated allocations | | | 2010 voters only |
|------------------|------------|-----------------------|--------|------|------------------|
| | allocation | age | tenure | type | |
| Scotland * | 50 | 50 | 52 | 44 | 49 |
| Wales | 30 | 29 | 29 | 30 | 30 |
| Northern Ireland | 16 | 17 | 15 | 16 | 14 |
| England† | 500 | 500 | 499 | 506 | 503 |
| Northeast | 26 | 25 | 26 | 27 | 24 |
| Northwest | 68 | 66 | 69 | 70 | 66 |
| Yorkshire | 50 | 51 | 50 | 51 | 48 |
| East Midlands | 44 | 43 | 42 | 43 | 45 |
| West Midlands | 54 | 52 | 52 | 53 | 53 |
| East of England | 56 | 56 | 55 | 55 | 58 |
| London | 68 | 76 | 74 | 74 | 69 |
| Southeast † | 81 | 80 | 80 | 81 | 84 |
| Southwest | 53 | 51 | 51 | 52 | 56 |

* This excludes the two protected constituencies.

† This excludes the two constituencies for the Isle of Wight.

¹ The Electoral Commission, *Great Britain’s Electoral Registers 2015* (London: The Electoral Commission, December 2011).

² That research is available online at <http://y-g.co/vls5Mw>

to be registered to vote), hence London's current apparent considerable under-representation.

Of course, these are only rough estimates, which can be improved when the 2011 census data become available. However, if IER succeeds, the UK's map of constituencies currently being prepared for the 2015 general election could be succeeded by a considerably different one five years later.

Some of those attending the British Academy Forum, including electoral registration officers, feared that if registration is not mandatory then many of those not interested in politics who don't vote at general elections may decline the invitation to be on the electoral register. To assess the potential implication of this, we have run a further simulation – shown in the final column of Table 1 – which allocates seats according to the number of people in each country and region who voted in 2010. Again there are small but not insignificant differences from both the 2011 allocation and that which might occur if IER resulted in a complete electoral register. Northern Ireland, for example, could lose two of its current 16 seats; each of the three regions of northern England (Northeast, Northwest, Yorkshire and the Humber) would lose two each whereas three southern regions (East, Southeast, Southwest) would gain a total of eight seats.

The future of representative democracy

These changes arising from the interaction of the new rules for defining constituencies with the introduction of IER will contribute to a considerable alteration in the nature of British representative democracy. For many centuries, one of its core features has been that, as far as possible, MPs represent distinct communities. Despite relatively frequent redistributions in the last 50 years, a majority of constituencies remain substantially unchanged, giving continuity of representation. That underpinning feature of British democracy is now rapidly waning, replaced by a system that will be characterised by more frequent change than heretofore. In the future, there will be much less of a

sense of place with which a constituency's MP can identify, which will be disadvantageous to MPs, parties, electoral administrators and the electorate.

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In 2010, Professors Johnston and McLean co-authored two British Academy policy reports, *Choosing an Electoral System*, and *Drawing a New Constituency Map for the United Kingdom* (www.britac.ac.uk/policy/policy-centre-reports.cfm).

British Academy Forums offer a neutral setting for argument based on research and evidence, to help frame the terms of public debates and clarify policy options. They provide opportunities for frank, informed debate. It should not be assumed that any summary record of a Forum discussion reflects the views of every participant. Further information about British Academy Forums can be found via www.britac.ac.uk/policy/BA-Forums.cfm

Building a new politics?

When it comes to UK citizens and their relationship with politics, the figures are depressing. Recent research from the Hansard Society shows that seven in ten of us have limited or no trust in politicians; only half of us claim an interest in politics; and two-thirds believe that Britain's system of government needs a great deal of improvement.

In *Building a new politics?* Gerry Stoker emphasises that these statistics do not point to a steady decline in political interest and trust, but to a longstanding alienation between UK citizens and politics. Increasingly, more participatory and deliberative ways of policymaking are being floated as options for a government that promotes decentralisation and citizen involvement. How can this work if the interest is just not there among the population?

The academic debate on how to engage citizens is well established. One camp suggests that policymakers should focus on restoring citizen faith in existing representative processes,

while the other urges policy-makers to get citizens more actively involved through new participatory processes. Really, Stoker says, what are needed are new designs which draw on both schools of thought. And it's up to social scientists and policymakers to take up the challenge. *Building a new politics?* provides essential information for those interested, and is a digestible guide to the research that is key if government is to tap into the potential power of its citizen body.

The report is available to download via www.britac.ac.uk/policy/

