Individual electoral registration still needs a lot of work, if it is not to be a car crash for British democracy

By Democratic Audit

*Most of the Conservative-Liberal Democrat Coalition's original programme of constitutional reform has conspicuously failed to get implemented (notably AV, Westminster boundary changes and House of Lords reform). Yet, individual electoral registration (IER), making each voter register themselves instead of a 'head of household' doing it, has been pushed through and implementation is about to start. The Electoral Commission calls this the 'biggest change to the voter registration process since the universal franchise was introduced'. **Toby James** shows how the reform may yet mean a giant step backwards for British democracy, unless implementation is superbly handled*

The passing of the Electoral Registration and Administration Act 2013 means that every citizen will soon need to:

- Register individually – this is currently done on a household basis (except Northern Ireland)

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- Provide a national insurance number and date of birth or an alternative form of evidence of their identity

The change is being phased in next year, and people who fail to register individually will be removed from the register after the 2015 general election.

Rarely has there been so much interest in a bill about election administration in Britain. Sadly, most of this interest was not about election administration. The Liberal Democrats used the bill to sneak in a block on constituency reform as pay-back for Conservative 'treachery' over Lords reform. It was political theatre, but not of the type that furthered any genuine public interest in the election administration reforms ahead. Some salient criticisms were made of the Bill – by the Electoral Reform Society, Harriet Harman, Ros Baston and me. But by and large the public and media interest was a damp squib, and especially compared to the public outrage and excitement surrounding each reform proposed for election administration in the USA. (For instance, check out Sarah Silverman 's hard-hitting video on the issue – includes explicit language).

The dangers of Individual Registration

Why should we care? Aren't these safe, meaningless reforms? I undertook research on the effects that individual electoral registration will have which was presented to the Political and Constitutional Reform Committee and published in *Parliamentary Affairs*. The study was based on interviews with officials on the frontline of elections. Their views matter because these are the people who would be responsible for implementing the changes, explaining to citizens how they must now register, and dealing with any problems. They should know. Based on this research, we might expect:

- Voter confidence in the integrity of the register should be increased. But

- The costs involved in electoral registration may rise considerably, at a time of austerity cuts

- There could be significant issues with data quality and management

- There could be adverse spillover effects on other practices

Bad news for students, the young and geographically mobile people

The government's 'silver bullet' supposedly meant to prevent any decline in voter registration levels is a massive IT project. It is complex in both infrastructure and terminology. Few voters will know much about it. But its success is vital for British elections. Its first stage will be something called 'confirmation.' Names from the last household electoral register will be matched against the Department for Work and Pensions (DWP) database. If a name can be 'confirmed' by the DWP, it will remain on the register. If it cannot, each person will need to re-register, or will be removed from the list in 2015 or 2016.

The bad news is that the Electoral Commission's evaluation of the confirmation process estimated that only 72 per cent of currently registered citizens are on the DWP database. As it stands, everyone else will need to register. Moreover, the pilots also revealed enormous geographical variations, probably because of demographic factors. For example, many more people could be confirmed in Wigan than in Tower Hamlets borough in London. To quote the Electoral Commission report: 'Our analysis suggests that particular groups of electors – students, young adults and other mobile populations – are far less likely to be confirmed'.

There is another hope for getting people painlessly onto the register: data-mining. This sounds the same, but instead it involves local authorities using other databases (such as council tax etc.) to find people who they think should be on the register and asking to register. At present, we do not know how successful this strategy will be for increasing registrations – a report will follow from the Electoral Commission very soon.

Where next?

Individual Electoral Registration is coming, and it is coming fast. On many issues, decisions have been made and all that is left is implementation. This summer will see a dry-run of the behind closed-doors technology for implementing individual electoral registration (or IER). But as scholars of public administration often stress, the implementation phase is often where policies fail or succeed. Key aspects here include:

- Voter facing organisations need to mount high quality public information campaigns, so that the public know what is coming.

- Investment needs to be made in skills and training for local government staff. My research noted a need for re-skilling electoral officials. And the Electoral Commission concluded: 'not all EROs [Electoral Returning Officers] currently have the capacity or skills to conduct local data matching and there is a risk that variation in practices or the quality of different local data sets could introduce significant inconsistencies into the confirmation process across Great Britain'.

- The Government must make sufficient funding available to local authorities, both in the short and long term. Research shows that money improves election administration and election offices have faced cuts in recent times.

- Other strategies for improving electoral registration levels need to be actively considered. If there is a decline in the electoral register, then we need to think more imaginatively, learning from abroad and from the political science literature, about how registration can be boosted so as to offset this loss.

- The completeness of the register needs to be at least as much of a government priority as its accuracy.

Data-matching, electoral registration, confirmation processes and skilling electoral administration are not words that usually ignite public interest. But a re-shaped electoral register will determine who the electorate is and who it is not. It will determine the winners or losers of future elections. It is vital that British democracy as a whole is not one of the losers.

Note: This post represents the views of the author, and not of Democratic Audit, or the London School of Economics

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