

Briefing on improving electoral registration rates among attainers for peers

6th October 2020

1 <https://publications.parliament.uk/pa/bills/lbil/58-01/126/5801126-R-I.pdf>

Parliamentary Constituencies Bill (Report Stage) – AMENDMENT 16¹
(see appendix for full amendment and cross-party signatories). Voting will take place on the evening of Thursday 8 October.

What is the problem?

- The Parliamentary Constituencies Bill 2019-21 proposes using the electoral registers as the data source to draw parliamentary constituencies but this data is less likely to include the names of young people than older people, since young people are often not registered to vote.
- The problem has arisen partly because, since the introduction of Individual Electoral Registration (IER), the completeness of electoral registers has fallen among attainers (16 and 17-year olds who will reach electoral age within the life of the register).² There were 471,000 attainers on the registers in 2013, but this figure had fallen to 306,000 by 2019. Registration rates for eligible 16 and 17-year olds were estimated to be 25% in 2018 – a drop from 45% in 2015. In contrast, 94% of those aged 65+ were estimated to be registered.³
- This low level of registration among attainers should be of deep concern to anyone with the best interests of democracy in the UK at heart. Without revision to the Bill, the electoral boundaries will systematically give less democratic representation to young citizens.

2 James, T.S. (2020) *Comparative Electoral Management*, chapter 9. <https://tobysjamesdotcom.files.wordpress.com/2020/09/c09-chapter-9-james.pdf>

3 Electoral Commission (2019) *Completeness in Britain*. <https://www.electoralcommission.org.uk/who-we-are-and-what-we-do/our-views-and-research/our-research/accuracy-and-completeness-electoral-registers/2019-report-2018-electoral-registers-great-britain/completeness-great-britain>

Potential solutions outlined in this amendment

- This cross-party amendment seeks to compel the government to bring forward proposals to improve the completeness of the electoral register, in relation to attainers.
- The receipt of a National Insurance number (NiNo) from the Department of Work & Pensions (DWP) is an important recognition of an individual's rights and responsibilities in the economic sphere. It is also has the potential to be a moment where an individual is made aware of their rights and responsibilities in the democratic sphere.⁴
- The cross-party House of Lords Select Committee on the Electoral Registration and Administration Act 2013, recommended piloting a system of automatic voter registration (AVR) for attainers.⁵
- This amendment describes how such a system of AVR for attainers could work, with the DWP sharing information with Electoral Registration Officers (EROs), meaning a much higher proportion of attainers would be registered than is currently the case.
- Another option, as outlined in the amendment, would be for the DWP to provide attainers with information on how to apply to join the electoral register, at the same time as communicating with them regarding the receipt of their NiNo.

4 James, T.S. & Bernal, P. (2020) *Is it time for automatic voter registration in the UK?*. <https://tobysjamesdotcom.files.wordpress.com/2020/04/is-it-time-for-automatic-voter-registration-single-sides.pdf>

5 HL Paper 83 (2020). <https://committees.parliament.uk/publications/1792/documents/18271/default/>

Why the Parliamentary Constituencies Bill?

- The Parliamentary Constituencies Bill 2019-21 proposes using the electoral registers as the data source to draw parliamentary constituencies, as is standard for the boundary review process. As described above, however, this data source is incomplete and disproportionately less likely to include the names of young people.
- It is important that constituency boundaries are based on data that are as complete and accurate as possible, reflecting the real number of electors in each area. These straightforward proposals would go some way to improving the completeness of the data that will be used to draw constituency boundaries.

Rebuttals to potential objections

Privacy

- Under the proposed amendment, attainers would be entered onto the full electoral register, which is strictly for electoral purposes, but not the open register (the 'edited register' in Northern Ireland) which is sold for commercial purposes.
- If automatic registration were adopted, detailed legislation could require the ERO to write to all attainers, informing them of the ERO's intention to include them on the electoral register.
- Attainers could be informed by the ERO of their right to register anonymously and the ERO would have to wait a minimum of 28 days from the issuing of their communication to the attainer, before registering them.

Individual responsibility to register

- Automatic registration is sometimes opposed on the basis that it is an individual's responsibility to ensure they are on the electoral register.
- The Electoral Reform Society is unconvinced of this argument against automatic registration in general. In relation to 15-16-year olds, who have no prior experience of the electoral system, there is a strong case that it should not be their responsibility to ensure they are on the electoral register. We do not expect this group of people to seek out the DWP and ask for a National Insurance number. Why should we expect them to seek out their ERO to be placed on the electoral register?
- If automatic registration for attainers were not adopted, the proposal for the DWP to include details of how to register to vote, when communicating with attainers regarding their NiNo, would at least ensure that the vast majority of attainers will have received such information.

Party political bias

- There would be no evident party political advantage as a result of improving the proportion of 16 and 17 year olds who are registered. Based on ONS population estimates, 16-17 year olds make up an identical average (mean) of 2.6% of the population aged 16+ in constituencies in England and Wales won by the Conservatives, Labour and the Liberal Democrats at the 2019 general election.

Costs

- Electoral registration officers are currently facing significant financial pressures, which has led them to cut voter outreach work.⁶ Being provided with information about eligible attainers will likely lead to cost savings since fewer resources would need to be spent encouraging them to register to vote.

⁶ James, T.S. & Clark, A. (2020) 'Delivering Electoral Integrity Under Pressure: Local Government, Electoral Administration and the 2016 EU Referendum in the UK', <https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/abs/10.1080/03003930.2020.1719075>

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Appendix

Amendment 16 to Parliamentary Constituencies Bill (House of Lords Report Stage)

After Clause 6

LORD SHUTT OF GREETLAND (LIBERAL DEMOCRAT)

LORD WILLS (LABOUR)

LORD JANVRIN (CROSSBENCH)

LORD LEXDEN (CONSERVATIVE)

Insert the following new Clause—

“Improving completeness of electoral registers for purposes of boundary reviews etc.

1. Within a year of this Act coming into force, the Secretary of State must lay before Parliament proposals for improving the completeness of electoral registers for purposes of boundary reviews.
2. The proposals in subsection (1) may include requirements for either—
 - a. the Department for Work and Pensions to provide every registration officer with the name, address, date of birth and nationality of each individual in their district to whom they issue a National Insurance number ahead of their 16th birthday, and for registration officers to add to the full electoral registers those electors who they are satisfied are eligible for inclusion; or
 - a. the Department for Work and Pensions to notify individuals of the criteria for eligibility to vote and of the process for making an application to join the register when they are issued with a new National Insurance number.”

Member’s explanatory statement

16 and 17 year olds are added to electoral registers for the purposes of boundary reviews, but many of them are not known to the registration officers. The amendment would require the Secretary of State to make proposals for improving the completeness of electoral registers and suggests two possible ways in which the issue of a National Insurance number could trigger the inclusion of 16 and 17 year olds.