Electoral Reform Society

Automatic Voter Registration

May 2024

Automatic Voter Registration (AVR) would mean that all eligible voters are put directly on the electoral rolls ensuring that the millions of missing voters are registered and that no-one needlessly misses out on their democratic right to vote.

Millions missing from the register

In September last year, the Electoral Commission reported that between 7 and 8 million people were incorrectly registered or completely missing from the electoral registers across the UK.[1]

The Electoral Reform Society (ERS) estimates that 7.6 million eligible voters are missing from the electoral registers in England and Wales. Numbers vary across constituencies but in the worst areas, up to a fifth of potential voters may not be on the register.

AVR would increase the completeness and accuracy of the register

Not only would AVR ensure that all eligible voters are on the registers, but it would help to deal with inaccurate registrations, for instance where entries have become redundant due to home movement.

The top 5 constituencies with the largest estimated percentage of potential voters missing from the electoral registers are: Cities of London and Westminster (20.3%), Leeds Central and Headingley (20.2%), Bristol Central (19.6%), Sheffield Central (19.5%) and Liverpool Riverside (19.4%).

1   The Electoral Commission, "2023 report: Electoral registers in the UK", 2023. Available at: https://www.electoralcommission.org.uk/research-reports-and-data/electoral-registration-research/accuracy-and-completeness-electoral-registers/2023-report-electoral-registers-uk

Top 10 Constituencies with the largest % of voters missing from the electoral register

Constituency	Estimated % of eligible voters missing from the register
Cities of London & Westminster	20.3
Leeds Central & Headingley	20.2
Bristol Central	19.6
Sheffield Central	19.5
Liverpool Riverside	19.4
Kensington & Bayswater	19.1
Bermondsey & Old Southwark	19.0
Poplar & Limehouse	18.8
Holborn & St Pancras	18.7
Manchester Rusholme	18.7

Number of voters missing from the electoral register

| 0 | 5207 | 10,415 | 15,623 | 20,830 | 26,038 |
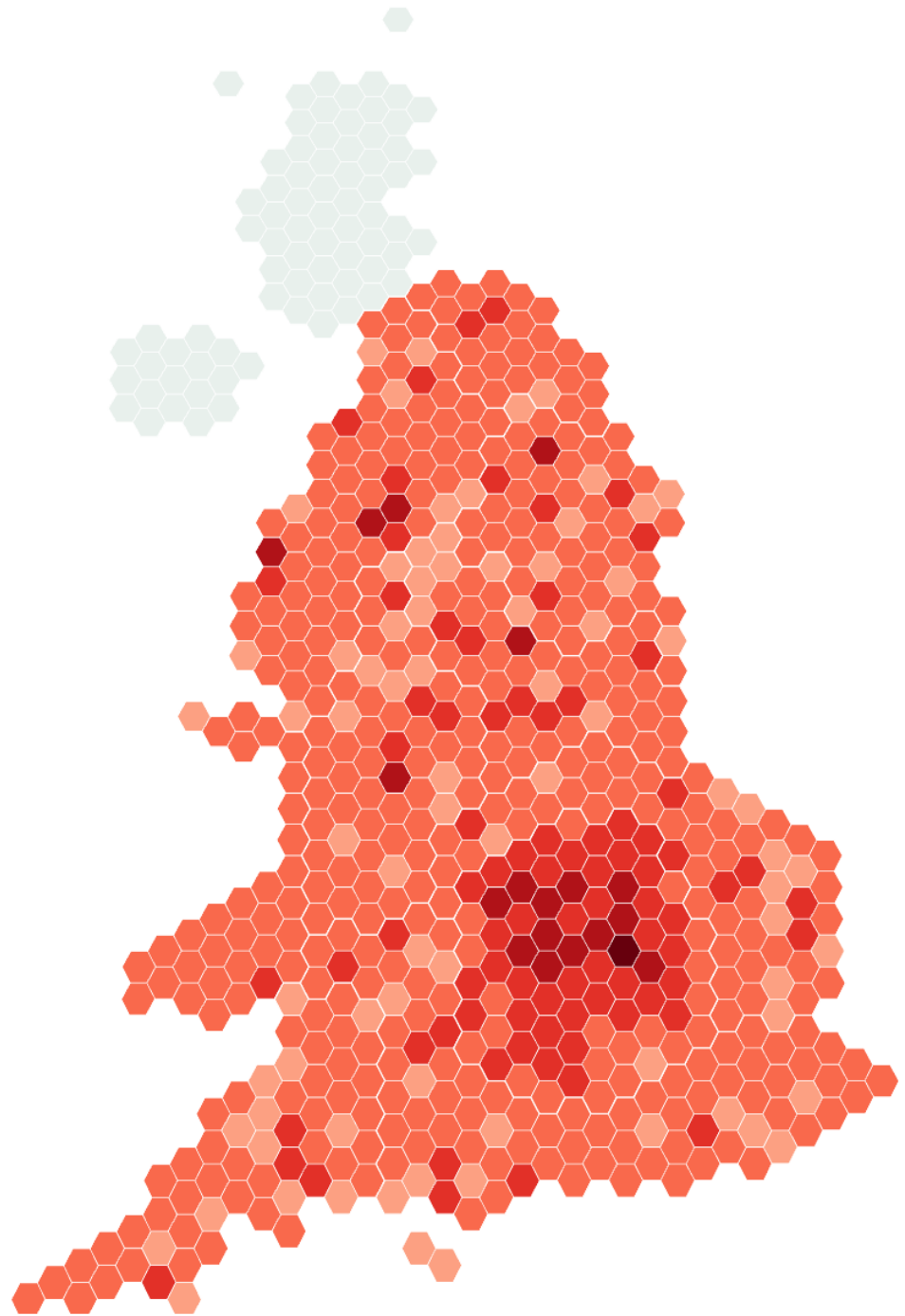
Find out how many potential missing voters you consituency has here. www.electoral-reform.org.uk/ers-reveals-constituencies

Under-registered groups

It is well documented that some groups are less likely to register to vote than others depending on age, ethnicity, social grade, housing tenure and disability. Research has found that young people, minority ethnic groups, people in lower DE socio-economic groups and people in privately rented accommodation are less likely to be registered to vote.[23] Mencap research found that 60% of people with learning disabilities who didn't vote said it was because registering to vote was too difficult.[4]

AVR would ensure that a significant barrier to taking part in the democratic process is removed, improving the completeness of the register and ensuring under-registered groups are on the electoral rolls.

2   Uberoi and Johnstone, "Political disengagement in the UK: Who is disengaged?," House of Commons Library, 2022. Available at: https://researchbriefings.files.parliament.uk/documents/CBP-7501/CBP-7501.pdf

3   Generation Rent, "Surburbanisation of renters boosts our influence at the ballot box". Available at: https://www.generationrent.org/2023/11/16/suburbanisation-of-renters-boosts-our-influence-at-the-ballot-box/

4   Mencap, 'People with a learning disability's passion for politics thwarted by system of excludes them,' 8 October 2014. Available at: https://www.mencap.org.uk/press-release/people-learning-disabilitys-passion-politics-thwarted-system-excludes-them

5   Rowena Mason, "Voter registration rise boosts Labour's election hopes", The Guardian, 2019. Available at: https://www.theguardian.com/politics/2019/nov/26/voter-registration-rise-boosts-labours-election-hopes

6   House of Commons Political and Constitutional Reform Committee, "Voter engagement in the UK", Fourth Report of Session 2014-2015, 2014. Available at: https://publications.parliament.uk/pa/cm201415/cmselect/cmpolcon/232/232.pdf

7   Toby James, Bite the Ballot and Alistair Clark, "Missing Millions Still Missing: A Vision for Electoral Modernisation in the UK". All Party Parliamentary Group on Democratic Participation, 2019. Available at: https://tobysjames.com/wp-content/uploads/2019/08/missing-millions-still-missing-1.pdf

8   House of Commons Levelling Up, Housing and Communities Committee, "Electoral Registration" Fourth Report of Session 2023-2024, 2024. Available at: https://committees.parliament.uk/publications/43968/documents/217860/default/

9   Electoral Commission, "Electoral registration at the June 2017 UK general election. Report on the UK Parliamentary general election held on 8 June 2017", 2017. Available at: https://www.electoralcommission.org.uk/sites/default/files/pdf_file/Electoral-registration-report-July-2017.pdf

10   The Electoral Commission, "Modernising electoral registration: feasibility studies", 2019. Available at: https://www.electoralcommission.org.uk/who-we-are-and-what-we-do/changing-electoral-law/a-modern-electoral-register/modernising-electoral-registration-feasibility-studies

11   The Electoral Commission, "2023 report: Electoral registers in the UK", 2023. Available at: https://www.electoralcommission.org.uk/research-reports-and-data/electoral-registration-research/accuracy-and-completeness-electoral-registers/2023-report-electoral-registers-uk

12   Tony James and Paul Bernall, "Is it time for Automatic Voter Registration in the UK?", Joseph Rowntree Reform Trust: York, 2020. Available at: https://tobysjamesdotcom.files.wordpress.com/2020/04/is-it-time-for-automatic-voter-registration-single-sides.pdf

13   Nordic Co-Operation, "The right to vote in Sweden", 2024. Available at: https://www.norden.org/en/info-norden/right-vote-sweden

14   International IDEA, "Voter Turnout Database, Sweden" 2022. Available at: https://www.idea.int/data-tools/country-view/261/40

15   Brennan Centre for Justice, "Automatic Voter Registration, a Summary", 2023. Available at: https://www.brennancenter.org/our-work/research-reports/automatic-voter-registration-summary

Pressures on EROs

AVR would also reduce the pressure on Electoral Registration Officers in the run up to elections. In 2019, after the General Election was called, more than 3 million people registered to vote during the campaign (29th Oct 2019 – 26th Nov 2019). In the same period before the 2017 General Election, the figure was just over 2.3 million.[5] EROs were dealing with upwards of 100,000 registration applications per day in the run up to the election in 2019, putting enormous strain on electoral services. AVR would remove the last minute dash for registration.

Support for AVR

Cross-party parliamentary support for automatic voter registration has come from the Political and Constitutional Reform Committee in its 2014 report on *Voter Engagement*[6], the All-Party Parliamentary Group on Democratic Participation's report on the *Missing Millions*[7], and the Levelling Up, Housing and Communities Committee report on Electoral Registration[8].

The Electoral Commission[9] called for automatic or direct voter registration processes in 2017, and there is widespread civil society support.

In 2019, the Electoral Commission released feasibility studies on automatic/automated voter registration, which showed that moves to automatic or more automated registration 'are feasible from a technical and operational perspective and could be implemented without radically altering the structure of the electoral registration system in the UK'.[10] In 2023 they highlighted how AVR could be implemented via the HM Passport Office which already undertakes rigorous checks on the information provided, collects the data needed to undertake electoral registration and is already sharing this data to government departments and public sector bodies for 25 million identity checks per year.[11]

Automatic or more automated registration could be combined with other modernisations, such as a more centralised or joined-up database and a registration look up facility, to further improve accuracy and completeness of the registers and reduce the pressures on EROs.

Anonymous registration would still be possible under AVR. If AVR is introduced, it is paramount that those currently registered anonymously are contacted and informed of the changes to the system, they should then be supported by local authorities to ensure that they remain anonymous. For this reason there should be a designated period of time in which it is the responsibility of the local authority to contact all anonymous voters and assist them with entering the register. It has been suggested that the period of anonymous registration be extended to 5 years from the current 12 months and that the attesters for anonymous registration be expanded to 'reflect victims' lived experiences of abuse' .[12]

Comparative Evidence

The UK wouldn't be alone in moving to AVR. For instance Sweden uses an automatic voter registration model.[13] All persons who qualify to be included on the Swedish Tax Agency's population register 30 days before the election day are automatically registered and mailed a polling card. In 2022, the voting age population of Sweden was 8.1 million and over 7.75 million people were registered to vote. Turnout was 84%.[14]

In America, 23 states and the District of Columbia have approved AVR and more states are expected to pass similar provisions.[15] Oregon introduced AVR in 2016, the mechanism compelled the Department of Motor Vehicles offices to provide the necessary data for electoral registration to the Secretary of State. Since introducing AVR in 2016, Oregon has seen registration rates quadruple. In the first six months after AVR was implemented in Vermont in 2017, registration rates jumped 62 percent when compared to the first half of 2016.