Changes to electoral registration procedures may have significant implications for registration levels and electoral outcomes

Blog Admin

Registering to vote must be simple and convenient. New research by
Toby S. James shows that individual electoral registration, by itself, will lead to a decline in
registration levels. The government can do more in the Electoral Registration and
Administration Bill to improve levels of registration.

In the 1980s American academics Frances Fox Piven and Richard Cloward, alongside the organisation Human SERVE, campaigned to make voting and registering to vote easier for citizens. At the time, America was concerned about low levels of turnout and registration. The campaigners argued for measures such as allowing citizens to register to vote at various public offices such as welfare offices and childcare centers, with the aim of promoting participation amongst groups where it was traditionally low.

Their campaign culminated in the 1993 National Voter Registration Act (NVRA). This expanded the number of locations and opportunities whereby eligible citizens could apply to register to vote. In particular, citizens were to be given a voter registration application when they applied for or renewed a driver's license, or when applying for (or receiving) services at certain other public offices. It was praised by many as being a triumph for the civil rights movement which had previously fought to abolish the Jim Crow laws. Signing the law, President Bill Clinton declared that:

> *'The victory we celebrate today is but the most recent chapter in the overlapping struggles of*
> *our Nation's history to enfranchise women and minorities, the disabled, and the young with*
> *the power to affect their own destiny … Today we celebrate our noble tradition by signing into*
> *law our newest civil rights law…'*

Some campaigners, including Piven and Cloward, were disappointed that the Act didn't go far enough. Nonetheless, the legacy of NVRA is clear. Today, a huge proportion of new registrants use this mechanism to register to vote in the US. Data from the US Electoral Assistance Commission shows that 37.1 per cent of registration forms were submitted via motor vehicle agencies in 2010. Over 18 million citizens used this method in 2008. Subsequent empirical studies showed how this (and other methods) could improve registration rates (see here for an overview). Frances Fox Piven and colleagues later argued that the effect on registration could have been greater had federal agencies worked harder to enforce the Act.

Fast-forward twenty years and cross the Atlantic to 2012. Today, the UK is in need of similar reforms. The government is planning to introduce individual voter registration as part of the Electoral Registration and Administration Bill. This involves making registering to vote *more* bureaucratic for many citizens. Registration is currently conducted on a household basis meaning that one person can register every citizen in each house. The proposals will require each individual to register themselves and provide personal identifiers such as national insurance number. These will be checked against government databases to check whether they are legitimate voters.

I have recently undertaken research on UK electoral administration and the effects that individual electoral registration will have. This will be published in *Parliamentary Affairs* very shortly (download a pre-

print here) and is based on extensive interviews with local election officials. The research suggests that:

- Individual registration is likely to lead to a considerable decline in levels of registration, especially amongst the younger and minority populations

- Individual registration is a more resource intensive way of compiling the electoral register than household registration. There may also be many unforeseen costs to local government at a time that they are faced with budget cuts. Returning and registration officers may therefore make cuts in other services to allow for the introduction of individual registration.

- The requirement for citizens to provide personal identifiers, such as a national insurance number, may confuse many voters.

These proposals come at a time of serious electoral registration decline. An Electoral Commission Report in December suggested that the parliamentary electoral register was as low as 82.3 per cent. As I have argued in previous blog post, the UK compares poorly internationally. Under-registration is a serious problem for UK democracy.

Individual electoral registration was announced in a White Paper in June last year. Since then the government has already shifted its position on a number of policy positions. For example, the 'opt-out', whereby citizens could tick a box and not be included on the register has been dropped. Nick Clegg hinted that this might happen in October last year. The proposed Bill suggests that there will be now be a penalty for those who do not register. These changes must be, and have been, welcomed by campaigners such as the Electoral Reform Society, who launched their Missing Millions campaign in response to the government's initial plans.

The government has invested much hope in using data-matching to improve electoral registration. Data-matching pilot schemes were initially launched to check the accuracy and to identify people who may be eligible to vote and then invite them to apply to register. In February 2012 it was suggested that 'the names and addresses of all individuals currently on an electoral register will be matched against the data held by public bodies such as the Department for Work and Pensions and local authorities themselves' and that '[i]f an elector's information can be matched, the individual will be automatically placed onto the new IER register and would not need to take any further action to be registered under IER' (see: here). This too must be welcome news for those seeking to maximise electoral registration.

Unfortunately, the Electoral Commission's evaluation of the initial data-matching schemes did not fully test such an approach and instead highlighted a number of concerns about relying on data-matching. It suggested that the process was labour intensive with significant work required to analyse the data. Moreover, the approach 'did not prove very effective at getting new electors on to the registers'. Only 7,917 citizens were added in the 22 pilots (although this is still enough to win a few marginal constituencies). This leaves efforts to improve electoral registration levels somewhat in the air.

The Electoral Registration and Administration Bill therefore offers the opportunity to address this. Here are some recommendations, based on my research findings:

1. **The government could therefore consider other new schemes to offset the anticipated decline.** These might include:

   - Allowing citizens to register to vote when accessing other government services such as obtaining a driving licence (as in America). This could be an especially effective way of targeting younger citizens, many of whom many be keener to get their drivers licence than register to vote. The data-matching project noted that using the DVLA database was 'more effective at targeting 16 and 17 year olds as opposed to the population as a whole'. Why not add a section to the drivers licence application form asking them to register to vote at the same time? What about citizens claiming for state benefits? Moving house? Until there is confidence that data-matching works, this could be an important mechanism for dealing with under-registration.

   - Implementing online registration for new registrations. This was always the government's plan, it seems, but it is important that it is taken forward and implemented. At present citizens can only re-

register online. They have to download a form, print it off, sign it and post it. Couldn't this be simplified?

- Providing penalties for those who do not register (which, as mentioned, now appears to be on the cards…).

- Election day registration is considered as a long-term policy aim. This may be some way away, but it is known to work in some states and would genuinely approach election administration from the voters perspective.

2. **Measures should be put in place to ensure sufficient *long-term* funding of elections. This could involve ring-fencing new funding for election departments.** Individual electoral registration will cost more money to implement. Data-matching will cost more money to implement. Elections in America are littered with examples of where there have been problems (Florida, 2000) indirectly or directly resulting from underfunding. The Electoral Commission has pointed out that the government 'has not yet explained how funding will be allocated.'

3. **The views of citizens towards the registration process should be carefully monitored through survey and focus-group research after the implementation of IER.** This is important because my research showed that the requirement for citizens to provide personal identifiers, such as a national insurance number, may confuse many voters. Or they may be reluctant to provide personal identifiers to election officials.

4. **A detailed implementation plan for individual electoral registration is published as soon as possible.** Electoral administrators need time to change software, re-skill staff and change processes.

Changes to the way the electoral register is compiled does not always capture the public or media's interest in the way that it did, and still does, in America. But it has important implications for how many people vote, electoral fraud, whether people perceive electoral institutions to be fair and sometimes who wins elections. There have been some excellent recent blog posts from the like of Ros Baston, Mark Pack, Stuart Wilks-Heeg and others in recent months and weeks. Let's hope there remains continued public interest in this important, but easily forgotten, issue.

Note: This article gives the views of the author, and not the position of the British Politics and Policy blog, nor of the London School of Economics. Please read our comments policy before posting.

About the author

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The **Electoral Registration and Administration Bill** will receive its second reading in the House of Commons on the 23rd May 2012.

For an overview of different procedures and the evidence base, see this article.

You may also be interested in the following posts (automatically generated):

1. UK electoral registration levels are already low by international standards, but new plans to change registration may make things even worse. (60)

2. The government's plans to change the voter registration system will do little to prevent electoral fraud. They may even mean that fewer people vote. (36)

3. The move to individual electoral registration offers an unparalleled opportunity to take into account disabled people's access needs and remove some of the systemic barriers they face in casting a vote. (32.8)

4. Tactical voting can still occur under the Alternative Vote, and it may lead to unexpected outcomes

(18.9)