There are effective ways of getting the 'Missing Millions' back on to the UK's electoral register

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*Reforms to the electoral registration process under this and the previous coalition government have led to changes which experts and campaigners alike have described as negative for democracy. Here, **Toby James** and **Oliver Sidorczuk** describe the findings of* a new report *which proposes solutions to the electoral registration crisis.*

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We stand at a critical crossroads in our democracy. The number of people that are on the electoral register is in long-term decline. It was estimated that up to 7.5 million people were not registered in 2014. During the transition to individual electoral registration (IER) another 1.4 million names were removed. Dramatically, the number of attainers, our next generation of voters, fell by 40%.

In a draft report, co-authored with Bite The Ballot, and presented to the All-Party Parliamentary Party on Democratic Participation for discussion today, new information is unveiled about the nature of the problem. Findings from a new UEA survey of electoral administrators, as detailed in the report, shows that two-thirds of electoral administrators agreed that citizens had complained to them about the registration process being bureaucratic. Roughly half of electoral officials thought that the completeness of the register had declined.

IER has clearly increased the accuracy of the register. Many of the names to be removed under IER are likely to have been duplicates and old registrations. The available evidence, however, is that it has also left fewer people on the register today than there were two years ago.

A 'Perfect Storm' in Electoral Services

Moreover, the report reveals that electoral services up and down the country have faced a perfect storm of challenges under IER. Moving to IER has involved major organisational and technological change in the context of

major cuts to local government funding. Half of electoral administrators said that they had thought about leaving their job at some point in the last year. Why does this matter? Because running elections is difficult and we will only see more problems without experienced, dedicated and motivated staff who aren't stretched beyond capacity.

Getting the 'Missing Millions' back on to the register

We are at a crossroads today because, now that IER has been completed, there is an opportunity to focus on the completeness and inclusiveness electoral register. Thankfully, there are clear short- and long-term steps that can be taken to improve this situation – drawing from the experiences of local election officials, civil society groups (such as Bite The Ballot) involved in registering people on the frontline and best practice from decades of academic research on the topic.

Ideas, proposals and solutions

In our report, which we hope that the APPG will use as a foundation for an all-party endorsed report, we set out 14-short term solutions, including calls to:

- Replicate the Northern Ireland 'schools initiative' throughout Great Britain
- Coordinate a specific registration drive to target 16 and 17 year-old 'attainers'
- Register students annually when they enrol in college or university
- Publish a detailed evaluation of innovations designed to improve the completeness of the register
- Strengthen the funding of electoral registration services
- Include civil society groups and academics in government reviews on registration, and
- Support the Law Commission's proposals to consolidate electoral law.

Longer-term remedies (of which we've set out 10) include:

- Introducing a national website for citizens to check their own registration status online
- Encouraging citizens to register to vote online when they access other government services such as paying council tax, renewing car taxes or registering for benefits (drawing lessons from the USA's 'motor voter' registration via driver's licences)
- Reintroducing N. I. number cards when notifying 15-year-olds of their NI number, and enabling the option to request an N. I. number (or a reminder of a number) online, and
- Introducing automatic voter registration.

The ultimate goal has to be a system of automatic registration. In the 21 st century, many people assume that they are on the electoral register because they pay council tax and use other Government services. Voters were turned away from the polls at the 2015 General Election not because they didn't want to vote, but because they thought that they were on the register but they were not.

Automatic registration has now been introduced in Oregon and California. Reports are suggesting that in a typical month, 2,000 people register to vote in Oregon. In the first six days of this year, more than 4,300 joined the voter rolls under a new initiative that automatically signs up voters when they apply for driver's licenses.

There are solutions to this problem. And yes, many proposals are often technical in nature. But they can make a real difference to our democracy – and deserve to be embraced by all parties, now.

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