

The Electoral Commission's Jenny Watson on internet voting, electoral fraud, and Individual Voter Registration

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By Democratic Audit UK

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*The Electoral Commission is the public body responsible for regulating party and election finance and setting standards for UK elections. The organisation's Chair, **Jenny Watson**, agreed to answer questions from Democratic Audit's **Sean Kippin** on the prospects for moving voting online, recent allegations about the integrity of postal voting, and the concerns around the implementation of Individual Voter Registration (IER).*



Recently, a lot of people have raised the idea of internet voting as a way of increase youth voter turnout. Do you view this as a realistic prospect?

What's clear is that as technology advances and society develops, the whole issue of electoral modernisation cannot stay on the slow track any longer. There are a number of potential options that could increase participation at elections, particularly amongst the young, and e-voting is certainly one option to explore. But what must never be lost sight of is the need to balance accessibility in our electoral system with its security.

The UK needs an ambitious and comprehensive strategy for bringing the way we vote into the modern age. Despite some positive steps being taken, such as online registration, these have been piecemeal rather than tied to a coherent strategic approach. So we are now going to look at a range of options that could help increase participation – from the possibility of registering to vote on the day, to options such as advance voting; e-voting has to be part of that consideration. We want future governments and parliaments to be clear about the options, and we want to make sure that the voice of the electoral community is heard in the debate about how the way we vote develops in future – but we'll also be consulting more widely as we do this work.

Questions have been raised about the integrity of postal voting, what is your take on it? Does the increased

accessibility to the political process for marginalised groups justify the potential for fraud?

Postal voting is a popular and convenient way for millions of people to cast their vote. At the 2010 General Election, across the UK, 5.5 million valid postal votes were received, representing just over 18% of all votes cast at that election. At the Police and Crime Commissioner elections in 2012 where turnout: was 15% overall, postal votes accounted for 48.9% of all votes counted (2.8 million).

The law was actually tightened up in 2007 and postal voters now have to provide their signature and date of birth when applying for a postal vote, and also when casting their vote. Both records are checked, and if they don't match, the ballot paper is not counted. The introduction of Individual Electoral Registration will further secure the process as it will remove any attempts to create false entries on the electoral register.

Proven cases of electoral fraud are rare, but everyone should be concerned about a crime where voters are the victims. After all it's unscrupulous campaigners that commit electoral fraud. We don't think that it would be proportionate to take away access to postal voting for the large numbers of voters who value the convenience, but we do think that some additional safeguards are needed.

So to give greater confidence for voters, we've recommended that campaigners should not handle completed postal vote application forms or postal ballot packs. We have already shared this view with political parties and will encourage them to agree to sign up to an enhanced Code of Conduct for elections in 2015.

What efforts are being made by the Electoral Commission to ensure a comprehensive electoral register following the introduction of Individual Electoral Registration?

Ahead of the transition to Individual Electoral Registration (IER) in June a vast amount of planning has been undertaken by Electoral Registration Officers (EROs) whose role it is to ensure the electoral register is as accurate and complete as possible.

A 'dry-run' of the matching of electors' details against details held on the Department of Work and Pensions (DWP) database has already taken place. Under this confirmation process, where an elector is matched, the ERO will include that elector on the new register and that elector will not need to take any further steps in order to remain on the electoral register. The 'dry-run' found a 78% match rate and what this 'dry-run' has done is provide invaluable data to EROs showing which of their specific wards are likely to have fewer people automatically matched and transferred to the new register. That means EROs can focus their efforts and resources on the people who – because they are not "confirmed" – would otherwise fall off the register. EROs are best placed to understand that data, and what it means in the context of their local community. And by the way, all that data is public – for every local government ward in Great Britain – and you can find it [here](#).

The Electoral Commission has created a single electoral registration form design for the whole of Great Britain, which we've extensively tested with voters to be sure it works. We've also provided guidance to EROs and created over 160 template resources – from posters and letters to online adverts – to help them during the transition to IER

The Electoral Commission will also run a mass-media public awareness campaign to coincide with the write-out that electoral administrators will do to voters informing them of the change and the campaign will encourage them to take the necessary action to ensure they remain on or join the electoral register.

How is the Electoral Commission going to monitor all of these developments?

We will be collecting data from EROs at various points during the transition to IER. This will allow us to answer important questions such as how confirmation match rates vary across the country (as they did in the 'dry-run'), how the number of registered postal voters changes and, at different points, how many electors have not yet been either confirmed or re-registered individually (and would therefore be removed from the registers at the end of the transition to IER). There are important elections all over the UK in 2016 and we'll want to be sure that large numbers of voters

won't be disenfranchised ahead of these elections if the transition goes ahead early, as Government has indicated it would prefer.

We will also be conducting two studies on the accuracy and completeness of the registers. The first of these studies is already underway and will provide a baseline against which we can judge the impact of IER. This will provide estimates of accuracy and completeness for the last registers to be compiled under household registration – those published in February and March 2014. We will report on this study in July 2014.

The second study will take place once IER transition is complete using either the December 2015 or December 2016 registers. This will provide estimates on the accuracy and completeness of the first full IER registers and will be published in either July 2016 or July 2017.

Note: This post represents the views of the author and not those of Democratic Audit. This is part one of a two part interview – [part two can be viewed here](#). Please read our [comments policy](#) before posting. The shortened URL for this link is: <http://buff.ly/1izH3gw>

Jenny Watson is the Chair of the Electoral Commission. She is also a non-Executive Director of WRAP (Waste and Resources Action Programme) and a trustee of the charity Money Advice Trust. She is Chair of the Independent Complaints Panel at the Portman Group. She was the last Chair of the Equal Opportunities Commission prior to the creation of the Commission for Equality and Human Rights, and is a past Deputy Chairman of both the Banking Code Standards Board, and of the Committee on Radioactive Waste Management. She has also worked in a number of human rights organisations, including Liberty and Charter88.

