

## The electoral register

1. Electoral registration is a central focus for the Electoral Commission. We therefore welcome the important remarks on the subject made by Dr Michael Pinto-Duschinsky in his Memorandum of Evidence to the Committee on Standards in Public Life and in his oral evidence before the Committee on 13 June.

In particular, we accept his point that there has been no recent research into the key topic of the number of ineligible (“redundant”) names on the register.

2. This note will outline the research we intend to carry out to remedy this gap and explain why such research was not carried out after the 2001 Census.

It will give a caution about all estimated totals of errors in the register (including that of Dr Pinto-Duschinsky) because of the lack of information about the number of redundant names .

Finally, the note will summarise the main initiatives that have been taken and will be taken by the Commission to improve the register.

### Establishing the facts

3. A significant amount of our work has been and will be targeted at understanding and tackling the causes of inaccuracy in electoral registers.<sup>1</sup>

For reasons that are explained in Paragraph 5, it was not possible to conduct research after the 2001 Census on the number of ineligible persons included on the register. Research was commissioned and carried out by the Office of National Statistics (ONS) on missing names (eligible voters whose names were missing from the register).

Despite the fact that it is technically more difficult and costlier to carry out research into the number of redundant names outside the time of the decennial Census, it is the Commission’s intention to carry out this research in the near future, as detailed in Paragraph 12.

4. The Commission has considered over the last two years how to address the current absence of accurate data about redundant names.
  - A likely way of carrying out this research will be to select a sample of streets across the UK and compare registration eligibility with actual registration through knocking on doors and interviewing occupants. It is likely that the research might involve random probability sampling whereby an interviewer will need to make

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<sup>1</sup>See paragraphs 25-31.

several call-backs to specific addresses until an outcome had been recorded. This will clearly be resource-intensive.

- The sample will need to be large enough to produce results which can be robustly extrapolated to the whole of the UK. The sample will need to be segmented by factors such as gender, age and ethnic origin. This implies a sample of 10,000 -20,000 individuals.
  - As a result of the two factors above, the cost could be in the order of £0.5m - £1m depending on the exact research design.<sup>2</sup>
  - This research will inevitably be sensitive, as participants might have concerns about public bodies investigating their behaviour and might not therefore give accurate responses.
5. The reason why there was no research on redundant names in the aftermath of the 2001 Census is that the Electoral Commission only became operational in 2001, when it was too late to make plans to arrange for research on the accuracy of the register to coincide with the Census.

Moreover, the Office for National Statistics (ONS) did not plan to undertake research on the accuracy of the electoral register, although it had done so after the censuses of 1981 and 1991, looking both at over- and under-registration.<sup>3</sup>

However, the Commission identified early in its existence the importance of such research and engaged in extended negotiations with ONS staff over a period of years in order to secure agreement to working with the Commission to produce equivalent data to that produced in earlier years.

The project specification eventually agreed with ONS focused only on issues of under-registration. This was because the ONS data from the 2001 census could not be used to estimate the extent of over-registration.

The result was our report, *Understanding Electoral Registration*, published in 2005. On the Commission's behalf, the Office of National Statistics compared available population figures from the 2001 Census and the Labour Force Survey with figures on the 2000 electoral register for England and Wales<sup>4</sup>. The best estimate is that 91-92% of eligible voters are registered to vote. This report is the source of the figure for the current rate of under-registration (the estimate that 3.5 million eligible voters are not currently registered) discussed by the CSPL at its evidence session with Dr Michael Pinto-Duschinsky on 13 June 2006.

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<sup>2</sup> The Commission's total research budget for 2006-07 is £0.7m.

<sup>3</sup> Todd JE and Butcher B (1981), *Electoral Registration in 1981*; Smith, S (1993), *Electoral Registration in 1991*. OPCS Social Survey Division, HMSO, London

<sup>4</sup> Scotland and Northern Ireland are not covered by the Office for National Statistics, and registration statistics from those countries were not available for the research for *Understanding Electoral Registration*. This paper deals with registration figures for England and Wales alone.

## The number of errors on the current electoral register

6. The Commission agrees with Dr Michael Pinto-Duschinsky that an estimate of the total number of errors on the registers in England and Wales must include both the estimated number of missing names (of eligible voters excluded) and of redundant names (of ineligible voters included). Since there has been no recent research into the number of redundant names and since the estimate for the number of missing names applies to 2000-1, the number of errors on the current electoral register is necessarily a matter of conjecture. This is agreed by the Commission and by Dr Pinto-Duschinsky, as is clear from his evidence to the Committee on 13 June.
7. We therefore wish to make three main points. First, any estimate of the number of errors in the registers of England and Wales must be treated with considerable caution. Second, it is possible to use other methods of calculation to reach different approximations from the 7 million errors given by Dr Pinto-Duschinsky in his Memorandum of Evidence. Third, in proposing somewhat different totals, the Commission does not wish to deny the serious proportions of the current problems relating to voter registration.
8. One method of estimating the number of errors was given by Dr Pinto-Duschinsky. This was to assume that the ratio of missing names to redundant names has remained approximately the same as it was at the time of the Census of 1981. According to this method of estimation, the electoral register for England and Wales currently contains roughly 7 million errors. This figure is made up of an estimate of 3.5 million people who are eligible to vote but are not on the register plus an estimate of 3.5 million names which are on the electoral register but who are not eligible to vote. The figure of 3.5 million who are eligible to vote but are not on the register was provided in the Commission's 2005 report *Understanding Electoral Registration* (see above paragraph 3). This represents an estimated 8-9% of the electorate of England and Wales.
8. A second method is to assume that the current ratio of missing names to redundant names is the same as it was at the time of the Census of 1991. The results of the 1991 study were strikingly different to those of the previous study at the time of the Census of 1981. Whereas the research published in 1982 indicated that the number of redundant names was roughly the same as (in fact slightly larger than) the number of missing names, in 1991, the number of redundant names was only about a quarter of the number of missing names.

According to the study after the 1991 Census, the percentage of redundant names was very approximately 1.8-3.3% (as compared with about 7% in 1981). If this percentage still applied at the time of the 2001 census, then the total of redundant names in England and Wales in 2000-1 might have been around 1 million and the total number of errors on

registers in England and Wales (redundant names plus missing names) may have been as low as 4.5 million.

In comparison with the study at the time of the 1981 Census, the study at the time of the 1991 Census has the advantage of being more recent (albeit not very recent). It is possible that fewer redundant names were on the electoral register at this time because of widespread failure to register during the period of the poll tax, although there is no hard statistical evidence on the effect that this had on registration.

9. It should be noted that neither of these estimates is necessarily accurate. It may be that the number of redundant names is entirely different from the number of non-registered individuals. It should also be remembered that the figure of 8-9% in the Commission's report *Understanding Electoral Registration* was itself a 'best estimate' based on available figures rather than an exact figure.
10. If both the studies carried out at the time of the 1981 and 1991 Censuses have their drawbacks as models for 2000-1, there are further possible methods of calculation of the likely number of errors in recent registers. For example, one alternative approach would be to estimate the possible number of redundant names on the electoral register by identifying the numbers of people in each of the likely 'redundant' categories (e.g. individuals who are not British, Irish and qualifying Commonwealth citizens, or nationals of an EU member state; people who have died; etc.) and looking to find other sources for each of those groups. However, robust figures for each of these categories are difficult to establish.
11. Ideally, it is also necessary to take into account the possible results of measures introduced since the Commission came into existence in 2000, which have been introduced in order to improve the accuracy of the register. These intended improvements are (a) the rolling register and (b) the rule that names should not be carried forward from a previous register for more than one year in the absence of evidence that the named person still resides at the address included in the earlier register. However, there is no systematic evidence about the effects of these measures on the number of errors in electoral registers on the qualifying date.
12. It should be noted that all the above totals are for England and Wales alone. Moreover, these estimated totals of errors are for the qualifying date of 15 October on the year a register is created. By the time the register comes into force four months later, it already contains a larger number of errors because of removals and deaths. During the course of the year, it becomes still less accurate.

## Where next

12. As indicated above, the Commission fully recognises the value of further research to establish an accurate estimate of the extent of over-registration to sit alongside our 2005 research report *Understanding*

*Electoral Registration.* Our plans for such research had been focused until recently on the anticipated registration pilot schemes included in the Electoral Administration Bill. Since the removal of the pilot provisions from the legislation in May, we have been exploring alternative ways forward. We hope to be in a position to have identified a suitable research methodology in time to implement this approach in 2007-08, notwithstanding the challenges set out in paragraph 4 above.

13. In parallel, the Commission continues to undertake a range of work with local authorities, the police, prosecuting bodies and others (e.g. Association of Electoral Administrators, Association of Chief Police Officers) to identify and tackle instances of incorrect or potentially fraudulent registration; and to promote best practice in the registration process.
14. We actively alert, and respond to queries from, electoral administrators about procedures in relation to suspicious rolling registration applications and act as a conduit between them and law enforcement agencies to encourage efficient joint working to deal with suspected fraudulent registrations. This is in addition to our regular guidance activities.
15. We also recognise that fraudulent registration may be motivated by economic crime and are working closely with the relevant enforcement bodies to address this issue.
16. The Commission's guidance in relation to the retention of names on the register is unambiguous – electoral registration officers must remove electors from the register if they do not receive a canvass return in each of two consecutive years.
17. The Commission also has a number of strategies for promoting registration amongst those groups which are under-registered. Each year we run dedicated multi-media registration campaigns targeting the general public to remind them to register in advance of upcoming elections. In addition to our main campaigns, we also carry out targeted advertising aimed at particularly under-registered groups: recent homemovers, people from ethnic minority communities, young people, service voters and overseas voters. Our mailing to people who had recently moved house in March 2006 generated over 70,000 new registrations and a pilot campaign using street teams in the West Midlands registered almost 1,000 young people from ethnic minority communities in three weeks.
18. In addition to our advertising campaigns, we currently run a partnership grants programme, which provides grants to organisations working with young people, people from ethnic minority communities and people with disabilities. Eligible organisations are invited to apply for funding to run projects that aim to increase understanding and involvement in democracy. Finally, our participation team work with partner organisations, providing training and resources to promote democracy and to aid the registration of particular groups. All of our resources and

campaign materials are available for electoral administrators to order free of charge to help them to run registration activity locally.

Electoral Commission  
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