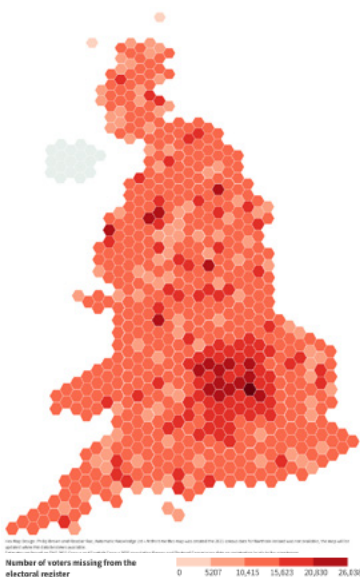# Electoral Reform Society

Briefing on Modernising Electoral Registration

February 2026

Estimated number of eligible voters missing from the electoral register in England, Scotland and Wales, by constituency

Number of voters missing from the electoral register

0   5,207   10,415   15,623   20,830   26,038

The Electoral Commission's most recent analysis of electoral registers estimated that between 7 and 8 million people are missing from the electoral rolls.[1] ERS constituency estimates based on these findings suggest that, in some places, as much as 20% of the total eligible population is likely to be missing from the register.[2]

In the 2024 General Election, voter turnout was just 59.9%, narrowly beating the previous historically low turnout of 59.4% in 2001. However, what the turnout figure fails to show is how many people were unable to vote because they weren't registered to vote in the first place. With around 19 million people not turning out to vote and 8 million likely missing from the register – a total 27.5 million people did not participate in the election: Nearly as many people didn't vote as did in 2024.[3]

Eligible citizens missing from the register is a democratic problem. Not only are these potential voters not able individually to exercise their right to vote, but collectively their voices are not being heard by decision makers. This is particularly a problem when missing eligible voters are not evenly distributed within the population.

81% of British people support automatically registering voters with 48% strongly supporting this change.[4]

Comprehensive and accurate electoral registration which reaches as many eligible voters as possible, is critical to our democracy. It is vital therefore that all possible steps should be taken to ensure everyone who is eligible to vote is registered.

In this briefing:
- How the registration system currently works
- Problems with the current system
- What is Automatic Voter Registration (AVR)
- Pilots of AVR in Wales
- International examples
- Assisted/integrated registration

How the UK's electoral registration system works

In 2014, the UK moved away from a model of household registration where one person (the 'head of household') would apply on behalf of all residents, to a system of Individual Electoral Registration (IER). Under IER, Electoral Registration Officers (EROs) were given powers to match names and addresses on current electoral registers against data held by the Department for Work and Pensions. This process of registration 'confirmation' allowed EROs to transfer existing electors, who had been confirmed in the data matching process, onto the IER register.

The annual canvass (required under section 9D of the Representation of the People Act 1983) which is used to identify changes to the register, continued under IER via the Household Enquiry Form (HEF) and house to house inquiries. However, the Electoral Registration and Administration Act 2013 which introduced IER also contained powers to amend or abolish the canvass via secondary legislation.

At the same time, a system of online registration was introduced and a requirement for date of birth and National Insurance numbers to be provided as identifiers. However, despite being able to register via an online national portal, under the current system, each application is determined locally and there is no centralised database.

In 2019, changes to the annual canvass were made introducing automatic re-registration.[5] The annual canvass now begins with a data-matching step (against both national (DWP) and local data). If a registration can be reliably matched, the ERO will communicate with the resident but, if that information is correct, a response from the resident is not necessary in order for them to remain on the register (it remains an offence to fail to notify of a change or provide false information). The ERO does not need to send a reminder or chase a response (this is called 'route one'). If the registration cannot be matched, a process similar to the previous canvass takes place with a minimum of three attempts to contact the property/residents (route two). A third route to registration is available for properties such as care homes and student accommodation where one person can be responsible for registering all residents.

These updates to registration have already moved the UK's system closer to automatic registration with EROs using data-mining as an integral part of the registration process and re-registering those who can be reliably matched. However, there remain problems with the system as it stands.

Problems with the current system

Missing millions

Across Great Britain, between 7 and 8 million people are missing from the electoral rolls according to the Electoral Commission's analysis. Completeness of the electoral registers stands at 86% across Great Britain (86% in England, 81% Scotland, 87% Wales, 83% Northern Ireland).[6]

Completeness has remained fairly static over time. Between 2011 and 2023, completeness of the registers across Great Britain has been between 82 and 86 percent. Only in Northern Ireland has there been a marked improvement with registration increasing from 71% in 2012 to 83% in 2023.

This means that for the last four General Elections, millions of eligible voters have missed out.

In its latest report on registration, the Electoral Commission states that, *"there is little evidence to suggest that levels of accuracy and completeness are likely to significantly improve without major changes to the current electoral registration system."*[7]

This points to the reality that without change to the UK's electoral registration processes, millions of eligible voters will continue to miss out on having a say in our democracy.

The UK currently ranks in the bottom half of European countries on electoral integrity scoring which includes measurements of accessibility and registration. The Electoral Integrity Project global report in 2025 noted that electoral registration in the UK, *"has been a long-term area of weakness in electoral integrity scores"*.[8]

Unequal registration

Not only are millions missing from the electoral rolls but those missing are unequally distributed across society. Research suggests that the current system of registration is proving a barrier, particularly to young people and people in privately rented accommodation.

In 2022, 65% of private renters were registered compared to 95% of owner occupiers and 88% of those with a mortgage; only 60% of 18- and 19-year-olds were registered compared to 96% of those aged 65 and over and only 16% of attainers (those aged 16 and 17 in England) were registered.[9]

People who move home more frequently are particularly affected: only 39% of those who have been at their address for a year or less are registered to vote compared to 91% who have been at their address for 5-10 years.[10] The English Housing Survey (2024-25) finds that the average length of time households spent in their current home was 13.9 years but for private renters this reduces to 4.7 years. In 2024-25, approximately 1.8 million households moved home in the previous 12 months and around half of these were moves into or out of private rented dwellings.[11]

Failure to register does not necessarily indicate an apathy towards voting. Surveys of poll workers consistently find that the most common problem on polling day is people turning up to vote and not being registered. Half of poll workers in the 2018 local elections in England experienced at least one person turning up to vote who was not on the electoral register, some had experienced turning away more than 10 potential voters.[12]

Duplicate registrations and resources

The introduction of an online portal for registration has seen an increase in event-led registration in which large numbers of applications are received in the run up to elections (often immediately before the registration deadline) putting extra pressure on EROs. Often these applications are duplicates of existing applications as there is no way for voters to check if they are already registered online.

In the run up to the 2024 General Election, just under 2.9 million applications to register to vote were made between when the election was called and the registration deadline (May 22nd – June 18th).[13] Despite a huge surge of 632,901 applications on the last day, the overall number of applications was still well short of the estimated 8.2 million people missing. A similar effort to increase registration was seen in 2019, with more than 3 million people registering to vote between the 29th Oct 2019 and the 26th Nov 2019.[14] In the run up to general elections, EROs are under huge pressure dealing with sometimes upwards of 100,000 registration applications per day, putting enormous strain on electoral services. In 2017, duplicate applications during the election period ranged from 30% to 70% of applications by area.[15]

Automatic Voter Registration (AVR)

A system of automatic registration would see voters added to the electoral rolls using existing data without the need to initiate the registration process themselves (this is not far from the 'route 1' process of the reformed annual canvass that currently takes place as described above). Once the electoral rolls have been populated, voters are contacted and given the opportunity to apply for anonymous registration.[16] Most countries use a form of automatic registration.[17]

Automatic voter registration is different from assisted registration in which voters are prompted to apply for registration during other interactions with government offices – such as when applying for driver's licence (see final section).

In a feasibility study into the use of automatic, more automated and assisted registration, the Electoral Commission found that "all the reforms were feasible from a technical and operational perspective and could be implemented without radically altering the structure of the electoral registration system in the UK."[18]

In 2023, the Electoral Commission highlighted how AVR could be implemented with Passport Office data. The Passport Office already undertakes rigorous checks on the information provided, collects the data needed for electoral registration and is already sharing this data with government departments to undertake around 25 million identity checks per year.[19]

There is widespread and longstanding cross-party parliamentary support for automatic voter registration including from the Political and Constitutional Reform Committee in its 2014 report on Voter Engagement, the All-Party Parliamentary Group on Democratic Participation's report on the Missing Millions, and the Levelling Up, Housing and Communities Committee report on Electoral Registration in 2024.[20] [21] [22]

Devolved elections

Electoral registration for local registers is devolved in Scotland and Wales and the Welsh government has recently legislated via the Elections and Elected Bodies (Wales) Act (2024) to pilot AVR.[23] In Scotland there have been cross-party calls for the introduction of AVR, with an amendment to the Scottish Elections (Representation and Reform) Act which enables AVR to be pursued at local authority level.[24] Glasgow may be the first place to trial AVR.[25]

Wales AVR pilots

In 2025 three Welsh councils piloted automatic voter registration (a fourth council tested just data-matching to see whether the electoral register could be re-created from local data).

The pilots identified and automatically registered 14,500 new electors. This represents between 2% and 8% of the registers in these areas (Gwynedd 8%, Powys 5%, Newport 2%). The pilots were particularly successful in registering attainers. Between 16% and 37% of attainers were added in Gwynedd and Powys.[26]

The pilots were able to utilise local data such as council tax and housing records to match residents. However, the pilots could not access UK level datasets (such as the DWP) and as a result, despite very positive results, there were limits to how effective the pilots could be. The Carmarthenshire pilot, which looked at re-creating electoral rolls, found that 60% of existing electors can be matched on local data. A UK-wide system of AVR with national data therefore has the potential to have an even greater impact.

The Electoral Commission review of the pilots found in initial assessments, that AVR did not negatively affect the accuracy of the registers and there were few concerns raised from those in the pilot areas.[27]

Important considerations
Edited/open register

The UK currently has two versions of the electoral register: the full electoral register and the open register (sometimes called the edited register). The full electoral register contains the name and address of everyone who has registered, it is restricted and is only accessible for certain purposes including electoral administration, campaigning activities, preventing and detecting crime, checking applications for loans or credit, and jury summoning in England, Wales and Northern Ireland.

Whilst the responsibility for registration (whether initiating or confirming) currently lays with the individual, registration is still compulsory and citizens can be fined for not registering.

EROs are also required to create an open register. The open register contains the names and addresses of anybody who has not opted out (those under 16 are automatically removed). At present around 60% of those registered have opted out of the open register.[28] The open register is available for purchase by private individuals, companies or organisations and there are no restrictions on its sale.

The open register would need reviewing under a system of automatic registration and our recommendation would be that automatically enrolled citizens do not have their data shared on the open register, effectively removing this register.

Anonymous registration
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. The Welsh pilots allowed for 60 days in which to respond to request anonymous registration. Once an anonymous registration is in place it should remain so for a longer period of time than the current 12 months.

Lessons from overseas
Many countries register their voters automatically. Some examples are:

Sweden
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 8.15 million and 7.78 million people were registered to vote.[29]

Germany
Germany has a system of automatic voter registration which uses their national population register. Every resident in Germany is required to register with their municipal authority when they move home and the municipal authorities utilise this data to create the electoral roll. In 2025 the voting age population was 61.5 million and 60.5 million people were registered to vote.[30]

Australia
Australia has a system of direct enrolment which uses data from other government agencies to identify and verify people to add to or update the register.[31] The Australian system is an 'opt out' rather than 'opt in' system in which voters are

automatically added if they don't respond to the notification (similar to 'route one' in the UK described above). 97.6% of Australian electors are on the register compared to 90.9% in 2010 before the introduction of automatic registration.[32]

Australia moved to automated registration from a system of continuous registration (self-enrolment) within 18 months. The enabling legislation was passed in June 2012, pilots ran in late 2012 and then was rolled out across the rest of the country by the September 2013 elections. Further improvements were made subsequently, enabling voters to self-register online and further outreach activities.[33]

Assisted/integrated registration

Often termed "motor-voter" registration after the initiative in the US, assisted registration would nudge people to register to vote when they interact with other government services. The USA's National Voter Registration Act of 1993 (NVRA) required that states offer voters the opportunity to register to vote at motor vehicle agencies and specific state and local offices. Any application for a driver's license (including a renewal) serves as a voter registration application unless the applicant does not sign the application. It may also be used to update an existing registration.[34] In 2022, over half of US electoral registrations came via this route.[35]

A similar system could be implemented in the UK when a potential voter interacts with a government agency, such as the DVLA. This could be done via a tick box on paperwork required to obtain a driver's licence which would give the DVLA permission to pass on the information necessary to register to vote to the local Electoral Registration Officer. In 2024-2025 the DVLA issued 12.5 million driving licenses. An assisted registration system would allow these 12.5 million applications to be checked and updated against the electoral role helping to maintain the accuracy and completeness of the register.[36]

Researchers have highlighted several other touchpoints with government services where potential voters could be nudged to update their details or register to vote:[37]

- Applying for a passport: 7,800,233 people applied for a passport in 2024[38]
- Registering for council tax: 24,926,000 dwellings were liable for council tax in 2024[39]
- Updating driving licence details: 12,500,000 driving licences were issued in 2024/2025[40]
- Registering at university: 2,904,425 undergraduates and 847,905 postgraduates enrolled in higher education in 2023/2024[41]
- Claiming benefits: 23,200,000 people claimed some form of DWP benefit in February 2025.[42] [43]

This equates to over 72 million points of contact between government bodies and potential voters per year, all of which could be used to update and enrol people on the register through assisted registration. There will undoubtedly be crossover between these groups however, these points of contact could, especially in conjunction with AVR, help to keep the electoral registers up to date.

Endnotes

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