

**Pushing The Boundaries of Democratic
Practice: Individual Registration and
Boundaries, Revisited**

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THE

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PUSHING THE BOUNDARIES... OF DEMOCRATIC PRACTICE

Individual Registration and Boundaries, Revisited

Lewis Baston, April 2016

Executive Summary

- The Individual Electoral Registration (IER) system went live in Great Britain in June 2014. Using the existing Department of Work and Pensions database and data from local authorities, IER successfully transferred 79 per cent of the electorate onto the IER system. However, there have been numerous difficulties and problems with the introduction of IER. Despite an initial surge in the number of online registrations – ahead of the May 2015 General Election – the introduction of IER has so far seen a loss of just over 1 million electors.
- As it currently stands under IER, the electoral register is too incomplete and unstable to provide a suitable basis for allocating parliamentary representation. IER has had disproportionate effects on the representation of certain social groups. IER and the use of the December 2015 purged register will be considered in relation to the following: registration levels; under-representation of the electorate; party composition; and demographic composition.
- There have been noticeable levels of under-representation, which has varied with social and demographic characteristics. Registration levels are cyclical, and the introduction of IER has had a knock-on effect on registration in areas of student and transient communities. Since boundaries are drawn at the low point of the ‘cycle’ of students moving back home from university, there has been a systematic under-representation of areas with large student populations.
- The use of the December 2015 purged register has also had a regional effect. London has three seats fewer than it should. Nationally, it has mainly affected urban areas, with the big core cities in particular had poor net completeness in electorate registration.
- Since the British electoral system is constituency-based, registration has been strongly correlated with political allegiances, and the introduction of IER seen further under-representation of more politically ‘liberal’ areas. Those most affected areas have been where many residents vote for Labour, the Greens, or – in the case of the 2010 Liberal Democrat electoral coalition – the Liberal Democrats. Areas with high-turnover constituencies and inner metropolitan have seen their electoral influence significantly reduced under IER.
- Unfortunately, the Boundary Commission will be unable under the current rules to rectify these problems, particularly the issues with student constituencies, before the upcoming election takes place.
- If IER performs as well over the longer term as its advocates claim, the current boundary review will be further discredited. For instance, the constituencies proposed by the boundary commissions will almost certainly involve several that are too big according to up-to-date electorate numbers.
- Going forward, there are several ways in which the current system could be improved. The government could change the way IER works. One possibility would be to eliminate the household canvass through secondary legislation, which would remove the negative canvass effect. However, this would undoubtedly lead to further reductions in completeness, and registration may deteriorate more over the years in difficult, expensive and under-resourced areas (which tend to be Labour-inclined). Another option is to make IER more streamlined, by

introducing bulk registration of people in communal accommodation. This would create more automatic and routine systems for those moving house, gaining citizenship, and signing rental contracts.

- At the very least, the Electoral Commission should widen its remit to encompass the subsidiary uses of the register, including the re-drawing of boundaries. It should further utilise existing ONS data taken from the Census and population estimates, to measure the numbers of entitled electors. This could be done by more routine publications of the figures provided to Chris Ruane in 2014.
- More generally, a future government should de-couple the electoral register from the boundary review process. In its place, the government should introduce an aggregate estimate of the entitled population derived from the Census.

Introduction

This paper is a successor to *Electoral Collision Course*, a longer paper I wrote for the Constitution Society in early 2014. It dealt with the interaction between two apparently unrelated changes to electoral law. These were the transition to Individual Electoral Registration (IER) which was then underway, and the new mechanism for distributing and designating parliamentary constituencies established under the Parliamentary Voting System and Constituencies Act 2011. While the boundary review under the new rules had been stalled by Parliament in 2013, it would automatically re-start using the December 2015 electorate numbers to draw new boundaries by October 2018.

In *Electoral Collision Course* I drew attention to the potential implications of IER as such, and the particular point of the transition at which it would be in December 2015, for the completeness of the electoral register. I warned then that:

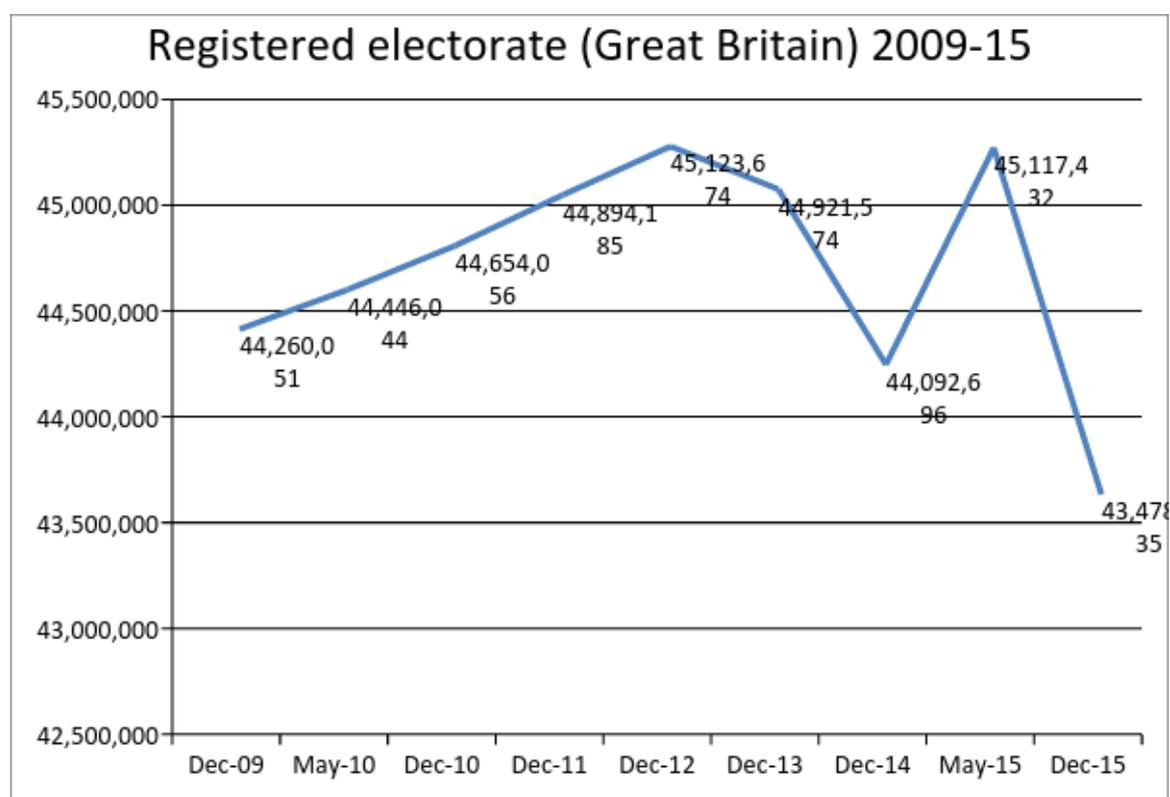
If the register numbers in December 2015 are inaccurate, the boundary review will contaminate the entire basis of the electoral system.

This has duly come to pass. While in the previous paper, the implications could only be assessed in a speculative fashion, using assumptions about the progress of the transition to IER based on the success of 2013-14 data matching and the confirmation runs, we now have real figures to work with. The efforts of the Office for National Statistics (ONS) and former MP Chris Ruane have also enabled more precise estimates of what a complete, accurate register would look like. The warnings made in 2014, of damage to the representation of London and the metropolitan areas, have come true and the map drawn in the 2016-18 boundary review will under-represent these areas. It might even become rapidly apparent that there has been a severe under-count embedded in the December 2015 figures. This undercount might come about because of the annual cycle of register completeness. Furthermore there is a possibility that other factors such as improving techniques of managing IER, and political events that prompt people to join the register, will also cause the large recent variations in the size of the electoral register to continue over the next few years.

This paper deals with events since the start of IER, the decision to 'purge' the register of transitional entries in December 2015, and the concrete consequences of under-registration for the next boundary review. It suggests how the problems might be avoided in future.

FROM SURGE TO PURGE: THE ELECTORAL REGISTER IN 2015

The Individual Electoral Registration (IER) system went live in Great Britain in June 2014 – it had been introduced in Northern Ireland in 2002. During the preceding months local authorities had engaged in extensive work to try to match electoral register entries with data held elsewhere, particularly that from the Department of Work and Pensions (DWP) database. The bulk of the electorate was transferred during this process, with coverage being most complete among people who were the simplest cases – those who stay living in the same place, have uncomplicated names and family arrangements, and keep up to date with the authorities (pensioners in particular have strong incentives). The coverage was 79 per cent, but the introduction of IER can be added to the long list of circumstances in which the Pareto principle seems to apply. 80 per cent of the exercise could be accomplished with 20 per cent of the effort... and the last 20 per cent is going to be difficult and problematic.



As figure 1 shows, the period of transition to IER was associated with a loss of just over 1 million electors from the registers between December 2012 and December 2014.

There was a dramatic surge in registration levels in time for the May 2015 General Election. Greatly facilitated by the possibility of on-line registration, some 900,000 electors registered in the last five days before the deadline, with 469,047 of these applications made online in the final 24 hours. However, this unprecedented volume of late registrations only returned the registers to their December 2012 levels. Prior to IER, registration levels had been growing at around 200,000 electors

per annum from 2009-12. In the absence of IER, it is reasonable to assume that there would have been at least 45.5 million registered electors in May 2015 rather than 45.2 million.¹

The dramatic variations in total electorate that have taken place during the IER transition between December 2012 and December 2015 undermine the idea that at any stage the electoral register is a reasonable estimate of the total local population entitled to vote. The fact that the December 2015 figures are at the extreme low end, and that they are well below estimates of the eligible population compiled from other sources, irresistibly suggests that they are severely distorted. The pattern of distortion has clear partisan implications. The government might at least have given the system some time to settle down after such a period of volatility. It remains quite possible – and indeed it is the hoped-for outcome from many non-partisan IER advocates – that electorate numbers will rebound strongly from December 2015, particularly in those areas where registration is currently most incomplete.

Drawing boundaries is different from establishing an individual's right to vote

Completeness and accuracy are both desirable in an electoral register when it is used in an election. Incompleteness deprives people of a vote to which they are entitled, and is therefore a bad thing from the point of view of democratic participation. Inaccuracy is less immediately problematic – it is probably best to err on the side of keeping people on the register to prevent disenfranchisement. But inaccuracy can be a gateway to electoral fraud, causes an artificial fall in recorded turnout and wastes the time of officials and political campaigners. From this point of view, both should be minimised.

When the electoral register is used to compile numbers that purport to represent the 'size' of a constituency, the calculation is different. An inaccurate entry will inflate the entitlement of an area, while incompleteness reduces it. But there will be many cases when these errors cancel each other out. An inaccurate entry can be a placeholder for someone who should be registered but has not been; the two phenomena often arise from the same cause, i.e. people moving house.

Imagine a situation where Jane Roe is living at 5A Victoria Mansions and registered under the household registration system. She moves out in the autumn, and John Doe moves into that flat but does not bother to get on the register until the spring when he notices that there is an election happening. The error of including Jane but not John cancels itself out when counting the total number of people entitled. However, if Jane is deleted under IER but John is still a bit slow to get on the register, the December total number will be one short.

Improving accuracy while completeness deteriorates, or even remains constant, will therefore systematically under-count areas of high population turnover.

¹ For further discussion on this process see the various Electoral Commission reports and Wilks-Heeg and Baston (2015) – from which these paragraphs and the chart have been derived.

This is what the government decided to do in 2015.

The purge – ending the transition early

There were 1.9 million transitional entries on the register in May 2015. During the post-election period the majority of these cases were resolved, although 770,000 remained at the end of November without either having been transferred to IER or deleted from the register. Of the 1.9m transitional cases 450,000 (24 per cent) were successfully transferred to IER.

The legislation introducing IER envisaged ending the transition at the end of 2016, but the Conservative part of the coalition government favoured ending the transition before that, and the law allowed the date to be brought forward using secondary legislation. This order was made shortly before the summer recess in 2015, against the clear advice of the Electoral Commission.

Taking into account the data and evidence which is available to us at this point and the significant polls which are scheduled for May 2016, we recommend that Ministers should not make an order to bring forward the end of the transition to IER. We recommend that the end date for IER transition should remain, as currently provided for in law, December 2016.

(Electoral Commission, June 2015)

Liberal Democrat peer Lord Tyler attempted to annul the order in the House of Lords on 27 October 2015, arguing that:

... without cross-party consultation or consent, Conservative Ministers have introduced a deliberately self-interested, partisan order in direct conflict with the recommendations of the independent commission which is appointed by Parliament to ensure fair play.

Those in favour of an early end to the transition appeared reluctant to deal with the detail of the Commission's report published in June 2015. They described the non-verified electors as 'ghosts' – although the Commission's subsequent work has established that there were real cases:

For example in Hammersmith, approximately 10% of the 2,228 entries removed applied to register individually before their entry was deleted but their identity had not been verified in

time.²

While many of the non-verified entries were inaccurate, the process of establishing this had clearly not concluded, and the year-round cycle of registered numbers was ignored as was the status of the dud entries as placeholders for real but missing electors.

Lord Tyler's motion was voted down by a margin of 11 (246-257) and the purge went ahead.

Part of the problem is that the integrity of the electoral register as the basis for drawing boundaries has no guardian – it is assessed primarily in regard to individual voting rights.

The Electoral Commission itself, although one might detect a hint of concern about the wider implications, regards its mission as being:

that the electoral registers support and enable effective participation in elections and referendums by all those who want to take part.

It was on this rationale that the Commission advised against an early end to the transition period, rather than the boundaries – it has no formal role to pronounce on these ancillary uses of the register. The Boundary Commissions themselves operate under the law and the numbers that they are given, and have no channel by which they can query even a flawed basis.

http://www.electoralcommission.org.uk/_data/assets/pdf_file/0011/197516/IER-Assessment-December-2015-registers.pdf

Registration levels are cyclical

The damage done to registration rates in student constituencies by the early end to the transition and the lack of any facility for universities to block-register their students is clear from the statistics and the Electoral Commission's report.

Both Canterbury and Cambridge have indicated that because students are not usually resident until late September (for Canterbury) or early October (for Cambridge) the registration activities designed to target them were not finished by the time the revised registers were published. In both cases activities to encourage student registration have therefore been ongoing since 1 December 2015 (para 2.32 p35).

Registered electorates in these seats in December are therefore a particularly inaccurate measure of how many people will be on the register when most elections take place. As the Commission noted, the experience of 2014-15 showed that December is a low point in registration in student and transient constituencies. There was a larger increase in the registered electorate between December 2014 and May 2015 in these constituencies than the national average (5 per cent rather than 3 per cent). The variation in size over the year is much greater in student seats than the national average, with December being the low point and May being the high point. Boundaries are drawn at the low

² Electoral Commission (2016) para 2.17 p29

point of the cycle, while elections tend to happen at the high point of the cycle (even if local authorities are successful in encouraging students to register). The result will be the systematic under-representation of areas with large student populations. Oxford East, for instance, went from being too large if assessed against the quota applied to the May 2015 electorate, to too small on the pruned register in December. It will probably be too big again at the expected May 2020 election.

This phenomenon, applying in every constituency, was noted in the Northern Ireland transition ten years previously when it was dubbed the 'negative canvass effect'. The Northern Ireland Select Committee (2004, p.10) noted that 'a pattern appears to be emerging for the number of registered electors to decline at each canvass only to show a slow increase thereafter as a consequence of rolling registrations'. PWC/Electoral Commission (2004) found that from December 2002 to May 2004 there was a clear downward trend in the number of register entries across all of Northern Ireland's eighteen parliamentary constituencies. The report noted that such a decline was virtually inevitable following a canvass given the absence of any mechanism for retaining voters on the register who did not respond (PWC/Electoral Commission, 2004).³

Large scale political events add another, longer and more general cycle of fluctuations in the size of the register. It is reasonable to expect the experience of surges in the registered electorate in the run-up to the Scottish referendum in September 2014 and the UK general election in May 2015 to be repeated in advance of a UK general election and to a lesser extent other electoral events such as Scottish Parliament, the EU referendum and local elections. This rhythm was already apparent in Northern Ireland after 2002.

December is not a critical date in terms of establishing one's right to vote, because the register has become increasingly continuous over time and this feature has become more pronounced under IER. Entry to the electoral register is increasingly flexible with the traditional annual canvass and post-2000 rolling registration up until fairly late in the election campaign, now joined by the efficient system that has been created to enable people to apply online to join the register.

There are therefore three factors contaminating the usefulness of the December 2015 registers for drawing fair boundaries:

- Overall under-registration which varies with social and demographic characteristics.
- An annual cycle in student (and probably also transient) constituencies in which it is most complete at the end of the academic year – which is when elections happen – and least complete at the beginning, which is when the numbers are used for drawing boundaries.
- A multi-year cycle of registration among transient residents and the more marginal participants in electoral matters, in which registration ramps up in advance of the most important elections and referendums and slackens in the off-years.

³ See Wilks-Heeg and Baston (2015), Northern Ireland Select Committee (2004) Electoral Registration in Northern Ireland, first report of session, 2004/05, HC-131, London: House of Commons. PWC/Electoral Commission (2004) Electoral Commission Update Report No.1, Belfast: Electoral Commission Northern Ireland.

HOW FAIR WILL THE NEW BOUNDARIES BE?

Explaining 'Estimated Net Completeness'

Estimated Net Completeness is simply the percentage of the total estimated entitled population that is reflected – in aggregate – on the electoral register.

The comparison is in aggregate, rather than at an individual level. It is the net effect of entries that are there but should not be, and people who are entitled but are missing from the electoral register.

Therefore, inaccurate entries that are placeholders for people who are entitled to vote but are not on the register will help an area get closer to *net* completeness.

The source for the ideal number of registered electors in a constituency is derived from Office for National Statistics (ONS) analysis of the 2011 Census. There is no rival for the completeness and accuracy of the Census in establishing aggregate population numbers, or the efforts made by enumerators to track people down. The data collected also covers criteria that are related to qualification to vote, namely age and passport status. During the research phase of my previous *Electoral Collision Course* (2014) I derived my own estimates.⁴ In this paper I am using figures published by the ONS in March 2014 but updated to attempt to reflect subsequent population change after the census date in 2011.

It may be noted that the 2011 statistics were made available as a result of a Parliamentary Question by then Labour MP Chris Ruane, who had been one of the principal critics of under-registration.⁵ It would be useful in assessing electoral registration in future if publication of these figures were made routine and periodically updated. These figures are also only for England and Wales; equivalents for Scotland and Northern Ireland appear not to be readily available.

The updating to the 2011 figures provided to Ruane that has been applied for this paper is based on the following procedure. The proportion of the population aged 18 and over who were counted as eligible to vote was assessed; in the median constituency this was 97.3 per cent although there were a number of outliers at the lower end. This proportion was assumed to remain constant between 2011 and 2014, and then re-applied to the adult population in the mid-year estimate for 2014 to attempt to reflect population changes over three years.

There are therefore a few possible sources for error in the estimated ideal, complete electorate model and therefore the percentage registration rate. One is any error in the original ONS statistics, either the entitled population in 2011 or the mid-year population in 2014. Another is the assumption that the ratio of entitled to total population remains constant. It may well be that areas with large existing numbers of non-entitled residents attract more than their proportionate share of new non-entitled people. But the effect is likely to be small, particularly over three years, and it does not seem to be a significant influence compared to other factors such as youth and population turnover.

⁴ The *Electoral Collision Course* calculations produced very similar estimates of entitled population in 2011 to the official figures from the ONS.

⁵ House of Commons Written Answers, 31 March 2014 Column 456W. The table was produced as Table CT0240 by the Head of the UK Statistics Authority for MPs.

The other sources of error are additional population change in the year since mid 2014, and the minor discrepancy of the electorate figures using 16-18 year old attainers but these not being counted in the ONS data.

Forthcoming Electoral Commission research into the accuracy and completeness of the registers, due in July 2016, will no doubt clarify the position further.

Implications of the purge and under-registration

1. Nation and region

Table: Implications of different base numbers for allocation by nation and region

	July 2014 entitled population	May 2015 electorate	December 2015 electorate
UK	600	600	600
England (including Isle of Wight)	501	501	501
Wales	29	29	29
Scotland (including Islands)	54	54	53
Northern Ireland	16	16	17
<i>English regions</i>			
East of England	56	56	57
Isle of Wight	2	2	2
South East (not IoW)	81	81	81
South West	52	53	53
SOUTH	191	192	193
LONDON	71	70	68
East Midlands	44	43	44
West Midlands	53	53	53
MIDLANDS	97	96	97

North East	25	25	25
North West	67	68	68
Yorkshire & The Humber	50	50	50
NORTH	142	143	143

Data sources: July 2014 ONS Census data as adapted by author; May 2015 Electoral Commission; December 2015 ONS.

The principal regional effect of using the December 2015 purged register is to under-represent London by three seats⁶ compared to estimated entitled population.

Smaller mainly urban sub-regions lose out as well. Greater Manchester, Merseyside, Leeds-Bradford and Birmingham lose out on a whole constituency or slightly more each. Some examples of the effect on provincial English cities and urban areas are given in the table below.

	Estimated net completeness May 2015 %	Estimated net completeness December 2015 %
Liverpool	84.4	81.0
Leeds and Bradford inner	88.4	84.0
North Tyne & Wear	91.3	87.1
Birmingham	91.5	88.0
Sheffield	91.9	88.0
Bristol & Bath	95.3	90.2
Outer Merseyside	96.0	93.3
Outer West Yorkshire	95.9	92.6
South Tyne & Wear	94.8	93.4
Black Country	95.9	93.3
Outer South Yorkshire	95.4	92.9

⁶ London's seat number 71 is the last to be allocated in the model distribution; if the estimation method overstates London's entitled population significantly London's loss of seats is two rather than three, but certainly no fewer than two.

Outer Avon

98.8

95.8

The effect is concentrated on the big core cities. The outer metropolitan areas are not much worse than suburban and rural areas for under-registration, under the May 2015 and December 2015 numbers, but the core cities had poor net completeness in May and fell even further short in December.

2. Party composition

Geography is at the core of the British electoral system, as it is in any constituency-based system. It is also of increasing importance in that it is correlated so strongly with political allegiances. High-turnover constituencies and inner metropolitan areas are often culturally and politically liberal, voting for Labour and the Greens and being a strong part of the Liberal Democrat electoral coalition as it existed in 2010.⁷ The influence of these areas is systematically reduced, first by existing levels of under-registration and then by the additional effects of IER as such and the transitional position in December 2015.

The least-affected areas tend to be Conservative – retirement areas, owner-occupied rural and suburban areas, smaller non-university towns, and low-diversity areas. These are areas where it is easiest to find and register the population and where there is much less year-on-year turnover. There is also a category of Labour constituencies (often where UKIP polled reasonably well in 2015) where these factors also apply – white working class and social housing areas like Knowsley, Rotherham or South Tyneside.

Table: Under-registration by party representing constituency May 2015

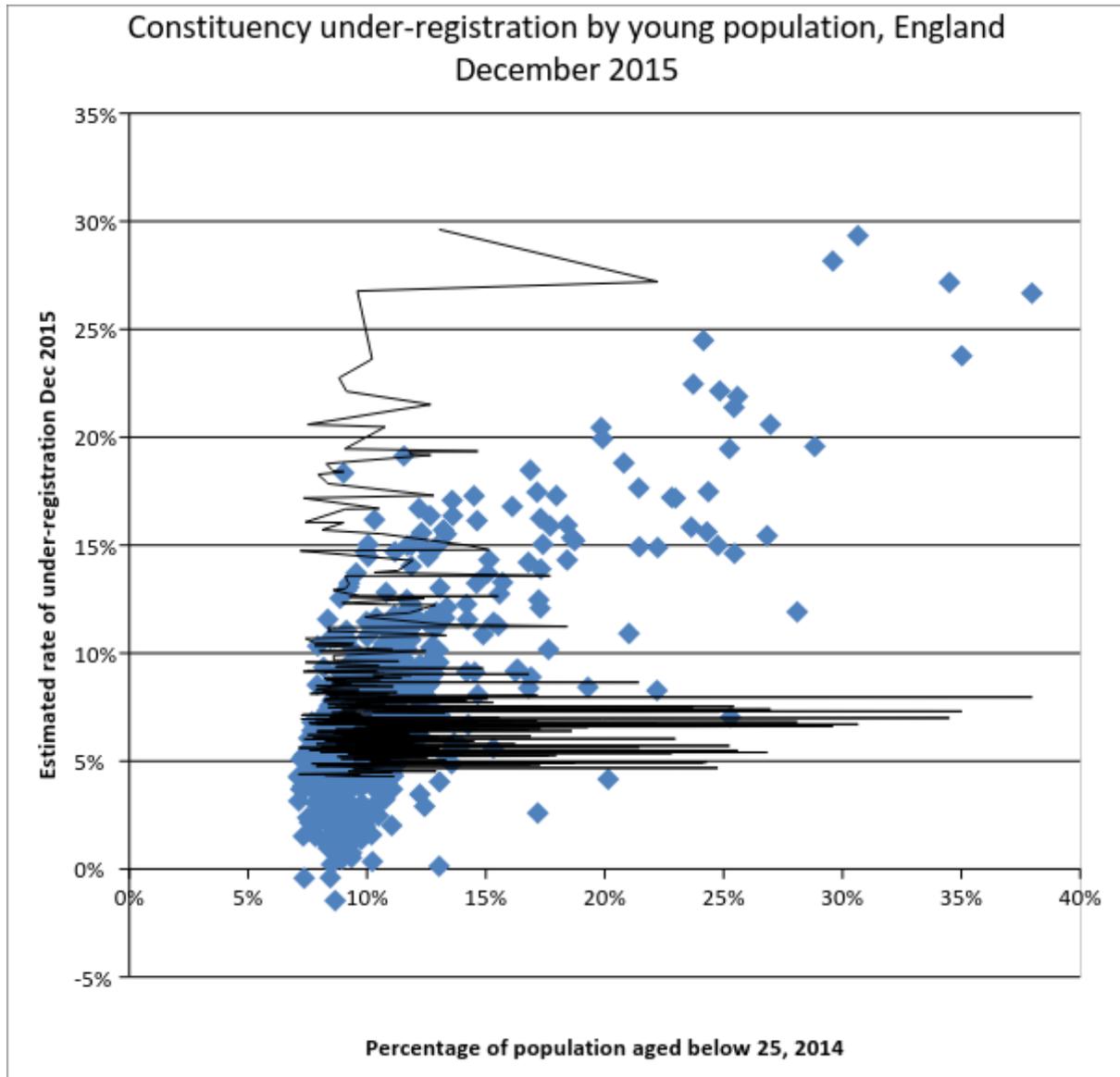
England & Wales, by party holding seat 2015	May 2015 Est Net Comp %	December 2015 Est Net Comp %	Change May to December 2015 %	Estimated net shortfall May 2015	Estimated net shortfall December 2015	Shortfall per seat December 2015
Conservative	96.6	93.6	-3.1	847,600	1,589,757	4,832
Labour	93.6	89.8	-4.1	1,100,952	1,757,041	7,606
Lib Dem	95.0	91.0	-4.2	24,363	43,554	6,222

In general, Conservative constituencies suffer least from existing under-registration and lose fewest electors from the IER transition.

⁷ There are a handful of Conservative seats in the category such as Cities of London & Westminster. Many of those affected were quite Conservative in past decades, such as Bristol West, Oxford and Cambridge.

3. Demographic composition

The worst-registered constituencies tend, overwhelmingly, to be those with young populations. The R-squared of this relationship is 0.55, a large correlation by social science standards.



4. Existing levels of under-registration

Estimated registration net completeness May 2015	Change in registered electorate May to December 2015 %	Number of constituencies
Over 100%	-4.3	56
98-100%	-3.6	94
96-98%	-3.0	141
94-96%	-2.9	120
92-94%	-3.4	104
90-92%	-3.6	33
Under 90%	-5.0	58

If the 'ghost electors' hypothesis was true, there should have been a straightforward relationship between the change and the existing state of the register. Where the existing register was full or over-full, there should have been the largest number of deletions. But although it was the case that places with more than 98 per cent registration did see larger drops than average, the rest of the curve was in the wrong direction. Deletions were fewest in the constituencies that were closest to average, but increased markedly in areas where the register was already most incomplete.

This peculiar curve is quite easily explained. Populations that were difficult to register under the old system are even more difficult to reach under the new system, exacerbating the inequalities in registration levels between metropolitan and student areas and the rest of the country. Constituencies with the very highest rates of registration – particularly those over 100 per cent – will tend to be anomalous. This tendency usually comes about because the local authority had a large number of transitional entries in the register having taken a permissive approach to rolling over household registrants in the run-up to May 2015. The effect is biggest where that approach and a surge in registration before the General Election combine to inflate the register, as in Hackney.

Table: Constituencies with the largest drops in electorate May to December 2015

	Change in registered electorate, May 2015 to December 2015 %	Estimated under-registration, May 2015 %
Cambridge	-19.3	-2.3

Canterbury	-15.5	7.5
Ilford South	-15.0	1.6
Hackney South & Shoreditch	-14.6	0.5
Hackney North & Stoke Newington	-14.1	-2.8
Cardiff Central	-14.0	17.6
Merthyr Tydfil & Rhymney	-13.9	-6.6
Vauxhall	-13.2	-1.6
Swansea West	-11.6	9.5
Brighton Pavilion	-11.6	6.4
Streatham	-11.2	2.8
Slough	-11.2	1.8
Oxford East	-11.0	10.8
Bristol West	-10.0	6.0
Leeds North West	-10.2	10.4
ENGLAND & WALES	-3.7	3.6

This analysis also helps distinguish between different causes when a constituency's registered electorate dropped steeply. There are a few cases where the May 2015 register in particular was over-full because particularly large numbers of entries had been carried over from the household register. This was clearly an element in the large drops recorded in Hackney, Lambeth, Merthyr Tydfil and Cambridge, where the registration figure in May 2015 was in excess (or nearly so) of the estimated entitled population.

Hackney was an outlier in having such a high proportion of transitional household entries – 23 per cent of the total; it was notable in the Lords debate in October 2015 that this one outlier was frequently mentioned by government supporters. Several other seats had unusually full-looking registers considering their demographics, caused by carrying-over, as in Slough and Ilford. It should be noted, though, that the large drops in these areas have often led to these constituencies having registers that are much less complete than average.

But several of the cases of big drops between May and December were in constituencies that already had notably incomplete electoral registers: Canterbury, Cardiff Central, Swansea West, Brighton Pavilion, Oxford East, Bristol West and Leeds North West. These are all constituencies with large numbers of students and transient young people.

Conversely, there are some cases of constituencies where the IER register in December was larger than the transitional register in May. Local authority policy again seems to play a part in this tendency; either to have been more active in deleting entries before May 2015 or in getting people registered between May and December. Local electoral efforts in Manchester, Dudley, South Tyneside, Bedford and Epping Forest seem to have been particularly successful. There is room for learning from the experience of these authorities, but it will all be too late for the boundary review.

WHAT IS TO BE DONE?

The Boundary Commission has to work within its statutory criteria. Even in the pre-2011 system, anticipated changes in the electoral register – or indeed changes since the enumeration date that had verifiably happened – could not be taken into account. There is simply nothing that can be done under the current rules to rectify the problem that student constituencies are likely to be oversized (in terms of registered electors) when the election takes place.

If IER performs as well over the longer term as its advocates claim, its completeness will presumably increase year on year, particularly if measured in May when the number is most electorally relevant and where the authorities are most likely to have registered mobile populations. The numbers on the register will be available for 2016, 2017 and possibly 2018 before the order comes to parliament. There will still probably be substantial incompleteness, but there will be less than in December 2015. The constituencies proposed by the Boundary Commissions will almost certainly involve several that are too big according to up-to-date electorate numbers. Verifiable numbers will be more convincing evidence than data based on population models and might change the debate.

The better IER performs over the next few years, the more it will discredit the basis of the current boundary review.

If severe enough, this would be reasonable grounds for considering the nuclear option of voting to deny Parliamentary approval for the boundary changes order when it comes round in autumn 2018. This is what would have happened had the Sixth Review in 2011-13 run its course, but the process was cut short by Parliament through an amendment to legislation in January 2013.

It remains unlikely that the order will be voted down, even if the Conservatives' overall majority in the House of Commons has been eroded away by the time of the boundary vote. However, this is one issue on which the non-Conservative parties are nearly entirely united (Northern Ireland MPs may be less bothered than in 2011-13 because the province loses one seat this time round rather than two).

The House of Lords lacks a Conservative majority, but there are several factors militating against the prospect of the upper House vetoing the boundary changes. The government's Strathclyde Review of the powers of the Lords proposes removing the power of veto over statutory instruments, so if implemented the question will not arise. It may also appear problematic for an unelected House to stall a process that is ostensibly about improving the functioning of the electoral system, in order to require boundaries drawn on the basis of the electorate in 2000 to be used in 2020. The Lords narrowly failed to vote down the register purge, so it is unlikely that they will be in a more

confrontational mood about the main changes. But things do change in politics, and given other developments it might be defensible.

The government could also change the way IER works. One possibility is to eliminate the household canvass, which is a permitted course of action (like the 2015 purge) under secondary legislation. While it would remove the negative canvass effect, it would also mean that electorates would gradually drift further and further from completeness rather than moving in an annual cycle. This would no doubt be convenient if introduced to affect the 2020 electorates for the next boundary review. Another possible reduction in completeness could come as a result of the end of the formal transition period, during which some of the most affected local authorities were given financial and other assistance from the Cabinet Office. In an environment of continuing cuts to local authority funding and services, it does seem feasible that registration may deteriorate more over the years in difficult, expensive and under-resourced areas which will tend to be Labour-inclined.

On the other hand, a future government might attempt to improve IER by introducing streamlined bulk registration of people in communal accommodation, and creating more automatic and routine systems for those moving house, gaining citizenship and signing rental contracts.

In future, at the very least, the Electoral Commission remit should be widened to encompass the subsidiary uses of the register, most importantly in drawing boundaries. The Commission is the primary source of research and information about the completeness and accuracy of the electoral register, and may soon be taking over the main role in publishing electorally-related statistics from the Office for National Statistics. This should enable further and more detailed work on using other ONS data – notably the Census and population estimates building on Census information – to measure numbers of entitled electors and compare with the size of the register. The figures given in 2014 thanks to Chris Ruane should be published on a more routine basis and any necessary methodological adjustments should be made to improve their accuracy.

Ultimately, the transition to IER has demonstrated that the electoral register is too incomplete and unstable to be a satisfactory basis for allocating parliamentary representation, particularly in the raw transitional state it was in at the time of enumeration in December 2015.

A future government should therefore de-couple the electoral register (whose primary purpose is as a gateway by which individuals are deemed eligible to vote) from the boundary review process. Its place should be taken by an aggregate estimate of the entitled population, derived from the Census which is the gold standard source of population data.

FURTHER READING

Baston (2014) *Electoral Collision Course* London: Constitution Society.

Electoral Commission (2015) *Assessment of progress with the transition to Individual Electoral Registration: May 2015 registers in Great Britain*.

Electoral Commission (2016) *Assessment of December 2015 Electoral Registers in Great Britain*.

Office for National Statistics (2014) Census Table CT0240.

Wilks-Heeg and Baston (2015) *Reforming Electoral Registration: Lessons from Northern Ireland and Great Britain*. Cork: conference paper.

This paper presents the personal views of the author and not those of The Constitution Society, which publishes it as a contribution to debate on the subject.