**Review of the 2024 general election**

**Written Evidence to the Public Administration and Constitutional Affairs Committee, January 2025**

Professor Toby S. James, University of East Anglia

Professor Paul Bernal, University of East Anglia

Ellen Berry, UK Democracy Fund

There are an estimated 7 to 8 million people missing or incorrectly entered on the electoral register in the UK which directly affects citizens ability to participate in elections.[[1]](#footnote-1)  The authors published previous reports on voter registration reform.[[2]](#footnote-2) We are currently preparing a guide on how Automatic Voter Registration (AVR) can be implemented in the UK to resolve this challenge, which we can happily share with the committee on request. We summarise the main points of this plan here.

**Key recommendations:**

The Government should adopt a two-track system of reform.

To make immediate improvements to the electoral register, including during the enfranchisement of 16- and 17-year-olds, Track One involves:

* UK-wide legislation being proposed to Parliament in 2025 which would empower electoral registration officers (‘EROs’) to register people without application, where EROs are satisfied that the person is eligible.
* EROs being given access to datasets, such as the DWP’s Customer Information System (CIS) for AVR, and public agencies should be required to provide assisted registration options.
* Newly enfranchised citizens being automatically registered as they become eligible for the first time. This will be an essential step in making the Government’s commitment to Votes at 16 a success.
* The Open Register being abolished. This would enhance voters’ privacy and reduce security risks.

Track Two should involve:

* The Government moving to implement a central register, effectively re-introducing the Co-ordinated Online Record of Electors (CORE) which was originally established in 2006.
* Options being piloted UK wide (using UK-wide datasets).
* The Government developing a “look-up tool” so voters can check if they are already on the register, removing the pressure on EROs.

**The solution to the challenge of voter registration**

AVR is the technological, data-led solution, that the Government can introduce to address democratic inequality and create a system fit for the 21st century. AVR would involve giving ERO the power to register electors when they have reliable and accurate information about them – without citizens having to act. An Automatic Voter Registration system would be the most effective way of improving the completeness of the electoral register. Alongside AVR, Assisted Voter Registration involves prompting citizens to register when accessing other government services. At the same time, steps should be undertaken to create a single centralised electoral register to maximise the benefits of data for political equality, government efficiency and public service.

An [international study](https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/00344893.2023.2207194), which has looked at 159 counties, show that countries with AVR have both more accurate and complete electoral registers than those that do not.  This means that more potential voters are on the register, at the correct address and with the correct information.

**How can this be implemented?**

EROs already have access to data which is held locally (eg [council tax and school admissions data](https://www.electoralcommission.org.uk/running-electoral-registration-england/processing-applications-and-other-amendments-register-throughout-year/verification-applicants-identity/using-local-data-matching-verification-purposes/potential-data-sources-local-data-matching#:~:text=As%20ERO%2C%20you%20are%20legally%20entitled%20to%20access,providing%20outsourced%20services%20under%20any%20finance%20agreement.%20)) and this is currently used within the voter registration process for verifying applicants to the register. EROs can use this data to maintain existing registrations and to remove people from the register – but not to add them. EROs could therefore be given the powers to have access to an increased range of data sources (eg DWP CIS, DVLA records and school registrations). This could come in the form of the ability to search existing government datasets to locate people who are missing from the register.

Assisted Voter Registration would mean that people are prompted to register to vote when interacting with other government services. Millions of transactions are undertaken each year in which people enter their personal details, for example, to apply for a passport. Assisted Voter Registration could involve adding a tick box to the end of the passport form asking citizens whether they would like this information to also be sent to the ERO. It has previously been estimated that [up to 6.5 million people per year](https://tobysjames.com/wp-content/uploads/2020/04/is-it-time-for-automatic-voter-registration-single-sides.pdf) could register when applying for a passport.

Information could then be shared with an ERO and treated as an application. Assisted Voter Registration is therefore a convenience measure for citizens, who may not otherwise register. Assisted Voter Registration can support a fuller AVR system, but on its own will not be likely to solve the full scale of the registration challenge.

Legislation is needed to give EROs the power to register someone without an application in the UK – as would be the case with AVR. Wales has already passed this – so there is legislative text which could be built upon. At present, EROs can remove electors, but not add new ones without an application. Legislation is therefore the central impediment to progress. Legislation may also be required to ensure that EROs can receive the data that they need to register electors.

Assisted Voter Registration might be implementable without legislation. However, legislation is encouraged as it could be used to require specific public agencies to support voter registration. This was key to success in the US.

The current system is very decentralised, with each ERO responsible for a separate electoral register for their Local Authority. There are therefore hundreds of local registers across the UK in need of separate maintenance. Introducing one single centralised registration system would make it easier for EROs to check for duplicate electors in the register. The system could contain one register for UK parliamentary elections; and one register for each of Scotland, Wales, England and Northern Ireland. Each register would be connected using a unique electoral identifier for each person. This would make it easier to develop a look-up tool to let potential voters know if they are already registered, and if so, where. When voters move home, EROs would be better able to securely notify other EROs.

We have produced a soon to be published detailed guide on introducing AVR which can be provided if useful.

1. Electoral Commission 2023. [*2023 report: Electoral registers in the UK*](https://www.electoralcommission.org.uk/research-reports-and-data/electoral-registration-research/accuracy-and-completeness-electoral-registers/2023-report-electoral-registers-uk). London: Electoral Commission. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Bite the Ballot, Toby S. James and ClearView Research (2016) [‘Getting the missing millions back on the electoral register,’](https://tobysjames.com/wp-content/uploads/2013/11/getting-the-e28098missing-millions_-on-to-the-electoral-register-report-appg-on-democratic-participation-bite-the-ballot-dr-toby-james-clearview-research-2016-1.pdf) the *All Party Parliamentary Group on Voter Registration*, April 2016; Toby S. James, Bite the Ballot and Alistair Clark (2019) ‘[Missing Millions, Still Missing: a vision for electoral modernisation in the UK’](https://tobysjames.com/wp-content/uploads/2019/08/missing-millions-still-missing-1.pdf) The All Party Parliamentary Group on Voter Registration: London, August 2019; Toby S. James and Paul Bernal (2020) [Is it Time for Automatic Voter Registration in the UK?](https://tobysjames.com/wp-content/uploads/2020/04/is-it-time-for-automatic-voter-registration-single-sides.pdf). Joseph Rowntree Reform Trust; Toby S. James and Paul Bernal (2023) [The UK Electoral Data Democratic Deficit: A vision for digital modernisation](https://tobysjames.com/wp-content/uploads/2023/01/electoral-data-democratic-deficit-report-1.pdf), Joseph Rowntree Reform Trust: York, with Paul Bernal. Toby S. James (2024) [Register Every Voter](https://aaf1a18515da0e792f78-c27fdabe952dfc357fe25ebf5c8897ee.ssl.cf5.rackcdn.com/2273/Register%2BEvery%2BVoter%2BReport_DIGITAL.pdf?v=1700563440000). Unlock Democracy: London. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)