



Interim Note on Individual Voter Registration

Summary

The Deputy Prime Minister has pledged to speed up the introduction of individual voter registration. Can modern technologies help to accelerate the process, to make it easier for citizens to register and to increase completeness and accuracy of the electoral register? What does this mean? Are the experiences of other countries relevant to the UK? Can we learn from them?

One of the aims of electronic individual voter registration is to enhance security by allowing a third party check of the information supplied at the point of registration against other public databases such as the National Insurance Number database. The Electoral Commission supports the move which enjoys all-party consensus. Individual voter registration means each voter must register in person, with their data stored electronically on a database, rather than have the head of each household fill in a form.

Under current plans, each year the Electoral Commission will review progress until 2014 when, if the Commission recommends it, a vote will go before Parliament to change to full permanent individual registration from July 2015. But the pledge to speed up the introduction of these changes is likely to accelerate this timetable.

EURIM is conducting an exercise to learn from other countries' experiences in making individual voter registration schemes operational, to compare and contrast these, and to identify best practice without adopting organisational and legal structures that may be inappropriate.

This includes:

1. the technical means of holding and transferring personal data between different authorities,
2. how to transfer that data securely,
3. how to store that data in a way consistent with privacy requirements,
4. how current or emerging technology might help facilitate:
 - i. access to the electoral register;
 - ii. the process of applying to be registered;
 - iii. updating information (e.g. change of address);
 - iv. ensuring information held by an Electoral Registration Officer (ERO) is accurate.

A more detailed study will focus on the data matching processes and security arrangements of a small sample set of the countries.

Background

In February 2010, Philip Dunne MP, then a Director of EURIM, invited the organisation to look at the issue of individual voter registration, which had broad cross-party support. The Electoral Commission was in favour of the introduction of individual voter registration as introduced in the Political Parties and Elections Act (2009). The Coalition Government has indicated that it would like to speed up this process. It was emphasised that electronic voting would not be a part of the study.

Nick Palmer (at that time a backbench Labour Party MP with a strong interest in identity issues), put forward the caveat that whatever changes might be made to the current system, the introduction of new technologies should not introduce bias or lead to the disenfranchisement of groups that historically have lower-than-average levels of registration and voter turnout – e.g. women, ethnic minorities, the poorly motivated, and youth.

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The introduction to the UK of electronic voter registration methods has been under discussion for some years.

- The Electoral Commission's paper 'The Electoral Registration Process' (May 2003) recommended after full and careful testing, that electronic, online registration should be enabled when the new requirements for individual voter identifiers are introduced.
- Taking the issue further, the Department of Constitutional Affairs issued a **consultation paper in December 2005 canvassing views on CORE**¹ – a Coordinated Online Record of Electors. The DCA paper proposed that Electoral Registration Officers would update information on CORE, a centralised database, daily, using a common data language (EML) and the Government Connect network. Following the consultation, the government inclined towards a position where CORE would not replace locally held electoral registers, but would act as a clearing house to check the accuracy of locally held information.
- **The Political Parties and Elections Act 2009**² provides for data matching pilots between local government authorities and other public databases with the aim of testing methods for ensuring the completeness and accuracy of the electoral registers.
- The Association of Electoral Administrators has recently published its **Interim Report** following this year's general election and has made recommendations on the reform of the electoral system, **including a call to make improvements to the electoral registration system**³.

This study has attracted the attention of the Electoral Commission and the National Audit Office amongst others.

EURIM'S SCOPE OF WORK

EURIM's scope does not include an analysis of, or recommendations on, the political desirability of national, centralised databases as opposed to locally held electoral registers. Our study did however throw up interesting trends in this area, which we record.

Although electronic voting is specifically excluded from the study, as is any other analysis of the process of polling itself, EURIM recognises that any recommendations on voter registration need to be practical and conducive to improvements in registration levels and accuracy. They must also be consistent with the present methods of polling or assist in improvements to the polling process and turnout.

EURIM's main focus is:

- the technical means of **holding and transferring personal data** between different authorities,
- how to **transfer that data securely**,
- how to **store that data in a way consistent with privacy requirements**,
- how current or emerging technology might help facilitate:
 - i. access to the electoral register;
 - ii. the process of applying to be registered;
 - iii. updating information (e.g. change of address);
 - iv. ensuring information held by an ERO is accurate.

We looked at a selection of countries to understand how individual electoral registration works overseas. We chose a significant sample of countries representing different traditions of law, culture and governance. Our canvass took the form of an e-mail approach with a limited list of questions, chosen to elucidate how electoral registration systems work overseas. A more detailed study will focus on the data matching processes and security arrangements of a small sample set of the countries.

SELECTED COUNTRIES

We identified and approached 22 countries, some with very different cultures and approaches to governance, representing well in excess of 1 in 10 of the countries recognised by the United Nations. Countries were chosen in some cases because of the historical and legal cultures they share with the UK [e.g. Australia,

¹ http://www.dca.gov.uk/consult/core/core_cp2905.pdf

² http://www.opsi.gov.uk/acts/acts2009/pdf/ukpga_20090012_en.pdf

³ http://www.aeaelections.co.uk/downloads/reports/aea_election_report_final_PUBLICATION.pdf

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Canada, New Zealand] or because of their adoption of a centralised population register, which is used to generate an electoral register [as in the Scandinavian states].

Other countries were included because their populations are, like that of the UK, large [Germany, Japan]. Another group includes those which, like the UK, are in a state of transition, upgrading or changing the entire basis of their electoral register [India, Malta, Ireland].

A substantial number of relevant authorities responded to our canvass, whilst responses are still awaited from others. A full list of countries approached, questions posed and responses received can be found in the summary grid at www.eurim.org.uk/activities/ig/idg/eVR_GridOverseas.pdf.

Electoral Registers versus Population Registers

Some interesting trends or approaches to the basis of the electoral register are already emerging.

1. A number of countries sharing a legal and historical culture with the UK (Commonwealth states and the republic of Ireland, although Spain appears to be a notable inclusion) use their electoral registers only for electoral purposes or for a very limited set of other purposes such as providing lists for jury service.
2. All of the countries of continental, mostly northern, Europe (except Spain) from whom we have received responses have established population registers which are used for multiple purposes, including that of generating the electoral register or registers immediately prior to an election. These population registers may be held centrally (i.e. nationally) – e.g. Scandinavia, or locally, as in Germany and the Netherlands.
3. Some countries are in a state of transition: in the case of India moving from locally held electoral registers to a centralised national register; or, in the case of Malta, converting the electoral register to a national identity register.

Types of Register

Stand – alone Electoral Register	Population Register	
	National	Municipal
Australia	Chile	Germany
Canada	Denmark	Netherlands
India	Estonia	Japan
Ireland	Finland	
New Zealand	Malta	
Guyana	Norway	
Spain	Senegal	
	Sweden	

Data Transfer between public authorities.

Our initial study shows that the electoral registration systems used in Australia, Canada and New Zealand (as well as other countries where the register is preserved only for electoral purposes) seem to have limited or no ability to match data with other public authorities online.

In contrast, the population registers of northern Europe operate a well established system of data transfer online between public authorities. Initial responses show also that the northern European states have adopted high standards of data security, employing for instance digital signatures to control access to information.

So What?

The current political direction in the UK has ruled out the creation of a population register (which is what the National Identity Register was) and this suggests that the electoral register will remain a stand-alone item.

Against this backdrop, there is no compelling political reason to concentrate electoral registers into a single, centrally held electoral register. So the northern European population registers are not likely to be relevant as an organisational model for the UK's electoral registration system.

However, it seems probable that the northern European registration systems, whether centrally held as in Scandinavia, or locally held as in Germany and Netherlands, will hold valuable lessons for the UK in the operation of data matching between public authorities to ensure maximum completeness and accuracy of the electoral register. These lessons will include methods of transferring data and security measures surrounding the data.

Further into the future, the UK Authorities may learn valuable lessons on methods of online registration from these overseas authorities.

Next Steps

We will study a small sample of the selected countries in greater depth with the aim of identifying best practice in their approaches to data security and data matching.

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