

**POLITICAL AND CONSTITUTIONAL REFORM SELECT COMMITTEE
INQUIRY ON PARLIAMENTARY VOTING SYSTEMS AND CONSTITUENCIES
BILL**

Evidence submitted by Dr Stuart Wilks-Heeg - Director, Democratic Audit

3 September 2010

I am the Executive Director of Democratic Audit, an independent research organisation based at the University of Liverpool. This note supplements evidence already submitted to the committee by Lewis Baston on behalf of Democratic Audit and focuses principally on issues concerned with the electoral registers. My evidence draws principally on research I undertook during an Economic and Social Research Council research fellowship with the Electoral Commission from 2009-10. I am also a Senior Lecturer in Social Policy at the University of Liverpool.

SUMMARY

- There are a number of concerning issues associated with this Bill. They include: the conflation of a referendum on electoral reform with reviews of constituency boundaries; a seemingly arbitrary decision to reduce the House of Commons from 650 to 600 MPs; and the haste with which the Bill has been introduced.
- It is not clear that the electoral registers are 'fit for purpose' in undertaking radical changes to reduce and equalise constituencies. Recent research into the completeness and accuracy of the electoral registers highlights that there has been a sharp fall in registration levels over the past decade, and variations in under-registration appear to be growing.

General observations

1. Democratic Audit's view is that, measured against the principle of pursuing constitutional reform via informed, evidence-based policy-making, there are a number of serious deficiencies in the Bill. In particular:

- While there may be political reasons for marrying the proposed referendum on the Alternative Vote with proposals to reduce the total number of MPs and equalise constituency electorates, there is no policy rationale for introducing the measures in the same Bill.
- The justification for reducing the number of MPs from 650 to 600 has not been clearly made, particularly in representative terms, and the target figure of 600 seems entirely arbitrary. For instance, while the UK may appear to have a lower ratio of MPs to electors than many comparable

countries, it also has far higher ratio of local councillors to electors than any country in Western Europe.

- The 'reduce and equalise' objective in relation to parliamentary constituencies is more far-reaching and ambitious than anything attempted by previous boundary reviews. Yet, the Bill has been introduced with much haste, militating against expert consultation, proper pre-legislative scrutiny and informed debate – both within and without the Houses of Parliament.
- Recent evidence about possibly substantial variations in the completeness of the electoral registers raises important issues about the proposals to reduce and equalise constituencies. Since constituency size is measured by the sole criterion of the number of registered electors, there is a risk that areas in which under-registration is currently concentrated will also become 'under-represented' in Parliament.
- Key research evidence about the completeness and accuracy of the December 2010 electoral registers (on which the boundary reviews will be based) will become available following the 2011 Census. Matching Census records against register entries is the most reliable way of estimating the completeness and accuracy of the registers and the opportunity to do so arises only once in a decade. The current proposals do not appear to allow for this evidence to be taken into account. It not unthinkable that Census-based estimates, which will become available during the period in which the new boundaries are determined, could serve to undermine the credibility of the exercise.
- The government has also indicated that it intends to accelerate the introduction of individual voter registration. A substantial change to the system of registering electors and a far-reaching set of boundary review will therefore take place simultaneously. Based on the experience in Northern Ireland, it is likely that individual registration will result in significant changes in registration levels – nationally, regionally and locally. Since the boundary review process will be based on the December 2010 electoral registers, there is every chance that the more 'equalised' constituencies in 2015 will come to exhibit greater variations in the number of electors than among the constituencies they will be replacing.

The state of the electoral registers

2. The remainder of this submission is concerned exclusively with issues concerning electoral registration. I was the lead author on the Electoral Commission's 2010 report 'The completeness and accuracy of electoral registers in Great Britain'.

3. Until very recently there was a serious dearth of evidence about the state of the electoral registers. Between the late 1990s and the mid-2000s, no research at all was published on electoral registration. This meant that the opportunity was missed to undertake detailed comparison of the December 2000 registers

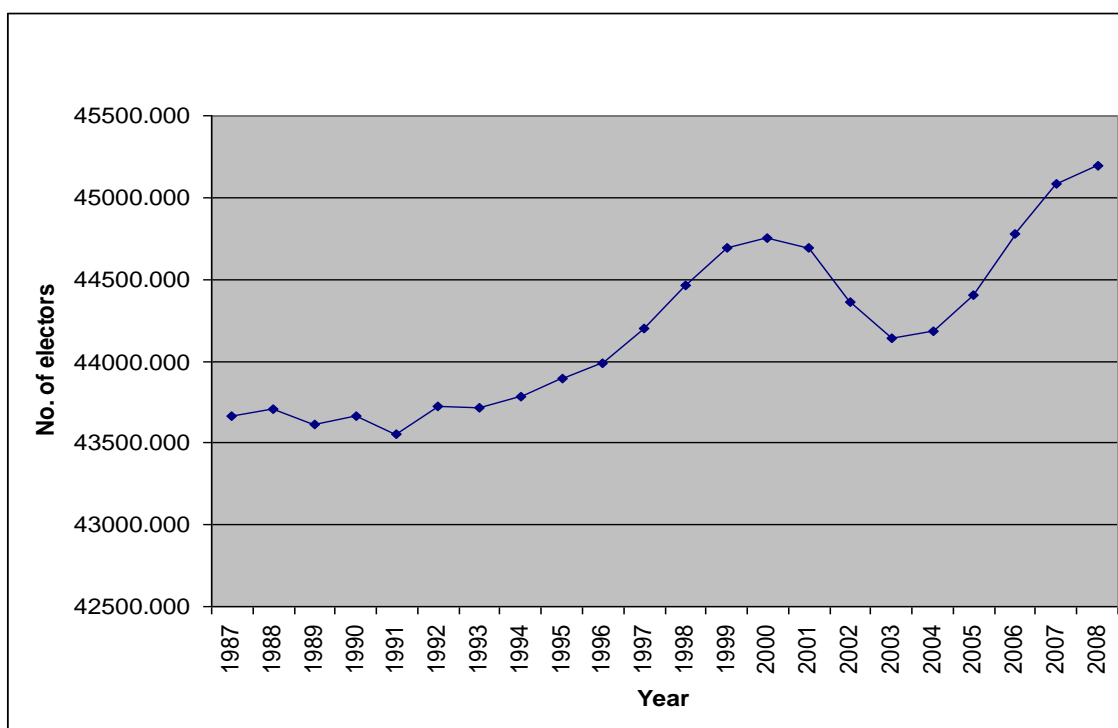
against the April 2001 Census of Population. The Electoral Commission (EC) began to fill this research gap after 2005, beginning with a retrospective study of the completeness and accuracy of the 2000/01 registers. The EC's report on electoral registration published in March 2010 is therefore the most detailed account of the state of the registers for almost a decade.

4. The key findings from the EC's 2010 report were that:

- The completeness of Great Britain's electoral registers remains broadly similar to the levels achieved internationally.
- There is evidence of a gradual long-term decline in the completeness of Great Britain's electoral registers since the 1970s.
- There was a particularly sharp fall in registration levels from 2000-2005, since which time registration levels have stabilised.
- As in previous decades, under-registration is concentrated among specific social groups, with registration rates being especially low among young people, private renters and those who have recently moved home.
- There appear to be widening local and regional variations in UK registration levels, with metropolitan and unitary areas outside of Greater London experiencing the greatest levels of decline.
- While the vast majority of local registers are likely to be more than 90 per cent complete, a growing minority of local registers are likely to be less than 85 per cent complete.
- The highest concentrations of under-registration are most likely to be found in metropolitan areas, smaller towns and cities with large student populations, and coastal areas with significant population turnover and high levels of social deprivation.
- Owing to population movement, the completeness of local registers is likely to decline by an average of 10 percentage points within the annual lifecycle of the electoral registers.
- Case studies in eight local authority areas revealed that variations in levels of completeness are mirrored by variations in levels of accuracy – in large part reflecting the impact of contrasting local migration rates. Registers in metropolitan areas tend to be both less complete and less accurate because of higher levels of population movement.
- There is scope for some immediate improvement in electoral administration, mostly through the more effective identification, dissemination and adoption of good practice among local authorities. This would be likely to reverse at least part of the decline in registration levels, most notably in metropolitan areas – but there are limits to what Electoral Registration Officers (EROs) can achieve under the current system.
- In the medium-term, maximising the completeness and accuracy of the electoral registers will require significant reforms to the current system of electoral registration. Plans for the phased introduction of individual elector registration in Great Britain from 2011-14 represent a significant opportunity to undertake such reforms.

5. Very little was known about recent trends in registration levels before the EC research was published earlier this year. The report established that there were clear grounds for assuming that registration levels had fallen quite dramatically in the period from 2000-2005, pointing to a far deeper dip in registration than had been associated with the introduction of the Community Charge ('poll tax') in the early 1990s – see figure 1.

Figure 1: Total number of registered UK Parliamentary electors



Source: ONS Electoral Statistics.

6. This decline in the number of registered electors from 2000-2005 occurred at a time when the notionally eligible population continued to grow – see figure 2. As a consequence, the UK's notional registration rate (a relatively crude measure of the completeness of the registers) fell from around 95% in the late 1990s to 90.5% in 2006. In 1983, the notional registration rate had been 97.8%.

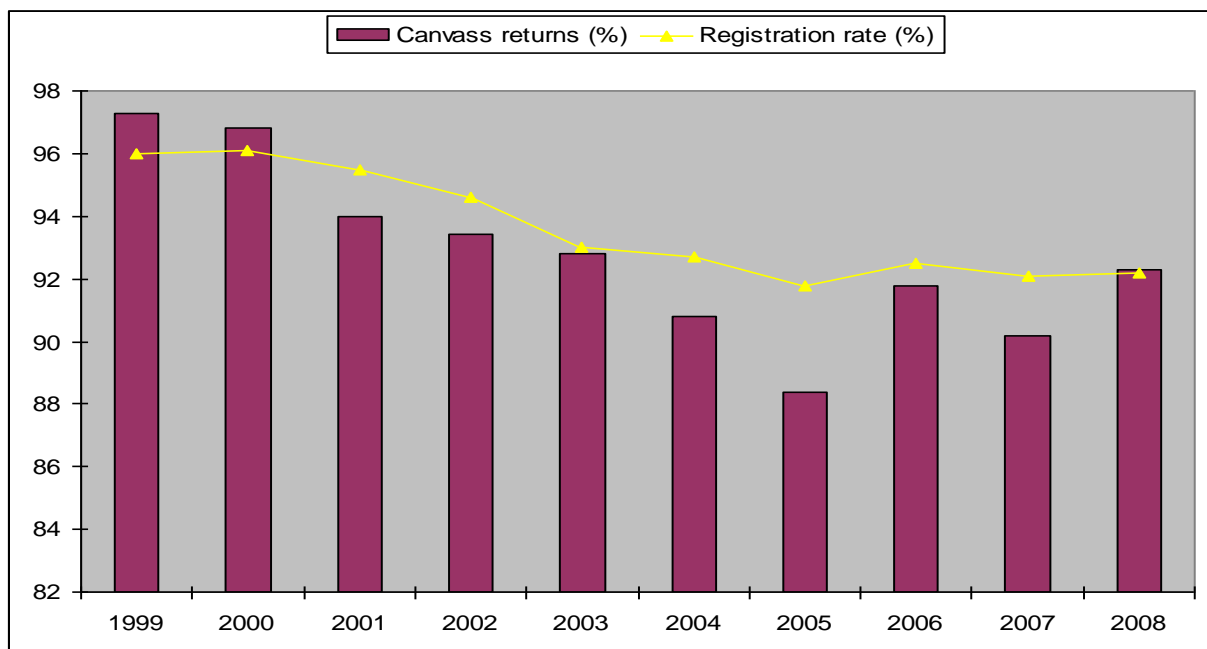
7. The decline in register entries in the early 2000s was also associated with a clear decline in levels of household response to the annual canvass of electors. This decline in canvass response appears to have been most marked in metropolitan areas – particularly the areas covered by the former Metropolitan County Councils in England. By way of illustration, figure 3 shows how the registration rate declined alongside the canvass response rate in England's largest local authority (Birmingham) from 1999-2005, followed by a modest recovery from 2006-08.

Figure 2: Growth in the population aged 16 and above and growth in entries on the electoral registers, England and Wales, 1991-2008 (1991=100)



Source: ONS Mid-Term Estimates; ONS Electoral Statistics

Figure 3: Canvass return rate and registration rate, Birmingham, 1999-2008



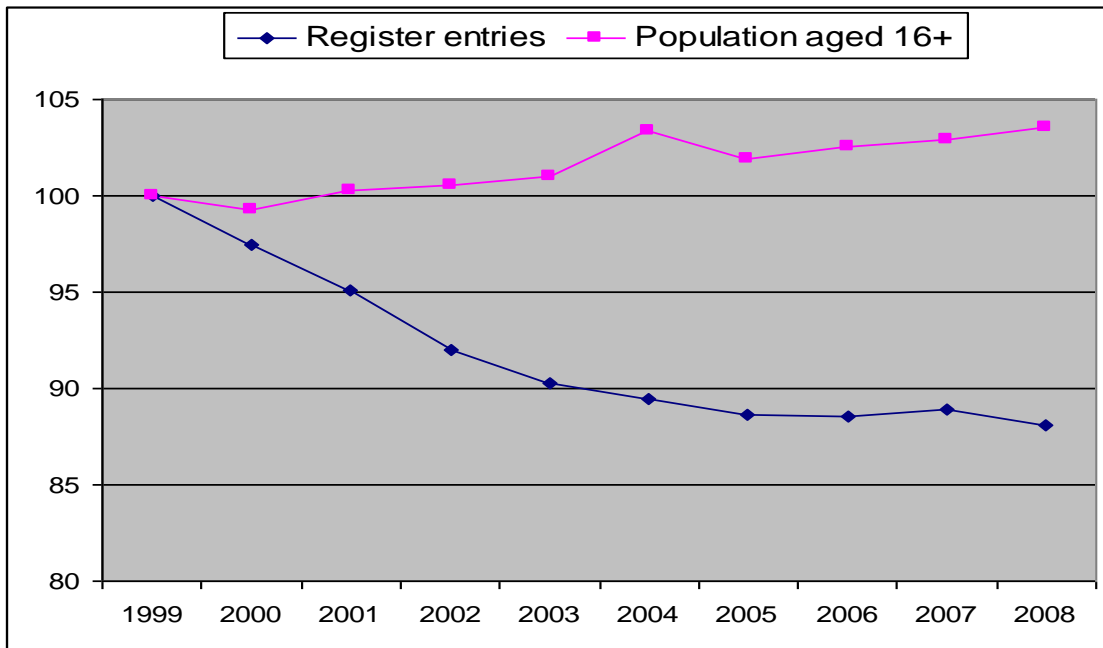
Sources: Association of Electoral Administrators; Electoral Commission Performance Standards data; ONS Electoral Statistics, ONS Mid-Term Estimates

8. This emerging evidence about the state of the electoral registers is particularly important because the proposals involve both reducing the number of constituencies and equalising the number of electors in each. There are significant concentrations of seats with smaller electorates in a number of metropolitan areas – notably Merseyside, the West Midlands and parts of West and South Yorkshire. Given existing registration levels, it would appear inevitable that these areas will 'lose' representation relative to other areas. Yet, based on existing evidence about local variations in registration levels, it is clearly conceivable that were a successful registration drive to take place in these areas during the 2010 annual canvass of electors tens of thousands of electors could be added to the registers in individual metropolitan areas. Such a scenario would be likely to bring a number of constituencies with smaller electorates significantly closer to the arithmetic mean. This could, in turn, have profound implications for the outcomes of the boundary review process.

9. The EC's research highlighted that the rates of completeness of individual electoral registers (the percentage of missing entries) tends to mirror the rates of accuracy of those registers (the percentage of entries which are redundant or false). It could be argued that this will mean that inaccuracy will tend to counter-balance incompleteness, thereby producing electoral registers which approximate quite well to the total number of eligible electors. It will only be possible to test the validity of this argument once the evidence is available from research matching entries on the 2010 electoral registers against the 2011 Census records. However, based on the EC research, I would argue that this assumption is likely to be flawed.

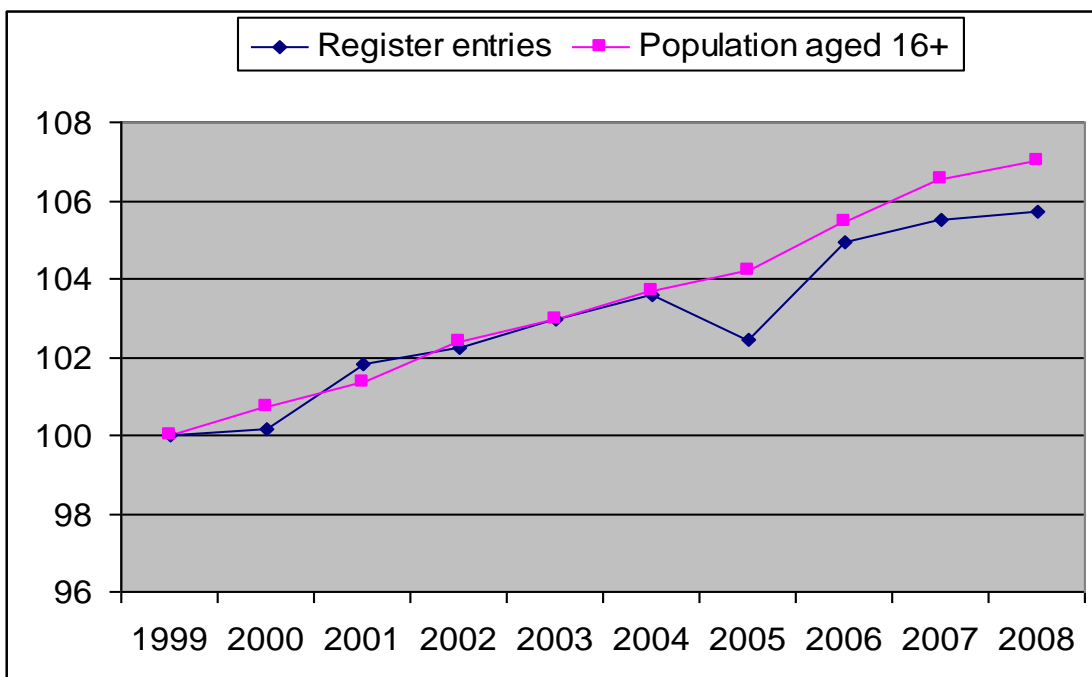
10. The EC research includes detailed case studies of the registers in eight local authority areas, based on surveys carried out by Ipsos MORI. These surveys demonstrated that completeness and accuracy rates tend to mirror one another – this is largely because the principal cause of both missing entries and redundant entries is the same, namely population movement. However, additional analysis of registration trends in the eight areas suggests that the areas with lower rates of completeness and accuracy were generally those in which the number of registered electors has failed to keep pace with the growth in the notionally eligible population over the past decade. This was particularly evident in the case of Glasgow. Conversely, the areas which were found to have the most complete and accurate registers tended to be those where the registered electorate had grown at the same pace as the adult population. This was well illustrated by the case of Hambleton, a sparsely populated rural district in North Yorkshire. Figures 4 and 5 highlight these patterns.

Figure 4: Local government electors and population aged 16+, Glasgow, 1999-2008 (indexed: 1999=100).



Estimated completeness of Glasgow register (September 2009): 74%; estimated accuracy of Glasgow register (September 2009): 77%

Figure 5: Local government electors and population aged 16+, Hambleton, 1999-2008 (indexed: 1999=100).



Estimated completeness of Hambleton's register (September 2009): 89%; Estimated accuracy of Hambleton's register (September 2009): 91%.