



House of Commons
Political and Constitutional
Reform Committee

**Voter engagement in
the UK: Government
Response to the
Committee's Fourth
Report of Session
2014–15**

**Fourth Special Report of Session
2014–15**

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The Political and Constitutional Reform Committee

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Powers

The Committee's powers are set out in House of Commons Standing Orders, principally in Temporary Standing Order (Political and Constitutional Reform Committee). These are available on the Internet via www.publications.parliament.uk/pa/cm/cmstords.htm

Publication

Committee reports are published on the Committee's website at www.parliament.uk/PCRC-publications and by The Stationery Office by Order of the House.

Evidence relating to this inquiry is published on the Committee's website at <http://www.parliament.uk/voter-engagement-in-the-uk>

Committee staff

The current staff of the Committee are Martyn Atkins (Clerk), Edward Faulkner (Committee Specialist), Ami Cochrane (Legal Assistant), Tony Catinella (Senior Committee Assistant), James Camp (Committee Assistant), Nerys Davies (Campaign Co-ordinator), and Jessica Bridges-Palmer (Media Officer).

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Special Report

The Political and Constitutional Reform Committee published its Fourth Report of Session 2014—15, [Voter engagement in the UK](#), on 14 November 2014, as House of Commons Paper HC 232. The Government Response to this Report was received on 28 January 2015 and is published below.

Appendix: Government response

Letter from Sam Gyimah MP, Minister for the Constitution, Cabinet Office to the Chair of the Political and Constitutional Reform Committee

I am writing on behalf of the Government to respond to your interim report. Thank you to you and your Committee for its thorough work.

The Government agrees with the Committee that improving voter engagement is vital to the long term well-being of democracy in the UK and welcomes this report. At the same time the Government notes that this is response to an interim report for public consideration and looks forward to the publication of the final report on National Voter Registration Day on 5 February. Whatever the Committee's final report recommends, it will certainly stimulate the debates on this issue that will take place ahead of the General Election in May.

Hopefully this response, along with others, will help the Committee shape its final recommendations, particularly by highlighting work that is already under way to encourage participation in the democratic process, both through education and practical changes, such as being able to register to vote on-line in three minutes. The references to paragraphs in this response relate to paragraph numbers in the report's interim conclusions and recommendations.

28 January 2015

Government Response to the Interim Conclusions and Recommendations of the PCRC's Fourth Report of 2014-15 about Voter Engagement

[Paragraphs summarising the Committee's conclusions and recommendations are highlighted in bold. References to paragraphs are to the [numbered list of conclusions and recommendations at pages 82 to 94 of the Committee's report.](#)]

All party talks on party funding are resumed urgently with a view to reaching agreed settlement before the general election. (Paragraph 6)

Following the publication of the 13th report from the Committee on Standards in Public Life (CSPL) in November 2011, the Deputy Prime Minister convened discussions between the three main political parties to discuss possible reforms to party funding. Representatives met seven times during 2012 and 2013, with discussions based on the principles identified by the CSPL. Unfortunately, as on previous occasions, there has been no agreement between the three parties on beginning party funding reform.

Although it is now clear that reforms cannot go forward in this Parliament, the Government hopes that the principles explored can inform further discussions on this topic and that the parties will then return to this issue after the General Election.

The legal requirement to register to vote should be clarified and this basic civil duty should be enforced. (Paragraph 12)

The Government believes that compelling someone to register to vote is unlikely to make them more engaged and therefore more likely to vote.

The Government has introduced a variety of measures to help engage the UK electorate but increasing democratic engagement is not solely the responsibility of Government. Politicians, political parties, electoral administrators, civil society groups, schools, parents and people themselves all have a role to play in promoting understanding and engagement in registering to vote.

Every effort is made by Electoral Registration Officers (ERO) to reach all registered voters who have not been automatically transferred to the new register, to give them the opportunity to register under the new system. The Electoral Commission must make it a priority to ensure that this happens and we are asking the Commission to give a progress report to us in the New Year. (Paragraph 14)

In order to safeguard levels of voter participation, the Government commit in its response to look favourably on requests for additional funding to be made available to EROs to support their work in maintaining and enhancing the levels of electoral registration, and to other bodies and organisations that have a proven track record of increasing voter registration in the most economical and effective way possible. Also that the Electoral Commission look into service level agreements with agencies, bodies and organisations such as Bite the Ballot and Operation Black Vote who have a proven track record in increasing electoral registration and can do it a fraction of the cost of the Electoral Commission or Government Departments. (Paragraph 17)

The Government produce a plan well before May 2015 for targeting those groups that are least likely to be registered to vote. (Paragraph 26)

The Government has taken measures to both safeguard and increase the completeness and accuracy of the electoral register as part of the transition to Individual Electoral Registration (IER). Through the use of data matching 87% of existing electors have been automatically transferred to the new registers under IER. Electors who did not transfer automatically have each been invited to register, sent reminders and canvassed in person to encourage them to apply under IER. The introduction of on-line registration makes registering to vote quicker and simpler than ever before and is proving to be a success. Since the introduction of IER, over 4 million people have submitted applications to register to vote with the majority of these being made on-line. Over 90% of users are satisfied with the online service.

Alongside the move to IER, the Government has taken steps to increase levels of voter registration. In the 2013/14 financial year we invested £4.2million, shared across every ERO in Great Britain and five national organisations to support the costs of their activities in encouraging eligible electors to register to vote.¹

We have also invested in understanding the problem of under registration to help inform our approach. For example, in 2012 we published qualitative research conducted with under-registered groups, to identify barriers and risks to registration for these groups under the new system. The results showed that many aspects of IER were welcomed by participants, including for example online registration and increased personal ownership of registration and that when it is explained, an application under IER was more straightforward than participants anticipated.

The Electoral Commission carried out research in 2014 that shows that registration levels have stabilised since 2011.² However, there is no room for complacency. The Government remains committed to ensuring every eligible voter is registered and can exercise their democratic right at the ballot box. We have therefore recently announced in a Written Ministerial Statement³ a further investment of £9.8 million to support the costs of activities aimed at increasing the completeness and accuracy of the register. In line with the Committee's recommendation, this funding package consists of a number of components that will support efforts to improve registration among different types of electors and under registered groups.

A core component of this investment is the sharing of £6.8 million between every ERO in Great Britain. The Government recognises that EROs are best placed to determine the type of activity which will best drive up registration rates in their local area. As a result, they are free to use this funding for canvassing activity early in 2015 as the Committee has suggested. This could include either targeted canvass activity (in areas or among

1 This press release has further details on the allocation of this £4.2 million funding:
<https://www.gov.uk/government/news/funding-for-new-ways-to-encourage-voter-registration>

2 http://www.electoralcommission.org.uk/_data/assets/pdf_file/0005/169889/Completeness-and-accuracy-of-the-2014-electoral-registers-in-Great-Britain.pdf

3 www.parliament.uk/business/publications/written-questions-answers-statements/written-statement/Commons2015-01-09/HCVS180/

groups with disproportionately low registration rates), or a further write out to all households to advise who is registered, in order to prompt those not currently registered to do so and to help identify those who have recently moved within or into the local area. Allocations for EROs are based on levels of under registration and reflect the scale of the challenge in each area by ensuring areas with larger proportions of under registered groups, such as students, receive a greater share of the funding. In addition, a share of the £9.8 million investment has been made available for national organisations to promote voter registration among under registered groups such as students.

The Electoral Commission will be responding separately to the Committee's request for a progress report on efforts to capture unconfirmed electors and around the scope for service level agreements with external organisations.

With 5.5 million voters not yet confirmed on to the new electoral register, unless the electoral registers are substantially more complete than at present by May 2015, the Government should not bring forward the end date for the transitional arrangements for Individual Electoral Registration. (Paragraph 15)

We are continuing to deliver the transition timetable debated in Parliament and approved in the Electoral Registration and Administration Act 2013. It is for the next Government and Parliament to make the decision, following the advice and assessment of the Electoral Commission, as to whether the transition should conclude at the end of 2015 or at some stage during 2016. We anticipate that the completeness and accuracy of the registers will be at the centre of these deliberations.

A requirement to present photographic ID at polling stations cannot be justified at present, and we recommend against its adoption. (Paragraph 19)

It is vital that the public has confidence in the running of elections and that the integrity of the electoral system is safeguarded. However we have not seen any evidence to suggest that personation at polling stations is significant problem that needs to be addressed by the introduction of an ID requirement at polling stations. Figures published by the Association of Chief Police Officers/Electoral Commission show that there were a total of 58 alleged cases during the four years from 2010 to 2013. At least 26 of these related to one of the 16 local authority areas identified by the Electoral Commission as being at higher risk of alleged cases of electoral fraud.

Personation at polling stations is difficult to organise on a large scale, as large numbers of people would need to be mobilised to commit the offence in order to significantly affect the result of a poll. Small numbers of individuals who commit personation a number of times are more likely to be detected. The offence is therefore more likely to be attempted at closely contested polls where a small number of votes might determine the outcome. Returning Officers and the police are able to identify polls where this is a risk factor, and take preventative action.

We are not convinced that introducing a photographic ID requirement on a national basis is a necessary or proportionate response, and believe it could potentially disenfranchise significant numbers of legitimate voters. The Government therefore welcomes the Committee's recommendation.

We recommend that within three months of the publication of this Report, the Government consult with the Electoral Commission, EROs and disability groups and publish clear and stretching proposals setting out how registration and voting will be made more accessible to people with disabilities. We also recommend that political parties work with disability groups to make manifestos and other election material accessible in formats which people with disabilities find easier to use. (Paragraph 23)

The Government is committed to making the electoral system fully accessible for all electors. We held meetings in July and November in 2014 with the Royal Mencap Society (Mencap) and the Royal National Institute for the Blind (RNIB) to identify options for making registration and voting easier for people with disabilities. Representatives from Mencap and RNIB discussed these options at a meeting of the Electoral Policy Coordination Group on 9 December. The Group, whose membership also includes the Electoral Commission and senior Returning Officers (RO) and EROs, meets regularly to discuss electoral policy and to plan and prepare for polls.

Mencap, who represents people with a learning disability, was one of five national organisations to share funding awarded by the Government in 2013/14 to test new approaches to improve registration levels and democratic engagement amongst under registered groups. As part of this initiative Mencap has developed an easy-to-read guide to registering to vote and voting, to be used in a one-to-one setting for with people with learning disabilities, their families and carers. This engagement resource is freely available on Gov.uk.⁴

Mencap is also adapting [Rock Enrol!](#)⁵, the Government's freely available resource for engaging young people in the democratic process, specifically for young people with a learning disability.

At the meeting on 9 December, it was agreed that Mencap's easy-to-read guide on voting and registering to vote would be published on the Electoral Commission's website, as a public engagement resource for electoral administration staff, and that the Electoral Commission would remind polling station staff of their legal duty towards disabled voters. Further work to bring forward proposals to improve the accessibility of the electoral system for disabled people remains ongoing.

Officials continue to have a good ongoing relationship with Mencap and RNIB and are discussing with them how best they can work together in the future.

We expect to see a comprehensive plan from the Government in response to our Report, setting out how it plans to increase registration rates for overseas voters. We recommend that, at a minimum, this include using UK embassies to promote registration to British citizens living abroad, working with the BBC to put out information through BBC World and the World Service, and making changes to voting to make it more convenient to overseas voters. (Paragraph 24)

4 www.gov.uk/government/publications/voting-and-registering-to-vote-an-easy-read-guide

5 www.gov.uk/government/publications/rock-enrol-engaging-young-people-in-democracy

The Government remains committed to maximise registration amongst all groups, including overseas electors and is already working to achieve this ahead of the 2015 General Election.

Some of the measures introduced, such as IER, on-line registration and the extension the electoral timetable for UK Parliamentary elections from 17 to 25 days making it easier for postal voters, to return their postal votes, are particularly helpful for overseas voters. Also a digital channel has been introduced that enables special category electors, such as overseas voters, to submit an electronic application. The requirement for overseas electors to have a witness for their application to register has also been removed, which will make it a more straightforward process.

Up to £2.5 million funding will be available to fund wider activity, including working with national organisations. This funding will support activity to encourage specific under registered groups such as students, overseas electors and armed service personnel to register to vote.

EROs already have defined steps to take to remind overseas electors to renew their declaration under existing regulations and this is supplemented by the requirement to send an invitation to register, and a reminder, if necessary, to those electors who do not renew their registration and who the ERO believes may still be resident at their address.

The Electoral Commission, provides information about how to register and vote overseas on its website and, working with the Foreign and Commonwealth Office, is targeting UK citizens living overseas as part of its online advertising campaign ahead of the General Election, particularly in countries with high populations of UK citizens, such as Australia, Canada, France, Spain and the USA. That campaign includes advertising on Facebook and other websites commonly used by UK citizens overseas, on expatriate radio stations worldwide, and working closely with its partners and the media to ensure the registration message is spread across expatriate networks. The Electoral Commission has increased its target to register overseas voters from 25,000 to 100,000 and will be launching their General Election voter registration campaign on 2 February.

The Electoral Commission should run a specific campaign aimed at Commonwealth citizens and citizens of other EU member states resident in the UK, focussing on eligibility to participate in elections, and how to register to vote. The Electoral Commission should also bring forward proposals for simplifying the process for EU citizens living in the UK to register to vote at European Parliament elections promptly so that the necessary changes can be made before the next European Parliament elections in 2019. (Paragraph 25)

Commonwealth citizens resident in the UK have the same voting rights and opportunities to register as UK nationals. They are encouraged to register to vote just like any other British citizen who is eligible to vote. The Government is not aware of an issue specifically with Commonwealth citizens resident in the UK on voter registration.

The Electoral Commission has confirmed to us that it plans to carry out work on the issue EU citizens resident in the UK being able to vote in European Parliament (EP) and

local elections. Cabinet Office officials have also met representatives of New Europeans⁶ to discuss issues that arose with the participation of EU citizens at the EP election in May 2014. Cabinet Office plans further discussions with the Electoral Commission and other electoral stakeholders on the registration process for EU citizens to consider ways to simplify the process for EU citizens living in the UK to register to vote at EP and local elections.

In future targets for registration should be included in performance standards for EROs. The Electoral Commission will need to consider how such output targets should be set, and the steps which would be most effective in securing attainment of such targets should they not initially be achieved. Best practice, as identified by EROs and the Commission, should also be incorporated in the performance standards. We believe that the outcomes on the number and percentage of those registered to vote should also be a key performance indicator for the Electoral Commission. (Paragraph 27).

As the Electoral Commission is an independent body established by Parliament, it is overseen by the Speaker's Committee. Consequently, key performance measures for the Electoral Commission are a matter for that Committee.

The Government to set out proposals for annually recognising notable successes and best practice in electoral registration. MPs should be more closely engaged with the monitoring of electoral registration in their constituencies and that the Electoral Commission should provide them with specific data on the outcomes of the number and percentage rates of registration in each ward within their constituency. The Government commit to finding parliamentary time for an annual debate in Parliament to allow registration issues to be discussed. This could be held on National Voter Registration Day or on a "Democracy Day". (Paragraph 28)

This is currently the subject of discussions between the Cabinet Office and the Electoral Commission. The Electoral Commission has now launched its project on identifying, recognising and sharing 'what works' in relation to elections, and we provided initial information to Returning Officers and electoral administrators on the scheme in one of its regular [Electoral Administration Bulletins](#).

The scheme currently focuses on elections and has the objective of identifying examples of good practice that can be used in this year's General Election, the Electoral Commission intends to evaluate its success after this initial round, with a view to potentially extending it to cover electoral registration over the 2015 canvass.

The Government should take enforcement action against EROs which repeatedly fail to fulfil their statutory duties in a way which has an adverse effect on the quality of voter registration in their area and set out the circumstances in which it is prepared to seek a prosecution of any electoral official considered to be in breach of an official duty under the provisions of the Representation of the People Act 1983. (Paragraph 29)

6 New Europeans is a non profit organisation created to promote and support the UK's EU membership.

There is no mechanism within the current legal framework for registration for the Government to take enforcement action against EROs that do not fulfil their statutory duties beyond the power to issue a Secretary of State direction under section 52 of the Representation of the People Act 1983. The Government has made clear to all EROs that Parliament expects them to fulfil their statutory duties and has emphasised that Ministers are prepared to issue a direction (subject to a positive recommendation from the Electoral Commission), to ensure EROs comply with their obligations. Any authorities identified during the course of the implementation of IER as failing to implement their legal obligations will be dealt with promptly and unambiguously.

In addition, prosecutions in England and Wales are a matter for the Crown Prosecution Service (CPS), which is an independent prosecuting authority and Ministers have no influence over its decision making.

The Government to issue an Order under section 5 of the Freedom of Information Act 2000 (FOIA) designating EROs and ROs public authorities for the purpose of that Act. (Paragraph 31)

The Government agrees that there is a case for bringing EROs and ROs under the FOIA. There is insufficient time remaining in this Parliament to complete the required steps (including formal consultation with EROs and ROs), so this will necessarily be an issue for the next Government.

It is worth noting that the Association of Electoral Administrators advises its members to behave as if they were already subject to the FOIA, and the Government understands that many, but not all, do so.

The Government should set out how it plans to support Bite the Ballot's National Voter Registration Day 2015. The Electoral Commission, electoral officials, and all public sector organisations should put specific plans in place to take advantage of National Voter Registration Day (NVRD) to make a significant difference to the number of people who are registered to vote ahead of the 2015 general election, and future elections. (Paragraph 35)

The Government welcomes all initiatives including Bite the Ballot's National Voter Registration Day, British Youth Council's Make Your Mark and Vinspired's Swing the Vote, that promote democratic engagement and voter registration.

The Ministry of Defence's information campaign for service personnel and their families and the Electoral Commission's Overseas Voter Registration Day will fall on 5 February, the same day as NVRD.

The Government is considering how best to support activities which fall on 5 February and beyond, to encourage all groups in society to register to vote. This will include using social media channels and using our networks to promote voter registration messages.

The Government to make specific proposals about how people could be prompted to register to vote when they access other public services, particularly those services associated with a change in address, such as registering to pay council tax. The Electoral Commission and EROs should also seek to work with private companies

who interact with the public so they can, as part of their corporate responsibilities, prompt those people who are currently not registered to vote to register. (Paragraph 36)

The Government has introduced IER and on-line registration on schedule. We also ensured all the necessary systems were in place to enable data matching to automatically transfer the majority of existing electors onto the registers under the new system.

As IER embeds, we now have the opportunity to explore how we can best maximise its benefits, particularly on-line registration, in order to help boost the completeness and accuracy of the register even further. As part of this work, the Cabinet Office is actively exploring options for collaboration between online electoral registration and other public sector digital transactional services.

In the short term, Cabinet Office is currently identifying the most appropriate official websites to promote voter registration by signposting the link to the on-line registration channel. It will be subject to agreement with the service providers, but the aim is to have these links in place ahead of the General Election.

We understand that the Electoral Commission will be responding separately on the question about the scope for working with EROs and private companies to target electors and encourage them to register.

The Secretary of State for Education to promote registration for 16 to 18 year olds at school and in college. EROs also should now be working with schools and colleges to register students, and we recommend that the Electoral Commission explicitly include this action in its performance standards for EROs. (Paragraph 37)

The Department for Education to ensure that schools' citizenship education courses specifically include discussion of the political and governmental structures of the UK and the electoral systems that operate in the UK, and also the practicalities of registering to vote and actually participating at an election. (Paragraph 49)

Given the low registration rates amongst young people, there is a strong case for making greater efforts to register 16 to 18 year olds at school and in college—particularly as registration now takes place on an individual basis and can be done, easily, on-line, from school. The Cabinet Office is working with the Department for Education on promoting this in schools. This could be integrated with broader citizenship education, and include a discussion about how to register to vote when moving to university or away from home. At the same time, we are looking at the scope to scale up pilots in Sheffield and Manchester that registered students at the point of enrolment.

Effective citizenship education is an important part of the process of becoming an engaged voter, and should continue to be a part of the national curriculum. Schools' citizenship education courses specifically include discussion of the political and governmental structures of the UK and the electoral systems that operate in the UK, and also the practicalities of registering to vote and actually participating at an election.

The Government to set out proposals for reducing the number of days between the cut-off date for registration and the election day, with a view to implementing them

as soon as possible. The Government set out the steps to achieving, by 2020, the objective of allowing eligible electors to register and then vote at the Town Hall or equivalent up to and on the day of an election. (Paragraph 38)

There are no plans to introduce such a change as there is no evidence that large numbers of people are turned away from polling stations because they are not registered.

It has been the policy of successive governments to have a period between the end of electoral registration and election day to give administrators the time to perform the necessary checks on identity and eligibility to vote. To change this so that anyone could turn up at the local Town Hall to register and cast a vote would be a significant departure. The Government has no plans to change the current period which provides a crucial safeguard to preserve the integrity of our democracy.

To work effectively and securely, it is likely that election day registration would require all polling stations in a constituency to be electronically linked and the register updated in real time to prevent anyone registering and voting in one polling station and moving quickly to another to do the same. This would be certain to present considerable technical challenges and carry significant cost.

Currently, the deadline for registering to vote at elections and referendums is the 12th working day prior to the date of the poll. The deadline for making an application for registration prior to an election was altered by the Electoral Administration Act 2006; it was previously, in practical terms, 6 to 7 weeks before the date of the poll.

The final version of the register, to be used for the poll, is published 5 working days prior to the poll. The ERO may determine an application to register to vote after 5 clear working days has passed from the date it is received, provided it meets the statutory requirements, no objections to it have been received and—following the move to IER—the identity of the applicant has been verified.

The existing timescales allow time for the ERO to verify the identity of an applicant, for example, using Department for Work and Pension records (National Insurance numbers and date of birth), and for any objections to be made to the application, prior to it being determined by the ERO. Reducing the number of days between the deadline for registration and the date of the poll would therefore impact on processes in place for dealing with applications that are designed to ensure that only those who are eligible to vote are able to do so.

This could be addressed by moving the date of publication of the final register closer to polling day, although this would impact on the administration of the poll, for example, the timing of the issue of postal votes and the supply of the final register to polling stations.

Providing for registrations on polling day itself would further raise issues about how the identities of applicants would be verified. If it is thought that such applications should be subject to the same level of scrutiny and checks as on applications made further in advance of polling day, then this would require EROs to take steps after the close of poll to confirm the eligibility of the person to register to vote.

Pending completion of these steps, votes cast by such persons would need to be deemed as ‘provisional’. This would have a significant impact on the timing of the declaration of results for polls, as either the declaration would need to be delayed, or a ‘provisional’ result given, pending confirmation that those voters who registered on polling day were entitled to vote at the poll. This would cause delay to the final outcome of the poll being known and the successful representative taking up office and possibly the formation of a new government after a General Election, which may be thought to be unacceptable. This situation could be avoided by having different verification processes for applicants on polling day to other applicants, for example, they could be required to produce specified identity documents, though this may also not be deemed to be appropriate or acceptable.

These proposals would represent a significant change to the UK’s electoral system and would raise important issues around the integrity of electoral processes. The Government considers that IER is a major modernisation of the electoral system and should be allowed to settle in before any further significant changes are considered. These are matters that may merit further consideration in light of the experience of IER at the General Election.

The Government to take immediate action to abolish the open electoral register before new registers are published. (Paragraph 39)

The electoral register was completely open from at least 1832 until 2002. Any individual or organisation could ask for a copy and there were no restrictions about its use. In 2002 the law was changed to provide for two versions—the electoral register a full list of constituents, which is available only to certain specified persons and bodies for electoral, law enforcement and credit checking purposes, and the open register from which people could opt out of annually.

The Government considered the future of the open register and the opt out in 2012 and decided to retain both. It is likely that if the open register was abolished there would be strong pressure for wider access to the electoral register—moving back towards the pre 2002 situation—and this would be a change that could discourage people from registering to vote.

However, the Government has recently introduced changes that include enabling electors’ preferences on the open register, including opting out, to be carried forward indefinitely—unless or until they want to make a new choice or complete a new registration application (having moved home for example), rather than having to be renewed every year by ticking a box in the annual canvass form.

The Government to clearly set out its view on moving to a system of automatic registration. (Paragraph 40)

The Government believes registering to vote is a civic duty and that individuals should take responsibility for their own vote. That is one of the fundamental underpinnings of the new system of IER. This belief is incompatible with a system of automatic registration.

Given the scale of the transformation to the electoral registration system introduced by IER, the Government used national and local data matching to successfully passport 87%

of those previously registered to vote onto the new IER registers without having to take any action. This was intended to minimise the impact of the transition to the new system on electors and administrators—allowing registration officers to focus their resources on registering those who did not match and those not previously registered to vote.

The Government agrees that registering to vote should be as easy and straightforward as possible. That is why we have introduced online registration and are looking at data sharing and signposting.

The Government explore further proposals for weekend voting, extending voting and designating election days as public holidays. (Paragraph 41)

Polling stations for UK elections are open to voters from 7am to 10pm. This provides most electors with the opportunity to vote. For electors who cannot get to a polling station, postal voting provides an alternative means for them to cast their vote.

There is no robust evidence that moving election day to the weekend would have a significant impact on levels of participation. In addition, faith groups would also have concerns about a move to weekend voting and it may also increase costs. An impact assessment undertaken in 2010 by the Ministry of Justice (under the previous Government) concluded that moving from Thursday to weekend voting would increase the costs of a UK Parliamentary election by around £58 million.

There is also no strong evidence that designating election day as a public holiday would have any significant impact on participation rates. It is not clear that those who choose not to vote would do so if the day of election was a public holiday. Furthermore, such a change may also have consequences beyond the election itself, for example, for business and the national economy.

The Government should provide an assessment of the challenges and likely impact on turnout, and run pilots in the next Parliament with a view to all electors having the choice of voting on-line in the 2020 election. (Paragraph 42)

Various forms of e-voting were trialled in England between 2000 and 2007 and this resulted in very small changes to overall turnout.

The major issue raised by those opposed to the introduction of e-voting is that it is not sufficiently transparent or secure. The selection of elected representatives for Parliament is regarded as requiring the highest possible level of test and, at present, there are concerns that e-Voting, by any means, is not seen by many to be sufficiently rigorous and could potentially be vulnerable to attack or fraud.

In addition, the cost of introducing such a system would be substantial. Public support for such measures is still far from universal and traditional means of voting (such as polling stations and postal voting) remain popular with the electorate. Therefore, any means of e-voting would have to be introduced as an additional voting channel. Even if proven to be sufficiently robust, such a move would require careful consideration given the current economic climate.

Further trials of all-postal voting in elections should be held. (Paragraph 44)

It is recognised that where all-postal voting has previously been trialled at elections in the UK it has generally enhanced voter turnout. However, since the Electoral Administration Act 2006, postal voters have been required to provide “personal identifiers” (date of birth and signature) when applying for a postal vote, and to provide these personal identifiers when voting by post at subsequent elections. Returning Officers carry out checks on the personal identifiers provided at elections by postal voters to ensure they match with those originally provided and if they do not match the postal vote is deemed invalid.

The use of personal identifiers for postal vote has had a positive impact in strengthening the integrity of postal voting. The Government would not wish to change the current postal voting requirements in the event of an all-postal voting election, and therefore the date of birth and signature of all electors would therefore be needed for the purposes of such a poll.

Importantly, although under IER persons provide personal identifiers for the purpose of establishing whether they are the person named in the application, those identifiers do not include the person’s signature. It would therefore be necessary to ask electors at an all-postal poll who were not existing postal voters to provide their date of birth and signature. This would be a significant logistical exercise and electors who did not provide the necessary identifiers, for whatever reason, would not be able to take part in the poll and would effectively be disenfranchised.

Postal voting on demand has been in place since 2001 and its availability is widely known and publicised. It has proved popular with many voters and it enables people to participate in elections who would otherwise be unable to do so. However, it is not certain that there would be widespread public support for all-posting as voting at polling stations remains popular with many voters.

The Government is therefore not convinced that there is a strong case for further trials of all-postal voting in elections.

The Government, working with the Electoral Commission and EROs, bring forward a package of reforms to electoral arrangements to increase accessibility and turnout, and establish a series of pilots early in the next Parliament to test the various proposals that we have considered, with a view to making permanent changes to electoral arrangements by 2020. (Paragraph 45)

Making elections convenient for voters is an important consideration in helping people engage with the democratic process. It needs to be achieved in a way that safeguards the security and accuracy of the electoral system, and avoids the creation of any new obstacles to voting.

Proposals to move the polling day to a weekend, or to turn it into a public holiday, could make voting easier for some, and so encourage those people to vote. However it could also affect the turnout of people who use the time for other activities or possibly, in the case of creating a public holiday, incentivise people to use the time other than for voting. Allowing voting to take place over several days may have little effect on turnout unless wider issues of voter engagement are addressed.

While we have for the first time allowed people to register to vote online, extending that facility to voting presents significant challenges with regard to making the system secure from attack and fraud. E-voting may be something to consider in the future, but is not currently a priority for the Government.

We endorse the Committee's positive view of the effect of postal voting on voter turnout and we note its concern about the loss of entitlement to a postal vote of some people under the transitional arrangements for IER. Electors whose details could not be confirmed during the transition to IER, or who did not register before the publication of the new register, lost their absent vote if they had one (though they could vote at a polling station if they had been carried forward from the old register). They have been notified and encouraged to register individually so their details can be verified and an absent vote provided. The measure ensures the security of the new voter registration system by preventing abuse of the absent voting process.

The electorate's continued support for retaining different methods of voting (such as in person voting at a polling station) suggests that all postal voting could discourage some groups from participating in elections who currently do so, even if it increases turnout overall. It would be important to ensure these groups remain democratically engaged.

Allowing people to cast their vote at any polling station could have advantages for some groups, such as disabled voters, by allowing them to choose the location that is the most suited to their access requirements. We would need to consider the practical challenges of such a scheme, and the likely take up, in order to decide whether it would be worth introducing.

There has been more than an academic interest in such changes in the in the past and many of the potential processes suggested, such as all-postal voting, voting over a number of days and online voting, have been tested in range of pilots. We will consider the Committee's proposals further in order to determine which of them could have significant positive effects on accessibility and turnout, and could be piloted in the next Parliament.

The Government to discuss with the Electoral Commission and include in this response details of arrangements that are currently in place to provide information to the public about elections and registering to vote, and bring forward proposals for the effective use of new technology to better inform the public and increase awareness of elections. The Government and Electoral Commission should also examine the changes which can be made to provide more and better information to voters, and should actively support the work of outside organisations working to similar goals. (Paragraph 47)

There are a wide range of sources of information about elections and registering to vote. The award-winning [GOV.UK](https://www.gov.uk) website includes information and the online registration service.⁷ The information includes links to pages that cover subjects such as how to register to vote if an elector lives overseas, registering for a postal vote and how to contact your local ERO.

7 www.gov.uk/register-to-vote

Political parties, referendum campaigns and election candidates all play an important role as does the media, in providing information to the public about elections and registering to vote.

The Electoral Commission has a statutory duty to promote public awareness of electoral and democratic systems, and is therefore primarily responsible for informing citizens of their electoral rights. The Electoral Commission will advise people of their eligibility to vote, how to register to vote and how to cast their vote at elections. Local authorities will also take steps to publicise elections being held in their area.

Currently, Returning Officers are responsible for publicising the results of elections for which they are responsible. Local authorities will also publicise the results of polls held in their area. The media will also provide information about election results. There is the risk that providing for a central source of information could duplicate information that is already publicly available, and it may only be possible to provide such information over a longer period of time without adding value to the information already produced. Putting in place a central source of information would involve logistical and cost issues, and the Government would need to be certain that there is a robust case and justification for putting in place such arrangements.

The Government to report to the House of Commons how a system of compulsory voting could operate in the UK, including an assessment of international experience, and an assessment of whether voting should only be compulsory for certain types of election. (Paragraph 50)

The Government believes that, whilst it is true that in some countries voting is not just a fundamental political right but also a duty of the citizen, voting is a civic responsibility and that the importance of political participation should be reinforced without the need for a sanction for non-compliance. There are, therefore, no plans to introduce a system of compulsory voting for elections in the UK.

While there are currently thirty-two countries with systems for compulsory voting, only nineteen of these actively enforce it (including Australia, Argentina and Turkey).

In the event that voting in certain elections is made compulsory, an option to vote “none of the above” or to “abstain” should be one of the options set out. These options could also be included if voting were not compulsory. (Paragraph 51)

The inclusion of a ‘positive abstention’ box on the ballot paper would allow electors to register their dissatisfaction with a candidate, party or politics more broadly and a variation of a ‘none of the above’ option appears on ballot papers in Columbia, India, Spain, Ukraine, and the state of Nevada in the USA. However, the Government believes that, when participating in a ballot, the position should be that the elector makes a positive choice of a representative rather than a negative one. It does not agree, therefore, that the introduction of such a provision would be a positive step. Rather, the Government believes it should be for candidates and the political parties to actively engage the electorate so they can make a positive choice of representation.

Parliament leads a national discussion on extending the franchise to include 16 and 17 year old and that a motion on the issue is brought forward in 2015 to allow the House of Commons a free vote on its view, with a view to the introduction of legislation if appropriate. (Paragraph 53)

This is an issue that needs to be resolved through the political process. There is no consensus within the Coalition Government and consequently the Government has no plans to introduce a change in this Parliament. This is no doubt an issue that will be debated extensively before and after the General Election.