

# Assessing the Impact of Individual Electoral Registration using the British Election Study

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# 1 Introduction

In 2014 a new system of electoral registration was introduced in England, Scotland and Wales called Individual Electoral Registration (IER).<sup>1</sup> This new system requires voters to register individually and provide individual identifying information, such as their date of birth and national insurance number. It replaced the previous system of ‘Household Electoral Registration’ (HER), whereby one person in every household was responsible for registering everyone else who lived at that address and no additional identifying information was required. Importantly, the new system allowed for voters to register online.

This report examines the impact of this change from household to individual electoral registration on voter registration. To do so we use British Election Study internet panel and face-to-face survey data in conjunction with electoral registration records to examine who is registered to vote during the transition period and how people feel about the registration process. Specifically, the questions asked in this report are:

- How has the transition to IER affected overall registration levels in the population?
- Has the transition to IER impacted registration levels amongst specific demographic groups?
- Who has dropped off the electoral register during the transition to IER?
- Who has joined the electoral register during the transition to IER?
- How has satisfaction with the registration system changed over time?

In broad terms, the answers to these questions depend on *when* we are talking about. *During the transition period* (up to May 2016) we find clear evidence that overall levels of registration decreased and that people in demographic groups that are less likely to be registered in general (i.e. young people and privately renters) were more likely to drop off the register. Comparing the 2015 and 2017 elections however we find no evidence that IER affected the level of registration *at the time of the elections*, nor that is disproportionately affected groups that are less likely to be registered in general. How can we reconcile these seemingly contradictory findings? In short, IER seems to have increased the volatility of electoral registration – people were more likely to drop on and off the register when IER came into force.

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<sup>1</sup> IER had been in place in Northern Ireland since 2002.

We cannot say for sure whether the pattern we observe of people dropping off the register between elections but registering in-time for elections is a feature of the 2014-2017 period, or is something we are likely to continue to observe. If this pattern persists it is both good and bad news for British democracy. On the one hand, it is good news that IER has not negatively impacted registration levels at the time of elections – electoral participation does not seem to have been affected. On the other hand however, electoral registers serve important roles between elections as well – such as being used to redraw constituency boundaries. If these registers are inaccurate – as the December 2015 registers used in the current boundary review are – then decisions that arise from them such as constituency boundaries will be inaccurate as well.

## 2 Background

This section outlines the key moments that led to the introduction of IER and briefly outlines the arguments made at the time both for and against the new system.

### 2.1 Introduction of IER

#### 2.1.1 2003-2010

Prior to 2014, the England, Scotland, and Wales had long used a system of household electoral registration. IER was introduced to Northern Ireland in 2002 (alongside voter identification requirements) as part of an effort to combat electoral fraud. A system of individual electoral registration for the rest of the UK was first called for by the Electoral Commission in 2003 in their report *Voting for Change: An Electoral Law Modernisation Programme*. IER was initially proposed as a building block for e-enabled voting but later was seen as beneficial as a protection against electoral fraud.

The Labour Government at the time said it was ‘sympathetic’ to the Commission’s recommendation but were concerned about a possible negative effect of IER on levels of registration. However, the 2009 *Political Parties and Elections Act* was passed which provided for a new system of individual voter registration to become compulsory from 2015.<sup>2</sup> In 2010, the Conservative-Liberal Democrat Coalition’s *Programme for Government* promised to speed up the introduction of the new system of registration, moving the introduction of compulsory individual registration forward to 2014. However, a proviso was

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<sup>2</sup> A provision for IER was not included in the original Bill but was added in the Lords Committee stage due to pressure from opposition parties

added to the plan so that no one who failed to register before this would be removed from the register until after the 2015 General Election.

### *2.1.2 June-November 2011*

On 30 June 2011, the government published a White Paper outlining how IER would be accelerated. Following this, The Political and Constitutional Reform Committee conducted an inquiry into the government's proposal. In November 2011, the Committee's final report concluded that there was broad consensus on the need for IER but disagreement on the ways of implementing it. Amongst the concerns that were raised to the Committee was the government's decision not to hold a full household canvas in 2014. Usually, all households receive a voter registration form in an annual canvas however the Government proposal made no provision for a canvas in 2014 believing that voters may be confused if they had responded to the household form in the annual canvas and then were invited to re-register under the new system.

Amongst other recommendations, the Committee also suggested that it should initially be an offence to fail to complete registration under the new system. They suggested that this could be reviewed after five years as registration rates then may be high enough to create a culture of enrolment. Concerns were also raised over the limited effectiveness of data matching – a process whereby pilot schemes would be used to test if public databases could be cross-matched with electoral registers to identify individuals not on the register who could be invited to register and verify those who could be transferred to the new register. The Committee recommended the government published results of pilots and explored further ways of improving information sharing.

### *2.1.3 February 2012*

In February 2012, the government responded to the Political and Constitutional Reform Committee's report and announced several changes to the initial framework set out in the White Paper. Firstly, information held by the Department of Work and Pensions would be used to match details of individuals held on the electoral register when IER was introduced. Secondly, the 2013 household canvas would be delayed until early 2014 so that a more up to date and accurate register would be used as the basis for the new IER register. The government's response offered no decision on making it a criminal offence not to register (and this recommendation has still not been implemented).

#### *2.1.4 December 2013*

The *Electoral Registration and Administration Bill 2012-13* passed in January 2013. In a written ministerial statement on 18 December 2013 it was announced that the transition to IER would begin in 2014.

#### *2.1.5 June-September 2014*

The new system was introduced in England and Wales on 10 June 2014 and in Scotland on 19 September 2014, following the Scottish Independence Referendum. Electors who were matched up to records held on the Department for Work and Pensions database were automatically confirmed on the new IER register. Household enquiry forms and invitations to register were sent to addresses and individuals where Electoral Registration Officers (EROs) were not certain that all the eligible residents had been transferred to the new system. Alongside this, the Electoral Commission ran a national public awareness campaign about the new registration system.

#### *2.1.6 December 2015*

The original Act provided for the termination of the transition to IER in December 2016 whereby all those not registered under the new system would be removed from the register. However, it left the possibility of ending the transition a year early, which the government decided to do, ending the transition to IER in December 2015. A Written Ministerial statement on the issue reasoned that carrying forward electors who had not yet registered under the new system beyond December 2015, “[posed] an unacceptable risk to the accuracy of the register. Since the registers published by 1 December 2015 will be used for the parliamentary boundary review and then the elections in May 2016” (HC Deb 16 July 2015 WS127).

## **2.2 Advantages and Disadvantages of Individual Electoral Registration**

### *2.2.1 Why change the method of registration?*

Previously one person in a household (the ‘head of household’) had registered all individuals in that household, a system called Household Electoral Registration (HER). The three key arguments for switching to a method of Individual Electoral Registration were:

1. *To ensure an increased accuracy of the register* – individual registration would reduce duplicate and out-of-date entries;
2. *To improve the security of the system* – IER would make the registration system less susceptible to fraud;

3. *To modernise the system* – It is out-dated to have a system based on archaic notions of ‘heads of households’ and individuals should have access to their voting rights and not be dependent on anyone else.

In 2011, a report by EURIM (the Information Society Alliance) studying the mechanisms for voter registration in a number of other countries concluded that:

*“Some of the countries we surveyed put in place sophisticated systems long ago to enable them to capture details leading to a very complete and accurate electoral roll. Compared with these countries, the UK’s system is overdue an overhaul.”*

When announcing the accelerated introduction of IER in September 2010 the Minister for Constitutional Reform Mark Harper told the House of Commons:

*“It is widely recognised on both sides of the House that the current arrangements for electoral registration need to change. At present, there is no requirement for people to provide any evidence of their identity to register to vote, which leaves the system vulnerable to fraud. Household registration harks back to a time when registration was the responsibility of the head of the household. Access to a right as fundamental as voting should not be dependent on someone else. We need a better system of keeping up with people who move house or who need to update their registration for other reasons. Individual registration provides an opportunity to move forward to a system centred around the individual citizen.”*

Similarly, the Electoral Commission (2012) stated:

*“We believe that it is the right thing to do because the current system is vulnerable to fraud; and it is right that people take responsibility for their own votes. The 'household' registration system means there is no personal ownership by citizens of a fundamental aspect of their participation in our democracy - their right to vote. This is too important for it to be left to anybody other than the individual.”*

### 2.2.2 What were the concerns?

#### 2.2.2.1 Completeness of the Register

One of the most common concerns raised over IER was that it would lead to a reduction in levels of registration. When IER was introduced in Northern Ireland it led to improved accuracy of the register, as ineligible and duplicate entries were reduced, however the completeness of the register dropped and it led to significant fall in voter registration levels (Political and Constitutional Reform Committee, 2011).



In interviews with returning officers and other 'back office' staff in local councils' electoral services departments James (2014) found falling registration rates to be a major concern if IER was implemented. Those responsible for implementing the changes on the ground feared that apathy in voters and the additional task of giving a National Insurance Number could put voters off registering. Electoral services staff also thought that people may be reluctant to give personal details to canvassers who come around in household canvasses and may be concerned about the use of personal data.

#### 2.2.2.2 Registration Rates in Individual Groups

In both James's research and in the evidence given to the Political and Constitutional Reform Committee there were concerns about the potential for IER to disproportionately suppress the registration levels of certain groups who are already under-represented on the electoral register, such as young people and students; electors from some BME communities; people in private rented accommodation; and some disabled people, especially those in residential care.

In particular, there was concern about certain groups:

- Young people and students, who move around frequently and whose parents would have commonly registered them in the past;
- Non-English speaking citizens, where before a co-habitant may have commonly filled in the form for them;
- Those in institutions, such as student halls or care homes, who were previously registered by 'block-registering' i.e. one official registered all residents.

Criticisms about lower levels of registrations amongst student populations dominated much of the media and political discussion of the new system. For example, in January 2015 the Labour leader Ed Miliband said there were 'one million' missing from the electoral register and many of them were students. The government responded to the issue and sent a letter to University Vice Chancellors asking for support in ensuring more students were registered under the new system, suggesting targeted campaigns at key points such as during enrolment. The Coalition Government also gave £530,000 to organisations to encourage student registration (White, 2016).

The Association of Electoral Administrators (2015) produced a report on IER and the 2015 General Election and specifically recommended that the Government review the process for registering students and care home residents, allowing electoral services to directly register people at institutions.

#### 2.2.2.3 Local government resources

Electoral services staff interviewed by James (2014) were concerned about the increased cost and burdens to local authorities of implementing a new system, especially at a time of budget cuts. The added bureaucracy of having to canvass individuals rather than households and having the numbers of staff to deal with the implementation were common concerns.

#### 2.2.2.4 Data Issues

Problems of data quality and management were raised by electoral services staff, in particular making it easy for the general public – especially the elderly – to navigate the new online registration system. In fact after the 2017 EU Referendum, Clark and James's (2016) survey and qualitative interview data found that many members of the public said they were confused by the electoral registration process, and it was reported by local councils that they received many duplicate registration applications, suggesting that people were confused as to whether they were already registered or not (although it should be noted that the last-minute extension to the registration deadline for the EU Referendum could have had an influence). The Association of Electoral Administrators' recommended in 2015 that there should be a 'look-up' option where voters could check if they were already registered.

In local councils, the new system was also thought to require more staff and greater skills with datasets to match up voters. Alongside this, concerns were raised over having the physical data storage for such confidential information (James, 2014)

#### 2.2.2.5 Spill-over and displacement effects

A final concern raised by electoral services staff was that the burden of implementing IER would have spill over effects into other areas of electoral administration, especially at a time of cuts when staff were already stretched thin.

### **3 Data**

To investigate the impact of the IER on levels of registration and attitudes towards the registration process, we use two datasets from the British Election Study (BES):

- 1) To compare registration levels during the transition period, we make use of the BES Internet panel survey data (Fieldhouse et al., 2017): The BES Internet Panel is a

large sample non-probability internet survey fielded by YouGov.<sup>3</sup> The panel study is designed to follow the same survey respondents over time in a number of survey ‘waves’ and so are particularly useful to study within-person change. The following waves are used in this report:

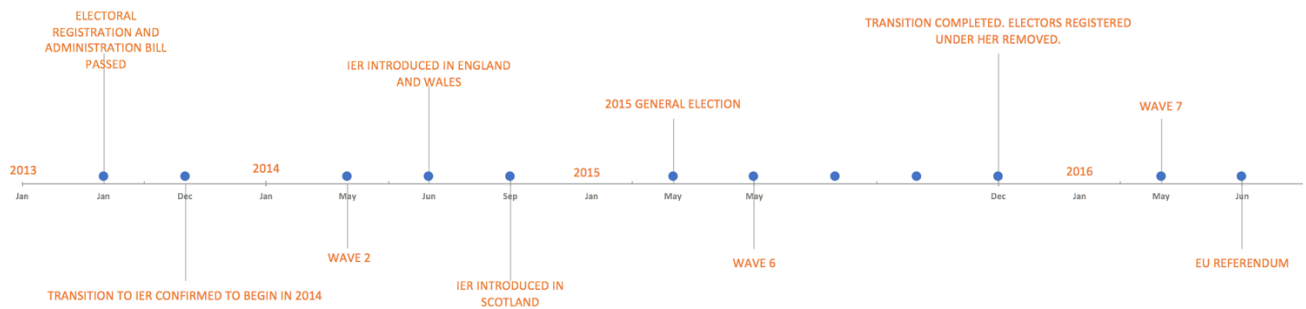
- Wave 2 (May 2014) – Fielded after the 2014 local elections when the old system of household registration was in place.
  - Wave 6 (May 2015) – Fielded following the 2015 election, during the transition period to IER where anyone registered under the old system was still on the electoral register.
  - Wave 7 (April to May 2016) – Fielded before the 2016 local elections, nearly six months after the finalisation of IER, any voters registered under the old system of HER were removed from the register. The survey ran beyond the registration deadline for the local elections.
- 2) To compare registration levels at the 2015 and 2017 elections, we use BES **Face-to-face survey data** (Fieldhouse et al. 2016): Since 1964, the BES has conducted an in-person (face-to-face) survey using a random probability sampling method to obtain responses from a representative sample of the general population after each general election. These data provide a representative ‘snap-shot’ of the population and each dataset includes a new set of survey respondents. The two most recent face-to-face surveys are used here:
- May 2015 – The 2015 post-election survey, which occurred during the transition period to IER where anyone registered under the old system was still on the electoral register (Fieldhouse et al., 2016).
  - June 2017 – The 2017 post-election survey, which occurred 18 months after the finalisation of IER, any voters registered under the old system of HER were removed from the register (Fieldhouse et al., 2018).

The timing of each survey and their relationship with key events in the IER timeline are shown below in Figure 1.

### Figure 1. Timeline

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<sup>3</sup> For a recent overview of the advantages and disadvantages of non-probability internet panel surveys, particularly concerns about data quality, see Fieldhouse and Prosser (2017).



For each wave of the internet panel and the two face-to-face surveys, respondents, who gave permission, were matched to the electoral register (collected at the time of the survey by the Electoral Commission) using their name and address.

The matching process differed between the internet panel and face-to-face surveys due to the format of the data.

For the internet panel the matching was done using a custom-made computer assisted matching program. The matching program first attempted to match respondents' names and addresses to electronic copies of the register. Where a full match (first name, surname, and address) was found the respondents were classified as registered, likewise where none of the information was found the respondents was classified as unregistered. Where partial information was found (e.g. surname and address but a different first name) the program flagged the record to a researcher who would decide whether the person in the survey was likely to be one of the people flagged as a possible match by the program. In order to do so the researcher followed a set of decision rules based on whether the names matched due to misspelling/typos, shortenings/nicknames, and possible name changes due to marriage where there is evidence of cohabitation with someone of the same surname (i.e. the hypothetical survey respondent Susan Williams is not found on the register but a Susan Jones who lives at the same address as David Williams is).

For the face-to-face surveys the matching process was done manually by a team of research assistants using copies of the marked electoral registers from the 2015 and 2017 elections. The researchers followed the same coding logic as the semi-automated program.

In order to assess the reliability of the semi-automated coding process, a random subset of the internet panel records for wave 6 of the internet panel were also manually coded by the research assistants. The result of this was that 96.4% of the cross-checked internet panel records were given the same code by the semi-automated program and the research assistants.

Similarly, a random subset of the face-to-face respondents were coded by a second research assistant. In 2015 the research assistants gave the same classification to the cross-checked respondents 94.8% of the time. In 2017 the research assistants coded the cross-checked respondents the same 97.5% of the time. These very high levels of reliability can give us a great deal of confidence in the matching process.

## 4 Levels of Registration

### 4.1 Registration levels over time

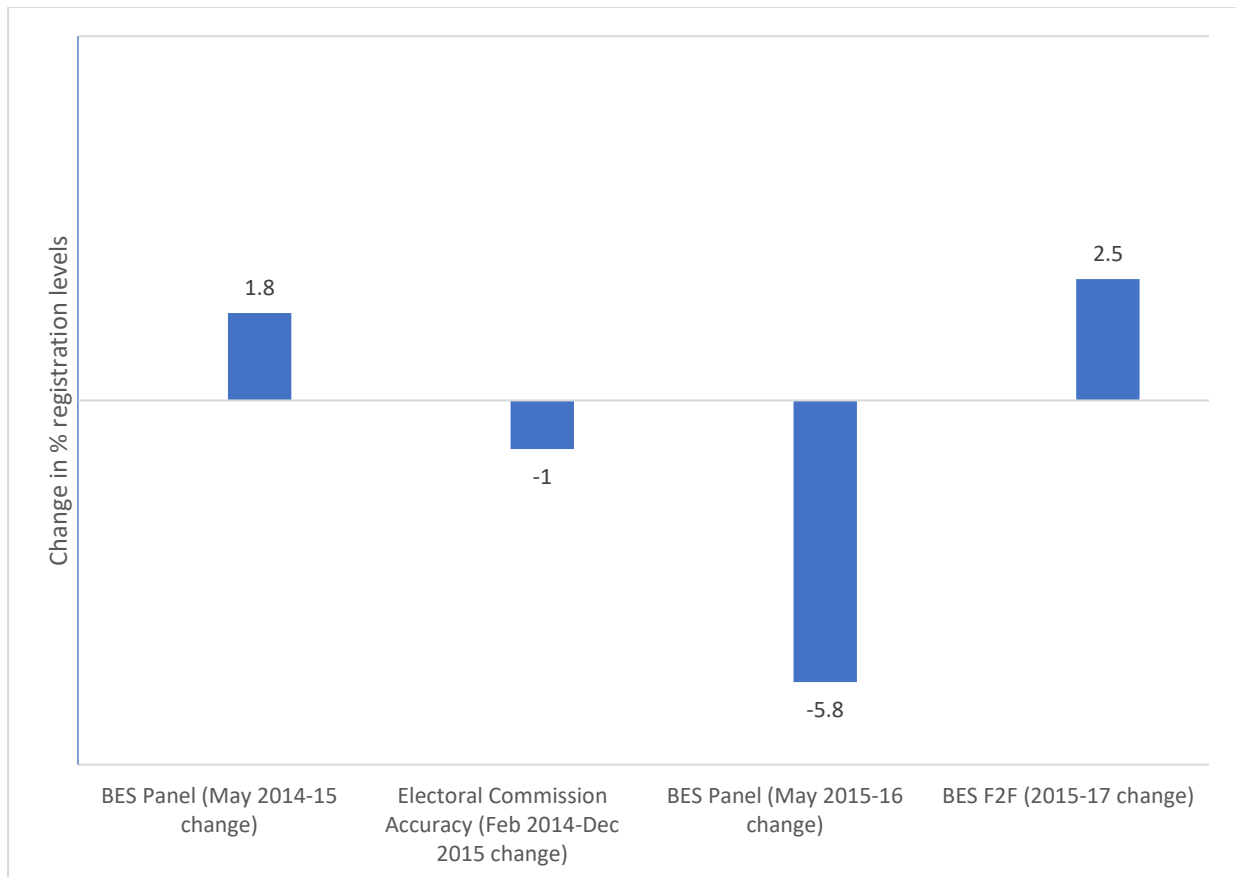
One of the most common concerns raised about IER was that it would lead to a reduction in overall levels of registration in the population (Political and Constitutional Reform Committee, 2011). We use the BES data in conjunction with official aggregate level data to examine whether these concerns came to fruition, first using the internet panel to assess changes over the transition period and then using the face-to-face data to compare registration at the two elections either side of the removal of names from the register.

Figure 2 uses the BES panel data and face-to-face data to examine changes in levels of electoral registration over time compared to the Electoral Commission completeness figures. The Electoral Commission's completeness figures refer to "the percentage of eligible people registered at their current address" (Electoral Commission) i.e. it is the total number of accurate entries on the register divided by the eligible population. Figure 2 shows a reduction in registration levels in the official figures from the Electoral Commission after Individual Electoral Registration (IER) was finalised in December 2015, at which point anyone only registered under the old system was removed from the electoral register. The drop in the official figures was only small – one percentage point. In the BES data, we see a larger drop in registration after IER was finalised. Yet the 2017 face-to-face data suggests there was later a recovery, as registration levels increased from the May 2015 face-to-face survey to the June 2017 face-to-face survey, 18 months after IER was finalised. This recovery is reflected in Figure 3 which shows the official ONS and Electoral Commission figures for total number of registered voters from 2014 to 2017. After an initial drop from May 2015 to December 2015, when those registered under the old system were removed from the register, registration rose again with particular spikes for the EU Referendum in June 2016 and the General Election in June 2017.

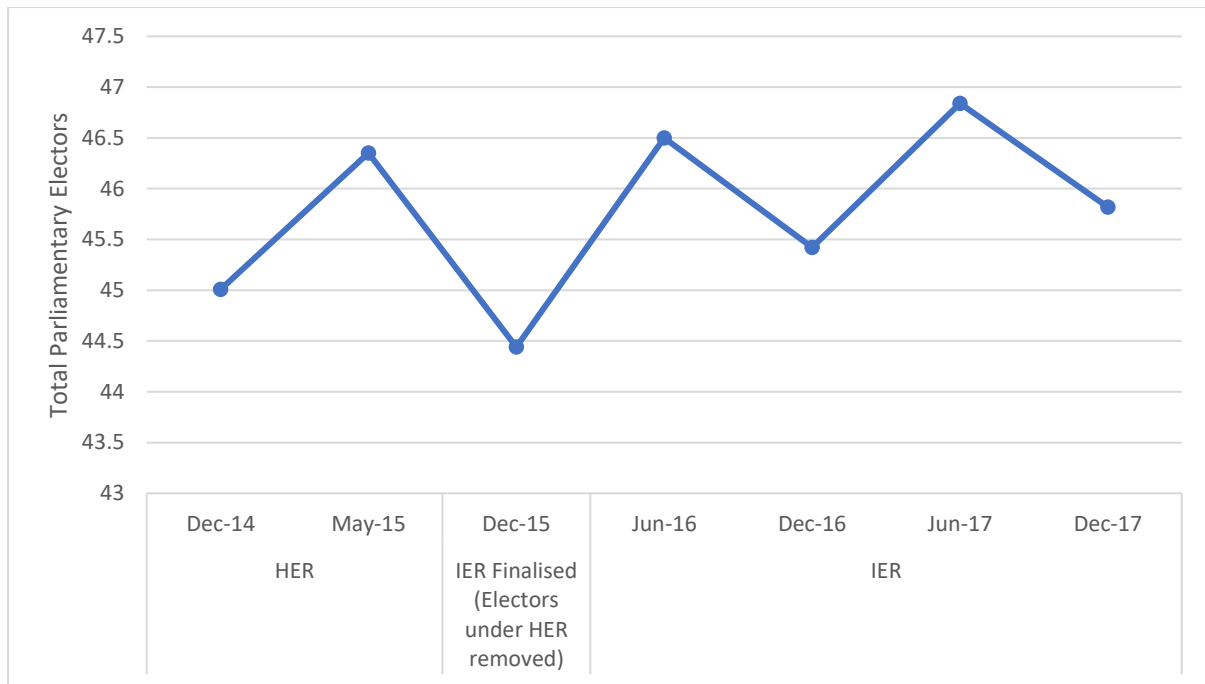
The following sections of this report examine what this change meant for different groups of voters. Who dropped off the electoral register? Who remained registered? Who joined the

electoral register? These are the types of questions this section seeks to answer using British Election Study data.

**Figure 2. Changes in Registration Levels in BES compared to Electoral Commission completeness figures**



**Figure 3. Aggregate Registration Levels 2014-2017**



## 5 Demographics of Registered Voters During the transition period

### 5.1 Who is registered at each point in time?

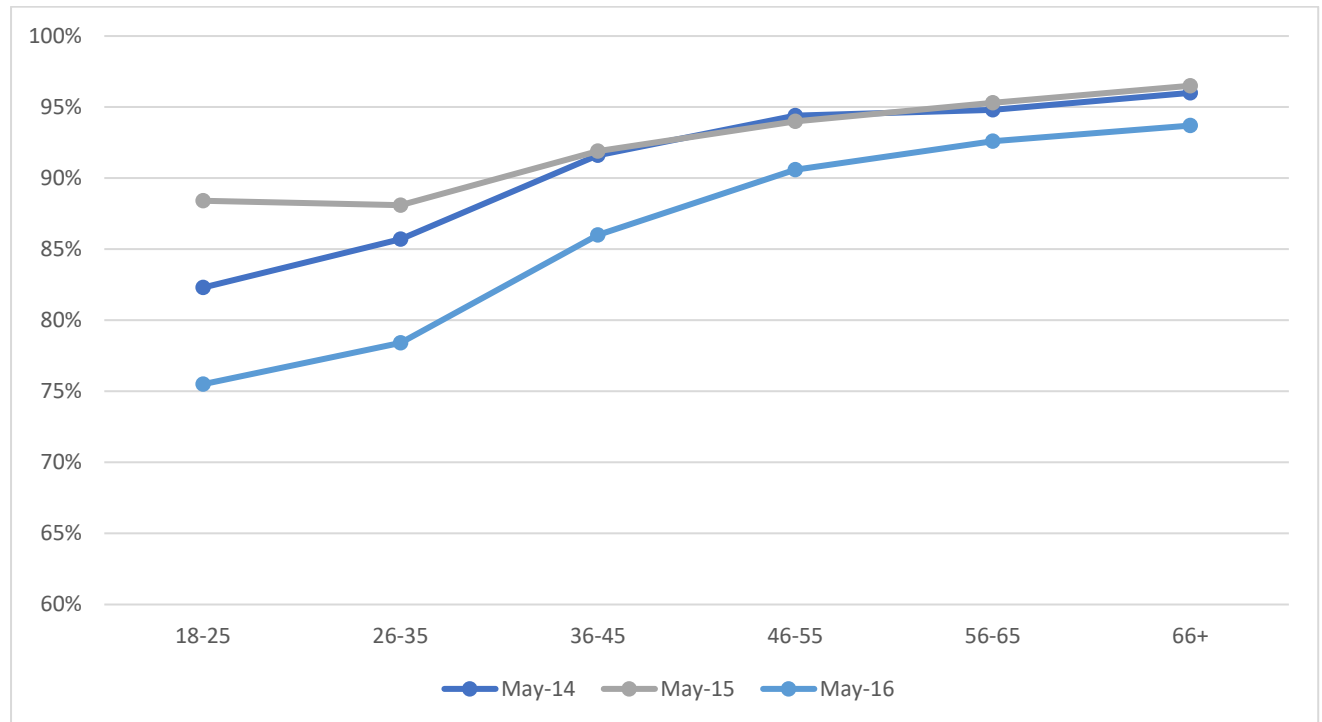
We can use the BES panel data to trace changes in registration over the three time points at the individual level as the dataset follows the same survey respondents over time. This allows us to examine not only the level of registration but *who* is registered.

#### 5.1.1 Age

Figure 4 shows that across the three time points, registration rates increased in line with age. Regression modelling demonstrates that, at all time points, age group was a significant predictor of being registered to vote when controlling for other factors. In May 2016, under the new IER system, there was a decrease in registration levels across all age groups. However, the decrease was largest in the youngest three age groups (45 years-old and under), leading to an increased registration gap between the older and younger age groups. This change can be clearly seen by looking at the youngest and oldest age groups. Between May 2014 and May 2016 there was a 6.8 percentage point decrease in registration rates in 18-25 year olds but only a 2.3 point decrease for those aged 66 and over. By May 2016, when those registered under the old system had been removed from the register but before the late surge in registration for the EU Referendum, the registration gap between the

youngest and oldest age group was 18.2 percentage points, and anyone 36 years-old and above were significantly more likely to be registered than those aged 18-25 when controlling for other factors.<sup>4</sup>

**Figure 4. Registration rate by age: Panel Data 2014-16**



### 5.1.2 Home Ownership

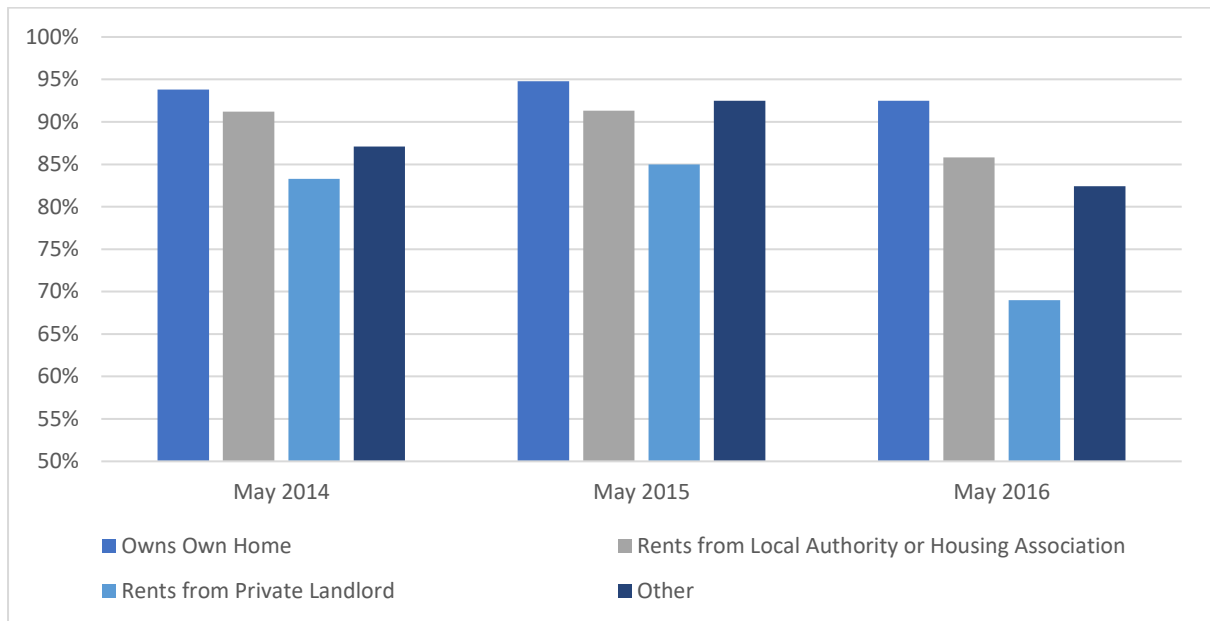
The change to IER appears to have disproportionately affected renters, especially those who rent from private landlords (Figure 5). Private renters consistently had the lowest levels of registration and, although registration dropped for all groups in May 2016, the impact was smallest on homeowners. As a result, the registration gap between homeowners and private renters increased from 10.5 percentage points in May 2014 to 23.5 points in May 2016. IER also had an impact on the registration gap between homeowners and local authority or housing association tenants which increased from 2.6 percentage points in May 2014 to 6.7 points in May 2016. Housing status was a significant predictor of whether a person is registered or not when controlling for other factors in all three time periods.<sup>5</sup>

**Figure 5. Registration rate by housing tenure: Panel Data 2014-16**

<sup>4</sup> See full logistic regression models in Appendix 1

<sup>5</sup> See regression models in Appendix 1



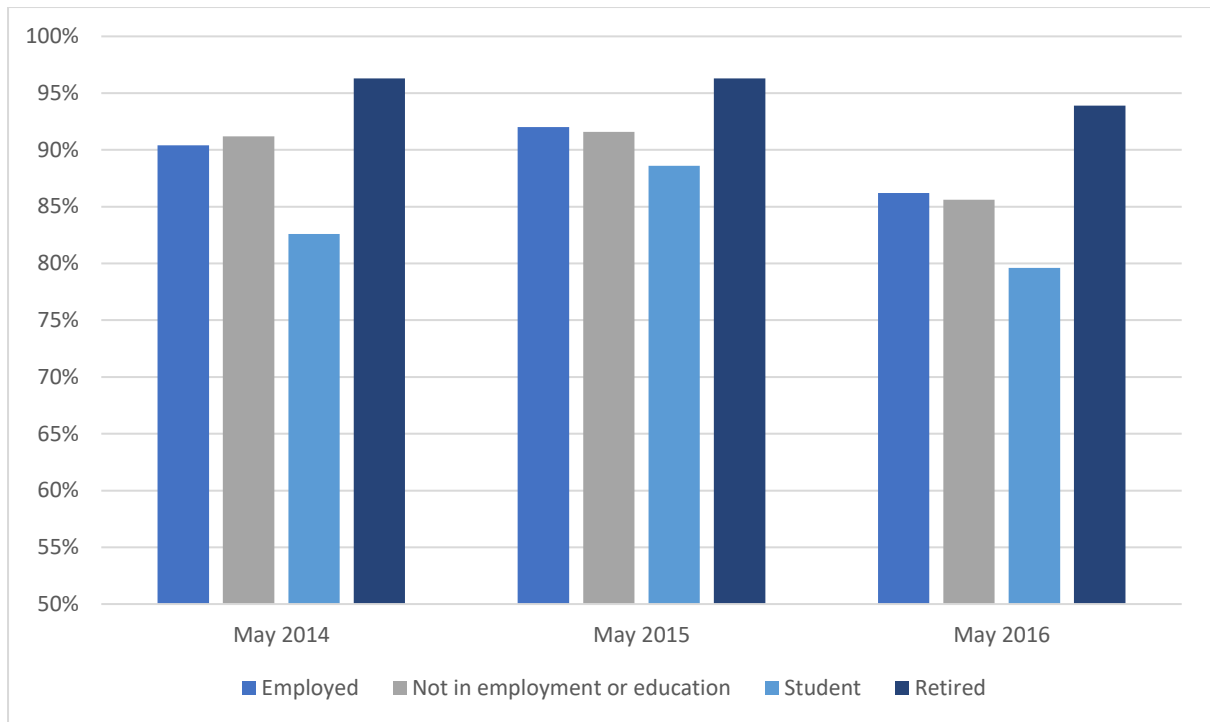


### 5.1.2.1

#### 5.1.3 Economic Activity

Figure 6 shows retired people were consistently more likely than any other group to be registered across all three time points. Warnings of reduced student registration levels dominated much of the media and political discussion around individual registration. Figure 6 initially lends some support to this concern but upon further examination the trend is less clear. Between May 2014 and May 2016 there was a 3-point drop in the registration rate for students, however the drop was greater for employed (4 percentage points) and only slightly less for those who were fully or partly retired (2.4 percentage points).

**Figure 6. Registration rates by economic activity: Panel Data 2014-16**



In fact, when other factors are controlled for using a regression model, whether someone is a student is only a significant predictor of their likelihood to be registered to vote in May 2016, under individual registration. Moreover at this point, counter to popular predictions, being a student was associated with a significantly *higher* chance of being registered to vote compared to those in employment.<sup>6</sup> Although this seems counterintuitive at first, it is important to note that one of the control variables is age. On average, students are younger than the general electorate. Without controlling for age, students are less likely to be registered than the general population. However, controlling for other factors suggests the reason for this is because they are *young* not because they are *students*. Indeed, amongst young people, those that are students are *more* likely to be registered to vote than non-students. A closer inspection of the data shows that in 2017 only 67% of non-students under 26 were registered compared to 78% of students of the same age.<sup>7</sup> The fact that students are more likely to be registered partly reflects that they tend to have higher levels of political engagement, although the regression analysis shows this difference persists even when this is controlled for. An additional factor could be efforts within universities and wider campaigns to drive up student registration, given the concern around the potential effect of IER on student registration rates there. Even though the net registration advantage among young students did not appear to grow after IER, these efforts may at least have had the desired

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<sup>6</sup> See Appendix 1.1

<sup>7</sup> In 2015 the equivalent figures were 65% non-students and 79% students respectively.

effect of mitigating any drop in student registration, though there is no way of knowing this for sure.

**Table 1. Education Level and Registration Levels: Panel Data 2014-16**

	<i>May 2014</i>	<i>May 2015</i>	<i>May 2016</i>
Degree or equivalent	90.1%	91.8%	84.5%
No Degree	92.4%	93.3%	88.8%
Other	93.0%	93.4%	90.1%
	<i>N=18,479</i>	<i>N=23,575</i>	<i>N=20,387</i>

With respect to educational level, the consistent trend across the time period was that those with a degree are less likely to be registered. However, when controlling for other factors having a degree was only a significant predictor of likelihood of registration in May 2016 once IER has been finalised. This may be due to high geographical mobility amongst the burgeoning number of young degree holders.

#### *5.1.4 Party Identification*

So far we have considered the socio-demographic basis of support, but because some groups are more likely to support some political parties than others, this is likely to mean that changes to registration are not politically neutral. Our data is able to provide evidence of which parties are most and least affected by changes in registration levels. In other words, is there a disproportionate effect of IER on any one party's support? Table 2 examines registration levels amongst party identifiers (people who feel close to a particular party). First, it is important to note that there were differences before IER was introduced, with Conservative identifiers being most likely to be registered and Liberal Democrat, SNP and UKIP being least likely. Given the demographic correlates of party support, these differences are not surprising. For all the parties, registration levels dropped with the finalisation of IER in May 2016 (before the resurgence at the EU referendum in June). Looking at the two major parties, this drop was larger amongst those who identified with Labour where registration dropped by 4.4 percentage points compared to 3.5 for Conservative supporters, suggesting the change to IER had a disproportionate effect on Labour. This is because Labour has more support among groups that were most affected by the change to IER, such as young people and people living in private rented accommodation. The three largest drops in registration rates once IER was finalised were seen for those who identify with the Green Party, the Liberal Democrats and UKIP.

	<i>May 2014</i>	<i>May 2015</i>	<i>May 2016</i>
Conservative	93.7%	94.4%	90.2%
Labour	92.3%	92.7%	87.9%
Liberal Democrat	90.5%	92.5%	85.7%
SNP	93.9%	94.3%	90.0%
UKIP	90.4%	93.4%	88.3%
Green Party	90.4%	92.2%	83.2%
None	88.5%	90.1%	85.1%
	<i>N=17,772</i>	<i>N=23,108</i>	<i>N=19,743</i>

## 6 Who drops off the register and who stays on?

The unique value of the BES panel is the ability to track who joined and left the register before, during and after the introduction of IER. We can get a better idea of who is dropping on and off the register by using the BES panel data to examine changes over two time periods:

1. *Transition to IER (May 2014 to May 2015)* – To join the electoral register, voters would need to register by individual registration but those only registered under old system were not removed from the register.
2. *IER Finalised (May 2015 to May 2016)* – Voters only registered under the old system were removed from the electoral register before the December 2015 registers were finalised. Therefore, who ‘dropped off’ in this time period shows the effect of IER on registration rates for different demographics of voters.

At these time points it can be examined who is dropping on or off the electoral register, who stays off the register, and who remained consistently registered. To do so, four different groups are created (see Table 4):

- *Group 1 ‘Dropped off’*: Those who are registered in the first wave but not registered in the next
- *Group 2 ‘Continually registered’*: Those who are registered in first and next wave
- *Group 3 ‘Joined’*: Those not registered in the first wave but are registered in the next wave
- *Group 4 ‘Stayed off’*: Not registered in previous or next wave

**Table 4. Registration Groups**

	Transition to IER	IER Finalised

	<i>May 2014</i>	<i>May 2015</i>	<i>May 2015</i>	<i>May 2016</i>
Dropped Off	Registered	Not Registered	Registered	Not Registered
Continually registered	Registered	Registered	Registered	Registered
Joined	Not Registered	Registered	Not Registered	Registered
Stayed Off	Not Registered	Not Registered	Not Registered	Not Registered

**6.1 Demographics**

Firstly, we note that those who remain registered tended to be in be older, retired and own their own home in both time periods.<sup>8</sup> In other words they are similar to the characteristics of people most likely to be registered. Rather than focus our attention on these, we examine in more detail those that leave and join the register and those that remain unregistered. What we find is that just as the same people tend to remain registered, the same people tend to drop on and off the register – that is, there is a ‘churn’ effect amongst certain demographics of voters.

*6.1.1 Age*

Regression analysis shows age to be a significant predictor of how likely a voter is to drop off the register in both time periods when controlling for other factors.<sup>9</sup> In line with the individual wave analysis above, significant differences are found between the top and bottom age groups in terms of effect of IER. During the transition period, all age groups were significantly more likely to drop off the register than those 66 years old and above. After IER was finalised, only those 45 years old and below were significantly more likely to drop off the register, suggesting any negative effect of IER was concentrated in these younger age groups. We also see a big increase in the number of people who dropped off the register between the two periods.

**Figure 10. Age Group and Between Wave Changes: Panel Data 2014-16**

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<sup>8</sup> See Appendix 3.

<sup>9</sup> See Appendix 1.2

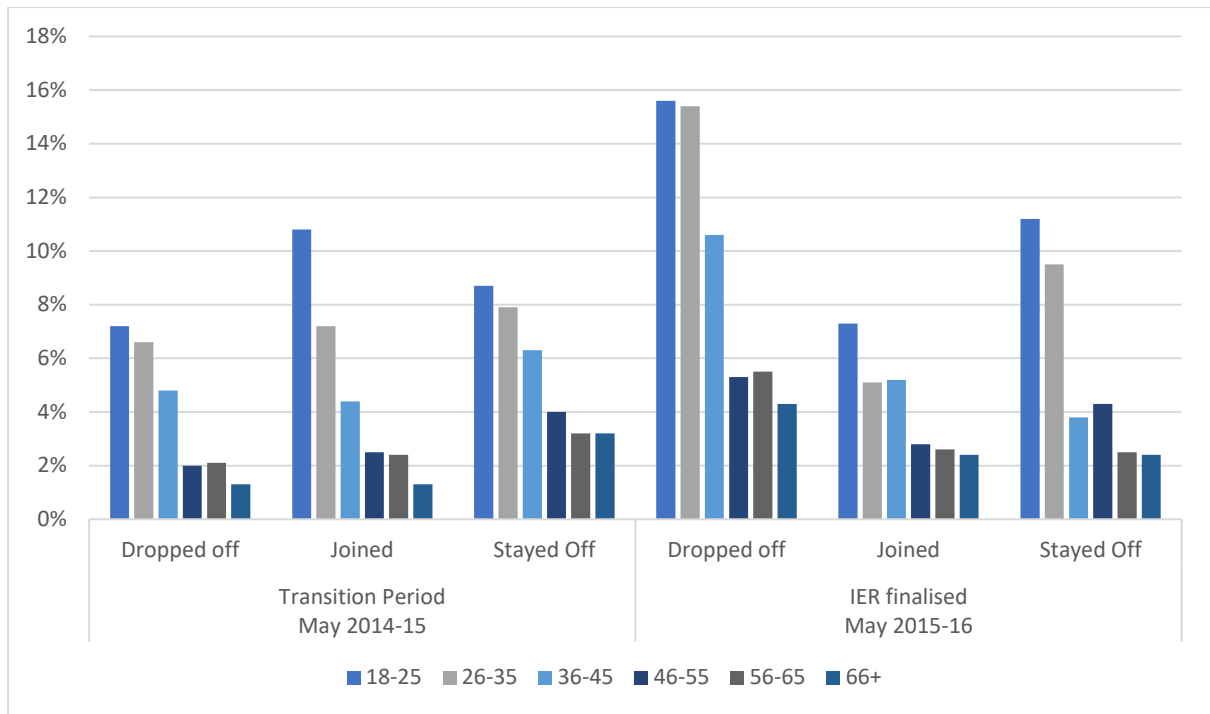


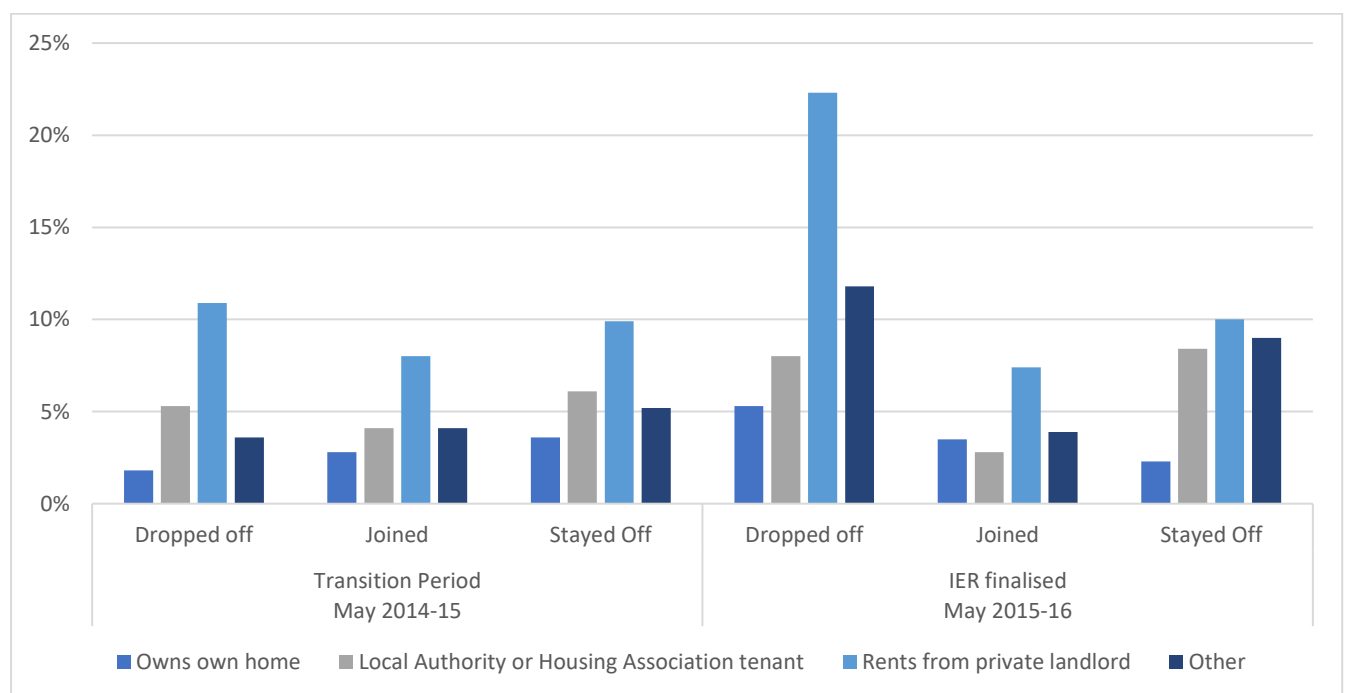
Figure 10 also shows differences in age groups in terms of who joins the register with the youngest age groups more likely to join, especially in the transition period. Interestingly, as well as being more likely to drop off the register, younger people were also more likely to join the register at both time points. There is however a slight decrease in the number of young people joining the register in the IER finalisation phase of the panel. This could indicate that IER potentially had a negative impact on registration levels amongst younger people during this period. However, the change in likelihood of joining the register may also have been affected by large numbers of first-time voters registering in May 2015 in order to vote in the 2015 General Election – these would have been categorised as joiners during the transition period. Moreover, dropout rates were much higher amongst the younger age groups. Under IER, those 45 and under were significantly more likely to drop off the register. Indeed in both absolute and relative terms younger people were more likely to drop-off than to join following the finalisation of the IER registers in December 2015. This again suggests IER had a negative effect on younger age groups, especially once names registered only under the old HER system were removed. It also suggests a higher churn in these age groups, with voters likely to drop on and off the register.

### 6.1.2 Home Ownership

Figure 11 shows a higher proportion of private renters drop off the register in both time periods but the number is especially high in the finalisation period – 22.3% of private renters dropped off compared to 5.3% of homeowners. Local authority or housing association

tenants are also more likely to drop off but the differences between these renters and homeowners is smaller. When other factors are controlled for, both types of renters are significantly more likely to drop off than homeowners during both time periods. This confirms the increased gap between homeowners and renters seen in the cross-sectional data. A slightly higher proportion of private renters than any other group also joined the register in both time periods suggesting, as with younger voters, that there is a certain amount of churn amongst renters in terms of dropping on and off the electoral register. However the rate of joining is dwarfed by the rate of leaving for this group, leading to greater inequalities in registration by May 2016.

**Figure 11. Home Ownership and between Wave Changes: Panel Data 2014-16**



### 6.1.3 Education

**Table 5: Education Level and between wave changes: Panel Data 2014-16**

	Transition Period May 2014-15				IER finalised May 2015-16			
	Dropped off	Continually registered	Joined	Stayed Off	Dropped off	Continually registered	Joined	Stayed Off
Degree or equivalent	4.3%	86.2%	4.8%	4.7%	11.1%	80.9%	3.6%	4.4%

No Degree	3.2%	88.1%	3.4%	5.2%	7.2%	83.9%	4.2%	4.7%
Other	3.1%	89.1%	3.3%	4.5%	7.1%	85.8%	2.7%	4.4%
$N=13,591, \chi^2(6)=28.462, p<0.001$					$N=12,274, \chi^2(6)=59.82, p<0.001$			

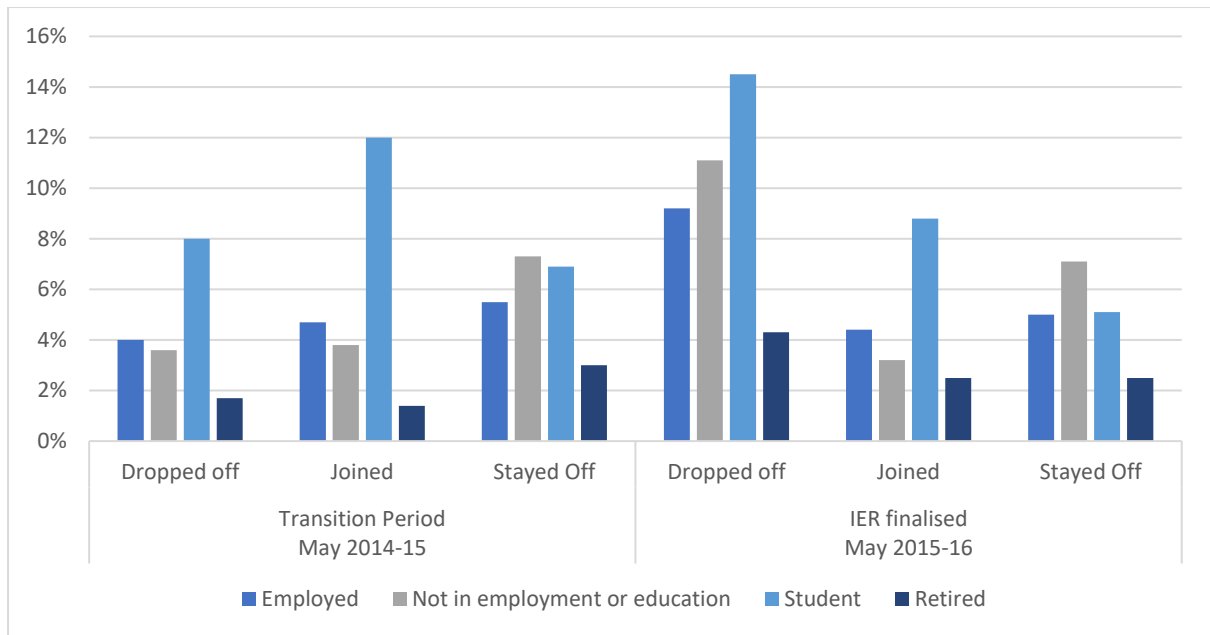
In both time periods there was a higher rate of drop off for those with a degree. After the finalisation of IER the dropout rate for both those with and without a degree increased but the increase was greater for those *with* a degree. However, having a degree was only a significant predictor of dropping off the electoral register when IER was finalised. In this period having a degree also meant a person was significantly less likely to join the register. During the transition period from HER to IER those with a degree were significantly more likely than those without to join the register.

#### 6.1.4 Economic Activity

The highest numbers of drop-offs in both time periods were found amongst students. We can also see that the highest numbers of joiners in each time period were students. Although the regression model shows that students were not significantly more likely to drop off the register than employed people in either time period after controlling for other factors. There may be two explanations for this; firstly, it may be that the drop off can be explained by other factors (especially age) and is not significant; alternatively, the influx of student joiners may make up for the high number dropping off the register seen in the raw figures before controlling for other factors. In fact, from May 2015 to May 2016, when IER was finalised, students were significantly more likely to join the register than those in employment. A churn effect appears to be present for students, characterised by high levels of both leaving and joining the register.

**Figure 12. Economic Activity and Between Waves Changes**





Tracing groups of voters over time confirms some of the trends seen in the individual panel data in section 1. Namely that registration rates for younger voters, private renters and local authority or housing association tenants were negatively impacted by the change to individual electoral registration. These groups were all more likely to drop off the register. The descriptive numbers also suggest these groups joined the register at greater rates suggesting there was a high level of churn in these groups of voters, especially when we consider the recovery in registration rates seen in the face-to-face survey data in 2017.

## 7 Demographics of Registered Voters at the 2015 and 2017 elections

Based on the analysis above, it appears the change to individual electoral registration decreased registration levels in younger voters and renters, especially those who rent privately. However, this shows only the impact at one time point after IER was fully implemented. Using the BES face-to-face surveys, a longer-term view can be taken of who is registered with one more time point of June 2017 added to the analysis. It should be noted that the sampling method is different between these two surveys (see data section above). The consequence of this is that we would expect higher levels of registration in the BES panel data than the face-to-face data as politically engaged people are relatively more likely to take part (and stay) in the panel study (Mellon and Prosser, 2017). For these reasons we compare the 2017 face-to-face data with the 2015 face-to-face rather than the internet panel data.

The panel survey data suggested that IER had a negative impact on overall registration rates. However, the face-to-face data, as shown in Table 3, suggests there could have been a recovery in registration. It was seen that this hypothesis was supported by the aggregate figures seen in Figure 2 in Section 4.1. Both face-to-face surveys were taken at the time of a General Election therefore it appears there was a higher rate of overall registration for the 2017 snap General Election under the new system of IER than in 2015 during the transition period to IER. The question is how did this recovery relate to the key demographics identified above?

**Table 3. Registration Level in Face-to-face Surveys**

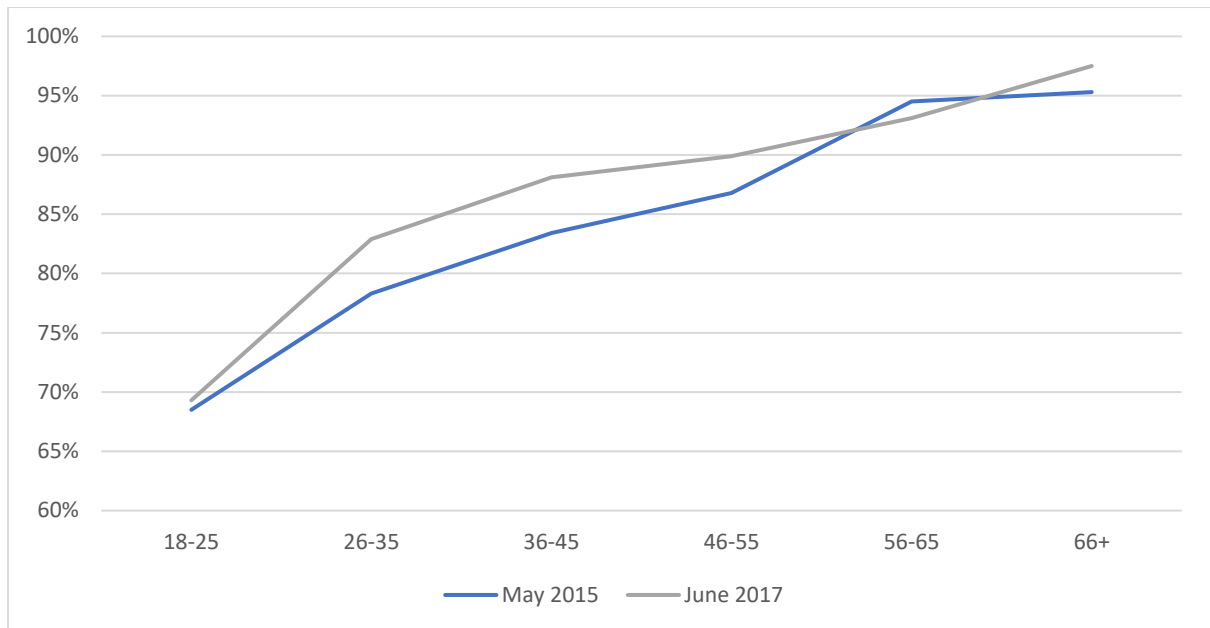
	<i>May 2015</i>	<i>June 2017</i>
Registration Level	85.7%	88.2%
	<i>N=1,844</i>	<i>N=1,399</i>

Firstly, Figure 7 shows registration rates in the face-to-face data for age groups. Although the pattern of higher registration in older age groups still holds, registration rates were higher for nearly all age groups in 2017 compared to 2015, except 56-65 years old. The largest increases were seen in those between 26 to 55 years old, suggesting any recovery in registration did not apply to the same extent to 18-25 year-olds. In both 2015 and 2017 age group was a significant predictor of the likelihood a person being registered to vote when controlling for other factors.<sup>10</sup> In line with the panel data there is a continued inequality between older and younger age groups in terms of registration levels. In fact, the gap is larger in the face-to-face data where there is 28.2 percentage points difference between 18-25 year-olds and those 66 and above.

**Figure 7. Registration rate by age: face-to-face data 2015 and 2017.**

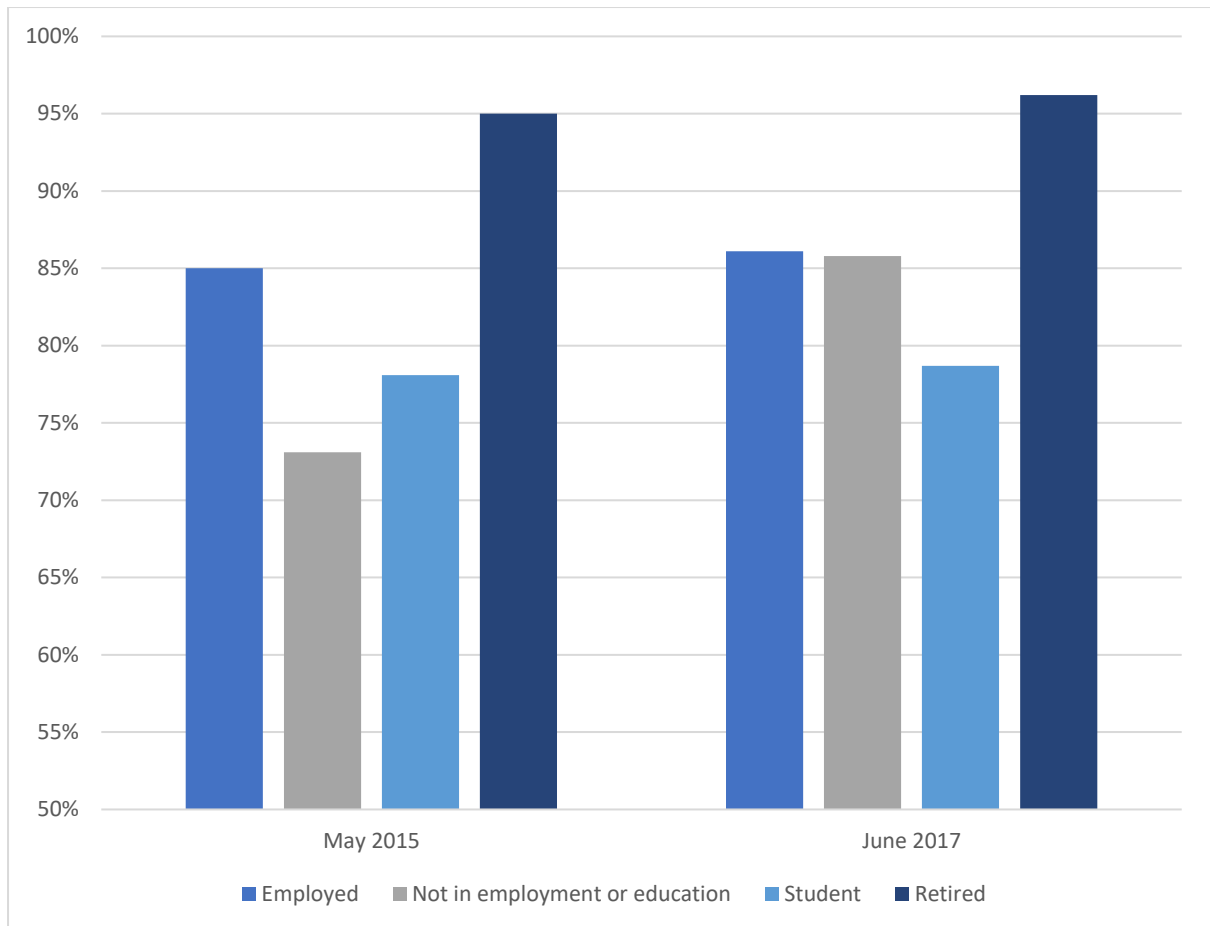
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<sup>10</sup> See regression models in Appendix 2.



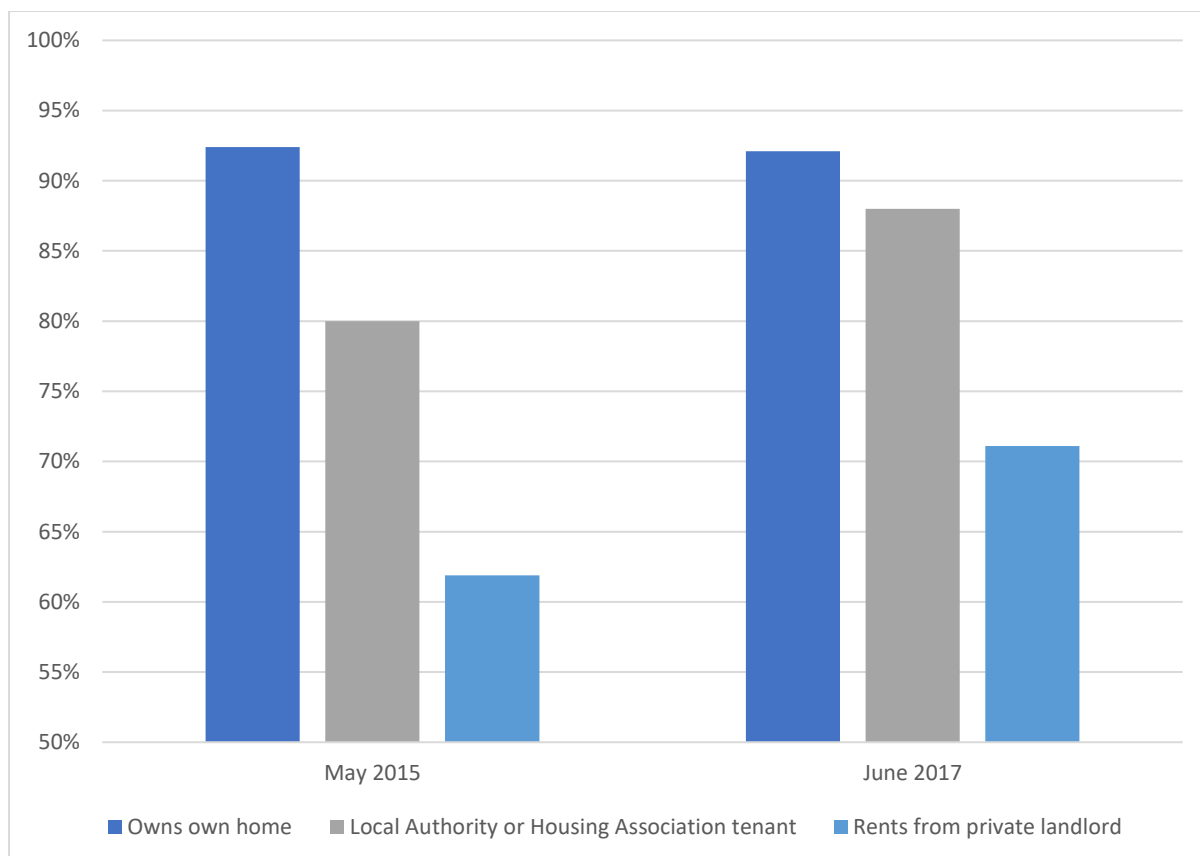
Analysing registration rates according to economic activity using the face-to-face data (Figure 8) throws more doubt on the contention that students would be disproportionately affected by IER, with very little change seen in registration levels for students between 2015 and 2017. In fact, economic activity overall was not a significant predictor of registration in 2015 or 2017. Both under the old and new electoral systems, being a student compared to being employed had no significant impact on a person’s likelihood to be registered to vote.

**Figure 8. Registration rate by economic activity: face-to-face data 2015 and 2017**



Importantly there was an increase in registration rates for private renters and local authority and housing association tenants from 2015 to 2017 suggesting the recovery in registration rates was beneficial for those groups which were originally thought to have been negatively affected by IER in the panel data examined above. In 2017 registration rates under IER had increased for private renters by just under 10 percentage points compared to 2015. Despite this increase, home owners are still much more likely to be registered to vote. Controlling for other factors, home ownership is still a significant predictor of whether a person is not registered to vote in both 2015 and 2017.

**Figure 9. Registration rate by housing tenure: face-to-face data 2015 and 2017**



## 8 Attitudes to politics and electoral registration

As well as examining levels of registration and who is registered and who is not at different time points, we can also examine attitudes to democracy and the registration system during the transition period using the BES panel data. Table 6 shows that both under household registration and under the new IER system (May 2016) those on the register were more satisfied with democracy than those who are not registered. Similarly, registered voters pay more attention to politics across all individual waves. There is no significant difference in trust in MPs until after IER is finalised.

**Table 6. Political Attitudes Scores: Difference Between Registered and Non-Registered Voters: Panel Data 2014-16**

	<i>May-14</i>	<i>May-15</i>	<i>May-16</i>
Satisfaction with UK Democracy	0.15***	0.06*	0.07***
Trust in MPs	0.07	0.07	0.12***
Attention to Politics	0.31***	0.35***	0.29***

\* $p \leq 0.05$ , \*\* $p \leq 0.01$ , \*\*\* $p \leq 0.001$ , two-tailed significance

### 8.1 Attitudes towards Registration

In the BES panel data respondents were asked how satisfied they were with the electoral registration system. Table 7 shows satisfaction levels in those registered compared to those not on the electoral register at all three time points.

**Table 7. Satisfaction with Registration System Score: Difference Between Registered and Non-Registered Voters: Panel Data 2014-16**

	May-14	May-15	May-16
Satisfaction with registration system	+0.51***	+0.31***	+0.27***
	<i>N=18,146</i>	<i>N=23,607</i>	<i>N=16,777</i>

The consistent pattern is one that we might expect – those not on the electoral register have a lower level of satisfaction with the registration system than those registered. At all three time points this difference is statistically significant. Interestingly this gap closes after IER is finalised, although the difference is small still, only decreasing by 0.24 points on a 5-point scale. Overall, levels of satisfaction with the registration system are higher after IER is finalised which is counter to some concerns that people would be unhappy with providing additional data about themselves in order to register.

**Table 8. Satisfaction with Registration System Scores: Between Wave Changes**

	<i>W2W6 Transition Period</i>				<i>W6W7 IER finalised</i>			
	Dropp ed off	Continually registered	Joi ned	Staye d Off	Dropp ed off	Continually registered	Joi ned	Staye d Off
Satisfaction with registration system	3.67	3.95	3.66	3.34	3.77	3.93	3.71	3.26
	<i>N=13,256</i>				<i>N=12,214</i>			

In both time periods lowest satisfaction is with those who remain off the register and highest in those that always remain registered. Interestingly there is little difference in satisfaction between those that joined and dropped off the electoral register. This suggests the groups with a higher churn are less satisfied than those who are consistently registered, as those who join and drop off tend to be the same group of voters.

## 8.2 Satisfaction with Registration System by Demographics

### 8.2.1 Age

Satisfaction with the electoral registration system increases with age – in line with levels of registration increasing with age. This trend holds across all three time points. Satisfaction with the registration system was also higher across all ages under the new individual electoral system in May 2016 than under household registration in May 2014.

**Table 9. Age and Satisfaction with Registration System: Panel Data 2014-16**

	<i>May 2014</i>	<i>May 2015</i>	<i>May 2016</i>
18-25	3.53	3.62	3.75
26-35	3.72	3.81	3.91
36-45	3.91	3.94	3.99
46-55	3.94	4.00	4.03
56-65	3.99	4.08	4.10
66+	4.09	4.19	4.16
	<i>N=28,699</i>	<i>N=29,103</i>	<i>N=23,236</i>

### 8.2.2 Home Ownership

Again, in line with higher levels of electoral registration, it is homeowners who are consistently more satisfied with the system of electoral registration across all three time points. Satisfaction is higher across all groups under the new individual electoral registration system in May 2016 than under household registration in May 2014.

**Table 10. Home Ownership and Satisfaction with Registration System: Panel Data 2014-16**

	<i>May 2014</i>	<i>May 2015</i>	<i>May 2016</i>
Owns Own Home	3.97	4.08	4.10
Rents from Local Authority or Housing Association	3.86	3.81	3.93
Rents from Private Landlord	3.68	3.79	3.87
Other	3.63	3.72	3.80
	<i>N=28,699</i>	<i>N=29,129</i>	<i>N=23,123</i>

### 8.2.3 Employment

Employment status and satisfaction with registration system shows the same pattern as home ownership status and age in that the group which have consistently shown the highest

levels of registration – retired voters – also consistently had the highest level of satisfaction with the electoral registration system. Also in line with patterns in other demographics satisfaction was higher under the new system of registration in May 2016 for all groups apart from the unemployed than in May 2014.

**Table 11. Employment and Satisfaction with Registration System: Panel Data 2014-16**

	<i>May 2014</i>	<i>May 2015</i>	<i>May 2016</i>
Employed	3.86	3.95	4.00
Unemployed	3.81	3.73	3.79
Student	3.48	3.65	3.76
Retired	4.07	4.17	4.16
Other	3.84	3.82	3.93
	<i>N=28,680</i>	<i>N=29,129</i>	<i>N=22,395</i>
<i>Inclusive of ineligible voters</i>			

## 9 Conclusions

This report examined the impact of the change from household to individual electoral registration on voter registration using the British Election Study internet panel and face-to-face survey data. The report set out to ask:

- How has the transition to IER impacted overall registration levels in the population?
- How has the transition to IER impacted registration levels amongst specific demographic groups?
- Who has dropped off the electoral register during the transition to IER?
- Who has joined the electoral register during the transition to IER?
- Who has remained consistently on, or off, the electoral register over this time period?
- How has satisfaction with the registration system changed over time?

One of the key concerns with the introduction of IER was that it would lead to an overall reduction in registration rates. In at least one sense this appears to have happened. There was a reduction in overall registration *levels* in the official figures from the Electoral Commission after Individual Electoral Registration (IER) was finalised in December 2015, at which point anyone only registered under the old system was removed from the electoral



register. This drop could be in part due to the removal of inaccurate entries from the electoral register. However our analysis of the BES panel data shows a drop in registration rates as well.

When it comes to registration rates *at the time of an election* however, we find no evidence that IER has had a negative impact on registration levels. The face-to-face data suggested there was a slight *increase* in registration levels from the May 2015 face-to-face survey to the June 2017 face-to-face survey, 18 months after IER was finalised.

Using the British Election Study panel data we can see the individual level effects of the change to IER. On first examination, it seems that the change to IER had a negative impact on registration levels in younger age groups and amongst those who rented, especially those in private rented accommodation. Discussion of the transition to IER was often dominated by concerns around the registration of students. The impact of IER on student registration however was less clear. Although students are less likely to be registered than the general population, this seems to be because they are generally young, and not because they are students. Amongst young people, being a student makes someone significantly *more* likely to be registered..

However, when we take into account the recovery in registration levels found in the BES face-to-face surveys the disproportionate impact of IER on certain demographic groups was not as clear cut. In June 2017 under IER compared to May 2015 during the transition to IER increases in registration were seen for younger age groups, the largest increases being for those between 26 to 55 years old, suggesting any recovery in registration did not apply to the same extent to 18-25 year-olds. Additionally, there was an increase in registration rates for private renters and local authority and housing association tenants between 2015 and 2017. It appears that the potential recovery in registration rates further into IER's full implementation was beneficial for those groups originally thought to have been negatively affected by IER.

The effect of IER may be more complex, with a possible recovery of registration rates in 2017. Our evidence points to a 'churn' effect with the same types of voters dropping on and off the register. An examination of the individual level data using the BES panel data confirms this. Certain groups of voters were found to be more frequently dropping off the register, but were also more frequently joining the register, both in the transition to IER and when IER was finalised and those registered under the old system were removed from the register. These voters were predominantly young people and those in private rented

accommodation. In comparison, the demographic that tend to be continually registered are older, retired and owned their own home.

The democratic implications of the effects of IER are important to understand IER seems to have increased the volatility of the registration process. Under IER, some types of people are more likely to become unregistered than under HER. However, government statistics show that in the run up to recent electoral events since the introduction of IER – the 2015 and 2017 elections and the 2016 EU referendum – there has been a surge in registration rates, particularly amongst young people.<sup>11</sup> Our survey evidence here suggests that most of these ‘new’ registrants are likely to have been previously registered people who had dropped off the register. The net effect of these drop-offs and registration seems to be that, at election time, the total and subgroup levels of electoral registration are no-worse, and in some instances possibly better, under IER than they were under HER.

It is good news that IER does not seem to have resulted in the systematic disenfranchisement of any demographic group we have examined. However, the effects of IER are not all neutral or positive. Our evidence here suggests that *between* elections, the electoral registers are likely to be missing large numbers of voters, particularly those voters that we have identified as being more likely to drop off the register. It is unclear as yet whether the increased churn is a feature of IER simply a feature of the transition period (and therefore affecting the December 2015 registers but not necessarily future mid-cycle registers). Moreover, whilst churn on the register does not affect whether or not people are able to vote on future elections, it may affect processes that use non-election year registers. This includes the drawing of parliamentary constituency boundaries. The proposed boundary changes arising from the 2018 boundary review<sup>12</sup> uses the December 2015 registers. Should Parliament choose to implement those recommendations, those groups most affected by the increased churn in the registers will be under-represented in the apportionment process.<sup>13</sup> The types of people who are most likely to be unregistered in non-

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<sup>11</sup> <https://www.gov.uk/performance/register-to-vote/registrations-by-age-group#from=2014-06-01T00:00:00Z&to=2018-06-01T00:00:00Z>

<sup>12</sup> <https://boundarycommissionforengland.independent.gov.uk/2018-review/>

<sup>13</sup> This is not to say that the old system of registration was necessarily better in terms of apportionment. Inaccurate registers are also a problem for apportionment because areas with lots of inaccurate entries will have fewer voters living in them than they appear to and so will consequently be relatively overrepresented compared to areas with accurate registers.

election years are not evenly geographically distributed and so will lead to distortions in the number of electors in each constituency. Areas with large numbers of the types of people who are likely to be unregistered between elections will be likely to end up with significant increases in their number of electors at elections. The result of this is that weight of the vote of someone living in this kind of constituency will be effectively less than the weight of the vote of someone living someone with fewer people who drop off the register between elections. Regardless of whether churn continues in the future the use of registers from December 2015 in the 2018 Boundary Review will lead to an under-representation of areas with larger proportions of these groups in future elections.

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