

Register Every Voter

How Automatic Voter Registration can bring the forgotten millions back into our democracy.



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The Electoral Integrity Project is an independent academic study founded in 2012. The Electoral Integrity Project produces innovative and policy-relevant research comparing elections worldwide. The project is currently directed by Dr. Holly Ann Garnett and Professor Toby S. James and is housed at the Royal Military College of Canada/Queen's University and the University of East Anglia. It was founded in 2012 by Professor Pippa Norris and originally based at Harvard University and the University of Sydney.

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Strengthening democracy in the UK

A high level of participation of citizens in the democratic process is key to building a stronger democracy. Yet at the last UK General Election, more citizens chose not to vote than voted for the winning party. Many of those citizens are not even on the UK's electoral register.

This report sets out how reforms to the electoral registration process can increase the number of citizens on the electoral register for a stronger and more inclusive democracy.

A close-up photograph of a person's hands holding a white rectangular sign. The sign features the text "YOUR VOTE MATTERS" in a bold, sans-serif font. The word "YOUR" is in a dark blue color. The word "VOTE" has a red checkmark symbol integrated into the letter "V". The word "MATTERS" is in a lighter blue color. The background is a blurred outdoor scene with green trees and a brick building.

**YOUR
✓OTE
MATTERS**

1

Why electoral registration matters

Electoral registers are the bedrock of electoral and democratic processes. They are the definitive list of who can vote in an election.

Legal enfranchisement does not guarantee inclusion on the lists in the UK, and as a result, millions of people are unable to vote on election day because they are missing from the registers.

Electoral registers should therefore be evaluated in terms of whether they support or hinder the quality of democracy. Four considerations are important: completeness, accuracy, equity and the robustness of the administrative process (Box 1).

Register completeness

The completeness of the electoral register is the extent to which every person who is entitled to be registered, is registered.

Register accuracy

The accuracy of the electoral register can be usefully defined as the extent to which there are no false entries on the electoral registers.

Register equity

Degree of equity in electoral registers refers to the extent to which there is an even distribution in the completeness of the electoral register across educational, socio-demographic, ethnic, gendered or other groups.

Administrative robustness

Electoral registration processes must be deliverable without errors which can lead to citizens not being able to vote or the trust in the system being undermined. This requires sufficient staffing, resource and capacity.

2

The Forgotten Millions? Assessing the quality of the UK registers

The UK electoral registers do not include all citizens who are eligible to vote – and concerns have been raised within parliament, amongst civil society groups and elsewhere about the ‘missing millions’.

In 2016, for example, the All Party Parliamentary Group on Democratic Participation published the report Getting the ‘missing millions’ on to the electoral register to draw attention to the issue of under-registration ^[2]. This was in the context of the move from household to individual registration. Further concerns about the system were also raised by the cross-party House of Lords evaluation of the move to individual voter registration ^[3].

Missing millions

Where are we now? The Electoral Commission’s completeness and accuracy studies reported that the 2022 local registers were 86% complete and 88% accurate ^[4].

In raw numbers, they estimated that up to 8 million people were either missing or not correctly registered on the local government registers in December 2022.

Those who were under registered were more likely to be in urban areas; in London or Scotland; more mobile; private renters; younger; from Asian, Black, Mixed or ‘other’ ethnic backgrounds; non-UK nationals; from lower socio-economic groups and with lower qualifications ^[4].

Under-registration has a direct impact on voter participation. Research has shown that many citizens visit the polls, only to find themselves not on the electoral register ^[5, 6]. At a general election, more than two-thirds of poll workers report that they are turning away voters because their name does not appear on the electoral register ^[6].

Electoral registers are used to draw electoral boundaries. Those citizens who are not registered are therefore not included on the electoral map. Low underlying electoral registration rates also

Between 7 and 8 million people are missing or not correctly registered to vote

create huge logistical challenges close to election day for elections staff, who have limited resources^[7]. It can trigger a last minute rush of applications which could be avoided.

Longer-term declines

The population of the UK has increased by around 6 percent since 2011 so we would expect there

to be an increase in the number of electors on the electoral register over time^{[8] [i]}. However, the numbers on the electoral roll have not increased as Figure 1 shows. There is evidence of seasonal increases in voter registration numbers around general elections, but entries on the 2021 parliamentary registers have dropped to levels below the levels of 2016.

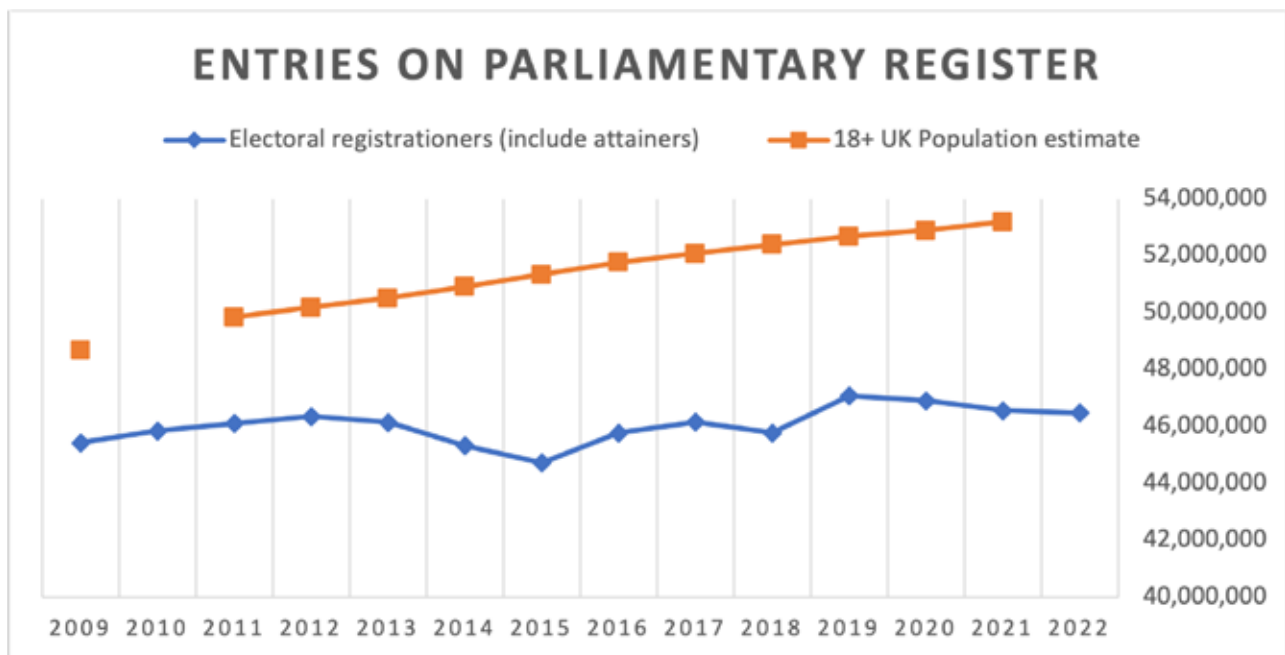


Figure 1: Entries on the parliamentary register as of 1 December each year, compared to the ONS mid-population estimates of 18+ year olds in the UK. Source: author using data from the ONS 2009-2023^[8, 9]. Data is missing for 2010 and 2022.

ⁱ Not all over 18s are eligible to vote – and the franchise varies by type of election. However, the population estimates provide a useful crude measure of the potential eligible electorate. For further information on the franchise, see: www.gov.uk/elections-in-the-uk.



There has been a notable decline in the number of young people on the electoral registers. The UK has an attainer process to capture the next cohort of voters. An attainer is someone who becomes eligible to vote in the near future. Hence the electoral register should contain many 16 and 17 year olds. But as Figure 2 shows, attainers have dropped from nearly 541,000 in 2009 to 175,037 in 2022.

Electoral administration pressures

There is strong evidence of growing pressures and limited resources being available to electoral administrators running elections ^[7, 10, 11]. Increasingly complicated electoral laws, new voter identification requirements and late legal changes have made elections more challenging to run. EROs spend precious resources inviting individuals to register – when cost savings could be made by registering them automatically.

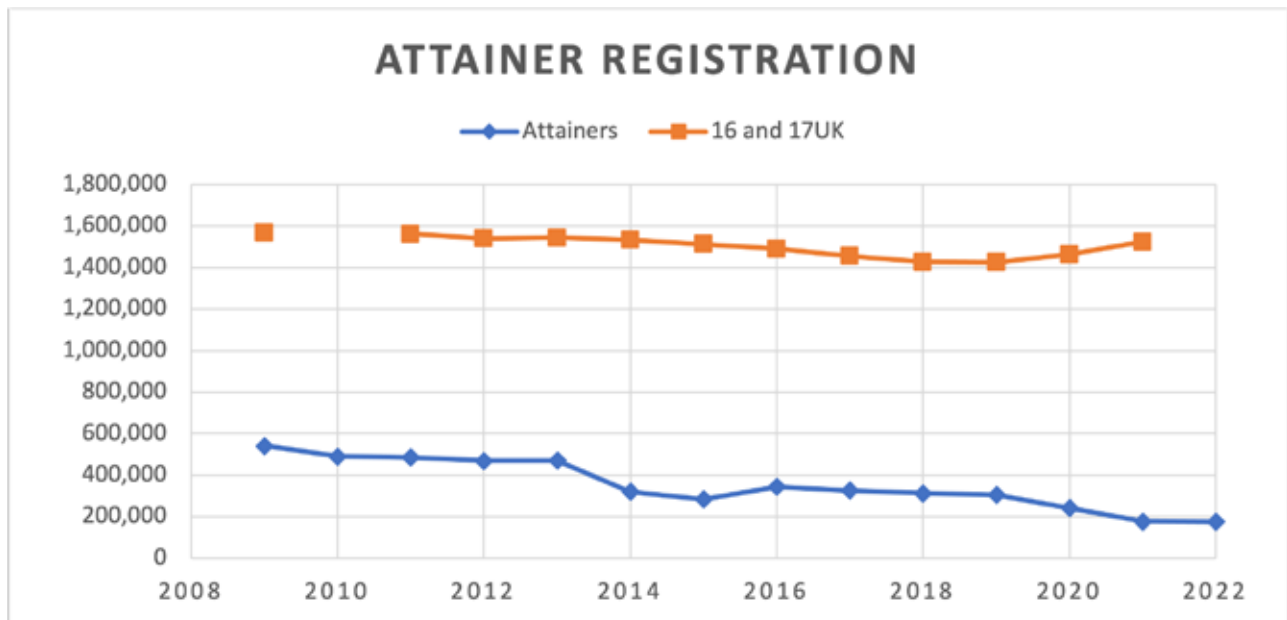


Figure 2: Attainer entries on the parliamentary register as of 1 December each year, compared to the ONS mid-population estimates of 16 and 17 year olds in the UK. Source: author using data from the ONS 2009-2023 ^[8, 9]. Data missing for 2010 and 2022.

3

Recent UK Policy Reforms

The UK voter registration architecture was designed in 1918. After decades of continuity, there have been recent reforms built on top of the system (see: Appendix 1), but there is a need to further modernise the system.

The move to online voter registration in 2014 was a major step forward in the modernisation of the voter registration system. This was accompanied by the move to individual registration in Britain. This was widely recognised as being a positive step for giving citizens greater ownership over their electoral rights. However, there was significant evidence that the process negatively affected the completeness of the electoral register amongst attainers and young people. It also led to an overly-bureaucratic two-stage canvass ^[12].

Subsequent reforms have tried to address the side effects of individual voter registration. An amendment to the Higher Education Act 2017 required universities to support voter registration activities. A new reformed canvass system was brought in which enabled automatic re-registration and data-matching following legislation in 2019. The effects of both changes remain unclear at this point. As figures 1 and 2 show, there remains a need for further action to address the 'missing millions' problem.

Automatic voter registration has increasingly been suggested as an important and feasible policy reform to address these ongoing problems. Devolution in Scotland and Wales has enabled more innovative policy debate about how voter registration could operate differently. Wales has now legislated for automatic voter registration. This has not yet been implemented, but is on the horizon ^[13]. The Electoral Commission has also called for direct enrolment ^[14].

What is automatic voter registration?

Internationally, there are three main approaches to voter registration:

- **Individual-responsibility voter register** – where it is the citizen’s responsibility to enrol themselves for elections and bespoke electoral registers are maintained for this purpose.
- **Assisted voter registration** – where it is the citizen’s responsibility to enrol themselves for elections, but they are assisted through, for example, some targeted automation or prompting when they access other government services.
- **Automatic voter registration** – where citizens are automatically enrolled on the electoral register by government offices. An electoral register is usually created for each election based on a civil population register or other state record.

Recent research shows that AVR is present in half of countries around the world [15]. Examples include Finland, Iceland, Switzerland and Denmark. For example, Finland, has its electoral register compiled by the Digital and Population Data Services Agency using information from the Population Information System [ii]. These data are then publicly displayed, and each elector is sent a notice of their right to vote. Any elector who is not on the list may make an appeal before the election to have their name included. This model rests on the usage of an existing population register and is managed by the agencies and departments involved in its administration.

Many countries which do not have a civil population register, like the UK, are beginning to introduce components of AVR – such as Australia, USA and Canada. For example:

- In Victoria, Australia, a Direct Enrolment scheme was put in place – citizens would be

automatically added to the register 21 days after they turned 18. Roughly 200,000 young people were added to the register per year – most went on to vote [1].

- In states such as Oregon and California in the USA, automatic voter registration has been implemented at motor vehicles agencies [16]. When citizens interact with the Department of Motor Vehicles, they can be added to the electoral register. The effects of AVR vary according to how it is implemented [16], but AVR has been found to support voter registration and turnout for young and minority voters [17].

- In Canada, a National Register of Electors is a permanent and continuously updated register, which is constructed using data sources such as the Canada Revenue Agency, provincial and territorial driver’s licence agencies and Department of National Defence. It contains roughly 27 million voters and roughly 12% of electors have their details changed each year through this mechanism. Citizens can opt out – but then have to register themselves

during the revision period (from after the call of the election until 6:00 p.m. on the Tuesday before election day) [18].

Research now shows that automatic voter registration can improve both accuracy and completeness of the register, while also potentially saving public money too.

Why AVR?

Research now shows that the advantages of AVR are:

- **Citizen convenience** - Voter registration should be easy and convenient for citizens. Automating the process means that citizens will have fewer administrative steps to take in order to register.
- **Higher completeness rates** - International studies show that countries with automated systems have more complete registers [15]. There are therefore more voters able to exercise their democratic right on election day.

ii www.vaalit.fi/en/right-to-vote-and-compilation-of-the-voting-register

- **Higher accuracy rates** - International studies show that countries with automated systems have more accurate registers ^[15]. There have been concerns from the current government that AVR would undermine accuracy and increase opportunities for fraud – but the research shows the opposite to be true. By using data from other secure datasets, the accuracy of the electoral registers can be improved.
- **Administrative time and savings** - Rather than sending out invitations to register, citizens could be added automatically, saving time and resources for EROs who otherwise have to proactively chase them. Direct enrolment in Victoria, Australia was thought to have produced 10-15% percent savings ^[1]. The implementation of AVR in US states has been found to lead to cost savings ^[19]. There are likely to be even greater economies of scale by moving to a single national register – rather than requiring every ERO to procure voter registration software separately to maintain their own register.
- **More secure voter registration** - Data from other public sources such as passport applications and that held by the DWP is likely to be highly accurate and secure because of checks undertaken by those government agencies.

How many new voters?

Providing citizens with an option to register to vote/update their registration details when accessing other government services would enable millions of citizens to register more easily. It could enable up to:

- **6.5 million per year** could register when applying for a passport.
- **4 million people** could register when they update their driving licence address with the DVLA.
- **2 million a year** could register when applying for Universal Credit.
- **2.5 million students** could be registered through annual student enrolment.
- **800,000** could register when they apply for child benefit for the first time.
- **500,000** could register when they provide the Student Loans Company with a new address.
- **450,000** could register when they apply for disability benefits

Source: ^[1].



4

A call to action

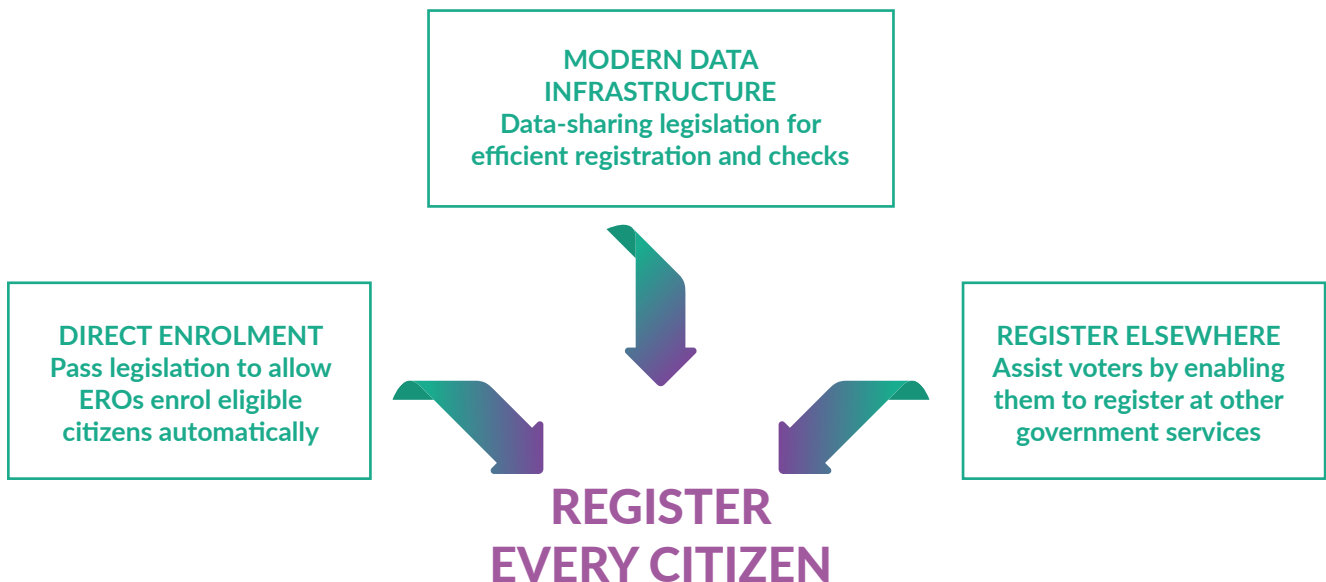
There is a need for a longer term programme of reform for voter registration in the UK, rather than reactive reforms.

This agenda has already emerged through cross-party, evidence-based forums and there is now a growing consensus about the need for action ^[1-4, 14, 20]. The UK Electoral Commission has recently encouraged policy makers to consider how ‘specific data sources could be used to improve the accuracy and completeness of electoral registers,’ including the move towards automatic and assisted voter registration ^[4].

There is now the need for political will to implement this. We therefore call for:

- 1. Direct registration for eligible citizens**
Electoral registration officers (EROs) should be granted the power to directly register eligible citizens for whom they have the necessary reliable data, without the need to trouble busy citizens. Electors would then be written to, to confirm their registration and given the opportunity to correct any error.
- 2. Modernised data infrastructure**
Electoral registration already involves data-matching and data-sharing between public bodies. The UK, Scottish and Welsh governments should modernise the process by passing updated legislation to enable data to be shared with EROs. The data should be that which enables EROs to efficiently register and check the eligibility of citizens.
- 3. Register elsewhere**
Citizens should be nudged to register to vote online when they access government services such as the National Citizen Service, when paying Council tax, renewing car taxes or registering for benefits.

There are three key steps to registering every citizen



These three central policy reforms can strengthen the UK's democracy – but they might also save money by reducing the strain on public services.

There are other reforms, not required to implement the above, which can also strengthen voter registration work:

4. An 'Am I registered?' website

Introducing a national website so that citizens can check their own registration status online would save them making calls to busy electoral officials at peak times.

5. Centralised registers

Rather than having a patchwork quilt of hundreds of local electoral registers, the case for a single national electoral register could be reviewed. This would allow duplicate registrations and missing citizens to be picked up more easily. It would enable greater economies of scale in the updating process.

6. Digital electoral registers

Rather than having Victorian, paper copies of the electoral register in polling stations, electronic versions could be used on tablets. This would allow real time monitoring of polling station traffic and citizens to vote at any polling station within their local authority area (or anywhere within the country if there was a national register) rather than the one where they

live. There should also be a move to explore electronic poll cards to reduce the money spent by local authorities - and provide a more convenient service to the citizen ^[21].

7. Abolishing the open register

The edited/open register is available for purchase by any individual, company or organisation without restriction on its use. It serves no electoral purpose. Moreover, it provides a vulnerability for elections because individuals can be micro-targeted. There have been repeated calls for it to be abolished. Any electors who are directly enrolled should not be added to the edited/open register without their permission. Elections would be strengthened by abolishing it ^[21].

8. A centralised complaints system

There is often public confusion about who to complain to when there are problems at polling stations if a citizen is not registered. There should be a centralised complaints system available via the Electoral Commission website.

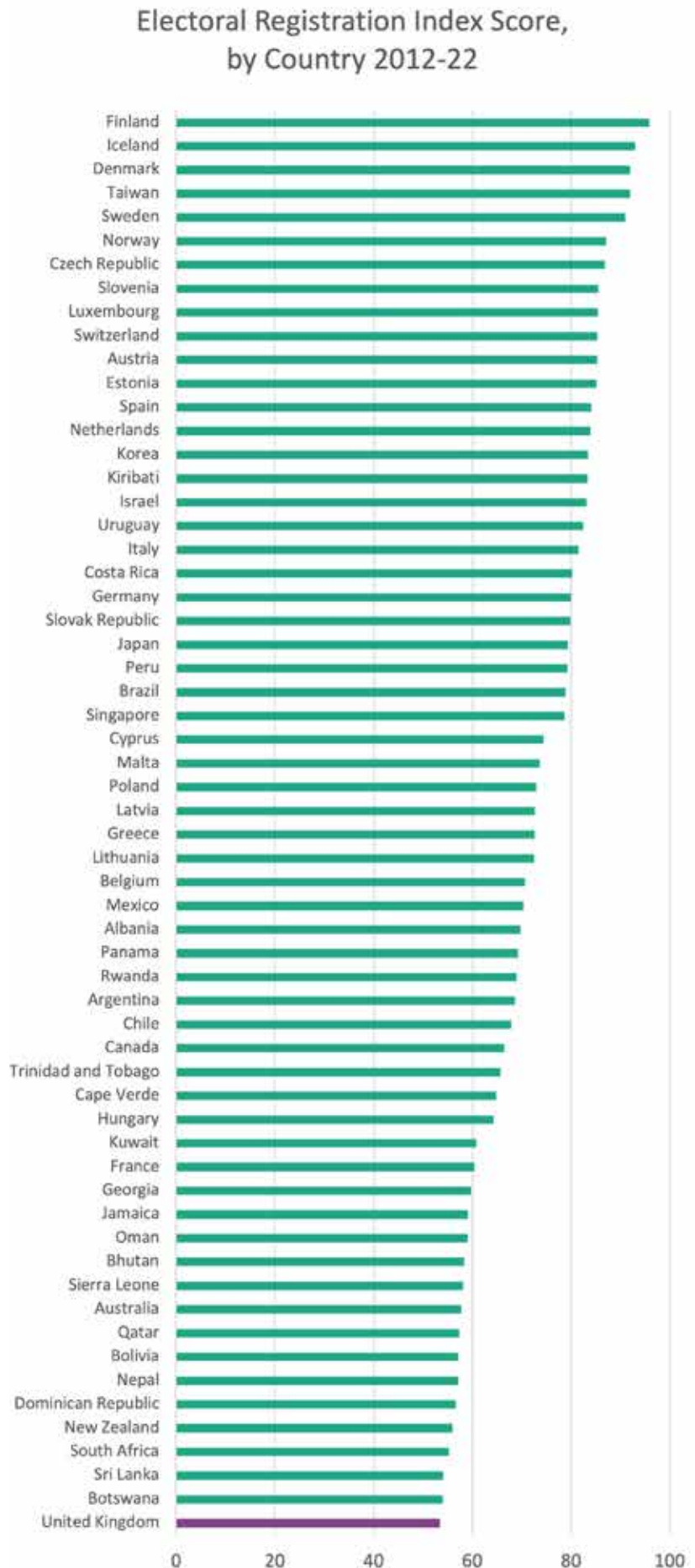
9. Legal consolidation

Electoral law is complex and fragmented which makes it difficult for electoral officials to implement. Legal consolidation should therefore accompany these reforms.

Appendix 1: Recent Voter Registration Reforms

Legislation	Changes
The Representation of the People Act 2000	Replaced the periodic system of registration with a 'rolling' register that could be updated year-round.
The Electoral Administration Act 2006	<p>Establishing a legal framework for a Coordinated Online Register of Electors (CORE) (this was not implemented).</p> <p>Made a statutory obligation on returning officers to conduct a canvass.</p> <p>Introduced a performance standards for Local Authority staff to maximise registration.</p> <p>Made registration fraud a specific offence.</p>
The Electoral Registration and Administration Act 2013	Abolished the 'household' registration system that had existed since the Victorian era, in which it was the responsibility of the 'head of household' to register all individuals residing at the address. This was replaced with a system by which every individual is responsible for their own registration; this system is known as Individual Electoral Registration (IER).
Higher Education and Research Act 2017	<p>Enabled an online registration system to be introduced.</p> <p>Created a new statutory requirement on higher education institutions to promote voter registration. In particular, it required them 'take such steps as the Office for Students (OfS) considers appropriate for facilitating cooperation between the provider and one or more electoral registration officers in England for the purpose of enabling the electoral registration of students who are on higher education courses provided by the provider'.</p>
The Representation of the People (Annual Canvass) (Amendment) Regulations 2019	<p>Reformed the process of undertaking the annual canvass to use some data-matching and automatic re-registration. Properties were divided into three categories:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Route 1 – households where individuals match national data (and automatic re-registration can occur after some communication). - Route 2 – households where electors do not match data sources and there must be at least two attempts to contact each property. - Route 3 – where the ERO can source data from a 'responsible person' e.g. student accommodation, hostels, house of multiple occupancy. Individuals present in the properties, who are not registered, are then invited to register by the ERO.

Appendix 2: The leading countries in voter registration quality



Source: Electoral Registration Index Score, Ranked by Country 2012-22. Top 60 countries shown. Source: authors based on the Perceptions of Electoral Integrity Dataset 9.0 [22]. The United Kingdom was ranked 60th out of 169 countries according to the index.

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