

A photograph of a woman in a red coat and grey turtleneck sweater, seen from the chest down, as she places a white ballot into a dark ballot box. The background is blurred, showing other people and what appears to be an indoor setting.

# The Electoral Fraud (Northern Ireland) Act 2002

An assessment of its first year in operation

## The Electoral Commission

We are an independent body that was set up by the UK Parliament. We aim to gain public confidence and encourage people to take part in the democratic process within the UK by modernising the electoral process, promoting public awareness of electoral matters, and regulating political parties.

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ISBN: 1-904363-35-0

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# Preface

The Electoral Commission was established as an independent UK-wide public body with the enactment of the Political Parties, Elections and Referendums Act 2000. Under Section 6 of this legislation we have a statutory duty to keep under review and, from time to time, submit reports to government on electoral law and practice. In accordance with this remit we have undertaken a detailed analysis of the operation of the Electoral Fraud (Northern Ireland) Act 2002 during its first year.

The Electoral Commission is a relative newcomer to Northern Ireland and this is our first statutory report. In future reports we will focus on elections to the Northern Ireland Assembly, the Westminster Parliament and the European Parliament as they occur.

In reporting on this new legislation we were conscious that:

- the Act heralded significant changes in voter registration and electoral identification for the electorate of Northern Ireland;
- the potential impact of the Act on the electoral process has been the subject of considerable public interest and debate;
- electoral fraud is perceived to have been a significant factor in the electoral landscape of Northern Ireland for many decades;
- electoral registration is the lynchpin of an effective electoral system;
- the lessons emerging from individual registration in Northern Ireland will be of direct interest to the rest of the UK.

The introduction of individual registration with a range of personal identifiers was a major undertaking. Its implementation was overshadowed by much public comment on the reduction in the number of registered electors. The research commissioned as part of this report highlights a number of reasons for the reduction of some 120,000 names on the first register compiled under the new system of individual registration and its predecessor compiled under the household registration system. We concluded that the reduction could be explained by a number of factors, of which the removal of the practice of carrying names forward from the previous register for a period of one year is likely to have been the most significant. The new system of electoral registration introduced a 'clean slate' in that everyone had to register afresh and individually for inclusion on the register. We do not agree with the assertion that 120,000 or so persons were disenfranchised as a result of the new legislation being introduced although there is some

evidence to suggest that eligible persons previously registered have not enrolled under the new system. As yet we have no evidence to conclude that the 'carry forward' should be reinstated.

The Commission is satisfied that the 2002 electoral register more accurately reflects those entitled to be registered. However, we note that it represents an estimated 86% of the population aged 18 years of age and above as compared with Census data. This highlights the fact that more effort needs to be made in respect of registration particularly with specific groups including young people, people with disabilities and those on low incomes who are more likely to be under-registered.

We recognise that the introduction of individual registration is more resource intensive in administrative terms than was previously the case. We consider that in addition to the Chief Electoral Officer and his staff all those with an interest and stake in the democratic process will need to continually emphasise the importance of, and actively encourage, registration each year.

We note that while the subject of electoral fraud in Northern Ireland has been the focus of much discussion for many years, there are no statistics or little hard evidence to support these widely held perceptions. Although it is not possible to measure whether the Act will reduce actual levels of fraud, we note that perceptions of confidence by members of the public have increased as a result of the new legislation.

The objective of this report is to provide an in-depth and independent analysis of the new individual registration process and the requirement for photographic identification at polling stations. It identifies a number of practice issues that need to be addressed. We hope the report's findings will enable the development of greater public confidence and participation in the registration process.

This report by The Electoral Commission was compiled at our Northern Ireland office in Belfast by a team led by the Head of Office Séamus Magee. We would like to thank all those who have assisted us with information including

members of the public, political parties, community groups, the media, research organisations and the Chief Electoral Officer and his staff.



Karamjit Singh CBE  
Electoral Commissioner  
November 2003



# Executive summary

The Electoral Fraud (Northern Ireland) Act 2002 received Royal Assent on 1 May 2002. The Act was primarily introduced to overcome impersonation and electoral abuse which were widely perceived to occur in Northern Ireland. It followed the publication of a number of reports on the subject between 1997 and 2001 all of which concluded that electoral fraud was a major issue in Northern Ireland and needed to be addressed if confidence in the democratic process was to be maintained.

## Background

The Electoral Fraud (Northern Ireland) Act 2002 brought about the most significant change to electoral law and practice in Northern Ireland for many years. It replaced household registration with a new system of individual registration. Under the new rules, those having their name included on the register must provide personal identification information in the form of their date of birth, national insurance number and signature. Implementation of the Act also involved the introduction of photographic identification at polling stations.

## Issues

Under Section 6 of the Political Parties, Elections and Referendums Act 2000 (PPERA) The Electoral Commission has a duty to keep under review and, from time to time, submit reports to government on electoral law. In accordance with its remit the Commission has undertaken research into the introduction and operation of the Act. Our report considers how the legislation was implemented by the Electoral Office for Northern Ireland (EONI) and reflects the views of key stakeholders, including the electorate and political parties. The report identifies a number of specific issues which have the potential to bring about improvements in individual registration for the electorate. The November 2003 Assembly election should provide us with a further opportunity to comment in more detail on provisions of the Act which can only be tested during an election.

## The public interest

The introduction of individual registration in September 2002 and the publication of the first new register in December 2002 were subject to much debate and speculation. Interest mainly derived from the fact that the number of names on the new register had reduced by 10%, representing an estimated 120,000 potential voters. At the time, we gave an undertaking to the political parties and others that we would conduct research to establish the facts behind the reduction and that our findings would be made public.

## Perceptions of electoral fraud

Despite the fact that electoral fraud is perceived to be a major issue there are no statistics to support these widely held perceptions and there have been few if any successful prosecutions. Official reports published between 1997 and 2001 identified consistent themes in respect of electoral fraud in Northern Ireland. All confirmed that the extent of fraud was difficult to quantify and conclusive evidence for it was hard to obtain. Consequently, the impact of the Act on actual levels of fraud cannot be gauged, as there is no readily available benchmark against which to measure.

Public opinion research conducted in April 2003 suggests that the measures introduced to combat electoral fraud have had a positive impact and confidence levels in the integrity of the electoral process have increased as a result of the Act. Altogether, 72% of a representative sample of the Northern Ireland population either strongly agreed or tended to agree that the new system should reduce electoral fraud.

## Implementation

The Chief Electoral Officer for Northern Ireland and his staff had the responsibility for implementing the operational detail of the Act. He was supported in this task by the Northern Ireland Office who made the necessary resources available and The Electoral Commission who had responsibility for ensuring the electorate was aware of and understood the new arrangements. Other stakeholders including the political parties, representatives from the voluntary sector, civic society and the media played a constructive role in disseminating key messages about the new arrangements.

## Analysis of the registers

A key part of our research has involved comparing the last register produced under the old household system (August 2002) and the first individual register produced under the new system (December 2002). The May 2003 register was also analysed to gauge the impact rolling registration had on increasing the number of people registered.

In respect of the last household register it was concluded that the registration rate of 95.5% was likely to have been an overestimate of the actual number of eligible persons registered to vote. However, it was not possible to quantify the factors that inflated the register. The analysis of the August 2002 register also showed there were wide variations between those registered by constituency and that these were more pronounced at ward level. We considered various explanations for some of the differentials identified.

The first register produced under the individual registration system (December 2002) suggests that the numbers on the register as a proportion of the 18+ population was approximately 86%. The non-registration rate is largely explained by the fact that the 'carry forward' facility (the mechanism used under the old household system to allow names to be carried forward for one year when a registration form was not returned) no longer applies.

The impact of removing the other inflationary factors from the December 2002 register is also considered. The December 2002 register shows that the largest declines in registration rates occurred in the Belfast constituencies and that rural constituencies continued to have the highest rates of registration. At ward level the analysis of the December 2002 suggests that there is a clear correlation between deprivation and percentage decline on the register.

## Impact of individual registration on specific groups

Individual registration tended to have an adverse impact on disadvantaged, marginalised and hard-to-reach groups. Young people and students, people with learning disabilities and other forms of disability, and those living in areas of high social deprivation were less likely to be registered and encountered specific problems with the new registration process. These findings are not unique to Northern Ireland and are a recognised phenomenon across the UK.



### The electoral identity card

The uptake of the electoral identity card varied from constituency to constituency with the overall uptake at just over 7%. Some of the concerns expressed in respect of access to the electoral identity card have been endorsed by the Commission's public opinion survey. This revealed that a number of disadvantaged groups were less likely to have eligible identification. Evidence from a local by-election suggests that the message about electoral identification at polling stations is generally understood by the electorate. However, efforts will need to be maintained to ensure that those without eligible identification and young people coming onto the register for the first time are aware of the requirement and have the opportunity to apply for an electoral identity card.

### Rolling registration

The number of names on the May 2003 register increased by 2.1 percentage points from the December 2002 register. However, this increase was not uniform across the Northern Ireland constituencies and was even more pronounced at ward level.

Electoral hearings are a feature of rolling registration that appears to be unique to Northern Ireland. In practice it means that electors are being treated differently. There also appear to be differences between the EONI's local offices in terms of the proportion of applicants called to hearings. The reasons for these variations are unclear. Fewer than half of those invited to hearings actually attend (leading to automatic non-registration) and the reasons for this require further exploration.



# 1 Introduction

The Electoral Fraud (Northern Ireland) Act 2002 was introduced to overcome widely held perceptions of impersonation and electoral abuse in Northern Ireland.

1.1 This report assesses the implementation of the Electoral Fraud (Northern Ireland) Act 2002. The Act was designed to overcome widely held perceptions of impersonation and electoral abuse in Northern Ireland. It introduced strict new measures in respect of voter registration and voter identification and has led to arguably the most significant change in electoral procedures in the UK in recent years.

1.2 Of course, perceptions of electoral fraud – and fraud itself – are not purely a Northern Ireland phenomenon. It is imperative that mechanisms are developed across the UK to instil confidence in the democratic process. The electoral process must adopt a consistently robust approach in ensuring security against fraud, while allowing for local circumstances to shape the specific approach to fraud prevention. This report is designed to inform a wider debate about tackling electoral fraud as well as assessing the operation of the changes in Northern Ireland.

## The Electoral Commission

1.3 The Electoral Commission is a UK-wide independent public body established on 30 November 2000 under Section 1 of the Political Parties, Elections and Referendums Act 2000 (PPERA). The Commission is independent of government and political parties and is directly accountable to Parliament through a committee chaired by the Speaker of the House of Commons. The Commission is headed by a Chairman and five other Commissioners, none of whom have connections to any political party. It is responsible for overseeing a number of aspects of electoral law including the registration of political parties, monitoring and publication of significant donations to registered political parties and the regulation of political party spending on election campaigns.

1.4 The Commission has a role in advising those involved in elections on practice and procedure and is required to report on the administration of every major election. In Northern Ireland the Commission has a statutory responsibility to report on elections to the Westminster Parliament, the European Parliament and the Northern Ireland Assembly. The Commission will be publishing public reports on the conduct and administration of these

elections as and when they occur. Unlike many electoral commissions outside the UK, the Commission does not have a responsibility for maintaining and updating electoral rolls, employing electoral services staff or conducting elections. In Northern Ireland these tasks are the statutory responsibility of the Chief Electoral Officer.

**1.5** The Commission's corporate aims are to:

- promote and maintain openness and transparency in the financial affairs of the UK's political parties and others involved with elections;
- review the administration and law of elections and to encourage best practice;
- encourage greater participation in and increase understanding of the democratic process;
- ensure that the Commission is able to undertake the effective conduct of a referendum;
- carry out all the Commission's statutory functions impartially using resources efficiently, effectively and economically.

**1.6** While the Commission's main office is located in London it has three other offices, one in each of Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland. The Commission's office in Northern Ireland has responsibility for delivering the corporate aims in the context of Northern Ireland. It ensures that the Northern Ireland dimension is fully represented in the strategic thinking and operational planning of the Commission. The Commission's office in Northern Ireland works closely with the Chief Electoral Officer and the EONI. Important priorities for the Commission are developing relationships with the political parties, developing and advising on electoral policy and practice and raising awareness of electoral matters. To this end the Commission has established an Assembly Parties' Panel.

**1.7** The Panel meets on a quarterly basis and with one exception all parties represented in the Northern Ireland Assembly are members. Minutes of the quarterly meetings are made public by putting them on the Commission's website. The Panel acts as a forum for sharing information on electoral matters and has been

central to developing good working relationships with all the political parties. The Chief Electoral Officer for Northern Ireland and his senior staff attend meetings of the Panel. This has afforded the parties and the Commission an opportunity to discuss together the implementation of the Act with the Chief Electoral Officer.

## Research framework

**1.8** The Act represented the most significant change to electoral procedures in Northern Ireland for many years. The introduction of individual registration and the publication of the new register in December 2002 with almost 10% fewer names, was also subject to much debate and speculation in Northern Ireland among political parties and the media. At the time the new register was published, we gave a commitment that we would conduct research to establish the facts and that our findings would be published and made widely available.

**1.9** Originally it was our intention to comment on the operation of the Act as part of our statutory report on the Assembly elections scheduled first for 1 May and then 29 May. However, the postponement of the election provided us with the opportunity to conduct a detailed assessment of the Act in its first year of operation. Under Section 6 of PPERA The Electoral Commission has a duty to keep under review and, from time to time, submit reports to government on electoral law. The Commission also has a well-established programme of research into electoral law and practice designed to underpin delivery of our statutory functions.

**1.10** In conducting our assessment we have adopted a rigorous evidence-based approach and sought the views of a wide cross-section of stakeholders including the electorate, political parties and voluntary organisations. In addition we commissioned two independent reports to inform our research and analysis. In preparing reports of this kind the Commission has a responsibility to consult the Chief Electoral Officer for Northern Ireland. In addition to ongoing consultations such as those described above, we also sought comments from the Chief Electoral Officer about factual accuracy. However, the analysis and conclusions reached in this report are those of The Electoral Commission alone.

## Scope

**1.11** This report assesses the impact of the Act after its first year of operation. It has been prepared in the public interest and for the consideration of those with an interest in electoral matters. Given that the legislation is relatively new we are in a position to report only on some specific aspects of the Act including individual registration and the requirement for electoral identity. Other aspects, such as the impact of the legislation at polling stations, will be reported on in the Commission's statutory report on the November 2003 Assembly election. It will therefore be important for the Commission and others to keep all aspects of the legislation under review.

**1.12** Our report comments on how the legislation was implemented by the EONI and reflects the views of key stakeholders including the electorate and political parties on how they perceived the new arrangements. It makes comparisons between the last register produced under the household canvass in August 2002 and the first register compiled under individual registration in December 2002. The reasons for the widely publicised reduction in names on the December 2002 register are analysed, as is the impact of rolling registration on the May 2003 register. The report also considers the processes put in place to ensure the electorate had access to relevant electoral identification. Finally, the report seeks to establish a benchmark from which all of those involved in, and interested in, electoral matters in Northern Ireland can build for the future.

## Information and sources

**1.13** Information contained in this report has been drawn from a large number of sources including public opinion surveys, desk research, consultation with key stakeholders including the political parties and focus groups along with information and data provided by the EONI.

### Public opinion surveys

**1.14** The findings of a number of public opinion surveys informed our report.

- Millward Brown Ulster was commissioned in April 2003 to conduct a public opinion survey about electoral registration and electoral identity cards. A representative sample of the Northern Ireland population aged 18+ was asked for its views. This survey had a sampling tolerance of +/- 3%. Interviewing was carried out face-to-face in people's homes between 7–21 April 2003. This was supplemented with two 'booster samples', one to increase the number of interviews with non-registrants (with a sampling tolerance of +/- 4.5%) and the second to increase the number of interviews with those who had asked for an application form for an electoral identity card but had not followed through with their application (sampling tolerance +/- 7%). In the report we refer to this as the April 2003 survey. The report is available on the Commission's website.
- Millward Brown Ulster's Omnibus survey was used during March and April 2003 to obtain accurate information on the compilation of the electoral register. Altogether 3,893 face-to-face interviews were conducted in people's homes with a representative sample of the Northern Ireland population. This provided a very robust sample with a sampling tolerance of +/- 1.4%. In the report we refer to this as the Omnibus survey.
- In order to measure the effectiveness of the Commission's public awareness campaign, Millward Brown Ulster was contracted by COI Communications to conduct 'tracking research'. Surveys were conducted in October and November 2002 and May 2003. On each occasion a representative sample of the Northern Ireland population was asked for its views. Interviews were conducted face-to-face in people's homes. The sampling tolerance was +/- 3%. In the report we refer to this as the 'tracking research'.

### Focus groups

**1.15** Altogether 16 focus groups were conducted by Millward Brown Ulster. Eight were conducted in July 2002 and a further eight in April 2003. The focus group participants in July were recruited to reflect the population of Northern Ireland in terms of age, socio-economic group and religion. To ensure both sides of the political divide were represented, four of the groups comprised people

who identified themselves as being supporters of the main unionist and nationalist parties. Possession of photographic identification and voting intention were also taken into account. The structure of the groups held in April 2003 was designed to allow for a particular focus on non-registrants.

The structure of the groups was as follows:

Table 1: July 2002 focus groups

Gender	Age	SEG*	Religion	Party support	Other constraints	Location
Male	18–24	ABC1	Protestant	UUP	Lapsed voter	Castlecaufield
Male	65+	BC1C2	Catholic	SDLP	-	Strabane
Female	25–34	C2DE	Protestant	DUP	No ID	East Belfast
Female	18–24	C2DE	Catholic	Sinn Féin	-	West Belfast
Female	65+	BC1C2	Protestant	-	No ID	Kilrea
Female	35–49	ABC1	Catholic	-	-	Coleraine
Male	50–64	BC1C2	Catholic	-	-	South Belfast
Female	50–64	BC1C2	Protestant	-	-	South Belfast

\* Respondents were categorised in terms of socio-economic group which is based on the occupation of the chief income earner in their household. The main classifications are AB (middle class or professional), C1 (Lower middle class or junior management), C2 (skilled manual workers) and DE (unskilled manual workers, the unemployed or those in receipt of state benefits long term).

Table 2: April 2003 focus groups

Religion	Urban/Rural	Ward
Protestant	Urban	Woodstock
Catholic	Urban	Poleglass
Protestant	Urban	Altnagelvin
Catholic	Urban	Strand
Protestant	Urban	Hilden
Catholic	Urban	Cavehill
Catholic	Urban	Ardoyne
Catholic	Rural	Washing Bay
Protestant	Rural	Caledon
Protestant	Rural	Castlecaufield

## Desk research

1.16 PricewaterhouseCoopers was commissioned in February 2003 to conduct desk research. The objective of this research was to compare and contrast the August 2002 register, the December 2002 register and the May 2003 register with socio-economic data sets including the 2001 Census. Each register was analysed at the Northern Ireland level, at Parliamentary constituency level and at ward level. A number of correlation analyses were conducted at ward level to determine what factors impacted on registration rates. This report is available on the Commission's website and includes the full technical detail.

## Consultation

1.17 Consultation was held with the political parties, the voluntary sector and local authorities through face-to-face interviews and the administration of a self-completion questionnaire.



### Media monitoring

**1.18** The press and broadcast media were monitored from May 2002 for articles and stories about the Act and its introduction.

### Other sources

**1.19** A number of other sources were also used to inform the report including:

- a focus group held with electoral administrators in April 2003 covering a range of topics agreed in advance with the EONI;
- statistical information and correspondence received directly from the EONI;
- policy reports produced by The Electoral Commission including *Voting for change: An electoral law modernisation programme*, *Best Value and electoral services* and *The electoral registration process*.

**1.20** We have also drawn upon oral and written evidence presented by various parties to the Northern Ireland Affairs Select Committee on electoral registration held on 2 April 2003. Following the introduction of the Act and the first year of individual registration, the Northern Ireland Affairs Select Committee<sup>1</sup> investigated the new arrangements for electoral registration in Northern Ireland. It examined:

- the reasons for the reported drop in voter registration in some areas;
- the procedures in place for publicising and issuing the new electoral identity card;
- measures taken to prepare voters and presiding officers at polling stations for changes in voting procedures;
- the effectiveness of measures taken by government and other bodies to promote participation in Parliamentary elections in Northern Ireland, while tackling electoral fraud.

**1.21** No report on registration has yet been published by the Committee; the Committee Chairman indicated

that the Committee intended to revisit the issue of electoral registration in Northern Ireland following an Assembly election in order to, in his words, get a 'before and after snapshot'.

### The wider context

**1.22** The Commission's recent report *Voting for change* recommended that the basis of electoral registration for the whole of the UK should be individual registration supported by personal identifiers.<sup>2</sup> Electoral registration in our view is the lynchpin of an effective electoral system and a high quality system should be both straightforward and user friendly. It should also have the potential to increase levels of registration while at the same time maintaining or enhancing levels of security. This report is primarily focused on individual registration and electoral identification in Northern Ireland. The experiences there will undoubtedly highlight important lessons for policy makers and electoral administrators in the rest of the UK should they have to prepare, at some future date, to move from household registration to individual registration.

### Distribution

**1.23** This report has been submitted to the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland in accordance with Section 6 of the Political Parties, Elections and Referendums Act 2000 (PPERA). It has also been sent to the Secretary of State for Constitutional Affairs (the Lord Chancellor).

**1.24** The Commission will be distributing this report to a wide range of organisations and individuals interested in electoral issues. The report is also available on the Commission's website.

<sup>1</sup> House of Commons, Northern Ireland Affairs Select Committee – Electoral Registration in Northern Ireland – Minutes of Evidence and Appendices, Wednesday 2 April 2003.

<sup>2</sup> The Electoral Commission (2003) *Voting for Change*, p.16.



# 2 Perceptions of electoral fraud in Northern Ireland

A number of reports produced between 1997 and 2001 reached the conclusion that electoral fraud in Northern Ireland was an issue that needed to be addressed if public confidence in the democratic process was to be maintained.

## Background

2.1 Allegations of electoral fraud have been a feature of politics in Northern Ireland for decades. Stories about impersonation and vote stealing and the phrase ‘vote early vote often’ is still heard around election time. The existence of electoral fraud is acknowledged on all sides of the political divide although its scale and level of intensity remain unknown.

## Records of fraud

2.2 We have been unable to find any statistics or information to confirm the actual current or historical extent of fraud. Numbers of prosecutions would normally be considered a good indicator but we understand from the EONI that there have been very few, if any, successful prosecutions over the years. A lack of prosecutions may reflect difficulties in gathering evidence in support of successful prosecutions or may be accounted for by direct or indirect threats of intimidation. It therefore follows that the success or otherwise of the measures put in place to prevent fraud are impossible to gauge primarily because there is no readily available benchmark against which they can be measured.

2.3 There is, however, a body of research evidence regarding perceptions of electoral fraud, which might be regarded as a useful proxy indicator of success in the absence of data regarding changes in the actual frequency of offences. Moreover, addressing people’s perceptions of fraud is a valuable objective in its own right – particularly if confidence in the integrity of the electoral process is to be maintained and enhanced. Boosting public confidence in the robustness of the electoral process has the potential to increase levels of participation and deter those intent on committing fraud.

## Public perceptions

2.4 In fulfilling our responsibilities under Section 13 of PPERA we undertook a promotional campaign to raise awareness of the changes introduced by the Act. To assist in developing a public awareness strategy on individual registration, the Commission engaged Millward Brown Ulster in July 2002 to conduct a series of focus

groups representative of the Northern Ireland adult population. Perceptions of electoral fraud were addressed as part of the focus groups with participants from both sides of the community asked to recount their experiences of electoral fraud.

**2.5** The unionist perception was that electoral fraud was largely a well-organised nationalist activity involving such activities as fraudulently securing postal votes, personation and voting out of hours. Although also acknowledged as a unionist phenomenon this was considered sporadic and uncoordinated.

In certain areas it is more widespread. You take the border areas, it's going on, it definitely is.

You hear the stories whether they are true or not you hear the stories about dead people coming up to vote.

Well everybody has their aspect of it and maybe more so in a nationalist area. I'm sure it happens in Protestant areas about Belfast.

**Millward Brown Ulster focus group July 2002**

**2.6** The nationalist perspective was that electoral fraud had occurred on both sides of the community in the past. However, it was regarded as less of a feature of the present-day electoral process and was considered no longer 'necessary and justified'. It was also suggested that its extent was hyped by the media.

It's a myth now, but at the same time a few years back it wasn't, but then again nobody could prove it... it is still the stories of old, because of the identification issue.

I think it's a myth really, nowadays it's a myth, it is probably only believed by some of the more colourful Talk Back [BBC Northern Ireland radio programme] listeners. I know for a fact in the past political parties kept registers which they maintained, they went through the daily papers and kept note of who died, they knew on polling day who was alive and who was dead, so it was quite easy to walk in

and say I'm Jimmy Bloggs where's my vote, that was how that came about, there's no doubt that that happened, they were all at it ... every political party was at it, when things were tight this is one of the things that was used effectively.

**Millward Brown Ulster focus group July 2002**

**2.7** Following the combined Westminster and local government election in June 2001 the Northern Ireland Office and the EONI commissioned an independent research company to conduct an in-depth survey about a range of electoral issues.<sup>3</sup> The survey findings were intended to inform the development of policy about the future use of combined polls and to highlight particular areas of concern regarding electoral malpractice. Altogether 1,200 face-to-face interviews were conducted with people over the age of 18. In addition, 926 presiding officers responded to a postal survey seeking their views. This was followed up with four focus groups and 10 in-depth interviews with presiding officers.

**2.8** One section of the questionnaire dealt with suspected malpractice. In the public opinion survey just over 1 in 10 (11%) of those who voted in person felt that someone other than the presiding officer made a note that they had voted,<sup>4</sup> with 3% reporting to have felt intimidated at some time during the voting process. Altogether 6% said that something happened at the polling station that they felt was 'inappropriate or caused concern' with the most common occurrence being the obstruction of the entrance by party officials or election banners. However, 92% of those who voted in person expressed overall satisfaction with the process and 1 in 20 (5%) were dissatisfied.

**2.9** Presiding officers gave an important insight into their perceptions of electoral malpractice. Altogether 54 presiding officers (6%) mentioned the problem of data

<sup>3</sup> *The combined election: An analysis of the combined Parliamentary and District Council elections in Northern Ireland 7 June 2001*. NIO Research and Statistical Series: Report No 6.

<sup>4</sup> According to the EONI, political parties have the right to locate polling agents in polling stations. Presiding officers are required by law to call out electors' names and elector numbers as each presents himself for his ballot paper. This is so that party polling agents can challenge anyone they suspect of fraud and note who is voting to ensure that they do not reappear later in the day. It is probable that this is the activity being reported by the 11%.

on who had already voted being transferred out of the polling place while 40 (4%) cited cases of voters being turned away because their vote had already been taken. Other concerns raised included suspected forgery of identity documents and suspicion that persons had voted more than once. Ten presiding officers claimed to have turned away potential voters because a proxy had voted on their behalf. A small proportion, 14 (2%), reported polling agents challenging voters on the grounds of personation, validity of identity documents and believing wrongly that the person had already voted. When the presiding officers who took part in the focus groups were asked about their perception of the scale of electoral malpractice most felt it was 'not widespread' or 'not very high'. A minority felt electoral fraud was rife on both sides of the community, while others felt it was worse in republican and nationalist communities as well as in city areas particularly where there was a close electoral contest.

**2.10** Interviewees were also asked about their perceptions of electoral fraud in a public opinion survey commissioned by The Electoral Commission in October 2002. The findings revealed that perceptions of fraud were generally high; that it was not considered a past phenomenon and that it had not been exaggerated and that it was more prevalent among people living in Belfast. Protestants believed it was more commonplace than their Catholic counterparts.

**Table 3: Attitudes to electoral fraud, October 2002**

Statement	Tend to agree/ strongly agree (%)*	Tend to disagree/ strongly disagree (%)
Electoral fraud is very common in some areas	66	8
Electoral fraud in some areas is enough to change the election results	64	10
Levels of fraud in Northern Ireland are exaggerated	23	43
Electoral fraud is a thing of the past	7	49

Source: Millward Brown Ulster Tracking Research October 2002.  
Base: 972

\* Where percentages do not add up to 100% the balance comprises people who either responded 'don't know' or 'neither agreed nor disagreed' with the statements.

## Building the momentum for change

**2.11** Between 1997 and 2001 a number of reports were produced about electoral fraud in Northern Ireland. A number of consistent themes emerged from these reports, including a widespread sense that electoral fraud was a major issue, that it was difficult to quantify and obtain conclusive evidence and that it needed to be addressed if confidence in the democratic process was to be maintained. The reports are summarised below. By 2002, the debate generated by these reports had led to new legislation aimed at tackling the perceived problem of fraud. The Electoral Fraud (Northern Ireland) Act 2002 received Royal Assent on 1 May 2002.

## The Northern Ireland Forum for Political Dialogue Report – October 1997

**2.12** After the general election on 1 May 1997 and local government elections on 21 May 1997, allegations of electoral fraud were made. As a result the Northern Ireland Forum for Political Dialogue debated the issue and agreed to the following resolution:<sup>5</sup>

- Given the concerns expressed by a wide spectrum of political, public and business opinion throughout Northern Ireland and the possibility of 'irregularities' having occurred in the recent parliamentary and local-government elections, this Forum calls on the Government to instigate an early review of voting procedures for all future elections in Northern Ireland and resolves to refer this matter to a Committee which shall prepare a report to recommend methods of countering electoral irregularities – in particular,
- (i) removing multiple entries from the electoral register,
  - (ii) ensuring that those who are entitled to vote are registered,
  - (iii) providing suitable and convenient polling stations,
  - (iv) overcoming postal and proxy abuse,
  - (v) preventing voting personation by introducing proper and effective identity checks,
  - (vi) considering other relevant issues.

<sup>5</sup> The Northern Ireland Forum for Political Dialogue (known as 'the Forum') was constituted under the Northern Ireland (Entry to Negotiation, etc) Act 1996 to consider and examine issues relevant to promoting dialogue and understanding within Northern Ireland. The Forum was comprised of 110 members who were elected on 30 May 1996 and who represent 10 parties, although not all parties took their seats, and two later withdrew.

**2.13** A Committee on Electoral Reform was established which held a number of hearings and collected evidence from a range of sources. This culminated in a report to the Forum on 31 October 1997. It presented a number of conclusions and made recommendations, one of which was that the legislation should be amended.

#### Northern Ireland Affairs Select Committee Report – March 1998

**2.14** At around the same time that the Forum report was being completed, the House of Commons Northern Ireland Affairs Select Committee held a number of hearings about electoral fraud. A report was produced, which outlined how electoral fraud had been perpetrated, assessed the available evidence for it, and made a number of recommendations. Four methods were highlighted by which fraud was perpetrated:

- multiple entries on the register (where people are registered at several addresses, or names are invented and included on the register at an address);
- personation (where the vote of a person who is registered and entitled to vote is used by another person);
- absent voting abuse (where names of non-existent people have been included on the register and absent votes are applied for and completed in that name);
- undue influence (the threat of violence to compel a person to vote for a certain candidate).

**2.15** When assessing the quality of available evidence for these forms of electoral fraud, the Committee commented:

There was some evidence based on particular cases and much useful coverage of the impression, which exists about the integrity of the electoral process in Northern Ireland, but there was limited coherent evidence of the extent of vote stealing. There have been many allegations of voting fraud, in particular made by representatives of political parties, but the allegations have not always been precise. Much of the evidence of fraud is anecdotal and circumstantial. Gossip has not translated into

hard evidence. In particular, there is a notable lack of concrete information on the prevalence of voting fraud. As a result, the extent of the problem is hard to define. It is possible that the fear of intimidation has contributed to this reticence.<sup>6</sup>

However, the Committee came to the following conclusion:

On the basis of the wide experience of those active in political life in Northern Ireland and, in particular, the product of police searches and enquiries revealing organised arrangements for forging medical cards and abuse of absent voting applications, there is sufficient evidence of organised voting theft to indicate that the problem of electoral malpractice in Northern Ireland is serious.<sup>7</sup>

**2.16** A number of possible solutions were identified including:

- inclusion of signatures on registers to be used to cross check applications for identity cards and ballot papers;
- personal identifiers, including date of birth and national insurance number;
- telephone numbers included on applications for postal votes to allow for verification;
- use of door to door canvassers to carry out all registration, where possible;
- the setting up of a rolling register in Northern Ireland;
- the forms of identity accepted at polling stations should be replaced – if possible with a new, universal electoral card, capable of being read and cross-checked automatically;
- no liability resting on an agent who draws attention to a suspected irregularity at a polling station;
- the Chief Electoral Officer should be given the technology required to collate and crosscheck details on the register and applications for absent voting.

<sup>6</sup> Northern Ireland Affairs Select Committee, Second Report, (March 1998), para 46.

<sup>7</sup> Northern Ireland Affairs Select Committee, Second Report, (March 1998), para 49.



## Administering Elections in Northern Ireland – October 1998

**2.17** This report was produced following a review by the Secretary of State in July 1997. The review was tasked with looking into allegations of widespread malpractice and to formulate proposals to improve the integrity of the electoral process. On assessing the evidence of fraud, it concluded:

Despite the lack of hard evidence presented to the Review, it is convinced that a level of abuse exists which is unacceptable. In the case of the absent vote facility, it is clear from the RUC's investigations, instigated by the Chief Electoral Officer, that there is evidence to show a high level of malpractice. Personation at polling stations has, however, been impossible to quantify. No evidence has been presented and the review has been unable to discover any concrete proof that it occurs at a significant level.

However, despite the fact that no one has come forward with evidence, either to the Review, or indeed, during the last three elections, the experience of RUC officers on duty at polling stations certainly suggests that abuse is taking place.<sup>8</sup>

**2.18** The major proposals put forward were:

- an electoral 'smart' card, non-photographic, as the only form of identity accepted at polling stations;
- signature verification, used at every stage of the electoral process, as an alternative to the electoral card;
- more information included on the registration form, and a computer system established with the EONI to record and verify information;
- the establishment of an investigations team within the EONI;
- processes put in place to encourage registration, including increased publicity and twice yearly registration exercises;

- increasing security in the absent voting facility, including more personal identification being required on the application form, the forms being made prescribed documents, and acknowledgement cards sent out to all those who have applied for absent votes;
- the development of a more intensive training programme for electoral staff.

It also put forward proposals for increased resources to be made available to the Chief Electoral Officer to enable the administration of these changes.

## The Representation of the People (Northern Ireland) (Amendment) Regulations 1998

**2.19** Following the publication of the Election Review report, minor legislative changes were made to the absent voting procedures through the Representation of the People (Northern Ireland) (Amendment) Regulations 1998. These regulations allow more time for the scrutiny of absent vote applications by the EONI. The regulations also require any person attesting to the application of another on the grounds of ill health to state that he/she has seen the applicant in connection with the medical reason.

## Combating Electoral Fraud in Northern Ireland – March 2001

**2.20** In March 2001 the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland presented a White Paper to Parliament entitled 'Combating Electoral Fraud in Northern Ireland'. Drawing from the recommendations in the reports outlined above, it set out the Government's proposals for tackling electoral malpractice in Northern Ireland. The White Paper outlined the position as follows:

The responsibility of the Government is two-fold: to protect the democratic exercise of the franchise and to combat abuse at the poll. Any measure intended to prevent electoral fraud must be set against the effect it will have on legitimate voters. It is not the Government's intention to cause inconvenience to anyone except those intent upon fraud. Indeed, it is hoped that where the threat of

<sup>8</sup> *Administering elections in Northern Ireland*, Report of the Elections Review, (October 1998), The Northern Ireland Office, London, p. 3.

fraud is reduced, the credibility of the poll will be enhanced, and that this should encourage more people to exercise their right to vote.<sup>9</sup>

**2.21** The Government recognised that the procedures it was intending to introduce in Northern Ireland ran contrary to those in the rest of the UK, where the focus was on widening participation. However, the Government maintained that the outcome should be the same.

The measures outlined in this paper run contrary to the specific practices introduced in Great Britain to widen participation at elections; this reflects the very different circumstances surrounding elections in Northern Ireland. However, the ultimate aim remains the same. In partnership with the Electoral Office and the political parties in Northern Ireland, the Government believes that electoral abuse can be tackled to the benefit of the democratic process and thereby to society at large.<sup>10</sup>

**2.22** It put forward a number of proposals including the:

- collection of additional personal identifiers at registration;
- establishment of electoral investigation teams;
- monitoring of multiple registrations;
- introduction of barcoded absent vote application forms and declarations of identity, and, eventually, automated processing of absent vote applications and declarations;
- requirement to provide a signature and confirmation of the date of birth on absent vote applications and declarations;
- maintenance of order at the polling station through the application of existing police powers;
- introduction of a voluntary photographic identity card (the voter identity card) for use at the polling station;
- removal of all non-photographic forms of identification on the list of specified documents;

- use of the date of birth collected at registration as a means of checking the authenticity of the proffered identification document;
- introduction of a third statutory question permitted to the presiding officer;
- incremental moves towards the introduction of a comprehensive and secure electoral identity system, probably incorporating biometric technologies.<sup>11</sup>

## The Electoral Fraud (Northern Ireland) Act 2002

**2.23** The key elements of the Act are as follows.

### Registration

**2.24** People wishing to register to vote in Northern Ireland must provide the following information:

- a signature (this requirement can be waived if it is not reasonably practicable for the applicant to sign in a consistent and distinctive way because of any incapacity or an inability to read);
- a date of birth;
- a national insurance number (or a signed declaration confirming they never had one);
- a statement confirming the applicant has been resident in Northern Ireland for the whole of the three-month period ending on 15 October in the year in question;
- details of any other addresses at which the individual has applied to be registered.

In the event that a registration form does not include all of this information, or if the registration officer is not satisfied with the information, the person's name will not be included on the register.

### Electoral identity card

**2.25** A person whose name is included on the register can apply for a free electoral identity card and will be issued with a card provided the necessary personal identifiers

<sup>9</sup> Combating Electoral Fraud in Northern Ireland, Secretary of State for Northern Ireland, (March 2001), paras 4-6.

<sup>10</sup> Ibid.

<sup>11</sup> Ibid.

are submitted. The identity card contains a photograph, the applicant's full name, date of birth and the expiry date of the card. An identity card is valid for 10 years.

### National insurance number verification

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**2.26** Provision was included in the legislation for the Chief Electoral Officer to seek verification of national insurance numbers from the relevant authority. In the case of Northern Ireland the relevant authority is the Social Security Agency. In addition, any date of birth, gender, address and any other name recorded by the authority in question may also be provided.

### Absent voting

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**2.27** Those applying for an absent vote must provide their date of birth, national insurance number and signature. This information is checked and verified against that provided at registration.

### A third statutory question

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**2.28** Presiding officers at polling stations were given the authority to ask potential voters the following statutory question: 'What is your date of birth?'. The answer can be verified against the date of birth recorded at the time of registration.

### Offences

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**2.29** Those found guilty of knowingly providing false information are liable on summary conviction to a term of imprisonment of up to six months, or a fine up to level five on the standard scale, or both.

### Conclusions

**2.30** A series of reports published between 1997 and 2001 identified consistent themes in respect of electoral fraud in Northern Ireland. All confirmed that the extent of fraud was difficult to quantify and conclusive evidence for it was hard to obtain. Despite this lack of evidence the reports all concluded that electoral fraud was a major issue which needed to be addressed if confidence was to be maintained in the democratic process.

**2.31** The existence of electoral fraud was perceived to be an issue on both sides of the political divide although unionists and nationalists have different perspectives about its nature and extent. These perceptions were endorsed by those who took part in a series of focus groups and in a public opinion survey commissioned prior to individual registration. The findings showed that 66% of a representative sample of the Northern Ireland adult population either strongly agreed or tended to agree 'that electoral fraud was common in some areas'.

**2.32** Despite the fact that fraud is perceived to be a major issue there are no statistics to support these widely held perceptions. Using numbers of prosecutions as an indicator of success in tackling fraud is of limited value because there have been very few if any successful prosecutions for electoral fraud. Consequently, the impact of the Act on electoral fraud cannot be measured in terms of a reduction in the incidences of fraud. However the existence of the Act may in itself be a sufficient deterrent to potential fraudsters and the net result could be a reduction in the overall number of cases of electoral fraud.



# 3 Policy to practice

In Northern Ireland electoral administration is the responsibility of the Chief Electoral Officer who acts as both the returning officer and the registration officer for all elections.

## Roles in implementing the Act

**3.1** The arrangements for electoral administration in Northern Ireland are different from elsewhere in the UK and the system is administered centrally by a Chief Electoral Officer and the EONI. The Chief Electoral Officer is both the returning officer and registration officer for all elections in Northern Ireland. The duties and responsibilities on the Chief Electoral Officer are conferred on him by the Electoral Law Act (Northern Ireland) 1962.

**3.2** The Chief Electoral Officer has overall responsibility for implementing the operational changes to the electoral processes introduced as a result of the Act. The Chief Electoral Officer is a Crown appointment with the Secretary of State taking responsibility for the recruitment process. The Department's Permanent Under-Secretary is accountable to Parliament for expenditure by the Chief Electoral Officer.

**3.3** In Northern Ireland electoral matters, including electoral law and policy, are the responsibility of the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland. In this regard the Northern Ireland Office (NIO) has recently consulted the Commission and the EONI on whether an equality impact assessment should be conducted into the workings of the Act under Section 75 of the Northern Ireland Act 1998. We have shared with the NIO some of our preliminary research findings and have recommended that an equality impact assessment be conducted.

**3.4** As indicated previously The Electoral Commission has two main roles with regard to the Act. Under Section 6 of the PPERA it has a responsibility to keep under review the legislation and its impact on the electoral process. Under Section 13 the Commission has a duty to promote the public awareness of electoral and democratic systems and therefore has an ongoing responsibility for ensuring that the electorate in Northern Ireland is aware of and understands the new registration process and what identification documents are required for voting at polling stations.

**3.5** In order to take forward the work associated with the Act the Chief Electoral Officer established a steering group to oversee the changes in registration and

electoral identification. The Commission was represented on the group, as was the Northern Ireland Office. It met at regular intervals between May 2002 and April 2003 and was primarily used as a forum for sharing information.

### The electoral registration process

**3.6** Prior to the implementation of the Act voter registration in Northern Ireland was conducted in a similar manner to the rest of the UK. However, since September 2002, voter registration has become an individual responsibility and by law all citizens over the age of 18 must complete an annual electoral registration form. Instead of a registration form being left by a canvasser for the head of the household to complete for each individual, a separate form must now be completed by every person in order to be included on the register. To ensure the vast majority of homes were visited the EONI employed approximately 1,000 canvassers, almost double the number employed for the household canvass.

**3.7** As anticipated, the new legislation presented major challenges for the Chief Electoral Officer and his staff. In compiling the new register the EONI had to canvass all 1.2 million people on the August 2002 register where previously the canvass covered an estimated 650,000 households. In addition to the information previously requested on the household form, the registration form asked for additional personal information including a national insurance number, date of birth and a signature. In circumstances where the relevant information was not provided the individual's name was not included on the register. The Commission recognises that the Chief Electoral Officer and his staff fulfilled this difficult and complex task within the timeframe set and ensured all statutory deadlines were met.

**3.8** Canvassers were allocated to specific geographical areas and each was supplied with electoral registration forms containing the names and addresses of people who had been included on the August 2002 register. They were instructed to call to each house and where possible check to see if the pre-printed names on the register matched the names of those currently living there. When this information was confirmed the registration forms

were left and in circumstances where it was not, blank registration forms were left instead. If confirmation could not be obtained registration forms for those previously registered were left along with a note from the EONI advising that a canvasser had called.

**3.9** Canvassers were permitted to provide assistance to people who found the forms difficult to complete. However, they could not attest the forms as the correct personal information was unknown to them. Canvassers were also asked to try to identify households with potential first time registrants and any new homes. Forms were issued and collected on a cyclical basis (for example, delivered one week and collected the next), and canvassers were instructed, where possible, to return and collect all completed forms. On the return visit, if no one was available extra blank forms and guidance notes were left with a freepost envelope and a note asking for completed forms to be returned as soon as possible. Of the 1,072,345 forms processed by the EONI, just over half were collected by canvassers and the remainder were returned by post.

**3.10** In some areas it was not possible to conduct a door-to-door canvass because of difficulties in recruiting canvassers. In evidence to the Northern Ireland Affairs Select Committee<sup>12</sup> the Chief Electoral Officer said that about 13 wards were canvassed partly by post and partly by canvasser. The EONI has informed the Commission that within these 13 wards blank forms were also sent to dwellings on the EONI database which had no registered electors on the August register. Just over 17,000 people (1.6% of the names on the August register) were canvassed by post. A statistical analysis conducted on behalf of the Commission showed that levels of registration were, on average around 2% lower for wards canvassed partially or completely by post.<sup>13</sup>

<sup>12</sup> Northern Ireland Affairs Select Committee, *Electoral Registration in Northern Ireland*, para 51.

<sup>13</sup> PricewaterhouseCoopers, *A statistical analysis of Electoral Registration in Northern Ireland, August 2002 – May 2003*.



**Table 4: Wards canvassed entirely by post or by a combination of post and canvasser**

Area office	Ward name
Londonderry	Agivey
Londonderry	Ringsend
Newtownabbey	Glenarm
Omagh	Belleek & Boa
Newtownards	Carrowreagh
Belfast	Woodstock
Belfast	Finaghy
Belfast	Stranmillis
Belfast	Shaftesbury
Belfast	Glencolin
Belfast	Falls
Belfast	Duncairn
Belfast	Ardoyne

Source: EONI

3.11 According to the EONI, the cost of administering individual registration in the first year was £2.044m<sup>14</sup> or roughly £1.90 per elector. Costs included:

**Table 5: Costs of administering individual registration in first year\***

Costs	£K
Canvassers' fees	758
Temporary office staff	290
Printing forms, registers and post-out reminders	196
Freepost returns	90
Outward postage	14
Permanent staff costs	300
Overheads	191
IT costs	200
Miscellaneous, training, advertising	5
<b>Total</b>	<b>2,044</b>

Source: EONI

\*It should be noted that the costs of the new computer system and the normal salaries and administrative expenditure of the EONI are not included in these figures.

3.12 Following the publication of the December 2002 register the EONI conducted a review of its permanent absent voter list. They wrote to everyone on the list and asked them to provide details of their date of birth, national insurance number and signature. As a result of this exercise there was a 23% reduction in the number of electors on the permanent list. The impact of the Act on postal and proxy voting will be analysed as part of the Commission's statutory report on the November 2003 election.



The Electoral Commission's promotional banner, Belfast City Hall

<sup>14</sup> These figures were presented to the Association of Electoral Administrators Annual Conference, Brighton, February 2003 by the EONI.

Table 6: Absent vote review February 2003

Constituency	Number of absent votes reviewed	Number of absent votes retained post-review	Percentage reduction (%)
Belfast East	357	257	28
Belfast North	326	239	27
Belfast South	357	285	20
Belfast West	328	266	19
East Londonderry	261	197	25
East Antrim	816	610	25
Fermanagh and South Tyrone	2,251	1,752	22
Foyle	682	447	34
Lagan Valley	544	456	16
Mid-Ulster	1,599	1,253	22
North Antrim	668	438	28
North Down	362	239	34
Newry and Armagh	1,035	836	19
South Antrim	332	251	24
South Down	1,206	973	19
Strangford	464	383	17
Upper Bann	726	565	22
West Tyrone	1,382	1,056	24
<b>Totals</b>	<b>13,696</b>	<b>10,503</b>	<b>23</b>

Source: EONI

### Applying for an electoral identity card

**3.13** A section of the new electoral registration form invited people without the specified photographic identification to tick a box to apply for a free electoral identity card. Following completion of the 2002 annual canvass a total of 235,000 people had ticked the box, representing just over one in five (19%) of those returning forms. In early January 2003 all those who had ticked the box were sent an electoral identity card application form accompanied by a pre-paid envelope. The application form asked for surname, forename, full postal address, date of birth and national insurance number (or a declaration that they never had a national insurance number). Applicants were also asked to sign the form or if unable to do so were asked to have it attested by another person and provide a reason why the person could not sign the form themselves. Applicants were advised that all the information on the electoral identity card application form had to correspond

with the information contained on the electoral registration form. The external contractor commissioned by the EONI to process and issue applications was given controlled access to the register for checking purposes.

**3.14** The guidance notes accompanying the electoral identity application form advised applicants that they could either make a postal application or an application in person. Those opting to make a postal application were asked to attach a passport size photograph to a specific area of the form and to have the back of the photograph endorsed with their signature. People choosing to apply in person were told to complete their application form and bring it to an application centre in their local area where their photograph would be taken. The application form advised that details of local application centres would be published in the press. Details of the Commission's helpline were also given, as were details of the EONI website.

A large proportion of applications, around one in five, were initially rejected because they contained incorrect information. All rejected application forms were returned and the applicant informed as to the nature of the inconsistency in the application. The EONI did not record whether applicants who had been rejected subsequently reapplied. Identity cards were sent directly to the applicants' home address.

**3.15** The EONI established a number of sites for personal applications. Fixed centres were provided from late January, two in Belfast, and one in Londonderry. A continuous programme of mobile sites was initiated from early February. The Commission sponsored and coordinated substantial local newspaper advertising in support of both the fixed and mobile sites. The EONI advised us that the placement of centres and sites was determined mainly by their perceptions of need for the card based on official analyses of deprivation, low income and benefit uptake. The EONI also provided a comprehensive network of application centres for applicants and this process was assisted by the political parties and community groups. By the end of May 2003 the mobile sites had visited 85 towns and villages, providing 434 separate sessions at 174 locations and 229 sessions had been provided at the three fixed centres. Initially, there were some difficulties with the advertising – mainly to do with the synchronisation of the mobile sites and the newspaper advertising – but as the campaign progressed these were resolved satisfactorily.

## Public awareness

**3.16** The new legislation presented major challenges in terms of delivering key messages to the electorate and ensuring they understood their obligations under the new legislation. Later in this report we comment in detail about the effectiveness of our campaigns. Under section 13 of PPERA, The Electoral Commission has a duty to promote the public awareness of electoral and democratic systems and therefore has an ongoing responsibility for ensuring that the electorate in Northern Ireland is aware of and understands the new electoral registration process. To ensure the Commission's public awareness campaign was evidence-based eight focus groups were conducted in July 2002 with participants representative of the

Northern Ireland population. The findings offered important perspectives on electoral fraud and helped inform the nature and style of our publicity campaign.

**3.17** Focus group participants were asked for their views on a number of proposed themes for the campaign. The theme 'secure your vote or lose it' received cross community support from both nationalists and unionists and was perceived as being a balanced and positive statement, while at the same time indicating the pitfalls of non-compliance. Participants also endorsed the 'five easy steps' to register to vote and considered that these were easy to understand and offered reassurance to the registrant.

**3.18** The Commission's public awareness campaign commenced in September 2002 and was favourably received by the majority of political parties. However one party, in written evidence to the Northern Ireland Affairs Select Committee,<sup>15</sup> suggested the campaign started too late and should have commenced in July or August. However, the campaign was planned and organised during July and August in order to coincide with the start of the EONI annual canvass on 9 September 2002. The campaign was multi-media in nature and included:

- television advertising;
- radio advertising;
- regional and local newspaper advertising;
- outdoor advertising;
- a dedicated freephone helpline number;
- a dedicated website ([www.secureyourvote.com](http://www.secureyourvote.com));
- posters for schools, colleges and universities;
- a household leaflet distributed by EONI canvassers (available in other formats and languages).

<sup>15</sup> Northern Ireland Affairs Select Committee, Electoral Registration in Northern Ireland, Ev 37.

**3.19** Following the annual canvass a campaign promoting rolling registration and the requirement for photographic electoral identification was conducted using television and radio advertising, regional and local newspaper advertising and outdoor poster advertising. The dedicated freephone helpline continued to operate until the middle of May and was terminated after the postponement of the 29 May Assembly election. Altogether the Commission spent almost £1million promoting the new arrangements for electoral registration and identification.

**Table 7: Public awareness campaign costs for registration and electoral identification**

Costs	£K
Press advertising	210
TV advertising and production costs	543
Radio advertising	10
Poster advertising	84
Leaflet production	37
Helpline	50
<b>Total</b>	<b>934</b>

Source: *The Electoral Commission*

**3.20** All the materials used in the Commission's campaigns were either shared with or were the subject of consultation with the EONI. The EONI agreed to distribute on behalf of the Commission a small A5 information leaflet explaining the new registration process and the requirement for electoral identification. The leaflet was distributed with the registration forms and guidance notes which were designed and produced entirely by the EONI without any input from the Commission.

**3.21** Altogether the freephone helpline handled in the region of 35,000 calls in the period from September 2002 until it closed in the middle of May 2003. About half the calls were requests for additional registration forms and the rest covered general enquiries. The EONI produced a series of frequently asked questions covering all aspects of registration with questions about rolling registration and electoral identification added later. Before going 'live' a senior member of EONI staff trained team leaders in

the call centre on the new registration procedures. The Commission's dedicated website ([www.secureyourvote.com](http://www.secureyourvote.com)) also contained information about registration, rolling registration and the electoral identity card. The registration form was available for viewing on the website but, at the request of the EONI, could not be downloaded. Information from the Commission's website including the frequently asked questions was shared with the EONI for inclusion on its website. The Commission's A5 information leaflet was available for downloading in a number of other languages including Irish, Ulster-Scots, Chinese, Hindi and Urdu. It was also available in both large print and Braille formats.

**3.22** The EONI made independent arrangements with the call centre to send out additional registration forms and guidance notes to those who requested them. After 15 October 2002 the EONI provided some of the political parties with quantities of electoral registration forms for distribution to potential registrants. Rolling registration forms requested through the helpline were issued centrally by the EONI. Application forms for the new electoral identity card were made widely available.

## Conclusions

**3.23** The Chief Electoral Officer for Northern Ireland and his staff had the overall responsibility for implementing the operational detail of the Act. He was supported in this task by the Northern Ireland Office who made the necessary resources available and The Electoral Commission who had responsibility for ensuring the electorate was aware of and understood the new arrangements. Other stakeholders including the political parties, representatives from the voluntary sector, civic society and the print and broadcast media played a constructive role in disseminating key messages about the new arrangements.

# 4 Analysis of the August 2002 register

In August 2002, the month prior to the first canvass under the new system, a total of 1,192,136 names were on the electoral register for Northern Ireland. When the December 2002 register was published the number of names had reduced by 119,790 to 1,072,346.

## Background

4.1 This chapter analyses the impact of the Act on registration rates across Northern Ireland. It draws extensively from two reports produced on behalf of The Electoral Commission by two independent organisations, Millward Brown Ulster and PricewaterhouseCoopers.<sup>16</sup>

4.2 When the Chief Electoral Officer published the new register on 29 November 2002<sup>17</sup> (the December register), it contained 1,072,346 names. In a press release announcing the publication of the register he indicated that 1,204,548 people had been canvassed during the registration period and that the response rate was 89%. If these figures are used, the difference between the number of people canvassed and the number of names on the register is 132,202. However, we have been unable to determine what is meant by 'the number of people canvassed' and therefore the data set we have used in our analysis is the August 2002 register.<sup>18</sup> This contained the names of 1,192,136 people. For comparative purposes we have used the most recent Census figures for the 18+ population.

## The electoral registration rate – August 2002

4.3 The registration rate is calculated by taking the 18+ population figure and comparing it to the number of people on the register at any given time. On the basis of this formula, the registration rate in Northern Ireland on 1 August 2002 was estimated to be 95.5%.

$$\frac{\text{Number of people on electoral register (1,192,136)}}{\text{Number of people eligible to be on the electoral register (1,248,301)}} \times 100 = 95.5\%$$

<sup>16</sup> These reports can be accessed at: [www.electoralcommission.org.uk](http://www.electoralcommission.org.uk).

<sup>17</sup> Publication of the Electoral Register: EONI press release, 2 December 2002.

<sup>18</sup> The Chief Electoral Officer for Northern Ireland informed us that the term (the number of people canvassed) was used in a table which showed the number of people on the electoral register by ward as at 29 November 2002 compared with those canvassed, i.e. those people on the register as at 1 August 2002.

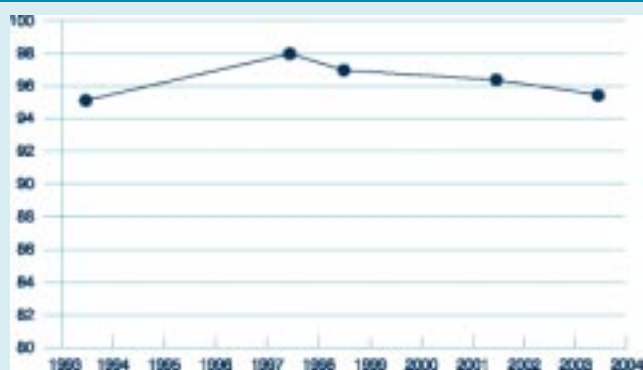


**4.4** People living in Northern Ireland are entitled to be on the electoral register if they meet the following criteria:

- citizenship – a person must be a British, Irish or Commonwealth citizen or a citizen of another member state of the European Union;
- age – a person must be 18 or over, or due to become 18 during the life of the register;
- residency – a person must have been resident in Northern Ireland during the whole of the three month period before the relevant date which in the case of the annual canvass is the 15 October.<sup>19</sup> This feature of registration is unique to Northern Ireland.

**4.5** In Northern Ireland there are relatively few people disqualified because their citizenship does not fall into one of the permissible groups. Therefore the registration rate can, in principle, be estimated by comparing the number of people on the register with official estimates of the number of people aged 18 and above. Figure 1 shows the estimated registration rate over the last decade under the old household-based system of voter registration. The rate for Northern Ireland as a whole was relatively stable, ranging between 94% and 98%. However, these estimates are unlikely to demonstrate a true registration rate.

Figure 1: Electoral registration as a percentage of the population aged 18+ 1993–2002



From: PricewaterhouseCoopers, *A statistical analysis of Electoral Registration in Northern Ireland, August 2002–May 2003*.  
Source: EONI, Census 2001.

<sup>19</sup> The applicant must also not be subject to any legal incapacity to vote – this largely refers to convicted prisoners and certain Peers of the Realm.

**4.6** Under the household canvass, if a household registration form was not returned, the names of those registered the previous year were carried forward and included on the new register. This was known as the 'carry forward'. We understand from the EONI that the 'carry forward' was significant and may have accounted for up to 10% of names on the register at any one time.

**4.7** In addition to the 'carry forward' we have identified three potentially inflationary factors which may have impacted on the registration rate prior to the Act. However, it is impossible to determine what impact each of these factors had on the registration rate either individually or cumulatively.

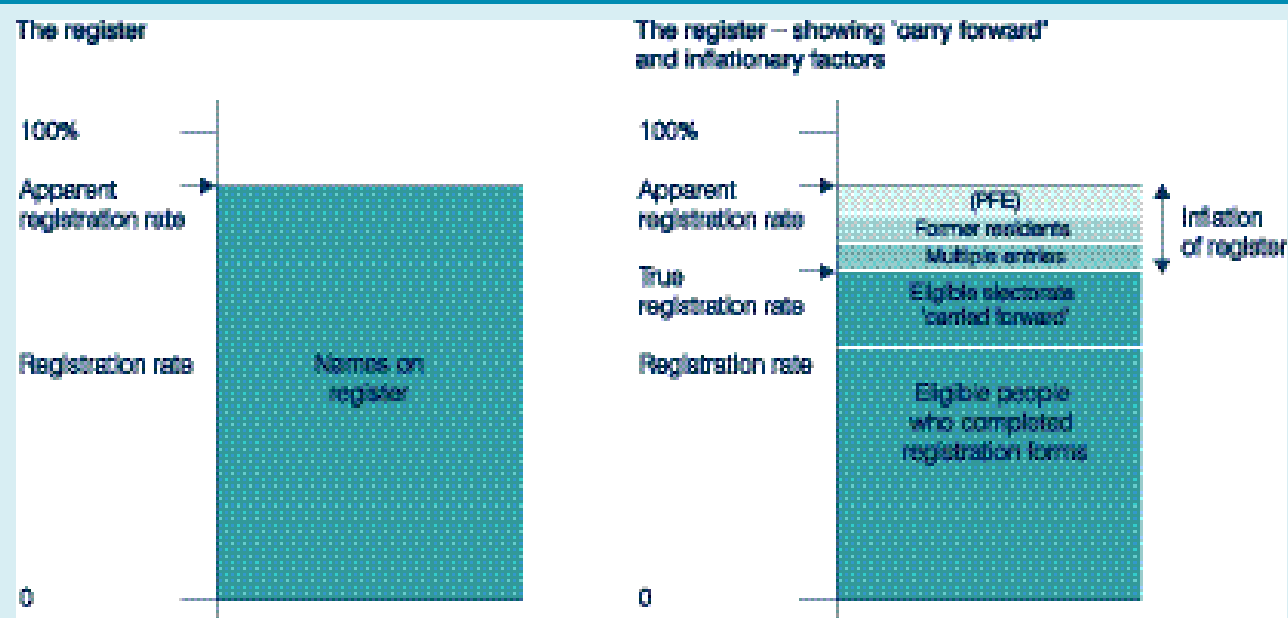
- Multiple registrations. This includes the names of people who had moved house within Northern Ireland since the last canvass. As a result of the 'carry forward', they were registered at both their new address and their old address. It also includes people owning more than one residence who are legitimately entitled to be registered at more than one property.<sup>20</sup>
- Former residents. This comprises the names of those who had moved outside Northern Ireland but remained on the register because of the 'carry forward'.
- Potential fraudulent entries (PFE). This comprises names included on the register by potentially fraudulent means. One example might have been where family members were included on the household form even though they were not living in Northern Ireland.

**4.8** It can therefore be concluded that, while the registration rate for the whole of Northern Ireland in August 2002 was 95.5%, this is likely to have been in excess of the true registration rate. The true registration rate includes only those entitled to be on the register whereas the apparent registration rate includes inflationary factors. Figure 2 helps illustrate the differences between the apparent registration rate and the true registration rate.

<sup>20</sup> People registered at more than one property can vote more than once only at local council elections in Northern Ireland.



Figure 2: The impact of 'carry forward' and potential inflationary factors on the register prior to the introduction of the Electoral Fraud (Northern Ireland) Act 2002\*

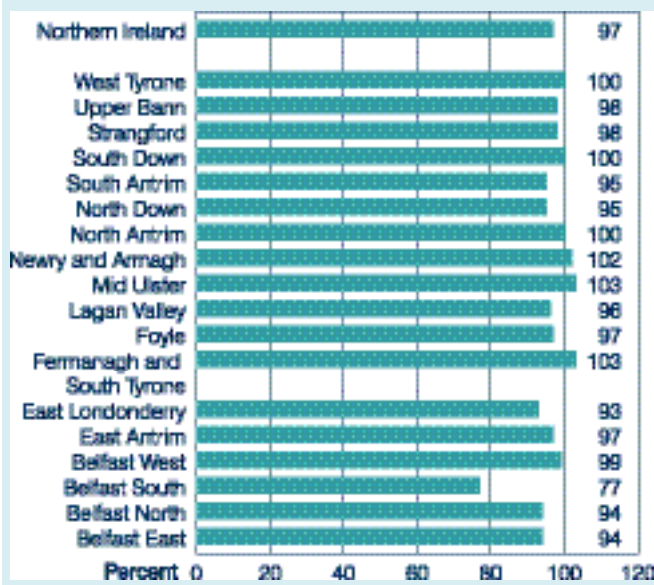


Source: PWC

\* This diagram is for illustrative purposes only and has been adapted from the report produced by PricewaterhouseCoopers: *A statistical analysis of Electoral Registration in Northern Ireland, August 2002 – May 2003*.

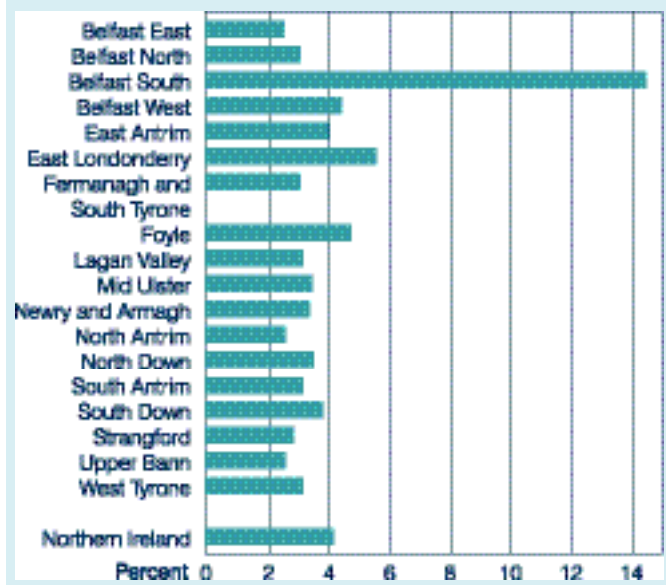
4.9 Registration rates for August 2002 varied across Parliamentary constituencies ranging from 77% in Belfast South to 103% in Mid-Ulster and Fermanagh and South Tyrone. Therefore in some constituencies there were actually more people on the electoral register than were accounted for in the Census figures. It may be that these differentials can be partly explained by the 'carry forward' and the inflationary factors referred to above. However, there is no evidence to suggest that these factors vary geographically, and therefore this does not help explain the differences in registration rates between constituencies.

Figure 3: Northern Ireland registration rates by Parliamentary constituency – August 2002



From: PricewaterhouseCoopers, *A statistical analysis of Electoral Registration in Northern Ireland, August 2002–May 2003*.  
Source: EONI, Census 2001.

Figure 4: Full time students aged 18–74 as a percentage of the population aged 18+ by constituency



From: PricewaterhouseCoopers, *A statistical analysis of Electoral Registration in Northern Ireland, August 2002–May 2003*.  
Source: Census 2001.

4.10 Possibly the most significant factor in explaining the variation in registration rates by Parliamentary constituency is the mismatch between where people live and where they are registered. Students are a particular case in point, with many for electoral registration purposes registered at home, but for Census purposes recorded at their term-time address. Belfast South is the constituency in Northern Ireland where the largest proportion of students reside. Significantly, this constituency also has the lowest registration rate in Northern Ireland.

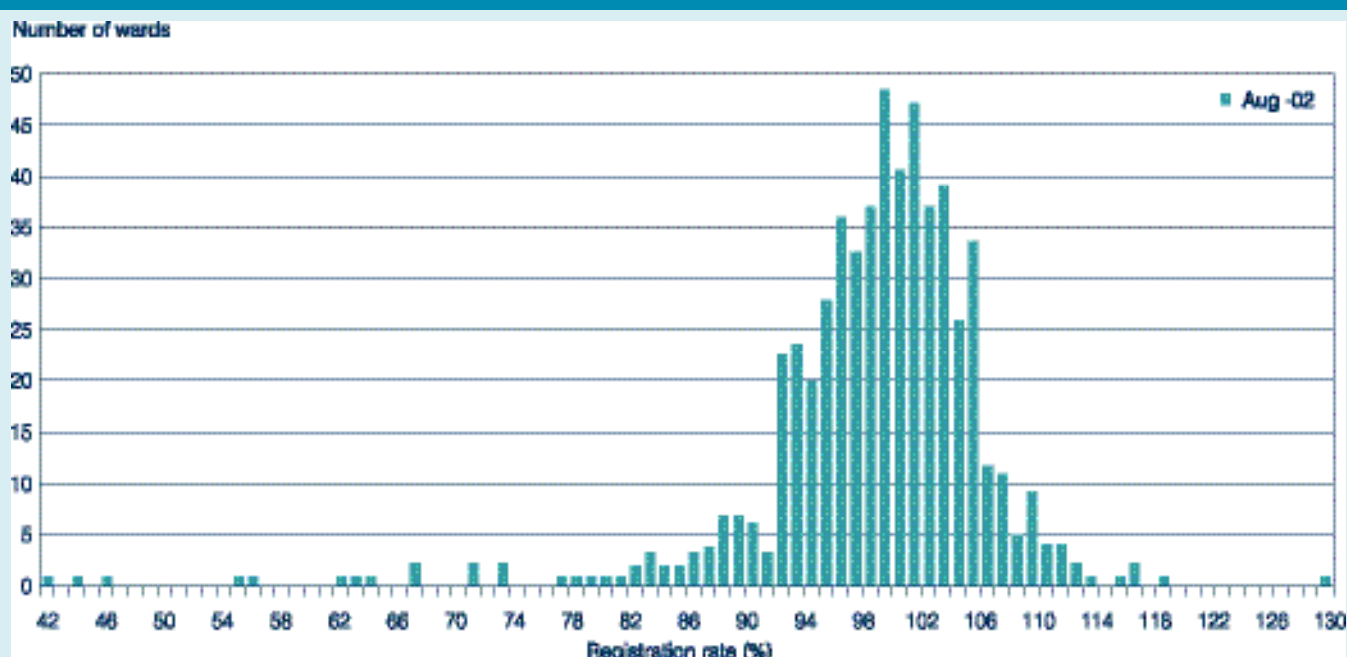
4.11 Variations between registration rates at Parliamentary constituency level may not be entirely explained by the 'carry forward', inflationary factors or the mismatch described earlier. Other socio-economic factors including age and levels of deprivation may be significant and these are best analysed at ward level, of which there are 582 in Northern Ireland.

4.12 At ward level, the problems involved in identifying true registration rates are considerably magnified for a number of reasons including:

- wide variations between wards in the mix of demographic and socio-economic factors that may be correlated, negatively or positively, with the propensity to register;
- local concentrations of 'special' factors such as students, army bases, and care establishments;
- unobservable inflationary factors;
- unobservable random influences, for example, a dislike of filling in forms.

4.13 Thus the disparities in registration rates between wards are much greater at this level than at the constituency level. Registration rates ranged from 41% in the Botanic ward (Belfast South) to 126% in the Forkhill ward

Figure 5: Northern Ireland registration rates for August 2002 by electoral ward



From: PricewaterhouseCoopers, *A statistical analysis of Electoral Registration in Northern Ireland, August 2002–May 2003*.

Sources: EONI, Census 2001.

Note: Northern Ireland comprises 582 wards

(Newry and Armagh). Figures show that a significant proportion of wards have registration rates well in excess of 100%, illustrating the fact that there are more people registered in these wards than are recorded as actually living there.

**4.14** The 20 wards with the lowest registration rates in Northern Ireland share a number of similar characteristics which help explain the lower registration rates. In total eight contain army bases (army personnel are recorded for Census purposes, but are unlikely to be registered to vote in Northern Ireland). A further nine wards contain a large proportion of student residences and one contains a prison. Only two of the 20 wards with the lowest registration rates contained none of these.

**4.15** In contrast, it is more difficult to identify a set of specific local factors to explain particularly high registration rates at ward level. However, these are mostly located in rural constituencies in the west and south of Northern Ireland. It could well be the case that the 'student factor' is also significant in these wards and that the position described earlier in respect of low levels of registration in the Botanic ward (Belfast South) is the reverse in these rural wards.

**Table 8: The 20 Census wards with the lowest registration rates, August 2002**

Parliamentary constituency	Ward	Registration rate (%)
East Londonderry	Roeside	81
Belfast South	Blackstaff	81
East Londonderry	Magilligan (P)	79
East Londonderry	Portstewart (S)	79
East Londonderry	University (S)	77
West Tyrone	Strule (A)	75
East Antrim	Rostulla (S)	73
South Down	Killough (A)	73
Belfast South	Ballynafeigh (S)	72
East Londonderry	Strand (S)	71
East Londonderry	Greysteel (A)	68
Foyle	Strand (S)	67
West Tyrone	Lisanelly (A)	64
Foyle	Ebrington (A)	64
Lagan Valley	Wallace Park (A)	62
North Down	Loughview (A)	56
Belfast South	Stranmillis (S)	55
South Antrim	Aldergrove (A)	46
Belfast South	Windsor (S)	44
Belfast South	Botanic (S)	41

*From: PricewaterhouseCoopers, A statistical analysis of Electoral Registration in Northern Ireland, August 2002 – May 2003.*

*Note: A = Army base S = Students P = Prison*

**Table 9: The 20 Census wards with the highest registration rates, August 2002**

Parliamentary constituency	Ward	Registration rate (%)
Newry & Armagh	Forkhill	126
Mid Ulster	Washing Bay	119
West Tyrone	Drumnakilly	115
West Tyrone	Coolnagard	113
Newry & Armagh	Silver Bridge	113
Newry & Armagh	Creggan	113
Mid Ulster	Swatragh	113
West Tyrone	East	112
West Tyrone	Termon	111
South Down	Rostrevor	111
Fermanagh & South Tyrone	Augher	110
Newry & Armagh	Fathom	110
Mid Ulster	Altmore	110
West Tyrone	Newtownsaville	110
West Tyrone	Sixmilecross	110
Mid-Ulster	Lower Glenshane	110
Fermanagh & South Tyrone	Caledon	109
East Londonderry	Enagh	109
Mid Ulster	Donaghmore	109
Mid Ulster	Killycolpy	109

*From: PricewaterhouseCoopers, A statistical analysis of Electoral Registration in Northern Ireland, August 2002 – May 2003, p. 22.*

## Conclusions

**4.16** An analysis of the last register produced under the old household registration system suggests that the number of entries on the register was likely to have been an over-estimate of the actual number of persons entitled to vote. Unfortunately it is not possible to quantify the factors that inflated the register.

**4.17** The analysis shows that there were wide variations between Parliamentary constituencies ranging from a registration rate of 77% in Belfast South to 103% in Fermanagh and South Tyrone and Mid-Ulster. Taken at face value this suggests that the former had a non-registration rate of 23% while the latter suggests there

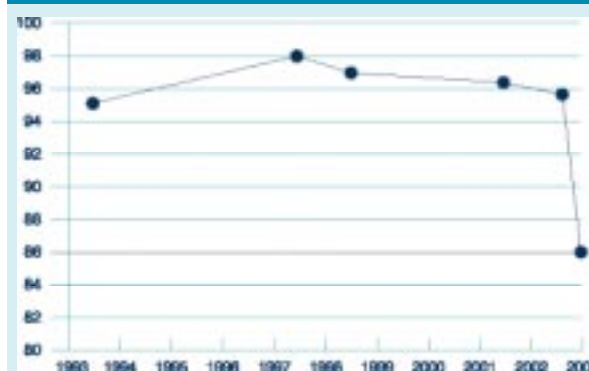
were more people on the register in the constituency than actually resided there. The low registration rate in Belfast South is largely explained by the 'student factor'.

**4.18** At ward level registration rates varied from 41% to 126%. Wards with lower levels of registration contained high concentrations of student residencies while the presence of army bases and a prison also tended to depress registration rates. Wards with high levels of registration tended to be located in rural areas in the west and south of Northern Ireland.

# 5 Analysis of the December 2002 register

When the December 2002 register was published, it contained 119,790 fewer names, representing a drop of approximately 10 percentage points from the August 2002 register. When compared to the estimated population eligible to be registered,<sup>21</sup> the registration rate for December 2002 was 86%.

Figure 6: Electoral registration as a percentage of the population aged 18+ 1993–2003



From: PricewaterhouseCoopers, *A statistical analysis of Electoral Registration in Northern Ireland, August 2002–May 2003*.  
Sources: EONI, NISRA.

5.1 Arguably one of the benefits of the Act has been the creation of an accurate and robust electronic register, free from 'carry forward' and inflationary factors. Taking these factors into account a drop in the numbers registered was to be expected. In order to obtain an accurate registration rate for Northern Ireland as a whole, we commissioned Millward Brown Ulster to include a question about registration in its Omnibus survey during March and April 2003. A representative sample of 3,893 people across Northern Ireland were shown an electoral registration form and asked if they had completed and returned one. Altogether, 14% of the population said they were not registered and 4% said they were unsure. As the non-registration rates for the December 2002 register and the Omnibus survey are the same, this suggests that the December 2002 register is particularly accurate and contains few if any inflationary factors. A MORI survey<sup>22</sup> for the Commission found that on a UK wide basis 93% of people claimed to be registered.

5.2 When the December 2002 register is compared to the August 2002 register it shows that all Parliamentary constituencies experienced a decrease in the number of people on the register. The reduction ranged from 6% in Mid-Ulster, to 18% in Belfast West. Overall the largest decreases were in the four Belfast constituencies.

<sup>21</sup> The registration rate for December 2002 is calculated on the basis of a 0.7% increase in the population aged 18 and over in the period since the 2001 Census.

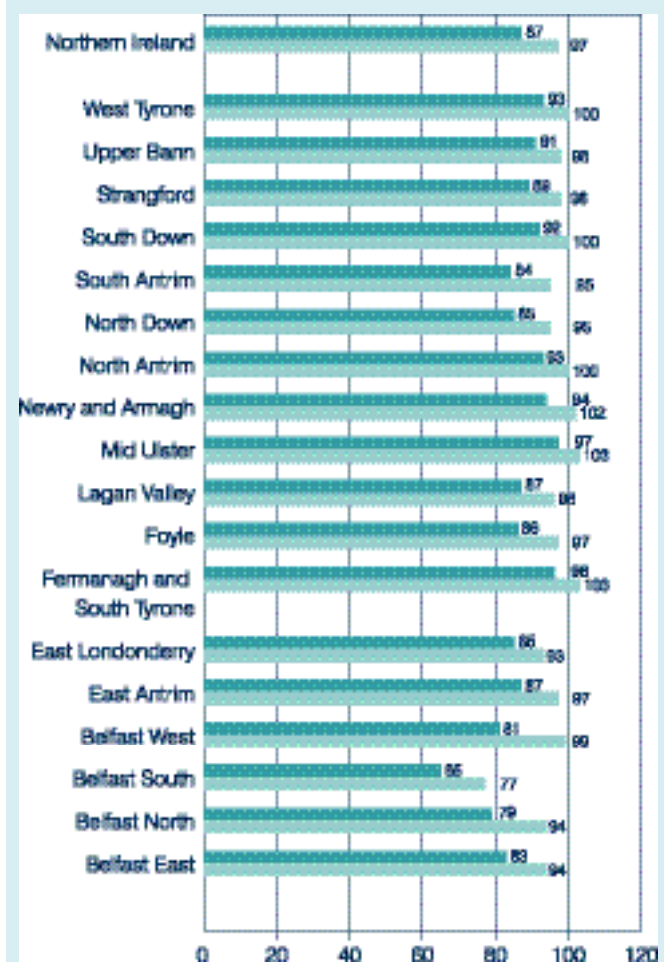
<sup>22</sup> MORI interviewed 1,500 adults aged 18+ by telephone between 2–11 May 2003.

Some of this reduction may be attributable to changes in the population within Northern Ireland. While Belfast has been experiencing a decline in population, other areas have been experiencing an increase. However, the population decline in Belfast has been less than 0.5% per annum and this alone would not be sufficient to account for the reduction overall. Another possible explanation is that Belfast comprises significantly more rental accommodation than elsewhere in Northern Ireland. Consequently, there are greater levels of mobility within the city and this may have made it more difficult to target this portion of the electorate with registration forms. Further evidence for this assertion comes from the public opinion survey. UK-wide research has also found mobility to be a key reason for non-registration.<sup>23</sup>

5.3 Setting aside the actual variations in the decrease across constituencies, what is particularly striking is that there was little change in the overall ranking by registration rates of constituencies between August and December 2002. Belfast South remained the constituency with the lowest registration rate, 22 percentage points below the overall Northern Ireland average of 87%.<sup>24</sup> Similarly, Fermanagh and South Tyrone (96%) and Mid-Ulster (97%) continued to have the highest registration rates. This suggests that many of the factors giving rise to the geographical variations in the registration rates in August were again manifest in December. This can be further explored by looking at registration rates at ward level.

5.4 As with the August 2002 register there were again significant differences between wards in respect of the December 2002 register. Despite an overall reduction in registration rates, some wards continued to record more names on the electoral register than appeared from the 2001 Census to be resident there. The lowest rate of registration was in the Botanic ward in the constituency of Belfast South (23%), while the highest registration rate was in the Forkhill ward in the constituency of Newry & Armagh (115%).

Figure 7: Northern Ireland registration rates by Parliamentary constituency, December 2002



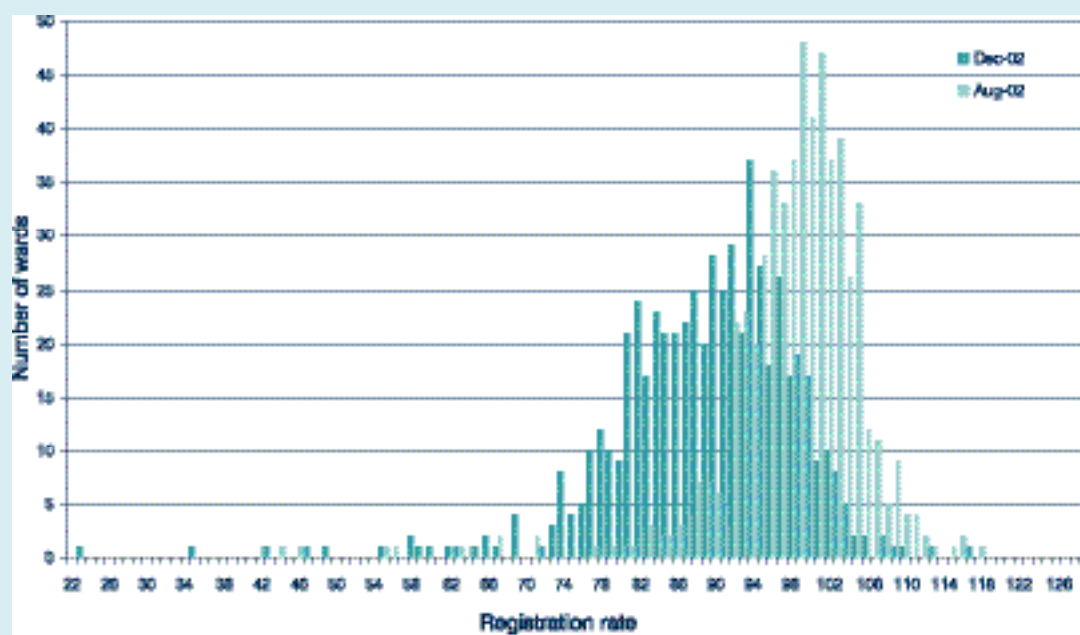
Source: PricewaterhouseCoopers, *A statistical analysis of Electoral Registration in Northern Ireland, August 2002 – May 2003*.

<sup>23</sup> MORI interviewed 1,500 adults aged 18+ by telephone between 2–11 May 2003.

<sup>24</sup> This is the average registration rate for Northern Ireland, measured relative to the population aged 18+ at the 2001 Census of Population. It differs slightly from the 86% Northern Ireland average shown in Figure 6. The latter is more accurate as it is based on an estimate of the 2002 mid-year population, and incorporates a 0.6% population increase compared to mid-2001.



Figure 8: Comparison of registration rates by ward – August 2002 to December 2002



From: PricewaterhouseCoopers, *A statistical analysis of Electoral Registration in Northern Ireland, August 2002–May 2003*.  
Sources: EONI, Census 2001.

**5.5** When compared to the 20 wards with lowest registration rates in August 2002 the rank order in December 2002 changed very little. The five wards with the lowest registration rates remained the same while 17 of the 20 wards continued to have the lowest registration rates in December 2002. This further supports the view that the factors (students registering at the family home, the presence of army bases and a care establishment) giving rise to the lower registration rates in August 2002 were again manifest in December 2002.

**5.6** The mix of the 20 wards with the highest registration rates changed more from August to December than those with the lowest registration rates. Altogether, eight new wards entered the top 20. Generally wards with the highest levels of registration tended to be located in rural constituencies. It is noteworthy that a number of the new high registration wards are finely balanced between the two main communities, possibly suggesting that competition for votes is a strong motivating factor for registering. Population growth is also likely to have been an additional factor in wards such as Loughbrickland, Katesbridge and Coolnagard.

**Table 10: The 20 Census wards with the lowest registration rates, December 2002**

Parliamentary constituency	Ward	Registration rate (%)
East Londonderry	University(S)	69
Belfast East	Island	69
East Londonderry	Portstewart(S)	69
Belfast South	Blackstaff	69
Belfast South	Shaftesbury	67
South Down	Killough (A)	66
East Antrim	Rostulla (S)	66
South Antrim	Springfarm (A)	65
East Londonderry	Strand (S)	63
East Londonderry	Greysteel (A)	63
Foyle	Ebrington (A)	60
Foyle	Strand (S)	59
Belfast South	Ballynafeigh (S)	59
Lagan Valley	Wallace Park (A)	58
West Tyrone	Lisanelly (A)	56
North Down	Loughview (A)	49
Belfast South	Stranmillis (S)	47
South Antrim	Aldergrove (A)	43
Belfast South	Windsor (S)	35
Belfast South	Botanic (S)	23

*From: PricewaterhouseCoopers, A statistical analysis of Electoral Registration in Northern Ireland, August 2002 – May 2003.*

*Note: A = Army base S = Students*

**Table 11: The 20 Census Wards with the highest registration rates, December 2002**

Parliamentary constituency	Ward	Registration rate (%)
Newry & Armagh	Forkhill	115
Mid Ulster	Washing Bay	113
West Tyrone	Termon	110
Mid Ulster	Swatragh	109
Mid Ulster	Altmore	106
Mid Ulster	Lissan	106
Newry & Armagh	Creggan	106
West Tyrone	Coolnagard	106
Fermanagh & South Tyrone	Augher	105
Fermanagh & South Tyrone	Brookeborough	105
West Tyrone	Drumnakilly	105
West Tyrone	Newtownsaville	105
Mid-Ulster	Lower Glenshane	104
Fermanagh & South Tyrone	Tempo	104
Fermanagh & South Tyrone	Caledon	103
North Antrim	Ardeevin	103
Fermanagh & South Tyrone	Rosslea	103
Mid Ulster	Lecumpher	103
South Down	Katesbridge	103
Upper Bann	Loughbrickland	103

*From: PricewaterhouseCoopers, A statistical analysis of Electoral Registration in Northern Ireland, August 2002 – May 2003, p. 22.*

5.7 The 20 wards with the largest percentage decline in registration from August 2002 to December 2002 were primarily located within the Belfast constituencies. Botanic ward in Belfast South showed the largest percentage decline, indicating that the 'student factor' continued to have a significant impact on the registration rate. However, it also suggests that it may have been more difficult to implement the new registration system in inner city areas as opposed to rural areas. These issues are explored in more detail below.

**Table 12: December 2002 register as percentage of August 2002 register: the 20 wards with the largest percentage decline in registration**

Parliamentary constituency	Ward	Percentage decrease between August 2002 and December 2002
Belfast South	Botanic	45
Belfast West	Falls	24
Belfast West	Twinbrook	24
Belfast West	Whiterock	24
Belfast West	Poleglass	23
Belfast West	Colin Glen	22
Belfast West	Glencolin	22
South Antrim	Springfarm	21
Belfast North	Water Works	21
Belfast North	Coole	21
Belfast West	Kilwee	20
Belfast North	Ardoyne	20
Belfast North	Dunanney	20
South Antrim	Fountain Hill	20
Belfast North	Bellevue	20
Belfast South	Woodstock	20
North Down	Harbour	20
Belfast South	Windsor	20
Belfast West	Clonard	19
Belfast South	Shaftesbury	19

From: PricewaterhouseCoopers, *A statistical analysis of Electoral Registration in Northern Ireland, August 2002 – May 2003*.

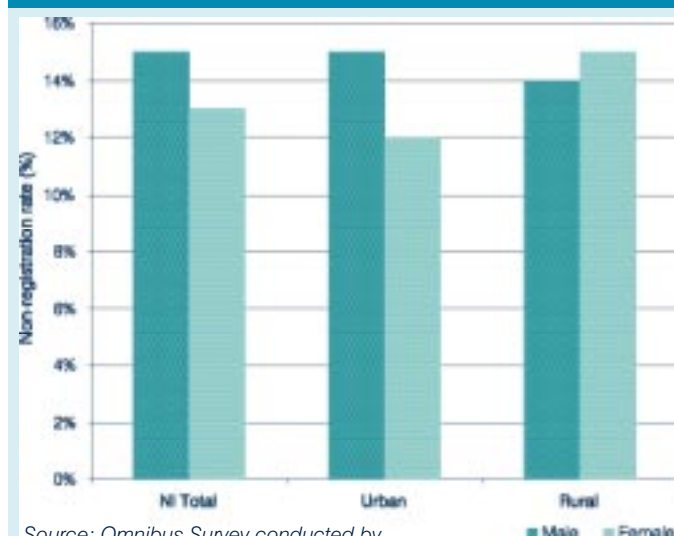
Source: EONI

5.8 A large proportion of the wards experiencing the largest decline in registration rates have high levels of social deprivation. Among these wards are Whiterock, Falls, Twinbrook, Ardoyne, Woodstock, Shaftesbury and Springfarm. The numbers in receipt of income support and jobseekers allowance in the 20 wards are significantly above the Northern Ireland average (33.5% as opposed to 17%). The unemployment rate for the 20 wards is on average 15% compared with the Northern Ireland average of 6.9%.

## Public opinion research

5.9 From the public opinion surveys we have been able to determine the patterns of registration by socio-economic groups. The omnibus survey conducted with 3,893 adults enables a detailed analysis of the profile of the registered population and those not registered. Overall, males were more likely not to be registered than females (15% as opposed to 13%). The gap was marginally higher in urban areas, while in rural areas this trend was reversed with slightly more females not registered than males.

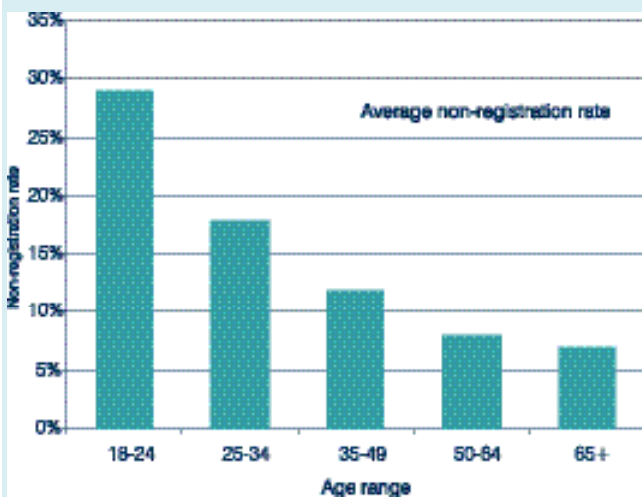
**Figure 9: Percentage of the population not registered by gender and area**



Source: Omnibus Survey conducted by Millward Brown Ulster, March – April 2003, base 3,893, sampling tolerance +/- 1.4%.

**5.10** The strongest and most consistent variation in respect of registration was age. Those in the age group 18–24 were the least likely to be registered with almost one third not registered (29%). This is in line with research elsewhere in the UK which shows below average registration rates for young people aged 18–24. In the rest of the UK it is estimated that 11% of those aged 18–24 are not registered.<sup>25</sup> It should be noted, however, that registration in Northern Ireland is an individual responsibility and household registration no longer applies. This may help explain the differential. Those aged 65 and over were the group most likely to be registered.

Figure 10: Percentage of the population not registered rates by age



Source: Omnibus Survey conducted by Millward Brown Ulster, March – April 2003, base 3,893, sampling tolerance +/- 1.4%.

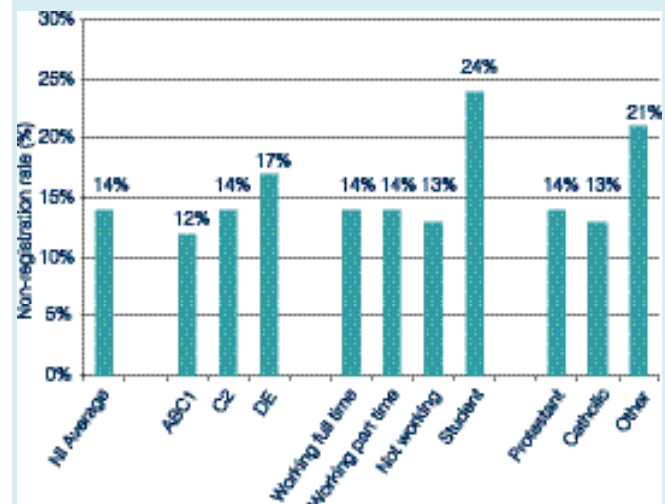
**5.11** There was a correlation between socio-economic classification and registration.<sup>26</sup> Those in social group DE (17%) were less likely to be registered than their counterparts in social group ABC1 (12%). Registration rates do not appear to vary with employment status.

<sup>25</sup> MORI interviewed 1,500 adults aged 18+ by telephone between 2–11 May 2003.

<sup>26</sup> Respondents were categorised in terms of Social Class which is based on the occupation of the chief income earner in their household. The main classifications are AB (middle class or professional), C1 (Lower middle class or junior management), C2 (skilled manual workers) and DE (unskilled manual workers, the unemployed or those in receipt of state benefits long term).

Students are much more likely not to be registered than their counterparts in the general population. Altogether about a quarter (24%) of those in full time education were not registered. There was little difference between non-registration rates for Protestants (14%) and Catholics (13%). However, those who designated themselves as 'others' had a much higher non-registration rate (21%).

Figure 11: Non-registration by social class, employment status and religion



Source: Millward Brown Ulster

**5.12** The April 2003 survey considered a wider range of demographic factors in respect of registration. These included political ideology, disability and perceptions about the extent of competition between political parties standing for election. Levels of registration varied depending on political ideology. Almost 8 in 10 of those who identified themselves as republican, nationalist or unionist were registered, whereas registration rates were lower among those who identified themselves as loyalist. Those who identified themselves as republican were much more certain as to whether or not they were registered while those identifying themselves with the other political ideologies were less clear, with almost 1 in 10 unsure. Around one-third chose not to associate themselves with any one political ideology and this group's registration rate tended to be slightly lower.

Table 13: Registration by political ideology

	Registered (%)	Not registered (%)	Don't know (%)
Republican	79	21	0
Nationalist	79	18	4
Unionist	77	15	7
Loyalist	65	28	7
Other	74	19	7
None of these	70	23	7
Refused	70	12	18

Base = 1,023

**5.13** People who identified themselves as having a disability were more likely not to be registered than those without a disability. One in four people with disabilities were not registered, a figure significantly higher than for those without disabilities.

Table 14: Non-registration by disability

	Registered (%)	Not registered (%)	Don't know (%)
No disability	76	18	6
Person with a disability	68	25	7
Carer	76	12	11

Base = 1,023

**5.14** Those who consider they live in areas where competition between political parties for votes is high are more likely to be registered than those who do not consider they live in such an area.

Table 15: Non-registration by competition for votes

	Registered (%)	Not registered (%)	Don't know (%)
'Elections in my area are closely fought'	82	14	4
'Elections in my area are not closely fought'	69	23	8

Base = 1,023

**5.15** Owner occupiers are more likely to be registered than their counterparts who live in Housing Executive or private rented accommodation.

Table 16: Registration rates by tenure

	Registered (%)	Not registered (%)	Don't know (%)
Owned or mortgaged	77	17	6
Rented – Housing Executive	71	24	6
Rented – private	54	34	13

Base = 1,023

## Conclusions

**5.16** An analysis of the first Northern Ireland register (December 2002) produced under the new system of individual registration suggests that the numbers on the register, as a proportion of the 18+ population, fell from 95.5% to 86%.

**5.17** Although this appears at first to represent a significant drop in the numbers of people registering, our research strongly suggests that the December 2002 register in fact provides a much better indication of actual levels of non-registration than the old register. In short, the old register did not provide an accurate record of the percentage of adults on the register because it over inflated the numbers entitled to be registered. The new system is less likely to suffer from inflationary factors due largely to the abolition of the carry-forward facility.

**5.18** Not all of the change, however, can be attributed to this factor and it is likely that some of those who were registered under the old system did not register under the new system. It is impossible to estimate what part of the difference between the August 2002 and December 2002 registers is due to an actual reduction in inflationary factors and what portion is due to an actual decline in the number of people on the register.

**5.19** The pattern of change in the December 2002 register varied at both Parliamentary constituency and ward level. At constituency level the largest declines

occurred in the Belfast constituencies. It is noteworthy that the ranking of constituencies by registration remained largely unchanged with the rural constituencies continuing to record the highest registration rates. At ward level the patterns of registration manifest in the December 2002 register were highly correlated with the August 2002 register.

**5.20** Changes in the register were not uniformly distributed across all 582 wards. The analysis suggests that the reduction in the number of people on the December 2002 register was correlated with the geography of deprivation. That is, the greater the incidence of deprivation, the larger the percentage decline on the register. This finding was endorsed by the public opinion research which found there was a correlation between registration and socio-economic status.



# 6 Explaining the differential

The publication of the December 2002 register was followed by an extensive public debate both in the media and among politicians as to the reasons why the number of names on the register had reduced by 10% from the August 2002 register.

## Introduction

6.1 This chapter investigates what evidence there is to support the different hypotheses put forward for explaining the reduction in names on the register. Theories about the causes of the reduction can be grouped as follows:

- a result of a reduction in electoral fraud;
- a result of the carry-forward facility being removed;
- a result of eligible voters not returning registration forms.

## A reduction in electoral fraud

6.2 The primary purpose of the Act was: 'to provide the Chief Electoral Officer for Northern Ireland with additional functions to address the problem of electoral fraud'.<sup>27</sup> As discussed earlier the precise extent of electoral fraud in Northern Ireland has never been quantified and therefore it is not possible to assess accurately the impact of the measures put in place to prevent it. However, its impact can be looked at in terms of people's perceptions as to whether or not it has made a difference.

6.3 In the April 2003 survey views on perceptions of electoral fraud were sought. By this date the electorate had been through the process of individual registration, levels of awareness were high in respect of the need for electoral identification and the Commission had been running a high-profile multi-media campaign emphasising the new arrangements. In addition, there was the expectation that elections to the Northern Ireland Assembly would take place in May 2003. When asked whether they agreed or disagreed with the statement, 'The new system should reduce electoral fraud' the responses were as follows.

Table 17: Response to the statement 'the new system should reduce electoral fraud'

Response	Percentage
Strongly agree	31
Tend to agree	41
Neither agree nor disagree	8
Tend to disagree	3
Strongly disagree	1
Don't know	17
<i>Base = 942</i>	

<sup>27</sup> Point 3 in Explanatory Notes to the Electoral Fraud (Northern Ireland) Act 2002.

**6.4** These findings suggest that the new system of individual registration and the use of electoral identification have gone some way to increasing confidence that the measures contained in the Act will reduce electoral fraud.

Do I think it will cut down on some of the fraud?  
Yes I would say some of it. Loads of it. It is making it more difficult for them.

Millward Brown Ulster focus group April 2003

**6.5** It is impossible to say what impact the new legislation will, in the long term, have on levels of electoral fraud. While fraud was perceived by the public and some political parties to have been widespread, evidence for it is largely anecdotal. As we have highlighted previously, there are no official figures confirming the level of fraud. Despite the views of some political parties and others it is unlikely that the entire reduction in numbers on the register (between August and December) can be attributed to a decrease in fraudulent entries. As one respected media commentator put it:

Most of this is not fraud. The number of votes being stolen in any constituency is probably in the hundreds, not thousands. Just think of the logistics of trying to steal thousands of votes.<sup>28</sup>

**6.6** One of the keys to individual registration has been the requirement for personal identifiers in the form of a date of birth, a national insurance number and a signature. Provision was included in the Act for the checking of national insurance numbers and names against records held by the Social Security Agency to establish the veracity of this personal identifier. The Chief Electoral Officer, in evidence to the Northern Ireland Affairs Select Committee in April 2003 confirmed that his office was in the process of verifying national insurance numbers.<sup>29</sup> The EONI has advised the Commission that beginning in December 2003, all national insurance numbers on the register will be verified electronically. The Commission welcomes this commitment, given that the verification of national insurance numbers appears to be the primary method of confirming a person's identity.

<sup>28</sup> *The Independent*, 29 November 2002, 'Farewell to the old Irish custom of voting early, and often'.

<sup>29</sup> Northern Ireland Affairs Select committee, Electoral Registration in Northern Ireland Ev23-24 paras 63-64

## The impact of the removal of the 'carry forward' facility

**6.7** Prior to December 2002 there was provision in the legislation for the names of those who had not completed an annual household canvass form to have their names 'carried forward' on the register for one year.<sup>30</sup> The EONI reported in its evidence to the Northern Ireland Affairs Select Committee that the typical return rate each year was around 90% of households and that about 10% of names were carried forward using this facility.<sup>31</sup> The 'carry forward' facility was revoked in Northern Ireland by the Representation of the People (Northern Ireland) (Amendment) Regulations 2002. Consequently, the EONI has the responsibility for producing a completely new register every year. To be included on the register an individual must complete a new registration form every year. The 'carry forward' facility continues in England, Scotland and Wales.

**6.8** The removal of the 'carry forward' resulted in:

- those who had not completed and returned an electoral registration form not being included on the register;
- those who had relocated outside Northern Ireland during the previous year being removed from the register;
- preventing those who moved house within Northern Ireland during the previous year being potentially on the register more than once. (This does not apply to people who own more than one home and are eligible to be registered more than once);
- the names of those allegedly on the register through fraudulent means no longer having their names carried forward.

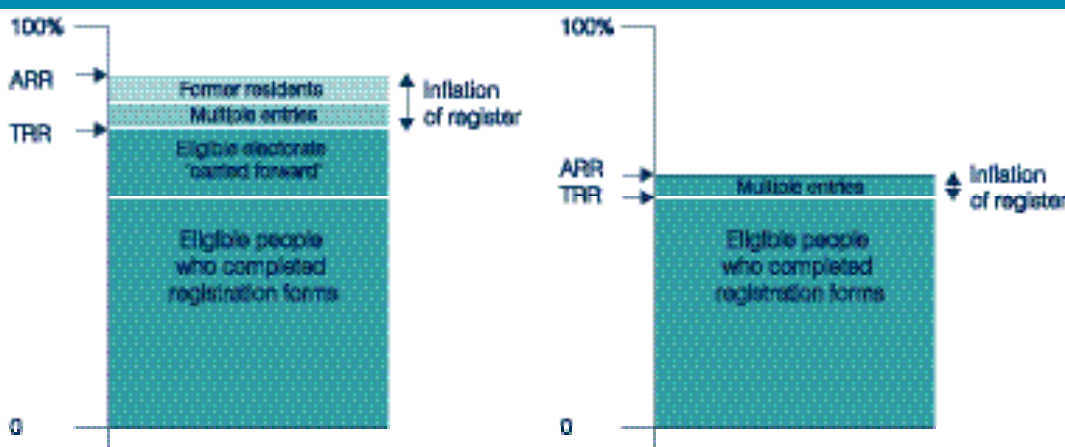
**6.9** Figure 13 illustrates the impact of the removal of the 'carry forward' on registration rates. The April 2003 public opinion survey showed that, of those people who were not registered in April 2003, 72% claimed to have been on

<sup>30</sup> The 'carry forward' facility was not formalised in legislation until the Representation of the People (Northern Ireland) Regulations 2001, in Regulation 34.

<sup>31</sup> Northern Ireland Affairs Select Committee, Electoral Registration in Northern Ireland: Minutes of Evidence and Appendices, Wednesday 2 April 2003 (London: The Stationery Office Limited), pEv.16.

the previous register. Taking this figure and assuming the 'carry forward' facility had remained in place suggests an estimated registration rate of around 96%. (This is calculated by taking the estimated number of people not on the register at April 2003 (14%), taking 72% of this figure and adding it to the 86% included on the register.)

Figure 12: Changes in electoral registration due to the removal of the 'carry forward' and other inflationary factors



Note: ARR = apparent registration rate; TRR = true registration rate  
Source: PWC

**6.10** The Chief Electoral Officer for Northern Ireland argues that the 'carry forward' facility should be reinstated because without it potentially up to 150,000 electors could be disenfranchised who in the past would have had their names carried forward for one year.<sup>32</sup> While we recognise the rationale of the Chief Electoral Officer's argument the evidence suggests that the removal of the 'carry forward' facility in 2002 has effectively created a more accurate and robust register with potentially greater longer-term benefits. It appears that the 'carry forward' facility tended to cloud the electorate's understanding of the link between registering and voting. Our research found that the requirement to register every year was not widely understood by the electorate with 4 in 10 people aware that they had to do so.<sup>33</sup> A recent MORI survey<sup>34</sup> revealed

that 53% of adults in the UK did not know they had to register every year. It could be argued that the process of registering to vote on an annual basis is undermined if a poll card is issued in circumstances where the person has not registered to vote. But we do recognise that in the absence of a 'carry forward' regular efforts have to be made to remind electors of the need to complete a registration form if they wish to remain on the register.

**6.11** We believe there is no evidence to conclude that the 'carry forward' should be reinstated in Northern Ireland at this time. However, this is clearly an issue that needs to be kept under review. In the meantime, the Commission included a specific focus in its 2003 public awareness registration campaigns on the need for individuals to register every year.

<sup>32</sup> Letter from Chief Electoral Officer to The Electoral Commission, 9 April 2003.

<sup>33</sup> Tracking research, April 2003, base 1,003 respondents.

<sup>34</sup> MORI interviewed 1,500 adults aged 18+ by telephone between 2-11 May 2003.

## Impact of eligible voters not returning registration forms

**6.12** Much of the concern about the reduction in numbers on the register focused on the possibility that the new registration system effectively disenfranchised people. The issues raised included:

- understanding and awareness of the new system;
- complexity of the new system;
- management of the new arrangements;
- voter 'apathy';
- concerns over disclosure of personal information.

## Understanding and awareness of the new system

**6.13** A number of political parties were of the opinion that the main reason for the drop in the numbers on the register was because of a widespread lack of understanding of how the new process worked. One party voiced a concern that changes in the registration process had led to confusion, particularly among young people,<sup>35</sup> while another suggested that the Commission's publicity campaign was inadequate.<sup>36</sup> However, a number of the political parties consulted for this report commented favourably on the Commission's public awareness campaign.

**6.14** The EONI expressed reservations about some aspects of the Commission's work in respect of public awareness. Canvassers delivered an A5 leaflet produced by the Commission to all households. This explained the new registration process in five easy steps. It later emerged that canvassers found the leaflet too heavy to carry in large numbers. Concerns were also expressed that the leaflet tended to create confusion in the minds of the public about the role of the EONI and The Electoral Commission respectively. As a result, EONI decided in January 2003 that it would neither use nor deliver a similar leaflet for the 2003 canvass.<sup>37</sup>

<sup>35</sup> *South Belfast Post*, '10,000 missing voters', December 2002.

<sup>36</sup> *Irish News*, 'Sinn Fein's concern raised over 'lost voters'', 12 December 2002.

<sup>37</sup> However, the Commission's view was that the new registration process needed to be effectively explained to the electorate in simple terms. Consequently for the 2003 canvass a new leaflet explaining registration was sent to all households. This supplemented the television, radio and newspaper advertising campaigns.

**6.15** Concerns were raised by the EONI about the service provided by the telephone helpline. While the Commission accepts that there were a small number of complaints about the helpline, particularly in the early days, it also notes that the numbers involved were less than 20 of the 35,000 calls handled. To further quality assure the responses received from the helpline the Commission engaged an independent company to monitor the quality and accuracy of responses. During the period when calls were analysed no particular problems were identified.<sup>38</sup>

**6.16** Tracking research commissioned to test the effectiveness of the 2002 campaign was very positive and a majority of those interviewed indicated that they found the advertising engaging and informative. However, the EONI was concerned that the television advertisement used to explain individual registration was unclear and could have been construed to condone personation.

**6.17** A representative sample of the electorate was asked for its views on the changes to electoral registration before and after the Commission's public awareness campaign commenced in Autumn 2002. Prior to the campaign commencing, 15% were aware that changes were planned to the registration process and electoral identification. Following the campaign nearly two thirds (63%) were aware of planned changes. Of these, 64% mentioned the requirement for electoral identity, 32% mentioned a shift to individual registration, and 23% mentioned the requirement for the registration form to be signed personally. By April 2003 79% were aware that changes had been made to the electoral registration and voter identification process. Overall, the publicity campaign proved effective in significantly increasing public awareness of the new arrangements.

<sup>38</sup> Future campaigns will, however, be supported by regular refresher training to ensure that all call centre team leaders and operators are better informed. For the 2003 canvass the Commission used a helpline in support of its public awareness campaign. As a result of the perceived shortcomings identified with the Commission's helpline, the EONI established, from its own resources, an advice line for the 2003 canvass. This was designed to handle more complicated enquiries from the electorate. Initially the Chief Electoral Officer had sought to take on this entire activity and requested funding from the Commission. However, the Chief Electoral Officer was advised that legislation did not allow the Commission to fund EONI activities. The Commission also advised that, while it did not regard the existence of two helplines as mutually exclusive, there was a need to guard against sending mixed and confusing messages to the electorate.

**6.18** Following the autumn 2002 campaign, more than half (52%) spontaneously recalled having seen or heard advertising about the new registration process. Just over two thirds (69%) recalled seeing television advertising, 27% recalled seeing a television programme, including the news, and 20% recalled seeing a newspaper advertisement. When the entire sample was asked about sources of advertising used and how they had heard about the new arrangements for registration, 43% said they had seen television advertising, 22% had seen a television programme, 19% saw a newspaper advertisement, 12% heard people talking about it, and 12% recalled receiving a leaflet from the Commission. Overall the Commission's campaign appears to have reached a significant proportion of the population, with television being the most effective medium in terms of reach.

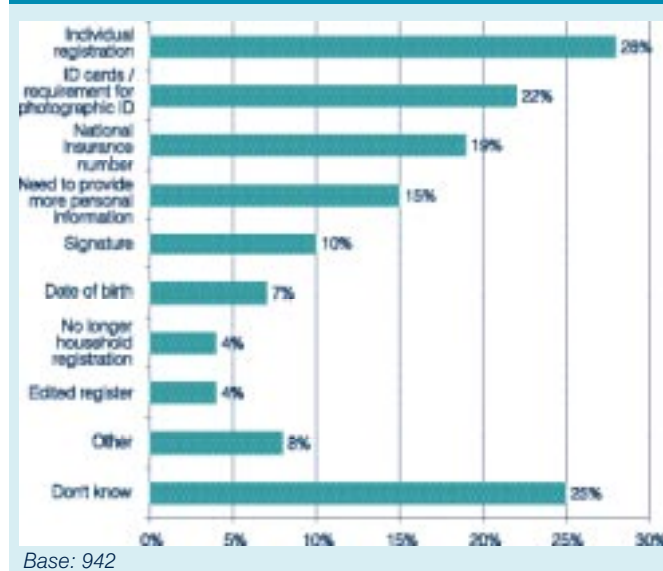
**6.19** The April 2003 survey also asked a series of questions about the new registration process and confirmed high levels of awareness. Just over 8 in 10 (84%) indicated that they were aware of the new electoral registration process and the requirement for electoral identification. Young people aged 18–24, however, showed lower levels of awareness, with less than 7 in 10 (68%) aware.

**6.20** When asked to specifically describe the changes introduced, a range of unprompted responses were received. The findings illustrate that while a significant proportion of the electorate are aware of change, there is less understanding of the detail. One in four (25%) who stated that they knew about the changes could not describe any of them when prompted. These results show that there is a continued need to raise awareness of the new arrangements. The Commission is committed to building on these results with successive high profile advertising campaigns over the coming years. The data gathered on public awareness will provide a useful benchmark for future campaigns.

### Complexity of the process

**6.21** Some media and political commentators concluded that the electoral registration process was off-putting and complicated for some people. A member of the Assembly (MLA) commented:

Figure 13: Unprompted awareness of changes in electoral processes April 2003



While the motivation ... to combat fraud is worthy, as with many government initiatives to combat fraud, it is often the innocent who suffer.<sup>39</sup>

A newspaper journalist made the following observation:

The people who have not returned their forms tend to be the least educated and living in the poorest areas, people who are unable or averse to filling in forms.<sup>40</sup>

In the same newspaper article, a person described as 'employed to collect forms from a Belfast district' commented:

There was a lot of irritation, even resistance in working class areas, especially Protestant ones. Many had 'lost' their forms, and many didn't know their national insurance number.<sup>41</sup>

<sup>39</sup> *Co Down Spectator*, 'Weir offers help', 26 September 2002.

<sup>40</sup> *The Independent*, 'Farewell to the old Irish custom of voting early, and often', 29 November 2002.

<sup>41</sup> *Ibid.*



**6.22** We organised a focus group with electoral administrators in April 2003, to discuss the new registration process. The administrators felt that the public generally did not find the registration forms difficult to understand or complete. Overall they estimated that around 10% of the forms returned to their offices were incorrectly completed. Common errors included missing or non-corresponding signatures (a husband signing for his wife and vice-versa), the current date being given rather than the date of birth and the use of a medical card number instead of a national insurance number. They were of the opinion that the canvassers played an important role in verifying information for inclusion on the registration form. This is confirmed by the fact that most of the forms incorrectly completed were submitted by post. Consequently, the EONI endorsed the use of a door-to-door canvass.

**6.23** In the April 2003 public opinion survey all those who completed an electoral registration form were asked if they found the form and instructions easy to understand. Almost half (46%) said they found the form easy to complete, while one third (34%) stated it was fairly easy and 1 in 20 (5%) said they found the forms difficult to complete. Students and people classified in the lower socio-economic groups and people with disabilities were proportionally over-represented in the group that found the form and instructions difficult to understand. Those in socio-economic class DE were almost three times more likely to find the form and instructions difficult to understand. A similar finding was recorded for people with disabilities.

It's like an application form. But it's easier than an application form. Its things you ought to know in your head anyway.

**Milward Brown Ulster focus group April 2003.**

Pensioners. Some of them might get those forms and if they don't have home helps or family coming in they just ignore them. My father, he just ignored his. He didn't even open it and because I've no interest in it I didn't bother explaining it to him.

**Milward Brown Ulster focus group April 2003.**

**6.24** These findings suggest that for the majority of the population who completed a registration form no significant difficulties were encountered. However there is a need for the EONI and the Commission working in partnership to provide support to those groups who find the registration process complicated and the form difficult to complete. Assistance is likely to be more usefully targeted at groups identified as finding the process difficult. This includes young people and students, people with disabilities and those with lower levels of literacy. One simple measure that could prove effective is for all information and forms provided for the public to be Plain English approved.

### Management of the process

**6.25** Chapter 3 outlined the process by which the EONI implemented the changes put in place by the Act. Commenting on the publication of the new register, the then Parliamentary Under Secretary of State at the NIO, Des Browne MP said:

I am impressed by the hard work and dedication of the Chief Electoral Officer and his staff in preparing the new Electoral Register, particularly after what has been a time of great change. New electoral fraud legislation has been enacted to ensure that everyone is properly included on the Register and can exercise their franchise without the fear of losing their vote through fraud. The Act also seeks to prevent anyone not entitled gaining admission to the register. This, together with the introduction of all-photographic identity at the May 2003 Assembly elections, should ensure that the democratic wishes of the people of Northern Ireland are expressed in a fraud-free environment. I am particularly pleased that the new Electoral Office computer system has been such a success in handling the requirements of the new legislation and in producing the register on time. Those involved deserve the warmest of congratulations for all they have achieved.<sup>42</sup>

**6.26** Most political parties commented that the process on the whole was well managed although a number of areas for improvement were identified. All the political

<sup>42</sup> EONI press release, 2 December 2002.



parties supported the need for a personal canvass, and some commented on aspects of the canvass with which they were unhappy. Only one political party was highly critical of the EONI's administration.<sup>43</sup>

**6.27** A number of parties expressed concern that some areas were not canvassed and alleged that canvassers in some areas missed houses and on occasions entire streets. It was also claimed that people living in some new housing developments were not canvassed. One party felt that some areas were not actually visited until four or five weeks after the canvass started. The same party also criticised the time of day the canvassers called, with some either calling too late at night or during the day when people were out at work.

**6.28** In evidence to the Northern Ireland Affairs Select Committee<sup>44</sup> some of the political parties expressed strong views about the annual canvass and how it was conducted. It was claimed by a number of political parties that some canvassers were not sufficiently trained and that they were unable to answer a number of basic questions about registration. It was also suggested that canvassers did not always attempt to ensure that all people in the household were given forms. This was particularly the case for students and young people who had just turned 18 or were due to reach the age of 18 during the next year.

One party said:

The canvass was poorly carried out in many areas. Many households were not visited for four or five weeks after the official start date. Limited face-to-face contact with householders, homes visited when people were not in (i.e. mornings). Homes visited in certain areas after dark (10–11pm). Only posted forms through the letterbox. Some canvassers poorly trained, not clear on residence qualification—students deprived of vote because attending university on the mainland. Did not establish if any young voters would attain 18 years of age during 2003.

Postal canvass, where no canvasser could be appointed was a disaster particularly in urban areas.

Whole families deleted because of no letterbox in home or difficult access to property.

Certain canvassers adopted the attitude they could not care less if the person was registered or not.

Another party suggested:

The direct canvass is the most effective way to ensure that people are registered to vote. Whilst the initial contact is made by the canvasser it would be helpful if there could be direct follow-ups with those who did not register to vote at the initial stage. We recognise that this direct canvass requires extra resources and these should be made available to the Electoral Office.

There are reports that some areas did not receive an initial canvass. Therefore the only contact with the electorate in these areas was via the post. This is not an effective way to get people to register and the EONI need to ensure that they have canvassers for all areas across Northern Ireland.

All canvassers should be fully trained before canvassing starts to ensure that they register everyone who is entitled to vote. It appears that some canvassers were not aware that students away from home were entitled to be registered at their home address and that people becoming 18 years of age in 2003 should also be registered.

One party commented:

No special arrangements were made for people with literacy problems or people with special needs. The absence of help from the electoral offices and the heavy onus on the individual to register clearly impacted and led to a drop in the electorate.

Electoral canvassers not properly trained. There were clear differences in terms of standard and approach of canvassers across the 18 constituencies. Some new housing developments were not canvassed at all.

<sup>43</sup> *Irish News*, 'Adams slams 'electoral scandal'', 16 January 2003.

<sup>44</sup> Electoral Registration in Northern Ireland, Minutes of Evidence and Appendices, April 2003, Appendices 1–4.

Large numbers of young people and potential first time voters did not receive forms. No pro-active approach by EONI to identify these young people. In some constituencies... figures range from a 50% to 80% drop in the number of young people registering for the first time.

**6.29** The EONI has advised the Commission that despite several requests to political parties for specific information on problems encountered, little evidence was produced. However, our public opinion research tends to support some of these experiences. A significant proportion (42%) of those who had not returned a registration form claimed not to have received one, although one in three (29%) recalled receiving a form. We recognise that concerns about the quality of the canvass in some areas and the performance of canvassers generally relate only to a small proportion of those employed by EONI. Indeed, many canvassers are very experienced and are well known in their local community and have done the job for a long time. Nevertheless the EONI may wish to consider whether there is scope for putting in place a mechanism to quality assure the work of canvassers thus contributing to improvements for future years.

**6.30** A number of political parties focused on the need for the improved training of all canvassers. Some suggested that the training should include an element on how to assist people with disabilities. The EONI advised the Commission that it had conducted appropriate training with its canvassers before the 2003 annual canvass.

**6.31** The EONI management held an internal workshop in January 2003 to review the registration process. A number of issues were discussed including the canvass methodology, forms revision, staffing, equipment levels, information technology publicity and the use of the helpline. The general consensus reached was that the new registration process was conducted better than could have been anticipated given the prevailing circumstances including delays in introducing legislation, the revision of all stationery, a new IT system and problems with the helpline sponsored by the Commission.

**6.32** Debriefing and 'wash up' sessions such as these are important management tools to assist an organisation in identifying what went well and what could be improved on. A number of action points were identified for administering the 2003 canvass. However, we note that no specific standards were set for the 2003 canvass (as was also the case in 2002) against which future improvements in service delivery could be measured. Public accountability through performance monitoring is in line with good practice throughout the public sector and would afford greater openness and transparency in the activities and achievements of the EONI. This could be further achieved by the EONI including in its statutory annual report to Parliament information on how the canvass was conducted. It could, for example, detail comparative facts and figures about registration rates and identify action plans for improving future canvasses. To maximise transparency the annual report could also be made available on the EONI website. We understand the Chief Electoral Officer intends to develop his annual report in this way.

**6.33** The Commission's report *Best value and electoral services* offers guidance on setting performance indicators and would be a useful starting point for the EONI to develop its own specific performance indicators.<sup>45</sup> Once developed, the EONI would be in a position to compare its performance year on year. It would also enable the EONI to compare its performance over a range of activities with counterparts elsewhere in the UK.

**6.34** In its own internal review of the registration process the EONI commented that the returns received from canvassers were of a much higher quality than those returned by post with the result that less follow-up was required. All the political parties were of the opinion that the door-to-door canvass should be retained, because it ensured blanket distribution of registration forms and canvassers could be called upon to assist people in completing the registration forms.

**6.35** Northern Ireland is one of the few areas in the UK that continues to have a door-to-door canvass. Many other areas use a postal canvass with canvassers only used for follow

<sup>45</sup> The Electoral Commission (2002) *Best value and electoral services*.

up visits to those who fail to respond. There are clearly advantages to the door-to-door canvass including direct contact with the electorate. Given that last year was the first year of individual registration there was a strong argument for having face-to-face contact. However, this form of canvass is relatively expensive, and it will clearly be important for the EONI to keep under consideration whether other forms of canvass might be more cost-effective, particularly given that 50% of electors returned their form by post during the 2002 annual canvass. There may be an argument for conducting the annual canvass using a combination of both the door-to-door canvass and a postal canvass. Resources could then be redeployed towards increasing registration rates with hard-to-reach groups.

### Voter 'apathy'

**6.36** The Act requires individuals to take responsibility for getting their name on the register. Previously only one person in the household had to complete a household registration form and consequently a large proportion of the electorate gave little or no thought to the process of registering. It can therefore be concluded that a significant proportion of people were registered by virtue of the fact that a more conscientious member of the household completed the household registration form and included their name on their behalf. The move to individual registration is likely to have had the effect of 'flushing out' apathetic voters and those not used to registering.

I've been registered because a member of my family used to put the names of the family down for everyone. Now it's changed and I haven't put my name down to vote.

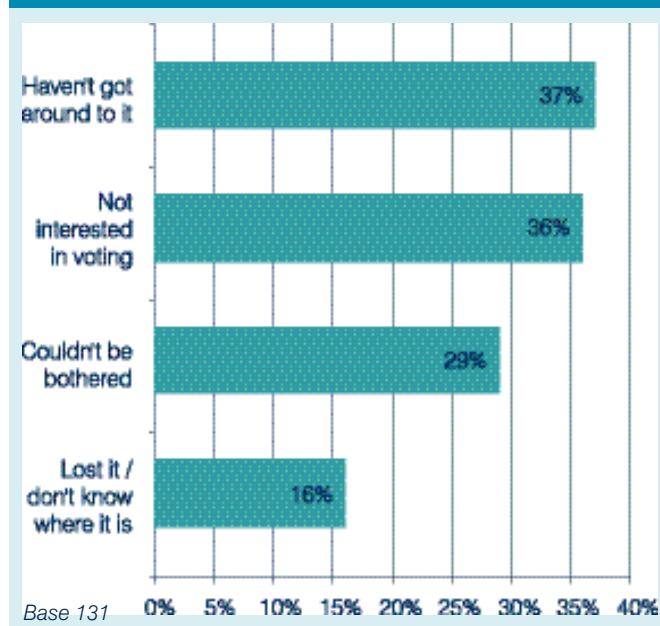
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**6.37** The public opinion research supports the view that apathy was a factor in non-registration and accounted for the majority of non-returns (other than where a form was not received by an individual).

When I do get something through the door, I do want to fill it in but I just don't and its laziness and it just gets thrown out.

Millward Brown Ulster focus group, April 2003

Figure 14: The four main reasons given for non-registration



**6.38** In the focus group held with electoral administrators the term 'form blindness' was used to describe the situation where people avoid completing forms of any kind. It was suggested this may have been a factor with the registration form. The EONI confirmed that canvassers were advised not to attest forms on behalf of people, as this could lead to problems where wrong information was supplied. However, canvassers were required to explain what was needed and to help people fill in their forms. One party raised concerns about literacy levels and commented that no special measures were adopted to help those who had difficulty reading and writing. Prior to individual registration difficulties of this nature are likely to have been masked by the fact that one person completed the household registration thus avoiding any embarrassment for the individual concerned.

**6.39** Just over a third (36%) of those not registered said the reason they were not registered was because they had no intention of voting. One political party in its response to our consultation said many people were

disillusioned with politics and with politicians, particularly in Northern Ireland. This opinion was also expressed frequently in the focus groups conducted in April 2003. Those expressing this view tended to link it to the particular nature of Northern Ireland politics.<sup>46</sup> However such views are not unique to Northern Ireland, as disillusionment with politics is a significant factor in the rest of the UK.<sup>47</sup>

I used to vote. Me and my husband but I don't now. I've just no interest... I mean sure they're not doing anything for you. To me they're all just in it for themselves.

They only come round the doors coming up to the election and say they'll do everything for you and then you don't see them again after.

If I really wanted to vote for somebody I would give my national insurance number. If you felt so strongly about it but I don't because I've no interest in what they are talking about.

Millward Brown Ulster focus groups April 2003

**6.40** There is no evidence to date to suggest that disconnection between the public and the political process has increased as a result of the implementation of the Act. However, the move to individual registration may mean that any sense of disconnection or disillusionment impacts more significantly on future registration rates. Previously, if one person in a household was inclined to register, they likely included all other occupants on the form, regardless of what they perceived their views to be about the electoral process or politics generally. Individual registration, however, has meant that disillusioned voters are less likely to be included on the register since they are less motivated to make the effort to register.

**6.41** The April 2003 public opinion survey highlighted reasons why people registered. Three out of four felt either that it was important to vote or they had a duty to vote. A small number said they had applied to be included on the register for credit purposes. About 4 in 10 were unaware that they had a legal obligation to complete an electoral

registration form. For the 2003 annual canvass the EONI emphasised this legal requirement on the registration form.

**6.42** One possible outcome of people not intending to vote excluding themselves from the register might be an apparently higher voter turnout at future elections. Voter turnout is calculated by dividing numbers voting by the registered electorate, usually expressed as a percentage. If a higher proportion of those registered are intending to vote than previously because they made the effort to register then this could lead to an increased turnout figure. However, other factors, particularly the political climate at the time of the election will also play a significant role in determining turnout.

#### Concerns over disclosure of personal information

**6.43** A number of different stakeholders expressed the view that some people had not registered for reasons linked to personal safety and the use of personal identifiers. These included concerns about the 'big brother' factor and how the register was used. It was suggested that some people operating in the 'black economy' were reluctant to disclose personal identifiers, particularly their national insurance number. About 5% of deliberate non-registrants said they did not register because they were reluctant to provide personal information:

I don't like the way you have to give your national insurance number. There's too many of your personal details and that's why I didn't register this time.<sup>48</sup>

**6.44** Prior to the 2002 canvass, the electoral register was available for sale to anyone who requested a copy. However, new legislation in 2002 introduced 'opt-out' provisions and created two registers, the full register and the edited register. As a result registrants were given the opportunity of opting out of the edited register but their names were included in the full register. The edited register is available for sale for commercial purposes including marketing whereas access to the full register is restricted. It may be that the combination of requesting personal identifiers such as national insurance numbers

<sup>46</sup> *Andersonstown News*, 'Apathy is reason for voter shortfall', 25 January 2003.

<sup>47</sup> The Electoral Commission (2003) *Public opinion and the 2004 elections*.

<sup>48</sup> *Ibid.*

and date of birth, along with more attention being given to the sale of the register may have acted as a deterrent to some people registering. Despite the fact that it is a legal requirement to register and personal identifiers are not included on the published registers, our public opinion research suggests around 3% of those who decided not to register did so because they believed the register was not confidential and the information asked for was an invasion of privacy.

## Conclusions

**6.45** Of the factors that may have contributed to the 10% reduction in the number of people on the electoral register, the removal of the 'carry forward' appears to be one factor that had the most significant impact on the number of people on the register. If it had been retained the apparent registration rate in December 2002 is likely to have been in the region of 96%. Its removal however and that of the other inflationary factors potentially established a more accurate registration rate for Northern Ireland. The register published in December 2002 contains the names of 86% of the population entitled to be on the register and is likely to be an accurate estimate of the Northern Ireland registration rate.

**6.46** The removal of the 'carry forward' and other inflationary factors including possible fraudulent entries from the register are not alone in explaining the reductions. Other factors relevant to the level of registration including the impact on particular socio-economic groups, disengagement from the political process, a lack of awareness of the new arrangements and a disinterest in voting may help explain the reduction. These factors are not unique to Northern Ireland as evidenced by experience elsewhere in the UK and in other western democracies.





# 7 The impact of individual registration

The new registration process disproportionately impacted on young people and students, people with learning disabilities, people with disabilities generally and those living in areas of high social deprivation.

## Context

7.1 A number of stakeholders we consulted including groups within the voluntary sector expressed concern that the new registration process disproportionately impacted on particular socio-economic groups including young people and students, people with learning disabilities, people with physical disabilities, people living in areas of social deprivation and those living in residential type accommodation.

7.2 We commented earlier that a number of groups appeared to be significantly under-represented on the December 2002 electoral register. While it is not possible to determine if this was a direct result of the Act, it is imperative that low levels of registration among disadvantaged and marginalised groups are recognised and addressed over the longer term. The EONI, The Electoral Commission and others have a shared responsibility to work in partnership to ensure that levels of registration among such groups are encouraged and supported.

## Young people and students

7.3 Across the UK and Western European countries, the disengagement of young people from the political process, including the electoral process, is increasingly becoming an area for concern. A report produced by The Electoral Commission, *Voter engagement and young people*, found that a key factor in low levels of participation of young people in elections was registration:

Non-registration constitutes a significant barrier to improving turnout. It is essential to improve registration procedures and increase levels of registration.<sup>49</sup>

In Northern Ireland non-registration rates for young people aged 18–24 are over twice the Northern Ireland average while those aged 65 and over are four times more likely to be registered than their counterparts in the 18–24 age group.

7.4 Prior to the introduction of the Act the names of young people aged 17 and over could be included on the household registration form. However, the introduction of

<sup>49</sup> The Electoral Commission (2002) *Voter engagement and young people*.

individual registration, in theory at least, transferred the onus from the head of household to the individual young person. The result of this is that young people and/or their parents have to be proactive in requesting additional forms from either a canvasser or the EONI if they want their names included on the register.

**7.5** This is a significant change in policy and was arguably not clearly explained in the guidance notes issued by the EONI. It is therefore possible that a significant proportion of young people were not included on the register in the first year of individual registration. The fact that 50% of registration forms were returned by post suggests that parents and young people may not have had an opportunity to discuss the position with canvassers or to request additional forms. Both the EONI and the Commission produced a number of posters for distribution to schools, colleges and universities explaining individual registration and the importance of registering to vote. Consideration needs to be given to developing a more structured methodology for ensuring that young people are made aware of their individual responsibility to register. Given our specific responsibility for public awareness the Commission will explore potential mechanisms for addressing this gap in individual registration with the EONI.

**7.6** A number of political parties raised concerns about the new process. Under household registration students were normally included on the household registration form and the process was relatively straightforward. However, under individual registration students had to have an individual registration form sent to their term-time address. Following completion, it has to be returned to the EONI. A Member of the Assembly expressed concern that thousands of students could potentially be disenfranchised as a result.

The issue of students studying away from home has not been properly safeguarded in the rules and procedures governing voter registration for upcoming elections. The consequences may indeed be far reaching with an entire generation of young voters being effectively disenfranchised. Considering that in England the British Government are taking significant steps to enable more people to exercise their vote, this latest move

will be seen by many as retrograde and anti-democratic. Potentially thousands of young people will be wiped off the electoral register... The need for forms to be signed individually as opposed to the old household registration form will put students at a disadvantage.<sup>50</sup>

**7.7** In its response to the Commission's consultation the National Union of Students and Union of Students in Ireland (NUS-USI) highlighted the fact that voter disengagement was a particular issue with regard to students. The Union claimed that among the student body there was an overriding and pervasive feeling of apathy towards the political and democratic processes and that neither the political parties nor the government were doing enough to address issues relevant to students. Conscious of these concerns, the Commission has developed and is implementing an outreach strategy with a focus on hard-to-reach groups. The first group to be targeted across the UK will be young people aged 16–24.

### People with learning disabilities

**7.8** A number of stakeholders identified particular concerns about the impact the new registration process was having on people with learning disabilities. Provision was made in the legislation for the registration form to be completed and signed on the registrant's behalf by another person (attestor). The person attesting was asked to give a reason why the registrant had not signed the form and to provide details of their name and address. In circumstances where a learning disability or mental health problem was the determining reason, the EONI issued the following letter:<sup>51</sup>

Under current legislation we are unable to include certain people in the Register of Electors. This includes people born without or with very limited reason, or people whose mental capacity has deteriorated to the point that they would have no comprehension of the voting process.

Unlike some areas of life whereby the affairs of a person can be put under the management of another person, for example by means of what is

<sup>50</sup> *Strabane Weekly News*, 'Student vote threatened by new electoral registration rules claim', 26 September 2003.

<sup>51</sup> Standard letter issued by EONI.

termed power of attorney, this does not apply to the right to vote or be registered. The right to vote depends on the person having sufficient mental capacity to be capable of making a choice for themselves regarding whom they wish to vote for. (Of course there are other general registration requirements that also have to be met, such as age, nationality and residence.)

If \_\_\_\_\_ meets the above mentioned criteria, then he/she is indeed entitled to be registered. If not, then there is no such entitlement.

Please advise me of whether \_\_\_\_\_ would be capable of personally making a decision for whom to vote, without the assistance of another person.

I appreciate that for many people, a letter such as this deals with very sensitive and personal issues. It is by no means the intention of this office to act in an intrusive or insensitive manner but trust that you understand why we have to make such enquiries.

The Chief Electoral Officer advised the Commission that approximately 1,000 such letters had been issued and about 120 people subsequently responded requesting inclusion on the register.

**7.9** A community umbrella organisation based in Belfast submitted written evidence about this process to the Northern Ireland Affairs Select Committee and highlighted the case of an individual, Mr B, who had been the subject of one of the above letters:

The investigation by the Electoral Office of individuals with special learning needs who have applied to claim their right to vote is insensitive and creates obstacles, perceived or actual, which other voters without disabilities do not encounter. ... Falls Community Council has communicated on this case with the Northern Ireland Human Rights Commission and a copy is provided of the reply received from the Commission to Falls Community Council which, as the Committee will note, recognises the potential adverse impact on human rights. Furthermore, there is a duty on all public bodies in the North of Ireland to proactively

promote equality of opportunity for those, like Mr B, who are vulnerable to discrimination and who experience inequality. Falls Community Council submits that the new Electoral Registration process not only fails to comply with the proactive promotion of equality of opportunity (s75, NI Act 1998), but is inherently prejudiced against people with special learning needs.<sup>52</sup>

**7.10** During our consultation with the voluntary sector, MENCAP also raised concerns about this issue. They were of the opinion that the process adopted by the EONI put the onus on the attester, often a family member, to prove the person's ability to vote without assistance. MENCAP suggested the letter should emphasise inclusion rather than exclusion, and should inform the person responding to err on the side of inclusion. The question of whether the applicant could vote unassisted was not felt to be sufficiently specific as voters with different forms of disability could rightfully vote with assistance. MENCAP concluded:<sup>53</sup>

Indeed, the lack of clarity about the issue of capacity to vote and the focus on individuals who should not be included in the Register of Electors was likely to reinforce the view, we believe, that people with a learning disability are not entitled to vote.

**7.11** The ability of the EONI to identify people with learning disabilities was a direct result of individual registration. Previously the names of family members with learning disabilities were included on the household registration form and no details were required of their disability. The process of individual registration may inadvertently have impacted on people with learning disabilities, thus effectively disenfranchising hundreds of people who in the past may have voted. We understand and welcome the fact that the EONI in line with its commitment to equality intends conducting an equality impact assessment into this matter under Section 75 of the Northern Ireland Act 1998.

**7.12** We understand the EONI compiled a new letter for use in the 2003 annual canvass and consulted groups interested in the rights of people with learning disabilities.

<sup>52</sup> Select Committee Report, Ev43.

<sup>53</sup> Letter from MENCAP dated 6 June 2003.

It is clearly important that inclusion rather than exclusion should be emphasised. More generally the Commission itself is undertaking a review of access to the electoral process, including access for people with learning disabilities to the voting process. An initial report on the legal framework for access was published in June 2003 and a guide setting out best practice is scheduled for publication in autumn 2003.

### People with other forms of disability

**7.13** A number of voluntary organisations representing the interests of those with visual impairments and chronic health conditions also raised concerns about the registration process. Our research confirms these concerns as people with disabilities were almost twice as likely to say they were not registered because they found the forms difficult to understand. In its response the Multiple Sclerosis (MS) Society commented:

Members of this organisation have expressed concerns that they have absolutely no knowledge of the electoral registration process. The majority of individuals associated with this organisation are typically older, have limited mobility and generally feel intimidated and unaffected by both the political and electoral processes.

Members ... feel as if they have been deliberately left out of the process, and that there is no emphasis being placed on facilitating the registration process in a way that would actively include them.<sup>54</sup>

**7.14** The registration process was also criticised for being too complicated and using language not relevant to everyday use. The Commission's publicity campaign was described as using language and detail that were 'too technical'. It was suggested that the EONI provide assistance to people with disabilities – although the Commission notes that canvassers were instructed to offer such assistance. The Commission endeavours to ensure that all information used in its public awareness campaigns is Plain English approved. The Commission has also produced information in a simpler format for

people who might have difficulty understanding the general leaflets. The EONI may wish to consider similar initiatives regarding information supplied to the electorate. However the EONI has advised the Commission that it aims to explain what is required by law and simplifying the wording of legislation may result in people being misled. Despite its reservations the EONI confirmed that it continually seeks ways of making information more understandable.

**7.15** A voluntary group working with people with visual impairments found it difficult to access suitably formatted material on registration for their members. The EONI, in its evidence to the Northern Ireland Affairs Select Committee<sup>55</sup> stated that it provided registration forms and the accompanying notes in Braille and large print. EONI may wish to consider making this material more widely available as clearly some groups were unaware of its existence.

**7.16** People with certain specific disabilities also experienced difficulty in completing the registration form. Leonard Cheshire Northern Ireland cited one example where a resident had his application form for an electoral identity card returned because his signature did not match that on his registration form. The organisation explained that:

He has cerebral palsy with severe muscle spasms. It takes him 5–10 minutes to sign his name. His signatures will never match.<sup>56</sup>

While the facility exists for a person to have their application attested, it should be recognised that people with many disabilities are empowered, active and independent citizens who prefer to sign their own signature regardless of how long it takes. In such circumstances the Chief Electoral Officer may wish to consider whether an alternative approach may be viable for dealing with situations such as this.

<sup>55</sup> Northern Ireland Affairs Select Committee. Electoral Registration in Northern Ireland para 16.

<sup>56</sup> Letter from Leonard Cheshire NI dated 25 June 2003.

<sup>54</sup> Correspondence from MS Society dated 14 May 2003.

## People living in areas of high social deprivation

**7.17** A number of the political parties suggested that the new registration process would have an adverse impact on people living in areas of high social deprivation. Our research has shown that areas experiencing a significant decrease in registration rates had higher than average deprivation scores, and that people classified in the lower socio-economic groups were less likely to be registered. Without further research we cannot be definitive as to the precise reasons for this, but disengagement from the political process in marginalised communities and lower levels of literacy are likely to be significant factors.

**7.18** It is also the case that home ownership in areas of high social deprivation is much lower and there is a clear link between home ownership and being registered. It has also been suggested that a proportion of people living in areas of high social deprivation may be operating within the 'black economy' and this may be a factor in their non-registration.

## People living in residential type accommodation

**7.19** None of the political parties or groups from the voluntary sector raised any particular concerns about the impact of the registration process on residents living in communal residential type settings. However, the distribution of forms to such establishments was raised during the focus groups. The EONI has advised us that residential homes are canvassed in the same way as other residences – in some instances the canvasser delivers the forms directly to each individual and returns to collect them later. In other cases, the forms are handed to a person for distribution in the home and are collected later. This is clearly an area of electoral registration practice that may benefit from further review and research in the coming years.

## Minority ethnic groups

**7.20** No specific feedback has been received by the Commission from groups representing the interests of minority ethnic groups as part of the work undertaken

for this report. However, we are aware from previous discussions with community organisations that registration rates among such groups in Northern Ireland are perceived to be very low. The Commission has identified the participation of minority ethnic groups as a priority area and has previously commissioned research on a UK wide basis.<sup>57</sup> The Commission intends to focus on the specific issues relating to minority ethnic groups in Northern Ireland as part of its future work.

## Conclusions

**7.21** Individual registration tended to have an adverse impact on disadvantaged, marginalised and hard to reach groups. Young people and students, people with learning disabilities and other forms of disability and those living in areas of high social deprivation were less likely to be registered and encountered specific problems with the new registration process. While these findings relate directly to Northern Ireland, they are not unique and reflect the wider picture across the UK. They present a major challenge to all those concerned with widening participation in electoral and democratic processes.

<sup>57</sup> The Electoral Commission (2002) *Voter engagement among black and minority ethnic communities*.





# 8 Provision of electoral identity cards

To vote at an election in Northern Ireland an elector must now present photographic identification. A current British or Irish passport, a UK photographic driving licence, a Translink Senior SmartPass (bus pass) or an electoral identity card are the permissible forms of identification.

## Introduction

**8.1** The provision of a free electoral identity card to electors who did not possess the necessary prescribed photographic identity was considered an important way of securing the electoral process in Northern Ireland. The Representation of the People (Northern Ireland) (Variation of Specified Documents) Regulations 2003 removed all non-photographic forms of identity from the specified documents. To vote at an election in Northern Ireland an elector must now present a British or Irish passport, a UK photographic driving licence, a Translink Senior SmartPass (bus pass for people aged 65+) or an electoral identity card.

**8.2** Earlier we discussed the process by which cards were made available to the Northern Ireland electorate. This chapter examines the uptake of the electoral identity card and assesses whether it has been distributed in sufficient numbers.

## Numbers of cards issued

**8.3** Some 235,000 electors had indicated at the 2002 canvass that they required an electoral identity card and had been sent an application form. Uptake was initially slow and by the end of January 2003 30,895 applications had been received, of which 29,303 were postal and 1,592 non-postal. By the end of February 2003 numbers had increased to 43,801, and by 30 June 2003 it stood at 86,162 of which 78,482 had already been issued.<sup>58</sup> In April 2003 the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland invited representatives from the EONI and the Commission to discuss the uptake of the electoral identity card and to agree joint activity aimed at increasing the number of applications. At this meeting the Secretary of State agreed, if required, to make additional resources available to the EONI to increase uptake. As a consequence the EONI sent a reminder and further application form to all those registered electors (around 200,000) who had indicated an interest in the electoral identity card on their registration form during the 2002 canvass but who had failed to apply for a card. It extended the programme of mobile sites to major shopping centres and

<sup>58</sup> By 31 October 2003, the number of cards issued had increased to 81,253, an increase of 3.4%.

supermarkets. It produced and distributed, with the assistance of political parties, a large volume of publicity material about the need for evidence of identity and the location and times of application venues. In response the Commission increased the level of advertising in support of the EONI. The Commission also undertook to establish through public opinion research an estimate of the numbers of people without proper identification.

**8.4** The EONI advised the Commission that data in respect of social deprivation was studied in order that the programme of mobile site visits could be effectively targeted. During April and the first part of May 2003 the mobile units visited major shopping centres and this significantly increased the uptake of electoral identity cards. Records collated on behalf of the EONI, however, revealed that 40% of those who applied for a card at shopping centres already possessed one of the other forms of suitable identity. The EONI also identified the fact that some people applying for a card at shopping centres were unlikely to remember their national insurance number. Furthermore, the EONI have advised us that the rate of inconsistency in application data from these venues was significant, with almost one third of applications found to be inaccurate. The EONI informed the Commission that in areas where political parties had been proactive in promoting the card within their local communities uptake was much higher.

**8.5** The number of cards issued per constituency at the end of June 2003 was as follows:

**Table 18: Uptake of electoral identity cards by constituency**

Constituency	Number issued	Percentage registered electorate with cards at 30 June 2003
Belfast East	3,555	6.83
Belfast North	5,545	10.77
Belfast South	3,323	6.53
Belfast West	6,154	12.08
East Antrim	3,183	5.73
East Londonderry	4,194	7.45
Fermanagh and South Tyrone	5,217	8.09
Foyle	6,847	10.47
Lagan Valley	4,097	6.02
Mid-Ulster	4,318	7.17
North Antrim	4,921	6.96
North Down	2,853	4.96
Newry-Armagh	3,887	5.64
South Antrim	3,465	5.43
South Down	4,175	5.94
Strangford	3,743	5.63
Upper Bann	3,840	5.57
West Tyrone	5,165	8.92
<b>Total</b>	<b>78,482</b>	<b>7.14</b>

*Source: Northern Ireland Office: Response to a Parliamentary question, June 2003*

**8.6** The constituencies where applications for the card were highest included Belfast West, Belfast North and Foyle. The lowest percentage uptake was in North Down, South Antrim, East Antrim and Newry and Armagh. Just over 7% of the Northern Ireland electorate registered on 1 July had electoral identity cards.

**8.7** The EONI has advised us that the cost of introducing the electoral identity card up to June 2003 was almost £1.7m.

**Table 19: Costs of the electoral identity card scheme to June 2003<sup>59</sup>**

Costs	£K (net of VAT)
Data capture and validation	1,019
Cards production and distribution	234
Extra card costs due to postponement of Assembly elections	243
Forms printing and posting	143
Other costs	60
<b>Total cost</b>	<b>1,699</b>

Source: EONI

## Views of political parties on electoral identity cards

**8.7** The majority of the political parties responding to the Commission's consultation felt that the new voter identification requirements resulting from the Act would assist in reducing fraud because the forms of identification prescribed were more secure. One party expressed a concern that the new identity card was less secure than the other forms of photographic identity, because the photograph did not have to be endorsed by a witness. One party who responded to our consultation disagreed with the new identification requirements, arguing instead that the forms of acceptable identification should be widened.

**8.8** Most parties felt that the new identification requirements would have a particular impact on a number of socio-economic groups. They identified older people, young people and students, people living in rural areas, people with learning disabilities, people with visual impairments and people living in socially deprived areas as the most likely to be affected. Reasons put forward for potential difficulties included problems with accessibility and location of application centres, problems with literacy, the availability of accessible information and concerns that personal identifiers would be used by other government agencies.

**8.9** Respondents from the voluntary sector raised similar concerns about disadvantaged groups. One group

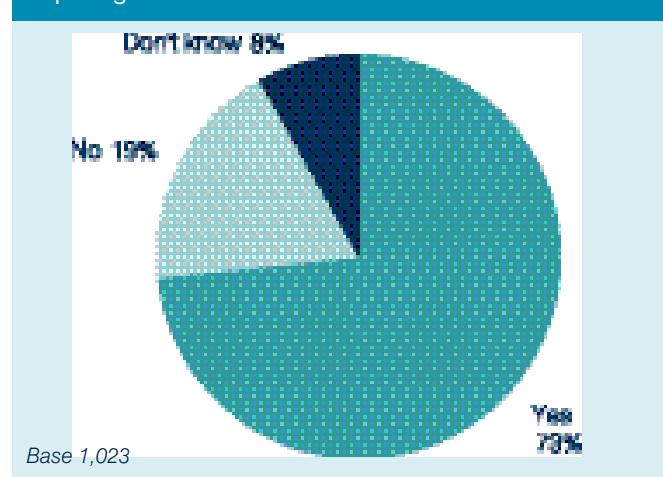
<sup>59</sup> First phase of the contract related to data processing and card production for the period up to 1 May Assembly election (postponed). These costs include initial design, set-up, equipment and material costs. Future arrangements are in place for nine years. Ongoing costs are subject to regular review in light of continuing demand for the electoral identity card.

representing people with visual impairments highlighted concerns about the font size on application forms and suggested all information should be provided in a large print and in Braille.

## Research findings

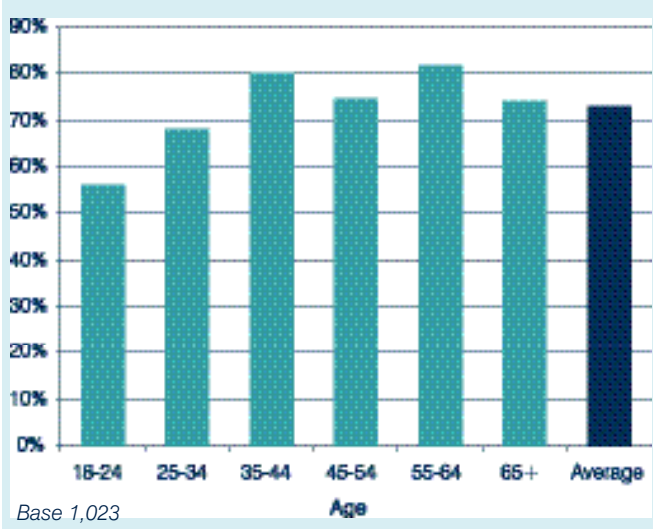
**8.10** In analysing the electorate's views and opinions about electoral identification the April 2003 survey has been used.<sup>60</sup> Overall levels of awareness of the new identity requirements were very positive particularly given that the new policy was in place for less than a year. Just over 7 in 10 (73%) of those questioned said they were aware of the changes and just under 2 in 10 (19%) said they were not aware of any proposed changes. Awareness varied considerably across different groups and there was a particularly strong correlation with age. Altogether 4 in 10 young people (aged 18–24) were aware of the changes, whereas 8 in 10 respondents aged 35+ were aware. Other groups that showed a lower than average awareness were students, those living in rented accommodation, people with disabilities and those not registered. Gender, religion and political ideology were not significant although those classified in the higher socio-economic group were more likely to state awareness than their counterparts in the other socio-economic groups.

**Figure 15: Awareness of identity requirements at polling stations**



<sup>60</sup> Sample size 1,023.

Figure 16: Awareness of changes to identification requirements by age



**8.11** When respondents were shown a list of forms of identification and asked for their views on eligibility for use at polling stations, the six forms most commonly identified were driving licence (84%), British passport (78%), electoral identity card (50%), Irish passport (36%), provisional driving licence (20%) and Translink Senior Smartpass (17%). These were all correctly identified. However, a number of respondents identified forms of identification that were no longer acceptable. These included: medical card (15%), allowances/pensions book (13%), social security book (11%) and student card (10%).

**8.12** When asked about the forms of identification that they would use at the next election, almost 9 in 10 (88%) mentioned an eligible form of identification, and 1 in 20 (5%) specified an ineligible form. The driving licence (54%) was identified as the form of identification most likely to be used, followed by British passport (17%), electoral identity card (7%), Irish passport (4%) and the Translink Senior Smartpass (4%). Of the ineligible forms specified those most commonly referred to were: social security book (2%), pension book (2%), and medical card (1%). It can therefore be concluded from these figures that potentially 5% of the electorate at the time of the

survey would have brought an inappropriate form of identification to a polling station.

**8.13** When respondents were questioned about the identification material they actually possessed, it transpired that just over 7 in 10 possessed a driving licence (71%), and a slightly smaller number (68%) possessed either a British or Irish passport and 6% said they had an electoral identity card. Less than 1 in 10 (7%) indicated they did not have any form of eligible identification documentation.

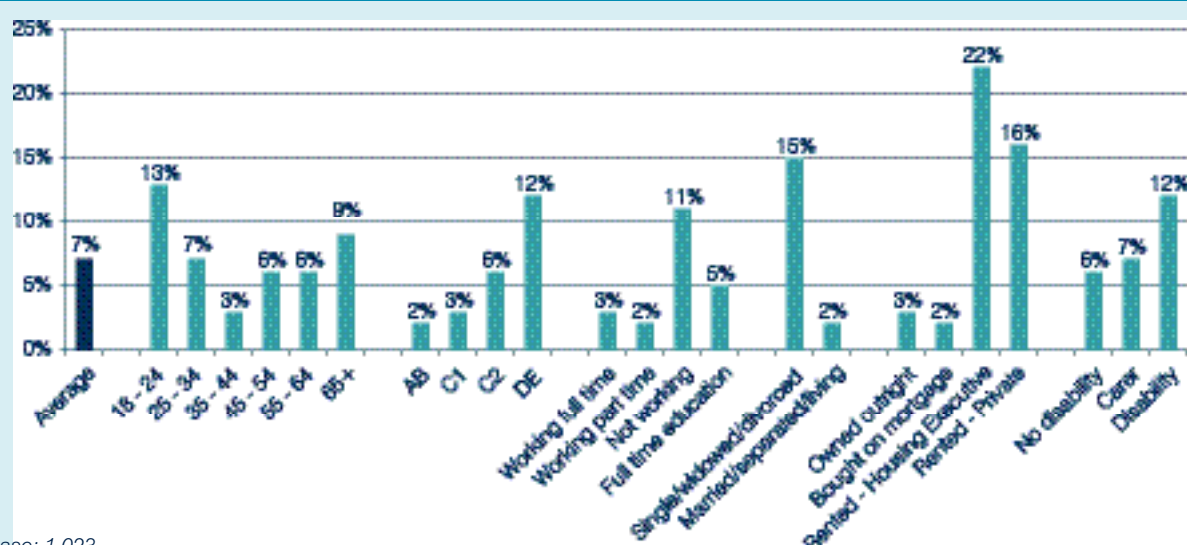
Table 20: Percentages holding eligible identification

Form of eligible ID	Percentage owning this form of ID
Driving licence	71
British or Irish passport	68
Translink senior SmartPass	10
Electoral identity card	6
Passport of other EU country	3
None of these	7

Base 1,023

**8.14** Those without eligible identification documentation were not evenly distributed across the population. Within this group certain categories of people had much higher rates of non-possession of eligible identification. This was particularly marked in respect of young people aged 18–24, those in socio-economic group DE, those living in rented accommodation and those with disabilities. People who identified themselves as single, widowed or divorced were also less likely to have eligible identification.

Figure 17: Percentage without eligible identification



Base: 1,023

**8.15** It is noteworthy that almost half of those without eligible identification material were not actually on the register. For those registered, the percentage without eligible identification documents was 5% of which a third had applied for an electoral identity card. This means that just over 3% of the registered electorate did not have eligible identification documentation, equating to approximately 37,000 people.<sup>61</sup> This represents a significant proportion of people without the necessary identification and every effort will need to be made to close this gap.

**8.16** In an effort to ensure that we had robust information on which to draw conclusions we used a booster sample of those who had ticked the box but had failed to return the application form for electoral identity documents. The results revealed that just over 3 in 10 (31%) did not have eligible identification. When all were asked why they hadn't applied for a card, a third said they had not received a form, a quarter (25%) said that they hadn't yet got around to it. A further 24% said they had another form of suitable identification.

<sup>61</sup> Taking into account the sampling tolerance of +/- 3%, the number of people registered to vote, but without eligible identification falls within the range 4,400 to 70,300.

**8.17** The EONI had an opportunity to gauge the effect of the Act at a by-election for a local council seat in Crotlieve, in the Newry and Mourne area on 18 June 2003. This was the first election anywhere in the UK where each elector had to present approved photographic identification before they were given a ballot paper. The EONI kept a record of the forms of identification used at the polling stations and shared this information with the Commission.<sup>62</sup> Turnout was 45% and the identification details were recorded for 6,670 people.

Table 21: Eligible identity documents presented and recorded

Form of identification presented	Number presented	Percentage
Driving licence	4,054	60.8
Passport	1,760	26.4
Translink Senior Smartpass	456	6.8
Electoral identity card	400	6.0
<b>Total</b>	<b>6,670</b>	<b>100.0</b>

<sup>62</sup> Source: EONI.

**8.18** Altogether 68 people (representing 1% of the total voters) were refused ballot papers either because they had presented ineligible identity documents, or had no identification documentation. According to the EONI many of these electors returned to vote later in the day with the correct form of identification. It is noteworthy that 22 of the 68 were refused ballot papers because their photographic identification was out of date. This highlights the importance of ensuring that the electorate are advised that their electoral identification must be current.

**Table 22: Number not presenting eligible forms of identity at polling stations**

Form of identification presented	Number
No identification	12
Driving licence – not current	10
Passport – not current	12
Allowance book	13
Medical card	4
Ineligible form of travel pass	5
Firearms certificate	6
Other	6
<b>Total</b>	<b>68</b>

**8.19** In its report on the Crotlieve by-election, the EONI concluded that the overall impression from polling station staff was that:

Identification is no longer a contentious issue and the simplification of the range of ID documents is welcomed. The electoral ID card is still novel and polling station staff felt that it was a sensible step to fill the void for people who did not have any of the other three forms of identification.<sup>63</sup>

## Conclusions

**8.20** The uptake of the electoral identity card varied from constituency to constituency with the overall uptake at just over 7%. Concerns expressed by the political parties in respect of access to the electoral identity card have been confirmed to some extent by the Commission's public opinion survey. This revealed that a number of disadvantaged groups were less likely to have eligible

identification. We estimate from our research that about 37,000 people on the electoral register do not have eligible photographic identification.

**8.21** Evidence from the Crotlieve by-election suggests that the message about electoral identification at polling stations is generally understood by the electorate. However, efforts will need to be maintained to ensure that those without eligible identification and young people coming onto the register for the first time are aware of the identification requirement and have the opportunity to apply for an electoral identity card. This will require a concerted and ongoing effort by both the EONI and the Commission.

<sup>63</sup> Source: EONI.



# 9 Rolling registration and absent voting

Rolling registration provides a voluntary means by which names can be added to or deleted from the register throughout the year. The Electoral Fraud (Northern Ireland) Act 2002 introduced changes to rolling registration to keep it in line with the process of registering during the period of the annual canvass.

## Background

**9.1** Rolling registration was introduced throughout the UK on 16 February 2001 and the legislative provisions are broadly similar in Northern Ireland to those in England, Scotland and Wales. Rolling registration provides a voluntary means by which entries can be added, transferred or deleted from the register throughout the year rather than during the annual canvass, as was the case up to that point.<sup>64</sup> The Act introduced changes to the rolling registration process to keep it in line with the process of registering during the period of the annual canvass. It also allows for the transfer of an elector's name from one address to another. Under rolling registration the register is updated on a monthly basis outside the normal canvass period which runs from 1 September to 30 November each year. A person wishing to have their name added to the register must provide the same personal identifiers as are required under the normal registration process.

**9.2** Given the concerns about the decrease in numbers on the register, the rolling registration process was seen by the political parties as an opportunity for people to register who had not been included on the December 2002 register. Following the publication of this register the Commission's public awareness campaign extensively promoted rolling registration as a means of ensuring as many people as possible were registered. The reduction in the number of names on the December 2002 register was partly offset through the rolling registration process, as the May 2003 register shows.

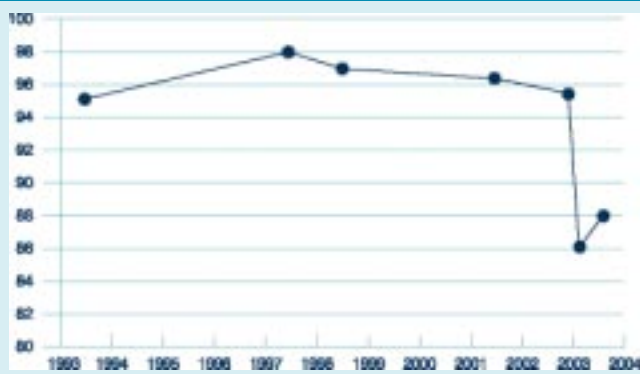
## The May 2003 register

**9.3** The total number of names included on the May 2003 electoral was 1,098,726, a net increase of 26,380<sup>65</sup> compared to the December 2002 register. This equates to an overall increase of 2.1 percentage points.

<sup>64</sup> There was, however, a process by which attainees could be added to the register for the first time at any point through the year.

<sup>65</sup> According to the EONI the total number of names included on the May 2003 register was 1,098,726 which represented an increase of approximately 38,000 electors under rolling registration and a decrease of some 11,000 in respect of electors who had died or left to live permanently outside Northern Ireland.

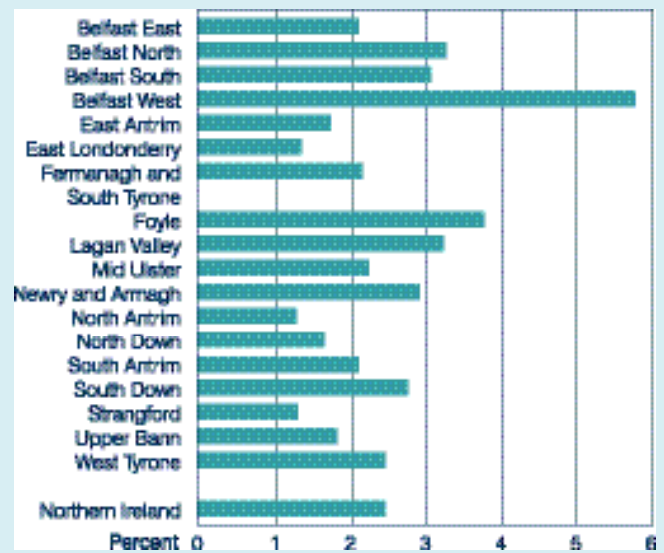
Figure 18: Registration rates by percent of population 18+



From: PricewaterhouseCoopers, *A statistical analysis of Electoral Registration in Northern Ireland, August 2002–May 2003*.  
Source: EONI, NISRA.

9.4 This increase was not uniform across Northern Ireland and ranged from +1.3% in North Antrim to +5.8% in Belfast West. This increase was not matched in the other Belfast constituencies. Belfast North and Belfast South showed increases in line with the Northern Ireland average, while Belfast East was slightly below average. The larger increases in some constituencies tend to confirm our understanding that political parties in some areas were particularly active in encouraging people to apply for registration through the rolling registration process.

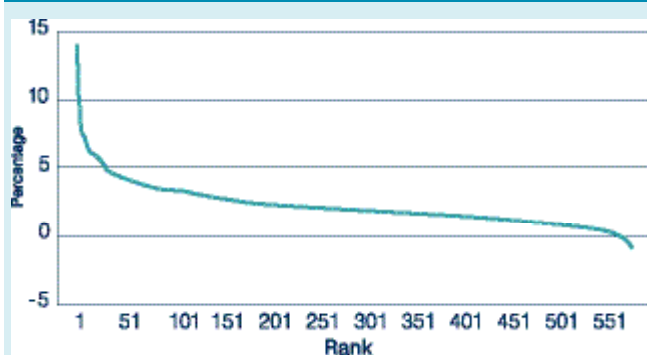
Figure 19: Percentage change in registration rate, December 2002–May 2003



From: PricewaterhouseCoopers, *A statistical analysis of Electoral Registration in Northern Ireland, August 2002–May 2003*.  
Source: EONI, NISRA.

9.5 The net change in wards varied from an increase of (+14.1%) in the Whiterock ward in Belfast West, to some wards which actually experienced a decrease. Decreases are probably accounted for by names being removed from the register because of death or people having moved. However, for the vast majority of wards the net change due to rolling registration was concentrated in a fairly narrow band ranging from 0%–5%. Only a handful of wards experienced a rise of over 10%.

Figure 20: Wards ranked by net change in registration rates, December 2002–May 2002



From: PricewaterhouseCoopers, *A statistical analysis of Electoral Registration in Northern Ireland, August 2002–May 2003*.

**9.6** When the 20 wards with the highest increase in registration rates due to rolling registration are examined, a link with deprivation is apparent. For these wards, the average proportion of the population aged 18+ in receipt of income support or Job Seekers Allowance was 32% compared to a Northern Ireland average of 17%. Similarly, the average unemployment rate in these wards was 16%, significantly above the Northern Ireland average of 6.9%. In terms of religious and political ideology, these 20 wards are overwhelmingly Catholic and nationalist. The average Catholic 'share' of the population in these wards is 92%, as opposed to just over 40% for Northern Ireland as a whole. We know from discussions with the political parties that nationalist and republican political parties were particularly active in encouraging their constituents to register under the rolling registration process.

### Issues raised by the EONI

**9.7** In evidence to the Northern Ireland Affairs Select Committee,<sup>66</sup> the Chief Electoral Officer pointed out the considerable difficulties faced by EONI staff when political parties submitted long lists of names requesting that they be sent rolling registration forms. He recounted the situation where one political party submitted 44 pages of names just before the deadline for inclusion on the register.

<sup>66</sup> Northern Ireland Affairs Select Committee, *Electoral Registration in Northern Ireland* para 67.

He said that lists received from political parties contained the names of people who had moved away or had died. He suggested that some political parties had simply compared the December 2002 register to a previous register and forwarded the names of those not appearing on the December register for inclusion. This triggered a number of letters and telephone calls from the relatives of deceased electors asking why they had been sent rolling registration application forms. He advised the Committee that in future he may have to ask parties to endorse lists before forwarding them to his office.

**9.8** Another difficulty highlighted by the EONI concerned possible breaches of the Data Protection Act 1998. After the annual canvass was completed on 15 October 2002 (the reference date for inclusion on the new register) the EONI issued some political parties with blank registration forms to help them canvass additional people for inclusion on the register. The forms were then apparently returned to the EONI by the political parties. The Chief Electoral Officer advised the Northern Ireland Affairs Select Committee:

One of the difficulties we have is that they (the forms) contain personal information and unfortunately we are led to believe that a number of parties have been copying these forms, either through a photocopier or putting them on to a PC so that personal information belonging to individuals is being held in contravention of the Data Protection Act. We are currently talking to the Information Commissioner about the difficulties we have there. I have written out to all the political parties, at the behest of the Information Commissioner, asking for confirmation that people are not retaining unlawfully the personal information belonging to individuals. So far, I have only had confirmation from two parties that they are not doing so.<sup>67</sup>

**9.9** The Chief Electoral Officer advised the Commission that he believed that he would be in breach of the Data Protection Act 1998 if he issued forms to political parties who then indirectly collected information on behalf of the EONI and retained it for their own use. However, the

<sup>67</sup> Northern Ireland Affairs Select Committee, *Electoral Registration in Northern Ireland. Minutes of Evidence and Appendices, Wednesday 2 April 2003*, paragraph 67.

Assistant Information Commissioner<sup>68</sup> has advised us that if the political parties were simply passing on registration forms to potential voters without assisting in their completion, they would not be 'data processors' (a data processor is someone other than an employee of the data controller who processes data on their behalf). Something more than simple transmission of the forms is needed for the political parties to become 'data processors' on behalf of the EONI. If they assisted an individual in the completion of the registration form they could be legally defined as a data processor of the EONI and in those circumstances EONI would be responsible for any breach of the data protection principles. In evidence to the Northern Ireland Affairs Select Committee<sup>69</sup> the Commission advised the Committee that if individuals returned forms directly to the EONI it did not consider there was a problem in making forms available through the political parties.

**9.10** Although the political parties were issued with blank copies of the registration forms as part of the annual canvass the EONI decided not to provide the parties with blank copies of the rolling registration forms. Some parties requested copies but were refused. Instead, the forms were issued directly from the EONI to people whose names and addresses were included on lists presented by the parties or through requests made to the Commission's helpline. One political party printed thousands of duplicate forms for distribution to its potential voters. In written evidence<sup>70</sup> to the Northern Ireland Affairs Select Committee the party explained:

People do not like the trouble of filling up forms, hence we embarked on a pro-active campaign to visit householders who were not registered, with a rolling registration form. Similar to the one issued by the Electoral Office and helped and assisted the electorate to ensure they were registered and this was greatly appreciated but not by the Electoral Office for Northern Ireland.

<sup>68</sup> Correspondence received from the Assistant Information Commissioner dated 23 August 2003.

<sup>69</sup> Northern Ireland Affairs Select Committee. Electoral Registration in Northern Ireland. Minutes of Evidence and Appendices, Wednesday 2 April 2003, paragraph 99.

<sup>70</sup> Northern Ireland Affairs Select Committee, Electoral Registration in Northern Ireland, Ev 38.

**9.11** This action attracted widespread publicity and the Commission was asked for its views. In response, on 11 February 2003 the Commission made the following statement:

Rolling registration provides the means by which those left off the electoral register for whatever reason can be added to the register. The Commission encourages its use to ensure that electors can secure their vote. In Great Britain the rolling registration form is freely available and can be downloaded from the Commission's website. Because of anti-fraud measures a different form is required for Northern Ireland to provide additional information. The issue of the form is matter for the EONI.

The Electoral Commission encourages greater use of the rolling registration form since it is designed to be machine readable, although a like form is permissible in law. Parties are therefore able to provide their own forms if they so wish. This, however, is not a practice we encourage and hope that the EONI will resolve with all the parties how best to ensure that rolling registration is used to enable all eligible persons to be registered.<sup>71</sup>

The Act put in place mechanisms to determine the identity of applicants for inclusion on the register. In the circumstances the rationale for restricting registration forms may no longer exist. Consequently, the Commission believes that registration forms should be made more widely accessible including downloadable online.

## Electoral hearings

**9.12** Despite the legislation being broadly similar throughout the UK electoral hearings appear to be a feature of rolling registration that is unique to Northern Ireland. Guidance notes<sup>72</sup> issued by the EONI accompanying the rolling registration form explain the process:

If you are not currently registered as an elector at any address in Northern Ireland, it may be necessary for you to attend a Public Hearing.

<sup>71</sup> The Electoral Commission, news release, 11 February 2003

<sup>72</sup> EONI letter about rolling registration.

At that Hearing you may be asked to provide evidence of your residence at the address claimed and this may be required to be given on oath. You will be notified in advance of the date, time and place of any such hearing.

**9.13** Hearings are normally conducted by the local Area Electoral Officer who in their capacity as Registration Officer must be satisfied as to the validity of the application. The applicant is asked to produce evidence that they are currently resident at the address at which they wish to be registered and have been living in Northern Ireland for three months prior to their application. The Registration Officer has discretion about who is called to a hearing and previous registration is no guarantee that an elector will not be called.

**9.14** Potential registrants called to hearings are also asked to bring a further two pieces of appropriate documentary evidence in support of their application. At least one of these must demonstrate that the applicant has lived in Northern Ireland for three months prior to the application. This appears to be over and above the signed declaration given to this effect on section 9 of the rolling registration form. A standard EONI letter titled 'Claim to be included in the register of Electors' offers a choice as to what constitutes appropriate evidence.

Appropriate evidence showing your name, address and date might include a bank statement, electricity/telephone account, rent book, benefit/pension book, pay slip, Northern Ireland driver's licence, correspondence with the Housing Executive, Rates Collection Agency, Building Society or Inland Revenue.

**9.15** The EONI website<sup>73</sup> advises young people aged 17 or 18 that they will not be required to come to a hearing if other family members are already registered at their home address. However, they are advised that they will need to send the registration officer a copy of their birth certificate. For young people called to a hearing the following advice is given:

You must bring along two pieces of evidence which link you with the address at which you wish to be registered. Most young people have some type of bank or building society account and have had correspondence with an official body (e.g. school, college, Education and Library Board). If you cannot provide a pay slip, benefit book, utility bill or mobile phone bill and are to be registered at a family address, some official correspondence to a parent would be accepted if accompanied by an explanatory letter to the Electoral Office from that parent.

**9.16** Hearings are normally held at the local electoral office and applicants are informed by letter of the date and time of the hearing. The letter advises the applicant that they should make every effort to attend in person but if unable to do so a personal representative can be nominated to attend on their behalf who must have a letter of authority from the applicant. In the course of our discussions with the political parties and EONI we have been advised that this is a role often fulfilled by political party activists. If an applicant or their representative fails to attend a hearing they are advised, that their claim will lapse and they will need to complete another claim form to restart the process. Those unable to attend at a specified time and venue are asked to contact the EONI to arrange an alternative venue.

**9.17** A number of the political parties who submitted evidence to the Northern Ireland Affairs Select Committee on electoral registration commented on electoral hearings. One party stated:

People are now being asked to appear at a brief hearing in certain areas which is 30 miles from their home (Dungannon – Omagh) and wait for up to one hour from their appointed time (no incentive).<sup>74</sup>

A second party commented:

There is a concern that those who are registering under the rolling registration system have to

<sup>73</sup> [www.electorlofficeni.gov.uk](http://www.electorlofficeni.gov.uk)

<sup>74</sup> Northern Ireland Affairs Select Committee, Electoral Registration in Northern Ireland, Ev 38. The EONI has advised the Commission that an investigation was conducted into this matter and the EONI are satisfied that the allegation was largely unfounded.



appear at a hearing/or have some one to appear on their behalf and that additional pieces of identification must be produced at the hearing. We would ask that those registering under this system be treated in the same way as the initial registration process subject to the same checks.<sup>75</sup>

A third party wrote:

When combined with the electoral fraud legislation the rolling registration process simply does not work effectively. The issue of calling people to electoral hearings is an unnecessary burden on the registration process particularly in view of the need to provide the new personal identifiers as part of the procedure and two additional pieces of information on top of a completed application form. This has effectively created different classes of electorate and negates the purpose and role of rolling registration as an aid and assistance to the voter.<sup>76</sup>

**9.18** The evidence suggests that electors are being treated differently depending on when they complete a registration form. The registration form issued by the EONI during the annual canvass does not stipulate a date by which the form should be returned. The arbitrary cut-off date chosen by the EONI for receipt of registration forms during the 2002 canvass was 20 November 2002. Registration forms received after this date were treated as rolling registration forms. Altogether the EONI accepted over 20,000 late registration forms all of which were included in the first two months' rolling registration cycle.

**9.19** The vast majority of those who complete a registration form during the annual canvass appear to be added to the register and the information provided is accepted at face value. However, those who provide the same information on a rolling registration form, outside the canvass period, could potentially be called to a hearing where they are asked to present two additional pieces of evidence in support of their application. It appears that the system of rolling registration operates

without due cognisance being taken of the Act in respect of the requirement for personal identifiers. The EONI has confirmed to us that as automation becomes streamlined, the need to call people to hearings will diminish.

### Numbers called to hearings

**9.20** The number of people called to hearings during the first two months (December and January 2003) of rolling registration was proportionally much smaller than it was over the next three months. Altogether 17,140 rolling registration forms were received during December and January and a further 24,700 during February, March and April. In total 8,100 people were invited to hearings.

**Table 23: Summary of numbers called to hearings as a result of rolling registration 2002/03**

Month	Rolling registration forms received	Numbers called to hearings
December January	17,140	1,014
February March April	24,700	7,086
<b>Total</b>	<b>41,840</b>	<b>8,100</b>

*Source: From statistics supplied by the EONI*

**9.21** An analysis of the statistics suggests there are differences between the EONI area offices in terms of the proportion of applicants called to hearings. For example, a person served by the Omagh office was two and a half times more likely to be called to a hearing than a person served by the Newtownards or Newtownabbey office. Applicants in Belfast were twice as likely to be called to a hearing than their counterparts in other areas. The EONI has advised us that they do not keep individual constituency records but intend collating this information in future.

<sup>75</sup> Northern Ireland Affairs Select Committee, Electoral Registration in Northern Ireland, Ev 44.

<sup>76</sup> Northern Ireland Affairs Select Committee, Electoral Registration in Northern Ireland, Ev 40.



Table 24: Proportion of applicants called to hearings by Area Electoral Office

Local area electoral office	Constituencies served	Applications received	Numbers called to hearings	Percentage
Omagh	West Tyrone			
	Fermanagh and South Tyrone	3,920	1,130	29
Belfast*	Belfast South			
	Belfast East	10,750	2,620	24
	Belfast North			
	Belfast West			
Londonderry	Foyle			
	East Londonderry	5,000	1,100	22
Ballymoney	North Antrim			
	Mid Ulster	4,570	860	19
Banbridge*	Upper Bann			
	Newry and Armagh			
	South Down			
	Lagan Valley	10,790	1,530	14
Newtownards	Strangford			
	North Down	3,110	410	13
Newtownabbey	East Antrim			
	South Antrim	3,710	450	12

Source: From statistics supplied by the EONI

\* The figures for the Belfast and Banbridge offices are aggregated and separate figures have not been collated for 2002.

9.22 The reasons for these variations are unclear although the EONI has advised us that the same criteria applies to all applicants. The EONI suggests that these differences merely reflect local differences, for example, there may be a larger number of attainers in one area than another. Another reason suggested by the EONI is to do with levels of previous registration. The EONI may wish to review practices between offices to ensure consistency of approach.

9.23 In the period from December 2002 to April 2003 the total number of rolling registration forms received by the EONI was 41,840. Of these 33,750 were added to the register without being called to a hearing and 8,100 (19.35%) were invited to hearings. Altogether 3,367 of those invited to hearings actually attended, representing an overall attendance rate of 42%. We understand from

the EONI that the vast majority of those who attend have their names added to the register. Attendance varied with the office serving the local population.

Table 25: Attendance at hearing by local electoral office

Local office	Constituencies served	Percentage of those called to hearings who attend
Omagh	West Tyrone	39
	Fermanagh and South Tyrone	
Belfast	Belfast South	37
	Belfast East	
Belfast	Belfast North	37
	Belfast West	
Londonderry	Foyle	37
	East Londonderry	
Ballymoney	North Antrim	52
	Mid Ulster	
Banbridge	Upper Bann	46
	Newry and Armagh	
	South Down	
Newtownards	Lagan Valley	52
	Strangford	
Newtownabbey	North Down	43
	East Antrim	
Overall proportion of those called who actually attended	South Antrim	42

Source: From statistics supplied by the EONI

\* The figures for the Belfast and Banbridge offices are aggregated and separate figures have not been collated for 2002.

**9.24** The reasons for non-attendance at hearings are unclear. Without detailed research into the views of those who are invited but chose not to attend it will remain so. However, anecdotally it has been suggested to the Commission by some political parties that non-attendance is influenced by a number of factors including: distance to travel, the inflexibility of appointment times, the location of hearings, and perceptions that hearings are semi-judicial and adversarial in nature with people having to take an oath. The EONI has advised the Commission that it is entirely flexible about the times of appointments and the location of venues and that it is rare for applicants to be placed under oath. The EONI believes that higher standards for the accuracy of registration are being demanded in Northern Ireland than the rest of the UK.

It is also of the opinion that the use of hearings are vital in combating fraud and feels that actual attendance at hearings is a good indicator of how successful the process is in deterring fraud. The Commission notes, however, that there is little evidence available to support this view and this may be an area of practice which would benefit from further research in the light of the additional security measures that have now been introduced. The EONI has informed the Commission that it is considering how to improve access to electoral hearings.

## Conclusions

**9.25** The number of names on the May 2003 register increased by 2.1 percentage points from the December 2002 register. However this increase was not uniform across the Northern Ireland constituencies and was even more pronounced at ward level.

**9.26** Electoral hearings appear to be a feature of rolling registration that is unique to Northern Ireland. Evidence suggests that electors are being treated differently depending on when they complete an electoral registration form. Information gathered during the canvass is taken at face value whereas outside the canvass period a potential registrant could be called to a hearing where they are asked to produce additional information on top of the personal identifiers stipulated under the Act. There also appear to be differences between the offices in terms of the proportion of applicants called to hearings. The reasons for these variations are unclear. Less than half of those invited to hearings actually attend and the reasons for this require further exploration. The use of hearings would benefit from a review given the need now to provide additional personal information in order to register.

# 10 Overall conclusions

We have identified a range of issues for consideration by those with a responsibility for ensuring that electoral law and practice in Northern Ireland is administered to the highest standard and in the interests of the electorate.

**10.1** This report gives a detailed assessment of how the Electoral Fraud (Northern Ireland) Act 2002 was implemented during its first year of operation. It comments extensively on the new system of individual registration and the arrangements put in place for accessing electoral identification. Provisions of the Act relating specifically to elections will be commented on in our statutory report on the November 2003 Assembly election.

**10.2** The Electoral Commission will continue to monitor the impact of the Act on registration rates and participation in the democratic process generally. In cooperation with the EONI further work will be conducted on specific issues identified in the report including: the participation of ethnic minority groups in electoral matters; reasons for attendance/non-attendance at electoral registration hearings and the impact of individual registration on people living in communal residential accommodation. The Commission will also ensure that its public awareness campaigns continue to be targeted at hard to reach groups including young people and people from disadvantaged and marginalised groups.

**10.3** Operational responsibility for registration rests with the Chief Electoral Officer for Northern Ireland and our report highlights a number of areas for his consideration including:

- developing a series of performance indicators against which a wide range of activities can be measured and reported on publicly over time;
- conducting an equality impact assessment on how the operational aspects of the Act have impacted on people with learning disabilities;
- reviewing the practice of calling some applicants to hearings under the rolling registration process and ensuring consistency of approach between area electoral offices;
- ensuring all registration forms are made more widely accessible to the electorate including making them downloadable online;

- developing mechanisms, in conjunction with the Commission for ensuring that those without eligible electoral identification and young people are aware of the identification requirements and have the opportunity to apply for an electoral identity card.

**10.4** The right to register to vote, and the ability to exercise that right in elections that are safeguarded against abuse and malpractice is the foundation of any democratic society. Promoting confidence in the democratic process in Northern Ireland is a responsibility shared by many stakeholders including the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland, the Chief Electoral Officer for Northern Ireland, The Electoral Commission, the political parties, the electorate and the media. All need to work to ensure that the legislation works effectively to minimise the potential for registration fraud while maximising participation in the electoral and democratic processes.



# The Electoral Commission

We are an independent body that was set up by the UK Parliament. We aim to gain public confidence and encourage people to take part in the democratic process within the United Kingdom by modernising the electoral process, promoting public awareness of electoral matters and regulating political parties.

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ISBN: 1-904363-35-0

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