

Accuracy and completeness of the electoral registers in Great Britain

Summary

The Electoral Commission undertakes accuracy and completeness studies to measure the quality of the electoral registers to assess how this changes in response to legislative developments and administrative and population changes.

The quality of the electoral registers is measured in two main ways: their accuracy and their completeness.

The results for Great Britain in December 2018 show that:

- Parliamentary registers were 85% complete and 89% accurate
- Local government registers were 83% complete and 89% accurate.

The findings lead to two main estimates: that between 8.3 and 9.4 million people in Great Britain who were eligible to be on the local government registers were not correctly registered; and that there were between 4.7 and 5.6 million inaccurate entries on the local government registers.

This is our first study since the 2015 assessment of the registers, following the transition to Individual Electoral Registration (IER). Since 2015 the levels of completeness have stayed at around the same level, with a not statistically significant decline of around 1 percentage point on the local government registers, while the accuracy has fallen by two percentage points.

This research confirms that age and mobility continue to be the strongest variables associated with lower levels of completeness. Plans to reform the annual canvass starting in 2020 are an important first step, enabling EROs to focus resources on households that have changed composition. However, there is more that could and should be done to modernise registration processes in Great Britain in order to provide the best possible opportunity for ensuring that as many people as possible are correctly registered.

Earlier this year we published the findings from a series of [feasibility studies](#) exploring how reforms, including automatic or more automated registration, could be delivered. The studies found that these changes are feasible from a technical and operational perspective and could be implemented without radically altering the structure of the electoral registration system in the UK.

This study

The quality of the electoral registers is measured in two main ways: their accuracy and their completeness.

By **accuracy** we mean that *'there are no false entries on the electoral registers'*. Accuracy is therefore the measure of the percentage of entries on the registers which relate to verified and eligible voters who are resident at that address. Inaccurate register entries may relate to entries which have become redundant (for example, due to home movement), which are ineligible and have been included unintentionally, or which are fraudulent.

By **completeness**, we mean that *'every person who is entitled to have an entry on an electoral register is registered'*. Completeness refers to the percentage of eligible people who are registered at their current address. The proportion of eligible people who are not included on the register at their current address constitutes the rate of under-registration.

This study of the 2018 December registers is our first since our 2015 assessment of the registers and the transition to Individual Electoral Registration (IER)¹. It establishes a new baseline as we seek to measure the impact of upcoming changes to the annual canvass.

Our findings

Completeness

In December 2018, the local government registers in Great Britain were 83% complete, and the parliamentary registers were 85% complete.

Socio-demographic variation

The study found that the main drivers affecting completeness are age, recent home movement and whether someone rents their home from a private landlord. These drivers of lower registration are in line with our findings in previous accuracy and completeness studies. These factors underpin many of the other variations by sociodemographic group explored in the report:

- **Age:** Completeness among those aged 18-34 is lower (71%) than for those aged 35-54 (86%) or 55+ (93%).
- **Length of residence:** Completeness is higher among people who have lived at their address for longer. People who have lived at their address for up to a year or between one and two years were significantly less likely to be correctly registered (36% and 71% completeness) than those who have lived at their address for longer (92% among those resident 16 years or more).

- **Tenure:** Completeness is lower among private renters (58%) than for outright owners (91%), those with a mortgage (86%) and social renters (83%).
- **Ethnicity:** Completeness is highest among those from a white ethnic background at 84%. The lowest level of completeness was observed among those from “other” ethnic backgrounds, at 62%. Those from Asian and Black ethnic backgrounds have a similar level of completeness (76% and 75% respectively), while completeness stands at 69% among those from mixed backgrounds.
- **Nationality:** European Union (54%) and Commonwealth citizens (62%) are significantly less likely to be correctly registered than UK and Irish citizens (86%).

Attitudes towards registration and voting

- **Electoral registration:** Those who agree it is everyone’s duty to register have the highest level of completeness (85%) compared to those who agree people should only register to vote if they care who wins an election (79%), those who think it is not worth registering at all (72%) and those who think it is only worth registering to vote to secure a better credit reference (68%).
- **Voting:** Attitudes towards voting show a similar pattern, with those who feel it’s everyone’s duty to vote having the highest level of completeness (84%) compared to those who feel it’s not worth voting (78%) and those who say people should only vote if they care who wins an election (79%).

Accuracy

In December 2018, the local government registers in Great Britain and the parliamentary registers were both 89% accurate.

In total, 11% of entries had a major error (up from 9% in 2015) with the most common major error being that no corresponding name was taken at the address (10%). This happens when previous residents have moved out and details have not been updated.

In Great Britain, 9% of register entries had minor errors. The most common minor error was for a middle name to be missing from the register which was the case for 6% of register entries. Minor errors would not prevent an elector from casting a vote in an election.

Addressing the challenges of accuracy and completeness

The data and findings presented in this study further supports our position, first set out in 2015, that the electoral registration system in Great Britain requires modernisation to provide the best possible opportunity for ensuring that as many people as possible are correctly registered.

This research confirms that age and mobility continue to be the strongest variables associated with lower levels of completeness. Plans to reform the annual canvass starting in 2020 are an important first step, enabling EROs to focus resources on households that have changed composition, but there is more that could and should be done to modernise registration processes in Great Britain.

Our vision of a modern electoral register is one which:

- Uses trusted public data to keep itself accurate and complete throughout the year without relying solely on action by individuals; and
- Makes it as easy as possible for electors to ensure their own registration record is accurate and complete, particularly ahead of elections and referendums.

Earlier this year we published the findings from a series of [feasibility studies](#) exploring how electoral registration reforms could be delivered, to help inform the debate about registration reform. These studies looked at the potential for giving EROs access to data from other public service providers; integration of electoral registration into other public service transactions; and automatic or more automated forms of registration.

The options explored in the studies could help address some of the specific challenges highlighted in this research. For example:

- For people who have recently changed address, including those who move more frequently, registering to vote may not always be an immediate priority. Regular access to reliable data from a wider range of public services about people who have recently updated their address details would allow EROs to make contact directly with them at their new address to encourage them to register to vote.
- Integrating electoral registration applications into other public service transactions could make it easier for individuals to keep their registration details up to date and accurate. This could be particularly effective for those who have moved recently and who are in the process of updating their details with other agencies and public bodies.
- Making better use of existing public data sources could also help to improve levels of completeness among some of the specific under-registered groups identified in this study. Data from the education sector – such as information held by the Education and Skills Funding Agency Learning Records Service, which collects data relating to learners in England, Wales and Northern Ireland registering for relevant post-14 qualifications, and the Scottish Qualifications Authority – could help EROs identify attainers and other young people. Also, data from the Department for Work and Pensions could potentially be used by EROs to register young people to vote automatically when they are allocated their National Insurance number ahead of their 16th birthday.

Our feasibility studies found that these reforms were feasible from a technical and operational perspective and could be implemented without radically altering the structure of the electoral registration system in the UK.

While reforms of this nature undoubtedly raise important questions about data sharing, data protection and the implications of automatic registration, they offer considerable potential to address the challenges of achieving accurate and complete registers in Great Britain. We want to encourage a wider debate on the potential benefits of further modernisation and electoral registration reform and look forward to discussing the findings of our feasibility studies with governments and other interested groups.

Methodology

The accuracy and completeness estimates presented in this report are based on a house-to-house survey of 5,079 addresses in Great Britain across 127 local authority areas. The

majority of information was gathered from face-to-face interviews of 4,968 households, conducted by trained interviewers with the aim of gathering information from residents which could then be checked against the details held on the electoral registers. A small number of postal questionnaires were issued in order to attempt to reach those addresses where a face-to-face interview was not achieved; of these 111 were returned. The fieldwork and data analysis from the study was carried out by Ipsos MORI.

This method is consistent with the approaches used for our 2014 and 2015 assessments of the registers. This approach has been validated through a separate study ('Electoral registration in 2011') using data from the 2011 Census. The results from that study were compared to those generated from previous house-to-house studies and found a high level of consistency between the results and methods. Therefore, we are confident in the estimates produced using the house-to-house survey approach.

We also compare some specific findings to our study of the 2015 registers in order to provide a sense of how the quality of the registers has changed with time.

Any estimate of accuracy and completeness represents a 'snapshot' at a particular moment in the lifecycle of the registers. We have generally taken this snapshot in the period immediately following the compilation and publication of the annual registers when, historically, the completeness of the registers was its highest. Our previous studies on the topic suggest that the completeness of the registers can decline by as much as up to one percentage point a month from the completion of the canvass. We would expect this effect to be less pronounced since the introduction of year-round registration and the introduction of online registration.

In line with previous studies, the findings presented in this report are for the registers published in England, Wales and Scotland on 1 December 2018.² We also present national estimates alongside the estimates for the whole of Great Britain.

² Electoral Registration Officers (EROs) were required by law to publish their revised register by 1 December 2018 except in cases where there had been an election in their area during the period of the canvass, in which case they had the discretion to delay publication to up to 1 February 2019

The December 2018 registers: assessment of accuracy and completeness

Key findings

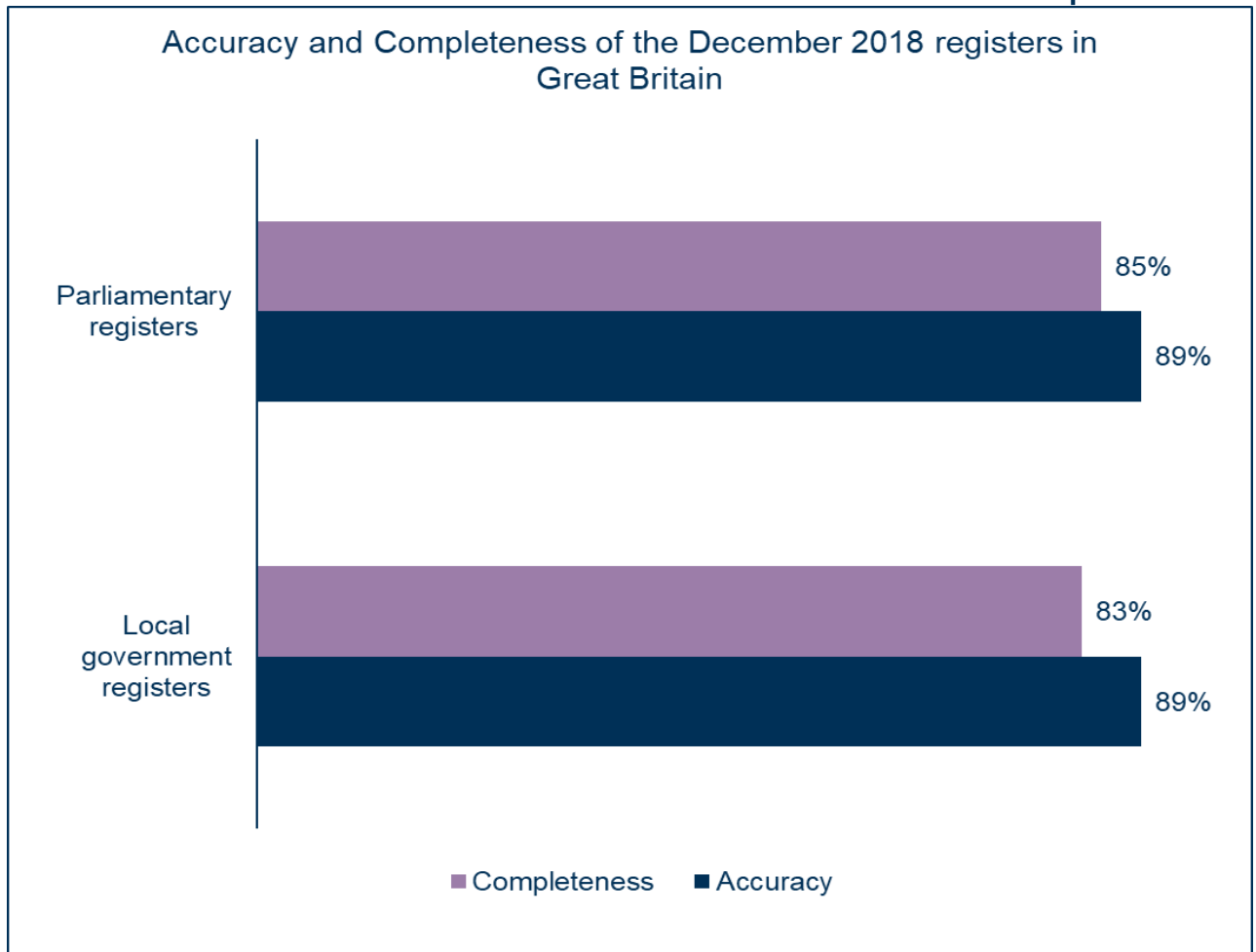
- In December 2018 the parliamentary registers in Great Britain were 85% complete and 89% accurate. The local government registers were 83% complete and 89% accurate.
- This means that completeness is around the same level as recorded in 2015 and accuracy has fallen by two percentage points.
- The findings from this accuracy and completeness study lead to an estimate of between 8.3 and 9.4 million people in Great Britain who were eligible to be on the local government registers but were not correctly registered in December 2018, and an estimate of between 4.7 and 5.6 million inaccurate entries on the local government registers.

The results for Great Britain in December 2018 show that:

- Parliamentary registers were 85% complete and 89% accurate
- Local government registers were 83% complete and 89% accurate.

Our study on accuracy and completeness at the end of the transition to Individual Electoral Registration (IER) in December 2015 found the parliamentary registers to be 85% complete and 91% accurate and the local government registers to be 84% complete and 91% accurate.

This means that since 2015 the levels of completeness have stayed at the same level recorded in 2015. The decline of around 1 percentage point on the local government registers is not statistically significant. Accuracy has fallen by two percentage points.



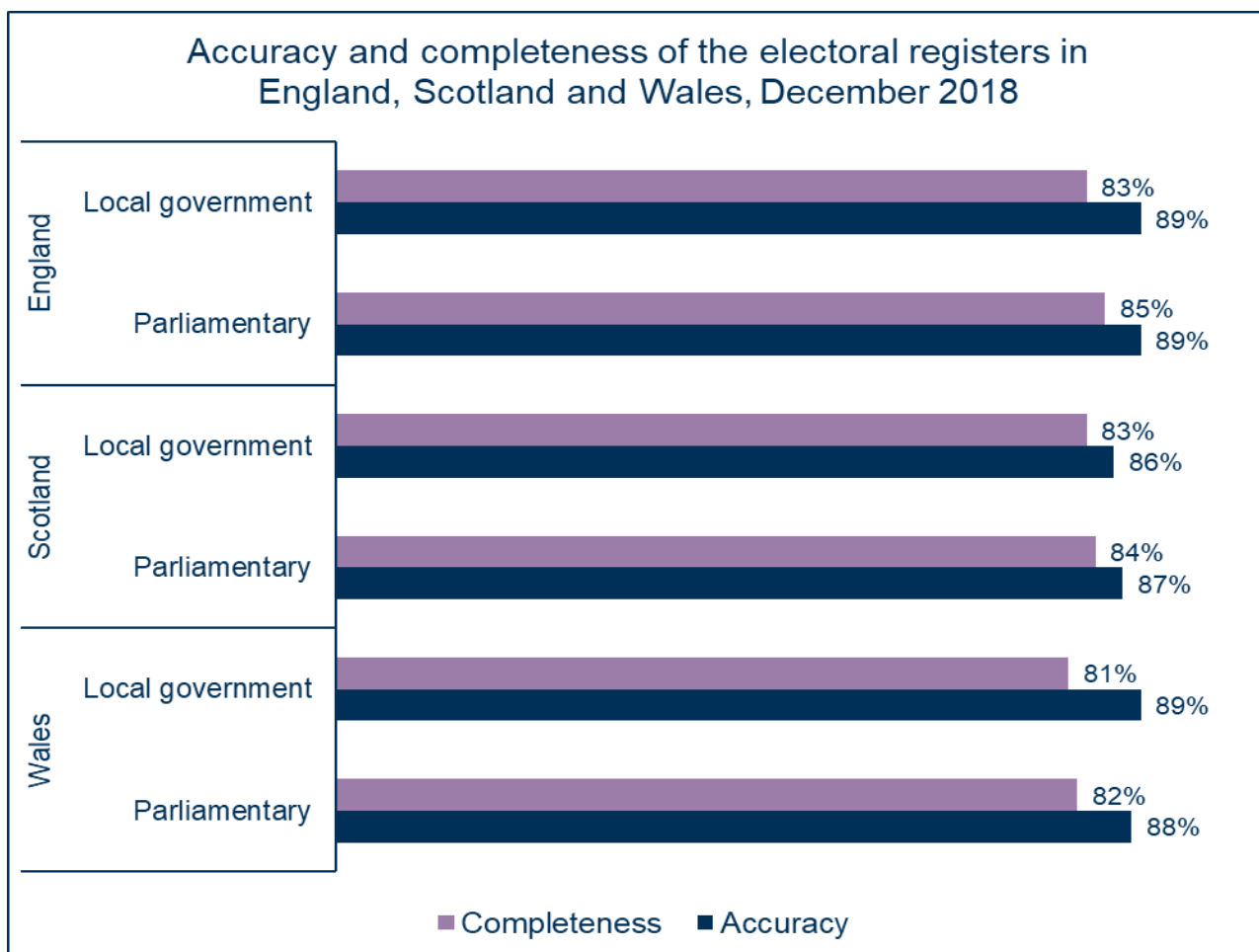
National estimates

The chart below sets out the accuracy and completeness estimates for England, Scotland and Wales for both the parliamentary and local government registers published in December 2018.

In **England**, the local government registers were found to be 89% accurate and the accuracy of the parliamentary registers also stood at 89%. The local government register was 83% complete, while the parliamentary register was slightly more complete, at 85%.

In **Wales**, the accuracy of the registers was similar to Great Britain as a whole with the local government register 89% accurate and the parliamentary register 88% accurate. The completeness of the local government and parliamentary registers was a little lower than the Great Britain average (81% and 82% respectively).

In **Scotland** parliamentary registers were 87% accurate and the local government registers were 86% accurate. Completeness was close to the Great Britain average at 83% for local government registers and 84% for the parliamentary registers.



Quantifying accuracy and completeness

Using the percentage figures produced from this research, it is possible to estimate the number of people who are not correctly registered, or who have inaccuracies in their register entries. However, it is important to be aware that these can only be estimates for several reasons.

Firstly, both the accuracy and completeness estimates are subject, like any survey findings, to confidence intervals ($\pm 1.1\%$ and $\pm 1.0\%$ respectively). This is because the results are from a surveyed sample of the overall population. The confidence intervals denote the range around any survey statistic where the true population value is likely to lie.

Secondly, related to completeness, it is not possible to determine with certainty the size of the population eligible to register to vote in Great Britain. Eligibility is determined by age and nationality. Mid-year estimate data from the Office for National Statistics, based on the 2011 census, offers the most accurate estimate of the size of the population. However, while annual estimates are made available which include data on age, they do not include information on nationality.

Any attempts to calculate the absolute number of people not correctly registered at their current address is therefore based on an estimate of completeness and an estimate of the total eligible population. It can, therefore, only be an approximation and should be treated as such.

The findings from this accuracy and completeness study lead to an estimate of between 8.3 and 9.4 million people in Great Britain eligible to be on the local government registers who were not correctly registered in December 2018. Our 2015 assessment estimated between 7.8 – 8.3 million.

Although completeness has remained stable, over time the estimated number of incorrectly registered people in Great Britain appears to have increased. This is mostly because the population has grown by close to two per cent between 2015 and 2018. It is also partly because of slightly wider confidence intervals for the 2018 estimates due to a smaller sample size.

A further point to note is that the range presented above does not mean that there should be an additional 8.3 – 9.4 million entries on the registers in total. Those not correctly registered may still be included on the registers but for instance at a previous address (an inaccurate entry).

The estimates also allow for the total number of inaccurate entries on the December 2018 registers to be approximated. In Great Britain **it is likely that between 4.7 and 5.6 million entries on the local government registers are inaccurate**. Our 2015 assessment estimated between 4.0 and 4.5 million.

This estimate suggests the number of inaccurate entries has increased although, as with completeness, factors such as population growth and different confidence intervals play a role. There are currently fewer inaccurate entries than in 2014, which was the last study carried out before the introduction of individual electoral registration (IER).

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Completeness

Key findings

- The local government registers in Great Britain were 83% complete, and the parliamentary registers were 85% complete.
- The study found that the main drivers of lower completeness are being younger, recent home movement and whether someone rents their home from a private landlord. These drivers of lower registration are in line with our findings in previous accuracy and completeness studies.
- Other factors associated with lower rates of registration include ethnicity, nationality and attitudes towards registration and voting.

The parliamentary registers for Great Britain were found to be 85% complete, and the local government registers 83% complete overall. This section will look at the levels of completeness across a range of demographic and attitudinal measures. Except where stated the figures outlined will relate to the local government registers as these include the larger proportion of the electorate. Where comparisons made in the text are not statistically significant this is acknowledged.

Urban/rural classification

In Great Britain there is a slight difference (two percentage points) between levels of completeness in urban and rural areas. Registers in urban areas are now 83% complete (from 84% in 2015), while in rural areas completeness is 85% (86% in 2015). The changes from 2015 are not statistically significant.

Local authority type

The most notable change in completeness across local authority types has been in London boroughs, where completeness has fallen from 81% in 2015 to 76% in 2018. There has also been a decline in district authorities from 86% in 2015 to 84% in 2018. Completeness in unitary authorities (83%) has stayed at a similar level to 2015 (84%) while there has been a small increase in completeness for metropolitan boroughs (from 83% to 86%). The lower completeness in London boroughs is likely to be reflective of high population mobility in London associated with the large private rented sector in London.

Completeness of local government electoral registers by local authority type, 2015 and 2018

	Great Britain	
	2015	2018
District	86%	84%
London borough	81%	76%
Metropolitan borough	83%	86%
Unitary authorities	84%	83%

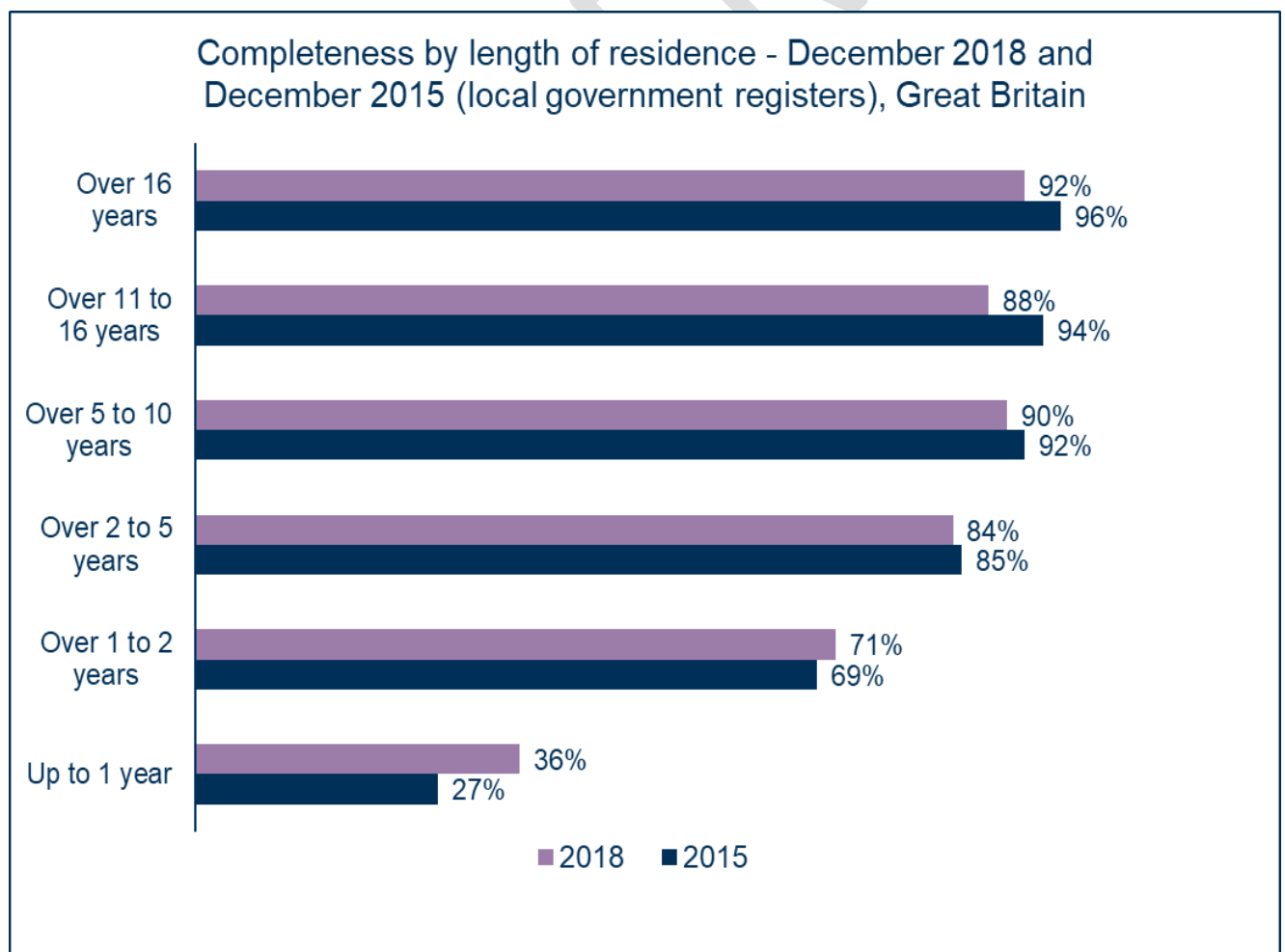
Length of residence

Previous research into the registers has found a connection between home movement and completeness: as registration is residence-based, greater mobility is associated with lower levels of completeness, while the longer an individual has been resident at their property, the more likely they are to appear on the electoral register.

As the figure below demonstrates, this pattern continues in the local government registers for Great Britain, with completeness at 36% (an increase from 27% in 2015) among those who have lived at their address for up to a year compared to 84% among those who lived at their address for two to five years and 90% for those resident between five and ten years

For those living at their address for ten to sixteen years completeness was 88% and for those resident for more than sixteen years it was 92%.

This pattern is consistent throughout our research. That is why we want to see changes to allow EROs to access national-level public data to help them to focus resources on addresses where they know a change has occurred. We also want to see greater integration of electoral registration into other public sector transactions, such as applying for or updating a drivers' licence, in order to encourage voters to update their electoral registration as part of another administrative task associated with moving house.



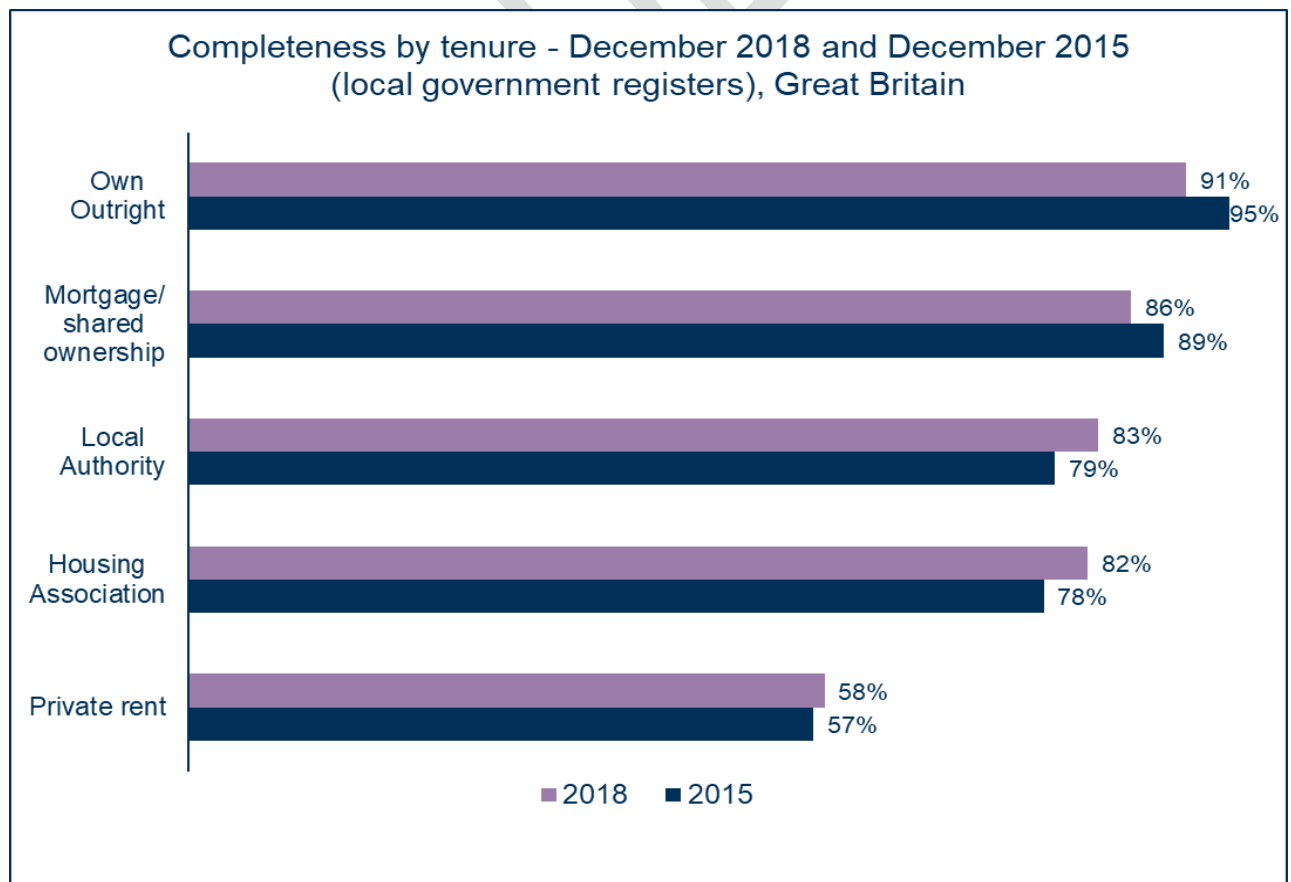
Tenure

Tenure is a variable that has previously been strongly associated with levels of completeness and this research reconfirms that finding. In Great Britain, homeowners (both those who own their home outright and those buying on a mortgage or shared ownership) are more likely to be registered than people in other types of tenure.

In Great Britain, there has been a small decline in completeness for owner-occupiers from 95% to 91%, and a similar-sized decline for those buying their home on a mortgage (from 89% to 86%).

Over the same period, completeness for those who rent their homes in the social rented sector has increased: for those who rent their home from a local authority it has risen from 79% to 83%, while those renting from a housing association have seen completeness increase from 78% to 82%. Private renters remain the least likely to have complete register entries and have stayed at the same level recorded in 2015.

The lower levels of completeness among private renters is associated with population mobility as private renters tend to move more frequently than those in other tenures. For example, the English Housing Survey 2017-18 shows that in England 27% of private renters have lived in their home for less than one year compared to 6% of social renters and 4% of owner occupiers. A similar pattern exists in Scotland and Wales. The 2017 Scottish Household Survey found 35% of residents in the private rented sector have been resident less than a year (6% for owner occupiers and 9% in the social rented sector) and the 2017-18 National Survey of Wales found that 33% of private renters had been resident for less than a year (5% for owner occupiers and 10% for social renters).



Age

Levels of completeness were found to vary by age group, with older groups more likely to be registered. This is a finding that has been consistent throughout our research.

In Great Britain, the highest level of completeness is seen for those aged 65+ (94%) and the lowest level is recorded for attainers (16 and 17 year olds, 25%), which has dropped from 45% in 2015.

In England and Wales, the age at which citizens become entitled to vote is currently 18, but the electoral registers also include records of ‘attainers’ - 16 and 17 year olds who will turn 18 within the twelve month period starting on the 1 December after they make their application.

In Scotland, the voting age for Scottish Parliamentary and local council elections is 16. This means that all 16 and 17 year olds in Scotland are entitled to be on the local government register and that attainers are 14 and 15 year olds who will turn 16 during the twelve month period starting on the 1 December after they make their application. However, entitlement for the parliamentary register in Scotland has not been affected by the change to the franchise so 16/17 year olds are attainers on the parliamentary register. Proposed franchise changes in Wales would mean that those aged 16 and 17 in Wales will have an equivalent entitlement as in Scotland.

The number of attainers has fallen significantly over the last few years, as is demonstrated in the table below

Before 2015 attainers could be registered by a parent or guardian via a household canvass form. Individual electoral registration (IER) was introduced in 2014 and from this point attainers (and those of any age registering to vote for the first time) have been required to register themselves, providing ‘identifying information’, namely date of birth and national insurance number. This information is then verified before a name is added to the register.

After the introduction of IER there was a significant decline in the number of attainers on both the parliamentary and local government registers. Our previous analysis in 2016 showed that there was a 40% drop in attainers on the local government registers between February/March 2014 and December 2015. Subsequently, between December 2015 and 2016, the number of attainers increased by 17% for local government registers and 22% for parliamentary registers. However the number of attainers on the electoral registers has yet to return to the same level as seen under household registration.

The Electoral Commission has previously recommended that the registration of attainers presents an opportunity for the development of a more automatic approach to registration, for example, at the point when individuals receive their National Insurance number (NINo).

NINOs are allocated automatically just before eligible people turn 16, and a letter containing details of the NINo are sent to individuals at the address held by HM Revenue and Customs. This information could be shared with EROs, enabling 16 year olds who have been issued with a NINo to be added to electoral registers provided that the ERO is satisfied that the individual is eligible and meets the residence requirements for registration.

The falling number of attainers presented below emphasises the importance of exploring such reforms. We believe that reform in this area is important, particularly as proposed changes to the franchise in Wales will allow 16 and 17 year olds to vote on the same basis as electors of the same age in Scotland.

In the interim, we believe that making datasets such as the Pupil Database available to EROs would help them to identify attainers more easily.

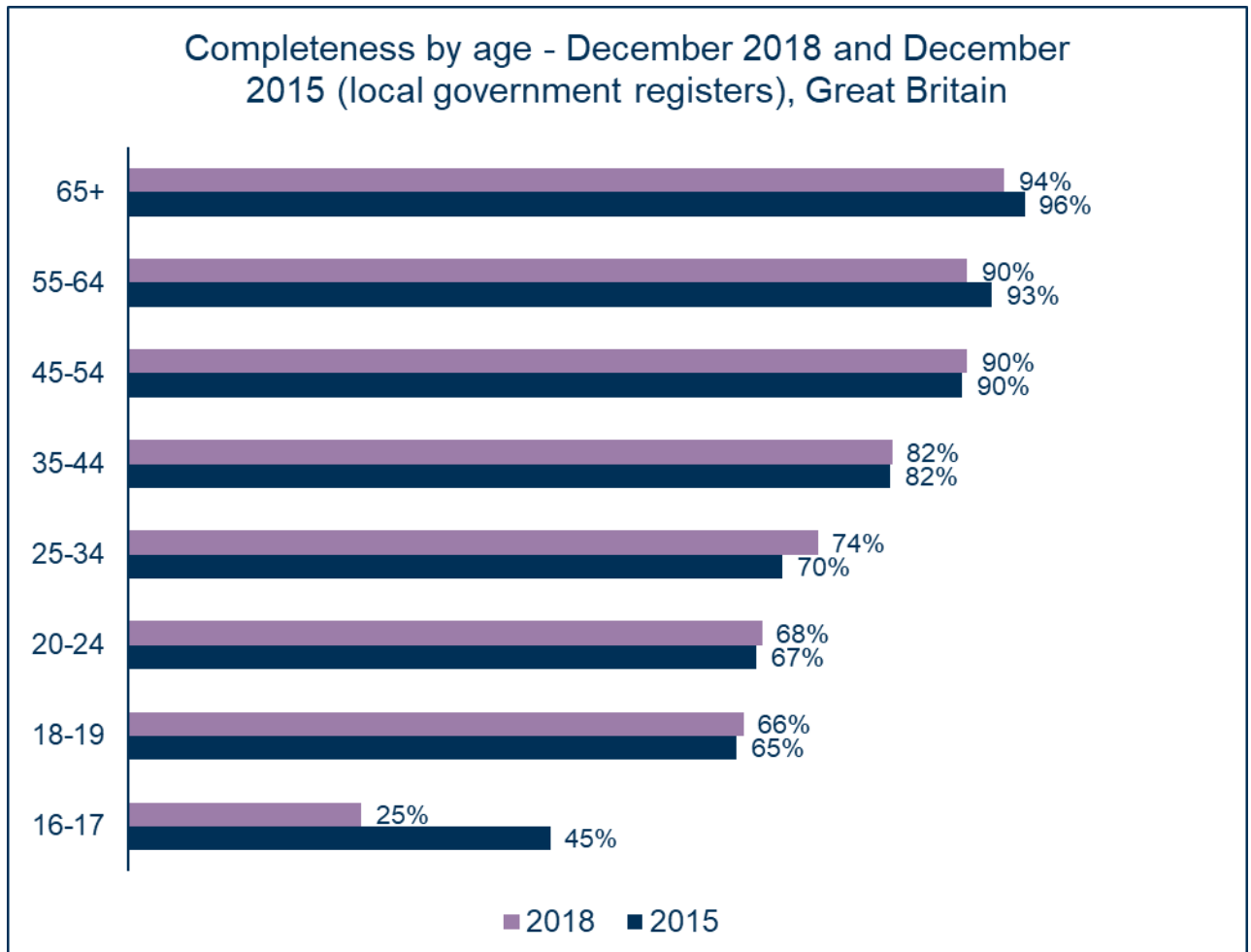
Number of attainers on the parliamentary and local government registers (at the beginning of December of each year)³

	Register	2013	2014	2015	2016	2017	2018
England	Local	387,292	260,715	244,781	293,430	279,388	268,396
	Parliamentary	379,284	254,836	239,019	284,522	269,092	257,938
Scotland	Local	64,299	39,513	21,343	22,035	20,788	20,232
	Parliamentary	63,471	38,963	24,827	41,561	43,357	41,296
Wales	Local	18,807	14,223	12,462	13,810	13,001	13,127
	Parliamentary	18,595	14,065	12,339	13,651	12,794	12,948
GB	Local	470,398	314,451	278,586	329,275	313,177	301,755
	Parliamentary	461,350	307,864	276,185	339,734	325,243	312,182

As seen in the figure below, the levels of completeness by age group have remained steady since 2015, with little to no change. The 35-44 age group are closest to the overall average of 83%, on 82%. Above this point all age groups have broadly similar levels of completeness (around 90%), while completeness drops with every age group before it. Completeness for 25-34 year olds is 74%, among 20-24 year olds it is 68%, and it is 66% among 18-19 year olds.

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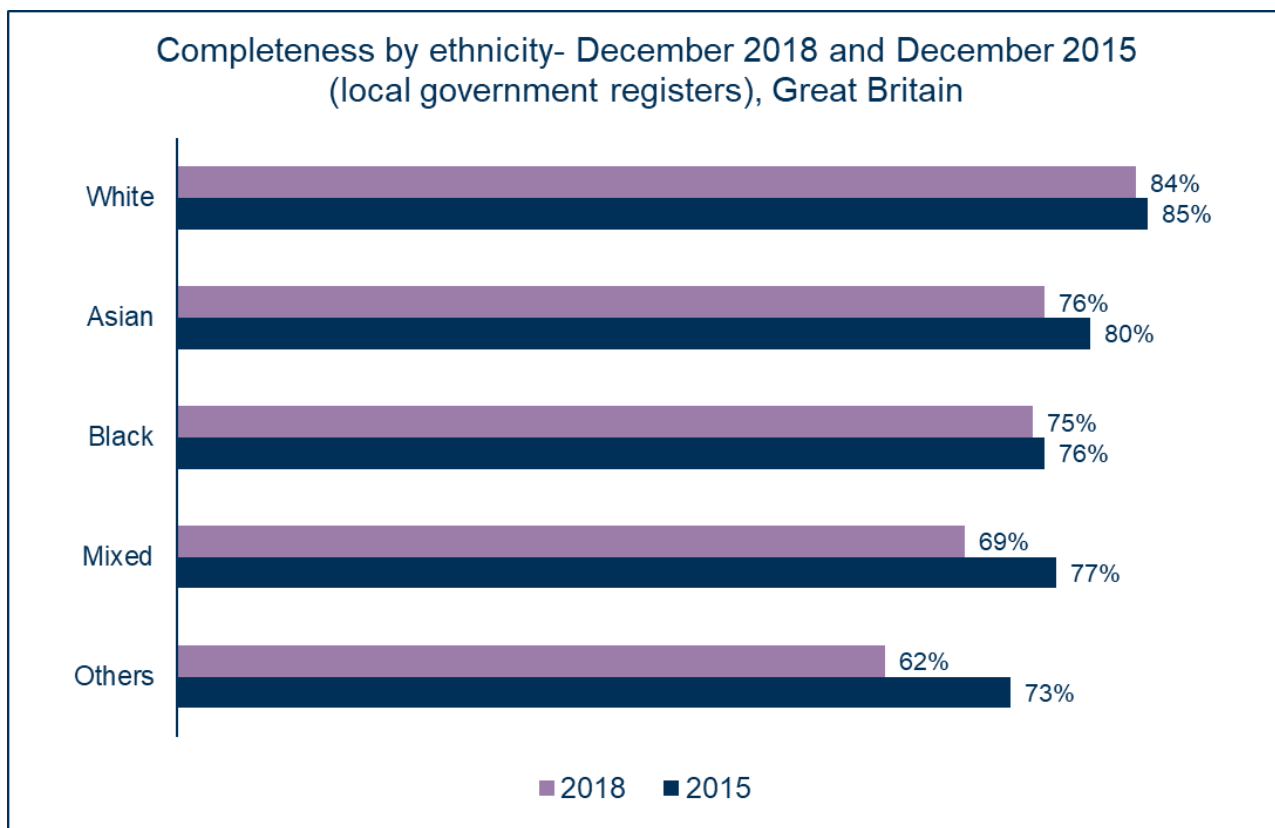
<https://www.ons.gov.uk/peoplepopulationandcommunity/elections/electoralregistration/bulletins/electoralstatisticsforuk/2018>



Ethnicity

Completeness is highest among those from a white ethnic background at 84%. In Great Britain, the lowest level of completeness was observed among those from “other” ethnic backgrounds, at 62%. Those from Asian and Black ethnic backgrounds each have a similar level of completeness (76% and 75% respectively) while completeness stands at 69% among those from mixed backgrounds.

All of the apparent declines in completeness from 2015 presented below were not statistically significant which demonstrates that the same patterns of difference in registration by ethnicity persist in 2018.



Nationality

Findings corroborate previous research which show that registration rates are lower among eligible non-UK nationals than among UK or Irish nationals.

UK and Irish citizens remain most likely to have complete electoral register entries, at 86% in Great Britain, which is the same as in 2015. Completeness for Commonwealth nationals is 62% (61% in 2015) while it is 54% for those with EU nationalities (53% in 2015). None of the apparent changes since 2015 are statistically significant.

Gender

While past studies have noted that women are more likely to be registered than men, in this study we have found no difference by gender. In Great Britain completeness is 83% for both men and women.

Disability status

People with a long standing physical condition or disability are more likely to be registered (92%) than those without a disability (82%) or those with a longstanding mental condition or disability (83%).

Socio-economic group

Levels of completeness are affected by social groupings: in Great Britain, those belonging to AB (86%) and C1 households (85%) show a significantly higher level of completeness than those in C2 (80%) and DE (80%) households. Since 2015 there has been a decline in the level of completeness among those in C2 households (from 86%), meaning that this group are as likely to have complete register entries as those from social grades DE. The level of completeness in AB households has fallen from 88% in 2015 while there has been an increase of two percentage points among those in C1 households (from 83%).

Highest qualification

In Great Britain, those with A Levels or Scottish Highers (81%) or GCSEs (81%) as their highest form of academic qualification are groups least likely to have complete register entries. Completeness is highest among those with degrees or further qualifications such as BTECs, as well as those with other types of qualifications or none at all (perhaps related to age). This reflects the pattern observed in 2015, when this question was first asked. Across other qualifications the levels of completeness do not vary much between highest level of attainment.

Completeness of local government electoral registers by education, 2015 and 2018

	Great Britain	
	2015	2018
Higher degree	87%	84%
Degree	86%	83%
BTEC	84%	86%
A Level/Higher	80%	81%
GCSE	83%	81%
Other	83%	85%
None	87%	86%

Number of adults in the household

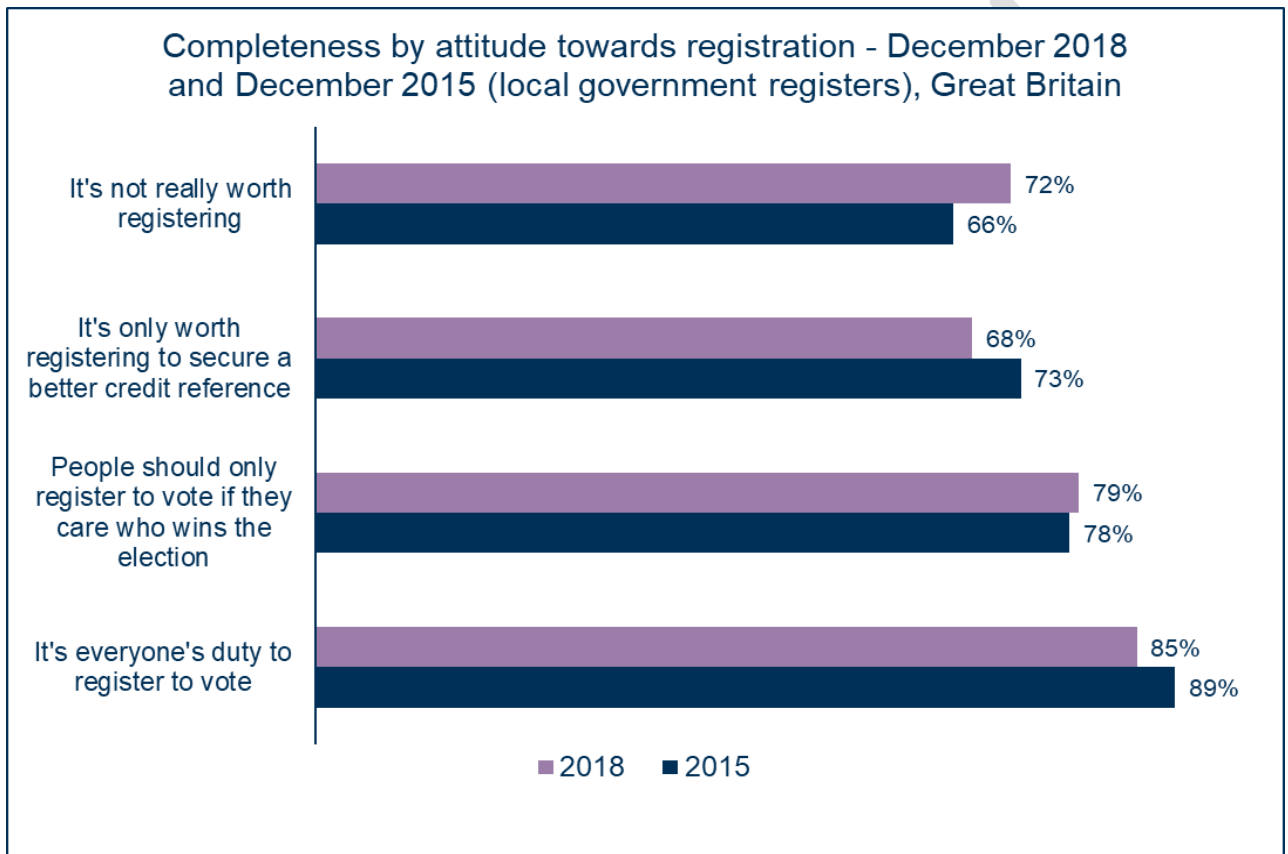
In Great Britain, completeness among single adult households has risen by four percentage points since 2015, to 86%, making this among the most likely household type to have a complete register entry alongside two-adult households (84%). Completeness for households with six or more adults is 78% (75% in 2015), while for households with between three and five adults it is 81% (83% in 2015).

Attitudes towards registration and voting

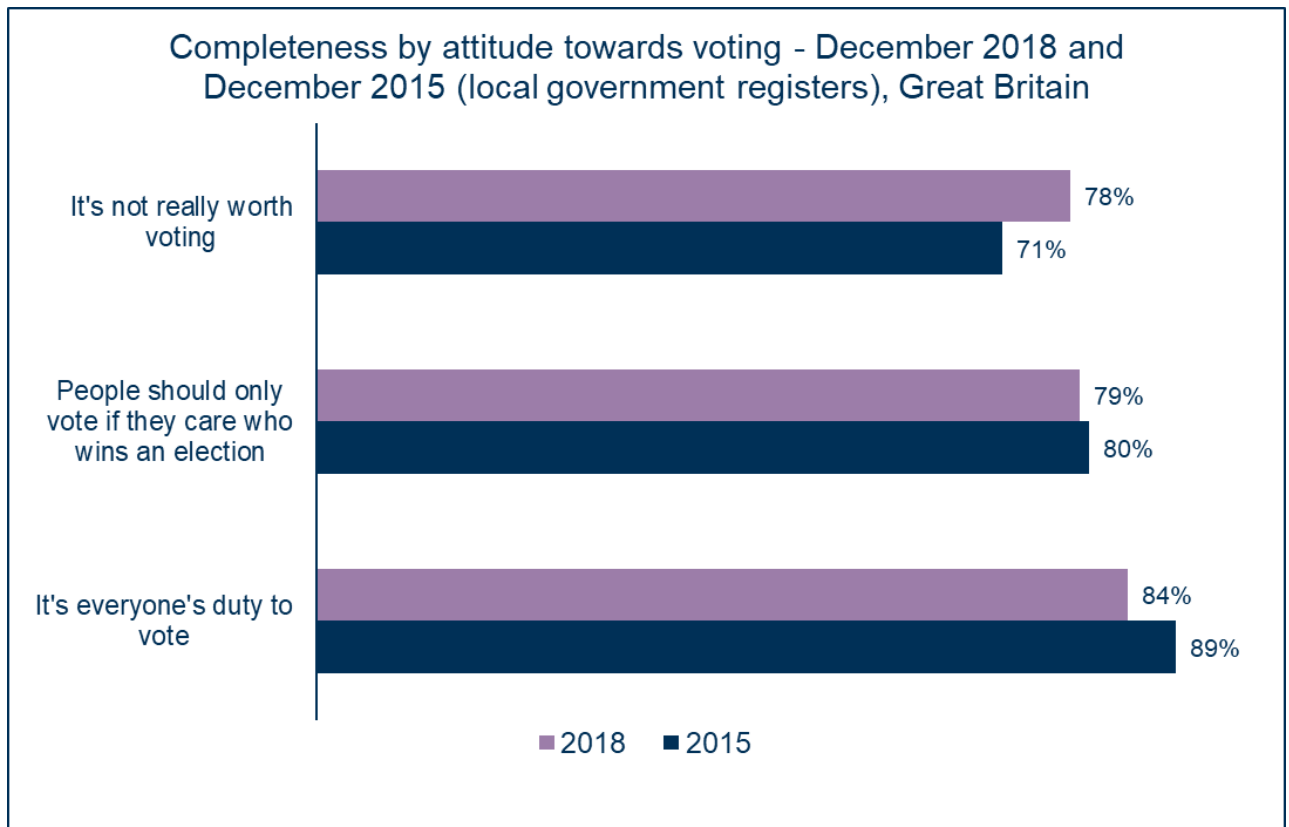
The person we spoke to in each household was also asked some questions around their attitudes to registering to vote and voting itself. While this means it is not a nationally representative sample of the population, the results provide another angle to consider the relationship between registration and attitudes towards elections.

As in 2015, completeness is lower among participants with more negative views of registering to vote. Those who agree it is only worth registering to vote to secure better credit references have the lowest level of completeness, at 68%, while completeness stands at 72% among those who say it is not really worth registering to vote at all. While both these groups had the lowest levels in 2015, their order has switched (see figure below).

Completeness stands at 79% among those who think people should only register to vote if they care who wins an election and 85% among those who say it is everyone’s duty to register to vote.



Attitudes towards voting show a similar pattern, with those who feel it’s everyone’s duty to vote having the highest level of completeness (84%) compared to those who feel it’s not worth voting (78%) and those who say people should only vote if they care who wins an election (79%).



Turnout at recent national electoral events

Although the distance between the December 2018 electoral registers and the most recent national election (the 2017 UK Parliamentary general election) is greater than it was for the December 2015 registers, the same relationship can be observed. Those who reported voting at the most recent UK general election showed higher levels of completeness: in 2015 the level was 92%, and in 2018 it was 88%. Completeness was lower among those who said they did not vote (although eligible to do so), at 72%. Completeness for those who were not eligible to vote (predominantly EU citizens) stood at 50%.

The 2016 referendum on the UK's membership of the European Union was notable for its higher turnout compared with the UK general election which preceded it. As this is the first survey of accuracy and completeness since the referendum occurred, we asked a question to understand the relationship between participating in that referendum and the completeness of the registers.

It revealed a very similar pattern to participation in the 2017 UK general election, with completeness highest among those who said they voted in the referendum (88%). For those who did not vote, completeness stood at 71%, while among those not eligible the level of completeness was 53%.

Accuracy

Key findings

- The local government registers in Great Britain were 89% accurate, and the parliamentary registers were 89% accurate.
- In December 2018, 11% of entries had major errors and 9% of register entries had minor errors.

Both the local government registers and parliamentary registers in Great Britain were 89% accurate.

Type of errors

In analysing the accuracy of the electoral registers, a number of different types of error can be identified. These errors are then categorised as either a 'major' or 'minor' error:

- The major error category is comprised of the following:
 - a) entries which refer to individuals that no longer live that address
 - b) entries which may prevent an individual casting their vote at a polling station (for example, an incorrect name);
 - c) those errors that would mean that someone could vote when they are not eligible to do so (e.g. an incorrect date of birth for someone under 18).
- Minor errors are those which would not prevent someone from casting their vote (for example, an entry with a spelling error).

In total, 11% of entries had a major error (up from 9% in 2015) with the most common being that no corresponding name was collected through our survey at that address (10%). This refers to register entries for individuals who no longer live at the property.

In Great Britain, 9% of register entries had minor errors. The most common was for a middle name to be missing from the register which was the case for 6% of register entries.

A breakdown of the types of errors used to calculate the accuracy of the local government registers can be found in the table below:

Great Britain		
	December 2015	December 2018
Major errors total	9.4%	11.2%
Major errors – (a)	8.8%	10.4%
No corresponding name taken at address		
Major errors – (b)	0.3%	0.7%
First name and/or surname wrong on register	0.1%	0.4%
First name and/or surname missing on register	-	0.0%
UK/Irish/ Commonwealth marker present	0.2%	0.3%
Major errors – (c)	0.3%	0.5%
Name on register corresponds to ineligible name on survey	0.1%	0.2%
Attainers - DOB missing or wrong	0.1%	0.1%
EU citizens marker missing	0.1%	0.2%
Accurate with minor errors	10.4%	9.1%
First name /surname on register misspelled	1.0%	1.2%
First name /surname on register incomplete	0.5%	0.5%
Middle name missing from register	7.8%	6.4%
Middle name or initials misspelled or incomplete on register	0.1%	0.0%
Middle name or initial wrong on register	0.1%	0.1%
Person does not have a middle name but middle name on registers (respondents only)	0.2%	1.3%
Surname is/ assumed to be previous surname	0.5%	0.5%
First/middle/surname in different order on register	0.1%	0.1%
DoB earlier on register for attainer	0.0%	0.0%

Demographic characteristics

Examining the demographic nature of inaccuracy on the electoral registers is more challenging; by nature, it is not possible to record demographic details for register entries which are not matched to a resident during an interview. Nor is it possible to take into account properties which are derelict or entirely vacant. In order to provide some guidance to the patterns of accuracy by different household characteristics, the analysis below takes into account household data where a resident was interviewed. However, this data still only presents a limited picture and so must be treated with caution.

Tenure

Accuracy by tenure follows a similar pattern to completeness, with owner-occupier households the most likely to have accurate register entries (95%). In Great Britain, households where the home is being bought on a mortgage (or through shared ownership) or rented from a social landlord have a similar level of accuracy (91-95%) while private rented households have a lower level of accuracy, at 81%.

Social grade

Social grade is also calculated at the household level, based on the occupation of the chief income earner. Here again, the pattern of accuracy is closely related with completeness with a slight gradient by social grade, with AB households the most accurate and DE households least. However, all are within five percentage points of each other.

Accuracy of local government electoral registers by social grade

	Great Britain
AB	94%
C1	93%
C2	93%
DE	89%

Length of time at address

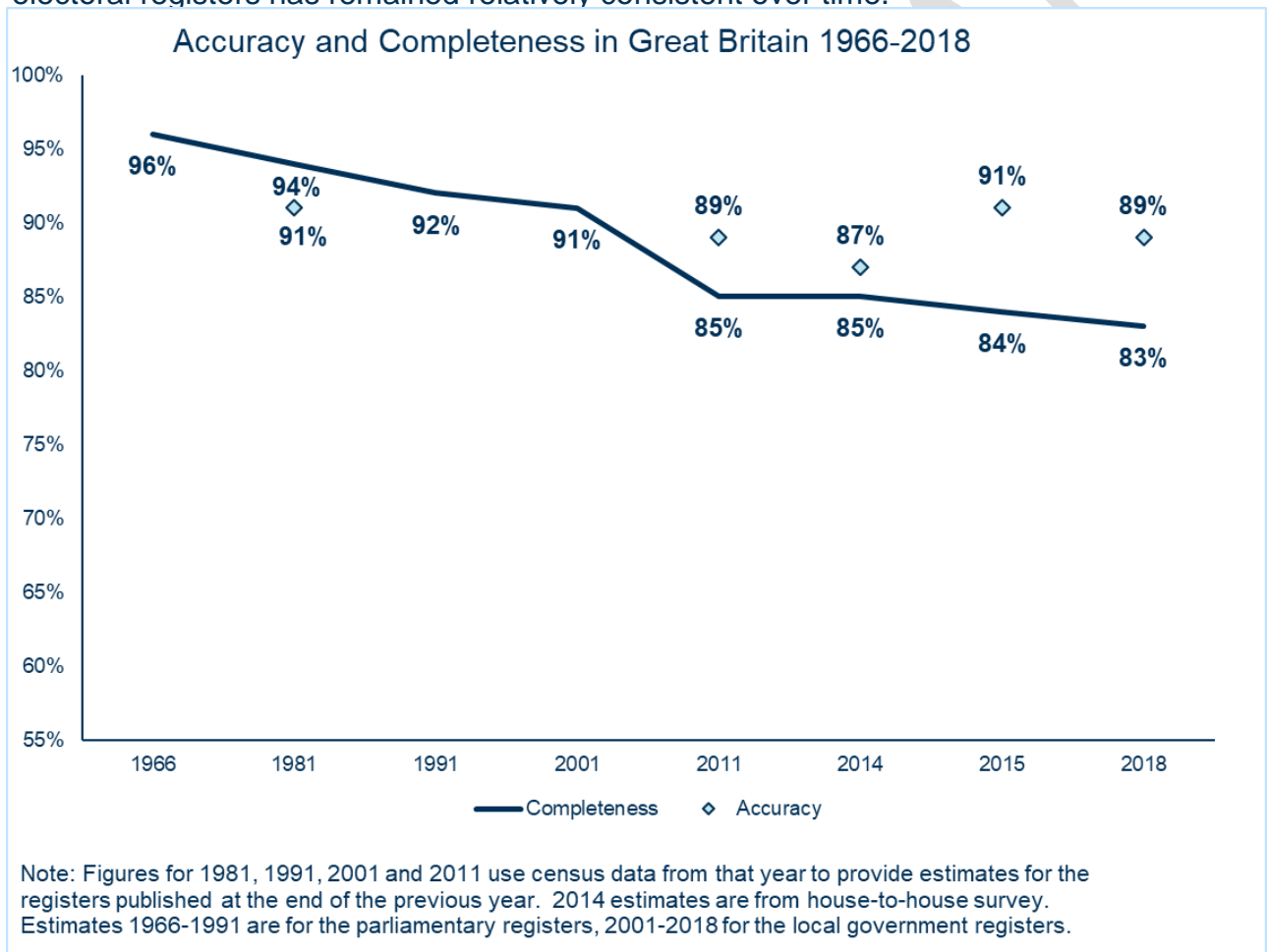
Accuracy follows the same pattern as completeness when looking at how long households have occupied their accommodation. In Great Britain accuracy is similar for all households who have been at their present address for at least one year, at 93% or higher, but is much lower for households where the current resident has been living for less than a year (56%).

Background to this study

Historical context

Figure 2.1 below shows the estimates of accuracy and completeness that have been produced between 1966 and 2018. National estimates of completeness have been produced irregularly but have been produced with a degree of uniformity that allows for making valid comparisons over time. However, comparable accuracy estimates have been produced less frequently.

Although different methods have been used to calculate accuracy, the estimates produced in 1981 and subsequently from 2011 to 2018 demonstrate that the accuracy of the electoral registers has remained relatively consistent over time.⁴⁵⁶



⁴Todd and Butcher, Electoral registration in 1981 (1981). This study set out estimates for the accuracy of the registers for April 1981 and used these estimates to calculate what the accuracy of the registers may have been at the time of the qualifying date for the canvass (October 1980). The study found that between 10.4% and 13.5% of the names on the April 1981 registers belong to people who by that time were not living at the address listed in the registers. The Office of Population Censuses and Surveys (OPCS) also estimated the proportion of names on the registers that were inaccurate in October 1981 was between 6.1% and 9.4%.

⁵ The 1991 OPCS study also considered redundant entries on the registers in Great Britain at the time of the 1991 census. This found that between 6.0% and 7.9% of the names listed at addresses which were occupied at the time of the census did not correspond with people living there at the time. However unlike the 1981 study, an estimate for the percentage of names on the registers that were listed at addresses which were unoccupied at the time of the census was not added to this percentage. Consequently, the figures do not represent a complete picture of the possible scale of inaccuracies on the registers.

⁶ The method used to calculate the accuracy of the 2014 registers was different from the one used by the Office for National Statistics in 2011.

There have been greater fluctuations in levels of completeness. The highest levels recorded were in 1950 and 1966 (96% by the end of the canvass in both 1950 and 1966) but had declined slightly by 1981 (94%) and again in 1991 (91-93%) and 2001 (91-92%).⁷ This gradual decline from 1966- 2000 was influenced by an increase in population mobility and the decline in the 1980s and early 1990s has been linked to the Community Charge (commonly referred to as the 'poll tax') where an estimated 350,000 people removed themselves from the electoral registers during this time in an attempt to avoid paying the new tax.⁸

Levels of completeness declined more dramatically after 2001, falling to 85% in 2011. This decline has been associated with population change, population mobility due to changing housing circumstances, a decrease in public engagement with electoral democracy and changing registration practices combined with declining form response rate in the early 2000s. In the analysis of the 2018 results we consider these factors to place our findings into context of the evolving challenges associated with maintaining accurate and complete registers.

The registers in 2018

In December 2018, there were 45,775,758 entries on the parliamentary electoral registers and 47,785,498 entries on the local government registers in the UK.

The December 2018 registers represented a decline in the number of register entries from December 2017 where the number of entries on the electoral registers in the UK was at its highest following the 2016 EU referendum and June 2017 UK general election.

Overall, there was a 0.8% decrease in the number of entries on the parliamentary registers and a decrease of 0.3% on the local government registers between December 2017 and December 2018. This follows two years where the registers have increased in size - albeit only a small increase between December 2016 and 2017 when the parliamentary registers increased by 0.8% and the local government registers by 1.2%.⁹

This study looks at the quality of these December 2018 registers for Great Britain. A separate assessment is published for Northern Ireland. It is important to note that while the registers may contain more entries than our last assessment in December 2015 that this does not necessarily lead to them being more complete. This is because no judgement on the accuracy of the entries is made in administrative statistics so all entries are counted equal regardless of their veracity. This assessment allows us to make a

⁷ P.G Gray and A. Gee, Electoral registration for parliamentary elections: an enquiry made for the Home Office (HMSO: London 1967)

⁸ McLean, I. and Smith, J. The UK poll tax and the electoral register: unintended consequences? (1991), Warwick University, Economic Research Papers, N. 398. McLean and Smith subsequently upgraded this estimate to 600,000 individuals. The Electoral Commission, The completeness and accuracy of electoral registers in Great Britain (March 2010).

⁹ <https://www.electoralcommission.org.uk/our-work/our-research/electoral-registration-research2/electoral-register-data> [WILL NEED REPLACED WITH INK FOR NEW WEBSITE]/
<https://www.ons.gov.uk/peoplepopulationandcommunity/elections/electoralregistration/bulletins/electoralstatisticsforuk/2018>

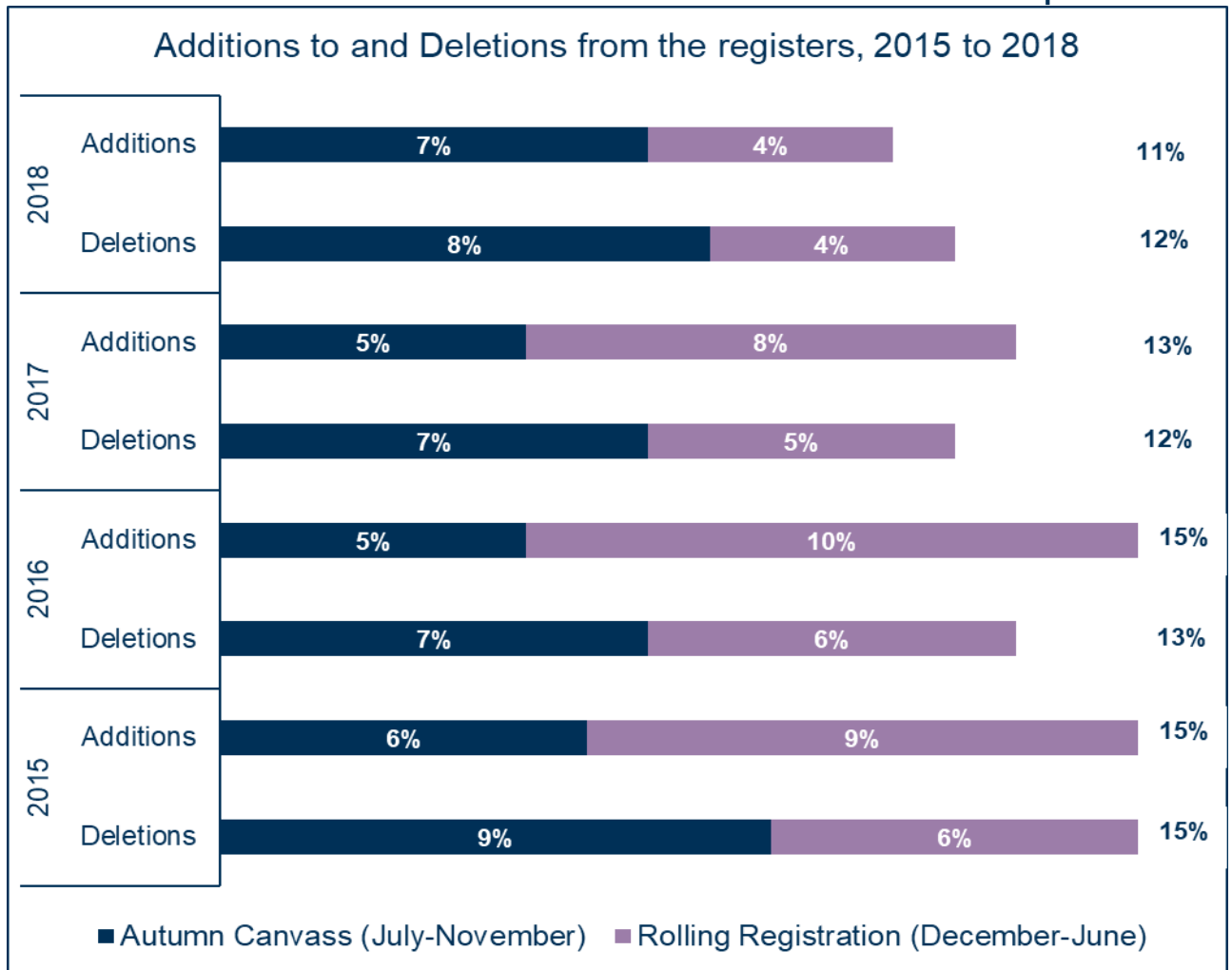
judgement on the quality of the registers and, therefore, determine how complete the registers are.

Additions and deletions to the registers, 2015 to 2018

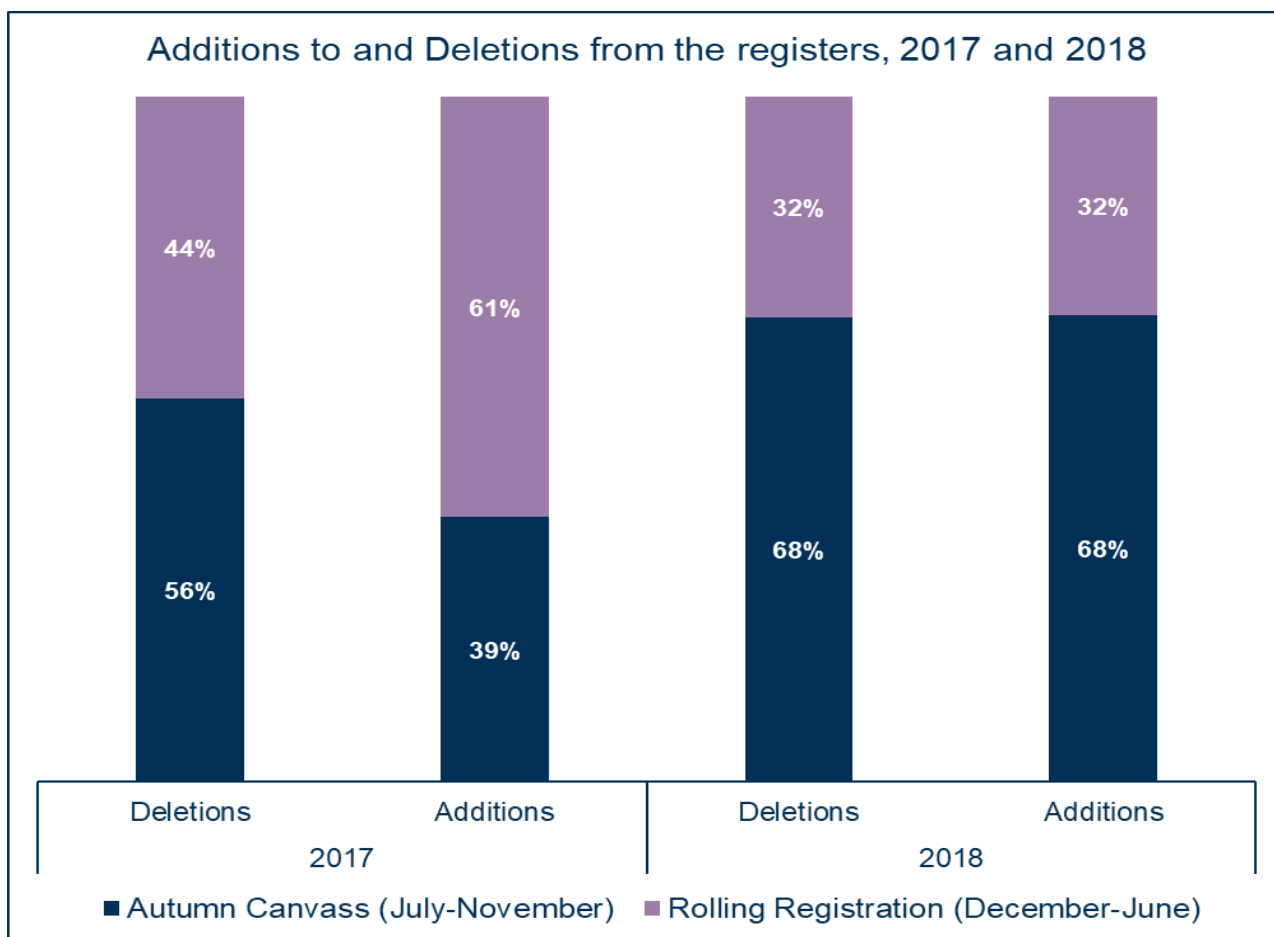
The electoral registers are a property-based database and, in order to maintain accurate and complete registers, EROs have to add and delete records for home-movers as well as to remove entries for those who have died and add entries for newly eligible electors and those not previously registered.

The figure below presents additions and deletions as a percentage of December local government register entries from 2015 to 2018. This figure shows that there was greater activity in 2015 following the transition to IER and this suggests that the December 2015 registers, the registers on which our last assessment of accuracy and completeness was based, were of a high quality (as our 2015 assessment proved).

Notably, in each of 2016 and 2017, activity around additions was greater in the rolling registration period than during the autumn canvass whereas deletions were still primarily recorded in the autumn canvass period. However, in 2018 more additions were recorded during the autumn canvass than during the rolling registration period. This difference between these years is likely to be the absence of a major national poll in 2018. In each of 2016 and 2017 there were high profile electoral events in the shape of the referendum of the UK's membership of the EU and a UK Parliamentary general election. There was a high volume of registration activity in the lead up to these events. In 2018 there were local government elections in 150 local authority areas in England and no elections in Scotland or Wales. This data demonstrates the value of the autumn canvass, particularly in years where there is less election activity, in maintaining good quality electoral registers.



An alternative way to present this information, which emphasises the effect of elections on when additions and deletions occur throughout the year, is to look at the proportion of additions and deletions during the canvass and rolling registration. The figure below presents this for 2017 and 2018. This further demonstrates the above point that in a high profile election year we tend to see additions weighted towards the rolling registration period (61% of additions in 2017) whereas in years with less elections the canvass continues to act as the primary vehicle for additions to and deletions from the register (68% for both).



The electoral registers and franchise

The electoral registers are a record of the names and addresses of people eligible to vote in elections and referendums. The registers are the foundation of the voting process: they provide the list of those who are eligible to vote, and those not included on the registers cannot take part in elections and referendums.

The registers are also used for other public purposes such as conducting boundary reviews, selecting people to undertake jury service in England and Wales and assisting law enforcement, as well as for credit ratings, and an edited version of the registers, containing only details of those who have not opted out of appearing on it, is available to anyone who wants to buy a copy.

There is no single electoral register in Great Britain but one for each local authority area in England, Scotland and Wales. Each local authority's Electoral Registration Officer (ERO) is responsible for compiling and maintaining the local list of electors.

Not every resident in the United Kingdom can register to vote and eligibility to register is directly related to the eligibility to vote which differs depending on the type of election. This means that EROs are required to keep:

- A parliamentary register: this is the list of electors used for UK Parliamentary elections;
- A local government register: used for elections to the Scottish Parliament and National Assembly for Wales as well as local government elections, mayoral elections and Police and Crime Commissioner elections.

EU citizens have been eligible to vote in local, devolved and European Parliamentary elections since 1999. Therefore, EU citizens are entitled to be on the local government register. In order to vote in European Parliamentary elections in the UK, EU citizens must also complete an extra registration form (commonly referred to as a 'UC1') to declare that they intend to vote in the UK rather than in their country of origin.

The table below sets out entitlement to vote by citizenship. Those not listed on this table are not eligible to be on either of the two registers¹⁰.

Franchise for citizenship and elections

Citizenship	Register		
	UK Parliament	Local government	
British	✓	✓	Parliamentary and local government
Commonwealth*	✓	✓	
Irish	✓	✓	
European Union	X	✓	Local government

Notes:* Citizens resident in the UK who either have leave to remain or do not require such leave

British citizens living abroad who have appeared on a UK electoral register in the last 15 years (or were resident in the UK and too young to be registered at the time of residence) are also entitled to be on the electoral register as an overseas elector and can vote at European Parliamentary and UK Parliamentary elections. They are registered in the same parliamentary constituency as before they went abroad or, if they were too young to register, in the constituency where their parent or guardian was registered.

In England and Wales, the age at which citizens become entitled to vote is currently 18, but the electoral registers also include records of 'attainers' - 16 and 17 year olds who will turn 18 within the twelve month period starting on the 1 December after they make their application.

In Scotland, the voting age for Scottish Parliamentary and local council elections is 16. This means that all 16 and 17 year olds in Scotland are entitled to be on the local government register and that attainers are 14 and 15 year olds who will turn 16 during the twelve month period starting on the 1 December after they make their application. However, entitlement for the parliamentary register in Scotland has not been affected by the change to the franchise so 16/17 year olds are attainers on the parliamentary register.

¹⁰ There are some specific exceptions to these rules. For example, convicted prisoners lose their right to vote while they are imprisoned regardless of citizenship.

Proposed franchise changes in Wales will mean that those aged 16 and 17 in Wales will have an equivalent entitlement as in Scotland.

The system for compiling the register

The electoral register is a property based database, with register entries linked to a property. This means that the quality of its information is affected by ongoing population change and EROs must add and delete records for home-movers, remove entries for electors who have died and add entries for newly eligible electors.

In Great Britain a new register is prepared annually and reviewed most months. A key element of preparing the annual register is through house-to-house canvassing. The majority of canvass activity takes place between July and November.

Each ERO is required by law to conduct an annual canvass of all properties in their area to confirm their electoral register entries and to identify electors who have moved or were not previously registered.

During the annual canvass, EROs are required to send a Household Enquiry Form (HEF) to all households (and follow-up with non-responders). This form requires the respondent to reply to the ERO with the names of any individuals no longer resident and of those who are now resident and eligible.

Since the introduction of IER it is no longer possible for a person to be added to the register as a result of their name being added to a returned HEF. Where returned HEFs include new (non-registered) individuals, a second communication – an Invitation to Register (ITR) – is sent out with a registration application for such individuals to complete. It is this application that asks for the person's National Insurance Number (NiNo) and date of birth which allows them to become registered. Individuals can apply to register online.

An ERO also cannot delete an entry based solely on a name being crossed off on a returned HEF (as they could under household registration) – so they will need either a second source of information or to carry out a review of the individual's entitlement to remain registered.

The proposed canvass process

The 2020 annual canvass commencing from July 2020 is expected to be the first under a reformed canvass model. The new canvass model aims to allow EROs in Great Britain to better focus their resources in the areas of greatest need, and better meet the objective of the canvass than under the current system.

The idea is that the canvass process will be streamlined for those properties which are likely to have not changed household composition, allowing the ERO to target their resources to where responses and updates to the electoral register are required. There is also an exemptions process for certain types of properties less suited to traditional canvassing methods – for example, care homes, Houses in Multiple Occupation and student halls of residence – which allows the ERO to seek information on residents in a different way.

The Commission sees these reforms as an important first step in modernising electoral registration. Our full response to the UK Government's proposals for reform of the annual canvass process can be found [here](#).

Our research programme

Since 2004, the Electoral Commission has been the principal body in the UK undertaking research into the electoral registers with the long-term aim to:

- Provide an overview of the accuracy and completeness of the registers in Great Britain and Northern Ireland
- Inform the Commission's guidance and support for Electoral Registration Officers (EROs)
- Provide up-to-date information on those groups which are more likely to be under-registered and thereby inform our approach to public awareness activity around elections and voter registration
- Provide ongoing tracking of how electoral registers change in response to legislative developments and administrative or population changes and use this tracking to inform our role in scrutinising proposals and policies to revise the registration system

This study of the 1 December 2018 registers establishes a baseline as we seek to measure the impact of upcoming changes to the annual canvass.

In order to measure the impact of reforms to the annual canvass we anticipate conducting two studies on the accuracy and completeness of the registers:

- 'Before measure': Presented in this report measuring the 2018 registers ahead of reform to the annual canvass.
- 'After measure': in order to assess the impact on the reforms to the annual canvass which we expect to be introduced in 2020.

We will also be collecting a variety of other data and working alongside EROs to understand the impact of the reformed canvass processes and how they are working in practice.