

The government's plans to change the voter registration system will do little to prevent electoral fraud. They may even mean that fewer people vote.

The government's plans to change the voter registration system in the UK hit the headlines as it was revealed millions of voters could be 'removed' from the electoral register. [Matthew Partridge](#) argues that the changes, supposedly aimed at reducing fraud in the electoral system, could spark partisan registration drives, drive up the cost of politics and depress turnout.



There is widespread agreement that the government's proposals to move from semi-automatic household voting registration to a system where the onus is on individuals to proactively register (or in the case of those already on the electoral rolls, to re-register) will result in a dramatic fall in the number of those able to vote. The [Electoral Reform Society](#) estimates that if individual voter registration (IVR) goes ahead, the percentage of eligible voters registered will fall from the current figure of 90 per cent to 80 per cent by 2014.

The political impact of this move has been hotly debated. [Mehdi Hassan](#) of the New Statesman argues that it will lead to a decline in overall turnout, exacerbate the tendency of voting to be positively correlated with income and generally benefit the Liberal Democrats and the Conservatives at the expense of Labour. The Telegraph's [Ed West](#), a supporter of the changes, counters that those are unwilling to register don't deserve the vote and claims that the reforms will reduce fraud, especially in areas where the "head of the household" might put pressure on family members.

Citing cost restraints, the Electoral Commission has not yet carried out any research on the potential impact of these changes on the number of voters. However, the [literature on the relationship](#) between voter registration laws and overall turnout in America, where variation in registration laws from state to state make comparisons easier, suggests that making it more difficult to register depresses turnout, though by a proportionally smaller amount than the impact on registration suggests. This suggests that although many of those unwilling to register are also unwilling to vote, there are many who find registering more difficult than voting.

Ending semi-automatic voter registration will also change politics in other ways. Although some supporters of the reforms argue that shifting responsibility for registration from the state to the individual encourages parties to engage with voters through registration drives, this can be costly, driving up the costs of politics generally and increasing the importance of fundraising, along with the inevitable scandals and conflicts of interest. Partisan driven voter registration can be extremely selective, with demographic groups that are relatively uncommitted to one party ill-served. As one [American political strategy guide](#) puts it "Focus on registering likely supporters; a shopping mall may have lots of traffic but may not be a good place to register voters unless most of them may actually support your campaign".

Although proponents of IVR claim that individual voting registration will [curb fraud](#) and reduce opportunities for intimidation, it may also increase the power of self-appointed community leaders, who will be able to leverage their ability to register large numbers of voters into real influence. It also needs to be pointed out the efforts of some voter registration groups in the US, such as the now defunct Association of Community Organizations for Reform Now (ACORN), [have been called into question](#) after it was charged with filing thousands of fraudulent voter registration forms.



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Even if these problems don't occur, IVR will fundamentally change the nature of British politics. A political culture where the primary electoral task of parties is to appeal to a majority (or at least a plurality) is different to one where elections are decided on the ability to get relatively smaller numbers of supporters to turn up at the polling station. The political polarisation and gridlock in systems based around the latter, where groups of small partisans on each side dominate each party, can mean the interests of moderate voters are less well represented.

These "reforms" to the registration system seem aimed at skewing the electoral system in favour of the Conservatives and Liberal Democrats, especially since they will be used to determine future constituency boundaries. If David Cameron is really concerned about fraud he would be better advised to stick with the current system and allow the Electoral Commission to access data from the NHS, Department of Work and Pensions and Inland Revenue to improve the electoral roll.