'Individual Electoral Registration: Getting students registered to vote.'

Minutes: 3rd November, 5.30pm-6.30pm

Attendees:

Paul Blomfield MP(Chair)
Lord Tyler
Eric Ollerenshaw MP
Caroline Lucas MP
Rebecca Harris MP
Adrian Bailey MP
Ann McKechin MP
Julian Huppert MP

Presentations from speakers:

Louis Trup, President of Oxford University Students' Union:

- Louis explained that integrated voter registration at the point of course enrolment is the most important and effective method for making sure that students are registered to vote. However, there are a number of challenges this, for example in Oxford the collegiate structure has been a barrier, and therefore other methods need to be explored. Full integration remains the long term aim.

- OUSU created voter registration publicity to promote at their freshers' fair, and they have sent invitations to register to 9000 of the 22,000 students. They are also holding a voter registration week in February, which will include a social media campaign run in partnership with the political societies at the university, as well as an event to which students will be able to gain free entry if they have registered to vote.

- The work which OUSU have been doing on voter registration is resource intensive. Although funds have been made available this year, further resources will be needed in order to sustain the work. There are also issues around targeting voter registration information, due to the lack of accurate data about student registration.

- Students care about a whole range of issues, but they also feel that politics has left them behind. OUSU are developing a student manifesto, in order to encourage students to debate key issues and to therefore strengthen student voice in the political system. There is work to be done in not only registering people to vote, but also making sure that they also turnout to vote.

John Tomlinson, Electoral Registration Officer, Sheffield City Council

- John outlined the process for integrating voter registration into course enrolment at Sheffield University. Most of the information needed to register to vote is also collected from students at enrolment, with the exception of national insurance numbers and dates of birth. Therefore, an additional form was created to integrate into online enrolment giving students the option to provide this information and the option of providing this information and register to vote.

- Importantly, the voter registration section fits seamlessly with the entire enrolment portal, meaning that it appears as part of a package of enrolment which students can complete at the same time.

- The method has proved very effective at boosting voter registration. In mid-September 27,000 students registered for courses, and approximately 20,000 of these students were eligible to vote; 12,500 students (approximately 63%) filled in the electoral registration form as part of enrolment, however 7,200 were then unable to provide their national insurance number. This has resulted in 22% of eligible students registering to vote at the point of enrolment.

- This method is more resource and time efficient than previous methods of getting students to vote. Contacting students directly, and subsequent follow up, costs at least £5 per students.

Gareth Parry, Elections Officer, Lancaster City Council

- Lancaster has two universities, Lancaster University and the University of Cumbria, and approximately 17, 000 students. The student population eligible to vote makes up roughly 14% of the total electorate. In one ward, which is 99.9% students, nearly 3,000 electors were registered before IER, but the match rate for that ward came back as 0.1%.

- The concentrated numbers of students in Lancaster allows for targeted advertising and promotions which can be difficult in areas with more dispersed student populations. The main initiatives in Lancaster have been on the campus, as well as utilising the digital ease of registration under IER.

- The Council have secured agreement from Lancaster University to supply all student data and are therefore able to generate 'Invitations to Register' (ITRs) for those not already registered. They have also worked to include electoral registration information on university enrolment software, and have seen an increase in student online registrations as a result.

- They have also developed a registration tile to add to Lancaster University's *iLancaster* smartphone app. This app has 9,000 active

student users, which equates to 75% of Lancaster University's student population.

- They have also made use of the fact that the campus based Lancaster University students are particularly reliant on travelling by bus to the city centre and have developed an interior banner advertising voter registration. They highlighted the free Wifi on buses in the campaign, encouraging students to register to vote by scanning the QR code.

- Private halls of residence and student letting agents and landlords have also been contacted about IER, and some of the bigger organisations have included IER literature in their welcome packs.

Edward Clough, Student Administrative Systems Manager, Manchester Metropolitan University

- Manchester Metropolitan University were keen to explore the options for integrating voter registration into their online enrolment process. Their current system has been developed in house, and can therefore accommodate additional webpages fairly smoothly. They therefore created an additional page for registering to vote at the end of the process. For students who didn't have their national insurance number at the time of enrolment, they are able to return to the form at any point to register.

- From the university perspective, although they would like to integrate voter registration more fully into their enrolment system, they do not want this to create any barriers or slow the process of enrolment in any way for the student.

- They have also produced postcards on voter registration which they can give out to all new students when they collect their student ID cards.

Discussion

Incentives for voter registration

There was discussion around whether it would be possible to introduce an incentive scheme for registering to vote, such as the scheme trialled in Northern Ireland where all those who registered to vote were entered into a raffle with cash prizes.

Gareth Parry suggest that although similar initiatives have been run under the previous system of voter registration, their impact has been difficult to prove definitively.

Louis Trup raised concerns that cash incentives didn't address the fact that registering to vote should be part of a journey of individual political engagement. The greater aim is that they should turn out and vote, not purely register, and democratic engagement should be long term

Young people and engagement in politics

There was discussion around increasing young peoples' engagement in politics. The point was made that registration and turnout rates among young people in the Scottish independence referendum demonstrated that young people are engaged in politics.

Louis Trup said that young people are interested in a whole range of issues, for example, liberation or education issues, but feel isolated from other forms of political engagement. This gap needs to be bridged, and there is a need for stronger political and citizenship education in and across schools, colleges and universities.

The role of politicians in young peoples' political engagement was discussed, and it was suggested that local political parties should make more of a commitment to go into schools and colleges to deliver cross party talks to students about politics.

The importance of political engagement and citizenship education in schools and colleges was also raised, as it is essential that young people become engaged in politics and register to vote before they leave the home environment for university and become more transient.

John Tomlinson highlighted that NUS and student unions have a key role in getting students registered, however they need resources to carry out this work and EROs need to recognise and fund this.

University engagement in voter registration

It was discussed that some universities have worked to introduce integrated voter registration whilst others have not, and parliamentarians questioned why this is. In particular, why have some universities raised concerns about data protection, whilst others, including Sheffield and Manchester, managed to get around this?

John Tomlinson explained that although the data protection concerns are largely due to misunderstanding, for Sheffield and Manchester integrating voter registration has been less problematic because both universities have their own bespoke systems. Edward Clough agreed that when universities are using off-the-shelf systems, this means that they require a customer agreement with the supplier. There are five suppliers of student record systems, and it might be worth contacting them to create an standard 'add-on' which can be used across universities.

It was suggested that issues around data protection could therefore be better communicated to universities. Edward Clough and Gareth Perry agreed that a key blockage in their experience was creating a data sharing agreement between the council and university.

It was also suggested by parliamentarians that in communicating the importance of voter registration to Vice Chancellors, an argument which has particular resonance is that the numbers of people on each electoral

register could impact on the outcome of a potential boundary review. If students are not registered to vote, this could lead to a diminished university voice.

Home registration

The issue of students registering to vote in their home constituencies was raised. Although a lot of work is being done through universities, more needs to be done to address low levels of participation elsewhere.

Parliamentarians asked whether it is possible to collate information about where a student is registered to vote. John Tomlinson explained that this has been difficult because of multiple people having the same full name, however now dates of birth are also collected this might be possible.

It was also highlighted that more needs to be done to counter a perception that some students have that they are 'visitors' in their university towns.

Best practice and learning from IER

Parliamentarians asked whether best practice from the work that EROs are doing in captured in any way.

A representative from the Cabinet Office explained that the Cabinet Office have a central forum which records all the activities which EROs are undertaking on student voter registration. There is also an IER insight newsletter which is circulated to EROs, and there are EROs in each region who are student leads. There was a suggestion from parliamentarians that this best practice information should be accessible to other groups working on and interested in voter registered.

Louis Trup also highlighted that NUS are capturing a lot of the work which universities and students' unions are doing on student voter registration. In addition, Bite the Ballot are also sharing best practice. NUS are also encouraging students' unions to write to their EROs.

The Cabinet Office emphasised that a lot of the learning from the transition to IER is being captured to inform long term strategy on voter registration, in particular the work around digital integration. There was also discussion around the need to sustain this work, given that the Cabinet Office funding is transitional, but a lot of the resources are required annually.