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OFFICIAL REPORT

Third Delegated Legislation Committee

DRAFT REPRESENTATION OF THE PEOPLE
(ANNUAL CANVASS) (AMENDMENT)
REGULATIONS 2019

Thursday 31 October 2019

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The Committee consisted of the following Members:

Chair: Ms KAREN BUCK

Ali, Rushanara (*Bethnal Green and Bow*) (Lab)
 † Baldwin, Harriett (*West Worcestershire*) (Con)
 Campbell, Mr Ronnie (*Blyth Valley*) (Lab)
 † Caulfield, Maria (*Lewes*) (Con)
 † Crouch, Tracey (*Chatham and Aylesford*) (Con)
 † Dent Coad, Emma (*Kensington*) (Lab)
 † Fitzpatrick, Jim (*Poplar and Limehouse*) (Lab)
 George, Ruth (*High Peak*) (Lab)
 † Jones, Andrew (*Harrogate and Knaresborough*)
 (Con)
 † Lefroy, Jeremy (*Stafford*) (Con)
 † Matheson, Christian (*City of Chester*) (Lab)

† Menzies, Mark (*Fylde*) (Con)
 † Moore, Damien (*Southport*) (Con)
 † Morris, Grahame (*Easington*) (Lab)
 † Rutley, David (*Lord Commissioner of Her Majesty's
 Treasury*)
 † Smith, Chloe (*Parliamentary Secretary, Cabinet
 Office*)
 † Smith, Nick (*Blaenau Gwent*) (Lab)

Sarah Rees, *Committee Clerk*

† **attended the Committee**

Third Delegated Legislation Committee

Thursday 31 October 2019

[Ms KAREN BUCK *in the Chair*]

Draft Representation of the People (Annual Canvass) (Amendment) Regulations 2019

11.30 am

The Parliamentary Secretary, Cabinet Office (Chloe Smith): I beg to move,

That the Committee has considered the draft Representation of the People (Annual Canvass) (Amendment) Regulations 2019.

It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Ms Buck. May I reassure the Committee that, although we are in the midst of thinking about a general election and preparing for it to be run successfully from an administrative perspective, this statutory instrument is not to do with the forthcoming election? I want to make that clear at the outset in case anyone has such thoughts in mind. The changes brought about by the draft regulations, which will first be made use of in the 2020 canvass, will run from July 2020 to December 2020, so what we are talking about now does not come into play for the general election that will follow in a few weeks' time.

As I am sure hon. Members are aware, the annual canvass is an information-gathering exercise that electoral registration officers are obliged to do every year to ensure that their electoral registers are as complete and accurate as possible. It currently involves sending a form—I am sure hon. Members have filled the forms in themselves—to each residential address with a pre-paid pre-addressed envelope, which households must legally respond to and which ascertains whether the details that the ERO holds for that address are accurate. That is then followed up with a further two written reminders and a household visit if the household does not respond. The point of the process is to find out who lives in a household and then to invite them to register. That is what the canvass does.

The problem we are dealing with today is the one-size-fits-all approach to the annual canvass. It incorporates a lot of prescribed steps and takes little account of differences within and between registration areas. It is heavily paper based, complex to run, and arguably stifling of innovation on the part of the administrators, who do a great job and a lot of hard work. I want to put our appreciation of the administration officers on the record here today.

The process is expensive. It is inefficient for EROs and, crucially, for citizens. It is financially unsustainable in its current form. It is clear that it needs to be improved. We do not want such processes to confuse citizens, and it is citizens we should think about first. If someone has lived at the same property for 30 years, it seems nonsensical to keep completing and returning a form every year that says basically the same thing.

As part of our commitment to make the process of registration as smooth and as simple as possible, we worked with 24 local authorities in 2016 and 2017 to design and deliver pilots across Great Britain to test

potential alternatives to the current annual canvass process that could be more efficient and at least as effective—an important point that I want to impress on the Committee. We are aiming for greater efficiency for administrators and citizens, and for the process to be at least as effective, which was one of our main goals.

The evaluation of the pilots provided a strong body of evidence that informed the development of a new, less prescriptive and less burdensome canvass model that will still be an effective audit of the electoral registers. The regulations implement the new model. The most significant change is that it moves away from being one size fits all and instead becomes a more tailored canvass. Households that have not changed since the previous year can follow a more streamlined and cost-effective process, allowing the ERO, crucially, to target their resources where they are most needed. That is important to all of us because we all believe everybody should have their voice and should be able to be registered if they so wish. Of course, we also want to be able to assist administrators to put those resources where they are most needed, targeting those whom we consider the hardest to reach for electoral registration.

Households for which responses and updates will most likely be required will be identified at the outset through a new data-matching step, which will tell the ERO which households likely remain unchanged and which do not. The pilots show that 57% to 83% of households across the pilot sites stayed unchanged from the previous year, and by identifying those properties, the ERO can focus their attention on those that did change and are likely to require additions to the register.

Let me give a few examples of what we are talking about when we talk about under-registered groups. We are talking about people who move home frequently—for example in the private rented sector; young people, including, but not limited to, students; and some groups of a black and ethnic minority background. I am sure we all agree that those groups have absolutely every right to be registered and ought to be the beneficiary of the changes we are talking about.

The data-match step will involve EROs matching their data on registered electors against data held by the Department for Work and Pensions and, where relevant, locally held data sources. Where the ERO's data on registered electors matches data in a national or locally held dataset, the ERO can have a level of confidence that the details they hold remain accurate.

The ERO will then follow one of three routes for each property, and let me briefly recap what those are. First, the matched properties route will be used for properties where the data shows that the names already held are likely to be complete and accurate. By introducing route 1, we will align the audit of electoral registers with people's expectations, because, quite understandably, people expect not to have to take action unless an update is required. A burden is also avoided for EROs, because they do not then need to put their resources towards an intensive exercise that is not needed.

Route 2 is for so-called unmatched properties and will be the default route. It will be used for properties where the data-matching exercise shows that there may be a change in the people who are currently registered or not registered for the property. This route is similar to the current canvass process, but the crucial change is that it lets the ERO use e-communications and telephone

calls to communicate with electors, instead of hard-copy paper correspondence. I think we can all agree that that is a way to enable greater innovation and greater convenience for citizens as well. I should point out that hard copy may, of course, be still be used; what we are talking about is opening up possibilities, in addition to paper, if that suits an ERO or household.

Route 3 is for defined properties. It is available for properties where the ERO believes they can more effectively and efficiently get the current list of residents using an alternative approach. The ERO will be able to identify a responsible person to give the most up-to-date list of people who should be invited to register in respect of that property. Examples would be care homes or student halls of residence, where a manager might be in a position to provide the ERO with information on those who ought to be invited to register.

I should just note at this point that this is not a proposal for automatic registration. The Opposition Front-Bench spokesman might want to talk about automatic registration, and there is a whole policy debate about the merits or otherwise of it, but this is not that. I point that out, Ms Buck, to help with the scope of this discussion, because automatic registration is not in the scope of what the regulations do—not that you need help; I am just trying to be helpful to the Committee.

In respect of all three routes, the regulations allow for more efficient and modern communication methods. We are talking about emails, text messages, phone calls or, where needed, a short letter encouraging electors to respond using these channels rather than the post.

Nick Smith (Blaenau Gwent) (Lab): We all have experience of this topic, haven't we? If the ERO thinks that a voter is still in residence and therefore does not need to be part of the annual canvass, but the streamlined process is not responded to—for instance, if an email goes into a junk folder or a phone call from the ERO is missed by the resident—will that person be taken off the electoral register, even though the council may still believe them to be in residence?

Chloe Smith: The short answer is no, not immediately. These models retain what we already see in the canvass, which is a number of attempts to ascertain information. Through this change, we are allowing for those attempts to be made more easily. We are not looking to reduce the likelihood that someone is able to get on the register.

Nick Smith: The Minister said, “No, not immediately.” What guidance will EROs be given and what further steps will be taken to make sure that a voter is left on the electoral register when the ERO believes them to be still in residence, to ensure that they are not robbed of their vote?

Chloe Smith: I welcome that point, because it is incredibly important. I can give the reassurance once again that we are not seeking for people to be taken off the register when they should not be. By the way, may I add that we are not seeking for people to stay on the register when they should not be, if they have genuinely moved home—deletions are, of course, as relevant as additions.

To the hon. Gentleman's point, I will provide the detail of how many times that can be done. The point is that, in line with the current law, removal would not be done immediately, from the citizen's perspective. The hon. Gentleman—I want to be clear in my words here—may

think that, when I say that it is not immediate, I mean that it is done by some sinister regulation other than the ones we are talking about. I want to be clear that that is not the interpretation. What I mean is that, just as now, the ERO does not immediately remove anybody, but continues to inquire. I will give him the detail of exactly how many times that method is done as I go through other details in my remarks.

I also want to cover the scope of these provisions. They relate only to the parliamentary registers across Great Britain and the local government register in England. Responsibility for the registers for local government is devolved in Scotland and Wales, so the final policy that hon. Members see in front of them today has been agreed over many months between myself, the Member who covered my maternity leave, and counterparts in the Scottish and Welsh Governments. It will be for the Welsh and Scottish Governments to introduce complementary legislation to cover the registers in Wales and Scotland.

I am grateful for that cross-party and cross-institution collaboration. Officials from the three Governments have worked closely to enable these statutory instruments to be produced. Those are due to be laid in their respective legislatures in the coming weeks. That will allow the reforms to be in place across the Great Britain registers by the beginning of 2020. It is helpful to remind the Committee that this shows that we can do that kind of work between Administrations. I fully welcome that as a way of being able to maintain complete and accurate registers for all electors across Great Britain.

I want to say a quick word on the support of administrators for these measures. EROs fully support these reforms. Given their frontline experience administering the process year on year, they are best placed to understand how important it is to modernise it. These regulations are the culmination of three years of collaboration with stakeholders such as the Association of Electoral Administrators and the Scottish Assessors Association, which represent EROs and administrators. A public consultation was also run on the regulations, gathering responses from administrators throughout the country. I am grateful that my officials visited every region of Great Britain to present the proposed reforms to groups of administrators ahead of the publication of the final statement of canvass reform policy in September.

The feedback from the electoral community about these reforms has been very positive. For example, the chief executive of the Association of Electoral Administrators, Mr Peter Stanyon, noted that

“using data to deliver a better experience for citizens is the right approach to take...It will also deliver much needed cost savings to local authorities.”

We have also worked closely with the Electoral Commission, as per section 8 of the Electoral Registration and Administration Act 2013, and its response is overwhelmingly positive. It supports the regulations, saying:

“The canvass reform proposals should result in greater efficiency, allowing Electoral Registration Officers (EROs) to focus their increasingly limited resources on areas of greatest need thereby better meeting the objective of the canvass.”

After its consultation, the Information Commissioner's Office also supports the scheme.

Today's reforms bring up to date a process that is no longer fit for purpose. The regulations give EROs greater flexibility to decide how to canvass their local areas.

[Chloe Smith]

They provide them with opportunities to identify where greater efficiencies can be made locally, and make the citizen experience more streamlined and user-friendly. The regulations also incorporate the safeguards that the hon. Member for Blaenau Gwent has quite rightly been asking about, which can be expected to continue to apply for citizens. Before making any removals, an ERO must find a second source of information, or conduct a review, which includes a legal process.

I assure the hon. Gentleman that non-response to the canvass does not lead to deletion. There are also safeguards in place for unread emails or unanswered telephone calls; for example, when email is used, the elector must respond. If no response is received, a letter is sent to make sure that the email is not in a junk folder, for example. This is all geared towards residents not missing out on updating their records, and the same is true for telephones. There is further detail in the policy statement, the impact assessment, and all the other documentation that goes alongside these reforms, which I hope will reassure the Committee that there will not be a reduction in the level of the service for ensuring citizens are not removed incorrectly.

Of course, I will answer any further questions the Committee may have about these regulations. However, I remind Members that we are looking to make greater efficiencies for both administrators, who sorely need them, and citizens, who quite rightly expect this process to be streamlined and user-friendly. If we do not pass these regulations, we are condemning citizens to continual greater inefficiency, and administrators to a further round of a costly process.

We are aiming to make changes that are ready for the canvass in 2020. Making those changes today will enable the data-matching step to be done in early 2020, and the canvass in 2020 to be run using those improvements. Not passing these regulations will lead to another year of greater cost and inefficiency, which is unfair to administrators and deeply unfair to citizens, who could have had better.

These regulations are uncontentious. They are largely highly technical, and they have the support of all the major stakeholders in this sector, including cross-party, cross-political support from the Welsh and Scottish Governments.

11.49 am

Christian Matheson (City of Chester) (Lab): What a great pleasure it is to serve under your chairmanship, Ms Buck. I thank the Minister for her opening remarks setting out the Government's position, and in particular for her assurances—which we entirely accept—that today's regulations have nothing to do with the general election that has recently been announced.

We have concerns about some of the measures, however, and the announcement of the general election and the impending Dissolution of Parliament mean that we are being rushed into a situation without giving sufficient attention to those concerns. The Opposition support a review of the model of the annual canvass of electors, with the aim of making it easier and cheaper to administer, as the Minister said, especially when EROs are facing increasingly squeezed budgets. I suspect, however, that a long speech on the effect of cuts on local government budgets might be ruled out of order by your good self, Ms Buck, so I will not go there.

It is essential that changes to the model do not jeopardise the primary purpose of the annual canvass, which is to ensure that the electoral register is as accurate as possible. We are concerned that there is a real risk that the proposed reform will have a detrimental impact on the accuracy of the register. The Minister has stated that four alternative models for the annual canvass were piloted in 2016 and 2017—[*Interruption.*] The Minister corrects me; there may have been only three.

The Cabinet Office's 2017 evaluation report found that all those alternative models provided the same quality of information at a lower cost, but only two models—the email and telephone models—provide the same volume of information as the current model. The report also included EROs' concerns in respect of the reliability of all the alternative models.

The Electoral Commission also provided an evaluation report for the pilot schemes. It stated that the current canvass system is “not sustainable” and made a number of observations about the pilot schemes. It noted that evidence from the pilot schemes suggested that the use of data by EROs would assist in targeting their canvassing, and recommended that the Government develop that approach. It also stated, however, that it did not think that

“any of the...pilot models are ready to be put into practice yet”.

The Government's reform envisages a new model of the annual canvass that is effectively a hybrid with elements from each of the pilot scheme models. In short, the reformed model begins with a data-discernment step for most properties, which are consequently identified as green or red. Green properties are then treated with a light-touch approach through route one, while red properties are treated with a more intensive approach through route two. A third category of properties, listed by group exemption—for example, properties of multiple occupation, such as student halls or residential homes—is treated by contact with the property manager through route three.

Although we welcome the principles behind the reform of the annual canvass, we have a number of concerns about the preparatory work that has led to it. First, the proposed reform has not been tested, because it is a hybrid model in which the Government have sought to derive the best elements from each of the pilot scheme models. It would be sensible and reasonable for the hybrid reform model to be tested in an appropriate pilot scheme before steps were taken to change the current annual canvass system.

Secondly, we are concerned that the pilot schemes were too limited. The Electoral Commission's evaluation report noted the limitations of the 2017 pilot scheme, in which 24 local authorities participated. That is not a large number, especially when only a small number tested each alternative model. Moreover, each alternative model involved more than one change from the current canvass process, which meant that it was not always possible to draw a clear conclusion on the effectiveness of the individual elements and changes.

Thirdly, we have serious concerns about how the reform will affect under-represented groups. The Electoral Commission's most recent study of the accuracy and completeness of the 2018 electoral register found that up to 9.5 million people are not correctly registered to vote, which is an increase of 1 million since its previous study in 2016.

The later study also found huge variations in registration levels based on factors such as age, mobility and ethnicity. For example, 71% of people aged 18 to 24 are registered to vote compared with 93% of people over 55; 58% of private renters are registered to vote compared with 91% of homeowners; and 75% of people from black and ethnic minority backgrounds are registered to vote compared with 84% from a white ethnic background. It is therefore disappointing that the pilot schemes did not include any objective to find out whether the alternative models had any impact on those under-registered groups.

Given the important role that the annual canvass plays under the current system, we believe that the proposed reform must be subject to testing by an appropriate pilot scheme, which is sufficiently large and specifically investigates the reform's impact on currently under-represented groups.

The Cabinet Office recently published its equality impact assessment of the proposed reform, and I will pick up on a number of points that concern us. Under route one, where the data indicates that there is no change in household composition, it will be at the EROs' discretion as to whether to adopt a light-touch approach. Under the heading "Age", on page 14, the equality impact assessment says:

"There is a risk, therefore, of older electors – who are likely to be less IT literate – becoming ostracised by the modernisation of the annual canvass. For example, being targeted with electronic communications rather than traditional canvassing methods."

Under the same heading of "Age", the equality impact assessment says on page 15: "With regards to attainers"—that is, someone who has just attained the right to vote—

"if the messaging on Route 1 canvass communications or electronic communications is not clear enough, there is a risk this could result in new attainers being missed. Unclear messaging on communications may result in recipients failing to understand the need to notify this change to the ERO. This is because the Route 1 paper communication will not require a response if the household has no changes in composition to report, nor will it be followed up with further contact by an ERO."

I get the impression that that was the point that my hon. Friend the Member for Blaenau Gwent made, namely that if somebody misses a first communication, it is unclear what measures there will be to follow up that first communication. Can I ask the Minister to return to that point?

Chloe Smith: For the sake of clarity, I have ensured that we have the figures available for the Committee from the great amount of backing detail that exists. I can confirm that, under route one, follow-ups can be expected via a combination of email and paper, and that, under route two—where we would expect that the follow-ups are most required, because route one is the unchanged category and route two covers those cases where there is change—there will be three steps, of which one must be a paper form, one must be a form of personal contact and one can be a method that is at the discretion of EROs.

Those are minimum steps and more steps can be taken if EROs wish. I underline that the whole point of what we are doing here is allowing greater discretion to EROs to use better methods rather than prescribed methods. I hope that is helpful.

Christian Matheson: I thank the Minister for that intervention. Our concern, which I think she is edging towards addressing, is that there are methods of follow-up that are different from the form of initial contact that is made. If that initial contact has failed, obviously a different contact method would be necessary.

We also have a concern, which I will come on to in greater detail shortly, that because these are minimum steps, when local authorities and EROs are hard pressed, unfortunately the minimum becomes the basic standard.

Chloe Smith: May I add a further point to that, because, of course, the question that follows is: are the numbers that I have just given different from those for what happens already? I can reassure the Committee that currently the canvass provides for three stages that use paper, including the so-called household enquiry form, and some form of personal contact is also possible. Regarding the figures that I cited, even if they were minimums, and we certainly expect greater local discretion to be used, they are as effective and as efficient as the current system. So the change that we are considering today is a positive rather than a negative one.

Christian Matheson: I am grateful to the Minister for that intervention and I welcome the statements that she has just made. However, I will return to the question of the equality impact assessment. The Government have attempted to address some of the questions about this process in that document as well. The equality impact assessment says:

"There is no requirement on EROs to utilise the alternative communication methods".

It goes on to say that "the EC"—that is, the Electoral Commission—

"will also design a suite of good practice guidance to support the reformed canvass process."

However, our concern is that because EROs will no longer be mandated to have a household visit under route one, at a time—as I have already mentioned—of increasingly squeezed budgets, many EROs may opt for the light-touch approach, which means that parts of the electorate might be missed. I hope that the Minister has gone some way to addressing that concern in her previous intervention, but it is something that we will watch keenly, to see how things develop in practice.

Finally, under the heading of "Race", the equality impact assessment says:

"We do not anticipate that the reforms will discriminate either indirectly or directly against the protected characteristic listed above."

That is a rather terse and dismissive response, which gives no basis for that particular claim. We know that people from black and minority ethnic backgrounds are significantly less likely to be registered to vote. We know that ethnic minorities, particularly people from black, Pakistani and Bangladeshi backgrounds, are more likely to live in areas of deprivation. The equality impact assessment does not address our concerns that under-represented groups will be impacted by the reforms.

More broadly, we are concerned that the Government want to roll out what we believe is discriminatory voter identification requirements in polling stations—a deliberate and well-established method of voter suppression used by right-wing politicians in the United States to suppress

[*Christian Matheson*]

voter turnout among minority groups. Such proposals are a blatant attempt by the Conservatives to suppress voters, deny people their democratic rights and rig the result of future general elections. The Windrush scandal has shown what happens when millions of people who lack voter ID are shut out by this Government.

Ultimately, any changes to the annual canvass will not be enough to ensure that every eligible voter can have their say in our electoral processes. Our current system of individual electoral registration has not achieved what we were told it would. Millions of people are still missing from the register, with disproportionately low levels of registration among young people, private renters and people from ethnic minority backgrounds.

The Tories know that when lots of people are registered to vote, they are less likely to do well in elections. We believe that is why the Government have done nothing to tackle the issue; that is why I return to the question of voter suppression. The Prime Minister even tried to fix the date of the forthcoming general election to make it harder for students to take part.

Instead of tinkering around the edges, we need a Labour Government that will take radical steps to drastically increase voter registration, such as examining the use of Government data to automatically place people on the electoral roll. That could be achieved by expanding the data sources available to EROs, such as those maintained by the Driver and Vehicle Licensing Agency, Her Majesty's Revenue and Customs and other listings maintained by local authorities. Under a modernised system, citizens could well be added to the electoral register, or their addresses updated, without their being required to take any further steps. That would take a lot of pressure off the annual canvass. Citizens could opt out if they wished to do so.

There are many successful examples around the world of automatic voter registration that would take the pressure off an annual canvass.

The Chair: Order. Can I gently bring the hon. Gentleman back to the business? He is in danger of straying too far.

Christian Matheson: Indeed, Ms Buck. I am trying to point out the alternatives to the annual canvass, which would take pressure off the EROs and therefore make their role in supporting that canvass as easy as possible. As always, I will follow your advice and do as I am told.

In the past, there has been support for automatic voter registration. In 2015, the cross-party Political and Constitutional Reform Committee reaffirmed its previous view that voters should be registered to vote automatically using data already held by the Government. The Minister will be aware of the Electoral Commission's recently published feasibility studies, which explore various options to modernise electoral registration. They consider the potential for giving EROs access to data from other public service providers; automatic or more automated forms of registration; and integration of electoral registration into public services. The Minister mentioned that point in her opening remarks, when she spoke about using other datasets such as those from the Department for Work and Pensions in order to validate some of the positions that had been taken by EROs in the proposed annual canvass.

It seemed to me as I listened that the Minister was edging towards suggesting that she was about to announce support for a method of automatic voter registration, but then she dashed my hopes by suggesting that it was still not the Government's proposal to move to that position. I hope the fact that the Minister is considering using other datasets from Government and other public authority bodies to support the annual canvass means that she will now consider that proposal—at least until the next general election, when presumably a Labour Government will take over and consider it themselves. Can she clarify whether the use of datasets held by other public authorities, which I am pleased to hear she is proposing to use to help validate this canvass, is not yet going any further than that and that automatic registration is not currently on the Government's agenda?

It is vital that every eligible voter can have their say in our democratic processes. As I have said, we support the review of the current model of the annual canvass of electors with the aim of making it easier and cheaper to administer. However, we are concerned at the timing for consideration of these statutory instruments; we have not been given enough time to consider them. We are concerned that they are about saving cash and not about ensuring that our electoral register is complete. We have genuine concerns that the proposed reform could have a detrimental impact on the accuracy of the register.

It is a significant and complicated piece of legislation that requires proper scrutiny by this House and should not be rushed through in days, before we all embark on a general election campaign. For those reasons, notwithstanding that I am grateful for the Minister's explanations, we will vote against the proposals today.

12.6 pm

Chloe Smith: I welcome some of the further points that the hon. Gentleman has made; I aim to respond to them.

It will be helpful to set out three further points to the Committee. First and most importantly, there is the impact on under-registered groups. That is crucial. The point of the regulations is that we are seeking to free up resources for EROs to do their job, which is to produce and maintain registers that are as complete and accurate as possible, and to do that by ensuring that all those who have a right to vote are invited to register. That is the goal. We are taking an unwise step in this place if we put more burdens in their way or if we fail to relieve them of an incredibly burdensome, Victorian process.

The Opposition are seemingly arguing that we should not relieve the EROs of an old, burdensome process, and instead condemn them to continuing it. I hesitate to move towards the Christmas, Dickens, Scrooge jokes, but do we really want to condemn administrators to continue to work under Victorian conditions when we could do so much better? Who is it that we do it better for? It is for those who may have the least attention paid to them under those burdensome processes—in other words, those who are least likely to be registered to vote. We wish to focus on those people and these methods allow, rather than disallow, that.

Christian Matheson: I have to repeat that the Opposition accept the need for change. Dickens jokes are always welcome, Christmas or not.

My concern is that several hybrid models have been melded into one. We have not had enough time to test the model yet and we do not feel that we have enough time to consider the proposals. Whether we are wholly opposed to the proposals at the end of the process is another matter entirely, but it is the question of how we scrutinise that we are concerned about.

Chloe Smith: In that case, I am glad that the hon. Gentleman agrees; his first argument has fallen away. These pilots provide a better experience for under-registered groups. They show no negative impact on under-registered groups and EROs agreed that they had more resource available to target those groups. We should all surely support that.

I can give a few more points of detail that may be helpful. For example, let us look at attainers, who are the group coming towards the age of being able to vote; this is not an argument about whether that ought to be 16 or 18, but about those who attain the age for voting. The reform allows EROs to be helped to get data that will help them to work out where and who those young people are, and to invite them to register. It is about helping EROs get better quality data that they can use to target their work where it is most needed, and to get people on to the register.

Nick Smith (Blaenau Gwent) (Lab): Does that mean the Department for Work and Pensions will give the attainer's national insurance number to EROs to help boost electoral registration? My very good Blaenau Gwent ERO told me that Blaenau Gwent council has found that, when young people try to register to vote, that voter registration effort fails because they may not have an NI number. Therefore, there is under-representation of young people because that important data is not woven into the system.

Chloe Smith: The short answer is yes. Today's data-matching step allows for those data fields—national insurance is one example, but other information is held in the DWP's customer information system and in locally available sources, which I covered in my earlier remark. There is the potential to use those datasets to reach people who have not yet been identified to be invited to register to vote. That is exactly the point of what we are discussing. These regulations allow that data-matching approach, which is what the hon. Gentleman's—I am sure excellent—registration officer has been searching for. We are enabling that improvement today. It is a mystery to me why his colleague, the hon. Member for City of Chester, indicates that he would not wish to support that. Voting against this instrument condemns the Blaenau Gwent registration officer to continue fumbling around in the dark.

Nick Smith: I do not speak on behalf of my colleague; he is more than able to do speak for himself. Our general fear is that the Minister is rushing her fences. It would have been much better to have more time to consider the regulations and deal with them after the general election, in anticipation of the annual registration drive in the autumn of next year. I understand that there are technical reasons that make it difficult for the Government, but a longer run-in would help to address the very real concerns we have about under-registration, as well as the need to involve people and boost electoral registration.

If the voter is thought to be in residence, but the follow-up, streamlined measures do not lead to registration, as the Minister mentioned, will there be a household visit at that place, similar to an annual register, but targeted at those people—

The Chair: Order. Interventions need to be fairly brief.

Nick Smith: I apologise—I will be succinct. Will there be a household visit to pursue those people who may not have responded to the streamlined measures the Minister outlined?

Chloe Smith: Yes, household visits remain in the system. I can clarify that we are talking about omitting the household visit only in route 1, which is where there is no change in a household. Why should people visit a household where they have been told there is no change? That seems to be good common sense. Routes 2 and 3 still include household visits in the mix of methods available. I hope that is helpful to the Committee.

Let me add a little further detail to the points about national insurance numbers. We have worked with HMRC to put a “register to vote” prompt on the issuing of national insurance numbers for 16-year-olds who might be getting those numbers. If it would be helpful, I would be happy to write to the Committee to be more precise on exactly which national datasets are in hand. I do not wish to confuse the Committee in any way about the types of data available from DWP and HMRC. I want to be able to get that right, so I will write to Members to confirm it.

Let me move on to a few other points that were made. The hon. Member for City of Chester asked whether this statutory instrument has been rushed. I understand why the argument arises, because here we are in the few days before the Dissolution of the House of Commons. As I explained, the substance of the statutory instrument is not to do with the general election, but I understand that we are having to debate it with fewer days' notice than would otherwise have been the case.

As I explained, the passing of this instrument and the equivalent ones in the other legislatures was always going to be this autumn; we are talking about only a matter of days or weeks' change. I cannot speak for the usual channels about exactly when the Committee would have been scheduled for, but the relatively short notice given in inviting hon. Members to join the Committee was more to do with Dissolution procedures than anything intrinsic to this statutory instrument. It is not being rushed through the House; it would always have been in front of the House this autumn.

Let me remake the point that three years' work has gone into this exercise, including considerable consultation and joint working between Administrations. That is the very opposite of being rushed. This has arguably been a slow, methodical process. I hope that reassures the Committee.

I want to go on to the impact of not passing the regulations today, and I want to use the Electoral Commission's words. It says in its consultation response summary that

“the success of canvass reform is highly dependent on new data-sharing mechanisms and careful planning and implementation activities being completed in good time ahead of the start of the 2020 annual canvass, which will commence from July 2020.”

[Chloe Smith]

In other words, if we do not agree to the regulations today, we will be depriving those hard-working electoral registration officers of being able to do data sharing—which is to the greater good—careful planning and implementation activities. That would be foolish.

The Electoral Commission reminds us:

“Under the current rigid statutory requirements for the canvass, EROs have to carry out the same steps...even if there has been no change...This means that EROs are unable to focus their resources in areas of greatest need, and a disproportionate amount of resource is required to be directed at...activity which does not identify eligible electors...We do not believe that the current system is meeting the objective of the canvass as well as it should, nor do we believe the model is sustainable in the short to medium term.”

That is the cost of voting against the instrument. It would be foolish to do so.

Andrew Jones (Harrogate and Knaresborough) (Con): A very good point.

Chloe Smith: I thank my hon. Friend.

In conclusion, let me say one other thing. In party political terms, the Labour party is being a little unwise to turn its back on the collaboration there has been with the Welsh Government and its colleagues in that place. It is also being a little foolish in saying that there has been no opportunity for scrutiny. While I was on maternity leave, the hon. Member for Lancaster and Fleetwood (Cat Smith) was invited to the Department to talk about the measures, but no response was received from her. I have not had the chance to tell her that I was going to make that point, Ms Buck, because I was made aware of it just before I came to the Committee. It is, however, a sad day when a set of rushed arguments are produced by the Opposition when we are talking about an important set of reforms.

Christian Matheson *rose*—

Chloe Smith: Perhaps the hon. Gentleman would like to clarify that point.

Christian Matheson: I will, and I am grateful to the Minister for giving way. The Opposition’s concern is that whenever the Government make changes to electoral

registration or voting practices, they are all in the same direction: making it harder for people, and under-represented people in particular, to register or vote.

I have made it clear to the Minister that we understand the need for reform, but there is a sense that we are being bounced, in the context of a Government who are bringing in voter suppression models, so we wanted more time. I do not know about my hon. Friend the Member for Lancaster and Fleetwood not replying to the Minister, but I put on record my gratitude to the Minister for her offer, albeit briefly, to meet and talk through the measures. She has always tried to be open with me, and I am grateful for that.

Chloe Smith: I am likewise grateful for the way in which the hon. Gentleman engages in this subject matter. However, I am sorry to have to say that, if he thinks this is rushed, he simply has not been reading this stuff for the last three years. It is not rushed. In addition, if he thinks the regulations are about preventing people from voting, I cannot describe how badly he has got the wrong end of the stick. This is about allowing resources to be put in to identify exactly those voters. On that point, I commend these regulations to the Committee.

Question put.

The Committee divided: Ayes 8, Noes 5.

Division No. 1]

AYES

Baldwin, Harriett
Caulfield, Maria
Jones, Andrew
Lefroy, Jeremy

Menzies, Mark
Moore, Damien
Rutley, David
Smith, Chloe

NOES

Dent Coad, Emma
Fitzpatrick, Jim
Matheson, Christian

Morris, Grahame
Smith, Nick

Question accordingly agreed to.

Resolved,

That the Committee has considered the draft Representation of the People (Annual Canvass) (Amendment) Regulations 2019.

12.21 am

Committee rose.

