

The Government needs to take steps to increase participation in elections by British expatriates

By Democratic Audit

Millions of UK nationals live abroad, but only a tiny proportion of these make use of their right to vote in British elections. A cross-party group of parliamentarians has considered why this is the case and what can be done to address the democratic deficit among expatriates. Their recommendations include making voter registration easier, experimenting with online voting and setting a new target for the Electoral Commission to increase participation.

The IPPR has estimated that [5.6 million British nationals are living abroad](#). The number registered to vote in UK parliamentary elections as of December 2011 was 23,366. It is not possible to determine how many of the 5.6 million are eligible to register in UK elections, as Electoral Registration Officers are not required to obtain or record the data. Of the 5.6 million, the number eligible to register is reduced by those aged under 18 years of age and those who have lived abroad for 15 years or more. Some estimate that the current number eligible to register is in the region of 3 million, which, if correct, means that less than one per cent of those eligible are actually registered. This level of disenfranchisement in the United Kingdom would be deemed totally unacceptable.

There is thus a case for examining ways in which UK nationals living abroad can be encouraged to register and to exercise their right to vote. Although much concern is expressed by low registration rates in the UK and the low turnout in general elections relative to post-war decades, this concern does not appear to extend to UK nationals living abroad. They are in many respects the neglected voters or rather non-voters.

The Cross-Party Group on Overseas Voters formed as a result of debate on the Electoral Registration and Administration Bill in the 2012-13 session of Parliament, during which it became apparent that there was a serious problem of non-registration by British citizens living abroad. We decided to examine ways in which UK nationals living abroad can be enabled to register and vote in UK elections more easily and in greater numbers. We published our [final report](#) with recommendation to Government this month.

Recommendations

The focus of our recommendations is how to ensure that UK nationals entitled to vote do register to vote and exercise that right in greater numbers than at present. As a result, we do not address the existing 15-year rule, but rather work within it. For those who wish to get rid of the limit, what we recommend will be necessary but not sufficient. For those who are opposed to, or see little point in, extending the limit, what we recommend will be necessary and sufficient. The unifying feature is that there is agreement on the existence of a principled case for encouraging all those who under our current law are entitled to register to exercise that right.

We also put to one side the case for dedicated parliamentary representation for overseas voters. Having such representation is unknown in the UK, though residents of Gibraltar are now part of the electorate for the South-West region of England in elections to the European Parliament. However, contemplating having an MP for overseas UK nationals is not presently feasible given the small number of overseas voters who are registered to vote. They constitute the equivalent of about one-third of a constituency electorate. Were the number of voters registered to reach a six-figure number then there would be a case for reviewing the proposal.

We recognise that there is a chicken and egg element to this debate. UK nationals may not register to vote because they lack any clear connection to those who they are entitled to vote for. Were they accorded a dedicated MP then they might be more inclined to register and vote. However, as there is no evidence to demonstrate that registration rates would shoot up sufficiently were a dedicated seat to be allocated, the case for introducing such a seat at this stage is not compelling.

Given that, we concentrate on addressing how British citizens living abroad can be encouraged to exercise their

right to register to vote and then cast their vote. As we stressed in opening, there are clear practical benefits to the UK, as well as to the citizens living abroad, in doing so. Our principal recommendations are set out below.

1. Joined up government

A Cabinet Office Minister should be given specific responsibility for co-ordinating all Government Departments to increase radically the take-up of overseas voting.

A necessary starting point is for Government to take the issue seriously. That entails not only giving voice to the need to take action, but also ensuring that there is someone within Government to drive the campaign to get British nationals living overseas onto the electoral register and to encourage them to vote. The way forward may be found fortuitously in the present ministerial structure. A lead must come from the top, but we recommend that responsibility for the task of driving up overseas registration should be vested in a minister. At the moment, Lord Wallace of Saltaire answers in the House of Lords for the Cabinet Office and also does so for the Foreign and Commonwealth Office (FCO). That appears to us to be a pertinent combination in terms of departmental responsibilities. Such a combination should be maintained, with a minister having clear responsibility for British nationals living overseas and for ensuring a co-ordinated approach within Government. This should also encompass ensuring effective communication between the Electoral Commission and the FCO.

2. Incentives

The Electoral Commission should devote more resources to registering citizens living abroad and be given a target of 100,000 registered voters.

We believe that there should be incentives for the different bodies responsible for enhancing voter registration to pursue such registration. We wish to see the Electoral Commission devote more resources to pursuing this task. We therefore recommend that a portion of the £4.2 million allocated to encourage greater registration be ring-fenced for encouraging UK nationals overseas to register to vote. We also propose that the Commission be set a target of achieving registration of at least 100,000 overseas voters – the equivalent of the largest sized constituency electorate – by the 2015 general election. We also see merit in charging ambassadors with a duty to encourage voter registration and for HM Government to record and publicise the extent to which embassies are successful (or a failure) in doing so.

3. Data sharing

There should be more data sharing by public bodies to identify citizens living overseas along with dissemination of information about eligibility to vote.

We recommend that the Government explore the possibility of data sharing to enable UK citizens living abroad to be identified. HM Passport Office has details of all live passports. HM Revenue & Customs (HMRC) has details of those who pay taxes in UK and know when a resident becomes non-resident by means of [form P85](#). The Department of Work & Pensions (DWP) has details of those in receipt of state pensions. If privacy protection prevents data sharing, we recommend pursuing a duty on the part of such bodies to inform UK citizens of their right to register to vote.

This could be by a straightforward inclusion of an information sheet with material sent to British citizens when the relevant agency is making contact with them.

4. Information dissemination

There should be a greater use of social and other media for disseminating information about eligibility and the means of voting.

There is a great deal more that could be done to disseminate information in addition to using the agencies that we have identified. More information could be disseminated utilising social media (e.g. an app) as well as media seen by expatriates, such as schools' websites. We have focused on reaching nationals who are already living abroad. There is considerable merit in reaching citizens before they move abroad. While the [Government's website](#) mentions that you are entitled to vote, it does not give any further information or provide links to information that may be useful. A simple enhancement of the information, not only by providing links, but also encouraging expatriates to register, would be a useful and potentially productive (and largely cost free) exercise.

5. Exhortation

The Foreign Office as well as embassies and consulates should emphasise the civic duty of voting and ensure that expatriate voters are valued as British citizens.

Making contact with UK nationals living overseas should not only be for the purpose of disseminating information, but also for exhorting citizens to vote. One of our witnesses stressed the importance of conveying that voting is a public duty. It is clear that many UK nationals living abroad remain fiercely loyal to the UK. Given that, we recommend following the practice of some other countries in emphasising the importance of the nation's citizens overseas and stressing the value of their votes and commitment to the United Kingdom. Our citizens living overseas should be made to feel valued. That is an essential prerequisite for encouraging them to vote.

6. Voting electronically

The Government should undertake a feasibility study of electronic voting, with a possible trial of such voting in areas with high levels of expatriate voters.

We welcome the changes that flow from Individual Electoral Registration for the purposes of enabling citizens overseas to download registration forms and the extension of time for distributing ballot papers. We believe that the next step will be to allow paper ballots to be downloaded electronically. This is permitted in New Zealand and if employed in the UK would entail, as for New Zealand voters, filling in the ballot paper and posting it back to the appropriate ERO, under a procedure which has been called 'email-out, post back'. We understand the Cabinet Office is undertaking a trial of such a procedure and we very much welcome this initiative.

The next step would be to enable voters not only to receive the ballot paper electronically, but also to vote electronically. We recognise that moving to voting electronically would be a very significant change and one that would be fraught with difficulties. We are not therefore minded to recommend such a radical step. However, given that France, the Netherlands and Estonia all utilise e-voting, we recommend that the Government undertake a feasibility study to determine whether such a move would be possible for UK nationals living abroad. A trial could be undertaken in some areas with the highest concentration of expatriate voters, such as Melbourne and Malaga. It would in itself be a signal of the extent to which the Government takes seriously the rights of UK nationals living and working abroad.

Conclusion

It is important for Government to take seriously the issue of the voting rights of UK citizens who are living abroad. The Government has placed stress on the need to encourage British citizens who are eligible to register to vote to do so and ensure as far as possible an accurate and complete electoral register. UK nationals living abroad, and who have done so for not more than 15 years, have a statutory entitlement to be on the electoral register. There is no case for treating them as second-class citizens, regarding them as people who have little interest in the UK

and who have left these shores never to return. This is an ill-informed and lazy view and one that works against the interests of the United Kingdom. Our citizens living and working abroad are a major asset and could be even more so if HM Government makes clear that they are valued and that their engagement in the electoral process is not only a right but also something to be encouraged. The sooner steps are taken, along the lines recommended above, the better.

The full report, *Making Votes Count: Enhancing engagement in the electoral process by British expatriates*, by the Cross-Party Group on Overseas Voters is [available to download here](#).

Note: This post represents the views of the authors, and does not necessarily give the position of the LSE or Democratic Audit. Please view our [comments policy](#) before responding. Shortlink for this post: buff.ly/1hmdprG



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