

Increasing the electoral registration of British citizens living abroad

House of Lords debate briefing

26 November 2014

The Electoral Commission is an independent body which reports directly to the UK Parliament. We regulate political party and election finance and set standards for well-run elections and referendums. We put voters first by working to support a healthy democracy, where elections and referendums are based on our principles of trust, participation, and no undue influence.

Introduction

Ahead of the Lords short debate on Wednesday 26 November, this briefing sets out our work to ensure that British citizens living abroad are registered to vote in advance of the 2015 UK Parliamentary election. **The Commission welcomes the support of Peers in getting British citizens living abroad registered.**

Background

British citizens registered to vote in the UK within the last 15 years are eligible to vote in UK Parliamentary elections and European Parliamentary elections.

Anyone who was too young to register when they left the UK can still register as an overseas voter if they left the UK no more than 15 years ago and their parent or guardian was registered to vote in the UK.

Following the introduction of Individual Electoral Registration earlier this year, overseas electors can now register online and no longer require another British passport holder to counter-sign their registration form. **This change, which was supported by the Commission, should make it easier for UK residents overseas to register to vote.**

The Commission also welcomed the change in the Electoral Registration and Administration Act 2012 which extends the UK Parliament electoral timetable from 17 to 25 working days. The Commission had called for this change for some time as

it will allow more time for the despatch and return of postal votes to and from overseas electors ahead of next year's elections.

Preparation ahead of UK parliamentary elections

Estimating the number of British citizens living overseas and establishing where they live is a complex challenge as there is no single reliable source of data. It is also a constantly changing group, with individuals leaving the UK and returning. There have been two reliable estimates of the number of British nationals living abroad produced in recent years. The Institute for Public Policy Research estimated the total number of British citizens living overseas in 2006 at 5.5 million; a World Bank study put it at 4.7 million in 2011.

Despite these challenges, the Commission is committed to reaching as many unregistered British citizens living overseas as possible. To do this, we conduct public awareness activity around European and UK Parliamentary elections, targeting those countries with the highest number of British expatriates.

During our campaign for overseas voters before the UK Parliamentary election in 2010, just over 40,000 overseas voter registration forms were downloaded from the Commission's website. For the elections in May 2015, the Commission has set itself a stretching target of 100,000 new registrations via the new online system from British citizens living abroad.

In order to achieve this, we will be undertaking a public awareness campaign in advance of the election, and **are working closely with the Foreign and Commonwealth Office (FCO) and political parties' overseas networks to promote voter registration**. We are also building links with organisations who provide services and are in contact with UK expats, such as:

- Moving companies
- Insurance companies
- Estate agents
- Companies who relocate employees regularly/relocation service providers
- Universities (who facilitate staff/researcher placements overseas)
- International teaching networks/International schools networks
- Pension providers
- Financial advisers
- Expat forums

We would urge Peers with networks or links to similar organisations to help spread the message to British citizens abroad. Practical advice about what you can do is at the bottom of this briefing note.

To ensure maximum time to allow British citizens living abroad to register before the 2015 elections, the Commission's campaign will run from Monday 2 February until Friday 17 April. We will also be holding an **Overseas Registration Day** on **Thursday 5 February 2015** to highlight the launch of our campaign.

We plan to run a predominantly online registration campaign aimed at British expatriates in the top 10-20 countries with a high British expatriate population. The activity will also include radio fillers (non-date specific radio adverts) for expatriate radio stations and we will distribute template PR materials amongst our partnership organisations and parties' overseas networks.

In addition to our public awareness activity, the Commission will continue to provide **guidance to Electoral Registration Officers to support their work in registering overseas voters**. This includes guidance on the processing of applications, the voting methods available to overseas voters and the maintenance of the overseas electoral register. The Commission's guidance to Returning Officers will also continue to recommend that postal votes being sent to overseas electors should be prioritised to maximise the time they have to receive, complete and return their postal votes.

How Parliamentarians can help get UK citizens overseas registered to vote?

- You can include a link to the online registration system www.gov.uk/register-to-vote on your website or any social media sites visited by UK expats.
- Support overseas register to vote day on 5 February 2015 by tweeting and promoting it in media consumed by expats.
- Identify any organisations or individuals living overseas who would be prepared to support the campaign and ask them to join in (you can also provide the details to us and we will contact them)

You can use the contact details below if you require further advice or materials to help you do this. We will also be reminding parliamentarians about our campaign and how they can support it when it is launched next year.

For further information, please contact **Megan Phillips**, Communications Officer on 020 7271 0714 or mphillips@electoralcommission.org.uk.