

Written evidence from Dr Susan Collard (TEB 44)

Public Administration and Constitutional Affairs Committee The Elections Bill inquiry

My submission relates to one specific item in the Elections Bill:

Part 2/10: Extension of franchise for parliamentary elections: British citizens overseas.

I have developed academic expertise on expatriate voting since 2012, initially relating to France and Italy but with a focus on the UK since 2015. Throughout my research I have engaged widely with Britons living abroad, including several field trips, as well as online through my web-site '<http://britonsvotingabroad.co.uk>' and its related Facebook page. I have conducted surveys on overseas electors and Britons living abroad and published several peer-reviewed journal articles and blogs on this topic.

Executive Summary

- My research provides evidence for strong support amongst Britons living abroad for the proposal in the Elections Bill to abolish the '15-year rule', indeed it is clear that this extension of the overseas franchise is perceived by many campaigners as a long overdue victory in their battle for 'electoral justice'.
- Suggested amendments to the registration process are also seen as very welcome, despite raising certain practical questions which I will address in a separate submission of evidence to the Bill Committee.
- However, while these new measures will make it easier for overseas electors to register, they will not necessarily make it easier for them to vote, which is the stated intention of the Government's manifesto. The Bill includes no proposals to modify or adapt overseas voting methods that give rise to problems of accessibility, mainly due to the practical constraints of postal voting from abroad, which is the method used by 61% of overseas voters according to a 'Cabinet Office Local Authority Survey on overseas electors 2020' (Impact Assessment p.56).
- Problems relating to postal voting for overseas electors have been well documented in reports by the Association of Electoral Administrators (AEA) and the Electoral Commission (EC), on social media and confirmed in my research findings: the time scale between publication of the list of candidates and polling day is too short to ensure the sending and return of postal ballots around the world, especially outside Europe. Informal comments from electoral registration officers reveal that overseas ballots sometimes reach the local authority several weeks or even months after the polling date. Overseas voters are unable to find out if their vote was received in time.
- This problem could be addressed by including in the Bill a provision for secure downloadable ballots for overseas voters: this would not only speed up the process but would also remove overseas postal costs for electoral authorities which will inevitably increase with the estimated enfranchisement of 2.3 British citizens abroad.
- Although issues of electoral management are to be considered in secondary legislation and in future overseas electors service design, the broader question of improving access to the vote itself should be discussed alongside the Bill's proposals to facilitate registration if the commitment in the Government's manifesto 'to make it easier for overseas electors to vote' is to be met.

- Recommendation: that consideration be given to the introduction of secure downloadable postal ballots for overseas electors during debates over the primary legislation.

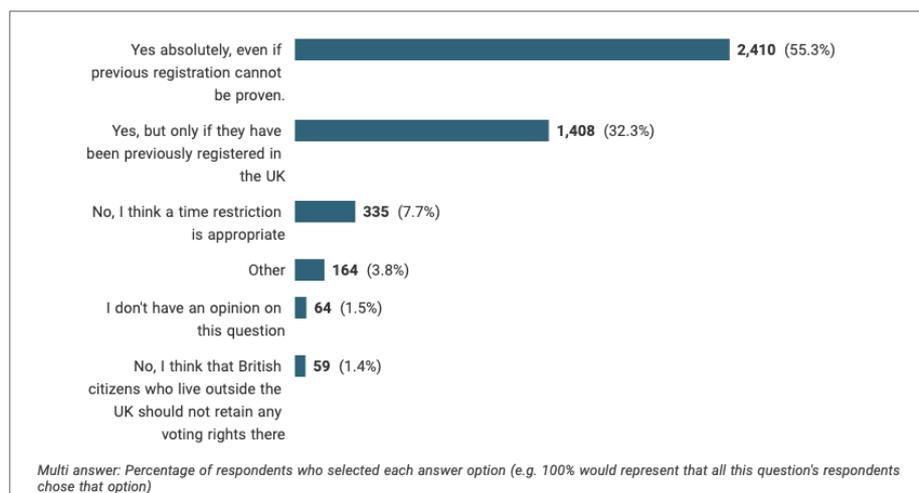
Evidence in support of the recommendation to introduce secure downloadable postal ballots for overseas electors

The data that follows is extracted from an on-line survey conducted between 15th December 2019 – May 2020 of the profile of Britons abroad, their political preferences and their experiences of voting (or not) in the UK as overseas electors. Given the ‘hard to reach’ nature of the total population of Britons abroad, the survey makes no claim to be a representative sample but it nevertheless produced some useful and original findings. It was launched from my web-site and Facebook page and further disseminated using the snowballing technique by a number of organisations campaigning for overseas voting rights and/or the defence of citizenship rights in the EU. There were 4366 respondents, 85.7% of whom lived in the EU and 14.3% outside the EU, mainly in Australia and the USA. Further details of the survey can be shared on request.

1. Support for extension of the overseas franchise amongst Britons living abroad.

Of the 4366 respondents, there was strong support for ‘Votes For Life’.

25 Do you support the idea that all British citizens of voting age who are resident outside the UK should be granted the right to vote 'for life' in national elections?



2. Overseas registration

2.1 92.3% of respondents said they were on the electoral register when they lived in the UK and 52.8% of respondents said they were now registered as an overseas elector. 79.4% said they always voted in parliamentary elections when they lived in the UK.

2.2 Of those who were not registered as overseas electors, 42% said they had previously been registered but had lost their right to vote due to the 15-year rule. 87% of these said it was ‘very likely’ they would re-register if the 15 -year rule was abolished while 9% said it was ‘quite likely’.

2.3 Of those who had never registered as an overseas elector, 70.3% said it was ‘very likely’ they would register if the 15 -year rule was abolished while 12.9% said it was ‘quite likely’.

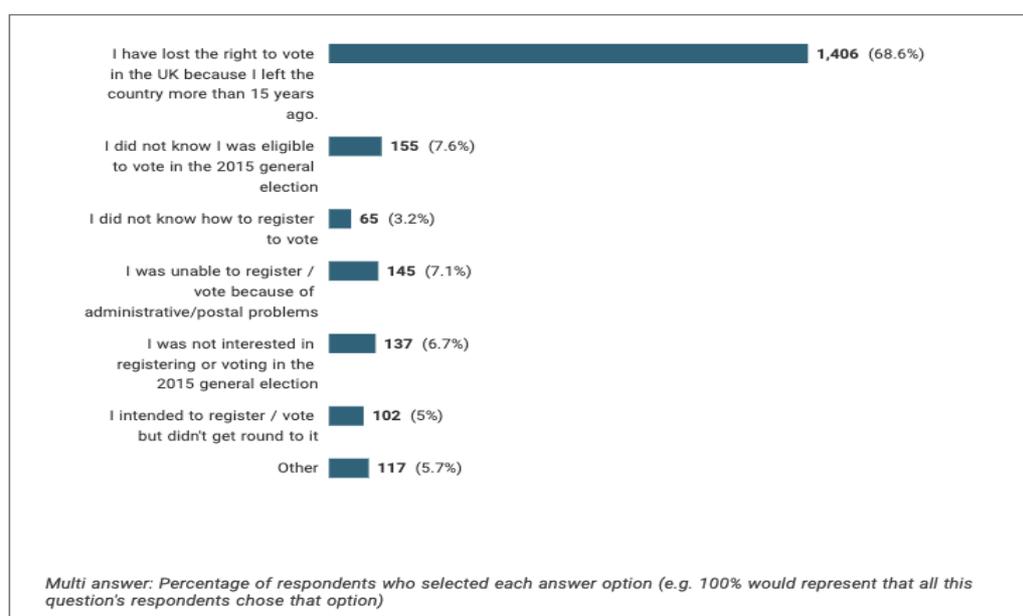
3. Problems with postal voting

3.1 50.7% of respondents said they voted while 47.2% did not.

3.2 Of those who voted, 54.7% did so by postal ballot, 15.5% by proxy and 29.8% in a UK polling station.

3.3 Of those who did not vote, 68.8% said it was because they had lost their right to vote due to the 15-year rule.

21.d Which of the following apply to why you did not vote in the 2015 UK general election? ✖



3.4 Of the 145 respondents who said they had been unable to vote for administrative/postal reasons, 105 gave further details to explain why. Over half said the ballot papers arrived too late or not at all. Others described various problems with registration or with proxies.

3.5 In the 2016 EU Referendum, 54.1% of respondents said they voted. Of the 45.4% that did not, 74.8% said it was because of the 15-year rule and 8% said it was because of administrative/postal problems. Of the 132 respondents who provided further details, a similar picture emerged to that of 2015.

3.6 In the 2017 parliamentary election, 50.1% of respondents said they voted. 60.8% of these said they voted by postal ballot, 22.2% by proxy and 17% in a UK polling station.

3.7 Of the 48.9% that did not vote, 74.8% said it was because of the 15-year rule, while 8.1% said it was because of administrative/postal problems. 136 further responses revealed an even great proportion of problems with late or non-arrival of postal ballots, as well as problems relating to registration and proxies.

3.8 In the 2019 parliamentary election, 48.9% of respondents said they voted whereas 51.1% did not. Of those that voted, 45% did so by postal ballot, 51.9% by proxy and 3% in a UK polling station.

3.9 Of those who did not vote, 79.9% said it was because of the 15-year rule and 7.4% said it was because of administrative/postal problems. 144 follow-up responses once again presented a picture of administrative disenfranchisement similar to that of the previous elections.

4. Observations from survey results

Voting methods used by overseas electors in last 3 parliamentary elections:

	Postal vote	Proxy	In UK polling station
2015	54.7	15.5	29.8
2017	60.8	22.2	17
2019	45	51.9	3

4.1 There has been a steep decline in the number of overseas electors coming to the UK to vote: this is possibly due to increased awareness of online registration.

4.2 There has been a rise in the number of proxy voters, possibly due to

- frustration at inefficiency of postal voting
- increased awareness of the possibility of overseas postal proxy voting

4.3 The drop in the number of postal voters in 2019 could be explained by bad experiences of postal voting in 2017, with proxy voting seen as more secure. It should be noted however that many people do not have a suitable proxy and are therefore limited to the postal ballot. Many respondents also complained of problems with overseas proxy voting.

4.4 The overall stated aim of the Elections Bill is ‘to strengthen the integrity of UK elections and protect our democracy,’ while the removal of the 15-year limit on the overseas franchise is intended ‘to increase participation in our democracy’: in order to achieve these objectives, the new legislation should go beyond improving the overseas registration process to ensuring that the act of voting for overseas electors is also ‘secure, modern and fair’. The introduction of secure downloadable postal ballots for overseas electors would go a long way towards achieving this goal.

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