



 **BRITISH IN EUROPE**
THE COALITION OF UK CITIZENS IN EUROPE

"I WILL EVEN GO TO THE UK TO VOTE IF NECESSARY."

A report on the previous experience of
British voters overseas and their future intentions to
vote in light of the expansion of the overseas electors'
franchise in the Elections Act 2022

Disclaimer

The Joseph Rowntree Reform Trust has supported this work in recognition of the importance of the issue. The facts presented and the views expressed in this report are, however, those of the authors and not necessarily those of the Trust. **www.jrrt.org.uk**

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Executive Summary

- This report covers a survey run by British in Europe from 28 January to 4 March 2023 to ask the global British diaspora about previous experiences of voting as overseas electors and their future intention to (re)register and vote in a future general election following expansion of the overseas franchise in the Elections Act 2022.
- Over 7000 responses were collected (statistical relevance was 1,067 – see section 3, page 7) from 65 countries around the world. The majority of the responses came from the European region. The completion rate was 84%.
- Respondents were split almost evenly between male and female. Almost 60% of respondents were of working age (18-64).
- Almost 60% (57.13%) of respondents have lived outside the UK for more than 15 years, and are currently disenfranchised in the UK. This corresponds with the government's estimates of at least 60%. A further 14% left between 10 and 14 years ago. We anticipate that on current emigration trends this figure (at least 60%) will at least be maintained and become higher by the end of this decade. **Given that the UK government estimates that up to 3.4 million British citizens overseas could be entitled to vote under the Elections Act 2022, this would present a significant democratic deficit in UK politics without the adoption and implementation of the required secondary legislation.**
- Over 85% of respondents have previously voted in a UK general election or referendum. Respondents had previously voted or last lived from Shetland to St Ives in Cornwall and Belfast to Thanet.
- In response to the question, *'Have you ever voted by post at a UK election, in the Brexit referendum or any other national referendum?'* answers were almost evenly split at 50/50 yes and no.
- When asked, *'What was your experience with postal voting in a UK general election or the referendum?'* 64.21% of the 52.71% who had voted by post (33.84% in total of those who answered the above question) described the process as, *'Good -everything went smoothly.'* However, 25.4% experienced some difficulties, although they were able to vote and 10.39% said that they were unable to vote. Experiences of postal voting varied according to the region of residence of the respondent.
- Delays in receipt of the ballot paper was the most cited reason for problems with postal voting.
- Proxy votes were less popular – less than 30% have ever used this option, although where they did the experience was smoother than with postal voting (80% - *'good - went smoothly'*).
- When asked about intention to vote at the next general election, an overwhelming 84% said they were *'very likely'* to do so if they could, with an additional 10% saying *'quite likely'*.
- When asked about documentation to prove identity in order to register to vote, 80% said they could supply a passport and National Insurance number, but there were regional discrepancies in these figures.
- The picture is far less positive when it comes to providing at least one document proving last residence in the UK. Overall, across all regions and all age ranges, 18% of respondents said they did not have any of the documents on the proposed list in the government policy paper from February 2022. However, there were significant differences in this figure depending on the period in which respondents left the UK and their current ages. Up to 60% of respondents in the 35-44 age range who left the UK between 1991 and 2000 did not have any of the documents on the residence list.

- These cohorts have no previous experience of using the attestation route so this may not necessarily be a less straightforward option to prove last residence.
- Significant differences between men and women who did not hold the required documentation were observed in some age ranges based on when they left the UK but the raw numbers were insufficient to reach a valid conclusion.
- Respondents provided very many examples of other documents not on the list that could be used to evidence their previous residence.
- There was a presumption and expectation that councils and Electoral Registration Officers (EROs) would have access to evidence of previous registration on the electoral roll even where the voter had lost their voting rights under the 15-year rule. There was no evidence that respondents understood that this is not necessarily the case and that the onus would be on them to provide this evidence.
- Notwithstanding previous difficulties with postal voting, when asked about future voting methods, 75% opted for the postal option. But very many reservations about postal voting were expressed in the large number of free text comments.
- The problems with postal and proxy voting and comparisons with overseas voting systems for other nationalities prompted an overwhelming 90% of respondents to support e-voting if security and privacy could be assured. There were similar levels of support for downloadable ballot papers and options to vote in UK embassies and consulates.
- British citizens overseas are in regular contact with a wide range of UK government departments and agencies. They interact via websites, email, telephone and post. This presents numerous opportunities for the government to engage actively with the diaspora to raise awareness of the extension of the franchise and inform prospective voters how to register and vote before the next general election.



Recommendations

a. Before the next general election

- Considerably more resources should be provided to local authorities and Electoral Registration Officers (EROs) to support the work needed to implement section 14 of the Elections Act 2022 (the “EA 2022”) to expand the franchise to several million potential new British voters overseas.
- The list of proposed documents for address verification on list A should be expanded to ensure that as many potential overseas electors as possible are given the opportunity to prove their last residence in the UK. Suggestions are made in section 6.6 of this report taking into account the responses to this survey.
- Subject to the written consent of the applicant and in full accordance with UK data protection legislation, (EROs) should be able to access data held on the residence history of a potential overseas elector by other government departments and agencies (e.g. the Department for Work and Pensions, HMRC, the DVLA etc.).
- Attention should be paid to the provision of information and clear instructions as to how to use the attestation route when registering, including for those who can attest, in any communications campaign.
- UK resident attestors for overseas voters should not be subject to requirements such as good standing because overseas voters struggle to find attestors in the first place, particularly among other overseas voters, as many are highly integrated without contacts to other British citizens in their country of residence.
- As the government has proposed, it should be possible to register to vote and apply for an absent ballot at the same time and online, and for copies of documentary evidence to be uploaded electronically (without need for certified copies).
- British electors overseas who are still entitled to vote and on the electoral roll should be contacted and encouraged to re-register early if necessary in order to reduce pressure on EROs once registration opens for currently disenfranchised overseas electors.
- Particular attention should be paid to how the proposed 2023 boundary changes in England will affect ease of registration, particularly for currently disenfranchised voters, with appropriate mitigation measures being in put in place.
- Plans should be put in place to ensure that ballot papers sent by post are not delayed in the event of strike action or due to government procurement practices. Conditions for the use of international Business Reply envelopes should be checked and explained given problems that have arisen in certain countries in the past, including European countries, e.g. Germany. The relevant postal authorities in at least the countries where the largest overseas populations live should be contacted to confirm acceptance.
- Clarification should be provided on the process and deadlines to apply for proxy votes in the event that postal votes do not arrive in time, and arrangements for emergency proxy votes should be extended to overseas voters ideally.
- EROs should confirm that ballot papers from overseas voters returned by any courier service will be accepted and subject to which conditions.

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- Training on the changes introduced under section 14 of the EA 2022 should be provided to all staff working on registration and staff and volunteers at polling stations.
 - A comprehensive monitoring framework should be put in place before registration opens to oversee implementation of the EA 2022 and identify early where issues are occurring. Particular attention should be paid to difficulties experienced by first time overseas electors and those living outside Europe.
 - A comprehensive information and awareness raising campaign will be needed to inform British citizens overseas of their new voting rights, how to register and how to exercise their vote. This should be a whole of government exercise focused across government and, in particular, where British citizens overseas interact with the UK state, e.g. HMRC, DWP, HM Passport Office, which will also reduce costs.
 - The campaign should start well before registration opens in order to inform overseas electors about changes in their voting rights, deadlines and the required documentation needed to prove identity and last place of residence/registration

b. In time for the first post-2025 general election, introduce and adopt legislation permitting:

- Ballot papers to be sent electronically and downloaded to speed up the turn-around time for sending in an overseas ballot; or, extend the minimum time period for the election campaign from five to eight weeks to enable postal votes to be sent out and returned in good time.
 - Emergency proxies for overseas voters.
 - Pilot projects to be run during the next general election on fully electronic voting and voting in UK embassies and consulates.
 - Funding to digitise all UK electoral rolls that exist back to 1900 in a centrally accessible depository, prioritising those pre-2008. EROs can then immediately check to see if a prospective overseas voter has previously been registered in a given constituency or council area.
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1. Introduction and background to the report

This report presents and analyses the findings from a survey of UK citizens living overseas carried out from January to March 2023. The survey was run by British in Europe to provide evidence on past voting experiences, as well as future voting intentions of the UK diaspora, with the aim of ensuring that the secondary legislation needed to implement relevant clauses of the Elections Act 2022 is as voter friendly as possible. The work was funded by a grant from the Joseph Rowntree Reform Trust (JRRT).

2. Changes introduced under the Elections Act 2022

Under section 14 of the EA 2022 all adult British citizens overseas who have previously lived in the UK will be entitled to register and vote in national elections.¹ At the time of the general election in December 2019, 230,000 people were registered as overseas electors, making up 0.5% of the total UK electorate.² Forty million UK residents were eligible to vote and turnout was 67%. The overseas electorate eligible to vote under the 15-year rule was at that time estimated to be around 1.2-1.4 million.

According to the IOM World Migration report 2022³, however, the British diaspora is in the top 20 largest global diasporas at around 4.7 million citizens.⁴

The Government estimates the changes, ending the 15-year limit and allowing all British citizens previously resident to be eligible, will mean around an additional 3.2-3.4 million British nationals living overseas would become eligible to register to vote.⁵

This would mean that UK voters overseas could make up over 10% of all eligible voters at the next general election.

In a policy paper published in February 2022, the government set out the changes to overseas voter policy above and beyond the removal of the 15-year rule.⁶ The key changes are that overseas voters will no longer need to prove that they (or a parent/guardian if they left as a minor) were previously registered on the electoral roll. They will, however, be required to prove their identity and either their last place of registration on the electoral roll or their last place of residence in the UK. The secondary legislation needed will set out the conditions and evidence required, as well as how to register for an absent (postal or proxy) vote and, if needed, provide an attestation to prove identity and/or residence.

The intention appears to be to apply the same procedures to prove identity and residence to both UK resident and overseas voters to the closest extent possible. However, British in Europe found the suggested documents to prove residence too UK-centric⁷ and decided to test that hypothesis through the simple expedient of surveying British

¹ Section 14 Elections Act 2022, extension of the franchise: British citizens overseas <https://www.legislation.gov.uk/ukpga/2022/37/section/14>

² The Electoral Commission In depth: delivering the 2019 UK parliamentary general election, April 21 2020 <https://www.electoralcommission.org.uk/who-we-are-and-what-we-do/elections-and-referendums/past-elections-and-referendums/uk-general-elections/report-2019-uk-parliamentary-general-election-was-well-run/depth-delivering-2019-uk-parliamentary-general-election>

³ <https://worldmigrationreport.iom.int/sites/g/files/tmzbd1691/files/documents/Chapter-2%2520Figure%25202.jpg> and <https://publications.iom.int/books/world-migration-report-2022-chapter-3> Figures are for 2020.

⁴ The UK diaspora was also the fourth largest European diaspora in 2020, behind only the Russian Federation (10.8 million), Ukraine (6 million) and Poland (4.8 million)

⁵ <https://commonslibrary.parliament.uk/research-briefings/sn05923/>

⁶ Overseas electors: Delivering 'votes for life' for British expatriates, February 3, 2022 <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/overseas-electors-delivering-votes-for-life-for-british-expatriates/overseas-electors-delivering-votes-for-life-for-british-expatriates>

⁷ Ibid. Annex A: Documentary evidence for address verification

voters overseas about their past registration and voting experiences, and future registration intentions should the secondary legislation be adopted in time for the next general election.

3. About the Survey

The survey was drafted by Alison Jones (British in Germany) and Fiona Godfrey (British in Europe) and reviewed and tested by members of the BiE Steering Team, BiE national group members and two academics with experience of organizing surveys of the British diaspora. It was run from 28 January to 4 March 2023. The target group was any British citizen over the age of 16 living outside the UK. We selected 16 as the cut off age as current 16-year olds may be entitled to vote at the next UK general election, depending on their birthdays and when it takes place (the latest possible option is January 2025).

It was created on a paid version of SurveyMonkey and disseminated via an email to over 4000 British citizens on the British in Europe mailing list, as well as via the BiE website, Facebook group, Facebook page and Twitter accounts. National group coalition members also posted the survey on their social media accounts. In addition, we searched for groups of British citizens on Facebook around the world and posted the survey (with permission) in these. Further assistance with dissemination was provided by the International Consortium of British Pensioners Canadian and Australian groups and several media outlets, as well as via the mailing lists of international branches of the Labour Party, the Liberal Democrats and the Conservative and Unionist Party.

Respondents were asked in question 1, *'Please confirm you are a British citizen residing outside the UK, and that you consent to the collection of your input data.'* Only those answering the question in the affirmative were permitted to continue with the survey.

The estimated target audience was approximately 3.99 million, assuming a total global British diaspora of 4.7 million⁸, of whom an estimated 85% are over the age of 16. Based on these assumptions, the number of responses required in order to reach statistical relevance with a confidence interval of 95% and a margin of error of +/-3% was **1,067**. A total of 7119 responses were collected. Reliable and up to date figures on the number of British citizens resident overseas who are under 16 are not always easy to find. The 2012 Research Report 68 – Emigration from the UK – GOV.UK suggested the figure may be as low as 7% but we took 15% as our reference point. That had no effect on the required sample size number, which would still have been 1,067.

According to the 2012 report referred to above, the top ten destinations for UK emigrants were the European Union (particularly Spain, Germany and France), Australia, Canada, New Zealand and the United States. Data on the number of UK citizens resident in the EU27 is available for 2021⁹ and for Australia for 2020, which estimated the numbers of UK citizens living in Australia at 1.2 million.¹⁰ Approximately 537,500 British citizens are living in Canada.¹¹

Statistical relevance (95% Confidence Level and a margin of error of 3%) was also achieved for France (SR=1060/1914 responses collected). Applying a margin of error of 5% achieved statistical relevance for France (sample size SR=383/1914), Spain (SR= 385/878), Germany (SR=383/741), and the Netherlands (SR=381/667).

⁸ See footnote 3, IOM World Migration Report

⁹ https://commission.europa.eu/system/files/2022-01/final_sixth_joint_report_on_residence_rights.pdf

¹⁰ Country profiles – Permanent migration from the United Kingdom

¹¹ See footnote 3

4. Completion rate

The typical completion rate for the survey was 84%, which compares well with SurveyMonkey's predicted rate of 71%, and it took an average of 12 minutes. This revealed an impressive level of engagement amongst respondents given the number of pages and potential questions depending on answers (30 pages and 59 questions)

The survey respondents were not randomly sampled and were self-selecting in that they were on the mailing list of British in Europe, or members of our closed Facebook Group or followers of our Facebook page, Twitter or LinkedIn accounts. However, considerable numbers were recruited through news articles on English language online websites aimed at English speakers overseas, such as the Local, Dutch News, Europe Street News and the Connexion, through overseas branches of political parties, as well as through other Facebook groups of British citizens that have no relationship with British in Europe.

5. Survey design and structure

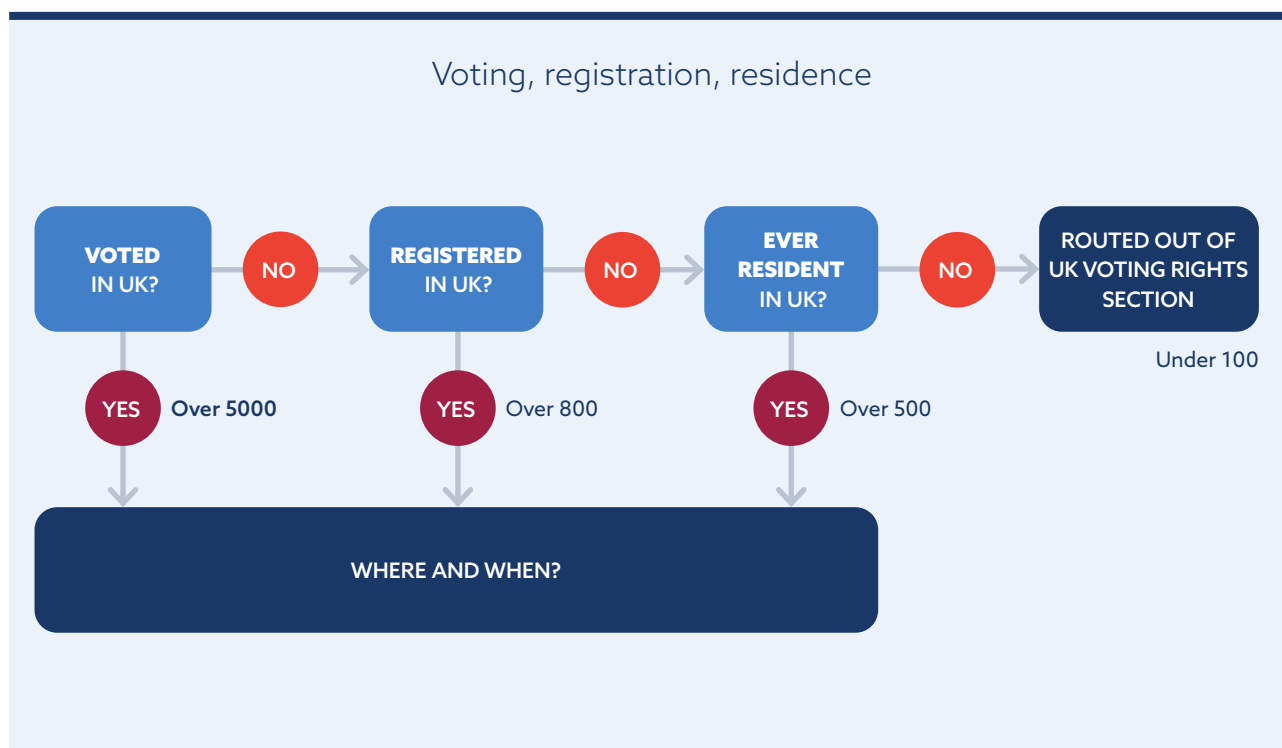
The survey design and structure reflect its core objectives of gathering information about voting patterns, intentions and access of UK citizens abroad.

It was designed around the priority information i.e. voting rights and participants' ability to evidence these. The survey also collected demographic data and information on mobility outside the UK and other nationalities held.

CORE OBJECTIVE 1: VOTING, REGISTRATION, RESIDENCE

- Are participants currently entitled to vote in the UK? Have participants voted in the UK? Where? When (approximately)?
- If participants have not voted in the UK, have they nevertheless been registered to vote in the UK? (even if they have not previously voted)? Where and when (approximately)?
- If participants have not been registered to vote in the UK, have they nevertheless been resident in the UK? Where and when (approximately)?

The following diagram shows the routing that was used to establish the existence of voting rights in the UK.



Places: Free format entry – postcode or name or constituency. This was because people may know one or the other, or only approximately. Had we insisted on one format, we thought it likely that answers would have been incomplete and/or simply guessed.

Dates were collected as ranges.

Those who had voted were also asked about their experience of postal and proxy voting, plus any experience of voting as a posted UK diplomat.

CORE 2 – AVAILABILITY OF DOCUMENTATION TO EVIDENCE:

1. Identity
2. Residency in the UK

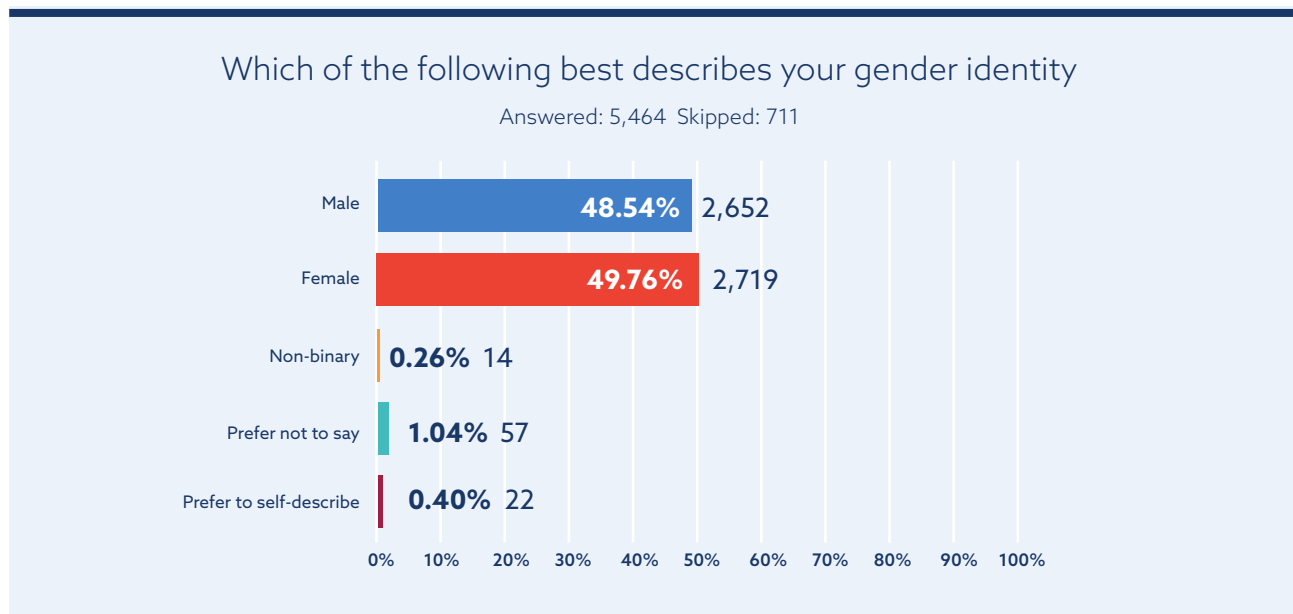
The base used were the proposals and the list currently proposed by the UK government in its policy paper published in February 2022.¹²

6. Data and Findings

6.1 About the respondents

A. GENDER

In response to the question, ‘which of the following describes your gender identity?’ 50.19% said male, 48.17% said female, 0.24% said non-binary and 1% preferred to self-describe.



B. WORKING STATUS AND AGE

Just over half of all respondents who answered the question, ‘which of the following best describes your current working status?’ were employed (30.37%), self-employed (14.69%) or so-called economically inactive, including stay at home carers, parents, or people in receipt of benefits (4.88%) or students (0.65%). The remainder were retired (47.39%), or other (2.02%).

This was reflected in the ages of the respondents. Just under 60% (58.53%) were of working age (18-64). Just over 40% (41.1%) were over 65. The remaining percentages were accounted for by 16-18-year-olds or ‘prefer not to say.’ This does not reflect the overall demographic profile of the British diaspora (the percentage of those over 65 is typically lower) and may, in part, be accounted for by the fact that the survey was widely disseminated by organisations of British pensioners living outside Europe who are campaigning on pensions issues.

¹² See footnote 6

Responses were collected from

65 countries

C. LOCATION OF SURVEY RESPONDENTS AND LENGTH OF RESIDENCE OVERSEAS (QS 2-8, 22-24, Q.42)

Responses were collected from 65 countries, plus the British Crown dependencies of the Isle of Man and the Channel Islands whose British citizen residents have overseas voting rights if they meet the conditions, plus the British Overseas Territories of Gibraltar, St Helena and the Cayman Islands. British citizens living there are also entitled to register as overseas voters provided that they have full British citizenship and meet the conditions of former UK electoral roll registration at the moment and former residence in the future. The geographical coverage ranged from Russia to South Africa and Canada to New Zealand.

The overwhelming majority of respondents live in Europe (88.14%). 5.12% in Australasia and the Pacific, 4.47% in the Americas, 1.23% in Asia, including the Middle East, and 0.49% in Africa

In Africa, South Africa dominated the responses (54.29%), followed by Zimbabwe, Egypt and Ghana.

In the Americas, 81.61% of responses came from Canada and 14.8% from the US.

In Australasia, 97.49% of responses came from Australia.

In Europe, the top five sources of responses were France (31.13%), Spain (14.28%), Germany, (12.05%), the Netherlands, (10.85%) and Greece (5.56%).

D. TIME SPENT LIVING OUTSIDE THE UK (Q.42) AND REASONS FOR LEAVING AND DISENFRANCHISED NUMBERS

Status of survey respondents, including reasons for leaving the UK (Qs.38-41)

Almost

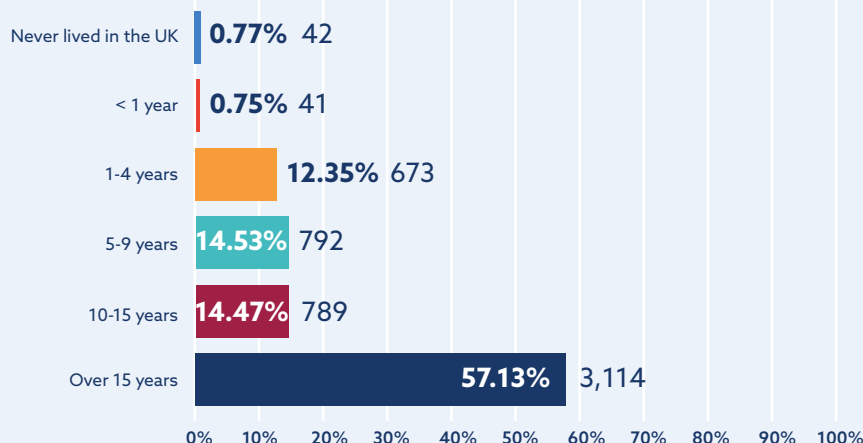
60%

(57.13%) of respondents have lived outside the UK for more than 15 years, and are currently disenfranchised in the UK.

Given that the UK government estimates that up to 3.4 million British citizens overseas could become entitled to vote under the EA 2022, a failure to implement the necessary secondary legislation **would present a significant democratic deficit in UK politics.**

Q42 How long have you been resident outside the UK?

Answered: 5,451 Skipped: 724



The top 5 countries with the most disenfranchised respondents were France, Spain, Germany, the Netherlands and Australia.

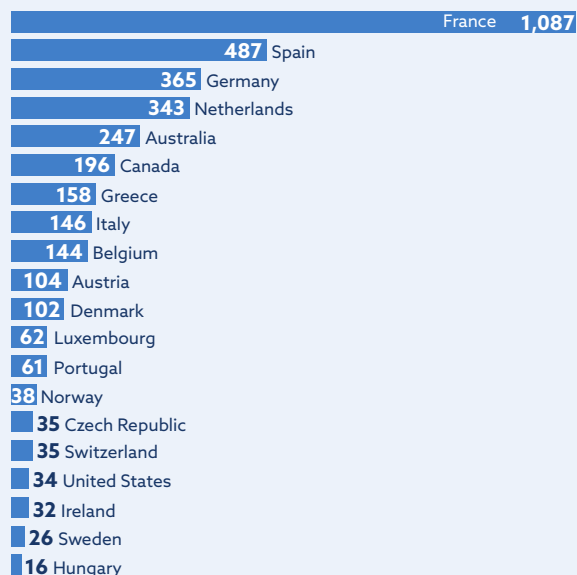
The countries of residence of disenfranchised respondents did, however, vary by age range. In the 35-44 range the top three countries were the Netherlands, Germany and France. In the 55-64 age range, the top three countries were France, Spain and the Netherlands.

Across all age ranges, women were more likely to be disenfranchised in France (n=535/440) and Spain (n=229/206), and men in Germany (n=188/144), the Netherlands (n=180/137) and Australia (n=146/72).

Whilst a significant minority of respondents were pensioners, only 9% cited retirement as their main reason for leaving the UK. The biggest single reason given was work (33%), followed by quality of life (26.8%).

The countries of residence of disenfranchised respondents

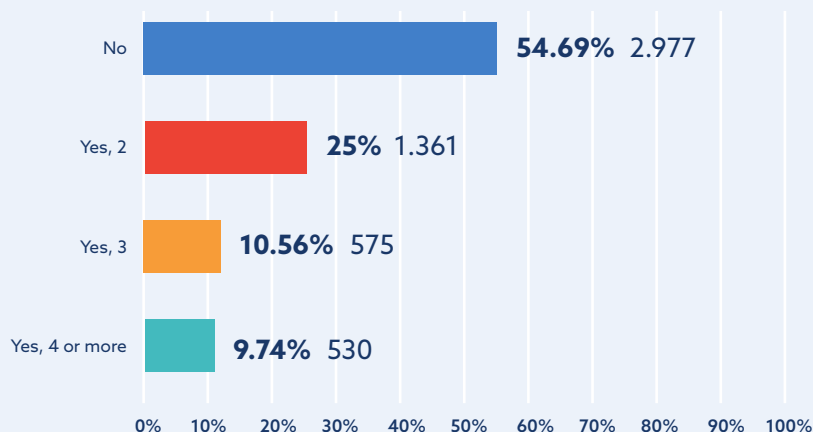
Based on 15 years, not entitled to vote in the UK



The likely role of employment in the emigration of UK citizens is also confirmed by the fact that a quarter of respondents (24.98%) have lived in two or more countries other than the UK. Almost 10% have lived in four or more countries. This will likely have implications for the ability of overseas electors to supply a paper trail proving previous residence.

Q45 Have you lived in more than one country outside of the UK?

Answered: 5,443 Skipped: 732



6.2 Current and past voting histories (Qs. 9-12, 19-21)

In response to the question, 'Have you ever voted in a UK election, in the Brexit referendum or in another referendum?' 85.2% said they had voted and 11% said they had not. 3.8% could not remember.

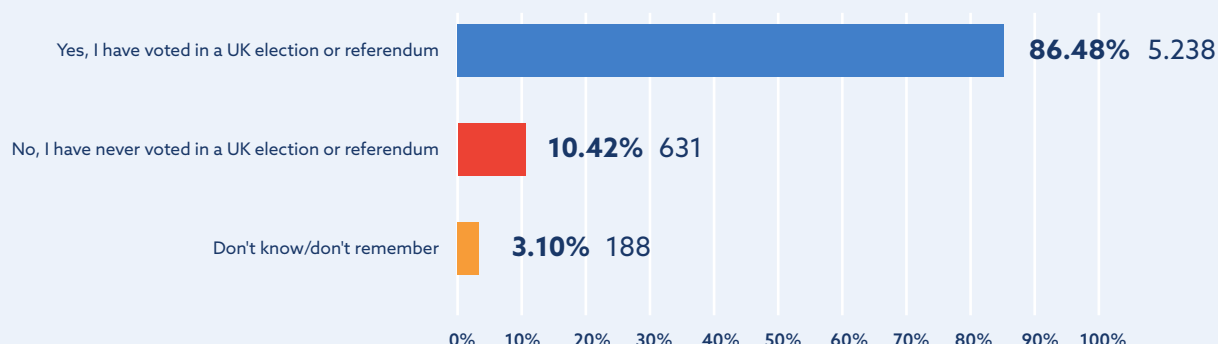
This may indicate a significant level of prior engagement with the electoral system amongst certain cohorts of respondents. The average turnout at UK elections is typically under 70% but this question only asked about *any* prior voting engagement, not at the last general election.

WHERE HAS THE BRITISH DIASPORA PREVIOUSLY VOTED?

We received 5729 answers to the question, 'Where did you last vote in the UK? Please give postcode, town or constituency.'

Respondents had lived from Shetland to St Ives in Cornwall and Belfast to Thanet.

Q10 Have you ever voted in a UK election, in the Brexit referendum or in another referendum?



6.3 Voting methods in the past (Qs. 13-18)

A. VOTING BY POST

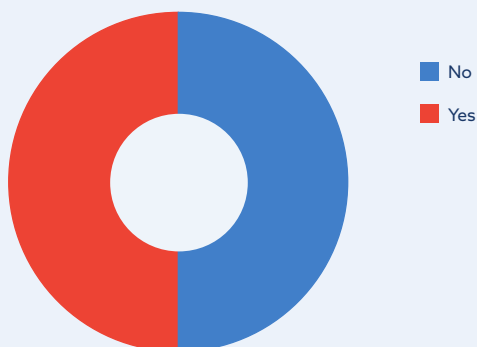
In response to the question, 'Have you ever voted by post at a UK election, in the Brexit referendum or any other national referendum?' answers were almost evenly split at 50/50 yes and no.

When asked, 'What was your experience with postal voting in a UK general election or the referendum?' 64.21% of the 52.71% who had voted by post (33.84% of those who answered the above question) described the process as, 'Good -everything went smoothly.' However, 25.4% experienced some difficulties, although they were able to vote and 10.39% said that they were unable to vote.

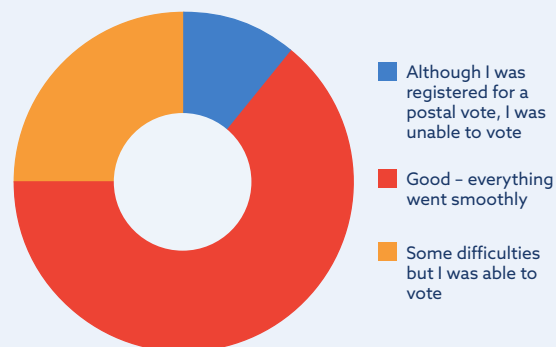


Voting pattern – overall

Ever voted by post

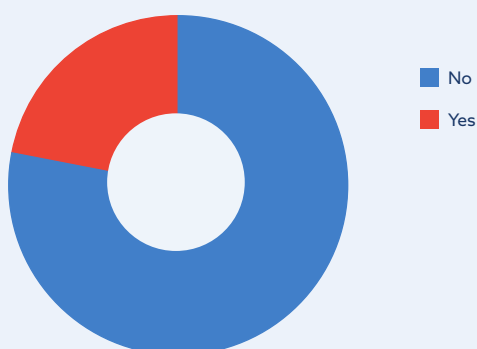


Experience of postal vote

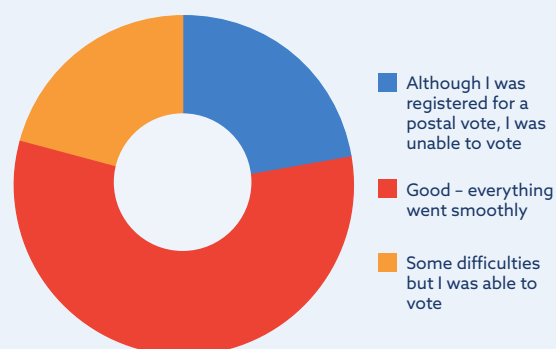


Voting pattern – Australasia and Pacific region

Ever voted by post



Experience of postal vote



However, these numbers changed depending on the **region** in which the respondents live.

Only 22% of respondents in the Australasia and Pacific region had voted by post. Of those that had, only 57% described the experience as 'Good - everything went smoothly.' Over 40% had difficulties or could not vote by post at all.

Postal voting percentages for the Americas were even lower at 21%, slightly better for Africa (35%), and Asia and the Middle East (39%) but still only just over 50% for Europe (53%).

Open text boxes were available for this question and attracted 753 answers. Some comments were positive, 'no problems, excellent via post' or

complimentary about the service offered by various councils, 'Bradford Council were always superefficient in registering me and sending out my voting papers.'

The vast majority, however, were critical of the delay in receiving the ballot paper:

'The ballot papers were postmarked the day before the election. This was despite our calling several times in the weeks before to try to ensure their timely arrival.'

One respondent highlighted the impact of boundary changes on his registration process and the delay this caused in sending out their postal ballot paper:

'I have succeeded in 2015 and for Referendum in 2016. However, in 2010 and again in 2019 I did not receive voting papers caused by delay at Council Office level. I was required to make my application to the returning officer at my last place of residence in UK South Staffs at Codsall. Owing to boundary changes they then forwarded this to Stafford for them to register me there. The process was not completed by the cut-off date for registration.'

Given the boundary changes set to occur between now and the next general election¹³ this could be an additional source of delay for thousands of existing and new overseas electors.

Others highlighted concerns with the prepaid International Business Reply envelope system:

'(We had) concerns about the prepaid envelopes sent and were they valid to be used. Some were, some weren't. If in doubt, we put a stamp on them.'

Some respondents mentioned changes to the postal service providers used and the impact this had:

'I voted but I don't think the vote was returned in time due to its late arrival. The UK voting system used a 3rd party postal service in the Netherlands (I think) which greatly delayed distribution.'

Some overseas electors went to extraordinary lengths to ensure their vote was registered after postal delays:

'Had to fly to London at shorthand (sic) because my ballot paper arrived too late for me to return it in time for it to count.'

Some voters whose postal ballots arrived at the last minute chose to send them back to the UK **by courier**:

'Voting papers only just arrived in time for me to courier them back at high cost.'

Others chose not to use this option as they were not sure that a vote returned in this way would be counted:

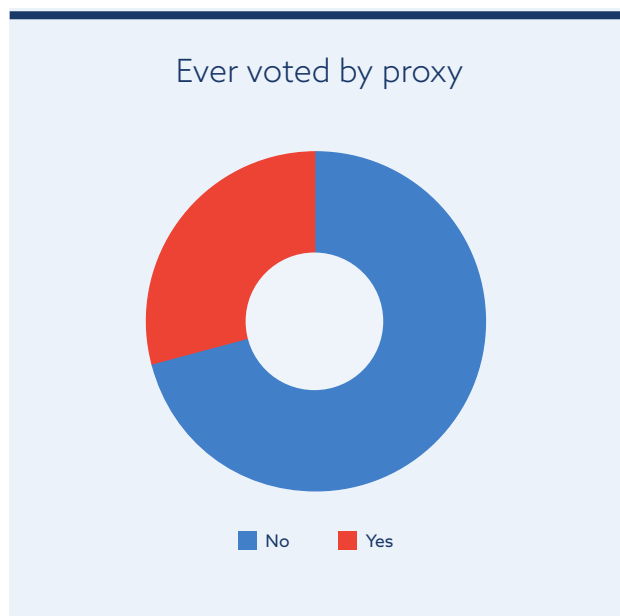
'It was not possible to use couriers or registered post either as this requires a specific recipient to sign for them in the UK. A very flawed system.'

Finally, even voters who ticked the Good – everything went smoothly option, expressed the fear that despite that, their ballot paper did not make it back to the UK in time to be counted. In other words, they actually did not have any way of knowing whether everything had gone smoothly:

'The trouble is, you don't know how it went. You post your vote but does it get counted? Who knows?'

B. VOTING BY PROXY

In answer to the question, 'Have you ever voted by proxy (having another registered UK voter cast a vote at a polling station on your behalf) at a UK election, in the Brexit referendum or in another national referendum?' 29% said yes and 71% said no.



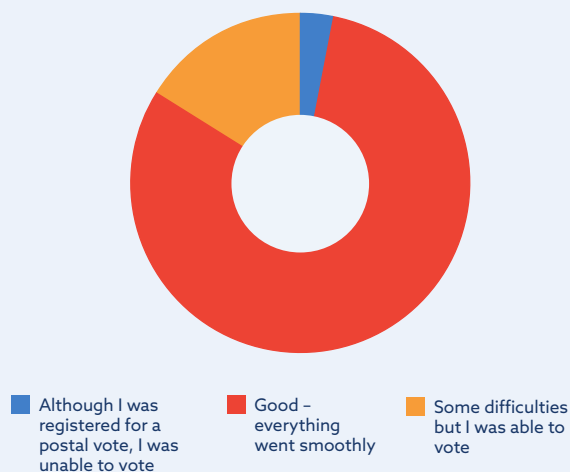
¹³ Boundary Commission for England 2023 Review <https://boundarycommissionforengland.independent.gov.uk/2023-review/>

Again, there were regional variations in the use of proxy votes, although these were somewhat surprising given the postal voting figures and geography.

Australasia and the Pacific recorded the lowest percentage of proxy users (13%) followed very closely by the Americas (14%). Africa (40%) and Asia and the Middle East (47%) showed the strongest support for proxy voting. European residents had only used a proxy in 30% of cases.

Of those who had voted by proxy, 81% agreed overall that the experience of voting by proxy was 'Good – everything went smoothly.' Just under 16% had some difficulties but were still able to vote by proxy. Only 3% were unable to vote this way. The lowest responses for 'Good – everything went smoothly' were recorded in Australasia and the Pacific (71%) and the Americas (72%). All other regions registered 80% or over.

Experience of proxy vote



We received 266 open comments on proxy voting which shed some light on the experience.

One elector who ticked the 'some difficulties but I was able to vote' box expanded on this in their open comment:

'I found out after my father had voted Conservative when I had told him anything but Conservatives and Thatcher.'

Others got around this potential difference of political opinion by asking the relevant constituency political party of their choice to cast a proxy vote on their behalf. Most who relied on this option found it useful and straightforward. Attention will, however, have to be paid to this method of voting now that the EA 2022 has reduced the number of proxy votes that can be cast by one voter on behalf of an overseas voter to four.

Some were not so lucky with political parties:

'Two political parties we asked to help were useless.'

Overseas electors who experienced problems with proxy voting also pointed to a lack of understanding of the proxy vote system amongst staff and volunteers at the polling station:

'My proxy had considerable difficulty at the polling booth on 2 occasions incl lack of knowledge of a different list to the ordinary and a refusal by staff to look further when my name did not initially appear despite my proxy having the voting card!'

Sometimes this had an impact not just on their ability to vote but on that of their proxy as well:

'Voted by proxy. The last time, my vote (was) disallowed and my proxy nearly lost his vote. Spent all day retrieving it. Only managed to vote with minutes to spare.'

Others were only successful because their proxy was familiar with the system and had time and persistence on their side:

'Last general election, there was an issue with overseas proxy voters at my polling station. My father (proxy voter) had to go to the polling station three times and eventually phone the ERO to be allowed to vote. It was only resolved due to his familiarity with the process and persistence.'

Overseas voters who moved away a long time ago mentioned that they may find it difficult to vote by proxy in their last constituency as their proxies have also moved away. Many did not appear to be aware of the rules or that a **proxy can be nominated in the UK to cast a postal vote**.

'The problem with proxy voting is that the proxy person must be a close relative and must live close enough to visit in person.'

'My proxy doesn't live in the constituency where I was last registered to vote, which meant they had to travel a long way to vote on my behalf.'

Even where the overseas elector is aware of the option of postal plus proxy, it is seen as a cumbersome process:

'The combination of proxy + postal vote for the proxy also requires being very organised at both ends as the window is relatively short and the postal service was somewhat unreliable, even then.'

Others were creative in finding ways to vote by proxy:

'I joined a Facebook group to find a proxy in Liverpool.'

Ultimately, although the system appears to work relatively well, a proxy is seen as something of a last resort because of the (sometimes wrongly) perceived difficulty in finding a proxy, the potential (and sometimes actual) inconvenience caused to a proxy, and the lack of trust that a proxy will vote as you ask them to. Most overseas voters:

'Would...prefer a reliable way to vote myself (e.g. post which arrives on time, or securely on line).'

C. SPECIAL CATEGORIES OF OVERSEAS ELECTORS

We asked about the experience of overseas voting as a UK diplomat or services member. Less than 3% fell into this category but almost all described the process as 'good' and 'no problem.'

6.4 Intentions to vote at the next general election (Q.25)

We assumed that the secondary legislation needed to implement clause 14 of the EA 2022 will be enacted in time for disenfranchised overseas electors to vote in the next general election but will they want to?

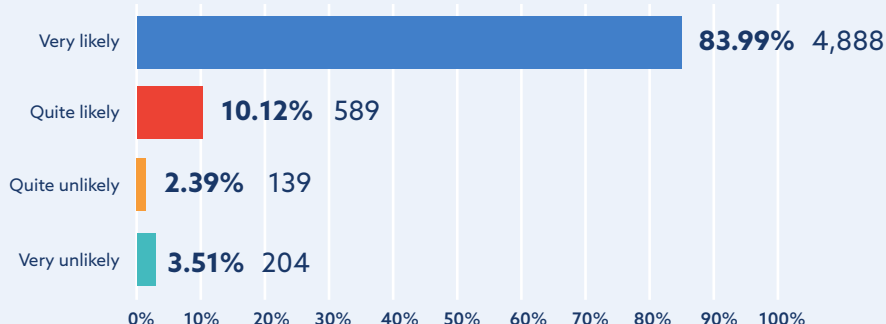
We asked,

'If you have the right to vote in the UK at the next general election, how likely is it that you will vote?'

An overwhelming 84% said 'very likely' with an additional 10% saying 'quite likely.'

Q25 If you have the right to vote in the UK at the next election, how likely is it that you will vote?

Answered: 5,820 Skipped: 355



We received 1,070 open comments in response to this question, the vast majority emphasized a strong commitment to exercising their voting rights:

'Never missed voting in a General Election since my first one in June 1970.'

'Women fought and suffered to be able to vote. I always vote.'

'If I cannot vote by post, I will travel to the UK to vote in person.'

There were strong feelings evinced about being disenfranchised:

'I feel bitterly angry that I am not allowed to be eligible to vote for my own country, simply because I live overseas.'

Many, including former service people, pointed out that although they are paying tax in the UK they have no vote there:

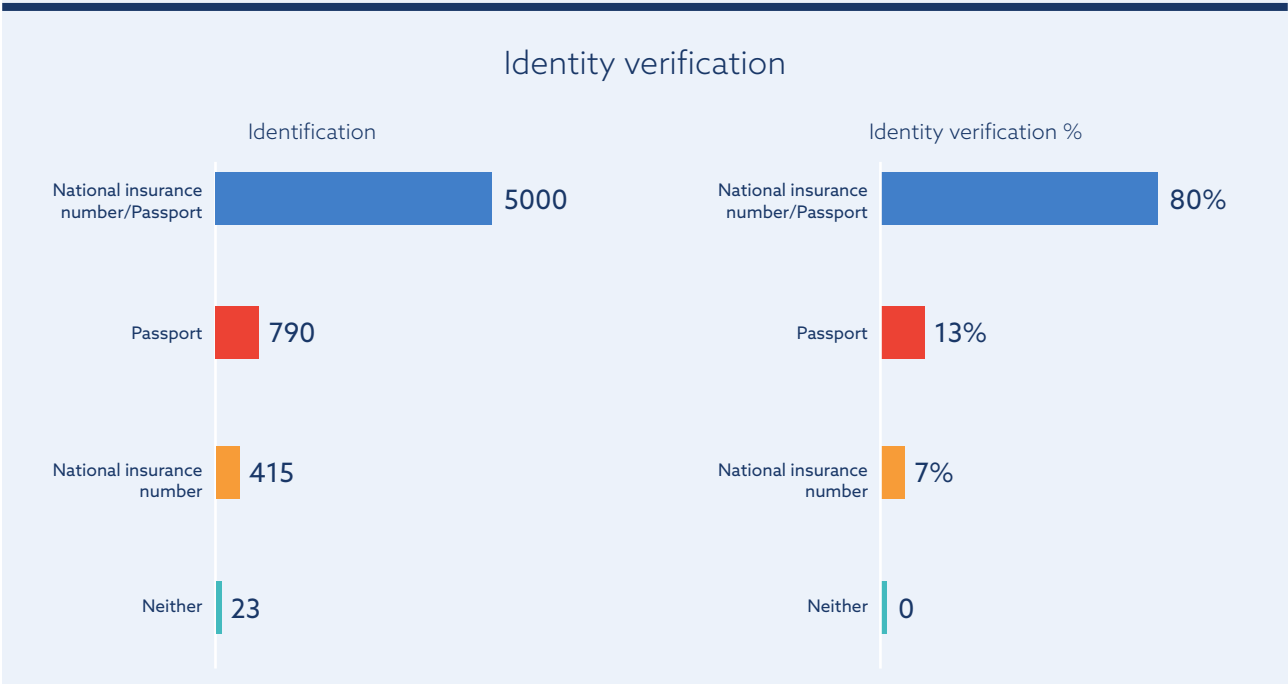
'UK military pension always taxed in UK but have no right to UK vote since 2020 (under the) 15-year rule.'

6.5 Ability to prove identity (Q. 27)

In order to register to vote online overseas voters will need to establish their identity. In its policy paper on overseas voting, the Department for Levelling Up, Communities and Housing proposed a number of documents that could be used to confirm identity.¹⁴

We asked, *'The UK government proposes to use the documents below as options to establish identity. Which of these do you have or could you easily obtain? Please check all that apply. Note that National Insurance number is the UK government preference, but other options are proposed.'*

Overall, 80% of respondents said they would be able to supply their NI number and a passport, although some commented that they could only remember their NI numbers but no longer had a document with their number on it.



¹⁴ See footnotes 6 and 7

When broken down regionally, 91% of respondents in Asia and the Middle East could supply both documents, followed by 82% in the European region, 81% in Africa, 69% in Australasia and the Pacific and 65% in the Americas.

When asked which other documents they held which could be used to prove who they are, birth, marriage and divorce certificates, as well driving licenses were frequently mentioned. Interestingly, quite a few respondents offered residence permits and identity cards from their countries of residence:

'German identity card, German driving licence.'

'Military veterans cards' were also mentioned.

6.6 Ability to prove residence (Qs. 28-31)

We asked, *'In order to prove that you have a right to vote, you will need to demonstrate either a) that you were previously registered to vote in a UK constituency, or b) that you were resident at a UK address. The UK government proposes to use the documents below as options to establish registration or residence. Which of these documents do you have or could easily obtain?'*

Please check all that apply. Although these are the UK government's current suggestions, we hope there will be opportunities to expand the list so your input will be very helpful.

The list came from the government's proposed list of documents in its February 2022 policy paper.¹⁵

Overall, 18.78% of respondents said they did not have any of these documents.

When broken down regionally, 88% of respondents in Africa said they held at least one of these documents, in the Americas, 87%, in Asia and the Middle East 92%, in Australasia, 87% and 81% in Europe.

However, when we broke down the data according to when respondents left the UK there were some surprising results: 23% of those who left in 1990 or earlier didn't have any of the documents on the list. Of those who left between 1991 and 2000, 26% said they did not have any of the documents and 35% of emigrants between 2001 and 2010 reported not having any of them. People who left in the last decade overwhelmingly *did* possess at least one of the documents (96%).

When looking at the data **according to when respondents left AND their age range**, a far more worrying picture emerged: 29% of emigrants between 2001-2010 in the 25-34 age range did not have any documents on the list. For 2001-2010 emigrants in the 35-44 age-range the figure was higher still at 43% and an astonishing 46% of 45-54 year-olds have no documentation on the list.

For those who left between 1991 and 2000, 60% of the respondents in the 35-44 age range do not have any of the documents. For the 45-54 age group this falls to 27% and to 23% for the 55-64-year-old cohort. There was a strong wave of primarily employment-related emigration from the beginning of the 1990s and this is the cohort which is reporting a lack of documentation. This reflects our anecdotal experience.



¹⁵ See footnote 7

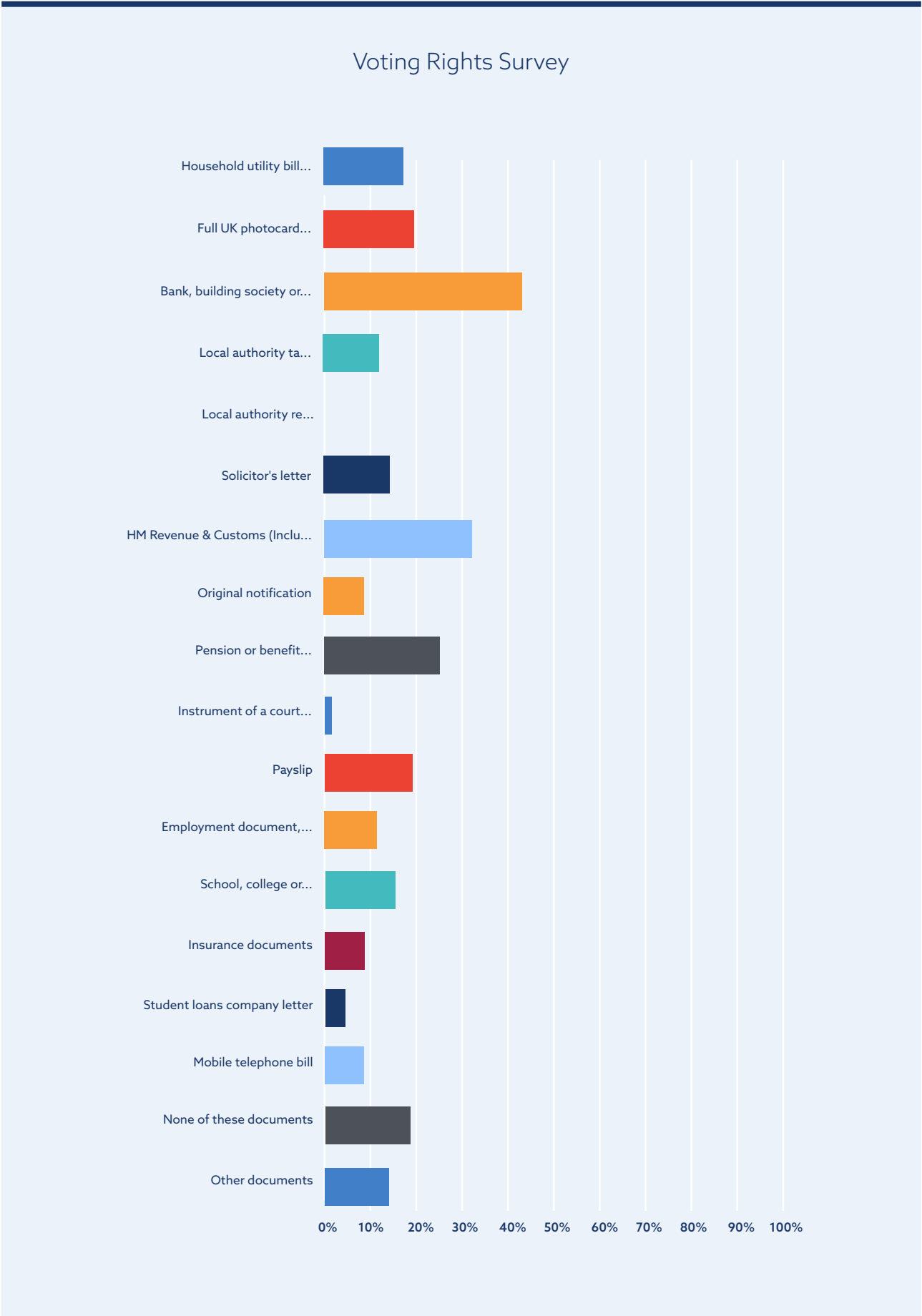


Table 1 By period left the UK

By period left UK	No documentation	At least one document	Size of sample
All periods	18.78%	82%	6220
1990 or earlier	23%	77%	363
1991-2000	26%	74%	117
2001-2010	35%	65%	66
2011-date	4%	96%	27

Table 2 By age group and period left the UK

By age group and period left UK	All periods No documentation	1990 or earlier	1991-2000	2001-2010	2011-date
All	18.78%	23%	26%	35%	4%
18-24	11%	N/A	N/A	N/A	N/A
25-34	11%	N/A	N/A	29%	N/A
35-44	25%	23%	60%	43%	N/A
45-54	22%	39%	27%	46%	N/A
55-64	22%	34%	23%	N/A	N/A
Over 65	27%	33%	N/A	N/A	N/A

*N/A denotes sample size too small to extrapolate.

A. COULD THESE COHORTS RELY ON THE ATTESTATION ROUTE?

Even if they indicate that they would find it very or quite easy to find an attestor, only 1% of the group that left in 1991-2000 have ever used an attestation, and 100% of the cohort who left between 2001-2010 have never used the attestation route. This would, therefore, be a completely new process that would take time to navigate. Attention should be paid to the provision of information and instructions as to how to use this route when registering in any communications campaign.

B. GENDER VARIATIONS

Overall, the same percentage of women as men (18%) did not possess one of the documents on the list. When we broke it down by period of emigration (1991-2000) and age range (in particular, 35-44) there were big discrepancies in the percentages between women and men who did not hold any of the documents, with women appearing to be at a significant disadvantage. We have not included this data because the raw numbers were too small to

be statistically reliable in our survey but we would suggest that particular consideration be given to this point when drafting this section of the secondary legislation. Otherwise, there is a risk that women will be discriminated against and continue to be disenfranchised.

Of those that did possess at least one document, the single most common document cited was a bank, building society or credit card statement, or bank or building society passbook (43.63%) followed by HM Revenue and Customs tax document (32.90%) and a pension or benefit correspondence from the DWP or previous incarnations (24.94%).

When asked to indicate other proof of residence or previous voter registration that they held, common responses included, correspondence with EROs, old voting cards, MoD discharge documents, P45s or P60s, proof of employment in the merchant navy, old NHS medical card and invitations to attend medical screening in the UK, correspondence in relation to private or civil service pensions, child benefit

documents, car registration documents, premium bond holders registration card, correspondence with a professional body, such as the Institute of Chartered Accountants, private rental agreements and UK television licenses.

The single biggest suggested 'other' document was evidence of previous registration on the electoral roll:

'Letters from electoral authorities – e.g. electoral roll registration and/or proxy form completed.'

There was a presumption and expectation that councils should have access to this information even where the voter has lost their voting rights under the 15-year rule.

'Does the UK not have historical electoral rolls? I fail to see why this would be our responsibility to prove.'

'Not sure if I have any of these after 29 years absence – council should have records of my right to vote prior to 2010 cut-off date.'

'I should be listed on the electoral roll records surely these can be accessed by the government?'

It is noted that in most cases EROs do not in fact have immediate access to electoral rolls that are more than 15 years old and that it would be incumbent on the individual applicant to source this evidence themselves. Whilst electoral rolls are kept by some city and county libraries, as well as the British Library depositaries in London and Wetherby, many of the electoral rolls from the 20th century are not available online and would necessitate a visit to the UK to locate them. We find it a source of concern that electoral rolls from the 19th century have, in some cases, been made available online to facilitate commercial ancestry tracing, as well as advertising and marketing, but that this has not been done to enable British overseas voters to re-register and exercise their democratic rights.¹⁶

Others asked why UK government records could not be cross-referenced to compile a UK residence history:

'I don't have physical or digital documents from 1993, but surely there should be some way to cross-check Census information, GP registration or any Govt agency records'

This is, in fact, something that was organized within only a few weeks at the start of the Covid-19 pandemic when the government created the Clinically Extremely Vulnerable People Service that allowed individual address and health data to be shared.¹⁷ We saw no indication in our survey responses that potential British voters overseas would be hostile to data sharing between government departments if it was done according to data protection regulations and with their consent if it facilitated the voter registration process and restored their voting rights.

It was also pointed out that some had left the UK without having the opportunity to acquire the kind of paper trail envisaged in the government proposed list:

'Something connected with parents' address – those of us who moved straight after university may never have had official documents at any other address.'

And it would be even more difficult for UK citizens who left as children:

'Easily is probably not an accurate word. My youngest daughter certainly wouldn't have any of this. She was 18 months old when we left the UK.'

Finally, even though 43% have some kind of bank or building society statement, it was not clear that this would evidence residence in the UK. It was pointed out that:

¹⁶ <https://www.bl.uk/collection-guides/uk-electoral-registers>

¹⁷ Institute for Government report, 'Government data sharing during the pandemic' 20 February 2023 <https://www.instituteforgovernment.org.uk/publication/government-data-sharing-pandemic>

'It is not clear in this question whether these documents should mention a UK Address. I have a UK bank account, but registered to my home address in Belgium.'

And that due to recent policy changes,

'My UK bank has recently informed me that because I am living overseas I am no longer eligible to have a bank account.'

C. ATTESTATIONS

One option available to prospective voters is the attestation route. There have been changes made to this in the Elections Act which make it easier to find an attestor (they previously also had to be a registered overseas elector, now they can be any British suitably qualified UK elector who is not a close relative).

We asked:

'An alternative to documentation may be an attestation (a signed statement) confirming your previous registration or residence. A suitably qualified UK voter who is not a close relative would need to make such an attestation. If you needed to use this option, how easy or difficult would it be for you to find a UK voter who is not a close family member and could vouch for your previous residence?'

A majority of respondents (57.5%) indicated that it would be 'very easy' or 'quite easy' to find an attestor. Almost 30% (29.7%) said it would be 'quite difficult' 'very difficult' or 'impossible.'

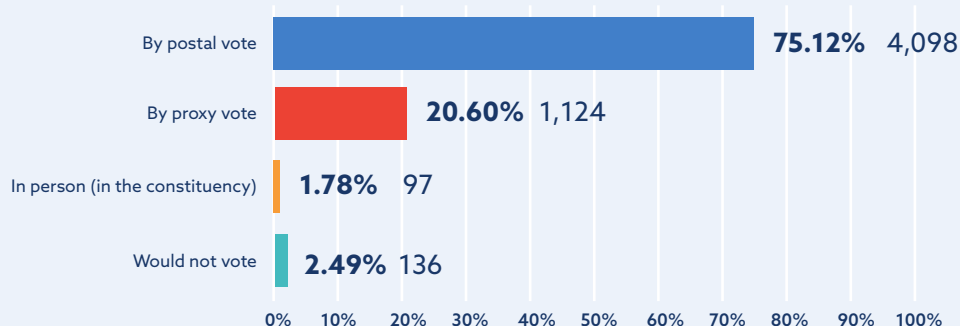
It should be noted that 96% of respondents had never previously used an attestation to prove their identity or residence so their optimism as to how easy it would be to supply one may be overestimated once the conditions and legal consequences are explained more fully to friends and non-close family members whom they may ask to provide one.

6.7 Intended and preferred voting methods in the future (Qs. 36-37)

Despite the problems encountered with postal ballots in the past, when asked, 'How are you most likely to vote in a future UK election?' 75% said they would choose this option. A fifth opted for proxy voting. Less than 2% said they would vote in person.

Q36 How are you most likely to vote in a future UK election?

Answered: 5,455 Skipped: 720



We offered a free text comment option. We received 1286 comments.

Notwithstanding the support for **postal ballots** lots of concerns were expressed about the reliability of this option in open text comments:

'The timescales for postal voting are very short, and the process is hostage to the postal systems of the UK and country of residence.'

Some expressed concerns about the impact of potential future industrial action:

'Postal votes can be problematic, depending on time allowed and reliability of postal system (strikes etc.)'

'There have been occasions for general elections when postal votes were not sent out early enough to ensure receipt and return.'

'Documents need to be posted from UK far earlier.'

Very many commentators raised the option of **electronic voting**:

'If the option to vote online with identity/security checks was provided that would be a timely and secure way of voting.'

Comparisons were drawn with **overseas voting systems in other countries**, whether it be with online voting systems:

'My preference is for electronic voting like my American wife so easily does. Her California vote-by-mail also comes abroad in plenty of time! And it's the postmark that counts, provided the mail-in ballot arrived within 7 days after election day.'

Or in combination with French-style options to vote in **embassies and consulates**:

'We should be able to vote online or at the Embassy or Consulate.'

It was also highlighted that:

'We have had secure internet submission of tax for many years, why not the same for voting?'

The importance of sending out the ballot papers in good time was mentioned on numerous occasions.

And, as evidenced in comments to other questions, what came across strongly was the desire to vote and have that ballot counted:

'I would travel to my hometown in person to ensure that me (sic) vote would be cast at a polling station and not lost in administration. That's how determined I am to vote.'

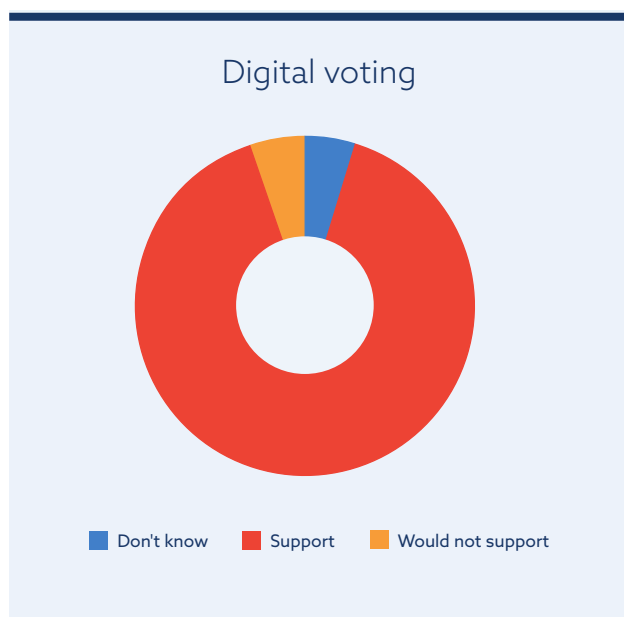


6.8 Support for other electoral policies in the UK (Qs. 48-55)

A. ELECTRONIC VOTING

In response to the question, 'Currently UK voting is entirely via physical ballot papers. If security and privacy could be assured, would you support a move to electronic / online voting?'

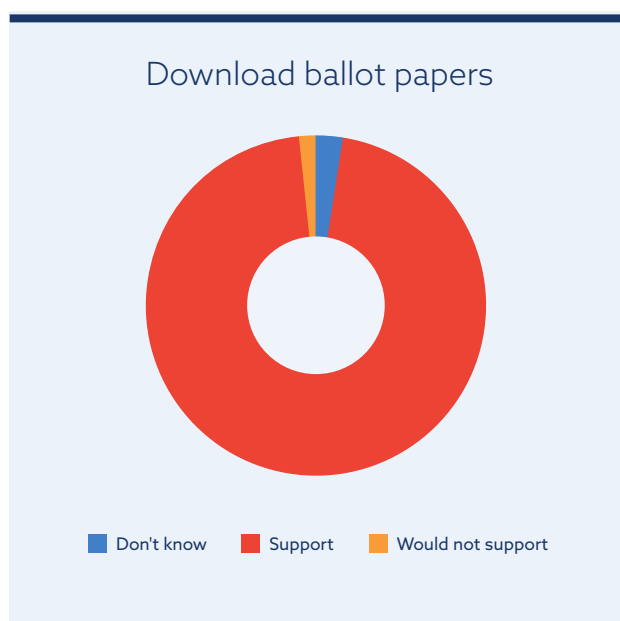
Ninety percent (90.01%) supported this option.



Almost 85% (83.64%) supported **mailing out ballot papers more than five weeks** in advance to give more time for postal voting. This was a proposal previously suggested by the Association of Electoral Administrators in 2021 who called for an extended 30-day electoral timetable and earlier deadlines for absent voting applications.¹⁸

In the absence of that option,

95.87% supported the option of electronic downloading of the ballot paper to reduce postal delays.



And just under 80% (79.77%) were in favour of being able to vote in **UK embassies and consulates**.

This number included some who said they supported the idea but lived too far away from consulates to make use of the option themselves:

'However, this must only be one option. When living in Australia I was 2500 kms from my nearest consulate!'

Others highlighted the difficulties and costs of this as a sole option:

'Embassies are often too far away from most people for them to travel to vote and how would the handicapped and less able people manage or those on a modest income afford to travel.'

¹⁸ The Association of Electoral Administrators Blueprint for a Modern Electoral Landscape July 2021
<https://researchbriefings.files.parliament.uk/documents/SN05923/SN05923.pdf>

6.9 Miscellaneous

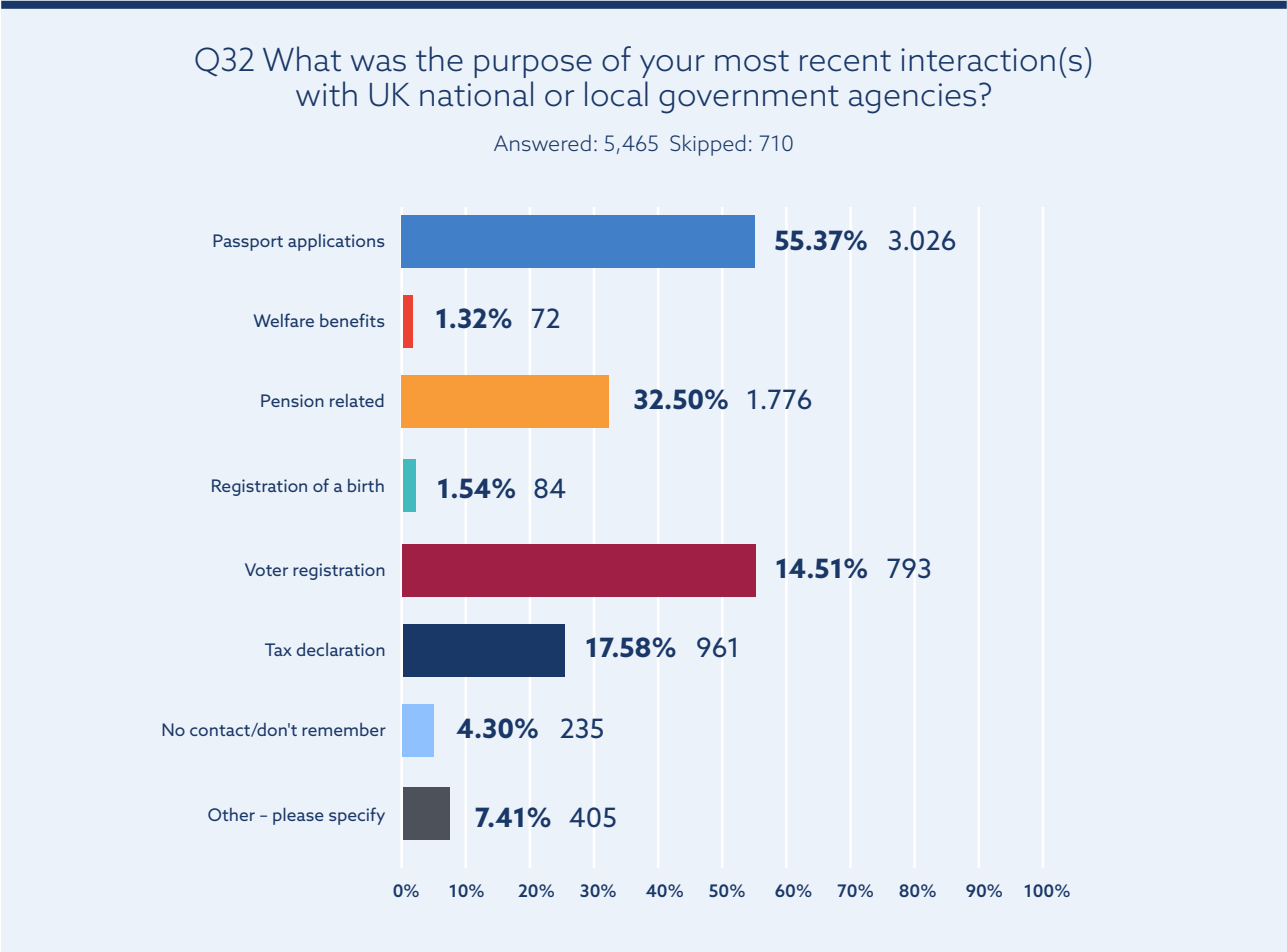
A. INTERACTIONS WITH THE UK GOVERNMENT AND AGENCIES - RELEVANT FOR RECOMMENDATIONS ON FUTURE COMMUNICATIONS AND AWARENESS RAISING CAMPAIGNS ON RESTORED VOTING RIGHTS) (QS. 32-35)

Given the difficulties identified in some cohorts with gathering evidence of previous residence in the UK we also looked at recent interactions between British citizens abroad and the UK state on the basis that the government holds information about us and could use this to assist us with registering to vote.

and that these are fairly recent. The biggest single source of engagement was for a passport renewal (55.37%). This was followed by 32.50% on a pension related matter, 17.5% on a tax declaration and 14.5% to renew their registration on the electoral roll. 50% had been in touch with the government in the previous 12 months.

Just over 50% (51,77%) had been in contact with the UK government in the last 6-12 months.

Survey responses indicated that a majority of British citizens have a variety of interactions with the UK government

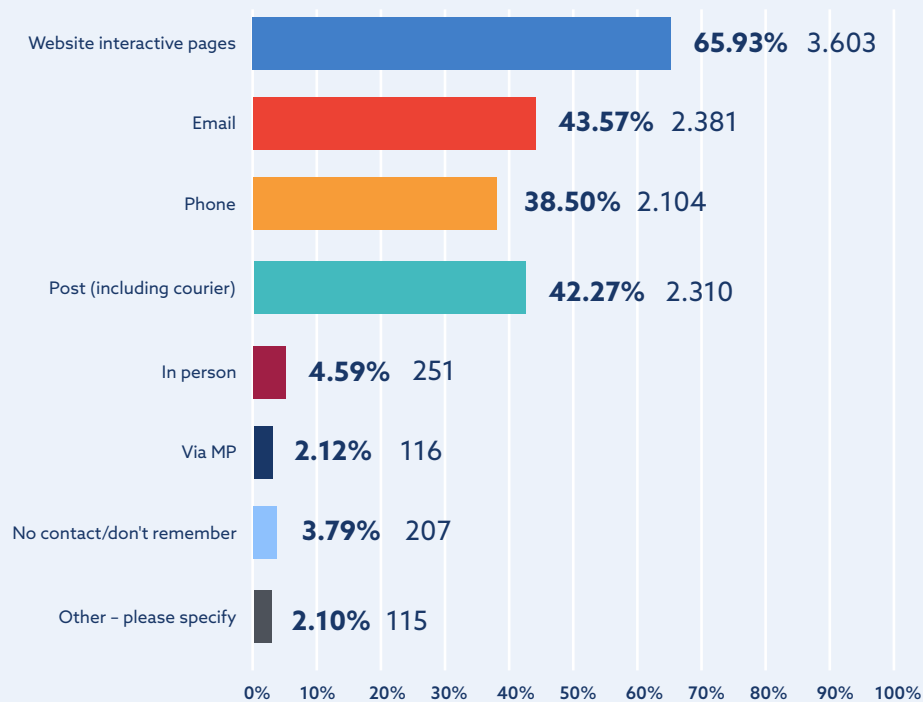


The top four places of interaction were a government website (65,9%), email (43,57%), phone (38,50%) and post (42,27%). These figures suggest that there would be numerous, easy and low-cost opportunities (for example, banners on a website, a message at the bottom of an email, a recorded message

on dedicated phone lines for overseas callers and flyers included with letters sent out by post) for government departments dealing with British citizens living overseas to inform them that their voting rights have been restored and how to register and exercise them before the next general election.

Q34 Which of the following have you used as methods of contact with UK national or local government agencies?

Answered: 5,465 Skipped: 710



Conclusion

The results of this survey demonstrate, in line with the government's estimates, that 60% of British citizens of voting age living overseas are currently disenfranchised prior to implementation of the Elections Act. The enthusiastic response to this survey indicates that the diaspora remains engaged with the UK notwithstanding the length of time UK citizens may have spent outside the country, or how far away they live. They have a voice and they want to make it heard.

They welcome the expansion of the franchise and an overwhelming majority indicated that they would exercise their restored voting rights at the next election should the necessary secondary legislation be adopted.

However, our survey revealed that considerable numbers of potential voters will face substantial obstacles meeting the conditions to re-register. In particular, they risk continuing to be denied a vote unless the proposed list of documents to prove residence in the 2022 policy paper is considerably expanded and reflects the real-life experience of emigrants from the UK and their mobility patterns.

Attention will also need to be paid to how these new electors will be able to vote and the systems put in place for this. According to the data from the survey, current voting options (postal and proxy) do not deliver an optimal voting experience that allows all who wish to do so to vote and have their ballot counted. This is especially true of postal voting where only 60% of overseas voters who have previously voted by post report a positive experience. It is particularly important that the postal option is improved given that 75% of respondents indicated that they would choose this option to vote at the next general election.

This will necessarily require more human and financial resources to be provided to local authorities to ensure that all overseas electors who want to register and vote can do so. Otherwise, legitimate expectations of voting rights will be denied to hundreds of thousands of British citizens at the next general election.

The Elections Bill Impact Assessment in 2021 estimated the cost of extending the franchise to be approximately £15 million over the next ten-year period, but suggested that the cost could be as high as £45 million if as many as 36% of eligible overseas voters register in election years, or as low as £3 million if as few as 9% register in election years.¹⁹ We know from a written parliamentary question tabled in June 2021 that, as of then, £2.5 million had been set aside to support the extension of the franchise.²⁰

Finally, whilst our survey received far more support than we had anticipated, very many British citizens overseas remain unaware that the Elections Act 2022 has re-enfranchised them (subject to the implementation of secondary legislation). A comprehensive awareness campaign should be run by the British government to ensure that British citizens overseas are informed of their new rights and how to exercise them. The survey data indicates that the British diaspora has numerous points of interaction with the UK state and that these interactions provide varied opportunities to inform and engage with UK citizens overseas on their voting rights, e.g. through standard messages/banners added to emails and websites.

¹⁹ Para 362 tables 23 and 24 Option 1 sensitivity 1 and 2 Elections Bill Impact Assessment, Cabinet Office 01/07/2021 <https://publications.parliament.uk/pa/bills/cbill/58-02/0138/2021-05-07ImpactAssessmentREV.pdf>

²⁰ Voting Rights: British Nationals Abroad, written question for Cabinet Office from Lord Wallace of Saltaire, UIN HL980, tabled on 9 June 2021 <https://questions-statements.parliament.uk/written-questions/detail/2021-06-09/HL980/>

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We would also like to thank Louise Harvey and Emma Willoughby of Chimney Design for their work on the design of the report.

And finally, a big thank you to the 7100 members of the British diaspora worldwide who took the time to answer the questions and provide lots of food for thought in the open comment boxes. We hope their comments will be heard and acted upon.

