

Written evidence submitted by Liberal Democrats Abroad to the Representation of the People Public Bill Committee (RPB47)

Prepared by Liberal Democrats Abroad [Representation of the People Working Group](#) on behalf of Liberal Democrats Abroad.

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Executive Summary

- The Representation of the People Bill (2026) as drafted represents a major missed opportunity to address the systemic disenfranchisement of approximately 3.5 million British citizens living abroad who are eligible to vote.
- Only 5% of the estimated eligible British voters living abroad (191,338) registered to vote at the 2024 General Election, compared to the 16% (234,000) who did so at the 2019 General Election. This compares to France, which saw some 600,000 (37%) of its registered overseas citizens vote at its 2024 legislative election.
- The decline in registrations was in spite of the Elections Act 2022 extending the right to vote to an additional 2.1 million British citizens abroad. Given that increase, we could have expected a proportionate rise in registrations by overseas voters to approximately 590,000.

- The Elections Act 2022 failed to address critical flaws in the system for voting from abroad, demonstrated by the fact that only 48%¹ of postal ballots issued were returned in time to be counted by citizens abroad at the 2024 General Election.
 - Liberal Democrats Abroad asks the Committee to support amendments regarding **AVR inclusion, electronic or blank ballot distribution, embassy voting, education initiatives, dedicated overseas constituencies, proxy voting improvements, and parity on donation rules between domestic and overseas voters**. This package of measures, taken together, would increase both turnout and the likelihood of successful participation for overseas electors.
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Introduction

1. Liberal Democrats Abroad (LDA) represents the members and supporters of the Liberal Democrats who live outside the United Kingdom.
2. This submission outlines the on-going barriers British citizens abroad face when voting, and offers some solutions. While the Government rightly recognises overseas electors as legitimate voters, current infrastructure remains outdated compared to international standards.
3. Our proposals draw on the results of our survey conducted during and immediately after the 2024 General Election, research into other countries' voting systems, and the Electoral Commission's Review of the 2024 General Election.

Summary of suggested amendments to the Bill

4. **Modernise Ballot Logistics:** Support feasibility studies for electronic and blank ballot distribution, the use of embassies, and amendment of the electoral timetable.
5. **Inclusive AVR:** Remove the exclusion of overseas voters from Automatic Voter Registration.
6. **Proxy Flexibility:** Allow postal voters to switch to a proxy vote, improve information shared with voters, and clarify party assistance rules.
7. **Campaign Material Parity:** Study 'Freepost' or electronic communication for candidate leaflets to overseas voters.
8. **Overseas Constituencies:** Conduct a feasibility study on Overseas Constituencies.
9. **Education Funding:** Fund the Electoral Commission for collaborative awareness campaigns.
10. **Donation Caps:** Implement a universal cap on all political donations to maintain democratic equivalence for overseas voters.

¹ See [2024 United Kingdom Parliamentary General Election administrative data](#), ConstituencyData tab, column AX

11. For any consultation periods or implementations, we ask that a timetable is prescribed, so that another electoral cycle does not commence with these barriers still in place.
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Key issues, facts, and proposed solutions

Failures in Voting Logistics from Abroad

12. Postal voting is the preferred or only practical method for nearly half of overseas electors². The Electoral Commission has been highlighting anecdotal evidence of problems with the postal vote system since 2015 although it was only at the 2024 General Election that quantitative data was published.
13. This data revealed that only 48%³ of the overseas postal ballots issued arrived back in time to be counted. The democratic wishes of around 45,000 overseas electors – two-thirds of a constituency – were ignored.
14. Notably, the Electoral Commission reported that this was not just a problem for the largest contingent of British citizens living abroad in Australia, where only 6% of ballots were returned in time, but also for parts of Europe, showing that distance was not the only factor.
15. Our survey results demonstrated a pattern of systemic delays. 52% of respondents reported receiving their ballot papers less than 11 days before the poll or not receiving them at all. Specific narrative evidence includes a voter as close as France receiving their ballot the day after the election and a voter in the United States receiving a pack just 11 days before the poll, which made a successful return via international mail nearly impossible. Several survey respondents reported paying for private express courier services in an attempt to have their vote counted.
16. All of this supports the conclusion in the Electoral Commission's report on the General Election stating that '*The options for voting by British and eligible Irish citizens overseas do not work well enough.*'⁴

² See [Data from Electoral Commission Review of 2024 General Election](#), column AW.

³ See [2024 United Kingdom Parliamentary General Election administrative data](#), ConstituencyData tab, column AX

⁴ See pp 22-26

17. RECOMMENDATION

We support the call in amendment NC8 to examine additional methods of ‘facilitating overseas electors to vote’ and are particularly in favour of

- The digital transmission and at-home printing of ballot papers to halve the round-trip post time, as has been done for many years elsewhere, including in the US since the 2012 Presidential Election.
- Ballot distribution by UK embassies and consulates with the option of returning through them.
- Amending the electoral timetable to increase the time allowed for the registration of overseas voters and allow a longer period for the issue and return of their ballots.

18. RECOMMENDATION

We suggest consideration of the Canadian approach of distributing ballot papers without candidate names on them, which can be distributed in advance of the close of nominations, allowing the voter to write the name of their preferred candidate once candidate lists are published.

19. RECOMMENDATION

Whilst we support electronic distribution of ballots, most election security experts are against online voting⁵. We therefore suggest that the consultation proposed in NC8 include risk-benefit analysis evidence from such experts.

20. RECOMMENDATION

Create a centralised electoral register for overseas electors to address the lack of information about problems faced by overseas electors and systematically assess the performance of the electoral system for them, as recommended in the PACAC review of the 2024 General Election⁶. This should encompass the collection of a wider range of metrics including

- Overseas registration patterns by new and existing voters, including applications made, their outcomes and the reasons for their acceptance or failure.
- The number of electors using the different methods of voting and the number of successes or failures of each in leading to a vote being counted.

⁵ Example paper: Park, S., Specter, M., Narula, N., & Rivest, R. L. (2021). [Going from bad to worse: From Internet voting to blockchain voting](#). Journal of Cybersecurity, 7(1), tyaa025.

⁶ page 45, paragraph 122

Exclusion of Overseas Voters from Automatic Voter Registration

21. We welcome the introduction of Automatic Voter Registration (AVR) in Part 2 of the Bill, but are disappointed to see that it specifically excludes overseas electors.
22. The annual canvass in the UK not only refreshes the data on the electoral roll, but also serves to publicise the democratic rights of those living there. Given the low level of awareness and participation amongst overseas voters, AVR is particularly important for this group.

23. RECOMMENDATION

We welcome using passport application and renewal as opportunities to inform citizens of their voting rights, as proposed in Amendment NC7, but recommend that these opportunities be used as a gateway to automatic voter registration, rather than merely providing the applicant with registration information. We would also include other governmental contact with individuals, including immigration services, Department for Work and Pensions, and HMRC as opportunities to make progress towards voter registration for eligible citizens.

Removing Obstacles to Proxy Voting

24. Local councils have been recommending proxy voting as an alternative for overseas electors for at least the last two elections.
25. We received regular enquiries and requests for help from potential electors abroad who were unable to find a proxy in the constituency where they voted, unaware that they could appoint someone living elsewhere who could then cast the vote on their behalf by post.
26. We received considerable correspondence at the 2024 General Election from concerned citizens abroad when it became clear that their postal vote would arrive too late to be returned in time to be counted. Since they had registered to vote by post, there was no mechanism to switch to a proxy vote as a fallback. Whilst the provision in the Bill to allow a postal voter to change their voting method at the last minute to an in-person ballot is helpful for a UK resident, it is not fit for purpose for someone living abroad, who would likely not be able to travel to the UK to vote in person at short notice.
27. We received a number of reports of proxies being refused at polling stations. In one instance, a presiding officer did not understand how to locate an elector in the "overseas category" on the register and had already turned away several other voters for the same reason.

28. RECOMMENDATION

We recommend that clearer information needs to be provided to voters about who is able to be appointed as their proxy, especially at the time of their registration or its renewal. We further recommend that polling station staff receive clearer guidance on the use of overseas registers.

29. RECOMMENDATION

We also request further clarification as to the circumstances under which political parties are permitted to assist voters in finding a proxy to vote on their behalf.

30. RECOMMENDATION

The provision in the Bill to allow a postal voter to switch to an in-person vote should be extended to allow them to nominate a proxy.

Lack of campaigning material sent to overseas voters

31. Overseas voters deserve to be able to make informed decisions about which candidate to support, yet they are often forgotten in campaigning. Unlike in the UK, they are not entitled to receive a 'Freepost' leaflet from candidates.

32. We believe overseas voters should have the same opportunity to receive material from candidates as domestic voters, but understand that the cost and potential delays of using the 'Freepost' system may be problematic.

33. RECOMMENDATION

We recommend that a feasibility study is conducted to examine the options for the 'Freepost' distribution of leaflets to overseas electors, including electronic communication using email addresses held by Electoral Registration Offices.

Dedicated representation through overseas constituencies

34. The UK's constituency system is built on the principle that representatives should have a direct, working knowledge of where their constituents live. This fundamental link is broken by overseas voters being tied to the constituency in which they lived immediately before they left the UK. There are many drawbacks for both the Member of Parliament and their overseas constituents including:

- MPs being expected to deal with overseas constituents living across the globe
- Constituents routinely being told in MPs' communications that they cannot be helped unless they are resident in the constituency.

35. We affirm our long-standing support for the creation of Overseas Constituencies, a system used in many countries ranging across Europe, Asia, and the Americas, which has the potential to:
- Ensure a better understanding for their MP of the concerns and issues affecting overseas constituents and therefore an improved ability to represent them in Parliament.
 - Provide improved links to the legislative system whose decisions have an important effect on Britons abroad.

36. RECOMMENDATION

We call for this Bill to include a feasibility study to make proposals for the creation of Overseas Constituencies.

Education and awareness

37. Only 26% of British citizens abroad are aware of their right to vote⁷. It is therefore not surprising that turnout was so low at the last General Election, despite the 2.5-fold increase in eligible voters.
38. The Electoral Commission created material for use in publicity and education programmes to inform voters of the changes in eligibility. This material was appropriate, but the method of delivery was extremely limited. For example, our connections in overseas digital media reported that there was no budget for advertising, and several councils told us they expected the publicity to be carried out by others, despite their contact with potentially eligible citizens.
39. LDA, like representatives of UK political parties abroad, ran an awareness campaign. However, as representatives of a single political party, we found that many organisations were unwilling to work with us.

40. RECOMMENDATION

We ask that the Electoral Commission is funded to conduct a voting rights awareness campaign to eligible voters abroad, in collaboration with Government departments, embassies, high commissions, and non-governmental organisations.

Donations

41. We welcome the tightening of rules on donations to UK political parties, and support amendment NC2 to exclude individuals serving a foreign administration from being permissible donors. It is important, however, that eligible British citizens abroad continue to be able to donate to UK political parties. As legitimate voters, the diaspora should have the same level of democratic service and effective participation as domestic electors.
42. Whilst supporting our Party's commitment for tackling foreign influence in our politics, we do not accept that the Government's recent proposed amendment to the Bill to restrict donations from British citizens abroad to £100,000 per annum is a fair or consistent

⁷ [YouGov poll commissioned by the Electoral Commission](#) after the 2024 General Election

response to their stated aim of enabling the full democratic participation of those legitimate voters.

43. RECOMMENDATION

We urge the Government to use this Bill to implement a cap on all donations to political parties and so maintain the democratic equivalence between all British voters, wherever they live.

Conclusion

44. The Government stated in their response to the Electoral Commission's General Election report that "Overseas electors are legitimate voters who should be able to exercise their vote without unnecessary barriers and we will consider options to support voting by overseas electors in general".
45. However, this Bill as drafted fails to tackle those very barriers, and so does nothing to reduce the democratic deficit endured by voters abroad.
46. We urge the Committee to adopt amendments in the areas mentioned to ensure that the **"Representation of the People"** Bill truly includes **all** of the people, regardless of where they live.

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