

In depth: delivering the 2019 UK Parliamentary general election | Electoral Commission Search In depth: delivering the 2019 UK Parliamentary general election You are in the UK general elections section Home UK general elections On this page Electoral Registration Officers are under pressure: high volumes of applications at major electoral events Overseas electors again faced challenges when voting The timing of the election brought challenges for Returning Officers Voters continue to have positive views about how the election was run What next? First published: 21 April 2020 Last updated: 21 April 2020 Overview People were very satisfied with the processes of registering to vote and voting at the 2019 general election. They thought that they had enough information about the election, how to register, and how to cast their vote The number of registration applications made before the deadline was significantly higher than at the 2017 general election. 3.85 million people applied to register to vote. 660,000 applied on the last day to register Data from Electoral Registration Officers (EROs) shows that approximately one in three applications was a duplicate, submitted by someone who was already correctly registered. In some areas the data suggests that the proportion of duplicates was even higher The most frequently mentioned concern in feedback from overseas electors was about not receiving their postal vote in time to complete it and send it back More than a third of s who responded to our survey said that they or their teams were struggling with the demands of the role and the extra workload from unplanned electoral events in 2019 Electoral Registration Officers are under pressure: high volumes of applications at major electoral events Register to vote on a mobile Electoral Registration Officers are under pressure: high volumes of applications at major electoral events Public interest in major electoral events is increasingly driving electoral registration applications just before elections. An accessible online registration process means it is easy for people who want to make sure they can take part to submit an application, and to do so close to the deadline. EROs and their teams were under pressure to process large numbers of registration applications during the period before the deadline in November 2019. The number of applications made before the deadline was significantly higher than at the 2017 election. 2017 2019 2.9 million people applied between the Prime Minister's announcement of the election and the registration deadline 3.85 million people applied between MPs voting to approve the election and the registration deadline 612,000 people applied on deadline day 660,000 people applied on deadline day Duplicate applications A large number of duplicate applications added unnecessary pressure for EROs and their teams. EROs and duplicate applications Data from EROs shows that many applications were submitted by people who were already correctly registered: Approximately one in three applications received before the deadline was a duplicate In some areas the proportion of duplicate applications was even higher Only around half of all applications led to an addition to the register We received feedback from 160 EROs, Returning Officers (ROs) or s from across the UK. Nearly half (46%) of those who responded to our survey said that the volume of duplicate applications received during the election caused strain on resources and staff, who had to work significant additional hours to process them in time, alongside processing applications to vote by post and proxy. Feedback from s "The duplicate process is a nightmare throughout the year but during a high profile election it becomes a huge drain on resources." "Number of duplicate applications is unacceptable and creates additional enormous workload for no benefit to the register." Feedback from s EROs and postal votes Additionally, the electoral registration and postal voting application deadlines fell on the same day in Great Britain, after Parliament

changed the law. It passed the Early Parliamentary General Election Act 2019 in November, to make sure the registration deadline was the same across the UK. EROs and electoral administrators told us that they felt additional pressure at this election as they processed both types of application to the same deadline. As a result of these pressures, EROs and their teams found it hard to provide the level of resource needed to process applications. In some cases this meant that voters didn't receive the service they should be able to expect. For example: In Plymouth, the ERO had included 1,451 people in the electoral register who had not completed an individual registration application. They identified and resolved this problem before polling day, but it meant that there was confusion about whether some people were able to vote in the election. There was limited time for the people who were affected then to apply to register correctly before the deadline. The ERO did not fully meet our performance standards. In Northern Ireland, the Electoral Office sent letters seeking required additional information from some people who had applied to vote, but some letters included an incorrect deadline for response. The Chief Electoral Officer confirmed that anyone who responded after this point, but before the actual deadline, would have had their registration processed correctly. It was also told us that the large number of registration and absent vote applications had an impact on their capacity to focus on running the election at a critical point. Feedback from an ERO was very challenging maintaining our level of processing to complete by close of business each day - many staff worked extra hours each night and at weekends to ensure we were up to date. We saw a sharp increase in levels of registration applications, Absent Vote applications and a corresponding sharp increase in numbers of overseas elector applications. Additionally, 33% of applications in the period in the run up to the election were duplicate registration applications. Feedback from an EROs need more support EROs need more support to help them continue to deliver the level of service that people should be able to expect before major electoral events. The UK Government should look at the funding model for future UK Parliamentary elections to ensure EROs can handle large numbers of registration applications. More fundamentally, it should also look at how the online register to vote service and electoral management software systems could be improved to reduce the number and impact of duplicate registration applications. The UK's governments should also explore reforms that would make it easier for people to register or update their details throughout the year, such as integrating applications into other public service contacts, or more automatic forms of registration. This could help reduce the need for people to make new applications immediately before an election. Overseas electors again faced challenges when voting. Some British citizens living abroad found it difficult to make sure their votes were able to be counted. Overseas voters found it difficult to vote. Votes being counted Overseas voter experience. Just over 230,000 people were registered as overseas electors, making up 0.5% of the total UK electorate. Many overseas electors who chose to vote by post had a tight deadline to receive and return their postal ballot papers before polling day: EROs could only begin printing ballot papers after the deadline for nominating candidates on 14 November. This left less than four weeks to print and issue postal ballot packs, and for overseas electors to receive, complete and return their ballot papers before polling day. People who registered or applied for a postal vote close to the deadline had only two weeks to receive, complete and return their postal vote. We received feedback after the election from more than 500 overseas voters. The most frequent problem they mentioned was not receiving their postal vote in time to complete it and send it back. Overseas electors were dependent on the speed of the postal service in

the country where they live. Quote from overseas voter "My overseas postal vote arrived the day before the election. This left no time to send it back, and so I was not able to vote despite my desire to." "The ballot arrived Saturday afternoon. I paid \$35 for express shipping to get it back to the UK as soon as possible but it was still unlikely to arrive in time (letters normally take around a week). I don't know why it arrived so late." "IT DOES NOT WORK. My post was sent too late to arrive for me to return it, will not reach the UK in time. I have no vote." "My postal vote did not arrive until 5 working days before the election, making it impossible for my vote to be counted."

Views from overseas electors

Experience of postal and proxy process

Some overseas electors also told us that they did not know they could ask someone in the UK to vote on their behalf by post (known as a 'postal proxy'). This could have been more convenient for the proxy voter, rather than having to travel in person to a polling station that could be far from their own home. More than half (53%) of s who responded to our survey said that they had spent significant time dealing with queries from overseas voters who were experiencing issues with postal or proxy votes during the election. We also received large numbers of queries ahead of the election from people living overseas who wanted to know if, and how, they could vote. This was not the first time that we have seen evidence of these problems for overseas electors. We highlighted evidence in our statutory reports on the 2015 and 2017 UK general elections, as well as following the 2016 EU referendum and the 2019 European Parliament election. At the 2019 general election, the Cabinet Office and Royal Mail put in place a system for faster delivery of postal ballot packs to overseas electors. This does appear to have improved the experience for some electors, but there was still not enough time for overseas electors in some countries to return their votes in time for them to be counted. Overseas electors should be able to expect that their vote will be counted. The UK Government should consider innovative new approaches to voting for overseas electors, using evidence from other countries. This could include the ability to download and print postal ballot papers or vote at embassies and consulates. The UK Government plans to increase the number of British citizens living abroad who can register to vote, by removing the current time limit of 15 years since they were last registered to vote in the UK. As more voters will be affected by the issues identified with postal voting, it will be even more important to give overseas electors ways of voting that mean they can be confident their votes will be counted at future UK Parliamentary elections.

The timing of the election brought challenges for Returning Officers

The timing of the 2019 election was unusual. It was the first general election to be held in December since 1923, and polling day was less than two weeks before Christmas. This brought specific challenges for ROs and their teams.

Polling station image

Polling station sign

Challenges of timing

The election process also began while the scheduled annual electoral registration canvass was still being carried out across Great Britain. Electoral administration teams had to complete their legal responsibilities to process canvass forms returned from households and invite new residents to register to vote, at the same time as setting up the administration of the election. Feedback that we received from EROs, ROs or s from across the UK highlighted some common challenges that they faced: Staff working in elections teams faced significant pressure and worked long hours to complete the annual canvass and deliver the election at the same time Some electoral management software systems had problems running election processes alongside the annual canvass ROs found it harder to recruit temporary staff, including polling station and counting staff, for an election held just before Christmas Some venues that ROs normally use for polling

stations or for the count were already booked for seasonal events and were not available for this election. Larger volumes of post during the Christmas period saw reported delays in issuing and returning postal votes in some areas. More than a third (38%) of those who responded to our survey said that they or their teams had struggled with the demands of the role and the extra workload from unplanned electoral events in 2019. The early general election in December followed the May 2019 European Parliament elections across the UK which had remained scheduled in law, but had not been expected to take place. Scheduled local government elections also took place in many parts of England and across Northern Ireland in May. Feedback from an electoral administrator: The pressure put on electoral administrators is untenable. This was our third all-out election in a year, two of which were unscheduled. Our mental health is fragile at best. We are exhausted and completely fed up. Feedback from an Errors: We saw evidence of printing errors on poll cards or postal ballot packs that caused confusion for electors in a small number of constituencies. Some ROs explained that they thought that the risk of printing errors was higher at this election because of the tight deadlines for checking proofs, combined with pressure on printer availability and capacity. In Waltham Forest, postal ballot packs were not initially sent to 1,470 postal voters because a data file was not sent to the printers. As soon as the problem was identified the postal votes were issued. Candidates and agents were told about this and information was put on the council's website. However, because some postal voters got their postal vote very close to polling day, they might not have been able to fill it in and send it back in time for it to be counted. The RO did not fully meet our performance standards. These competing pressures and errors also speak to the challenges of delivering elections within an outdated and increasingly complex electoral law framework. We have already seen similar problems at elections held at other times of the year, particularly when different elections are combined and held on the same day. Feedback from an electoral administrator: Very difficult to follow. Disparate and some of later legislation contradicts earlier legislation and not in-keeping with current times and technology. Feedback from an Modernising electoral law: The Law Commissions of England, Wales and Scotland have now published the final report of their detailed review of electoral law. They have made recommendations to simplify and modernise the law that would help improve how elections are run. The UK's governments need to commit resources and time to reform electoral law, building on these comprehensive and well-supported recommendations. Voters continue to have positive views about how the election was run. After each election we carry out research with the public to find out what they thought about taking part in the election. Our voter research: Our research found that people were very satisfied with the process of registering to vote and voting at the 2019 UK general election: 78% of people were satisfied with the process of registering to vote, 93% of people who voted at the election were satisfied with the process of voting. More research from voters: People also thought they had enough information about the election: 80% of people said that they knew a lot, or a fair amount, about the election, 81% of people said they found it easy to access information on what the election was for, 88% of people said it was easy to get both information on how to register to vote, and how to cast their vote. These are similar to positive levels of satisfaction that we have found at other recent UK-wide elections or referendums. More than two in three people (69% of voters and non-voters) said they were either very or fairly confident the election was well-run (12% said they didn't know). This was similar to the level we found at the 2010 UK general election, but generally lower compared with other UK-wide elections or referendums in recent years, and ten

percentage points lower than the 2017 result (where 79% were confident). However, our 2019 survey cannot tell us whether public confidence is returning to levels seen in the past or the start of a more significant decline. A significant minority of people (18%) said that they were not confident the election was well-run. We asked these people to select reasons why they were not confident the election was well-run. The most common reasons related to concerns about campaigning or the media. Some people also selected concerns that related to the way the registration or voting process worked: 28% of those who were not confident the election was well-run said they thought that some people did not have the opportunity to vote or had the opportunity taken away 22% said they were not confident because the election was held at short notice 17% said they were not confident because they thought some people had difficulties registering to vote More than 7 out of 10 of all voters and non-voters (72%) said that they thought voting in general is safe from fraud and abuse. A very small proportion of people said they had direct or second-hand experience of electoral fraud at the election: 2% said that they knew someone who had committed electoral fraud. 1% said that they personally saw someone vote when they were not allowed to. Despite these low percentages, more than a third of people (38%) said they thought that some fraud had taken place at the election. This is consistent with evidence about allegations of electoral fraud at the election. Data from police forces shows that they recorded 156 cases of alleged electoral fraud relating to the election. Of these cases, just over half required no further action following initial inquiries by the police, and one sixth were locally resolved. One third of the reported cases remain under investigation. What next? What next? Take an in depth look at campaigning at this election Or, go back and read our overview 1. Our power to set and monitor performance standards for electoral services does not apply in Northern Ireland. We continue to be of the view that our performance standards framework should be extended to Northern Ireland and will further engage with the Chief Electoral Officer and the Northern Ireland Office (NIO) to progress this. ■

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