



## BRIEFING PAPER

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# Armed forces voting

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## Summary

The Armed Forces can register to vote as ordinary electors, as overseas voters, or as service voters. There has been concern about the under-registration of the Armed Forces, especially those serving overseas, and the difficulties they face in participating in the electoral process more generally.

The *Electoral Administration Act 2006* made provision for the extension of the duration of a service declaration to five years. Surveys of Service personnel carried out between 2005 and 2010 showed fluctuations in the numbers of personnel who were registered to vote. Campaigns to promote awareness of the process of registration and relevant deadlines have been run by the Electoral Commission and the Ministry of Defence since 2007.

The results of the Armed Forces Continuous Attitude Survey (AFCAS) 2020 indicated that 86% of respondents were registered to vote. This figure grew from 67% in 2012 to 80% in 2016. The overall figure has remained steady since 2017. Overall the increase since the question was introduced in 2012 the increase has been driven by the increase in non-officer ranks registering to vote.

Officers continue to have a much higher proportion of registered voters (96%). This figure has been steady since 2016. The figure had been steady at 89% from 2012-2015. The proportion of Other Ranks that are registered to vote had increased from 63% in 2012 to 81% in 2017, remaining at 82% in 2020. The increase in registration levels overall was helped by the 2016 referendum and the 2017 General Election but also steps taken by the MOD, in conjunction with the Electoral Commission to inform Service personnel of registration arrangements.

The *Electoral Registration and Administration Act 2013* made provision to change the system for voter registration in the UK. Registration no longer occurs by household. Under Individual Electoral Registration (IER) each individual is responsible for their own registration. Registration can now be completed online. The online process is thought to have facilitated electoral registration for Service personnel posted abroad.

There has also been concern that postal ballots would often not reach those serving abroad in time for them to complete and return the papers before polling day. The 2013 Act also addressed this issue by extending the timetable for Parliamentary elections and by-elections, thereby creating more time for postal ballots to be sent out and returned in time to be counted at elections.

This Note also gives a brief history of how the system of voting by members of the Armed Forces emerged, particularly during the periods directly after each World War.

# 1. Registration of the armed forces

Personnel of the armed forces who are eligible to vote, and their spouses or civil partners, can register to vote in three ways:

- Personnel based in the UK can choose to register at their permanent home address;
- Personnel based overseas can choose to register as overseas voters;
- Personnel involved in operations or with no long-term base can choose to register as service voters by completing a service declaration that is currently valid for five years.

Registration can take place online, using date of birth and National Insurance numbers as identifiers.

Armed forces voters can register to vote using the Government's online registration portal, either as an [ordinary or overseas voter](#), or using the [armed forces section](#) of the portal.

The Government noted that enabling electoral registration online was "making it more accessible, especially for those registering from outside the UK, such as service personnel and other overseas electors."<sup>1</sup>

## 1.1 Service voter registration campaigns

The Electoral Commission and the Ministry of Defence have regularly carried out service voter registration campaigns.

It is MOD policy to encourage personnel, their spouses or civil partners to register so that they can vote in all relevant elections. Unit Registration Officers (UROs) have been appointed in all units to provide information about electoral registration.<sup>2</sup>

An Electoral Commission briefing on public awareness activities ahead of the 2015 General Election gave details of the 'service voters campaign':

We are working with the Ministry of Defence to target service voters as we have in previous years. Every year the MOD, with the support of the Electoral Commission, launches an information campaign to encourage service personnel to register to vote, to keep their registration details up to date and to generally improve awareness of the need to register and the options which are available.

The campaign ahead of May's elections will launch in February and will include adverts and editorial coverage in several forces magazines: Soldier, RAF News, Navy News, Homeport, Envoy, Army and You and Mascot.

We will also carry out media relations work to encourage other print and broadcast media with armed forces audiences to carry our registration message.

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<sup>1</sup> HL Deb 9 December 2013 cGC109

<sup>2</sup> Electoral Commission, [Armed forces](#)

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As part of the campaign, for the first time, the MoD will also include a voter registration message in wage slips and – as in previous years – have agreed to ask Unit Registration Officers (UROs) to hold a Service Registration Day during February/March. The Commission will provide a pack of material including voter registration posters, booklets with information about the change to IER and registration forms, for UROs to use on the day in support of this. These packs are available to order direct from the Electoral Commission.<sup>3</sup>

The Coalition Government commented on the campaign:

While around 85% of the general population are on the electoral roll, the lower ranks of the Army and Royal Marines are reported as 60% and 61% respectively.

Elsewhere, the Navy and RAF lower ranks reported rates of 75% and 74% respectively.

In order to increase electoral registration, the Government has made £9.8m available, of which the Cabinet Office has allocated £500,000 to the Armed Forces to encourage personnel to register in time for the deadline of 20 April 2015.<sup>4</sup>

Since then, service voter registration has risen. In 2017, the Government noted in a Parliamentary question:

The MOD works closely with the Electoral Commission to promote awareness among its people of the importance of registering to vote and of the options for doing so. Voter registration campaigns are run yearly within the MOD and the Department has seen a steady rise in the number of Armed Forces personnel who have declared they have registered.<sup>5</sup>

Since then, service voter registration has risen with recent Regular Armed Forces Continuous Attitude Surveys suggesting overall about 85% of service personnel are registered (see Section 4).

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<sup>3</sup> 'Briefing: Electoral Commission public awareness plans May 2015', *The Electoral Commission*, 2 December 2014

<sup>4</sup> 'Campaign launched to boost Armed Forces' voter registration', GOV.UK, 5 February 2015

<sup>5</sup> PQ HL632 19 July 2017

## 2. Voting procedures for the armed forces

Once registered, Service personnel can vote in three ways:

- In person (by voting at a polling station)
- By proxy (by appointing a proxy who can vote on their behalf, either at the polling station or by post)
- By postal vote (by requesting and returning a postal ballot paper)

Prior to the *Representation of the People Act 2000*, Service voters had to vote by proxy if they were overseas. The 2000 Act made provision for postal votes to be sent abroad.

There was often insufficient time for postal ballots to be sent out to forces serving abroad and for these to be returned by polling day, so voting by proxy was a safer option. The Government explained why in an answer to a PQ asked by Lord Roberts of Llandudno on 10 November 2009:

**Lord Roberts of Llandudno:** To ask Her Majesty's Government whether they propose to ensure that military personnel overseas who are registered for postal voting receive their ballots in sufficient time for them to be returned to be included in constituency counts.

**The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State, Ministry of Justice (Lord Bach):** Postal votes cannot be issued until the close of nominations, which for a UK parliamentary election means 11 working days before the poll. For this reason the Electoral Commission recommends proxy voting as the best way to ensure service personnel can cast their ballot, and the Commission recently issued guidance to all military personnel to encourage their participation in this way. However, it is important that service personnel have the opportunity to participate in the democratic process, and my right honourable friend Michael Wills MP has written to all MPs inviting them to a meeting to discuss ways in which the registration and voting arrangements for service personnel can be improved.<sup>6</sup>

### 2.1 2010 General Election

An article in the *Times Online* in March 2010 drew attention to the problems of postal votes for armed forces serving overseas and noted that the 2010 General Election (which had not been called when the article was published) would probably coincide with a changeover of troops in Helmand province in Afghanistan, thus further complicating the arrangements for postal voting for the troops there.

In response to a PQ on 6 April 2010, the then Minister for International Defence and Security (Baroness Taylor of Bolton) stated that the Government had made arrangements, subject to operational requirements, to use aircraft to expedite the delivery and return of ballot papers for service personnel in Afghanistan. She also said the Government had encouraged personnel to vote by proxy, and noted

<sup>6</sup> HL Deb 10 November 2009 c137WA

that the Electoral Commission had designed a bespoke registration form for the “people operating in those difficult circumstances”. Moreover, the new forces arriving in Afghanistan were to receive a “deployment package” including information about voting and registration.<sup>7</sup>

The closure of UK airspace during the 2010 General Election campaign due to volcanic ash complicated the voting process. The Electoral Commission accepted applications for rolling registration and absent votes by fax or scanned into an email, and allowed a change to proxy voting until 5pm on 20 April 2010.<sup>8</sup>

### 2.2 2011 referendum on the voting system

The referendum on the introduction of the Alternative Vote electoral system was held on 5 May 2011. In a House of Lords debate on 2 March 2011, concerns were raised about the low level of voting among armed forces serving abroad. The then Minister, Ministry of Justice, Lord McNally, acknowledged that the “disengagement of the military is not healthy”.<sup>9</sup> He said the Government was looking at the length of the election timetable ‘with a sense of urgency’ and that although there was not a great deal of enthusiasm for it at present, there was a case for a study of electronic voting in the UK; he also said:

It is important that we try to encourage our service personnel to vote. The Government are making every effort to encourage participation in the vote on 5 May, not only in Afghanistan but in other British service areas where the British Forces Post Office will make voting in military locations a priority.

As I said, the Government are introducing an initiative for voting on 5 May. The deadline for new postal vote applications and changes to existing votes for the referendum is 5 pm on 14 April. The chief counting officer for the referendum has directed electoral administrators to prioritise postal votes going overseas, to ensure that they are sent out as soon as possible after the deadline for new postal vote applications has passed, with the first issue of postal votes to take place not later than 18 April. That issue will include postal votes for members of the Armed Forces.<sup>10</sup>

Lord McNally concluded by saying that the issues raised in the debate were substantial and there should be a ‘really radical look at voting for our overseas residents and, very importantly, for our military’ early in this Parliament.<sup>11</sup>

On 18 May 2011, following the referendum, the then Minister, Cabinet Office, Mark Harper, replied to a PQ about voting by Service personnel in the 2010 and 2011 polls:

Under targeted initiatives implemented for service personnel who were in Afghanistan during the May 2010 and 2011 polls, service

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<sup>7</sup> HL Deb 6 April 2010 c 1360-62

<sup>8</sup> ‘Receiving registration and absent vote applications and other parts of the electoral process which may be affected by the closure of UK airspace’, The Electoral Commission, EC15/2010

<sup>9</sup> HL Deb 2 March 2011 c1131

<sup>10</sup> HL Deb 2 March 2011 c1133

<sup>11</sup> HL Deb 2 March 2011 c1133

voters were able to register for a proxy or postal vote and specific processes were put in place to support their participation.

I understand that for the 2010 UK parliamentary election, 217 postal votes were successfully returned and distributed out to returning officers. In addition to this 294 applications to vote by proxy were received and forwarded to electoral registration officers. The corresponding figures for the referendum on the voting system in 2011 were 40 postal votes and 281 proxies. The use of proxies in such circumstances is recommended by both the Electoral Commission and MoD.

However, it is not possible to know the overall totals of service personnel registered for postal or proxy votes whilst based in Afghanistan as they could have signed up outside the initiative—either as a service voter or as an 'ordinary' elector.<sup>12</sup>

## 2.3 Changes to the Parliamentary election timetable

The lengthening of the election timetable in 2013 created more time for postal ballots to be sent out and returned before polling day.

Statutory electoral timetables for both general and by-elections are laid down in the *Parliamentary Elections Rules* in Schedule 1 of the *Representation of the People Act 1983*. Section 14 of the *Electoral Registration and Administration Act 2013* amended Section 3 of the *Fixed-term Parliaments Act 2011* to provide for a 25 working day general election timetable, not including the day of issuing of writs and summoning of a new Parliament. This corresponds to the timetable for local elections.

The provisions to increase the length of the Parliamentary general election were brought into force on 6 April 2014 by article 3 of the [Electoral Registration and Administration Act 2013 \(Commencement No 5 and Transitory Provisions\) Order 2014](#).

On 6 January 2015, Lord Roberts of Llandudno asked what the Government was doing to encourage service personnel to vote in the 2015 General Election. The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State (Ministry of Defence) Lord Astor of Hever mentioned the joint Electoral Commission and MoD's information campaigns and said:

In the run up to the general election the British Forces Post Office will look to identify, extract and prioritise postal ballot papers on their way to and from locations overseas.<sup>13</sup>

A PQ on 16 March 2015 asked what the Government had done to ensure that Armed Forces personnel posted overseas would be able to vote in the General Election. Lord Wallace of Saltaire answered on 25 March 2015:

The Government has extended the length of the electoral timetable for UK Parliamentary elections from 17 working days to 25 working days and removed the restriction on issuing postal votes prior to the eleventh working day before the day of the poll. Combined, these steps will allow Armed Forces personnel posted

<sup>12</sup> [HC Deb 18 May 2011 c235W](#)

<sup>13</sup> [HC Deb 13 January 2015, cWA237](#)

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overseas more time to receive, complete and return their postal ballot packs in time for their vote to be counted.

In addition, the Government recently announced funding of an additional £9.8 million to maximise electoral registration. A proportion of this funding has been allocated to encouraging Armed Forces personnel to register to vote. The Government is also providing pre-paid envelopes for Armed Forces personnel based overseas to return their postal votes.<sup>14</sup>

Although the timetable has been extended concerns continue to be expressed for ballots that need to be sent abroad, particularly overseas voters' postal ballots. The Electoral Commission's report on the 2019 General Election noted that:

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.<sup>15</sup>

For those service personnel voting as service voters, the Government said:

Members of the armed forces serving abroad, or away from home in the UK, can vote with a postal vote or by proxy or in person if they are in their constituency on polling day. We work with the British Forces Post Office to ensure that mail specifically for service personnel, sent to forces post office addresses, is delivered as quickly as possible. We also work Royal Mail on overseas deliveries, through a specific provision to expedite dispatch of mail to overseas addresses.

We will continue to work with these stakeholders and others to support the voting process for overseas electors, including armed forces serving abroad.<sup>16</sup>

The Electoral Commission advice to overseas and service voters is that:

...it may be better to appoint a proxy to vote on your behalf as there may not be enough time for your postal vote to reach you and be sent back before voting closes.<sup>17</sup>

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<sup>14</sup> [Written question HL5763](#), 25 March 2015

<sup>15</sup> Electoral Commission, *In depth: delivering the 2019 UK Parliamentary general election*

<sup>16</sup> [WPO 9158 \[General Elections: Armed Forces\]](#), 5 February 2020

<sup>17</sup> Electoral Commission, [Armed forces](#)

## 3. A brief history of armed forces voting

### 3.1 The Representation of the People Act 1918

“War, so often the midwife of reform, led to the most comprehensive Representation of the People Act that had yet been seen.”<sup>18</sup>

The changes incorporated in the *Representation of the People Bill 1917-18* included universal suffrage for men on the basis of residence; up to that point it had been linked directly or indirectly to the payment of rates. The vote was given to graduates of provincial universities, and women over thirty were enfranchised if they were local government electors or the wives of local government electors. Owners and tenants were included in the local franchise, but the vote was not extended to all residents. David Butler explains the provisions enabling servicemen to vote after World War I in his book *The Electoral System in Britain Since 1918*:

Votes were given to servicemen on easier terms, as far as residence was concerned. Those who had served in the war were entitled to vote at the age of nineteen. Conscientious Objectors, on the other hand, were disenfranchised for five years.<sup>19</sup>

For the first time there were arrangements made to deal with the problem of the absent voter; service men and others unable to vote in person at a poll were put on the absent voters list:

For the immediate post war period servicemen overseas were to be entitled to vote by post, and permanent arrangements were made for proxy voting by servicemen.<sup>20</sup>

Butler describes the end of the special arrangements for counting the service vote:

In 1920 after some agitation, the Government decided to abandon the postal voting provisions laid down in the Act of 1918. The special provisions delaying the count for eight days to allow for the return of ballots from servicemen overseas had been necessary enough at the end of the war, but, in subsequent by-elections, there had been a steadily diminishing number of postal votes, and annoyance at the delay in announcing the result had grown.<sup>21</sup>

The *Representation of the People (No2) Act 1920* provided that postal voting should be limited to the United Kingdom; servicemen abroad could appoint proxies who would be able to vote for them on their behalf.

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<sup>18</sup> *The Electoral System in Britain Since 1918* by David Butler, O.U.P, 1963, p 7

<sup>19</sup> *ibid*, p 8

<sup>20</sup> *ibid*, p9

<sup>21</sup> *ibid*, p49

## 3.2 The Representation of the People Act 1948

The *Representation of the People Act 1945* had again made temporary provision for postal voting by service voters. Strenuous efforts were made by the Government to get all servicemen to complete their claim forms to be included on the service register, and it was announced that 90 percent had done so.<sup>22</sup> This appears to have been an exaggeration, as there were apparently 4,682,000 men in the forces on 30th June 1945<sup>23</sup> and hardly more than 1 million can have been under twenty one, but only 2,895,000 were on the service register. Of those on the service register, only 1,701,000 succeeded in recording their votes (59 per cent). Only half of those who had appointed proxies had votes recorded on their behalf and a quarter of those who applied for postal ballots were found not to be on the service register.<sup>24</sup>

The timetable of the 1945 General Election was altered because of the need to allow time for the service register to be compiled and for the service ballots to be returned. The election was announced on 27 May, but polling day was not until 5 July and counting of the votes did not take place until 26 July. Butler commented that "it was thus the most protracted election since the institution of a single nationwide polling day."

Preparations for a comprehensive *Representation of the People Act* were made in December 1946. The arrangements for electoral registration in peace conditions were considered by a Home Office committee that had been set up a year earlier. Since members of the forces would have to make a claim submitting the name of their proxy, it was thought that there was little point in providing automatic registration but that everything should be done to help servicemen and seamen to get onto the register.

No recommendation was made about postal voting for servicemen overseas but if there was to be time for ballots to be sent out and returned, the consequent delays in conducting the election were highlighted by the committee. It concluded that servicemen in the United Kingdom should be allowed to vote by post or proxy as before.

The subsequent *Representation of the People Act 1948* granted postal voting facilities to both service personnel and to certain groups of civilians, including those who were physically incapacitated, those unable to vote without making a journey by sea or air or because of the nature of their occupation, and those who were no longer residing at their qualifying address. All had to provide an address in the UK to which ballot papers could be sent. Service personnel could, alternatively, vote by proxy if they were likely to be at sea or abroad on polling day.

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<sup>22</sup> HC Deb 410,c,398 cited in *The Electoral System in Britain Since 1918* by David Butler, O.U.P, 1963, p 100

<sup>23</sup> As cited by Butler in the work above, p 101

<sup>24</sup> *ibid*, p101

### 3.3 The Representation of the People Act 2000

Before 2001 all members of HM Forces had to register as service voters. This registration remained effective until the elector made a new declaration or left the Forces. The *Representation of the People Act 2000* ended this arrangement.<sup>25</sup>

The Service Indices were closed in February 2002 which meant that there was no longer a central body holding the details of all registered service voters. The *Representation of the People Act 2000* allowed for postal voting on demand and Service voters serving abroad could now choose whether to vote by post or by proxy. Previously they had to vote by proxy if they were overseas as there was no provision for postal votes to be sent abroad.

### 3.4 Low levels of registration

MPs raised concerns about the low level of registration among armed forces following the changes in the law.<sup>26</sup> In an adjournment debate in Westminster Hall on 8 December 2004, Ivor Caplin, the then Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Defence, noted that “the changes were considered likely to encourage more service personnel to use their votes and to register with an up-to-date address”, and that measures were being put in place to inform service personnel of the options they had in registering to vote.<sup>27</sup>

Prior to the 2005 General Election, it was reported in the press that many service personnel had been unaware that they had to register to vote so that they were not on the register and could not vote in the election.<sup>28</sup>

### 3.5 Joint inquiry of the Constitutional Affairs and ODPM Select Committees into electoral registration

The joint inquiry of the Constitutional Affairs and Office of the Deputy Prime Minister (ODPM) Housing, Planning, Local Government and the Regions Select Committees into electoral registration acknowledged the growing concern about the fall in the numbers of armed forces personnel registering to vote.<sup>29</sup> The Committees’ report, published in March 2005, stressed that it was essential that the Ministry of Defence (MoD) should play an active role in encouraging service personnel to register and recommended that the MoD ‘adopt a policy of issuing

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<sup>25</sup> The *Representation of the People Act 2000*

<sup>26</sup> HC Deb 10 January 2005 c13, HC Deb 8 December 2004 cc117-118WH and c120WH

<sup>27</sup> *ibid*, cc121, 124WH

<sup>28</sup> ‘Most soldiers will not be able to vote’, *Daily Telegraph*, 15 April 2005

<sup>29</sup> *Electoral registration*. First joint report of the Constitutional Affairs and the ODPM: Housing, Planning, Local Government and the Regions Committees 2004-05. HC 243, 2004-05, para 83.

annual individual registration forms to each service person to encourage them to register.<sup>30</sup>

### 3.6 'Silence in the Ranks': paper published by the Army Rumour Service website

In September 2005, the 'Army Rumour Service' website published a paper about the problem of under-registration amongst the armed forces and submitted it to the Electoral Commission, the Ministry of Defence and the then Department for Constitutional Affairs.<sup>31</sup>

*Silence in the ranks: an analysis of factors inhibiting electoral participation by HM Forces personnel and their families in the General Election of May 2005, with recommendations on the way forward* drew attention to the lack of accurate information available to the armed forces about how they could register to vote in time to participate in the General Election and had revealed that "the Electoral Commission leaflets which were intended to be circulated in early February 2005 did not actually reach any service personnel until the week beginning 4 March 2005. Many personnel did not see it – if at all – until after the registration deadline on 11 March."<sup>32</sup> The Army Rumour Service also found that some local authority websites contained out of date information or no specific information for service voters and that the Ministry of Defence website did not have adequate information about registration and voting options for members of the services and their spouses.

The Army Rumour Service monitored problems experienced by armed forces voters at the General Election; some voters were not able to vote because of the late arrival of ballot papers which made returning them in time impossible. Three main factors were identified which led to the late arrival of postal ballot papers:

- (1) The UK's tight electoral timetable, which meant that no postal ballots could be despatched until 15 days before polling day;
- (2) Late despatch of postal ballots in some council areas, including those for voters overseas or elsewhere in the UK; and
- (3) Postal delays, especially in the BFPO mail system.<sup>33</sup>

The report made a number of recommendations about improving the system of postal voting and supported the then Department for Constitutional Affairs' proposal to make the deadline for postal vote applications 11 days before polling day rather than six, but also suggested that a controlled trial of electronic voting for service voters should be considered.<sup>34</sup> The report also suggested that there should be a survey of electoral registration, experiences and perceptions amongst service personnel and that an information leaflet for service voters

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<sup>30</sup> *ibid*, para 84

<sup>31</sup> Available at the [British Armed Forces Federation website](#)

<sup>32</sup> *ibid*, 3.1

<sup>33</sup> *ibid*, 4.2.2

<sup>34</sup> *ibid*, 4.4

should be distributed to every member of the armed forces at the time of the next annual canvass in the autumn of 2005.<sup>35</sup>

The *Times* reported on 21 September 2005 that Electoral Commission information leaflets, specifying the need to register, were to be sent out to service personnel and that all units would have to appoint an officer responsible for service voting.<sup>36</sup> On 23 September 2005 the Electoral Commission published a leaflet, *Register to vote: voting information for members of Her Majesty's Armed Forces and their families*.

### 3.7 The Electoral Administration Act 2006

The *Electoral Administration Bill 2005-06* was introduced in the Commons by Harriet Harman, then Minister of State for Constitutional Affairs on 11 October 2005. The Bill did not initially include provisions relating to service voters.

During the second reading debate in the House of Commons Andrew Tyrie MP (Conservative) asked:

What estimate have the Government made of the number of service voters who were unable to vote because they did not make it on to the register at the last election? Could the right hon. and learned Lady also explain why, despite the fact that vigorous representations were made a full nine months before the general election, we still went into the election with those who are trying to bring democracy to Iraq unable even to vote in their own country?<sup>37</sup>

A number was not given by the Government but Harman said that the Department for Constitutional Affairs, the Electoral Commission, the MoD and the Armed Services were holding meetings to find a solution to the problems faced by service voters.

It was not until 13 February 2006, during the second reading of the Bill in the House of Lords, that provisions for service voters were debated. At third reading in the Lords, which took place on 7 June 2006, a Government amendment was brought forward which included a provision to extend the duration of a registration made by a service declaration to up to five years instead of one year.

When the Commons considered the Lords amendments on 13 June 2006, the then Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for the Department of Constitutional Affairs, Bridget Prentice, explained the provisions in this amendment by noting that it would 'make the registration process more convenient for service personnel, particularly personnel serving overseas'.<sup>38</sup> She also outlined how the MoD would cooperate with Electoral Registration Officers to keep Service voters informed of relevant information.<sup>39</sup> The then Shadow Secretary of State for Constitutional Affairs, Oliver Heald, thought the amendment did not go far enough in committing the MoD to effect the registration of

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<sup>35</sup> *ibid*, Annex A – Consolidated list of recommendations

<sup>36</sup> 'Voting aid for troops overseas', *Times*, 21 September 2005

<sup>37</sup> HC Deb 25 October 2005 c196

<sup>38</sup> HC Deb 13 June 2006 c711

<sup>39</sup> HC Deb 13 June 2006 c718

service personnel, but the Government amendment was agreed to on a division.<sup>40</sup>

### 3.8 Implementation of the changes made by the Electoral Administration Act 2006

#### **The Service Voters' Registration Period Orders 2006 and 2010**

The period of time that members of the armed forces (and their spouses or civil partners) who have made a service declaration are registered was extended first to three years, and later to five years.

The Government introduced the *Service Voters' Registration Period Order 2006* to extend the registration period from 12 months to 3 years. The order came into force on 1 January 2007. The Electoral Commission welcomed the change but noted that further measures were necessary to improve levels of voter registration among service personnel.<sup>41</sup>

During the passage of the *Political Parties and Elections Act 2009* in the House of Lords an amendment was tabled which, if it had been accepted, would have made the Service declaration indefinite. Lord Bates (Conservative) moved the amendment in Grand Committee and argued that this would address the under-registration of armed services personnel.<sup>42</sup> The Minister, Lord Bach, said that the MoD was not in favour of the amendment and that the three year period struck the right balance between encouraging service personnel to register and maintaining an accurate register. However, by report stage the Government had reconsidered the issue and Lord Bach announced that the period of a service declaration would be extended from three years to five.<sup>43</sup>

After consultation with the Electoral Commission, the Government introduced the *Service Voters' Registration Period Order 2010*, which extended the validity period for service voters' declarations from 3 to 5 years. The Order was approved by both Houses of Parliament before the General Election in 2010.<sup>44</sup>

The Order came into force on 19 March 2010. The Electoral Commission issued a Circular about the Order that explained that armed forces personnel (and their spouses or civil partners) who register through a service declaration would now be registered for a period of five years.<sup>45</sup>

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<sup>40</sup> HC Deb 13 June 2006 c718

<sup>41</sup> Briefing on Regulations applying measures in the Electoral Administration Act 2006, Electoral Commission, 2006

<sup>42</sup> HL Deb 13 May 2009 c441GC

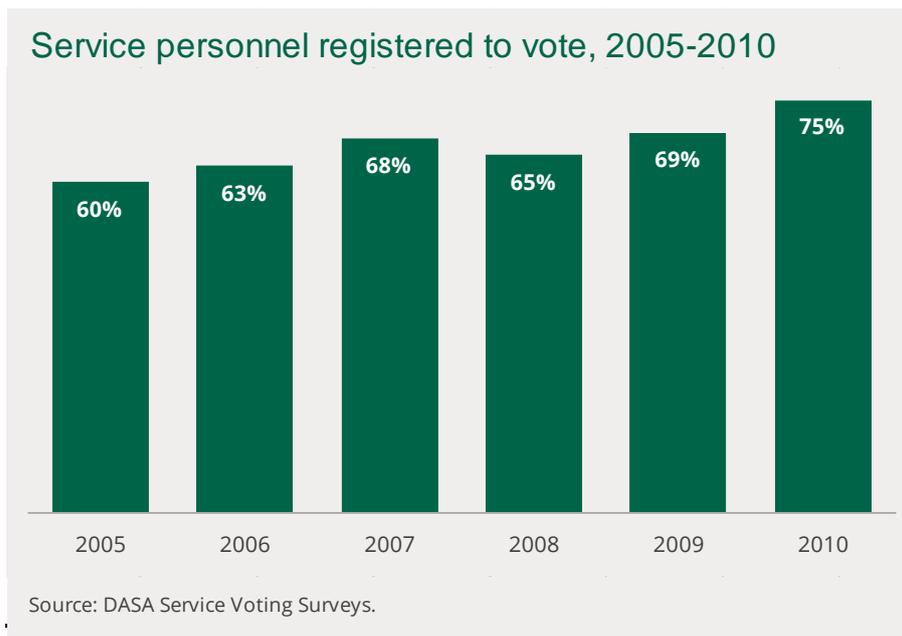
<sup>43</sup> HL Deb 17 June 2009 c1146

<sup>44</sup> The [Order](#) and [Explanatory Memorandum](#) are available online

<sup>45</sup> [Service voter declaration extension and amendments to published guidance](#), The Electoral Commission, EC09/2010

## 4. How many personnel are registered?

The Defence Analytical Services Agency (which was incorporated into the MoD in 2008) carried out yearly *Service Voting Surveys* that were placed in the Library of the House of Commons.<sup>46</sup> The surveys measured the proportion of Service personnel registered to vote:



These numbers were lower for those serving abroad. The majority of registered service personnel are registered as ordinary voters.

A Parliamentary Question (PQ) in July 2009 highlighted the difficulty of comparing levels of registration among service voters with those among ordinary voters:

**Mr. Maude:** To ask the Secretary of State for Justice what estimate he has made of the proportion of (a) armed forces personnel and (b) members of the public who are registered to vote.

**Mr. Wills:** No assessment has been made of the proportion of (a) armed forces personnel and (b) members of the public who are registered to vote. This is because the Office for National Statistics (ONS) does not have information on the proportion of the public who are registered to vote, as not everyone who is usually resident is entitled to vote. The total number of full-time armed forces personnel at 1 May 2009 was 194,280.

ONS figures reveal that as of 1 December 2008 the number of armed forces personnel who registered by way of a service declaration was 21,928. Not all armed forces electors, however, register as service voters. They may either register as an ordinary

<sup>46</sup> HC Deb 30 October 2008 c1227W and HC Deb 7 July 2008 c1159W; HC Deb 18 May 2011 c234W; HC Deb 13 September 2011 c40WS;

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elector, an overseas elector or a service elector. The Ministry of Defence Service Voting Survey 2008 indicates that 75 per cent of respondents were registered as ordinary voters.

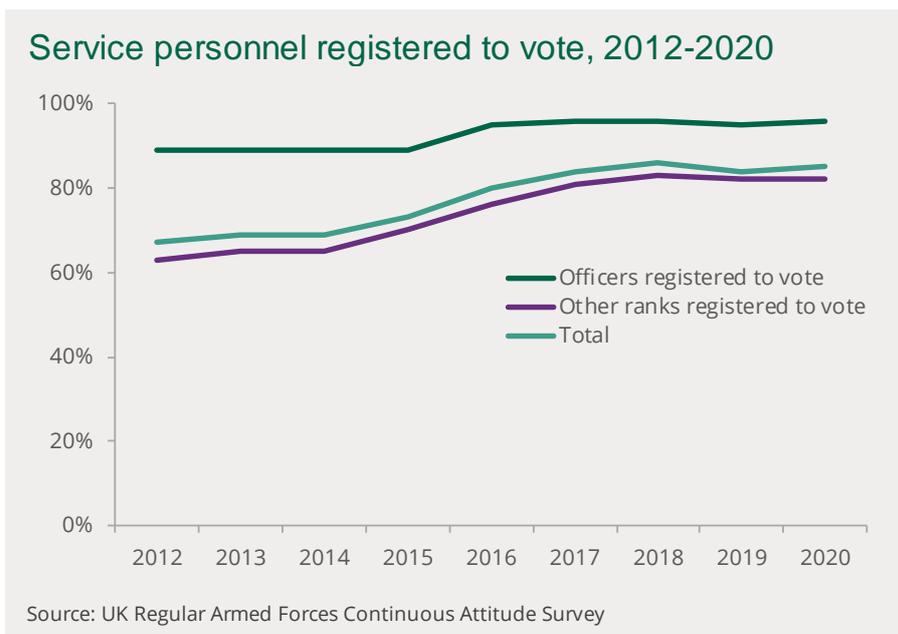
The Government are keen to support armed forces personnel in registering to vote. In order to increase service registration rates, the Government have recently announced that we will increase the service voter declaration period from three years to five years, which we hope will encourage more service personnel to register. We aim to bring forward this change in secondary legislation as soon as possible.<sup>47</sup>

The [UK Regular Armed Forces Continuous Attitude Survey](#) now regularly asks whether Service personnel are registered to vote. The proportion registered to vote has grown gradually since 2012, when the question was first asked. The number of personnel has grown from two thirds of personal in 2012 to 85% in 2020.

This has been driven mainly by improved registration rates in non-officer ranks. The proportion of Other Ranks was 63% in 2012. Since 2017 the level has been over 80%, with 82% saying they were registered in 2019 and 2020. The army has consistently been the service with lowest rate of non-officer ranks saying they were registered to vote, five or six points below the average across the all the services.

Officers continue to have a much higher proportion of registered voters (96%) with little differences between the services. This figure has been steady since 2016. The figure had been steady at 89% from 2012-2015.

The increase in registration levels overall was helped by the 2016 referendum and the 2017 General Election but also steps taken by the MOD, in conjunction with the Electoral Commission to inform Service personnel of registration arrangements.



The Government's democratic engagement plan, *Every Voice Matters*, published in December 2017, estimated that about 150,000 Service personnel and 54,000 civilian personnel were eligible to register as service voters.

*Every Voice Matters* acknowledged that Service voters are a unique group in electoral registration terms and were one of the groups that the engagement plan was aiming to address barriers. It stated:

Armed forces are a unique group in the electoral registration landscape: the registration challenges presented by high levels of mobility have been met with a determined and ground breaking response by the MOD and Armed Forces. To ensure that service personnel's voices are heard they are equipped with a number of ways to have their say in the democratic process.

Members of the Armed Forces, Ministry of Defence staff, their spouses and children frequently move around between posts both in the UK and abroad. They can apply to register to vote easily as a service elector, which allows them to use a fixed address even if they lived temporarily elsewhere. Alternatively they can choose to register as ordinary or overseas elector, if that is more suitable for their life situation.

Though the system is easy for citizens to use, the Cabinet Office has been mapping out administrative challenges that Electoral Registration Officers face when registering service personnel to vote due to their moving life style. We will co-operate with the Electoral Commission, Ministry of Defence and those EROs, who have high numbers of military personnel in their area, to identify best ways of partnering and improving practice. We are also considering communications and cooperation with key partner institutions to raise awareness of electoral registration.<sup>48</sup>

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<sup>48</sup> Cabinet Office, *Every Voice Matters: building a democracy that works for everyone*, December 2017, p46-7

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