

# Survey of UK citizens living overseas

## Summary of findings – September 2016

### 1. Background and methodology

This survey of UK citizens living overseas was conducted as part of the Commission's work to engage and encourage them to register to vote ahead of the referendum on the UK's membership of the European Union. The findings of this survey provided insights that were used to inform public awareness activity in the run up to the referendum.

The survey was conducted online via SurveyMonkey and distributed on the expat website, AngloINFO. The survey was aimed at gaining a top level understanding of UK citizens living overseas' knowledge of and attitude towards their voting rights. It was not designed to be, and is not, representative of this group overall.

UK citizens who live overseas are a particularly challenging audience to reach. The dispersed nature of and lack of data on UK citizens living overseas mean it is extremely challenging to conduct a study that would be reliably representative of this group as a whole. Consequently, the results presented below should be treated as indicative only.

The survey was in field between March 16 and April 4 2016. It was sent out to over 200,000 email addresses. Once respondents who did not provide answers to key questions were removed, the total number of surveys received totalled to **4,707**.

AngloINFO's British expat subscribers are based in Europe and as a consequence the majority of responses came from European countries, specifically France, Spain, Cyprus and Portugal (a more detailed breakdown of the country of residence of respondents can be found in Appendix A).

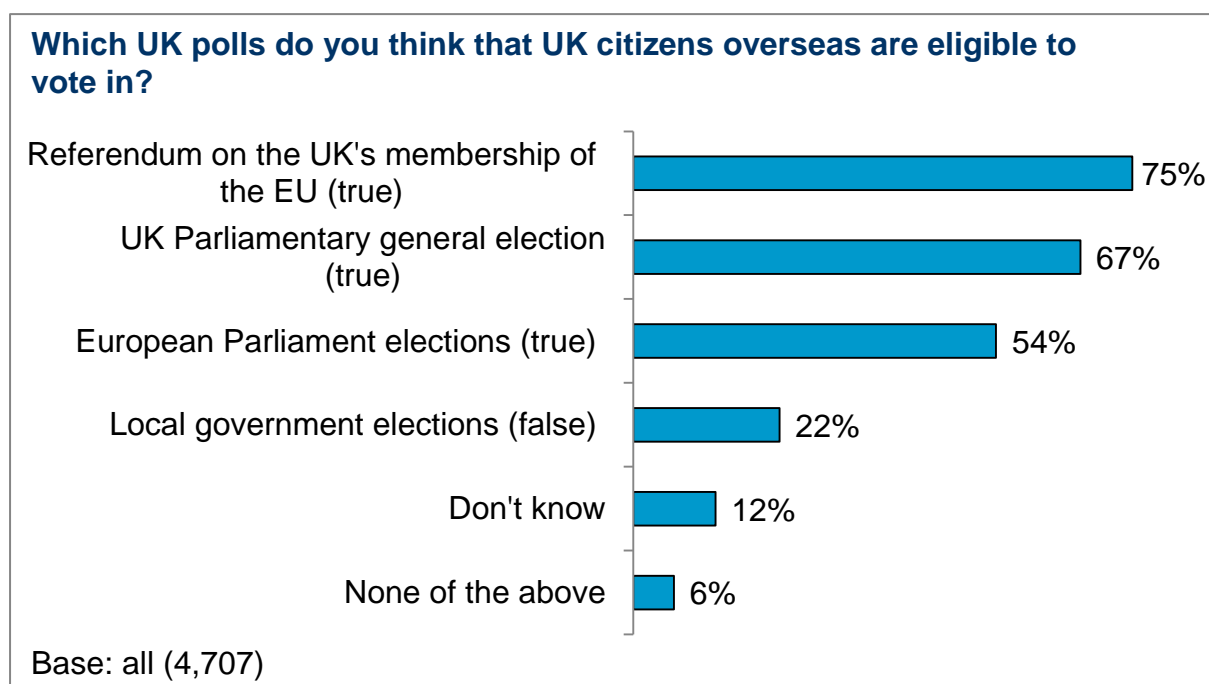
The majority of the sample (73%) is over 55 years old and one in five respondents (21%) have lived outside of the UK for over 15 years. For further demographic information on the sample see Appendix A.

### 2. Awareness and understanding

Among the overseas citizens eligible to participate in UK elections that responded to this survey, the overriding reason for not registering to vote or participating in UK elections is a lack of awareness of the process of both. When asked why they have not registered to vote, a third of respondents said that they did not have sufficient information or that they were unsure how to.<sup>1</sup> In contrast just 3% of citizens living in the UK say that they are not registered to vote because they don't know how to.<sup>2</sup>

## Eligibility

Respondents were asked which UK electoral events they thought that UK citizens living overseas are eligible to vote in; a quarter are unaware they can vote in the referendum while a third are unaware they could be eligible to vote in a UK parliamentary election.



The majority of respondents (74%) know that having been on the UK electoral register in the past 15 years is a requirement to qualify to be on the register as an overseas voter. There is however also some confusion on this; 31% believe that receiving a UK state pension and 22% believe that owning a property in the UK would make someone eligible to vote.

There is lower awareness of the '15 year rule' among those that have lived outside the UK for longer than 15 years: 58% are aware compared with 78% among those who have lived outside for less the UK for less than 15 years.

## Registration

<sup>1</sup> Based on coded responses to an open ended question, respondents were not required to respond

<sup>2</sup> Electoral Commission, UKPGE 2015 Post Election Research (2015)

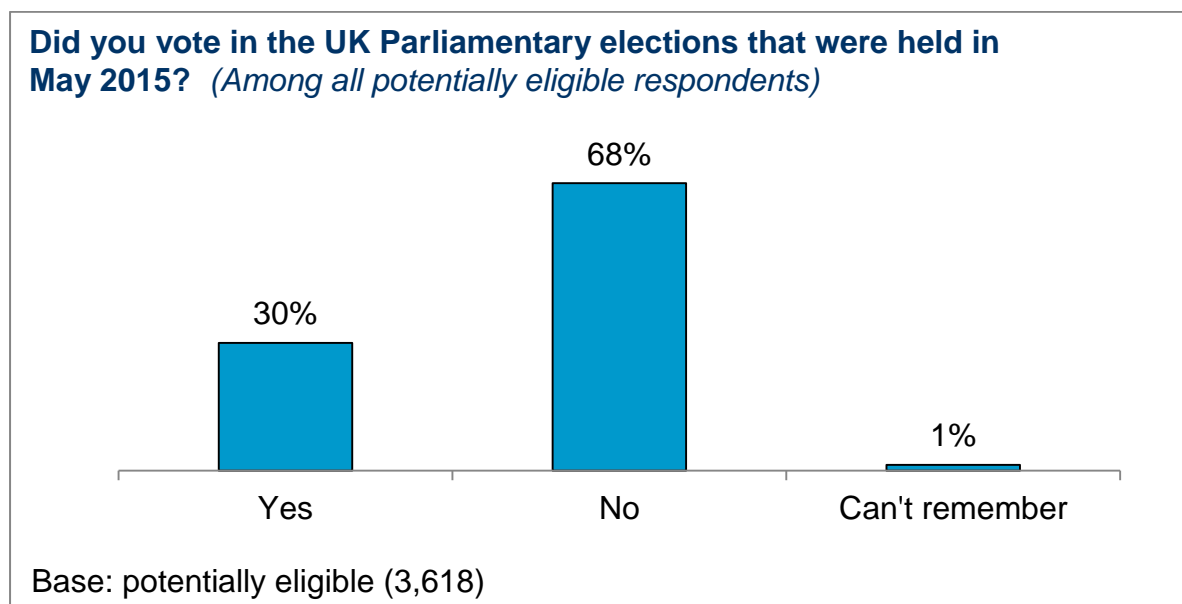
There is also a lack of clarity on registration processes and requirements. Of potentially eligible voters<sup>3</sup>:

- Only 50% are aware that they can register to vote online;
- 35% think that they can register to vote and apply for a postal or proxy vote at once (compared with 46% who realise it is a two-step process).

Registered overseas voters are required to complete an annual declaration to confirm their overseas status. The results of this survey suggest that uncertainty surrounds this process: just under a third (29%) believe it is true that 'UK citizens living overseas must renew their registration once every 12 months', 38% believe this is false while 34% are unsure.

### 3. Voting behaviour

Of the respondents potentially eligible to vote in UK elections, 58% believe that they are currently registered to vote to do so, 22% say that they are not and 20% are unsure of their registration status. However, only a third of say that they voted in the 2015 Parliamentary election.



Among those that didn't vote the most common reason cited for not doing so is lack of awareness. One in five (21%) say that they didn't know how to register and 21% say that they did not know how to vote.

Administrative problems were also a barrier to voting in the 2015 general election, 16% of respondents say that an administrative reason, including not receiving their postal vote, was the reason that they did not vote. Those claiming that they are

<sup>3</sup> Those that said they have lived outside of the UK for less than 15 years and who are of voting age/provided an age. Base = 3,618

registered but that they did not vote are more likely to cite this as a reason for not voting.

We raised both the issue of awareness and postal voting for overseas voters in our [report](#) on the administration of the May 2015 polls, and recommended that access to the voting process for overseas electors must be improved.

As a consequence of these recommendations a number of measures were introduced for the referendum on the UK's membership of the EU. These included, a targeted campaign running from mid-March up to the registration deadline, designed to reach UK citizens overseas, raise their awareness about voting in the UK and encourage them to register to vote. In conjunction with this International Business Reply Service has been attached to postal votes that will be returned from overseas meaning that they will not need to pay for return postage. The first postal votes for the referendum began to be sent out to overseas voters between the 23 and 27 May. these dates were specified in the directions issued by the Chief Counting Officer with the intention of ensuring voters living overseas are able to receive, complete and return their postal votes in time.

### **The impact of the referendum**

Among the overseas citizens that participated in this survey some claim that they do not want to participate in UK elections because they feel that such events are irrelevant to their lives now they live abroad: *'It did not seem important to vote in UK general elections as I am living out of the UK' – respondent living in France, 65+.* However, this view is only expressed by a small proportion of the sample that are potentially eligible to vote.<sup>4</sup>

In addition responses suggest that overseas voters may see the referendum differently. When respondents were asked what would motivate them to vote in elections for the UK in the future, the referendum is a common response. Many state that they believe the referendum is more relevant to them personally than a general election and as a result feel more inclined to exercise their right to vote. (It is worth noting again that the majority of respondents to the survey currently reside in EU countries and so may be more likely to feel that the outcome of the referendum could affect them). Other reoccurring responses include; streamlining of registration processes – including earlier receipt of postal vote forms as well as increased access to information on how to register and vote.

## **4. Channels of communication**

The BBC news website is the go-to source of news with 83% of respondents reporting that they are frequent visitors. Online newspapers are also popular: 21% regularly read the Guardian and 20% read the Mail Online. Facebook is widely used,

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<sup>4</sup> Based on coded responses to an open ended question, respondents were not required to respond

with 65% saying that they use it to stay in touch with their family and friends. (It should be noted that the sample is skewed toward older UK expats).

# Appendix A

## Country of Residence

<b>Country of residence</b> <i>(showing top 20 countries by number of responses)</i>	<b>Responses</b>
France	2647
Spain	895
Cyprus	254
Portugal	89
Philippines	75
Belgium	62
Italy	59
Luxembourg	51
Switzerland	45
Australia	39
UAE	38
Germany	36
Netherlands	34
USA	33
Norway	27
Thailand	27
Hong Kong	26
Greece	22
Turkey	22
Canada	19

## Length of time living abroad

<b>Number of years living outside the UK*</b> <small>*Respondents could select 'prefer not to answer'</small>	<b>Responses</b>	<b>%</b>
1-5 years	1007	21%
5-10 years	1279	27%
10-15 years	1352	29%
15 years +	965	21%

## Age

<b>Age</b>	<b>Responses</b>	<b>%</b>
16-17	2	0%
18-19	3	0%
20-24	36	1%
25-34	157	3%
35-44	328	7%
45-54	703	15%
55-64	1362	29%
65+	2085	44%
Rather not say	31	0%