



# Media handbook

UK Parliamentary general election in  
Northern Ireland

## **Translations and other formats**

For information on obtaining this publication in another language or in a large-print or Braille version, please contact the Electoral Commission:

Tel: 020 7271 0500

Email: [publications@electoralcommission.org.uk](mailto:publications@electoralcommission.org.uk)

# Contents

1	Media contacts and resources	1
2	UK Parliamentary general election calendar	2
3	Who's who at the election	3
4	Standing for election	5
5	Campaigning and expenditure	7
6	Electoral fraud and malpractice	14
7	Registering to vote	15
8	Voting	18
9	Counting the votes	21
10	Challenging an election result	23



**Please note:** this publication covers Northern Ireland only. A separate media handbook on a UK Parliamentary general election in Great Britain is available on our website at

[www.electoralcommission.org.uk/news-and-media/media-resources](http://www.electoralcommission.org.uk/news-and-media/media-resources).

# 1 Media contacts and resources

## Contact information

Electoral Commission press office

### **Northern Ireland – Weber Shandwick**

Office hours: 028 90 347 319/303

Out of office hours: 07770 886927

Email: [electoralcommission@webershandwick.com](mailto:electoralcommission@webershandwick.com)

### **London**

Office hours: 020 7271 0704

Out of office hours: 07789 920414

Email: [press@electoralcommission.org.uk](mailto:press@electoralcommission.org.uk)

### **Chief Electoral Officer for Northern Ireland/Electoral Office for Northern Ireland**

Office hours: 028 9044 6688

Email: [info@electoralcommission.org.uk](mailto:info@electoralcommission.org.uk)

## Websites

### [www.electoralcommission.org.uk](http://www.electoralcommission.org.uk)

Our corporate website features a dedicated elections area:

[www.electoralcommission.org.uk/elections](http://www.electoralcommission.org.uk/elections) and a dedicated media centre for journalists [www.electoralcommission.org.uk/news-and-media](http://www.electoralcommission.org.uk/news-and-media).

### [www.aboutmyvote.co.uk](http://www.aboutmyvote.co.uk)

This website provides information on how to register and vote. It includes a postcode search facility that allows people to find out where elections are taking place and an interactive 'polling station walk-through'.

### [www.dopolitics.org.uk](http://www.dopolitics.org.uk)

The Do Politics Centre is an online resource for democracy practitioners. It provides information and resources to equip people to run interactive workshops and events.

### [www.eoni.org.uk](http://www.eoni.org.uk)

The website of the Electoral Office for Northern Ireland provides information on how to register to vote, absent voting, how to find your polling station and electoral identification requirements

## Images

We have a range of election and voting related images, which are available by contacting Weber Shandwick using the contact details above.

## 2 UK Parliamentary general election calendar

<b>Event</b>	<b>Date</b>
Start of regulated period for campaign spending by political parties	Thursday 7 May 2009
Start of 'long campaign' regulated period for candidates' expenses	Friday 1 January 2010
Dissolution of Parliament and issue of writ	Monday 12 April 2010
Start of 'short campaign' regulated period for candidates' expenses	Monday 13 April 2010
<b>Receipt of writ</b>	<b>Monday 12 or Tuesday 13 April 2010</b>
Last day for publication of notice of election	Wednesday 14 or Thursday 15 April 2010
Deadline for applying for an absent vote	Thursday 15 April 2010
<b>Deadline for registering to vote</b>	<b>Tuesday 20 April 2010</b>
Deadline for delivery of nomination papers	Tuesday 20 April 2010
Last day for withdrawal of nominations	Tuesday 20 April 2010
<b>Statements of persons nominated published</b>	<b>By Wednesday 21 April 2010</b>
Deadline for applying for absent vote for unforeseen medical reason	5pm Thursday 6 May 2010
<b>Polling day</b>	<b>7am to 10pm, Thursday 6 May 2010</b>
Verification and counting of ballot paper	Starting as soon as practicable after 10pm, Thursday 6 May 2010
Declaration of result	Thursday 6 May or Friday 7 May, depending on count 2010
Event	Date
Last date for return of candidates' expenses	Thursday 10 or Friday 11 June, depending on declaration of result
Last date for return of party campaign spending returns (up to and including £250,000)	Thursday 5 August 2010
Last date for return of party campaign spending returns (over £250,000)	Friday 5 November 2010

## 3 Who's who at the election

### The Electoral Commission

The Electoral Commission is an independent body set up by the UK Parliament. We set standards for well-run elections and regulate party and election finance. We:

- make sure people understand how to register to vote and know how to cast their vote
- set the standards for running elections and electoral registration and report on how well this is done
- register political parties
- make sure people understand and follow the rules on party and election finance

For the UK Parliamentary general election, we have published guidance for political parties, candidates and their agents, and third parties on how they can comply with their statutory reporting requirements. These are all available on our website at [www.electoralcommission.org.uk/guidance](http://www.electoralcommission.org.uk/guidance). The Chief Electoral Officer for Northern Ireland has produced separate guidance for candidates and agents regarding the administration of the election.

We are running a public information campaign so people know how to register and vote.

We are statutorily required to publish a report on the administration of the UK Parliamentary general election. We will publish all reports in autumn 2010.

### Chief Electoral Officer for Northern Ireland

The Chief Electoral Officer, currently Douglas Bain, administers elections and compiles the register of electors in Northern Ireland.

The Chief Electoral Officer acts as the Registration Officer and Returning Officer (RO) for all elections in Northern Ireland and has responsibility for the organisation and conduct of the election – including nominations, distribution of poll cards and postal ballots, the conduct of the poll and the counting of votes.

The Chief Electoral Officer is supported in his duties by the Electoral Office for Northern Ireland.

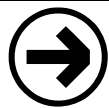
## Area Electoral Officers

The Electoral Office for Northern Ireland comprises a headquarters in Belfast and eight area electoral offices across Northern Ireland; an Area Electoral Officer heads up each office Area Electoral Officers act under the supervision of the Chief Electoral Officer and are responsible for acting as:

- deputy registration officers, for all registration matters within their constituency
- deputy ROs, for the conduct of elections to the UK Parliament, European Parliament and Northern Ireland Assembly in their constituency
- management of staff and budget for their area office

## Electoral observers

Anyone can apply to the Commission to be an observer at an election. Observers must agree to abide by the Commission's Code of Practice. Representatives of the Electoral Commission may also attend. Observers can ask questions of candidates, agents, electoral staff and electors and observe proceedings at the poll, count and the issue and receipt of postal ballots.



To find out more about being an election observer, please visit the Electoral Commission website:  
[www.electoralcommission.org.uk/elections/electoral\\_observers](http://www.electoralcommission.org.uk/elections/electoral_observers).

## Election agents

An election agent is the person responsible in law for the proper management of a candidate's election campaign. By law, certain people cannot be an election agent, e.g. employees of the RO. Candidates who do not appoint an agent take responsibility themselves and are automatically deemed to be their own election agent.

## Polling agents

Polling agents are appointed by candidates to assist in the detection of personation at polling stations. They are allowed to have a copy of the electoral register but are not permitted to remove it from the polling station until the close of poll.

## 4 Standing for election

### Who can stand as a candidate?

To be a candidate in a UK Parliamentary general election, a person must be:

- at least 18 years of age on the day they are nominated and on polling day
- a British, Irish or qualifying Commonwealth citizen. A qualifying Commonwealth citizen is one that has indefinite leave to remain in the UK or does not require leave to remain

A candidate is not required to live in the Parliamentary constituency in which they wish to stand.



This will be the first UK Parliamentary general election in which candidates as young as 18 years of age will be able to stand. The Electoral Administration Act 2006 reduced the minimum qualifying age from 21 years old to 18 years old.

### Is there any reason someone cannot stand as a candidate?

There are certain people who cannot stand for election to the UK Parliament. These include:

- someone who is the subject of a bankruptcy restrictions or debt relief order in England and Wales, has been adjudged bankrupt in Northern Ireland or had their estate sequestered in Scotland and they have not been discharged
- convicted prisoners serving a prison sentence of more than twelve months and who are currently in custody due to that sentence
- people found guilty of certain electoral offences (corrupt or illegal practices)
- certain Crown employees including civil servants, police officers, members of the armed forces and judges
- anyone who is entitled to sit and vote in the House of Lords

### How do you become a UK Parliamentary candidate?

Candidates must secure the support of 10 'subscribers' to assent to their nomination: a 'proposer', a 'seconder' and eight other assenters, who are registered and eligible to vote in the constituency in which the candidate wishes to stand.

Candidates, their agent(s), proposer or seconder must hand deliver a hard copy of their nomination papers, signed by their subscribers, to the Area Electoral Officer by 4pm on Tuesday 20 April.

## Is there a deposit and do candidates get it back?

Candidates are required to pay a £500 deposit at a UK Parliamentary general election. They must pay the deposit before 4pm on Tuesday 20 April.

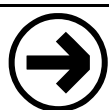
Candidates who poll less than five per cent of the total votes cast in their constituency forfeit their deposit.

## 5 Campaigning and expenditure

### What is Purdah?

'Purdah' refers to a period between the dissolution of Parliament and polling day. The Cabinet Office issue guidance for Ministers and civil servants on the handling of government business designed to ensure that no party or candidate uses their position for electoral advantage during this period.

Communities and Local Government produce a separate set of guidelines for local authorities.



For further information on the Purdah period, contact the Cabinet Office press office or see their guidelines on recommended practice: [www.cabinetoffice.gov.uk/propriety\\_and\\_ethics/civil\\_service/election\\_guidance.aspx](http://www.cabinetoffice.gov.uk/propriety_and_ethics/civil_service/election_guidance.aspx).

### Are there rules about what candidates can say about one another?

It is illegal to make a false statement of fact about the personal character or conduct of a candidate in order to affect the return of a candidate at an election in campaign literature. It is a defence to show reasonable grounds for believing that the statement was true.

In addition, rules about defamation or libel could also apply to elections materials.

### Do candidates get free delivery of leaflets?

Every candidate at a UK Parliamentary general election is entitled to free postage on an 'electoral communication', usually a leaflet, sent to electors in the constituency. Candidates should contact Royal Mail to make arrangements. Reasonable terms and conditions apply.

### What are 'imprints'?

An 'imprint' is the name and address of the printer and promoter of a candidate's or party's election material. The purpose of imprints is so that electors can be clear about the source of campaign information.

All printed election materials (i.e. posters, placards and leaflets distributed for the purpose of promoting the election of a candidate or party) must include an imprint.

## What are hustings?

'Hustings' can be organised by anyone, and are events where election candidates debate policies and answer questions from an audience. There is no legal requirement for all candidates standing in an area to be invited.

If someone other than the candidate or candidates meets the costs of the event, this may constitute a donation and count towards the election expenses of the candidate or candidates.

If an event is open to the public and is run in a way that genuinely does not promote the electoral success of particular candidates, we consider that it should not count towards any candidates election expenses.


In addition, it is the Electoral Commission's view that the costs of the event will **not** count against a candidates election expenses if:

- you have invited all the candidates in the constituency to attend
- your hustings is only open to members of your organisation

The simplest way to show that a hustings is genuine is to invite all known candidates in the relevant area. However, this may not always be practical. If an organiser of an event decides not to invite all the known candidates, they should be able to give objective reasons to show that the hustings is non-promotional.

These reasons should not be based on subjective matters, such as your view of the policies or a party or candidate.

Debates broadcast by the BBC, S4C or commercial broadcasters are exempt from candidate expenditure controls.

 The Commission produces guidance for parties, candidates, agents and hustings organisers. For further information, please see the *Topic Overview: Hustings Events* fact sheet on the Commission's website at: [www.electoralcommission.org.uk/guidance/resources-for-those-we-regulate](http://www.electoralcommission.org.uk/guidance/resources-for-those-we-regulate)

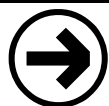
## How are Party Election Broadcasts allocated?

The Communications Act 2003 requires certain broadcasters to carry Party Election Broadcasts (PEB) (or Party Political Broadcasts (PPB)) based on allocation rules created by Ofcom.

In Northern Ireland the BBC is required to carry PEBs under its Charter and Agreements but is not regulated by Ofcom. UTV base broadcasts on allocations rules created by Ofcom.

Parties qualify for a broadcast on the basis of contesting three or more of the seats in any of the 18 constituencies in Northern Ireland. Parties may receive additional broadcasts depending on their level of past and/or current electoral support.

Political parties pay for and produce the contents of PEBs, which must observe the law – for example on copyright, libel, contempt, obscenity, incitement to racial hatred or violence. They must comply with the Ofcom Broadcasting Code and BBC Editorial Guidelines that relate to harm and offence and fairness and privacy.



Find out more from the Broadcasters Liaison Group, a group of Ofcom and broadcasters that co-ordinate the criteria for allocating PEBs: [www.broadcastersliaisongroup.org.uk](http://www.broadcastersliaisongroup.org.uk).

## What are the rules on political impartiality for broadcasters and programme makers?

Political impartiality in broadcasts is covered by the editorial guidelines or code relevant to that particular broadcaster.



The BBC's editorial guidelines on broadcasting during an election can be found at [www.bbc.co.uk/guidelines/editorialguidelines/edguide/politics/broadcastingdur.shtml](http://www.bbc.co.uk/guidelines/editorialguidelines/edguide/politics/broadcastingdur.shtml). The Ofcom code of conduct can be found at [www.ofcom.org.uk/tv/ifi/codes/bcode/elections/](http://www.ofcom.org.uk/tv/ifi/codes/bcode/elections/)

## How much can parties spend?

For a UK Parliamentary general election, political parties are subject to spending limits based on a formula set out in legislation. The amount a party may spend is £30,000 multiplied by the number of seats they are contesting. A party contesting all 18 seats in Northern Ireland can spend up to £540,000. There are separate spending limits for candidates (see 'How much can candidates spend?' below).

The regulated period for political parties at this UK Parliamentary general election overlaps with the regulated period for parties at the 2009 European Parliamentary elections. As a result, the spending limits for the UK Parliamentary general election and the European Parliamentary elections are combined. Any underspend by a party in relation to the European Parliamentary elections limit may be added to the UK Parliamentary general election spending limit.<sup>1</sup>

### **Example**

'Party A' contests in the European Parliamentary election in Northern Ireland for and all the Northern Ireland seats in the UK Parliamentary general election. If 'Party A' spends £100,000 at the European Parliamentary elections (£35,000 under their prescribed limit of £135,000), they can then add the amount of that underspend to their UK Parliamentary general election limit. This would allow 'Party A' to spend £585,000 in Northern Ireland at the UK Parliamentary general election.

<sup>1</sup> For spending by political parties at the 2009 European Parliamentary elections, please see <http://registers.electoralcommission.org.uk/regulatory-issues/gbcampaignex.cfm>

## When is party spending limited from?

The party spending limit for the UK Parliamentary general election overlaps with that of the 2009 European Parliamentary elections. The combined spending limit applies from 5 February 2009 for those parties that also contested the June 2009 European Parliamentary elections. The combined campaign spending limits for parties are outlined in Table 1 below. The actual limit for each party will depend on how many seats it contests in the UK Parliamentary general election, and how many regions it contested in the European Parliamentary elections.

**Table 1 Combined election campaign spending limits for parties**

Location	UK Parliament spending limit	European Parliament spending limit	Combined spending limit
England	£15,990,000	£2,655,000	£18,645,000
Scotland	£1,770,000	£270,000	£2,040,000
Wales	£1,200,000	£180,000	£1,380,000
<b>Great Britain</b>	<b>£18,960,000</b>	<b>£3,105,000</b>	<b>£22,065,000</b>
Northern Ireland	£540,000	£135,000	£675,000
<b>United Kingdom</b>	<b>£19,500,000</b>	<b>£3,240,000</b>	<b>£22,740,000</b>

## How much did Northern Ireland parties spend at previous elections?

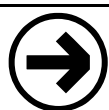
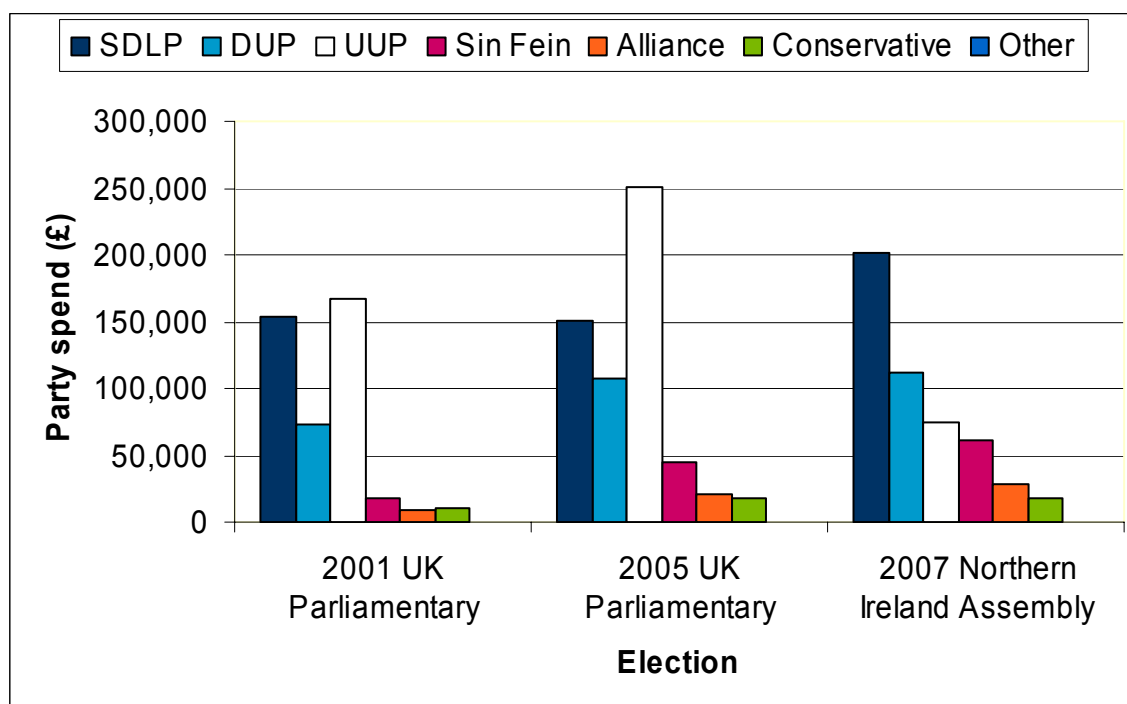
Table 2 and Figure 1 below show party spending in the last two UK Parliamentary general elections held in 2001 and 2005, and the 2007 Northern Ireland Assembly election.

**Table 2 Northern Ireland political party election campaign spending 2001–7**

Party	2001 spending (UK Parliamentary general election)	2005 spending (UK Parliamentary general election)	2007 spending (Northern Ireland Assembly)
Alliance	8,960	21,124	28,675
Democratic Unionist Party	73,230	107,133	112,180
Conservative and Unionist Party	7,309	8,434	7,471

Sinn Féin	18,508	44,212	61,697
Social Democratic & Labour Party	153,765	150,247	201,604
Ulster Unionist Party	167,495	251,119	74,422
Other parties	£2,404	£10,216	£9,780
<b>Total</b>	<b>£431,671</b>	<b>£592,485</b>	<b>£495,849</b>

**Figure 1 Spending at elections by political parties in Northern Ireland**



For information on campaign spending by political parties at previous UK Parliamentary general elections, visit <http://registers.electoralcommission.org.uk/regulatory-issues/gbcampaignex.cfm?fmGB=0>.

## Who do parties report spending returns to?

Political parties contesting the election must submit a report to the Electoral Commission detailing all the campaign expenditure they have incurred. Parties must submit this within three months of the election if they spent up to £250,000, or within six months of the election if they spent more than £250,000.

We will publish them on our website as soon as is reasonably practicable.

## Do parties have to report donations they receive?

Political parties report all donations and loans over £7,500 to central parties and donations and loans over £1,500 to local accounting units. Parties must normally report on a quarterly basis. During the UK Parliamentary general election period (from the date the Prime Minister calls the election to the date of the poll), central parties must report donations and loans to the Commission on a weekly basis.

As required by legislation, the Commission does not publish permissible donations and loans to political parties that are on the Northern Ireland register.

## How much can candidates spend?

The regulated period during which a candidate's spending is limited is split into the 'long campaign' and 'short campaign'.

The 'short campaign' runs from the dissolution of Parliament to polling day. During this period, candidates may spend **£7,150 plus 5p per elector in a borough constituency, or plus 7p per elector in a county constituency.**

The 'long campaign' regulates spending in the period before Parliament is dissolved, but applies only if Parliament has been sitting for 55 months.

For this election, the long campaign began on 1 January 2010 and will end on the day Parliament is dissolved. Each candidate can spend a maximum of **£25,000 plus 5p per elector in a borough constituency and 7p per elector in a county constituency** during the long campaign.<sup>2</sup>

The percentage of the new limit that a candidate may spend depends on when the dissolution of Parliament takes place. This is so the overall amount a candidate can spend reflects the overall length of the regulated period, i.e. the combined short and long campaign period.

The later Parliament is dissolved the more a candidate can spend of their long campaign limit. For this election, candidates may spend 100 per cent of the long campaign limit.

The candidate spending limits for these periods are distinct and may not be combined.

## Do candidates have to report donations they receive?

Candidates must include details of all individual donations over £50 accepted during the regulated period in their expenditure returns to Returning Officers. In addition, candidates must provide the total of all the donations of under £50 that they receive.

---

<sup>2</sup> In Northern Ireland all of the four Belfast constituencies are borough constituencies, The other 14 are county constituencies.

During this period, all donations of over £50 to candidates must be from a permissible source.

## Who do candidates report expenditure to?

Candidates must submit their spending return to the Chief Electoral Officer for Northern Ireland. These must be submitted within 35 days of the declaration of the result.

## Do organisations and individuals that are not parties or candidates have to report spending?

In every election, there will be individuals and organisations that campaign in the election, but are not standing as political parties or candidates. We call these 'third parties'.

Third parties that campaign at a UK general election – and plan to spend more than £10,000 in England or £5,000 in Scotland, Wales or Northern Ireland – must register with the Commission and report their campaign expenditure to the Commission.

The third party spending limit for the UK Parliamentary general election overlaps with that of the 2009 European Parliamentary elections. The combined spending limit applies from 5 February 2009.

**Table 4: Third party spending limits for the 2010 UK general election**

<b>Area</b>	<b>Spending limit</b>
England	£953,250
Scotland	£126,000
Wales	£71,259
Northern Ireland	£33,750
<b>UK total</b>	<b>£1,184,249</b>

Third parties must also report donations of more than £7,500 that they receive during the regulated period and used for controlled expenditure. They must also report a total figure for all donations under £7,500.

## 6 Electoral fraud and malpractice

### What types of electoral offences exist?

There are a number of offences under electoral legislation that can arise during an election period.

**Expenditure related offences** – Various offences relating to breaches of expenses limits, reporting and donation controls.

**Bribery** – A person is guilty of bribery if they directly or indirectly give any money or procure any office to or for any voter, in order to induce any voter to vote, or refrain from voting.

**Undue influence** – A person is guilty of undue influence if they make use of or threaten to make use of force, violence or restraint, or inflict or threaten to inflict injury, damage, loss or harm in order to induce or compel any voter to vote or refrain from voting.

**Secrecy** – Everyone involved in the electoral process should be aware of the secrecy of the ballot under Section 66 of the Representation of the People Act 1983.

**Personation** – This is where any individual votes as someone else (whether that person is living or dead or is a fictitious person), either by post or in person at a polling station as an elector, or as a proxy.

**Multiple voting and proxy voting offences** – There are various offences regarding multiple voting and proxy voting including voting by post as an elector or proxy when subject to a legal incapacity to vote; voting more than once in the same election and applying for a proxy without cancelling a previous proxy appointment.

**False registration information** – It is an offence to supply false registration information to an Electoral Registration Officer. It is also an offence to supply false information in connection with an application for a postal or proxy vote.

### Who investigates fraud at elections?

Electoral malpractice under the Representation of the People Act 1983 (as amended) is a criminal offence and therefore the Police Service of Northern Ireland would be responsible for investigating allegations of electoral malpractice.

## 7 Registering to vote

### Who can register to vote?

A person can register to vote in the UK Parliamentary general election if they are:

- aged 18 or over on polling day (16 and 17 year olds can register but not vote)
- a British citizen, Irish citizen or qualifying Commonwealth citizen resident in the UK. (A qualifying Commonwealth citizen is one that has leave to remain in the UK or does not require such leave)
- resident in Northern Ireland for the previous three months

**Voters must first register by Tuesday 20 April in order to be able vote on Thursday 6 May.**

European Union citizens resident in the UK cannot vote in a UK Parliamentary general election, but can be included on the electoral register and vote in local, Northern Ireland Assembly and European Parliamentary elections (Irish citizens resident in the UK can vote in UK Parliamentary general election).

### How do you register to vote?

Anyone wishing to register to vote should contact their area electoral office, or go to [www.aboutmyvote.co.uk](http://www.aboutmyvote.co.uk) or [www.eoni.org.uk](http://www.eoni.org.uk) for further information on how to register to vote. They can also call the helpline on 0800 0323 700.

Eligible voters are required to provide specified material with their registration form (in its original form) in support of their application to prove their:

- name
- date of birth
- nationality
- National Insurance number
- address
- that they have been resident in Northern Ireland for the previous three months
- any other information requested by the Chief Electoral Officer for Northern Ireland

### Can UK citizens living overseas register to vote?

British citizens living abroad can register as an 'overseas voter' and vote in UK Parliamentary general elections for 15 years after they were last on the electoral register in the UK. They register in the area where they were last registered to vote in the UK.

If someone was too young to be included on the electoral register when they left the UK, they can register to vote in the area that their parent or guardian was last registered.

Overseas voters can appoint a proxy to vote on their behalf at the election. Postal ballot papers cannot be sent to addresses outside the UK.

## Can someone register to vote at different addresses?

A person can register to vote at an address if they are resident at that address. It may be possible to be registered at more than one address, as long as you are resident at both addresses.

An example of this may be full time students, who may be able register at both their term time address and home address if they are in different local authorities. It is an offence to vote twice in an election to a single body, such as a UK Parliamentary general election.

## Can prisoners register to vote?

Remand prisoners can vote if they are on the electoral register. Convicted persons detained because of their sentence cannot join the electoral register or vote.

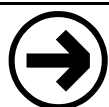
## How do members of the armed forces register to vote?

Service personnel and their spouses or civil partners, serving in the UK or overseas, can register either at their UK home address as an ordinary voter or as a 'service voter'. Service voters fill out an armed services declaration, which means they are only required to register once every three years.

## How many people are registered to vote in Northern Ireland?

According to the electoral register published on 1 February 2010, there were 1,171,214 Parliamentary electors registered to vote in Northern Ireland. This is a rise of 26,773 (2.3 per cent) on the previous year.

There are a number of groups that are less likely to be registered to vote. People who have recently moved home, young people and students, those living in rented accommodation and people from certain ethnic minority communities are all less likely to be registered to vote.



The Commission's 2008 report, *Accuracy and comprehensiveness of the electoral register*, is available at [www.electoralcommission.org.uk/\\_\\_data/assets/pdf\\_file/0009/64872/Accuracy-and-Comprehensiveness.pdf](http://www.electoralcommission.org.uk/__data/assets/pdf_file/0009/64872/Accuracy-and-Comprehensiveness.pdf). The most recent figures from the Electoral Office for Northern Ireland are available at [www.eoni.org.uk/index/statistics](http://www.eoni.org.uk/index/statistics).

## Who can see the electoral register?

There are two versions of the electoral register – the 'edited' register and the 'full' register.

Voters can choose to opt out of having their details published on the 'edited' version of the register. Anyone can purchase the edited register from Electoral Office for Northern Ireland for any purpose.

All voters are included on the 'full' version of the electoral register. The full version of the register for Northern Ireland is available to view at any area electoral office and anyone can view it under supervision. Copies of the register cannot be made.

Candidates are entitled to a free copy of the full register for all Northern Ireland constituencies. Candidates may not pass on the register, disclose any information in the register or use it for anything other than electoral purposes.

Registered political parties can request a full copy of the register at any time and councillors are entitled to a copy for the ward that they represent.

## 8 Voting

### How do you vote at a polling station?

All polling stations are open from 7am to 10pm on polling day. Every voter is allocated a specific polling station serving the area in which they live. The Electoral Office for Northern Ireland will send a poll card to each elector giving the location of the polling station.

**You do not need your poll card in order to vote.**

The Electoral Office for Northern Ireland will be able to tell you where your polling station is. Contact details are available from [www.eoni.org.uk](http://www.eoni.org.uk) or by calling the Commission's helpline on 0800 0323 700.

In a UK Parliamentary general election, ballot papers should be marked only once with a single 'x' in the box to the right of the candidate a voter wishes to vote for.

### What identification do you need to vote?

Voters must present photographic identification at their polling station to confirm their identity. Voters must present one of the following to poll staff before they can be issued with a ballot paper:

- a UK, Irish or EU passport
- a photographic Northern Ireland, Great Britain or EEA driving licence
- a Translink Senior Smartpass
- a Translink 60+ Smartpass
- a Translink War Disabled Smartpass
- a Translink Blind Person's Smartpass
- an Electoral Identity Card

### How do you vote by post?

Voters in Northern Ireland can apply for a postal or proxy vote but must provide a valid reason for their application such as:

- inability to attend due to illness
- blindness or other disability
- absence on the day of poll due to work commitments
- holiday arrangements

Postal vote application forms are available from area electoral offices or [www.eoni.org.uk](http://www.eoni.org.uk) or by calling our helpline on 0800 0323 700.

Area Electoral Officers cannot send out postal ballot packs until after 5pm On Tuesday 20 April.

**The deadline for applying for a postal vote for the UK Parliamentary general election is 5pm, 11 working days before the election.**

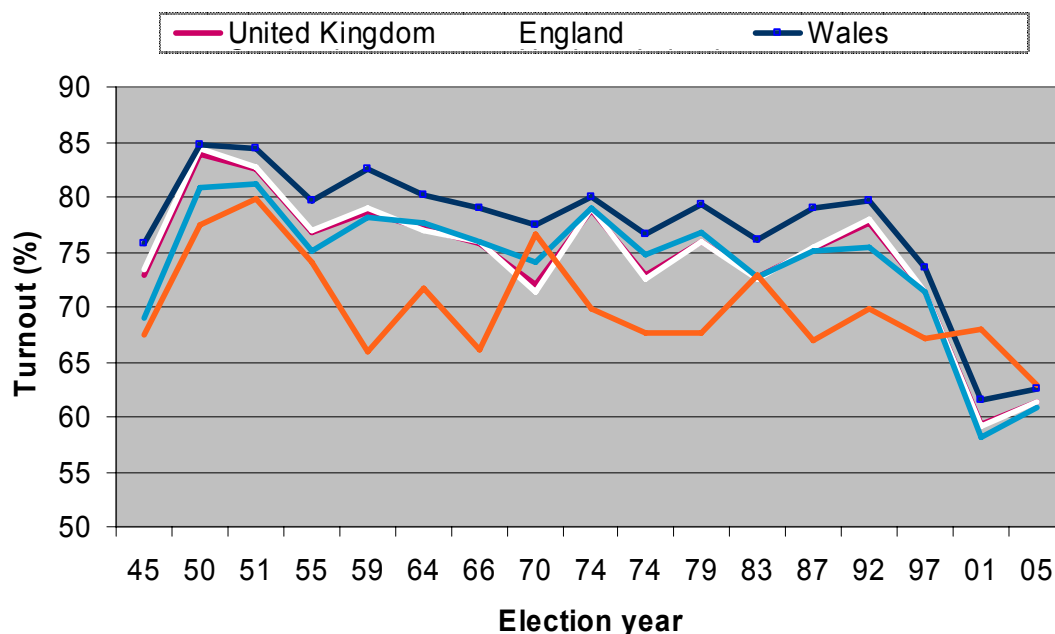
## What has turnout been like at previous UK Parliamentary general elections?

Turnout at the 2005 UK Parliamentary general election was 61.4 per cent of registered electors, higher than the 2001 turnout of 59.4 per cent, but historically low.

**Table 3 Turnout at UK Parliamentary general elections 1945–2005**  
(% of registered electors)

Year	Northern Ireland	UK-wide (Great Britain and Northern Ireland)
1945	67.4	72.8
1950	77.4	83.9
1951	79.9	82.6
1955	74.1	76.8
1959	65.9	78.7
1964	71.7	77.1
1966	66.1	75.8
1970	76.6	72
1974 Feb	69.9	78.8
1974 Oct	67.7	72.8
1979	67.7	76
1983	72.9	72.7
1987	67	75.3
1992	69.8	77.7
1997	67.1	71.4
2001	68	59.4
2005	62.9	61.4

**Figure 2 Turnout at UK Parliamentary general elections 1945–2005**  
(UK wide and in England, Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland)



## How many votes did each party get at the last election?

**Table 4** 2005 UK Parliamentary general election results<sup>3</sup>

<b>Party</b>	<b>Votes</b>	<b>% of votes cast</b>	<b>% change on 2001</b>	<b>Seats</b>	<b>Net gain/loss</b>
Alliance Party	28,291	3.9	+0.3	0	0
Conservative and Unionist Party	2,718	0.4	+0.4	0	0
Democratic Unionist Party	241,856	33.7	+11.2	9	+4
Sinn Féin	174,530	24.3	+2.6	5	+1
Social and Democratic Labour Party	125,626	17.5	-3.5	3	0
Ulster Unionist Party	127,414	17.8	-9.0	1	-5
Workers Party	1,669	0.2	-0.1	0	0
Socialist Environmental Alliance	1,649	0.2	+0.2	0	0
Others	13,849	1.9	+1.1	0	0
Turnout	717,602	62.5	-5.5		

<sup>3</sup> The Electoral Commission (April 2006) *Election 2005: The Results*. This report can be found on our website at [www.electoralcommission.org.uk/document-summary?assetid=47185](http://www.electoralcommission.org.uk/document-summary?assetid=47185).

## 9 Counting the votes

### When does the count take place?

For the first time in recent years, votes will be counted overnight in Northern Ireland for the UK Parliamentary election. Counting will commence as soon as practicable after the polls close at 10pm.

The timing of the count in Northern Ireland is a matter for the Chief Electoral Officer.

The counting of votes will take place at:

- North Antrim/Mid Ulster: Seven Towers Leisure Centre, Ballymena
- Upper Bann/Newry & Armagh: Banbridge Leisure Centre
- Foyle/East Londonderry: Templemore Sports Complex
- Lagan Valley/South Down: Lagan Valley Leisureplex, Lisburn
- East Antrim/South Antrim/Belfast North: Valley Leisure Centre, Newtownabbey
- Belfast West/Belfast South: Balmoral Hall, Kings Hall Complex, Belfast
- Strangford/North Down/Belfast East: Ards Leisure Centre
- West Tyrone/Fermanagh & South Tyrone: Omagh Leisure Centre

### What happens at the count?

The first stage of the count involves the verification of all ballot papers. Throughout polling day, polling station staff record the number of ballot papers that they issue to voters. Count centre staff will then compare this with the number of ballot papers in the ballot boxes that are delivered to the count centre.

Only after verification has taken place can counting assistants begin counting the votes for each candidate.

Candidates may appoint 'counting agents' to attend the count. Counting agents may observe the process and help to ensure it is carried out in an orderly and accurate manner. For example, counting agents can draw the attention of count staff to doubtful ballot papers and argue for the inclusion of ballot papers that count staff may have rejected as spoilt.



**The law prohibits counting agents from handling ballot papers. Anyone that attends the count (or any election procedure) must respect the secrecy of the ballot.**

Candidates and their agents may request that the Chief Electoral Officer (or Area Electoral Officer/ Deputy RO) conduct a recount. There is no limit to the number of recounts that a candidate or their agent can request, but the Chief Electoral Officer, or his deputy Returning Officer (RO), may refuse a request if they believe it to be unreasonable. The Chief Electoral Officer, or deputy RO, may instigate a recount.

## Can the media attend the count?

Members of the media must apply to the Northern Ireland Information Service if they wish to attend the count. They should abide by any direction the Chief Electoral Officer, or his deputy RO, gives. The Chief Electoral Officer's, or deputy RO's, decision is final and they are not required to allow any member of the media into the count (unless they are also a candidate, candidate's agent, counting agent or an accredited observer, etc).

You can contact the Northern Ireland Information Service on 028 9052 8400.

## 10 Challenging an election result

### Can someone challenge the result of an election?

Someone can challenge the result of an election can be challenged by the issuing of an election petition. An election petition can be presented by:

- someone who voted or had the right to vote at the election
- someone alleging themselves to have been a candidate at the election
- someone claiming to have had the right to be elected at the election

Petitioners must present the petition within 21 days of the return of the Writ (usually the day after the election). Where the petition relates to election expenses or corrupt or illegal practices involving the payment of money after the election, further time may be allowed.

Petitioners must sign the petition and return it to The Clerk of the Crown at the Royal Courts of Justice in Belfast.

## How to contact us

### The Electoral Commission

Trevelyan House  
Great Peter Street  
London SW1P 2HW  
Tel: 020 7271 0500  
Fax: 020 7271 0505  
Textphone: 18001 020 7271 0500  
info@electoralcommission.org.uk  
www.electoralcommission.org.uk

### The Electoral Commission

Scotland Office  
38 Thistle Street  
Edinburgh EH2 1EN  
Tel: 0131 225 0200  
Fax: 0131 225 0205  
Textphone: 18001 0131 225 0200  
infoscotland@electoralcommission.org.uk

### The Electoral Commission

Wales Office  
Caradog House  
1–6 Saint Andrews Place  
Cardiff CF10 3BE  
Tel: 029 2034 6800  
Fax: 029 2034 6805  
Textphone: 18001 029 2034 6800  
infowales@electoralcommission.org.uk

### The Electoral Commission

Northern Ireland Office  
Seatem House  
28–32 Alfred Street  
Belfast BT2 8EN  
Tel: 028 9089 4020  
Fax: 028 9089 4026  
Textphone: 18001 028 9089 4020  
infonorthernireland@electoralcommission.org.uk

### The Electoral Commission

Eastern and South East Office  
Trevelyan House  
Great Peter Street  
London SW1P 2HW  
Tel: 020 7271 0600  
Fax: 020 7271 0505  
Textphone: 18001 020 7271 0600  
easternandsoutheastoffice  
@electoralcommission.org.uk

### The Electoral Commission

London Office  
Trevelyan House  
Great Peter Street  
London SW1P 2HW  
Tel: 020 7271 0689  
Fax: 020 7271 0505  
Textphone: 18001 020 7271 0689  
london@electoralcommission.org.uk

### The Electoral Commission

Midlands Office, No 2 The Oaks  
Westwood Way, Westwood Business Park  
Coventry CV4 8JB  
Tel: 02476 820086  
Fax: 02476 820001  
Textphone: 18001 02476 820086  
midlands@electoralcommission.org.uk

### The Electoral Commission

North of England Office  
York Science Park  
IT Centre  
Innovation Way  
Heslington  
York YO10 5DG  
Tel: 01904 567990  
Fax: 01904 567719  
Textphone: 18001 01904 567990  
north@electoralcommission.org.uk

### The Electoral Commission

South West Office  
Regus, 1 Emperor Way  
Exeter Business Park  
Exeter EX1 3QS  
Tel: 01392 314617  
Fax: 01392 314001  
Textphone: 18001 01392 314617  
southwest@electoralcommission.org.uk

## The Electoral Commission

Trevelyan House  
Great Peter Street  
London SW1P 2HW

Tel 020 7271 0500  
Fax 020 7271 0505  
[info@electoralcommission.org.uk](mailto:info@electoralcommission.org.uk)  
[www.electoralcommission.org.uk](http://www.electoralcommission.org.uk)

To contact our offices in Scotland, Wales,  
Northern Ireland and the English regions,  
see inside back cover for details.

We are an independent body set up by  
the UK Parliament. Our aim is integrity and  
public confidence in the democratic process.  
We regulate party and election finance and  
set standards for well-run elections.

# Democracy matters