

23 November 2018

Armed Forces Voting

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) 2018 indicated that 86% of respondents were registered to vote. This figure has shown a steady increase since the question was introduced in 2012 and 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 has been steady at 89% from 2012-2015. The proportion of Other Ranks that are registered to vote had increased to 83% from 76% in 2016 and 63% in 2012. 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. Under Individual Electoral Registration, registration no longer occurs by household, but by individuals, and can 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.

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