



army families federation

commandbrief

Overseas Voting Survey

Over the last seven years, families have been raising concerns with AFF about their difficulties in voting in elections and referendums when posted overseas. Families consistently tell us that they would prefer to vote by post, but that this is often not possible due to the late arrival of voting papers, caused by the turnaround time required for ballot papers and issues with the accessibility of locations families live in.

Whilst AFF understands that the nature of the snap election resulted in a short turnaround time to dispatch voting papers, it is crucial the Government ensures that all Service personnel and their families posted overseas are able to participate in the democratic process.

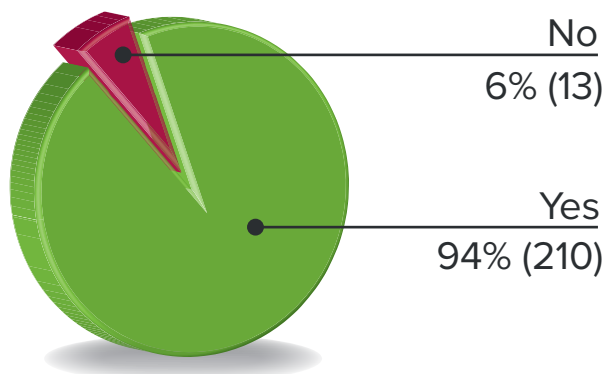
As AFF was aware of these concerns, we ran a survey following the 2017 General Election, to gather evidence on the voting experience of those overseas. The survey was only open for those currently serving overseas and we had 241 respondents.

Army families want their say in who runs the country

94% of those respondents who said they were based overseas were registered to vote, with 64% voting in the General Election 2017.

Are you registered to vote?

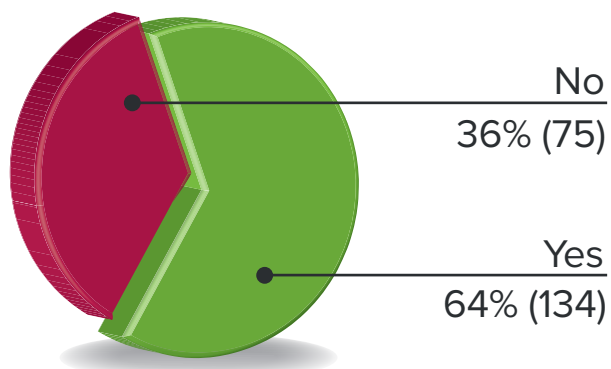
[Respondents 223]



Much of the work has been focused on ensuring personnel and families are signed up to vote. AFF is reassured to see that Service voting seems to be increasing, with a rise of 27% (*from 67% in our 2016 voting overseas survey*) saying they were registered to vote.

If yes, did you vote in the General Election 2017?

[Respondents 209]



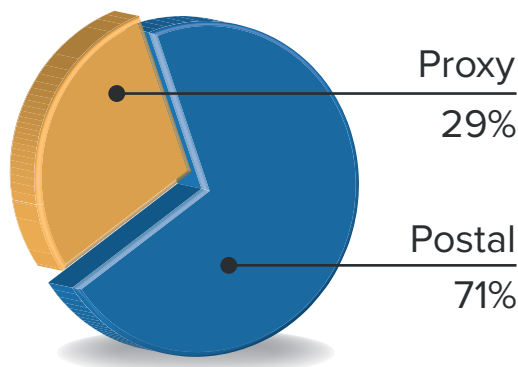
The difference in numbers may have been partly due to the problems families have experienced when voting overseas.

Postal voting the clear choice for families

The majority of Army families voted via postal voting during the General Election 2017 and would wish to vote via post in the future.

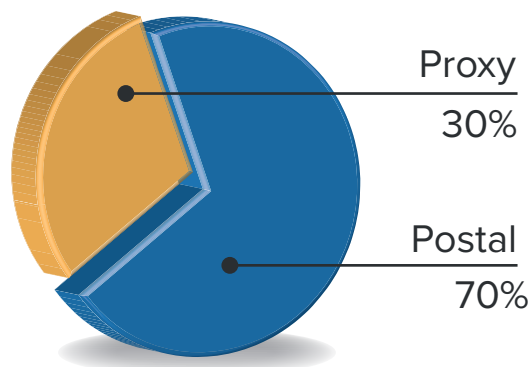
How did you cast your vote?

[Respondents 144]



How would you prefer to cast your vote in future elections if posted overseas?

[Respondents 217]



Although the majority of families would like to vote via postal vote, many cited issues with postal voting forms arriving too late or not at all.

The Electoral Commission has confirmed that, due to government legislation, Returning Officers are unable to send out postal votes until after the close of nominations, which is set at 19 days before polling day for a General Election. In addition, although local authorities are instructed to prioritise overseas voters when dispatching ballot papers, registration to vote closes only a few days before an election. This can result in an overseas voter being eligible to vote, but insufficient time left for them to receive their ballot papers.

*"This election was announced and it was already **too late** for us in Cyprus to get postal votes sent out to us, fill them in and send them back. We don't have relatives who live in the same county as us so could not proxy vote. **Very annoying and frustrating**, making us feel like we don't count while we are abroad working for the UK Government!"*

Proxy voting

The MOD and Electoral Commission both recommend proxy voting as the best option for overseas voters. However, proxy voting is not the choice of personnel and families, with only 29% voting by proxy at the General Election and 30% wishing to do so for future elections.

These results are similar to AFF's voting overseas survey in 2016, which indicated that only 26% of those currently overseas would wish to vote via proxy, and only 14% of those not currently overseas stating that proxy voting is the method they would choose should they be posted overseas.

When voting by proxy, the Service person or family member is restricted to either:

- voting in an area where they have a family member or trusted friend, but which may not be an area they are interested in or have any knowledge of
- voting in the area they last lived in, where they have nobody who can act as a proxy.

In addition, some families were concerned about having someone else voting on their behalf, with no guarantee they would vote for who they preferred. In addition, they may not wish to share their voting intention with someone else and would therefore be unable to participate in a secret ballot; a right enshrined in the Ballot Act 1872.

*“Why should I trust someone else to vote the way I want to by proxy? This is a **personal and private matter**, so I do not want others to know how I vote.”*

Army families want other solutions to vote

Many families suggested that alternatives for voting overseas be considered, including polling stations on overseas bases or in UK embassies.

Other British citizens living overseas voting

AFF is aware of the Government’s manifesto commitment to all UK citizens living overseas being able to vote in UK elections, regardless of how long it has been since they moved overseas. As this is likely to result in over a million voters living overseas being eligible to vote, this will require clear policy and direction to be created to ensure that all overseas voters are able to cast their vote. Under the current process, this may not be possible.

AFFview

Whilst AFF welcomes the work of the Electoral Commission and the MOD to encourage and improve Service voting, AFF does not believe their advice to use proxy voting meets the needs of Army families.

AFF would like the Electoral Commission to consider possible voting alternatives for Service personnel and their families posted overseas to ensure maximum participation from these families.

With the possibility of over a million former British residents living overseas being able to participate in UK elections from overseas, AFF asks the Government to include Armed Forces families serving overseas in any new policy to facilitate ex-pats’ engagement in national elections.