

Background note on statistics on people registered to vote in Scotland

Definitions

Attainers: For UK Parliamentary elections, eligibility to vote is conditional on the voter being aged 18 or over on the date of the relevant election or referendum. For Scottish Parliamentary or local government elections eligibility to vote is conditional on the voter being aged 16 or over on the date of the relevant election or referendum. The Electoral Register is made up of the Parliamentary Register and the Local Government Register. An attainer on the (UK) Parliamentary Register is an elector who will attain the age of 18 during the currency of the register (between 2 December 2023 and 30 November 2024). With the introduction of the Scottish Elections (Reform) Bill: child rights and wellbeing impact assessment, children aged 14 are now eligible to register as attainers ahead of becoming able to vote at the age of 16. An attainer on the Local Government Register is now anyone aged 14 or 15. From 1 December 2020, statistics on attainers registered to vote in Scottish Parliamentary or local government elections are all those on the register who are 14 or 15 as at 1 December 2021. Note that in the published tables, whilst attainers are identified separately, they are also included as part of the total electorate figures.

The calling of the December 2019 General Election resulted in some delays in the registration process for attainers, particularly for Scottish Parliament and local government elections, which means that the 2019 figures shown for attainers in this publication will be underestimates.

Residents: In order to be classed as 'resident' in a constituency the elector must be normally living at an address within the constituency area on the qualifying date. If the elector is temporarily absent (for example on holiday or away at university) this will not disqualify them from being classed as resident.

Overseas electors: Those who are not resident in the UK, but have been resident here and included in the Electoral Register within a period of 15 years of the qualifying date for the current register (or resident here and too young to be registered at the time of residence). They are registered in the same parliamentary constituency as before they went abroad or, if they were too young to register, in the constituency where their parent or guardian was registered. Overseas electors cannot vote at Scottish Parliamentary or local government elections, but are entitled to vote at UK Parliamentary elections.

Service electors: Service electors are members of HM Armed Forces and their spouses, plus Crown servants and British Council employees and their spouses residing abroad. They do not register in the same way as residents and may not necessarily reside in the area of registration. Spouses of members of the Armed Forces have the option of registering as residents while in the UK. New rules for Service electors were introduced in January 2007, whereby Service elector applications are required to be completed every three years (later extended to five years in March 2010) rather than indefinitely as previously. This means that many service electors may not have renewed their application because they have now left

the Services, or have opted to register as civilian electors, as they are entitled to do. Further background on armed forces voting is available [here](#).

Foreign nationals: The [Scottish Elections \(Franchise and Representation\) Act 2020](#), which came into effect on 1 April 2020, extended the electoral franchise for Scottish Parliamentary and local government elections to citizens of all countries who are resident in Scotland and have leave (or do not require leave) to remain in the UK. Citizens of the Republic of Ireland, qualifying Commonwealth citizens and EU citizens were already entitled to vote in these elections. The statistics on 'Foreign nationals' category from December 2020 onwards comprise EU citizens and other qualifying foreign nationals; for time points before 1 December 2020, it comprises just EU citizens. Citizens of the Republic of Ireland and qualifying Commonwealth citizens are not included in this category.

Prisoners: Prior to the implementation of the [Scottish Elections \(Franchise and Representation\) Act 2020](#) on 1 April 2020, remand prisoners, unconvicted prisoners and civil prisoners could vote if they were on the Electoral Register. Convicted persons detained in pursuance of their sentences were not eligible to vote. However, following the 2020 Act the right to vote in Scottish Parliamentary and local government elections was extended to convicted prisoners sentenced to prison terms of 12 months or less. Separate statistics on such prisoners have not been included in this report, as they cannot be separately identified in the data collected.

Peers: A Peer is a member of the House of Lords. Peers can vote in Scottish Parliamentary and local government elections. At 1 December 2023, there were 38 Peers on the Electoral Register for these elections. Peers do not have the right to vote at UK Parliamentary elections.

The Electoral Register

1. The electoral register is a list of all people who are registered to vote in elections and referendums. Maintaining the electoral register is the responsibility of local Electoral Registration Offices. There are 15 such offices in Scotland.
2. Each of the 15 Electoral Registration Officers (ERO's) in Scotland maintains the electoral register for its own area. This is generally done by means of an annual canvass and a process of rolling registration. These ERO'S may also use information held by the council(s) that appointed them to ensure the register is as accurate as possible.
3. Normally, the **annual canvass** is conducted by local ERO's every autumn. A form is sent to every domestic address to find out who should be registered to vote. Forms are generally sent out by post. Householders are expected to return the completed or amended form on the basis of their circumstances on the qualifying date. In the event that a form is not returned, the ERO will endeavour to obtain the necessary information by other means. Where that information is not available, the registration information from the previous year may be carried forward for one year.
4. A system of '**rolling registration**' was introduced in 2001. This allows the register to be voluntarily updated outside the period of the annual canvass. Thus, for

example, in the event of a household or person moving home, electors can update their registration accordingly.

5. [Individual Electoral Registration](#) (IER) was introduced in September 2014. That aimed to improve the accuracy of the electoral register by making individuals responsible for their own registration. IER affected the registration of students in particular. Prior to IER, block registration was permitted, particularly for students in halls of residence. The overall impact of the introduction of IER was a downward shift in the number on the electoral register by December 2015.

6. The voting age for Scottish Parliamentary and local government elections was lowered to 16 in 2015. There were 49,000 16 and 17 year olds on this electoral register as at December 2015.

7. An increase in registered voters is often seen in the lead-up to elections and referendums, as people register to ensure they can vote. The numbers can then fall back as EROs carry out their annual canvass to update registers, for example to take account of deaths and changes of address.

Eligibility

8. A person can register to vote if they:

- will be either 18 years or over (Parliamentary register) during the currency of the register (go to [Attainers](#)) or;
- are aged 14 or 15 (Local Government register) (go to [Attainers](#));
- are a UK, Republic of Ireland or qualifying Commonwealth citizen. (Qualifying Commonwealth citizens are those who has leave to enter or remain in the UK, or do not require such leave);
- are a qualifying foreign national who has leave to remain in the UK;
- are a citizen of the Channel Islands, the Isle of Man or a British Overseas Territory living in the UK.
- are a convicted prisoner sentenced to a prison term of 12 months or less

9. The requirements for those who can vote differ by type of election. The following general rules are applied. (For more detail on these rules, see [Who Can Register.](#))

10. To vote in **United Kingdom (UK) Parliamentary elections** a person must be:

- aged 18 or older on the day of the election (go to [Attainers](#));
- a British, Irish or Commonwealth citizen resident in the UK (go to [Residents](#));
or

- a British citizen who has been living abroad for up to 15 years and registered as an overseas elector (go to [Overseas electors](#)); or
- a British citizen living abroad and registered as a service elector (go to [Service electors](#)).

11. Members of the House of Lords (Peers) and foreign nationals (except Ireland or countries which are also members of the Commonwealth as above) are not entitled to vote in UK Parliamentary elections.

12. Anyone in any of the above categories (with the exception of [Overseas electors](#)) is also eligible to vote in **Scottish Parliamentary or local government elections**. Following the passing of the [Reduction in Voting Age](#) Act in the Scottish Parliament in June 2015 (and enacted on 24 July 2015), 16 and 17 year olds are now allowed to vote in these elections. Members of the House of Lords and (from June 2020, following the implementation of the [Scottish Elections \(Franchise and Representation\) Act 2020](#)) all qualifying foreign nationals living in Scotland are also eligible to register for a vote in these elections.

13. The electorate for a referendum will be specified in the legislation that requires a referendum to be held.

14. People may be registered at more than one address (such as students with term-time and vacation addresses, or somebody with a holiday home), but an elector is not entitled to vote more than once in an election to the same elected body.

15. An illustration of voting eligibilities is given in [Diagram 1](#).

Electoral Geographies

16. Electoral boundaries can sometimes coincide with other administrative area boundaries such as council areas and health board areas or statistical data zones. However, as a rule comparisons across the different types of geographies are not straightforward. In addition, electoral boundaries change as a result of regular boundary reviews, making analysis of change over time difficult. An illustration of the geographies reported is given in [Diagram 2](#).

UK Parliamentary Constituencies

17. There are now 57 UK Parliamentary constituencies in Scotland (also known as Scottish Westminster constituencies) as defined in the Parliamentary Constituencies (Scotland) Order 2023. Previously, there were 59 UK Parliamentary constituencies in Scotland which had been in place since the General Election in 2005. Prior to 2005, there were 72 UK Parliamentary constituencies in Scotland.

18. The legislation governing the [Sixth Review of the UK Parliament Constituencies](#) was amended in 2013, and as a result, the review was not completed. The Boundary Commission for Scotland started its latest review of UK Parliament

constituencies in February 2016 and submitted its recommendations in September 2018: [2018 Review of UK Parliament Constituencies](#).

19. The [Parliamentary Constituencies Bill 2019-21](#) was introduced on 19 May 2020 and gained Royal Assent on 14th December 2020. The most recent parliamentary boundary review was launched in January 2021, and [recommendations completed by the Boundary Commission for Scotland](#) in June 2023. This was laid before the UK Parliament on 28th June 2023. The new constituencies came into force on 29th November 2023, and will be in place for the next general election

20. The boundaries and electorates of some constituencies in Scotland are protected. The [Parliamentary Voting System and Constituencies Act 2011\(PVSaCA\)](#) stated that the electorate of almost all constituencies must be within 5% of the national average. This requirement would override considerations of local geographical and political boundaries, with a few exceptions:

- The island constituencies of Orkney and Shetland and Na h-Eileanan an Iar are explicitly protected.
- Constituencies covering more than 12,000 km² do not have to comply with the above requirement (this applies to Ross, Skye and Lochaber).

Scottish Parliamentary Constituencies

21. There are currently 73 Scottish Parliamentary constituencies. [The First Periodic Review of Scottish Parliament Boundaries](#) was implemented in time for the Scottish Parliamentary election in 2011. This review resulted in significant changes to many constituencies in terms of boundaries and names (although the number of constituencies remains 73), Direct comparison over time is therefore not generally possible. Boundary reviews of Scottish Parliamentary constituencies are conducted by the [Local Government Boundary Commission for Scotland](#).

Local Government Electoral Wards

22. Electoral wards are each fully contained within a single council area.

23. The [Local Government Boundary Commission for Scotland](#) started the [Fifth Statutory Review of Electoral Arrangements](#) in February 2014. The resulting changes were used for the May 2017 local government elections. Following changes to ward boundaries there were 354 electoral wards, with effect from 4 May 2017. Previously, 353 electoral wards in Scotland had been in place since 2007.

24. At the time the 2016 statistics were being collected, a number of Electoral Registration Offices (EROs) were still in the process of adopting the required changes to ward boundaries. Hence, a number of EROs were able to submit the data using the new 2017 ward boundaries, while other submitted the data using the previous 2007 ward boundaries. To allow for a continuous time series to be created for the new wards, estimates from the full Electoral Register were calculated for the new wards using postcode information. Due to attainers not being available in the full Electoral Register, the distribution of 16 and 17 year old electors was used to distribute attainers to the new wards. For the December 2017 statistics and later

publications, all EROs submitted data on the basis of the new (2017) electoral ward boundaries.

25. [The Islands \(Scotland\) Act 2018](#) required the six councils containing inhabited islands (Argyll and Bute, Highland, North Ayrshire, Orkney Islands, Shetland Islands and Na h-Eileanan Siar) to be reviewed as soon as practicable so that government and the public sector meet the needs of island communities now and in the future. The [2019 Review of Electoral Arrangements](#) began in January 2019. Proposals on councillor numbers and wards for Argyll and Bute, Highland and North Ayrshire Council areas were submitted to Scottish Ministers on 10 June 2021, and for Na h-Eileanan Siar, Orkney Islands and Shetland Islands Council areas on 28 May 2021. The Scottish Parliament approved the proposals for North Ayrshire, Na h-Eileanan Siar, Orkney Islands and Shetland Islands Council areas. These were used in the May 2022 local government elections. The Boundary Commission for Scotland's proposal for Argyll and Bute and Highland Council areas were not approved by Parliament. For the 1 December 2021 statistics, North Ayrshire and Shetland Islands have adopted their updated councillor numbers and ward names and numbers. Due to these changes, North Ayrshire decreased from 10 wards to 9 making a total of 353 electoral wards in Scotland for the 2021 statistics. Na h-Eileanan Siar adopted their updates for the May 2022 Local election. This updated information is first presented in the 1 December 2022 statistics. Na h-Eileanan Siar increased their ward numbers from 9 to 11. The total number of wards since the December 2022 statistics is now 355.

Interpreting and Using Electoral Statistics

26. The information presented in this publication is derived from the data supplied by the 15 Electoral Registration Officers using the full register published each December. To ensure the best possible quality of the published figures, this process involves close working with the Boundary Commission for Scotland, who hold a copy of the electoral register and produce similar statistical outputs for the purpose of monitoring and reviewing electoral boundaries in Scotland.

27. The statistics provide a definitive statistical picture of electoral registration across Scotland. They also allow some comparison with electoral registration in other parts of the United Kingdom. In addition, they provide a historical record of electoral registration, showing the results of boundary changes and changes over time as appropriate.

28. Electoral statistics usually relate to registers published on 1 December each year. However, there have been a number of exceptions to this over time.

29. In 2014 and 2015, the reference date was changed to 10 March, to facilitate the change to a system of Individual Electoral Registration. Also for the purposes of the data collection to inform the next review of UK parliamentary constituency boundaries, the [Parliamentary Constituencies Act 2020](#) provided for a one-off data collection of electoral register data, with a reference date of 2 March 2020. This was to mitigate the potential impact of Covid-19 on the [annual electoral register canvass](#). The reference date has since reverted to 1 December. The different reference dates

in 2014, 2015 and 2020 should be borne in mind when looking at time series of the electoral statistics.

30. Due to the priority given to administering the December 2019 General Election, ten ERO's published their electoral registers in the first few weeks of November and one in December, while the other four delayed doing so until the start of February 2020. The electoral statistics for 2019 included in this publication therefore only nominally relate to a reference date of 1 December 2019. The publication date for each Office is shown below:

Local Electoral Registration Office	Publication date of electoral register
Ayrshire	1 November 2019
Central Scotland	8 November 2019
Dumfries and Galloway	5 December 2019
Dunbartonshire and Argyll & Bute	11 November 2019
Dundee	5 November 2019
Fife	1 February 2020
Glasgow	1 February 2020
Grampian	1 February 2020
Highland and Western Isles	1 February 2020
Lanarkshire	12 November 2019
Lothian	14 November 2019
Orkney and Shetland	1 February 2020
Renfrewshire	4 November 2019
Scottish Borders	6 November 2019
Tayside	7 November 2019

31. Due to by-elections in December 2021, Dunbartonshire and Argyll and Bute ERO and Highland and Western Isles ERO published their registers in November 2021. The other thirteen ERO's published on 1 December 2021.

32. Considerable care must be taken when using electoral statistics alongside population estimates. The scope for direct comparison between these two sources is limited. Electoral geographies, eligibilities, registration processes and time references must be taken into account. Population estimates are produced on a different basis in all of these aspects. The following table summarises some of the key differences between statistics on people registered to vote and population estimates.

Electoral statistics	Population estimates
Geographies	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • UK Parliamentary constituencies • Scottish Parliamentary constituencies • Electoral wards • Council areas 	<p>Geographies used for population estimates such as health boards and statistical data zones differ from electoral geographies. Population estimates for some electoral geographies are produced, but only on a 'best fit' basis, with the exception of council areas which is therefore the only fully comparable geography that can be used.</p>
Coverage	
<p>Definition: Everyone eligible and registered to vote.</p> <p>Age: For the UK parliamentary electorate, those due to attain the age of 18 during the life of the register. For Scottish Parliamentary and local government electorates, those age 14 or over during the life of the register. Note that generally no age information is held on the register except for those who will become eligible through age during the currency of the Register. A count of attainers is also published as part of the dataset. Coverage of attainers is known to be low in the electoral register.</p> <p>Residency: Length of residency is not defined in terms of precise duration. The register includes persons residing overseas who have the right to vote in the UK.</p> <p>Number of entries: In some cases there may be more than one entry for the same person on the register nationally. For example, students may be on the electoral register at their term-time address as well as their parents' home address. In a similar way, people with second homes may appear on the electoral register twice.</p> <p>Voter eligibilities: Eligibilities for each type of election are complex. The Scottish Parliamentary and Local</p>	<p>Everyone resident for 12 months or longer.</p> <p>All ages. Population estimates are provided by age, but any viable comparison with the electoral register can only be done for the totality of those aged 16/18 and over.</p> <p>Population estimates are based on everyone whose stay in the UK is 12 months or more. Students are considered resident at their term-time address.</p> <p>The population estimates aim to count each person once.</p> <p>Population estimates cover everyone who meets the residency criterion irrespective of their citizenship status.</p>

<p>Government electorate is most comprehensive in terms of coverage and likely to be closest to the population estimate.</p>	
<p>Time reference</p>	
<p>The electoral register is aimed to represent the eligible registered population continuously. There is likely to be a time lag between relevant events (such as house moves) and the corresponding register update. The annual canvass takes place during August / September and is based on a reference date of 15th October in order to produce a Register as at 1st December. This is potentially five months after the last population estimate (or seven months before the next population estimate).</p>	<p>Population estimates refer to population as at a point in time – 30th June of each year.</p>

33. Statistics on votes cast and other information on previous elections, and a list of upcoming elections and referendums, is available from the [Electoral Commission](#).

Diagram 1

		Type of election		
		Local Government ¹	Scottish Parliament ¹	UK Parliament
Electorate	Main Electorate (Resident in Scotland on qualifying date)	✓	✓	✓
	Service Personnel (and spouses, Crown Servants and British Council employees)	✓	✓	✓
	Peers	✓	✓	X
	Foreign nationals (Resident in Scotland on the qualifying date)	✓	✓	X
	Prisoners (Serving 12 months or less)	✓	✓	X
	Overseas Electors (Have been on the electoral register within the last 15 years)	X	X	✓

1. The Scottish Elections (Franchise and Representation) Act 2020 extended the right to vote in Scottish Parliament and local government elections to a) convicted prisoners sentenced to prison terms of 12 months or less, and b) qualifying foreign nationals.

Note that this diagram is simplified – it does not include information on homeless, those with no permanent address and certain types of voluntary inpatients.

Diagram 2

