

Background note to Electoral Register

1. The Electoral Register

The electoral register is a list of all people who are registered to vote in elections and referendums. The creation and maintenance of the electoral register is the responsibility of local electoral registration offices. There are 15 such offices in Scotland.

1.1 Maintaining the Electoral Register

Each of the 15 local electoral registration offices 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. In addition, Electoral Registration Officers may use information held by the council(s) that appointed them to ensure that the register is as complete and accurate as possible.

Annual Canvass

Normally, in the autumn of each year, a canvass is conducted by local Electoral Registration Officers. A form is sent to every domestic address to find out who should be registered to vote. Forms are generally sent out by post, and 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 Electoral Registration Officer will endeavour to obtain the necessary information by other means. In the event that no information is available, the registration information from the previous year may be carried forward for one year.

Rolling Registration

A system of 'rolling registration' was introduced in 2001 which 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.

The information presented in these tables is derived using the data supplied by the 15 Electoral Registration Officers using the full register published on 1st December 2020. 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.

It therefore provides a definitive picture of electoral registration across Scotland, and allows some comparison with electoral registration in other parts of the United Kingdom. In addition, it provides a historical record of electoral registration, showing the results of boundary changes and changes over time as appropriate.

1.2 Eligibility

A person can register to vote if he/she:

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

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

To vote in United Kingdom (UK) Parliament 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](#)).

Members of the House of Lords (Peers) and citizens of the European Union (EU) (except Ireland or countries which are also members of the Commonwealth as above) are not entitled to vote in UK Parliament elections.

Members of the House of Lords and EU citizens living in Scotland are eligible to vote in Local Government or Scottish Parliament elections, along with anyone in any of the above categories (with the exception of [Overseas electors](#)). 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 also allowed to vote in these elections.

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

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

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.

Definitions

Attainers: For UK Parliament 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 Parliament 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 Parliamentary Register is an elector who will attain the age of 18 during the currency of the register (between 2 December 2020 and 30 November 2021). 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 Parliament or Local Government elections are all those on the register who are 14 or 15 as at 1 December 2020. 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 Parliament or Local Government elections, but are entitled to vote at UK Parliament and European Parliament 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 local government elections in Scotland and Scottish Parliament 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 as at 1 December 2020 which are included in this publication comprise EU citizens and other qualifying foreign nationals; for previous time points 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 local government elections in Scotland and in Scottish Parliament 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 Parliament, Local Government and European Parliament elections, At 1 December 2020, there were 39 Peers on the Electoral Register for these elections. Peers do not have the right to vote at UK Parliamentary elections.

1.3 Electoral Geographies

Electoral boundaries can sometimes coincide with other administrative area boundaries such as council areas and health board areas or statistical data zones, but 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.

UK Parliamentary Constituencies

There are currently 59 UK Parliamentary constituencies in Scotland (also known as Scottish Westminster constituencies) as defined in the Parliamentary Constituencies (SCOTLAND) Order 2005. These constituencies have been in place since the General Election in 2005. Prior to 2005, there were 72 UK Parliamentary constituencies in Scotland.

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](#).

The [Parliamentary Constituencies Bill 2019-21](#) was introduced on 19 May 2020 and gained Royal Assent on 14th December 2020. This means the next parliamentary boundary review, which is due to start in 2021, will have to be completed by the Boundary Commissions by 1 July 2023.

Scottish Parliamentary Constituencies

There are currently 73 Scottish Parliamentary constituencies. [The First Periodic Review of Scottish Parliament Boundaries](#) was implemented in time for the Scottish Parliament 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), and therefore direct comparison over time will not be possible. Boundary reviews of Scottish Parliament constituencies are conducted by the [Local Government Boundary Commission for Scotland](#).

Local Government Wards

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

The [Fifth Statutory Review of Electoral Arrangements](#) started in February 2014 and the resulting changes were used for the local government elections in May 2017. As a result of these changes to ward boundaries there are now 354 electoral wards.

Previously, 353 electoral wards in Scotland had been in place since 2007.

2. Interpreting and Using Electoral Statistics

Considerable care must be taken when using electoral statistics alongside population estimate data. 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 population estimates and electoral statistics.

Electoral statistics	Population estimates
Geographies	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • UK Parliament constituencies • Scottish Parliament 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 Parliament 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>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>Voter eligibilities: Eligibilities for each type of election are complex. The Local Government and Scottish Parliament electorate is most comprehensive in terms of coverage and likely to be closest to the population estimate.</p>	<p>Population estimates cover everyone who meets the residency criterion irrespective of their citizenship status.</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>

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.