Supplementary written evidence submitted by Conservatives Abroad (RPB35)

Conservatives Abroad is the overseas membership arm of the Conservative Party and was asked to provide oral evidence to the Bill Committee on 18th March on overseas electors.

Issues concerning Overseas Electors

While the current Bill as drafted largely does not focus on overseas electors save for the enlarging of the overseas voter franchise to include 16- and 17-year-olds, there are a couple of issues within the stated objectives of the Bill that also affect overseas electors. These were given consideration during the passing of the Elections Act 2022 and have been highlighted by the Electoral Commission in its report on the 2024 Elections.

1. **Improving Voter Registration**

A key objective of the Bill is improving voter registration. However, while the actual numbers of unregistered onshore potential voters remain unquantified, the number of unregistered overseas voters is demonstrably material with just 191,338 [i] registered at the 2024 General Election against estimates of 5 to 6 million British nationals living overseas.

Clauses 20 and 21 of the Bill create powers for pilots to find ways to enhance the capture of voter registration data including:

- Commissioning pilots that register eligible individuals who are unregistered, removing ineligible individuals, and updating individuals' details on the electoral register.
- Commissioning pilots to explore innovative methods for identifying eligible individuals and facilitating their registration. (For example, this could be through enhancing the data available to registration officers.)

The historic position of the Civil Service has been that contacting overseas Britons to encourage voter registration was not possible as the British Government did not keep a register of its citizens living abroad and therefore did not know who or where they were. However, as many Government services have transitioned to being fulfilled online, many Government departments now interact digitally with overseas British citizens as a matter of course.

Conservatives Abroad believe it is now possible for the extensive use of existing Government digital records to contact Britons based abroad to make them aware and to encourage them to register to vote by providing them with links to the online voter registration site.

Examples of Government digital interaction with overseas based British citizens include:

a) *Home Office / The Passport Office* – Approximately 500,000 [ii] British passport applications are processed each year from citizens living overseas who provide their addresses, emails and mobile phone numbers. Over the last 10 years, the life of a typical passport, around 5 million applications have been processed from overseas based citizens.

b) *DWP / International Pension Office* – As of 2021 there were 1,157,667 [iii] pensioners living overseas receiving a UK pension administrated by the International Pension Office of the DWP.

c) *Foreign Office / Individual FCDO missions* – while not uniform or consistent, certain overseas missions particularly in developing countries or potential trouble spots, maintain contact lists of British nationals, particularly in locations where evacuation may be required.

d) *Treasury / HMRC* - The HMRC is the first government body most Britons inform with a change of address when moving away from the UK. Many will continue to pay tax on UK income and property, pay voluntary NI contributions and file returns. ONS data shows about 100,000 more British citizens leaving the UK each year than returning [iv].

In all these cases a link to the online voter registration site could be provided upon interaction with an overseas based British citizen or information provided directly to an ERO where the last UK address is known, for follow up.

2. Conduct of Elections – Absent Voting

Once registered to vote an overseas elector has 3 ways to vote. By post, by proxy or to return to the UK to vote in person. In practice most are thought to opt for postal votes.

The Bill recognises -

'The legislative framework governing absent voting was designed in a very different electoral context. Postal voting volumes have increased significantly, supply chains are more fragile, and voter expectations around delivery and reliability have changed. At the same time the current electoral timetable compresses printing, dispatch and return of postal ballots into a narrow window, placing increasing pressure on electoral administrators and increasing the risk that postal votes cannot be returned in time'.

This is indeed a central concern to overseas electors who are reliant on a double international postal process to ensure their vote gets counted. The Electoral Commission in its Report on the 2024 General Election [v] while not having data on how many overseas electors voted by proxy did know that half (49%) of all registered overseas voters registered for a postal vote. Of these, only 52% returned their ballot paper in time to be counted in the general election. This means that only around a quarter of all registered overseas voters were able to vote successfully by post.

The Bill only addresses this issue with measures moving the postal vote application deadline forward by three working days. While this extra time may help some UK based electors it does not address the issue of the deterioration of postal systems both here and around the world and supply chain delays with ERO's having to queue alongside each other waiting for approved ballot printing firms to produce and release ballot papers for each constituency, further shortening the turnaround window overseas postal voters have.

The reality of the digital age is that traditional postal services are deteriorating as they become less relied upon. This is just as true in the developed world, such as rural parts of Australia and the USA or the UAE as it is in the developing world. It particularly affects the outward delivery from the UK of a voting pack leaving an elector little or simply no time to return their ballot. It also creates an unlevel playing field where an overseas voter in for example the Channel Islands, Netherlands or Switzerland has a very high chance of getting their vote counted while an overseas elector in Australia, South Africa or Brazil, has much less chance.

This issue was looked in to at the time of the Elections Act 2022 and the Civil Service came up with the solution of providing return envelopes with prepaid international priority post labels that could be identified by the Royal Mail on their arrival back in the UK. The evidence collected by the Electoral Commission in its report on the 2024 Elections suggests these envelopes made little meaningful difference particularly as they only covered the return half of the postal arrangements.

Conservatives Abroad believe technological advances now make it possible for a secure and verifiable online facility to be introduced to allow overseas electors to download and self-print their ballot paper and an address envelope for one way return posting.

This is also in line with one of the recommendations from the Electoral Commission's report on the Elections of 2024 [v] which read:

- Exploring how to send postal votes to overseas voters earlier in the election timetable – for example by sending a blank ballot paper before the candidate nomination deadline has passed, or, allowing voters to securely download and print their own ballot paper, then post it (rather than relying on post arriving from the UK).

With technological progress over the last few years several countries around the world have successfully introduced downloadable ballot papers for their overseas electors, including recently the Netherlands as well as English-speaking 'Westminster' democracies such as New Zealand and Singapore.

Key to why this is now possible and was not yet an option at the time of the Elections Act 2022 is the development and release by the Government Digital Service of new ways to access gov.uk services creating the possibility for verifying an overseas elector accessing a ballot paper for downloading against their voter registration credentials such as a UK passport or UK Driving Licence. An international postage paid return address label can likewise also be made available for printing.

In terms of other English speaking countries that have already implemented and have used at General Elections downloadable ballots for their overseas electors, Singapore is a good example where an overseas voter registers in a similar way to the UK and votes in the constituency of their last registered domestic address, accessing their ballot online using their equivalent login app which is called 'Singpass'. They also print out an envelope for one-way postal return. The ballot paper has QR codes which give the ERO certainty that it is genuine and make sure an elector's vote is only counted once, while the envelope is coded so that the Singapore Post Office can recognise it as a postal vote and prioritise its delivery. Singapore also operates polling stations in 10 of its overseas missions including London.

New Zealand has the longest record of successfully using downloadable ballot papers having first introduced them for its 2005 General Election. It was the template for the Singapore approach, and it has now gone a step further and allows electors once they have printed out their ballot paper and made their selection, to scan it with their smartphone and upload it back to their ERO without any postal service used in either leg of the process. New Zealand also creates polling stations in a limited number of its overseas missions at General Election time.

A Singapore Government video explaining how their process works is available HERE

A New Zealand Government video explaining how their process works is available HERE

[i] House of Commons Library 24 July 2025 - 2.1 Page 13.
[ii] Overseas Passport Application Data February 2025 – Tab PCCR_02
[iii] House of Commons Library 8 February 2021 – 3.1 Page 12.
[iv] ONS Long Term Migration Data June 2025 – Figure 2 data
[v] Electoral Commission Report on the 2024 General Election – 3. Barriers to voting at the elections – overseas voters

23 March 2026

UK Overseas Voter Participation

2024 General Election Data, OECD Comparative Analysis
Recommendations for Improvement

Conservatives Abroad

Executive Summary

At the 2024 UK General Election, only ~25% of registered overseas voters cast a counted postal ballot. The Electoral Commission concluded the system "does not work well enough."

Systemic Failure

75% of overseas votes did not result in a counted postal ballot — millions disenfranchised by an outdated system.

Postal Bottleneck

Ballots dispatched just 1 week before polling day in some cases. Return rate from Australia: just 6%.

UK is an Outlier

The UK's ~1.3% effective participation rate is the lowest of 13 OECD nations surveyed. France achieves 36.6%.

Sources: Electoral Commission Report Nov 2024 · FVAP 2024 · French MFA · International IDEA · Cambridge Core

2024 General Election — The UK Numbers

191,338

Registered overseas voters

First election under 'votes for life' rules

49%

Registered for postal vote

Of all overseas voters

52%

Returned on time

Of those who received a postal ballot

~1.3%

Effective participation

Of estimated 5.5m eligible overseas citizens

The snap election timetable (22 May → 4 July) compressed every deadline to its minimum legal limit

UK Postal Ballot Return Rates by Country — 2024 General Election

Country	Rate
France	75%
Canada	48%
USA	38%
Spain	32%
Australia	6%
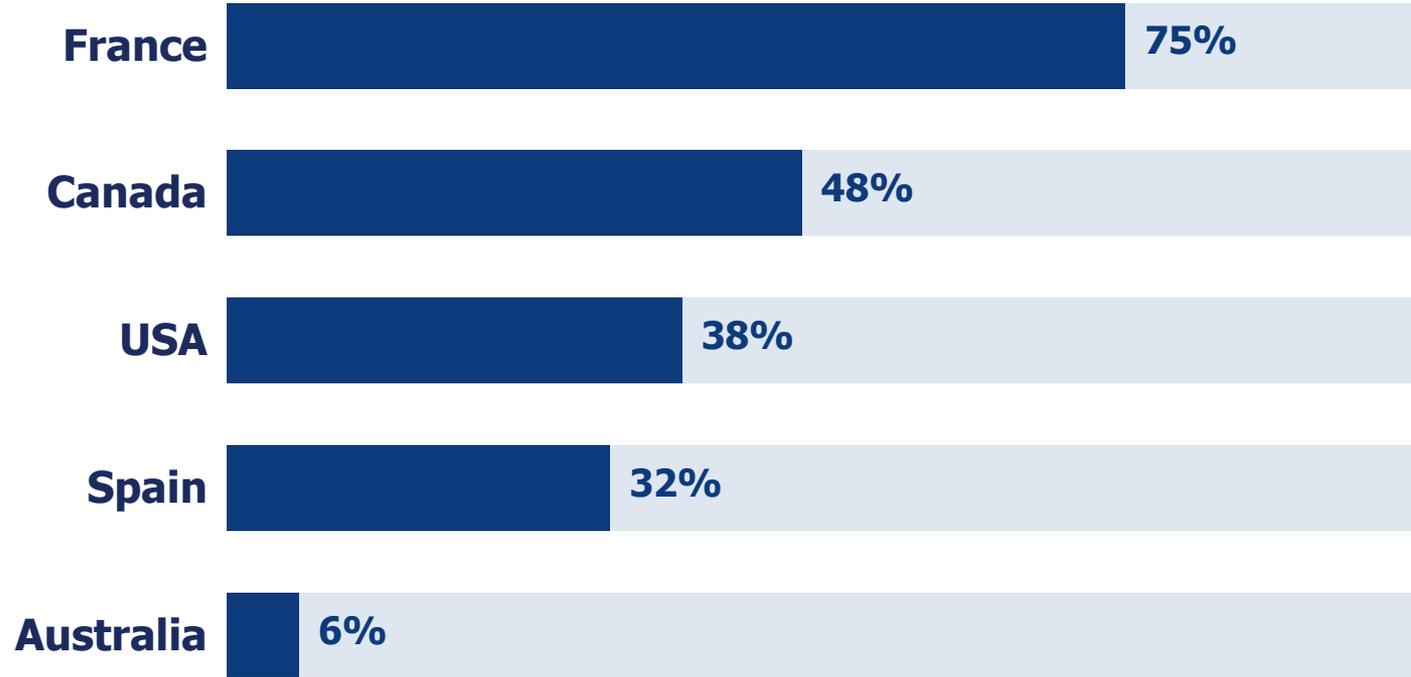
⚠ **Late-dispatched batches saw rates collapse to 2% (27 June dispatch) — with just one week for international post**

Source: Electoral Commission sample; British Overseas Voters Forum survey data

How Dispatch Timing Determined Success or Failure

22 May ● Election called

19 June ● Postal vote application deadline

14–18 June ● **1st dispatch batch — meaningful return rates achievable**

20 June ● **2nd dispatch batch — ~15% return rate**

27 June ● **3rd dispatch batch — ~2% return rate (1 week to polling day)**

4 July ● **Polling Day**
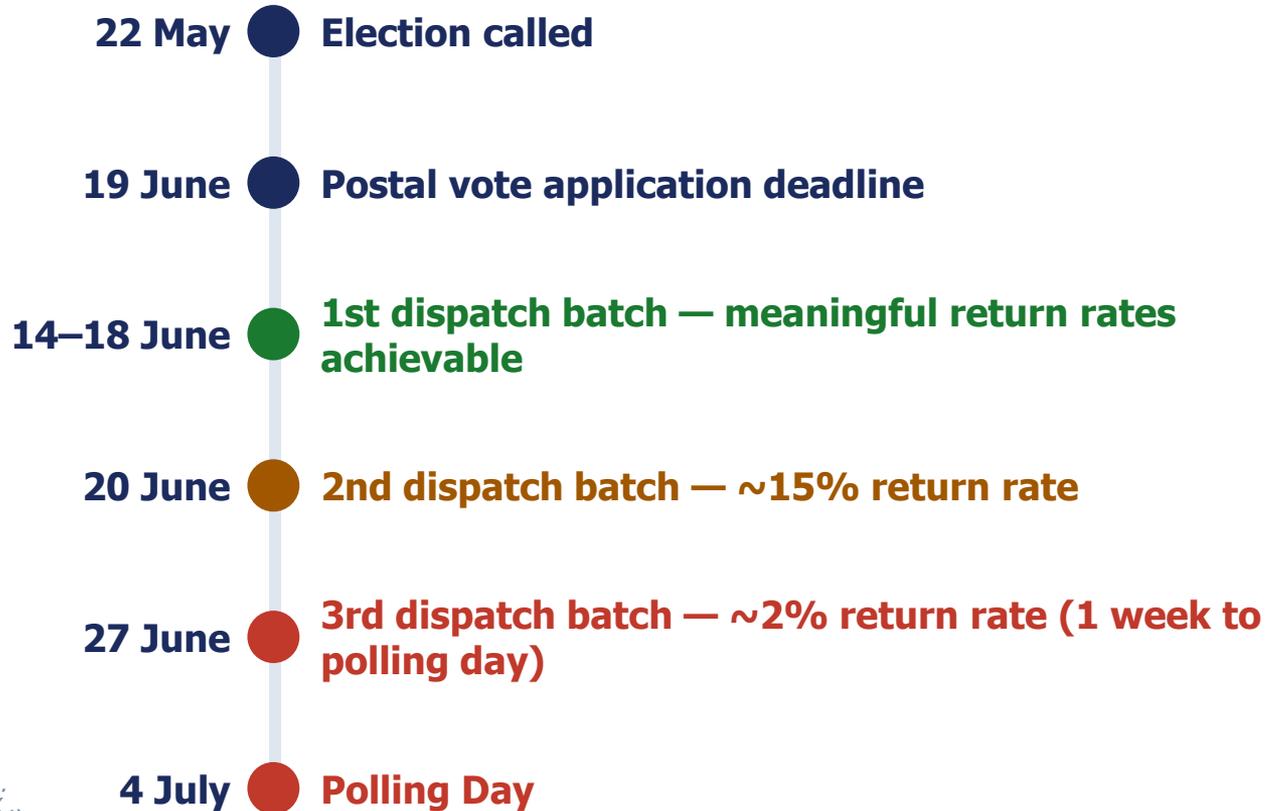
Source: Electoral Commission; Electoral Reform Society (2024)

How Large is Each Country's Overseas Population? - *OECD Comparison*

Country	Overseas Population
MX **Mexico**	12.0m
IT **Italy**	6.0m
GB **UK**	5.5m
US **USA (civ.)**	5.7m
DE **Germany**	4.0m
FR **France**	2.5m
CA **Canada**	2.9m
ES **Spain**	2.5m
JP **Japan**	1.4m
AU **Australia**	1.0m
CH **Switzerland**	0.8m
NO **Norway**	0.3m
EE **Estonia**	0.2m
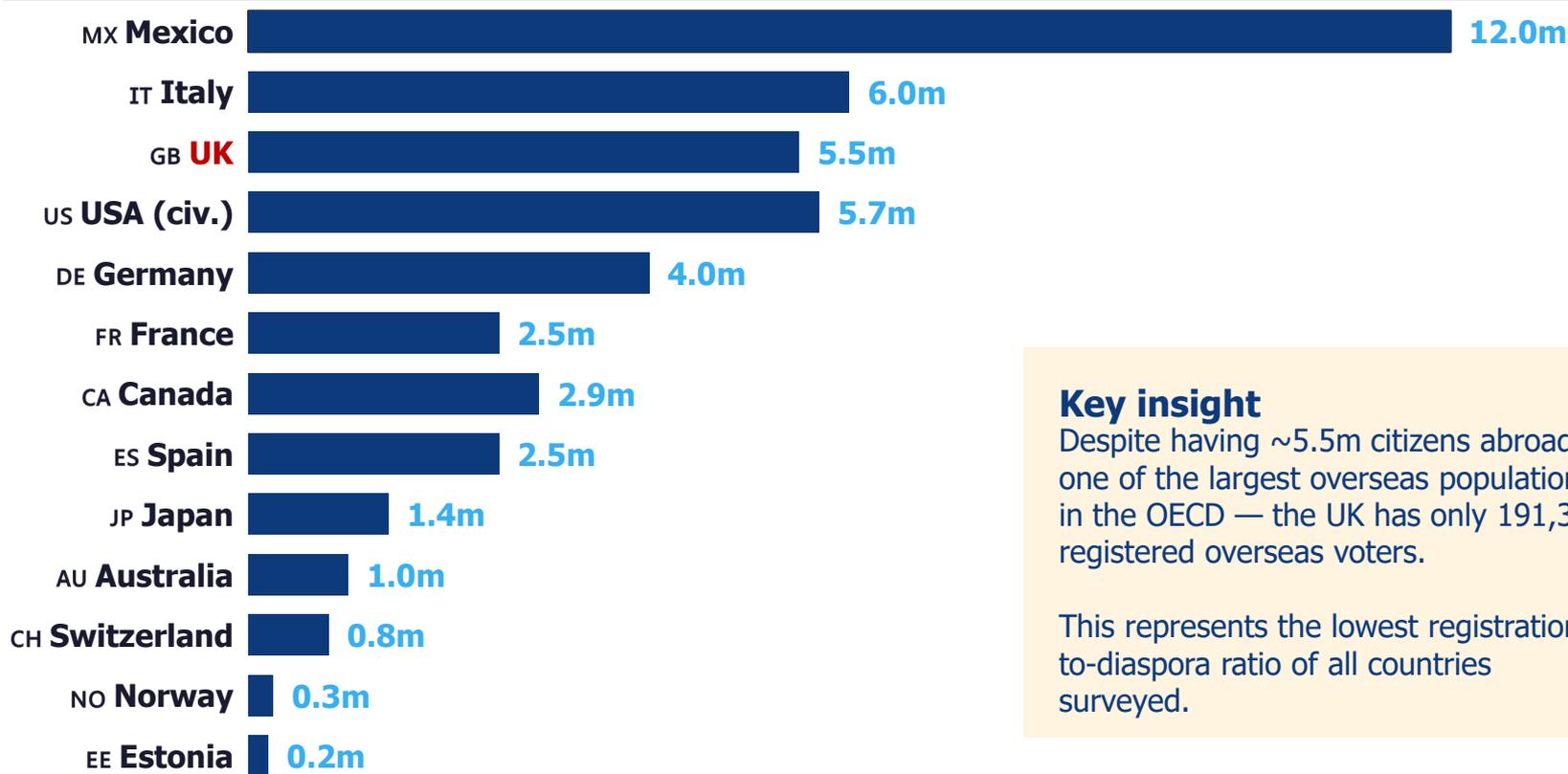
Key insight
Despite having ~5.5m citizens abroad — one of the largest overseas populations in the OECD — the UK has only 191,338 registered overseas voters.

This represents the lowest registration-to-diaspora ratio of all countries surveyed.

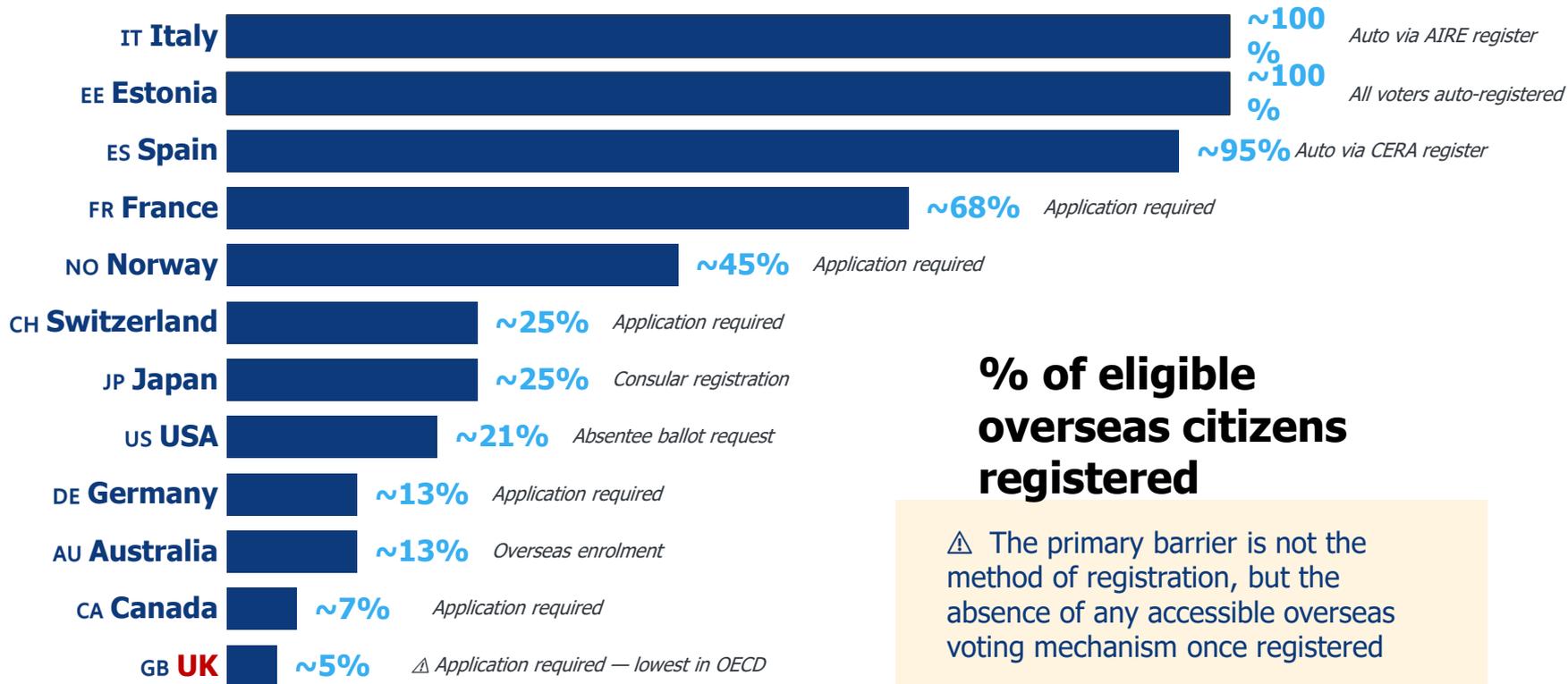*Sources: OECD; UN DESA; national foreign affairs ministries; FVAP 2024; Destatis; ONS*

Overseas Voter Registration Rates — *OECD Comparison*

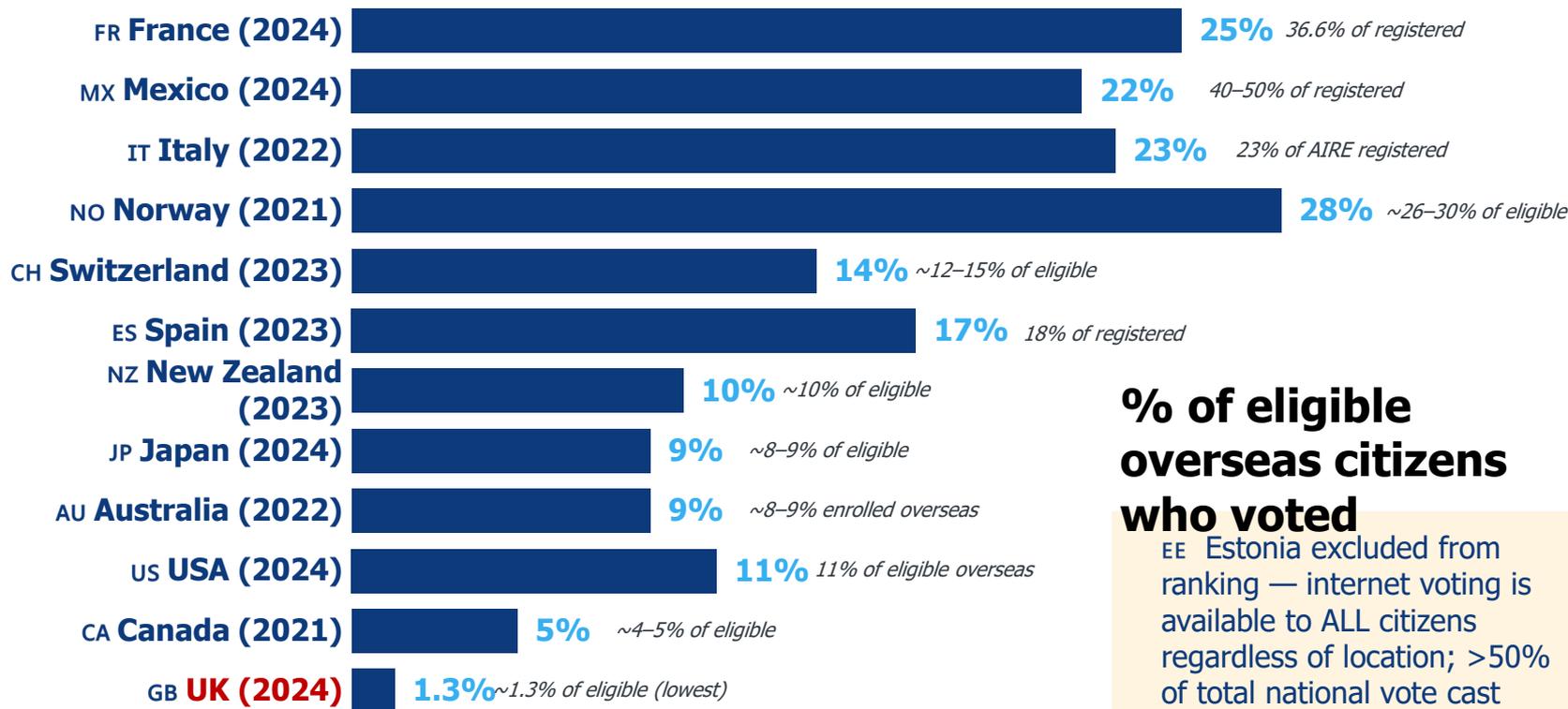| Country	Rate	Method
IT Italy	~100%	Auto via AIRE register
EE Estonia	~100%	All voters auto-registered
ES Spain	~95%	Auto via CERA register
FR France	~68%	Application required
NO Norway	~45%	Application required
CH Switzerland	~25%	Application required
JP Japan	~25%	Consular registration
US USA	~21%	Absentee ballot request
DE Germany	~13%	Application required
AU Australia	~13%	Overseas enrolment
CA Canada	~7%	Application required
GB UK	~5%	⚠ Application required — lowest in OECD

% of eligible overseas citizens registered

⚠ The primary barrier is not the method of registration, but the absence of any accessible overseas voting mechanism once registered

Sources: French MFA; Italian AIRE/Istat; Spanish INE; Elections Canada; AEC; FVAP; Electoral Commission UK Nov 2024
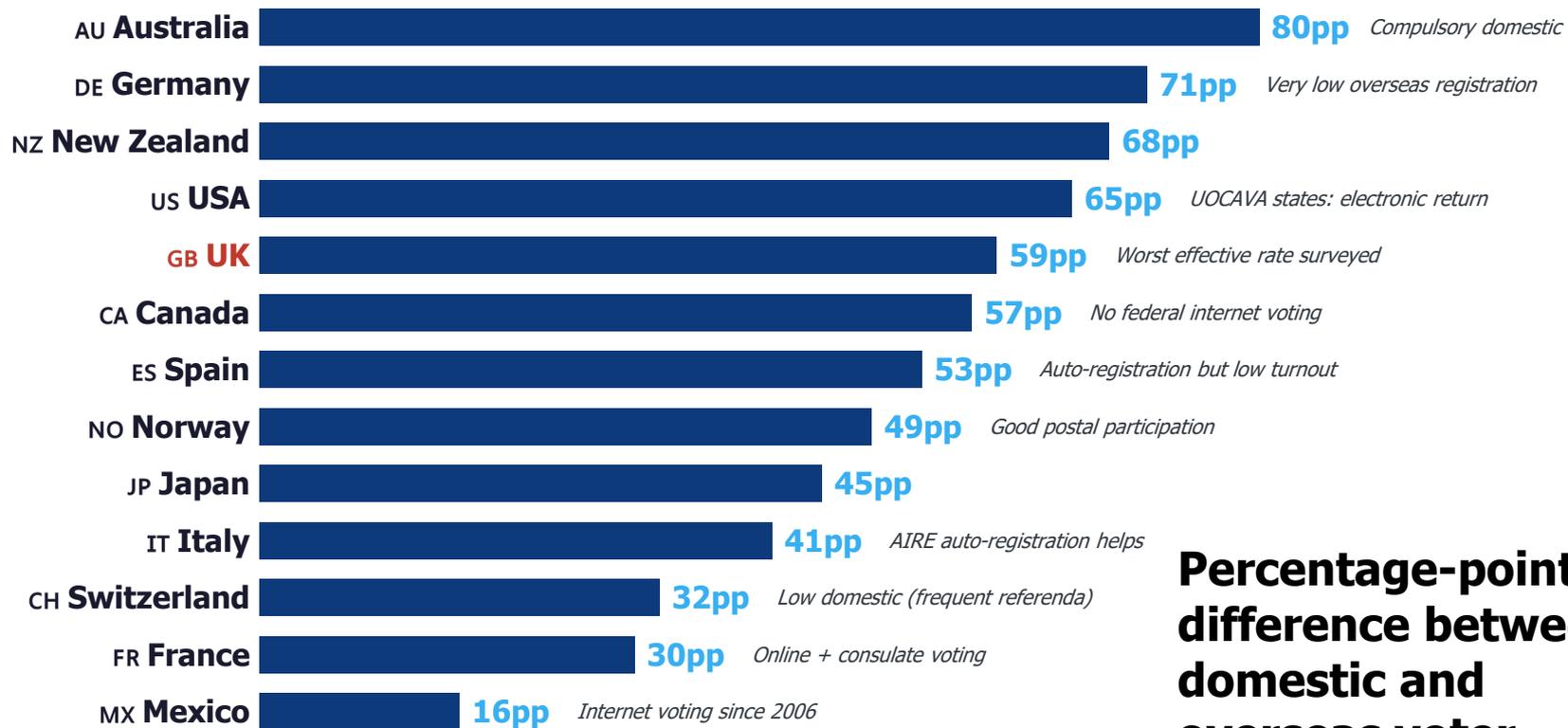
Overseas Voter Participation Rates — *OECD Ranked*

	% of eligible overseas citizens who voted	
FR France (2024)	**25%**	*36.6% of registered*
MX Mexico (2024)	**22%**	*40–50% of registered*
IT Italy (2022)	**23%**	*23% of AIRE registered*
NO Norway (2021)	**28%**	*~26–30% of eligible*
CH Switzerland (2023)	**14%**	*~12–15% of eligible*
ES Spain (2023)	**17%**	*18% of registered*
NZ New Zealand (2023)	**10%**	*~10% of eligible*
JP Japan (2024)	**9%**	*~8–9% of eligible*
AU Australia (2022)	**9%**	*~8–9% enrolled overseas*
US USA (2024)	**11%**	*11% of eligible overseas*
CA Canada (2021)	**5%**	*~4–5% of eligible*
GB UK (2024)	**1.3%**	*~1.3% of eligible (lowest)*

% of eligible overseas citizens who voted

EE Estonia excluded from ranking — internet voting is available to ALL citizens regardless of location; >50% of total national vote cast online in 2023

Sources: French MFA; Italian AIRE; Norwegian NEC; FVAP 2024; INE Mexico; Electoral Commission UK; International IDEA

The Domestic–Overseas Turnout Gap

Country	Gap	Note
AU **Australia**	**80pp**	*Compulsory domestic*
DE **Germany**	**71pp**	*Very low overseas registration*
NZ **New Zealand**	**68pp**	
US **USA**	**65pp**	*UOCAVA states: electronic return*
GB **UK**	**59pp**	*Worst effective rate surveyed*
CA **Canada**	**57pp**	*No federal internet voting*
ES **Spain**	**53pp**	*Auto-registration but low turnout*
NO **Norway**	**49pp**	*Good postal participation*
JP **Japan**	**45pp**	
IT **Italy**	**41pp**	*AIRE auto-registration helps*
CH **Switzerland**	**32pp**	*Low domestic (frequent referenda)*
FR **France**	**30pp**	*Online + consulate voting*
MX **Mexico**	**16pp**	*Internet voting since 2006*

Percentage-point difference between domestic and overseas voter turnout

Sources: International IDEA Voter Turnout Database; FVAP 2024; national electoral commissions; Electoral Commission UK

What the Comparative Data Tells Us

① Download, print and post back — a proven, low-tech bridge

New Zealand and Singapore both allow overseas voters to securely download their authenticated ballot, print and complete it, then post or upload it back. NZ's upload rate exceeded 90% of overseas voters in 2023. Singapore introduced postal download via Singpass in 2023. No full internet infrastructure needed.

② Voting method is the decisive variable

France saw abstention hit 84% when online voting was suspended in 2017. When it resumed, participation recovered to 36.6% in 2024 — the highest of any country where postal-only alternatives also exist. Mexico's internet voting grew from 32,621 (2006) to 122,497 (2024).

③ The domestic–overseas gap can be narrowed

Mexico (16pp gap), France (30pp) and New Zealand (upload system) all demonstrate the gap is closeable. Note: high overseas registration rates (Italy 100%, Spain 95%) do not alone drive participation — Italy achieves just 23% turnout despite near-universal registration. Mechanism is everything.

④ The UK is a statistical outlier by a wide margin

With ~1.3% of eligible overseas citizens casting a counted vote, the UK posts the lowest effective participation rate of the 13 countries surveyed. The next lowest — Canada at ~4–5% — is still 3–4 times higher. The UK also has the lowest registration-to-diaspora ratio despite having 5.5m citizens abroad.

Sources: Cambridge Core Modern Italy 2023; French MFA; INE Mexico; FVAP; International IDEA; Electoral Commission UK

PART 3

How OECD Countries Enable Overseas Voters

A comparative analysis of digital voting methods deployed across comparable democracies

Conservatives Abroad

OECD Overview — Overseas Voting Methods

Country	Method	Status
NZ New Zealand	Downloadable ballot papers for overseas voters	✅ Active
SG Singapore	Downloadable ballot papers for overseas voters	✅ Active
EE Estonia	Full internet voting (all voters)	✅ Active nationally since 2005
FR France	Online + postal + consulate in-person	⚠️ Active — credential issues noted 2023
CH Switzerland	Internet voting for overseas + cantonal pilots	⚠️ Resumed after 2019 security pause
US USA (UOCAVA states)	Electronic ballot return (email / portal)	✅ Active in multiple states
MX Mexico	Internet voting for overseas citizens	✅ 122,497 online votes in 2024
NO Norway	Postal + embassy in-person	❌ Internet voting discontinued 2014
AU Australia	Telephone-assisted; some state internet pilots	⚠️ Partial / sub-national
DE Germany	Extended postal window only	⚠️ No digital option federally
IT Italy	Postal only	⚠️ AIRE auto-registration; postal only
ES Spain	Postal only	⚠️ CERA auto-registration; postal only
GB UK	Postal only — no digital option	🔴 Reform urgently needed

NZ & Singapore: Download, Print & Post Back NZ SG

NZ New Zealand — Download & Upload System

>90%
of overseas voters used the download-upload system in 2023

- Enrolled overseas voters download ballot papers directly from vote.nz — no postal dispatch needed
- Voters complete the ballot digitally or print and scan, then upload back to the Electoral Commission
- Statutory declaration signed by a witness still required
- Physical postal return also accepted for those without internet access
- ~78,000 enrolled with overseas address in 2023; EC recommends digital signature to remove printer requirement

SG Singapore — Singpass Download System

2023
Introduced postal download via Singpass for PE2023 & GE2025

- After Nomination Day, overseas voters download and print their postal ballot AND return envelope from gov.sg using Singpass.
- Voter completes ballot, seals in the printed return envelope, and posts it back — postmarked before Polling Day, received within 10 days
- Eliminates the outbound postal delay entirely — Singapore no longer dispatches physical ballot packs abroad
- Singpass authentication ensures only the registered voter can access their own ballot download
- 9,759 overseas postal voters used the download system at GE2025 (May 2025)

Two Relevant Experiences for UK consideration US CH

US United States (UOCAVA)

62% *of overseas voters used electronic return when available*

- Electronic ballot return via secure portal or email — no national digital ID needed

- Active in Alaska, Arizona, California, Florida and more

- 20% of overseas voters say their local postal system is 'unreliable' — mirrors UK problem

- Authentication via existing voter registration data — implementable without new ID infrastructure

CH Switzerland

5% *turnout drop when internet voting suspended*

- System paused 2019 after security flaw discovered — entirely rebuilt with public cryptographic audit

- New system approved March 2023; trialled in 3 cantons Oct 2023

- Staged cantonal rollout with hard caps on online vote % — credibility-building approach

- Proves: pausing, rebuilding and re-introducing is possible — reform doesn't have to be all-or-nothing

Lessons from Active Systems FR MX

FR France

Since 2012: online voting for 11 overseas National Assembly constituencies (1.4m eligible overseas French voters). 36.6% participation in 2024 — up from 22.5% in 2022. 84% abstention when online voting was suspended.

⚠ Warning Signs

- 2023: Constitutional Council annulled 2 overseas constituency results — SMS credential delivery failures

- Independent researchers identified cryptographic weaknesses leaving no detectable trace

- Lesson: credential management and security audit must be watertight before rollout

MX Mexico

Online votes cast from abroad:

Year	Votes
2006	32,621
2012	59,115
2018	98,340
2024	122,497
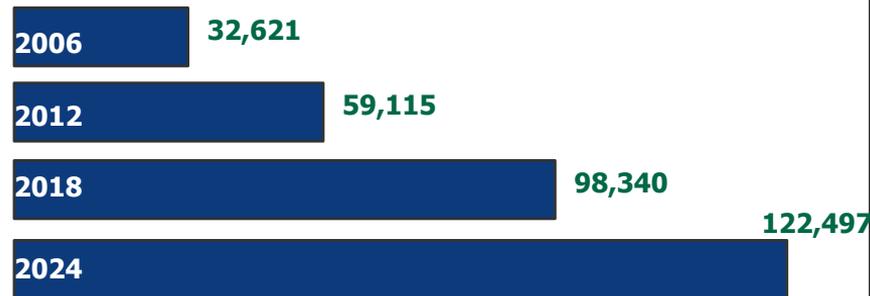
66% of all overseas ballots in 2024 were cast online

Key lesson: uptake grows steadily over election cycles — early low figures should not be taken as evidence of failure

Technological Options for UK Improvement

Assessment of feasibility, security risk, and OECD precedent for each available pathway

Conservatives Abroad

UK Options — Feasibility & Security Assessment

	Option	Security Risk	Feasibility (UK)	OECD Precedent
?	Earlier postal dispatch / blank ballots pre-candidates	🟢 Very Low	🟢 High — legislation only	Germany; **EC recommendation**
✔	Downloadable & print-at-home ballot (posted back)	🟡 Low-Medium	🟢 High — no new ID needed	NZ (>90% uptake); sɢ Singapore (2023); US UOCAVA; **EC recommendation**
✘	Electronic ballot return (email / portal)	🟡 Medium	🟡 Medium — implementable	US UOCAVA; Australian states
?	Embassy / consulate in-person voting	🟢 Very Low	🟡 Medium — ruled out by Govt	Japan, Australia, France
✘	Telephone-assisted voting	🟡 Medium	🟡 Medium — ruled out by Govt	Queensland, Australia
✘	Full internet voting (uncontrolled)	🔴 High	🔴 Low — needs natl digital ID	Estonia, New Zealand, Mexico

The EC's explicitly recommended near-term options: (1) blank ballots pre-nominations, (2) downloadable/print ballot — both require only legislation, not new infrastructure.

Key Conclusions

The UK is a statistical outlier among OECD democracies. With ~1.3% of eligible overseas citizens casting a counted vote, it has the lowest effective participation rate of the 13 nations surveyed — despite having one of the largest overseas diasporas. Multiple comparable democracies already provide digital pathways that do not depend on international post.

- New Zealand (>90% upload rate) & Singapore (Singpass download, 2023) prove download-and-post works today

- Voting method is the decisive factor — France 36.6% (online+consulate) vs UK ~1.3% (postal only)

- Near-term fixes (earlier dispatch, downloadable ballot) require only legislation — not new infrastructure

- Promotion of new verifiable ways to access gov.uk services should be rolled out which can be used by overseas electors to confirm their identity

- **Conservatives Abroad believe the best workable solution for the UK is downloadable ballot papers.**

Conservatives Abroad