

Edinburgh MP's bill will eliminate online voting anomaly

If it is successful, a bill introduced by Edinburgh North & Leith MP, Tracy Gilbert will allow those living in Scotland the option to apply online for postal votes, and avoid the need for written forms.

This is already the case in UK elections but not in Wales or Scotland, and it is considered to be a decided difference in voting methods. Ms Gilbert suggested that: "The Bill will make it easier to participate in our democracy. I believe that the more electors who are able to exercise their democratic right, the stronger our country will be."

The Chair of the Scottish Affairs Committee, Patricia Ferguson MP supported the bill and agreed with Ms Gilbert that this is essential to combat the dropping number of people voting at elections. She said: "Postal and proxy votes are a vital component of our elections, as they make voting possible for voters who are perhaps ill or on holiday, or whose working hours make it difficult to get to a polling station. As we have heard, since October 2023, the online absent voter application service has been available to voters who wish to vote by post and wish to apply online. The option to apply using a paper form is, of course, still available to anyone

who wishes to use it.”

Tonia Antoniazzi, MP, Chair of the Northern Ireland Affairs Committee said: “Thinking about the history of parliamentary reform, my hon. Friend is a modern-day Chartist woman. She is a fantastic woman in this place, and she is absolutely right that voting—the mechanism by which people exercise their electoral preference or express their sense of civic duty—is the backbone of our democracy.”

Ms Gilbert introduced the Second Reading of the Bill by saying: “Ensuring that electors can vote is fundamental to our democracy. Although most of us choose to vote in person, many people face barriers that prevent them from doing so. In October 2023, the online absent voting application services were launched, giving voters the option to apply online for their postal or proxy vote for the first time. The services allowed people the choice to apply online or to use the existing option to apply through a traditional paper application, should they wish. The services are currently available for electors in Great Britain for United Kingdom Parliament elections and for police and crime commissioner elections in England and Wales. In England, voters can also use the services to apply for a postal or proxy vote in all local elections.

“The value of the new online absent voting application services was made very clear in the 2024 general election, not long after their launch. Data published by the Government show that over 1.5 million people in Great Britain made an application to vote by post or by proxy vote in the run-up to the general election last year. Between 22 May—the day the election was called—and the deadline for absent vote applications, 84% of postal vote applications and 93% of proxy vote applications were made using the online service. It is clear that electors found it effective, with over 90% of those using it during that period recording that they were satisfied with the service.

“For voters in Scotland and Wales, the option to use the digital route for absent voting arrangements is limited. An elector in Scotland or Wales who wants a postal or proxy vote for a devolved Parliament or local election is still required to fill out a paper application form and physically send it in to be processed. The Bill would end the inconsistency and give voters in Scotland and Wales an equal choice in how they apply for an absent vote for use in the Scottish Parliament, Senedd Cymru and local elections.”

She went on to say: “There are two further aspects to the Bill. First, regulations made under the Bill would require electors applying for an absent vote for devolved elections in Scotland and Wales to provide their national insurance number as part of their application. To be clear, that identity checking requirement is not the same as voter identification at polling stations, where photographic identification must be produced. Instead, it is an up-front check at the point the postal or proxy vote application is made, and simply requires the applicant to provide their national insurance number. The same requirement applies to absent voting applications for reserved elections and has been in place for applications to register to vote for devolved and reserved elections since 2014.

“Secondly, the Bill would align the renewal cycles for devolved elections with the three-year cycles in place for reserved elections. Instead of having to refresh their signature every five years, electors would instead have to reapply for their postal voting arrangement every three years. That is done to avoid confusing electors and to ensure that the signature held on file is recent.

“The measures in the Bill have been discussed with Scottish and Welsh Ministers, who have agreed to every element. Through the Bill, we can end the divergence and remove burdens on voters in Scotland and Wales. The Bill will remove inconsistencies across our democracy and ensure that it is

modern, secure, transparent and fair.”

After the bill passed its Second Reading, Ms Gilbert said: “I am thrilled that my Online Absent Voting bill has been passed Second Reading with overwhelming support from my colleagues. This bill will end the anomaly where voters in Scotland and Wales can apply online for postal or proxy vote for general elections but not for local or devolved. If this bill progresses quickly through committee and the the Lords, I hope it can be used in the upcoming Scottish elections in 2026. It is vital that we work together to make voting more accessible, and this bill does exactly that.”



Tracy Gilbert MP (Edinburgh North and Leith, Labour) presented her Absent Voting (Elections in Scotland and Wales) Bill on 16 October in the House of Commons.