Electoral Registration, Population Mobility and the Democratic Franchise: the Geography of Postal Voters, Overseas Voters and Missing Voters in Great Britain

C. J. Pattie*, D. F. L. Dorling†, R. J. Johnston† and D. J. Rossiter†

ABSTRACT

A core concern of population geography is with the size, location and movement of groups of people. Most census analysis concentrates on various types of 'residents' of an area; many studies concentrate on 'households' while the population subgroups receiving considerable attention include children, the elderly, refugees, and ethnic minorities. The size, location and movement of one (very large and significant) group has received little attention - voters. In Great Britain, the geography of registered voters largely mirrors that of the adult population, but with three exceptions: firstly, electors can use a postal vote to cast a ballot in a place where they are not currently resident; secondly, some British nationals living overseas can register as electors and vote by proxy; and thirdly, many who are eligible to register as voters do not do so. This paper uncovers the geographies of those three groups and evaluates their implications for the operation of the democratic franchise.

Key words: mobility; postal voters; overseas voters; missing voters; democratic franchise

INTRODUCTION

British electoral law registers electors by their place of residence. Registration occurs annually: households are contacted in August–September and asked to register all adult residents plus any others aged 16 and over (from which the Electoral Registration Officer (ERO) will determine who is entitled to vote at any election during the period for which the roll refers). The closing date for registration is 10 October, and the new electoral roll comes into operation in the following February; it is in force for one year, and so is still live 16 months after the registration date. Although there are procedures for changing one’s registration during the year, these are rarely used. The electoral rolls are published by polling districts, subdivisions of local government electoral wards. Each polling district has one or more polling places, to one of which each elector is allocated: this is indicated on the 'polling card' distributed to each elector before every election (local, national and European), and is the only place where that person can legally cast a vote.

This system was designed for a society in which it was assumed that people were relatively immobile. (For general introductions see Rawlings, 1988; Blackburn, 1995.) Not all citizens are well served by it, and at least four groups are potentially disenfranchised:

(1) those who are unable to travel (mainly the
elderly and the infirm) and cannot cast their vote in person;

(2) individuals who have moved home (whether within a constituency or, more especially, between constituencies) after a registration date, who will not be on the electoral roll in their new locations and hence not eligible to vote from there;

(3) people who are temporarily away from their normal residence on the date of an election (perhaps on holiday or as a consequence of work) and who may well find it virtually impossible to attend their designated polling station;

(4) British citizens who have moved overseas and cannot be registered in the usual way, since they are no longer resident within a parliamentary constituency.

To cater for these groups, procedures for appointing proxies or for voting by post have increasingly been made available since 1918; they have to be applied for in advance. These allow people who would otherwise be prohibited from voting to ensure that their preferences are recorded; they also make it possible for the political parties to mobilise supporters.

Although electoral registration is mandatory, many do not register - either by omission or commission. Some of these are alienated from traditional social norms and the democratic process; some have no fixed addresses and so are not readily contacted by the relevant authorities; and for some their mobility means that they are not in a fixed place of residence on the registration date. Others prefer not to register, because by doing so they identify themselves to the civil authorities, which they fear may lead to undesirable consequences.

The existence of these groups makes conduct of the electoral process difficult, both for those involved in the administration of elections and for those who seek benefits from them - the political parties and their candidates. Little is known about their geography, however: where they are and what impact (negatively or positively) they have on the electoral process. In this paper we look at the distribution of three groups for which data are available:

(1) the postal voters, those who apply for and exercise that facility at general elections;

(2) the overseas voters, those living outside the UK who exercise their franchise at British general elections;

(3) the missing voters, those who fail to register on the electoral roll, but whose existence is known from the census and other sources.

POSTAL AND OVERSEAS VOTERS

A variety of measures has gradually allowed more individuals who cannot attend their designated polling booth to cast their votes. Electors can apply for the right to vote by post (a postal ballot) or to designate another voter to act as their proxy (proxy vote). Most recently, voting rights have been extended to a potentially large body of British citizens who live overseas (the overseas vote).

Since postal, proxy and overseas votes (we use the general term 'long-distance votes') allow individuals who would not otherwise be able to do so to participate in elections, they have potential implications for election outcomes. Political parties recognise this and mobilise support through promoting these facilities. Well-organised constituency parties, for instance, will ensure that as many as possible of their local supporters who cannot vote in person at an election apply for postal or proxy votes, while central party organisations identify and register supporters living overseas. Such activities have occasionally been the subject of political controversy. At the 1992 general election, for instance, Labour charged the Conservatives with electoral malpractice in some south coast retirement resorts: local Associations were accused of visiting retirement homes and encouraging residents, some of them senile, to name a Conservative party member as their proxy. There was also a general feeling in the run-up to the 1992 election that the Conservative party benefited most from the registration of overseas voters, many of whom were assumed to be affluent 'refugees' from high taxes in Britain; the other parties have since been recruiting overseas registrations.

Despite the occasional political controversy, long-distance votes have been the subject of almost no academic analysis. The Nuffield studies of each general election normally devote a few paragraphs to postal votes (see, for instance, Butler and Kavanagh, 1983, pp. 265-66; 1987, pp. 234-35;
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1992, pp. 243-44), and Halfacree and Flowerdew (1993) provided a rare analytical examination. One paper on the overseas vote deals largely with the legislation and the parties’ efforts to identify supporters among the expatriate community (Tether, 1994). No attention has been given to where postal and overseas votes are cast. If they are spread evenly (and relatively thinly) across all constituencies, their electoral effect will probably be negligible. If they are concentrated in particular types of constituency, however, they could have considerable impact, depending on the precise geography. In this paper, we open up the subject through an analysis of the geography of postal votes since 1983, and of registered overseas voters since 1991. Data are not available on the incidence of proxy voting by constituency, and we have had to ignore this component.

Until 1950 there were very few exceptions from the requirement that to cast a ballot a voter must attend in person at his or her designated polling booth. The main exempted group was members of the armed forces, for whom a proxy vote system was introduced in 1918 (Rawlings, 1988). Several recent relaxations of the rules have enfranchised more voters.

Postal Votes

The first major extension allowing civilians to apply for a postal vote came in 1948; it was restricted to those who, because of work, illness, or having moved out of the area since the register had been compiled, could not reasonably be expected to cast their vote in person. Claimants have to apply to their ERO, during a very restricted period; in 1950, the closing date for applications was the dissolution of Parliament, so an elector wanting a postal vote who waited until the onset of the official campaign was thereby disenfranchised (and because the timing of elections is not fixed by legislation, unless a Parliament runs its full five-year term, which is very unusual, a dissolution may be unexpected). Holidaymakers were excluded and had to return home to vote.

The rules have been gradually relaxed since. In 1951, the deadline for applications was extended by ten days, and in April 1974 voters who had transferred to different local government electoral areas could claim postal votes (Butler and Kavanagh, 1975). The 1985 Representation of the People Act further extended the rights, covering electors absent from home on holiday on election day (Rawlings, 1988). The dramatic jump in the number of postal votes cast between the 1983 and 1987 general elections (Fig. 1) reflects this change; both contests took place in June, but holidaymakers were excluded from postal voting at the former contest and entitled at the latter.

The numbers exercising their rights to a postal vote are not simply a consequence of the gradual extension of eligibility. Other factors operate, not least the age of the electoral roll when the election is called. The older the electoral register in use at the time of the election, therefore, the greater the potential demand for postal votes; elections held soon after the introduction of the new roll in February should have relatively low rates of postal voting. This has generally been so since 1950 (Fig. 1); the number of postal votes cast increased over the four decades (compare the election in May 1955 with that in April 1992, for example), with the greatest numbers at the contests held late in the year (compare October 1974 with October 1959).

The take-up of postal voting will also be affected by circumstances in individual constituencies. During an election campaign, local party activists try to identify potential supporters who may require a postal vote. Ensuring that they apply for and obtain this may have an important impact on the outcome in close-fought contests. All parties benefit from identifying and mobilising ‘their’ supporters, but the general, although largely unexamined, view is that the Conservative party benefits most from mobilising the postal vote (McLean, 1976; Leonard, 1991; Halfacree and Flowerdew, 1993).

Therefore, local variations in the uptake of postal voting may be influenced by different levels of local party activism and organisation. Differences between constituencies may also reflect other aspects of local social structure; some constituencies (especially those in large urban areas) experience rapid population turnover, for example, which contributes to problems of under-registration there (Smith, 1993; Smith and McLean, 1994) and to the ‘missing voters’ problem which we discuss below. It also means that the electoral roll is liable to become out of date even more rapidly in such areas than elsewhere, generating a stronger than average demand for postal votes.
Overseas Votes

With the exception of service personnel and government employees working abroad (embassy staff, etc.), British citizens living overseas were ineligible to vote in their homeland's general elections until the 1985 Representation of the People Act allowed them to register (Tether, 1994). Registration is in the UK constituency where they were last resident, and has to be renewed annually (the relevant ERO checks applications against old electoral rolls to establish the authenticity of claims of former residence). The onus is on the potential voter to apply, and as postal votes are not permitted from overseas, applicants have to specify a proxy who has agreed to vote on their behalf (Blackburn, 1995). Initially, only British citizens resident overseas for five years or less could apply, and the legislation came into effect at the 1987 general election. The take-up was very limited; of an estimated 600,000 eligible British citizens overseas, only about 13,000 registered as voters (Tether, 1994; Butler and Kavanagh, 1987). The 1989 Representation of the People Act extended the time limit on residence abroad from five to 20 years after leaving the UK, and also enfranchised British citizens living overseas who had been too young to register as voters before they left the UK; the changes were in place for the 1992 general election. The number of registered overseas voters rose substantially to 34,454 in 1991, but was still very far short of the potential total of up to three million (Office of Population Censuses and Surveys, 1991).

The party best able to mobilise support from among the large potential number of overseas voters should reap electoral dividends. The Conservatives invested most effort into this in the late 1980s and early 1990s, since they were much better funded than the other parties (Fowler, 1993; Tether, 1994; Pattie and Johnston, 1995). They established a Conservatives Abroad Unit in Central Office in 1985. The other parties had initial reservations about the facility; its institution was opposed by Labour (Blackburn, 1995) but the party is now assiduously seeking
out sympathetic overseas voters. Despite these efforts, however, the number of registered overseas voters has remained small and has declined annually since 1991 (Fig. 2), suggesting that most effort went into recruiting overseas votes for 1992 (when an election had to take place), but there was a falling-off of effort and interest thereafter. Few new voters have been registered since, but there may be a surge in 1996, in time for the anticipated next general election in 1997.

MISSING VOTERS

Electoral registration is mandatory in Great Britain, but compliance is not monitored and there are no examples of sanctions against individuals who do not enrol. In 1991, however, it emerged that as many as 1.2 million people had not been counted in that year's decennial census, and some concluded after the 1992 general election that the narrow Conservative victory might have been aided by people not registering to vote in order to avoid the 'poll tax' (Smith and McLean, 1994). It was generally assumed that most of those were relatively impoverished individuals more likely to vote against rather than for the government, and also young voters, who were relatively alienated from politics. Thus, it was claimed, a new tax had led to voters disenfranchising themselves in order to avoid paying it, and so harming the opposition parties' (and especially Labour's) electoral prospects.

One result of this attention to under-counting and under-registration was an ESRC-funded project to estimate where people were missing from: Estimating with Confidence (EWC). It estimated how many people were missing from each area and indicated the 'actual' number of residents in every ward in the country in 1991 (by age and sex: for further details see Simpson et al., 1995). These data have been released to academics for research purposes.

Even given good estimates of the number of residents, estimating how many electors there should be in each constituency is far from easy. Wards have to be allocated to constituencies:
those used for the 1983–1992 general elections were introduced in 1983 (and are approximated here by 1981 census wards); new constituencies promulgated in 1995 are defined in terms of 1991 census wards (see Rossiter et al., 1996). Estimates of missing people for both sets of spatial units are needed for comparative purposes. The problem is particularly tricky in Scotland; digital 1981 Scottish ward boundaries are not available to academic researchers and the Scottish Boundary Commission used Regional Electoral Divisions in the review completed in 1994 because the new District wards had not been defined in time. Worrying about shifting ward boundaries may sound pedantic, but misplacing half a large ward’s population can make it appear as if as many as 10,000 voters were missing from a constituency.

The second problem is that numbers of people do not equate to eligible electors. Only adults (persons aged 18 and over) can vote, so children have to be excluded. The EWC data use five-year age groups, so we have assumed that half the number of missing people aged 15–19 in July 1991 in each ward would have been adults by the time of the 1992 general election. Furthermore, only certain adult residents can vote at general elections:

1. members of the House of Lords and some inmates of psychiatric and prison institutions cannot vote;
2. members of the armed services do not have to register where they live;
3. people with multiple homes can register at two or more addresses (students as a group are the most spatially concentrated example of this phenomenon);
4. overseas residents can register (in order to vote at local government elections);
5. overseas residents who are neither Commonwealth (including British) citizens nor citizens of the Irish Republic may not vote at general elections.

It is very difficult to take any of these groups into account using the available data, and we have only addressed the fifth group here, by calculating from the relevant (1981 and 1991) census how many people living in each ward were born outside the Commonwealth or Ireland; we use this as a proxy for the number of adults ineligible to vote in each ward. This will be an overestimate of the numbers unable to vote, because many of these people are Commonwealth citizens. It also includes children, but they can be taken as a proxy for the numbers of missing adults who would not be eligible to vote in each constituency.

The derivation of these estimates is exemplified by the case of the old (1983–1995) Westminster North Parliamentary constituency. The 1991 census (corrected by the EWC project) enumerated 88,284 adults there, including 21,667 who were born outside the UK and not in either the Commonwealth or Ireland, leaving a potential electorate of 66,617. Only 58,847 electors were registered at the time of the 1992 general election, however, leaving 7770 unaccounted for. The Conservative incumbent’s majority over the closest (Labour) challenger was 3733 votes in 1992, so he would have lost the election if 48% of those missing electors had registered and voted Labour. Westminster North was tenth in the list of constituencies by the ratio of missing voters to the margin of victory then, and the Conservative overall majority at the 1992 general election was only ten seats.

The compromises made in producing these estimates generate plausible results, and there is considerable similarity between our findings and those of an earlier study (Smith and McLean, 1994) which suggested ten constituencies which the Conservatives won in 1992 because of missing electors (specifically due to the effect of non-registration to avoid the poll tax). More details on the seats involved is given in Dorling et al. (1996).

ANALYSING THE THREE GEOGRAPHIES

Postal, overseas and missing voters are substantial in number, therefore, and because of where they are located may have a significant impact on aspects of the conduct and outcome of elections. To evaluate that impact fully, we need to appreciate the geographies of the various groups.

Postal and Overseas Votes

Postal and overseas voters are not spread randomly across Great Britain’s constituencies. The average constituency in 1991 had only 54 registered overseas voters; one had none (Rhondda), and that with most (Cambridge)
had 255. The average fell by almost half in just four years, to 29 in 1994, with a growing number of seats reporting none (Table 1). There were more postal voters per constituency, however, and their number was more stable; on average, at each election since 1983 a constituency has had around 1000 registered postal voters. On average, more people applied for overseas votes and cast postal votes in seats held by the Conservative party than in those occupied by Labour MPs (Table 2). If postal and overseas voters are indeed predominantly middle class and more affluent than the national average, then this may be a direct consequence of the social make-up of Conservative seats compared with Labour. That notwithstanding, the implication seems to be that the Conservatives have an extra pool of voters to draw on (many of whom they may well have mobilised in their campaigns), over and above those who could attend the polling station in person.

The average number of postal and overseas voters in a constituency also varied regionally. Setting the national constituency mean at zero, regional averages are presented as deviations above (positive values) or below (negative values) that figure. For postal votes, this reveals clear north/south and urban/rural patterns (Fig. 3). Northern (especially Scottish) constituencies and those in the major urban areas (Strathclyde, the industrial North East, Merseyside, Greater Manchester, South Yorkshire, South Wales, the West Midlands conurbation and London) generally had lower than average numbers of postal voters, whereas those in more rural areas, and especially in the south, had above average numbers. For overseas voters, the regional pattern is more starkly north–south (Fig. 4). Constituencies in the Midlands and further north tend to have below average numbers, while seats in the south (especially in Inner London and the South East) have markedly above average numbers of overseas voters.10

**Correlates and Geography of Long-distance Voting**

The above discussion has alluded to several possible correlates of overseas and postal voting, linking them particularly to affluent, middle-class households, to generally pro-Conservative groups, and to high levels of population movement. This section provides a systematic appraisal of those hypotheses, using regression models whose dependent variables are the numbers of overseas and postal voters in each constituency.

If, as commentators have argued, either or both postal and overseas voters are drawn disproportionately from Conservative-supporting groups, or the Conservatives are the most effective in mobilising 'their' potential postal and overseas support, there should be more long-distance voters in areas where the Conservatives are
electorally strong than where they are weak. To assess this, the Conservatives' share of the vote at the previous election is included in the regression models; this variable also controls for the social composition of the seat, since the Conservatives do better in more middle-class areas and worse in more working-class areas (see, for example, Johnston et al., 1988). 

If the parties attempt to mobilise their long-distance support, they should invest most effort into those seats where additional votes will bring most returns. The more marginal a seat is for a party, the more postal and overseas votes that should be recorded there, other things being equal. To investigate whether this is so, we fit the marginality of the seat for the Conservative party at the previous election. This measure is always positive; where the Conservatives won the seat at the previous election, the marginality is the party’s percentage share of the vote minus that of the party in second place. Where the Conservatives did not win, the measure is the percentage share for the winning party minus that of the Conservatives. The measure is thus smaller the more marginal a seat is for the Conservatives.

Party efforts to mobilise voters can also be assessed by the vigour with which they run their constituency campaigns. The strength of such campaigning is difficult to measure directly for all seats, but the amount spent by local parties on the campaign is a good surrogate for their efforts (Pattie et al., 1994). We measured the strength of the Conservatives’ local campaign as the amount spent by the party there in that election year (since that was the crucial period for recruiting overseas and postal voters), expressed as a percentage of the legal limit on spending in each seat. The more effort a local Conservative party makes on its campaign, therefore, the more overseas and postal voters we expect to see.

The general affluence of a seat may have some impact upon the numbers of people applying for a postal or overseas vote, especially if the more affluent are most likely to need and apply for it. In the regression models, the proportion of the electorate reported as out of work a few months before the election is taken as a measure of an
One of the very few analyses of the postal vote drew a clear and highly plausible correlation between the number of recent migrants in a constituency and the level of postal voting there, using data from the 1981 census and postal voting in 1983 (Halfacree and Flowerdew, 1993). The logic is clear: the more people who move into, out of, or within a constituency, the less accurate the electoral register is likely to be, and the greater the potential demand for postal votes. Halfacree and Flowerdew (1993) provided detailed constituency estimates of the proportions of in-migrants, out-migrants and internal migrants (people who had moved from one part of a constituency to another). The equivalent estimates do not yet exist for the 1991 census, and we have employed a related measure: the proportion of the population in a seat who were living at a different address one year before the census. This is not a precise measure of what we need; crucially, people who moved into a constituency in the year before the 1991 census would have had time to register for a vote there in time for the 1992 election and, in the unlikely case that they had not done so, they may have registered for a postal vote in the constituency where they formerly lived. This measure also tells us nothing about overseas voters, since by definition only those normally resident in the UK on census night were contacted by the enumerators. However, the measure does indicate the volume of population movement within each seat, and this is unlikely to vary substantially over the relatively short term (Stillwell, 1990; Stillwell et al., 1990). We therefore use the proportion of people moving to a new address in 1991 as a surrogate for population turnover at the times of the 1987 and 1992 elections. Since areas with a high mobility rate are also likely to contribute more overseas migrants than are areas with only limited migration, we also use the measure in the 'overseas voters' analyses.

Finally, dummy variables for the region in which each constituency is located will reveal any underlying regional geography in the distribution of overseas and postal voters, once the
Table 3. Overseas voters: regression models (significance levels of regression coefficients in brackets).

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<tr>
<td>Con. vote (%)</td>
<td>0.95 (0.00)</td>
<td>0.88 (0.00)</td>
<td>0.57 (0.00)</td>
<td>0.57 (0.00)</td>
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<td>Con. margin (%)</td>
<td>0.10 (0.35)</td>
<td>0.11 (0.30)</td>
<td>0.14 (0.06)</td>
<td>0.16 (0.01)</td>
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<tr>
<td>Con. spend (%)</td>
<td>0.08 (0.17)</td>
<td>0.09 (0.13)</td>
<td>0.08 (0.05)</td>
<td>0.04 (0.26)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Unemp. Dec '91 (%)</td>
<td>-5.75 (0.00)</td>
<td>-5.38 (0.00)</td>
<td>-3.77 (0.00)</td>
<td>-3.19 (0.00)</td>
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<tr>
<td>Migrants 1991 (%)</td>
<td>10.06 (0.00)</td>
<td>9.78 (0.00)</td>
<td>7.35 (0.00)</td>
<td>6.30 (0.00)</td>
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Region:
- Strathclyde
- East Scotland
- Rural Scotland
- Rural North
- Ind. N. East
- Merseyside
- Greater Manchester
- Rest North West
- West Yorkshire
- South Yorkshire
- Rural Wales
- Ind S. Wales
- West Midlands Con.
- Rest West Mid.
- East Midlands
- East Anglia
- Devon/Cornwall
- Wessex
- Inner London
- Outer London
- Outer Metro

Constant: -40.09
$R^2$: 0.72

See text for explanations of variables.

other factors are taken into account; these will test whether variations in political culture across Great Britain (Johnston et al., 1988) apply to this aspect of electoral behaviour. The coefficient for each region compares the average number of long-distance voters in a constituency there to the average in the Outer South East region.

The geographical distribution of registered overseas voters across Britain’s constituencies in the early 1990s accorded well with expectations (Table 3). The data fitted the models well ($R^2$ was either 0.71 or 0.72), and the regression coefficients had the expected signs. The larger the Conservative share of the vote at the previous election, the more overseas voters registered in a constituency (indicating that the overseas vote was most concentrated in Conservative strongholds, and adding weight to the suggestion that these individuals were generally pro-Conservative). The significant negative relationship between the number of overseas voters and the proportion of the electorate officially registered as unemployed serves as the corollary of this argument. Other things being equal, overseas voters were less likely to register in constituencies where the unemployment rate was high; they were more likely to be registered in relatively affluent areas. There was also a clear relationship (in the expected direction) between levels of population turnover and overseas
voting. The higher the proportion of the local population in 1991 which reported having lived at a different address within the previous year, the more overseas voters were registered. The overseas vote was therefore relatively concentrated in Conservative-voting, affluent areas with high population turnover.

There was also a clear regional geography of the overseas vote. Other things being equal, constituencies outside southeast England had significantly fewer registered overseas voters than those in the Outer South East region (as indicated by the negative coefficients). Constituencies in Inner London and the Outer Metropolitan regions generally had more overseas voters than constituencies in the Outer South East, while constituencies in other parts of the southeast did not differ markedly from that region (indicating that many of those recruited as overseas voters lived in London and its hinterland before leaving the UK, perhaps in diplomatic and business occupations). As the number of registered overseas voters declined over time, however, with fewer overseas voters being recruited after the 1992 election than before (Fig. 1), so the regional differences began to disappear. Whereas in 1991 all but eight of the 21 regions differed significantly from the Outer South East in their average numbers of overseas voters, by 1994 only eight differed significantly in this regard.

The main consistent exception to this north-south pattern was Merseyside, where there were more registered overseas voters than in the Outer South East. This seems at odds with the data in Fig. 4, which showed Merseyside with below average numbers of overseas voters. The regression estimates hold other factors constant, however, and given Merseyside’s endemic high unemployment rates and the Conservatives’ generally poor showing in the region, even lower numbers of overseas voters were predicted than observed there. This positive residual indicating relatively high numbers of overseas voters may reflect Liverpool’s former importance as an international seaport, with many Merseysiders working overseas, but the decline of the Liverpool sea trade pre-dates the 1960s and Merseysiders who settled abroad when the port was thriving would have lived there too long to be eligible for an overseas vote. Another possible factor may be the region’s economic difficulties since the 1960s, and especially since British entry to the EC. The region has a very high out-migration rate (Gould, 1990); the Merseyside overseas vote could contain a number of people who left the depressed region for better employment prospects in Europe (including Ireland). Local efforts to identify them and persuade them to register may have been more successful than comparable campaigns elsewhere.\(^\text{12}\)

There was no evidence to confirm the hypothesis that the Conservative party had either made, or been successful in, extra efforts to recruit sympathetic overseas voters who could register in marginal seats. With the exception of 1994 (by which time only a relatively few overseas voters were still registered), there was no significant independent relationship between how marginal a seat was for the party and its number of overseas voters. Furthermore, making an extra campaign effort in 1992 (as indexed by spending on the campaign) had no significant impact on the recruitment of overseas voters. In itself, this is perhaps not surprising. Finding and recruiting overseas voters is a time-consuming and long-term job. By the time the election campaign is in full swing, it is undoubtedly too late to try to recruit more, both because the party (locally as well as nationally) has more pressing concerns and because the paperwork probably could not be processed in time.

Postal voters were much more numerous than overseas voters, especially after 1985 when making the facility available to holiday-makers might have generated a more widespread spatial distribution of postal than overseas voters. Even so, there should be some systematic variation in their distribution, following broadly similar patterns to that of the overseas vote. Both expectations are borne out by the regression models (Table 4); we concentrate here on postal voting at the 1987 and 1992 elections, since the rule change in 1985 makes comparisons with the 1983 election difficult.\(^\text{13}\) The \(R^2\) values for both equations, at around 0.55, are respectable, but lower than the equivalents for the overseas voter models. The links between the number of postal voters in a constituency and the region, local unemployment, and local migration levels were also similar to the equivalents in the overseas voter models. The higher a constituency’s unemployment levels, the fewer postal votes were cast there, but the higher the proportion of the local
population who had moved in the year prior to the 1991 census, the more postal votes there were. The regional pattern, although patchier than for overseas voters, also reveals a distinctive geography. Compared with those in the Outer South East region, constituencies in Scotland, the north of England and some of the major urban areas (including London and its surrounding suburbs in the Outer Metropolitan zone) had significantly lower numbers of postal voters, other things being equal. Postal voting was most prevalent in the more affluent regions (e.g. the Outer South East) and in the more rural regions outside Scotland and the North, presumably influenced in part by access difficulties for voters in large rural constituencies.

The main differences between the geography of postal voting and that of the overseas vote were in the links to Conservative electoral fortunes at the previous election. Whereas the party’s strength at the previous election consistently underpinned the geography of the overseas vote, it did not for the postal vote. There was no significant relationship between the party’s share of the vote at the last election, and the number of postal votes cast in a seat: those availing themselves of the facility were not predominantly concentrated in Conservative strongholds.

Another clear difference between the postal and the overseas vote was in the link with Conservative marginality. There was no significant relationship for overseas voting but a negative one between the postal vote and how marginal the seat was. Given the construction of the marginality variable, the negative coefficients imply that postal voters were disproportionately concentrated in Conservative marginals. This may have been a consequence of good organisation by local Conservative Associations in key battleground constituencies. Alternatively, it may be an artefact of the closeness of the competition itself; more electors turn out in marginal seats than in safe seats, since their votes are more likely to make an important difference to the outcome. Applying this logic to the postal vote, people who knew they would be unable to vote in person on polling day, but who lived in relatively safe seats, may have felt that the extra effort of applying for a postal vote was not worth the limited impact their vote would have whereas voters living in marginals who were eligible for a postal vote might have been inclined to apply, and encouraged to do so by party campaigners, because they felt their decision might be crucial. Whether a consequence of either local party activism or calculations of the importance of their ballot on the part of the eligible electorate, this implies that postal voting was concentrated in, and hence even more crucial to the contest in, key marginals.

Local party activism is incorporated in the models through the campaign spending variable. The more active the local Conservatives were in their constituency election campaigning, the most postal votes were cast there. Thus whereas the local campaign is too late to have any impact on the mobilisation of overseas votes, postal
votes can be applied for during the first weeks of the official campaign,16 and can be mobilised then by local parties. Since campaign spending controls for party efforts, this gives further weight to the ‘calculating voter’ argument advanced above for the relationship between marginality and the postal vote; party effort was insufficient to remove the link between the two, suggesting that voters’ own judgements of the importance and efficacy of their votes locally were also involved.

A final similarity between the analyses reported in Tables 3 and 4 is the significance of the impact of the reported volume of migration in a constituency on its number of postal and overseas voters. The more migrants in a place, the greater its number of electors who opted to vote by post and the greater the number of former residents who were successfully encouraged to register as overseas voters. Although the number who avail themselves of these options is small compared with the potential, it is clear that the more mobile the population is the more who so do – either by choice or after persuasion.

**Where were the Missing Voters in 1992?**

We use a similar regression model to investigate the geography of missing voters at the time of the 1992 general election. The dependent variable is our missing voter estimate expressed in two ways: the number of estimated missing voters, and the missing voters as a percentage of the constituency electorate.

Possible explanations for the size of the missing electorate from a constituency include: the political and economic situations there; levels of migration; the region in which the constituency is situated (local political culture again); and local differences in EROs’ working practices with regard to ‘purging the rolls’.17 Much of the discussion of missing voters to date has suggested that many of them were one or more of: poll tax evaders; the homeless; and those alienated from contemporary politics. None of these groups is likely to be dominated by Conservative supporters, with the implication that missing voters should be most numerous in seats where the party is weak. Conservative electoral strength at the 1987 election is included in the regression models, therefore, as are dummy variables for which party won the seat (Conservative seats form the comparison group). Going missing from the electoral register may also be an extreme form of abstaining from voting, and as abstention rates are generally lower in marginal than in safe seats, the size of the missing electorate should be related to a seat’s marginality.

A corollary of the argument that missing voters are largely non-Conservatives is that they are likely to be drawn from among less affluent, more deprived groups in the population. To assess this, we include three measures of local affluence, based on local housing market conditions in the early 1990s: the average house price in each seat in 1991 (in £’000s); the change in house prices between 1989 and 1991 (the period saw a marked recession in property values); and an estimate of the proportion of the electorate with negative equity (where the resale value of a house is less than the mortgage) in 1993. If missing voters are from less affluent areas, more of them should be in areas with low house prices and in areas (predominantly in the south) seriously affected by negative equity.

Absence from the electoral register might be a simple consequence of moving home, which implies that there should be more missing voters in areas where there are many migrants than in those with few. The surrogate for population mobility employed above is in the models, therefore. Finally, there may be regional factors at play, with missing voters more numerous in some parts of the country than others, hence inclusion of dummy variables for geographic regions.

The fitted regression equations show that few of these factors were significantly related to either the number of missing voters in a constituency or their percentage of the local electorate (Table 5). The $R^2$ values were low, and only three variables had significant regression coefficients at the 0.05 level: the marginality of the seat; whether Labour won it at the previous general election; and the percentage of migrants in the population. As expected, there were more missing voters where the population was more mobile. In addition, missing voters were more common in Labour than in Conservative-held seats, which can be read as a surrogate for constituency characteristics; residents were less likely to enrol as electors in the more deprived areas, which are those traditionally won by
Table 5. Missing voters: regression models (significance levels in brackets).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Missing voters (n)</th>
<th>Missing voters (%)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Con. vote (%)</td>
<td>-11.25 (0.52)</td>
<td>-0.02 (0.57)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Con. margin (%)</td>
<td>-19.71 (0.02)</td>
<td>-0.03 (0.05)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>House price (£'000s) 1991</td>
<td>-6.83 (0.53)</td>
<td>-0.02 (0.40)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Negative equity 1993 (%)</td>
<td>9.26 (0.30)</td>
<td>0.01 (0.63)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>% change house price 89–91</td>
<td>2.60 (0.58)</td>
<td>0.00 (0.59)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Migrants 1991 (%)</td>
<td>204.60 (0.00)</td>
<td>0.36 (0.00)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Winning party 1987</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Labour</td>
<td>714.82 (0.02)</td>
<td>1.24 (0.01)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Alliance</td>
<td>-383.21 (0.43)</td>
<td>-0.63 (0.43)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nationalist</td>
<td>-62.38 (0.94)</td>
<td>-0.10 (0.94)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Region</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Strathclyde</td>
<td>-474.40 (0.46)</td>
<td>-0.47 (0.67)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>East Scotland</td>
<td>-1138.51 (0.10)</td>
<td>-1.88 (0.10)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rural Scotland</td>
<td>-1268.10 (0.09)</td>
<td>-2.17 (0.08)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rural North</td>
<td>-234.06 (0.68)</td>
<td>-0.55 (0.56)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Industrial N. East</td>
<td>-653.05 (0.32)</td>
<td>-1.21 (0.27)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Merseyside</td>
<td>418.78 (0.53)</td>
<td>0.64 (0.59)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Greater Manchester</td>
<td>354.05 (0.55)</td>
<td>0.73 (0.46)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rest North West</td>
<td>-280.82 (0.61)</td>
<td>-0.45 (0.62)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>West Yorkshire</td>
<td>-268.38 (0.67)</td>
<td>-0.57 (0.59)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>South Yorkshire</td>
<td>-932.38 (0.19)</td>
<td>-1.71 (0.15)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rural Wales</td>
<td>-844.43 (0.23)</td>
<td>-1.35 (0.25)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Industrial S. Wales</td>
<td>281.54 (0.67)</td>
<td>0.48 (0.66)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>West Midlands Con.</td>
<td>599.39 (0.29)</td>
<td>1.08 (0.25)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rest West Midlands</td>
<td>-479.97 (0.34)</td>
<td>-0.74 (0.38)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>East Midlands</td>
<td>-126.50 (0.78)</td>
<td>-0.17 (0.82)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>East Anglia</td>
<td>-775.57 (0.13)</td>
<td>-1.23 (0.15)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Devon/Cornwall</td>
<td>304.14 (0.57)</td>
<td>0.49 (0.58)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Wessex</td>
<td>54.37 (0.90)</td>
<td>0.02 (0.98)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Inner London</td>
<td>222.54 (0.66)</td>
<td>1.00 (0.23)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Outer London</td>
<td>173.83 (0.68)</td>
<td>0.70 (0.32)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Outer Metropolitan</td>
<td>433.39 (0.26)</td>
<td>0.80 (0.21)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Constant</strong></td>
<td>-186.03</td>
<td>-0.39</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>$R^2$</strong></td>
<td>0.12</td>
<td>0.13</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

See text for explanations of variables.

Labour candidates, than in those characterised by more affluent, middle-class voters. Finally, contrary to expectations, there were more, and not fewer, missing voters the more marginal the seat was for the Conservatives. If missing voters are mainly non-Conservatives (the preponderance of missing voters in Labour seats supports this), the implication is that the Conservatives may have been helped by the missing voter phenomenon in 1992, since it meant the absence from the register in key marginals of potential voters opposed to the party during an unusually close-fought election (see also Smith and McLean, 1994).

**ELECTORAL IMPACTS**

There are systematic variations across constituencies in the numbers of people obtaining long-distance votes, and also, to a lesser extent, in the number of missing voters. But does this affect
election outcomes? Set against an average of some 60,000 electors in each seat, all three groups represent a small minority of the local electorate, and in most they would be insufficient as a group to change which party is successful there, although they may have an impact on the winning margin. However, they may have been sufficiently numerous to decide the winner in some highly marginal seats where their number exceeded the winning party's margin of votes over its nearest rival. In 1983, for instance, the number of postal votes cast exceeded the winning margin in 30 seats, and by 1992 this had risen to 47 seats (Table 6). Overseas votes, although less important, could have been crucial in two seats in 1992 (Vale of Glamorgan and Bristol North West: both also had more postal voters than the winning margin).

Postal and Overseas Voters

Although across all constituencies those held by the Conservatives had higher than average numbers of postal and overseas voters, the party's advantage was less clear-cut in those where the number of long-distance voters exceeded the winning margin. On the whole, Conservative-held seats were the most numerous in this group (except in 1983, when the number of long-distance voters exceeded the winning margin in more Labour than Conservative-held seats). There were sufficient seats in this category in 1992 to give long-distance voters the potential to change not only the local winner but also the outcome of the whole election. The Conservatives' overall majority in the House of Commons was 21 seats, but in 28 of its successes the number of postal voters was greater than its margin over the runner-up. Had those postal voters acted in unison and voted against the government (a relatively unlikely outcome), the Conservatives would have lost their overall majority in the House, and may have been out of government for the first time in 13 years. The other parties were also vulnerable to the postal vote, however; Labour could have lost 13 seats in 1992 had the postal vote there gone against the party.

A Conservative majority in the number of 'long-distance marginals' (those in which the number of postal plus overseas voters exceeded the winning margin) was likely in 1983 and 1987, because the party won most seats then. If the long-distance marginals were distributed at random between the parties, each party's proportion should be the same as its share of all seats in Britain. Their 'expected' number of seats where the postal vote exceeded the winning margin, based on the national share of constituencies, are reported ('expected, all seats') in Table 6. (Because only two seats had more overseas voters than the winning margin in 1992, we have not repeated the exercise for the overseas vote.) This reveals a dynamic pattern of threat and opportunity for the two main parties. Labour was the most over-represented in the long-distance marginals in 1983; based on its national share of seats, the party might reasonably have expected victory in 10 of these seats—it won 15. The Conservatives were under-represented then, with 12 rather than the expected total of 19 seats. In 1987, Labour's over-representation evaporated; each party won about the same proportion of long-distance marginals as it did of all seats. But in 1992 the situation changed again, with the Conservatives either most at threat, or having most to gain, from the postal vote; based on its national share, the party might have expected to win 25 long-distance marginals, but it got 28 of them.

The above analysis assumes that the composition of marginals is the same as for all seats. Focusing on the seats where the winning margin was less than or equal to 5% of the total electorate, recalculation of the expected values

---

Table 6. Number of constituencies where overseas voters or postal votes exceeded winning party's majority.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Party winning seat</th>
<th>Con.</th>
<th>Lab.</th>
<th>All.</th>
<th>Nat.</th>
<th>Total</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Overseas voters 1991</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Overseas voters 1992</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Postal votes 1983</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>30</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Expected, all seats</td>
<td>18.8</td>
<td>9.9</td>
<td>1.1</td>
<td>0.2</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Expected 5% margin</td>
<td>15.5</td>
<td>11.7</td>
<td>2.7</td>
<td>0</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Postal votes 1987</td>
<td>19</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>33</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Expected, all seats</td>
<td>19.6</td>
<td>11.9</td>
<td>1.1</td>
<td>0.3</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Expected 5% margin</td>
<td>16.3</td>
<td>13.2</td>
<td>2.8</td>
<td>0.7</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Postal votes 1992</td>
<td>28</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>47</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Expected, all seats</td>
<td>24.9</td>
<td>20.1</td>
<td>1.5</td>
<td>0.5</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Expected 5% margin</td>
<td>22.2</td>
<td>20.0</td>
<td>3.1</td>
<td>1.8</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
for the number of seats going to each party in the long-distance marginals, on the assumption that they are a representative subset of all marginals, produces the 'expected 5% marginals' in Table 6. Comparing these expected values to the actual numbers of seats won suggests that the long-distance marginals in 1983 and 1987 were similar to marginal seats in general. In 1983, the observed and expected figures were markedly closer than was the case when the expected figures were based on the national share of seats: in 1987 they were somewhat further apart, but were still quite close. (In both cases, chi-square tests suggest no significant difference between the observed and expected values.) In both elections, therefore, there was nothing particularly unusual about the long-distance marginals; they were simply a subset of all marginals, and in 1987 of all seats.

In 1992, however, the composition of the long-distance marginals differed significantly (chi-square tests) not only from the party shares of seats nationally but also from their shares of marginals in general. As when the long-distance marginals were compared with all seats, the comparison with all 5% marginals suggests that the Conservative party won more long-distance marginals in 1992 than it would have if these had been a representative subset of marginal seats generally, while Labour won fewer. The implication may be that, if postal voters are more Conservative in their partisan affiliations, they were crucial in some of the most marginal contests, and if local Associations made extra efforts there to ensure that Conservative-supporting electors who could not vote in person applied for postal votes, the effort paid off.

But does the presence of overseas and postal voters make a difference to the pattern of voting by constituency? We have modelled the Conservative share of the votes cast in 1987 and 1992, using as independent variables those generally employed in analyses of the geography of voting (Johnston et al., 1988), plus measures of population mobility (Taylor, 1979; McMahon et al., 1992; Denver and Halfacree, 1992) and the numbers of overseas and postal voters (the latter expressed in thousands). In general the regression coefficients are as expected (Table 7). In 1987, there was no relationship between Conservative fortunes and the number of postal voters, but in 1992 the more postal votes cast in a constituency the worse the Conservative performance, all other variables being held constant. On the other hand, the more overseas voters in a constituency the better the party did.

## Table 7. The relationship between Conservative voting and postal and overseas votes: regression models (significance levels in brackets).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Region</th>
<th>1987</th>
<th>1992</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Con. vote (%)</td>
<td>0.94 (0.00)</td>
<td>0.99 (0.00)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Con. margin (%)</td>
<td>-0.04 (0.00)</td>
<td>0.02 (0.04)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Con. spend (%)</td>
<td>0.02 (0.00)</td>
<td>0.01 (0.01)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Unemployed (%)</td>
<td>-0.12 (0.02)</td>
<td>-0.32 (0.00)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Migrants 1991 (%)</td>
<td>-0.12 (0.01)</td>
<td>-0.12 (0.04)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Postal votes (1000s)</td>
<td>-0.39 (0.12)</td>
<td>-0.74 (0.00)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Overseas votes</td>
<td>*</td>
<td>0.01 (0.00)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Region</td>
<td>1987</td>
<td>1992</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Strathclyde</td>
<td>-5.47 (0.00)</td>
<td>1.73 (0.00)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>East Scotland</td>
<td>-4.35 (0.00)</td>
<td>1.07 (0.09)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rural Scotland</td>
<td>-5.72 (0.00)</td>
<td>1.47 (0.03)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rural North</td>
<td>-1.67 (0.00)</td>
<td>0.47 (0.35)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Industrial NE</td>
<td>-3.35 (0.00)</td>
<td>2.15 (0.00)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Merseyside</td>
<td>-5.56 (0.00)</td>
<td>0.53 (0.39)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Greater Manchester</td>
<td>-1.54 (0.00)</td>
<td>0.50 (0.33)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rest North West</td>
<td>-1.74 (0.00)</td>
<td>0.80 (0.10)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>West Yorkshire</td>
<td>-0.67 (0.22)</td>
<td>1.29 (0.02)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>South Yorkshire</td>
<td>-3.30 (0.00)</td>
<td>1.40 (0.03)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rural Wales</td>
<td>-4.22 (0.00)</td>
<td>-0.58 (0.36)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Industrial S. Wales</td>
<td>-2.18 (0.00)</td>
<td>-0.28 (0.63)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>West Midlands Con.</td>
<td>-0.76 (0.16)</td>
<td>1.76 (0.00)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rest West Midlands</td>
<td>-1.01 (0.05)</td>
<td>0.57 (0.25)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>East Midlands</td>
<td>0.42 (0.34)</td>
<td>0.09 (0.85)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>East Anglia</td>
<td>0.23 (0.67)</td>
<td>0.54 (0.31)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Devon/Cornwall</td>
<td>-2.92 (0.00)</td>
<td>-0.15 (0.79)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Wessex</td>
<td>-0.25 (0.59)</td>
<td>-0.92 (0.04)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Inner London</td>
<td>0.13 (0.80)</td>
<td>1.97 (0.00)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Outer London</td>
<td>1.19 (0.01)</td>
<td>0.71 (0.09)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Outer Metropolitan</td>
<td>0.72 (0.07)</td>
<td>1.78 (0.00)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

| Constant                | 5.34       | 1.78       |
| $R^2$                   | 0.97       | 0.97       |

Missing Voters at the Next General Election?
The presence, or more correctly the absence, of missing voters also has electoral impacts. Our concern here is not with whether the geography of missing voters allowed the Conservatives to win the 1992 general election, but rather how important it might be at the next (which will probably be held in 1997 using the electoral roll
Mobility and the Democratic Franchise

Table 8. The registered electorate in Britain (thousands).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Total</th>
<th>Service</th>
<th>Attainers</th>
<th>Patients</th>
<th>Overseas</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1991</td>
<td>42424</td>
<td>268</td>
<td>540</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>34</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1992</td>
<td>42583</td>
<td>271</td>
<td>532</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>32</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1993</td>
<td>42565</td>
<td>262</td>
<td>498</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>22</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1994</td>
<td>42624</td>
<td>248</td>
<td>483</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>18</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1995</td>
<td>42710</td>
<td>227</td>
<td>463</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>-</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Change 1991–1995</td>
<td>286</td>
<td>-41</td>
<td>-77</td>
<td>-1</td>
<td>-</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>


compiled in 1996). Three factors will be different by then: the number of people registered to vote will probably have changed (the poll tax has been abolished); many will vote in different constituencies from 1992, even if they have not moved, due to the creation of new constituencies; and many may vote for a different party than they did before. Prediction of the result of the next election would be feasible if the magnitude of all three changes were known; all we currently know, however, is how the areas people will vote in and how the numbers registering to vote have changed.

Table 8 shows how many people have registered as electors annually since 1991. The total has increased by over 250,000, despite falls in the number of service voters, attainers (those attaining their majority and becoming entitled to vote on their 18th birthday), voluntary patients and overseas registrations. Nevertheless, our data suggest that the percentage of the eligible electors who register remains constant at 97.5%, so the growth probably results from increased net in-migration (most probably from within the European Union), since mortality rates are quite stable and the number of 18-year-olds is still falling. It is also possible that a higher proportion of Commonwealth and/or Irish citizen electors are registering to vote, but that there are now also more ineligible adults (such as other EU citizens) within Great Britain; unfortunately, there are no reliable data with which to test this speculation.

A simple way to model this growth is to include 1992 attainers in the electorate, and ignore losses such as deaths; this suggests a total electorate for Britain of 42,528,000 by the time of the next election, which is in line with the statistics in Table 8. Thus to calculate electorates for the new constituencies we sum the relevant 1991 ward electorates including attainers to simulate the increase in people registering. The number of adults living in each of the new constituencies was calculated as before, and the number of people born outside the Commonwealth and Ireland but living in each constituency was again subtracted from the estimated number of adults to give an estimate of the number eligible to register as electors. We have not attempted to estimate the effects of population change and migration between 1991 and 1996, as this is likely to be minor compared with the effect of changing the boundaries.

Comparing those estimates with the ones produced for the 1992 general election, the most obvious difference is that fewer people will be missing from the electoral register compiled in 1996, which will be employed for the 1997 general election. As importantly, the missing voters will have become geographically more concentrated. This may be an effect of the boundary changes which were produced using data which ignored the missing voters from the 1991 register (1992 in Scotland and Wales). The average Conservative-held constituency has 2754 fewer electors in 1996 than 1991, whereas the average Labour constituency has 2787 more (the figures are calculated from Table 9), an anticipated outcome since the primary purpose of the boundary review was to equalise the size of constituencies and population decline tends to be concentrated in Labour-held urban seats. Although by 1996 the average Conservative constituency will contain 4220 more electors than the average Labour one, it will only have 3739 more adults eligible to vote. By ignoring the missing voters the Boundary Commissions have made the House of Commons more equal than they know.

Our data show that the number of missing voters was probably at a maximum in 1991. This
Table 9. Arithmetic average constituency populations by party.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Party</th>
<th>A</th>
<th>NC</th>
<th>E</th>
<th>R</th>
<th>M</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Old constituencies</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Con.</td>
<td>73957</td>
<td>2504</td>
<td>71453</td>
<td>71276</td>
<td>785</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lab.</td>
<td>64053</td>
<td>1513</td>
<td>62540</td>
<td>61515</td>
<td>1412</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>LDP</td>
<td>60135</td>
<td>1415</td>
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Key to columns: A, estimated number of adults; NC, new Commonwealth and Irish born; E, eligible electors; R, registered electors; M, estimated missing voters.

was crucial to the work of the Boundary Commissions, which are directed to base their calculations on the number of registered electors in the chosen base year. The number of seats is determined through application of the electoral quota—the number of registered electors divided by the number of constituencies. The English Commission received several representations that it should take under-registration into account, but declined to do so because it is prohibited by the Boundary Commissions Act 1986 (Boundary Commission for England, 1995). The Labour Party was most active in making such representations, believing that most of the missing voters were in inner city areas which, if they had registered, would have been entitled to greater representation.

Evaluation of these claims indicates that they were overstated. The allocation of seats to local government units is undertaken by dividing their electorate with the electoral quota, the country’s total electorate divided by the existing number of constituencies.22 If all of the estimated missing voters had been registered on the 1991 rolls, then the electoral quotas for each country would have been about 2000 voters larger. Using these enlarged quotas, we have calculated the constituency entitlement for each relevant local government unit and estimated the partisan impact of any changes from the current situation (using the regression model referred to above: Rossiter et al., 1996). Most of the changes (involving only seven constituencies in total) would have been outside the main urban areas (Dorset would lose a seat, for example, whereas Devon would gain one); the net redistribution of seats would have disadvantaged Labour, but by one seat only.

Using the new seats and estimated electorates we find, somewhat surprisingly, that, despite the average number of missing voters falling by a third in Conservative-held seats, there are nine constituencies where the estimated number of eligible adults missing from the rolls in 1996 is more than twice the predicted Conservative majority; five of them are essentially new seats. Thus despite the anticipated reduction in the number of people who do not register as electors, the Conservative party could still benefit significantly (and especially so if the election result is a close one) as a result of their absence from particular constituencies.

CONCLUSIONS

Electoral campaigning is becoming a much more professional activity in Great Britain (Kavanagh, 1995; Scammell, 1995). Parties are becoming more adept at seeking out their supporters and persuading them to vote; extension of the franchise to overseas voters and relaxation of the rules for postal voting have provided new opportunities for such mobilisation programmes, and parties have also realised the importance of ensuring that their potential ‘home’ supporters are on the electoral roll.

The arguments in favour of the changes facilitating overseas and postal voting are linked to the increased mobility of large sections of the population. Laws which require people to cast their votes at a prescribed booth increasingly disenfranchise large segments of the population. To date, relatively few of those who could benefit from the relaxed arrangements do so (only 0.5% of the estimated number of potential overseas voters, for example), but the parties are now committing resources to mobilising such people, both over the long-term with regard to overseas voters, and in the short-term for postal voters. Our analyses show both the importance of the changes (there are more postal, overseas and missing voters in a constituency with a more mobile population) and the electoral impact of the measures taken by the parties. In 1992, for example, there were more postal votes in the government party’s marginal seats than else-
where, and the larger the Conservative majority in a seat in 1987, the more overseas voters there were. Similarly, in at least ten of the seats which the Conservatives won, the number of eligible adults who had not registered as electors was more than twice the margin of victory.

It is widely expected that the 1997 general election will produce a close contest in many constituencies. The resources which the parties invest in mobilising the support of long-distance voters, and in encouraging locals to register in October 1996, may have a significant impact on the outcome of at least some of those contests. The interaction of population mobility and party activity may substantially affect the operation of the democratic franchise.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENT

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NOTES

(1) The actual procedure varies slightly from place to place, according to the practices of the individual Electoral Registration Officers, but the general pattern is as described here. There are special procedures for adults resident in institutions.

(2) It is illegal not to register, but nobody is ever prosecuted for doing so. Many people, including students, are entitled to register at more than one address if they are resident there for part of the year. They can only vote at one place at a general election, at the location of their choice (basically where they are resident on election day), but they can vote in as many places as they are entitled to in local government elections.

(3) In the late 1980s and early 1990s, for example, it was erroneously believed by many that by not registering on the electoral roll individuals would avoid paying the new local government tax—the 'community charge', commonly known as the 'poll tax'—and so disenfranchised themselves (Butler et al., 1994; the two rolls were entirely separate). In the mid-1990s, the replacement local government tax—the 'council tax'—was a tax on households and some registered only one member of a multi-member household on the electoral roll, to obtain the partial remission of the tax for single-person households.

(4) In 1945, Labour MPs claimed that their opponents had improperly used doctors to secure postal votes (Butler, 1955).

(5) By a ratio of 4:1, according to informal Labour Party estimates.

(6) Data on the number of postal votes cast in each constituency are published in the statutory returns laid before Parliament after each general election giving details of each candidate's campaign expenditure; the reports give the total number of votes cast, but do not break them down by party. Since 1991, the number of registered overseas voters in each constituency has been reported in the annual Office of Population Censuses and Surveys Electoral Statistics report (London: HMSO). Since these deal with registered electors and not with votes cast, they too are not broken down by party.

(7) This was confirmed by press reports and television coverage of Conservative and Labour mobilisation strategies, especially in Spain, in January 1996.

(8) The electoral roll was not used as a basis for poll tax collection, and an entirely separate roll was compiled (the tax was abolished in 1993). Nevertheless, there was a widespread belief that the electoral roll would be used in the search for those who should be paying, and as a result many are believed to have failed to register as electors in order to make it harder for them to be traced as potential poll-tax payers.

(9) The regions employed here are those used in a large number of other studies of British voting patterns; they are based on the standard regions, within which the main urban cores are separately identified. (For full details see Johnston et al., 1988.)

(10) Constituencies vary somewhat in their size (number of electors) because of population shifts after each redistricting which is based on rules requiring electorates to be as close to the national quota (i.e. average) as possible. (The 1983, 1987 and 1992 general elections were fought on the same constituencies, introduced in 1983 but defined using 1976 (in England) electorate data.) The shifts usually lead to small inner-city constituencies and larger ones in the suburbs and rural areas, which cancel each other out on a regional scale, hence justifying the approach adopted here of calculating the average number of overseas and postal voters per constituency per region.

(11) In this, as in the other regression analyses reported here, we have to use areally aggregated data, since these are all that are available. There is thus the potential for committing the ecological fallacy, especially if the model is underspecified.

(12) At the constituency level within Merseyside, although the largest numbers of predicted overseas voters are in some of the more affluent parts of the conurbation (Crosby, Southport, Wallasey and the two Wirral constituencies), the largest positive residuals (i.e. where the number of overseas voters was...
but it is believed there is considerable variation in
were less likely to register,
be held within five years of the date of the current
official campaign (when Parliament is prorogued) and
not than these as percentages of the registered electorate.
When the models were rerun including constituency
size, there were no significant variations to any of the
coefficients.
(14) There was no collinearity between movement and
unemployment levels – the correlation between the
two produced an $r^2$ of 0.04.
(15) Perhaps this was because more voters in such
areas arranged for proxy votes to be cast on their behalf, but we have no data on this.
(16) There is usually 5–6 weeks between the start of the
official campaign (when Parliament is prorogued) and
polling day.
(17) Recommended practice is that EROs leave 'uncontacted' electors on the roll for one year only,
but it is believed there is considerable variation in
practice. There is also clear evidence that some EROs,
under political direction from local government
politicians, are more assiduous than others at register-
ing resident electors.
(18) Interestingly, there was no evidence that those
living in areas harmed by the property value recession
were less likely to register, even though voting in such
areas was clearly influenced by the phenomenon
(Pattie et al., 1995): they were apparently angered by
government policies, but not politically alienated by
them.
(19) Although it is generally assumed that postal voters
favour the Conservative party by a large margin, this is
not confirmed by detailed analyses, and exit polls at
recent elections suggest a more equal division between
the Labour and Conservative parties in the preferences
of this larger group of long distance voters.
(20) British electoral law requires a general election to
be held within five years of the date of the current
Parliament's first meeting (Blackburn, 1995), but the
Prime Minister can recommend a dissolution of
Parliament to the monarch at any time during that
five years. Few Parliaments run for their full five years,
but it is widely assumed that the one elected in April
1992 will, because of the very poor position of the
government in the opinion polls. An election held after
mid-February 1997 will be conducted using the 1996
electoral register.
(21) The Boundary Commissions (there is one each for
England, Northern Ireland, Scotland and Wales) have
to operate a complex, ambiguous set of rules, one of
which requires them to ensure that constituencies have
electorates which are as equal as is practicable.
(22) A separate quota is calculated for each of England,
Scotland and Wales. For the Fourth Periodic Reviews
which were reported to Parliament in 1994–1995, the
quotas were: England, 69,281; Scotland, 54,569; and
Wales, 5,525.

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