



How many dead people vote?

DOI:

[10.1111/j.1740-9713.2016.00980.x](https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1740-9713.2016.00980.x)

Document Version

Accepted author manuscript

[Link to publication record in Manchester Research Explorer](#)

Citation for published version (APA):

Purdam, K. (2016). How many dead people vote? *Significance*, 13(6). <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1740-9713.2016.00980.x>

Published in:

Significance

Citing this paper

Please note that where the full-text provided on Manchester Research Explorer is the Author Accepted Manuscript or Proof version this may differ from the final Published version. If citing, it is advised that you check and use the publisher's definitive version.

General rights

Copyright and moral rights for the publications made accessible in the Research Explorer are retained by the authors and/or other copyright owners and it is a condition of accessing publications that users recognise and abide by the legal requirements associated with these rights.

Takedown policy

If you believe that this document breaches copyright please refer to the University of Manchester's Takedown Procedures [<http://man.ac.uk/04Y6Bo>] or contact uml.scholarlycommunications@manchester.ac.uk providing relevant details, so we can investigate your claim.



How Many Dead People Vote?

Dr. K. Purdam

University of Manchester

Draft

2016

Forthcoming in *Significance*, 13 (6) 2016

How many dead people vote?

Introduction

In the 2015 UK General Election, Ronnie Carroll, who died in April 2015 aged 80, had two claims to fame. He was the only singer to have represented the UK in the Eurovision Song Contest two years in succession, with 'Ring-a-Ding Girl' in 1962 and 'Say Wonderful Things' the year after, coming fourth on both occasions. He also won votes at a British General Election despite being dead.

At the time of his death, from an age related health issue, Carroll was standing for election in the constituency of Hampstead and Kilburn. The seat had been a tightly fought marginal in 2010 with the incumbent Labour MP Glenda Jackson having a majority of only 42 votes. If a candidate from a registered party dies, the election has to be stopped and re-run, but if an independent candidate like Carroll dies the election goes ahead. Despite his campaign message, which had explicitly encouraged people 'not to vote for me', and despite the significant drawback of being dead, he secured 113 votes, more than one of his living competitors managed.

Carroll's story might sound unusual, but he was not the only British citizen to be posthumously participating in politics that year. As in all elections – in the UK and elsewhere – dead voters were on the electoral rolls, and some of them will have voted. Not many, perhaps several thousand at most. But with the weeks that pass between the closure of the electoral register and election day, and the increase in postal ballots, there is ample opportunity for registered voters to have their say from beyond the grave.

Still making a mark

Votes from the dead can end up in the ballot box for a number of reasons: administrative error, mistaken identity, or the death of people shortly after sending off their postal ballots. Deliberate fraud may also be an issue here: in England and Wales, for example, the registration of deaths in cases where an inquest is required will be delayed until a coroner has delivered their verdict. This may allow time for the deceased's postal vote to be used by others.

In the USA, where one in eight voter registrations are thought to be inaccurate (PEW 2012), there have been numerous claims of dead people voting in elections. For example, in the 2004 presidential election it was claimed that in Florida there were 64,889 registered voters who were also listed in a Social Security Administration database of people who had died (Dougherty 2004). In the 2004 governor election in King County, there were a number of allegations of dead people voting (Le and Nicolosi 2005). It was reported that one man voted on behalf of his recently deceased wife, whilst another man completed his postal vote but died and so his wife posted it. In the 2012 presidential election, it was reported that an estimated 1.8 million deceased people were registered to vote (PEW 2012). In Nassau County in New York in 2012 it was claimed that 270 deceased people voted posthumously, including one man who had voted 14 times since his death (Clark 2013). In North Carolina in 2013 it was claimed that 13,416 dead people were on the electoral register and 81 dead citizens were recorded as having actually voted (Strach et al. 2014). In the run up to the 2016 USA presidential election, concerns were also

expressed about voter fraud and whether dead people would in some way influence the outcome (Maass and Ackerman 2016; Vozzella 2016). In October, Republican candidate (now President-elect) Donald Trump stoked fears of electoral fraud by resurrecting the Pew Center finding of 1.8 million dead-but-registered voters. He told a rally: *“More than 1.8 million deceased individuals right now are listed as voters. Oh, that’s wonderful. Well, if they’re going to vote for me, we’ll think about it, right? But I have a feeling they’re not going to vote for me. Of the 1.8 million, 1.8 million is voting for somebody else”* (wapo.st/2fh8qQz).

Many other elections around the world have involved claims about dead people voting. In the 2013 Zimbabwe General Election, 8.7 million ballot papers were printed – 35% more than the number of registered voters (African Union Election Observation Mission 2013). It was also claimed that the electoral registers included the names of 2 million dead people, including one record-breaking Methuselah aged 135 (BBC News 2013). International election observers were not allowed into the country.

In the 2015 Turkish election it was claimed that there was evidence of dead people voting as part of electoral fraud. While in Venezuela in 2013, there were more registered votes than there were people living in the country, and it was alleged that 300,000 votes were cast in the names of dead people (Oppenheimer 2015).

A live issue

The sheer administrative complexity of mass electoral registers and the challenge of keeping them up to date, means that many dead people remain listed for some time after their demise. In the UK, the electoral registers are estimated to be only 90 per cent accurate, with an estimated 7.6 million people not correctly registered at their current address - including some who have died since the register was last updated (Electoral Commission 2014). Many electoral registration officers try to keep their lists as up to date as possible even after they have been printed, but this can be an ad hoc process in the run up to an election.

Of the around 50 million population aged 18 and over in the UK, approximately 550,000 people (roughly one percent of the population) die each year (ONS 2015a). That is around 1,500 people per day - although there are of course seasonal variations in mortality rates, as well as spatial ones. For example, in the UK, life expectancy can, on average, be more than a decade shorter for men and women in economically deprived areas compared to people in the most prosperous areas (ONS 2015b). In the electoral ward of Chipping Norton in Whitney, the constituency of ex-Prime Minister David Cameron, life expectancy is estimated to be 78 years. In the electoral ward of Beswick in Manchester Central (leading Labour Party figure Lucy Powell’s constituency), life expectancy is estimated to be 70 years (ONS 2006). These differences can have electoral consequences, given the associations between age, social economic status, health, voter turnout and party support (Bhatti and Hansen 2012).

In the UK, the main electoral registration process usually closes around two weeks before polling day (17 days in 2015), though it closes nearer to polling day for those who want to request postal or proxy votes. Even if we assume that the electoral register is fully accurate (which we know is not the case), around 25,500 potential voters could die between the date when the main registration closes and polling day. If we only focus on the already registered electorate of 46.4 million people, this figure falls to around 21,500 potential voters.

The increasing use of postal voting, adds to the likelihood of dead people voting, because they may have already cast their vote before dying. In 2015, 7.6 million people requested postal votes, and these were much more likely to be cast than in-person votes (86 per cent of postal ballots were returned, whereas turnout for those registered to vote in person was 63 per cent). With the main postal voting registration closing 16 days before polling day, and with the need to send a postal vote at least the day before polling day in order to ensure it arrives in time to be included, there is a possibility that around 3,000 potential postal voters could die before (if they have completed the ballot paper but not posted it) or after posting their vote, but ahead of polling day. This is only a crude approximate figure. People who are about to die might be ill, and less likely to vote, even by post. But on the other hand, postal voting request rates are disproportionately high amongst older people, and so the total may well be greater.

Could dead voters have determined the outcome in any constituency race in the last UK General Election? Probably not. The numbers of dead potential voters per constituency is low. A figure of 3,000 across the country represents around five people per constituency. Even if we assume all of these people vote in one direction, which is unlikely, they will not have been numerous enough to determine the outcome in any constituency in 2015. We can safely say that Bryon Davies, the present Conservative MP for Gower in Wales, who has the smallest majority - just 27 votes - did not emerge victorious solely due to the votes of the dead (even though areas of South Wales have some of the lowest life expectancies and lowest healthy life expectancies in the UK).

However, unless voter registration and identification practices are improved, the ageing UK population (the population over 80 years and older is projected to increase to 8 million by 2050), higher turnout amongst older people, long term inequalities in life expectancy across different areas and the growing use of postal votes mean that the chances are that some future constituencies' results may turn on the choices made by the recently departed.

Dr. Kingsley Purdam is a senior lecturer in social statistics and research methods at the University of Manchester, UK

BOX 1:

Posthumous popularity

Several dead election candidates have been even more successful than the UK's Ronnie Carroll. In 2000, Democrat Mel Carnahan won the US Senate seat for Missouri several weeks after dying in an air crash. In 2010 Jenny Oropeza won election to the California state senate several weeks after dying from cancer. It is reported that Republican Party members complained that voters had not been informed about Oropeza's death ahead of the election. In the 2015 Myanmar election the 54-year old U Soe Myint, a candidate for Aung San Suu Kyi's National League for Democracy Party, won, despite dying from a heart attack during the campaign.

The dead have also been consulted about whom they would vote for. In the 1987 and 1992 UK General Elections one newspaper asked psychics to find out who certain dead historical figures would have voted for. It was reported that Stalin would have voted for Labour; Queen Victoria for Churchill, and Elvis would have voted Conservative. Genghis Khan was a "don't know" (Chippendale and Horrie 1990). It is not clear how these claims could ever be verified. In the 2010 General Election the dead were consulted and, it was claimed, predicted that Cameron would win a

second election following a rerun after a hung parliament. The spirit world was reportedly too fearful to comment on the prospects of Nigel Farage (Gold 2010). In the USA psychics were asked to predict the 2016 presidential election (Bump 2015) – two out of three expected Hillary Clinton to win.

BOX 2:

Democracy is a dangerous business

Many people have died for the right to vote and to represent people as elected politicians.

In the 2015 Mexico Mid Term elections it was reported that seven electoral candidates had been killed (Human Rights Watch 2015). The newly elected Mexican mayor of Temixco Gisela Mota 30 was murdered on her second day of office. In 2013 on the eve of a re run vote in the Pakistan General Election Zahra Shahid Hussain vice-president of Pakistan's Movement for Justice party was shot dead outside her home. In the Netherlands in 2002 the 54-year old politician Pim Fortuyn was murdered during the General Election campaign. In the USA in 2011 the Democratic Congresswoman Gabrielle Giffords was seriously injured during a shooting at a public meeting in Arizona. Six other citizens were killed in the attack. In 2014, ahead of the General Election in Afghanistan, the Electoral Commission office was attacked and a number of electoral candidates murdered. More recently in the UK, Labour MP Jo Cox was murdered in the weeks before the referendum on membership of the European Union.

The Freedom House Index and the Democracy Index track democratic rights around the world including the safety of candidates and voters. According to the latest Democracy Index report only 13% of the world's population live in what are can be categorized as 'Full Democracies'. Even more worryingly, the Freedom House Index suggests a decline in political rights and civil liberties around the world.

Note: This article draws on research published in Cowley, P. and Ford, R. (eds) (2016) *More Sex, Lies and the Ballot Box*. Biteback Publishing.

References

African Union Election Observation Mission (2013) Observation Mission Republic of Zimbabwe. <https://eisa.org.za/pdf/zim2013au.pdf>

BBC News (2013) Zimbabwe election: A guide to rigging allegations. BBC News 7th August. <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-africa-23591941>

Bhatti, Y. and Hansen, K. M. (2012) Retiring from Voting: Turnout among Senior Voters. *Journal of Elections, Public Opinion and Parties*, 22:4, 479-500.

Bump, P. (2015) What three psychics told us will happen in the 2016 election. *Washing Post*. June 22nd <https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/the-fix/wp/2015/06/22/what-three-psychics-told-us-will-happen-in-the-2016-election/>

Chippendale, P. and Horrie, C. (1990) *Stick It Up Your Punter*. The Uncut Story of the Sun Newspaper. London: Heinemann.

Clark, M. (2013) 6,100 dead people on Nassau voter rolls. *Newsday*. <http://www.newsday.com/long-island/nassau/6-100-dead-people-on-nassau-voter-rolls-newsday-analysis-finds-1.6349860>

Dougherty, G. (2004) Dead voters on rolls, other glitches found in 6 key states. Chicago Tribune December 4th. http://articles.chicagotribune.com/2004-12-04/news/0412040222_1_voter-rolls-deceased-voters-voters-cast-ballots

Electoral Commission (2014) The quality of the 2014 electoral registers in Great Britain. London: Electoral Commission.

Gold, T. (2010) General Election 2010: Who can predict the outcome of the General Election? The Daily Telegraph, May 4th. <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/election-2010/7658245/General-Election-2010-Who-can-predict-the-outcome-of-the-General-Election.html>

Human Rights Watch (2015) Mexico: Aftermath of a Massacre. New York: Human Rights Watch <https://www.hrw.org/news/2015/07/14/mexico-aftermath-massacre>.

Le, P.C and Nicolosi, M. (2005) Dead voted in governor's race. Seattle Post, January 6th <http://www.seattlepi.com/local/article/Dead-voted-in-governor-s-race-1163612.php>

McLure, J. (2010) Candidate Is Stabbed to Death in Ethiopia. New York Times March 2nd. <http://www.nytimes.com/2010/03/03/world/africa/03ethiopia.html>

Maass, B. and Ackerman, M. (2016) CBS4 Investigation Finds Dead Voters Casting Ballots In Colorado. <http://denver.cbslocal.com/2016/09/22/cbs4-investigation-finds-dead-voters-casting-ballots-in-colorado/>

ONS (2006) Life expectancy at birth for wards in England and Wales. London: Office for National Statistics.

ONS (2015a) Deaths Registered in England and Wales, 2014. London: Office for National Statistics.

ONS (2015b) Life expectancy at birth and at age 65 by local areas in England and Wales, 2012 to 2014. London: Office for National Statistics.

Oppenheimer, A. (2015) In Venezuelan elections, too many dead vote Miami Herald, March 28th <http://www.miamiherald.com/news/local/news-columns-blogs/andres-oppenheimer/article16515473.html>

PEW (2012) Election Initiatives. Issue Brief. Pew Centre on the States, Pew Trust. http://www.pewtrusts.org/~media/legacy/uploadedfiles/pcs_assets/2012/pewupgradimgvoterregistrationpdf.pdf

Strach, K., Burris, M. and Degraffenreid, V. (2014) Voter Registration and Mail Verification. North Carolina: North Carolina State Board of Elections. http://www.wral.com/asset/news/state/nccapitol/2014/04/02/13534230/SBOE_JointCommittee_April_2014.pdf

Vozzella (2016) He fought in World War II. He died in 2014. And he just registered to vote in Va. The Washington Post, September 29th. <http://wpo.st/Q8662>