



General Elections: Guidance for Student Officers in Cambridge

With the general elections approaching, this briefing note aims to support postgraduate and mature undergraduate students' officers and representatives in getting involved and standing up for students locally and nationally while remaining within their duties as students' unions and charities.

Key dates

There will be a General Election held on Thursday 12th December.

The deadline for voter registration and for applications for a postal vote to be received by the Electoral Registration Office is the end of Tuesday 26th November.

What you can't do:

Postgraduate students' officers and representatives in Colleges at University of Cambridge (henceforth **MCRs**) have statutory obligations as students' unions and as charities. Some are registered charities in their own right and are therefore regulated by the Charities Commission in what they can do, while most are legally a part of their colleges, which are registered charities. All MCRs have to limit themselves to acting on behalf of their members *as students*, and must remain politically neutral in elections.

This means you can't:

- **Take positions on any party or candidate**, either for or against.
- Tell people how to vote or **attempt to influence voter behaviour**.
- Take positions on issues not relating to students in their position as students. This does not mean you have to stick rigidly to Higher Education policy, but it does mean that **you have to tie stances you take back to their impact on your members**.

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What you can (and maybe should) do:

Do not let the restrictions on what you can do discourage your MCR from getting involved! There is plenty that MCRs can do to raise the profile of student issues in elections and empower students to get involved in the local community. Students' Unions are there to represent and act in the collective interests of students, and elections have a big impact on all of our lives. Making sure that students have the voice they are entitled to and that issues affecting students are part of the conversation is comfortably within your role and mandate.

Voter Registration

One of the simplest ways to get involved is by pushing **voter registration**. Students are one of the least likely groups to be registered to vote, and all students must register individually. This is especially important here and now, as Cambridge is a marginal seat with a high student population and **the window for registration is likely to be very short in any 2019 general election**.

The easiest way to register is online at <http://www.gov.uk/register-to-vote>

Some key points to watch out for are:

- It is not only home students who can vote in General Elections – **you can also vote if you are a citizen of Ireland or a [qualifying Commonwealth nation](#)**.
 - Make sure you include international students who can't vote when talking about elections in your college. The outcome of these elections affects us all, and at this time especially many international students will feel personally invested in the outcomes. There are plenty of ways to ensure that those who can't vote are included in what you do, whether in issue-based campaigning or in encouraging others to vote.
- Many students will not be in Cambridge for the date of the General Election. If they wish to vote in Cambridge they can most easily do so by registering for a postal vote. Students will need to download, print and fill in a postal vote form to do this. These are available [here](#), and [need to be delivered to the appropriate Electoral Registration Office](#).
 - For most students this will be the Cambridge office, but some on the outskirts of town it may fall in South Cambridgeshire District Council. You can find the appropriate office for you [here](#).
 - Students' Unions often provide pre-printed forms and help with posting in order to encourage students to register for a postal vote.
- Students can register to vote both at home and at university, but it is very likely that Cambridge is more marginal than their home constituency, so they probably have more impact here. Note that they can only vote in one place.
- One of the big obstacles to registering students is often that the online form requires your National Insurance number – **it is worth thinking about ways to explain what a NI number is and how to find out yours**. Most people who have had a job in the UK can find their NI number on their payslips, and advice on finding a lost NI number is available [here](#).

More ideas for ways to drive voter registration from the NUS can be found [here](#). (Note that this document dates from 2015 so the dates are not up-to-date.)

Issue-based campaigns

You can also run campaigns based on issues, so long as the **intention is to influence political parties and raise the profile of these issues rather than to influence voter behaviour** towards or away from a particular party or candidate.

- You can take stances on particular issues that affect your students, whether they be local or national.
- You can platform/amplify the positions of candidates in order to prompt discussion, so long as you don't endorse or act to give one or more parties/candidates an advantage.
- Remember that most while Cambridge students live in the Cambridge constituency, there are a sizable number (including those who live at Girton or Homerton colleges) who live in the South Cambridgeshire seat, which has quite different politics.
- If you are adopting positions as a MCR, you are expected to do so with a democratic mandate from your members. Usually this would mean a motion at an open meeting or equivalent.

You can find more detailed guidance about how charities can behave in elections [here](#).

If you have any more questions about MCR activity around elections, please do get in touch with the [Graduate Union](#) for support. We would also love to hear about what you do so we can help promote it and share ideas.