

Unlock the Vote: Overview

Unlock is launching a national campaign to extend the right to vote to more people in prison. While people on remand can already vote, most people in prison in the UK can't. We believe this is an unjust and outdated restriction. It damages democracy, severs civic connection and undermines rehabilitation at the very time it's needed most.

We believe it is an imperative to shift public and political attitudes around this issue and to build momentum for much-needed reform. We're focusing on incremental steps to bolster public support with the ultimate, long-term goal of establishing voting as a civic right that should never be automatically removed.

Why This Matters

1. Voting is a legal right (although not an absolute right) not a privilege

Removing the vote is a form of 'civic death'. It sends a message that a person is no longer part of society. The underlying idea is that you not only lose your liberty as a punishment, but you go to prison to receive a further dose. We live in a carceral society, but we have to push back against this outdated mindset. The healthiest democracies around the world have strong and engaged voter franchises. It's not an accident that in many of these, people in prison retain the vote.

2. Removing the vote undermines democracy

Enabling people to vote affirms their civic identity and connection to society, which is vital for moving forward. Taking it away not only denies that identity, but it also weakens democracy by excluding thousands of voices.

3. It is unfairly and inconsistently applied

People on remand and 'civil prisoners' can vote. People serving short sentences cannot, even if they are only weeks from release. Many people sentenced in the community retain the vote, while someone sentenced to a few months inside loses it.

4. It affects whole communities

People in prison are more likely to come from already marginalised groups: including working-class communities and ethnic minorities. Removing the vote from people in prison risks disenfranchising the communities they belong to.

Why Now?

- *The government is considering giving 16- and 17-year-olds the vote.* This suggests a growing belief that expanding the franchise strengthens democracy. It also exposes an inconsistency: while we consider enfranchising young people, many adults in prison remain excluded, even those close to release.
- *Prison reform is back on the agenda.* The prison system have always been under strain, but with a new focus on it, the government is exploring measures such as incentivised early release for good behaviour. If we want people to leave prison ready to rejoin society and to stay outside, we must also support civic reintegration. Voting is a key part of that.

- *Voting is a way to reconnect.* It offers people in prison a tangible way to engage with their communities and feel part of the democratic process. It removes a symbolic barrier to playing a positive role in society, both during and after custody. With the recent sentencing review's focus on the importance of communities, this is one way of ensuring people feel a connection with their communities and vice versa.
- *If our democracy is worth defending, this is our chance.* Falling turnout, voter ID barriers, the attack on 'truth' and disillusionment with politics all point to the need for greater civic inclusion. It is imperative that the barriers to voting must be torn down for people in prison. By widening and strengthening the franchise, we affirm that everyone has a stake in the future.

Statements and Support

- *European Court of Human Rights (2005, Hirst v UK):* The UK's blanket ban on voting for people in prison was ruled a breach of human rights.
- *David Cameron (2012):* Famously said the idea of giving people in prison the vote made him "physically ill", this was a moment that defined the debate for a decade.
- *Caspar Walsh (2012):* "A prisoner's rehabilitation as a safe, responsible and productive member of society must include the most basic right of democratic process – the right to choose who governs us. To remove this right dehumanises prisoners."¹
- *Submission by Quaker Crime Community and Justice Sub-Committee (2013)²:* "People sent to prison remain members of society and should be encouraged to exercise their civic responsibilities despite the denial of their liberty."
- *Shami Chakrabarti (2014):* "That's why, when people go to prison, it is crucial they remain full citizens, still subject to our laws. We don't allow them to be tortured or starved; why deprive them of the vote—a form of "civic death"? It's unnecessary and serves no end."
- *Sir Philip Davis (2017):* "The Secretary of State knows that I think giving the vote to any prisoners is idiotic, unjustifiable and about as popular with the general public as finding a rattlesnake in a lucky dip."
- *Rory Stewart (Longford Lectures, 2023):* "We live in a situation which in many ways, prisoners are not treated as full citizens. One very good example of this is around the question, the most fundamental question of citizenship, which is the vote. Prisoners are full citizens, prisoners should have the vote..."

¹ [Why prisoners should be given the right to vote | Caspar Walsh | The Guardian](#)

² *Supported by the Prison Reform Trust, the Howard League and others*

- *Constitutional Court of South Africa*: “The universality of the franchise is important not only for nationhood and democracy. The vote of each and every citizen is a badge of dignity and personhood. Quite literally, it says that everybody counts.”³

Countries and States overseas

Two US states allow voting rights for people in prison: *Vermont and Maine*. Vermont has a 16% recidivism rate, while Maine is slightly higher at around 21%. While we can't connect removing the barriers to voting with reduced reoffending, it's worth bearing in mind.

Jersey: Plans to extend the vote to all people in prison.⁴

Guernsey full voting for people in prison: “Jersey’s sister Bailiwick introduced full enfranchisement in 1996. Prisoners at *Les Nicolles* vote by post, or in person if the Lieutenant Governor permits it. A prisoner in Guernsey votes in the district where he or she is inscribed on the electoral roll, *i.e.* where he or she was ordinarily resident prior to incarceration.”⁵

Ireland: All people in prisons can vote via postal vote (Electoral Act 1992, Section 63A; introduced in 2006).

Canada: All people in prisons can vote (*Sauvé v Canada*, 2002). Voting typically takes place in prisons via special ballots.

New Zealand: As of 2020, people in prison serving under 3 years can vote (Electoral Registration of Sentenced Prisoners Amendment Act 2020).

Belgium and Denmark: People in prison retain the right to vote and may do so via postal or in-prison voting mechanisms.

Scotland: Since 2 April 2020, the Franchise Act has allowed people serving 12 months or less to register and vote in Scottish Parliament and local government elections.

A Short history

- **1870**: Forfeiture Act formalised disenfranchisement of people serving a sentence in prison. Enshrines the notion of ‘civic death’.
- **1983**: Representation of the People Act, the key 20th Century legislation retained and restated the blanket ban on voting rights people serving a sentence in prison.
- **2005**: European Court of Human Rights rules UK’s blanket ban unlawful (*Hirst v UK*).
- **2017–18**: Minor changes made (the ‘Lidington Compromise’), allowing those released on temporary licence to vote – affecting around 100 people.

³ *August v Electoral Commission* 1999 3 SA 1 (CC) paras 18-19.

⁴ [Plans to extend voting rights to all prisoners based in Jersey - Bailiwick Express News Jersey](#)

⁵ https://www.jerseylaw.je/publications/jglr/Pages/JLR1402_Meiklejohn.aspx

What we're calling for

- Longer-term reform to enshrine voting as a civic right for all, regardless of sentence length.
- Greater civic engagement opportunities in prison, including information, debate and access to political education.