

# Unlock the Vote

Why prisoner voting matters

March 2026

**Funded by the Joseph Rowntree Reform Trust**  
**Unlock the Vote is a national campaign to extend the right to vote to more people in prison, led by Unlock - the charity for people with criminal records.**



# Executive Summary

**The current system for prisoner voting in the UK damages democracy, harms rehabilitation, and is not consistent across the UK.**

While people on remand can already vote, most sentenced prisoners in the UK cannot. However those serving sentences of 12 months or less in Scotland retain their right to vote. The UK has some of the most restrictive laws around prisoner voting of western democracies. The current system in the UK damages democracy, severs civic connection and undermines rehabilitation at the very time it is needed most. It is also so restrictive in England and Wales that prisoners with the right to vote are often not able to due to unfamiliarity with the rules and administrative failures.

In 2025 it was estimated that around 21,473 prisoners and over 15% of the prison population in England and Wales were entitled to vote.<sup>1</sup>

We believe the current voting system for prisoners needs urgent reform in order to widen participation, restore faith in our democracy, and strengthen civic society.

The Joseph Rowntree Reform Trust has supported this work in recognition of the importance of the issue. The facts presented and the views expressed in this report are, however, those of the authors and not necessarily those of the Trust. [www.jrtrt.org.uk](http://www.jrtrt.org.uk)

# **A background to prisoner voting in the UK**

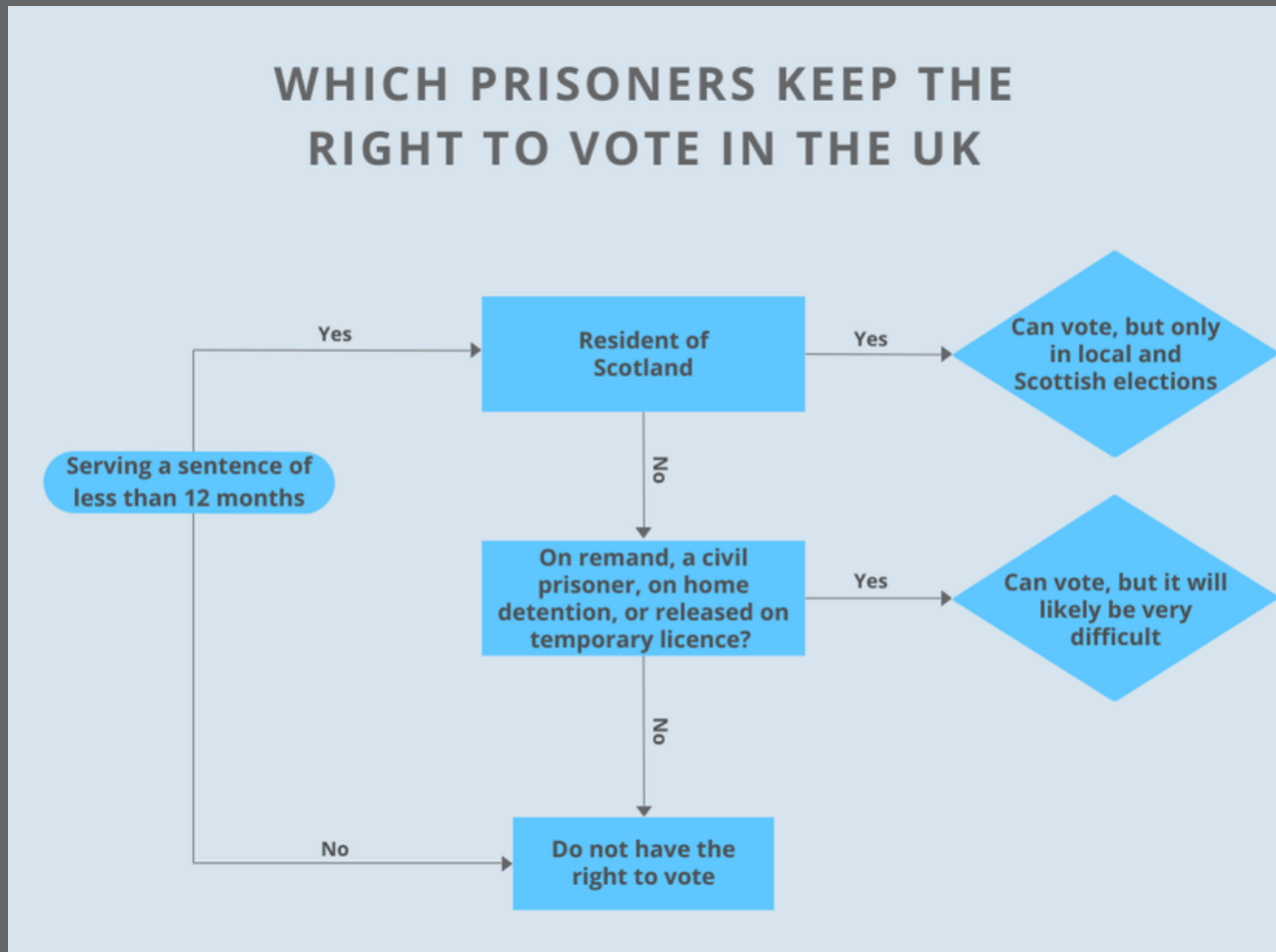
There has been an ongoing debate about prisoner voting rights in the UK since the European Court of Human Rights ruled the UK's blanket ban to be unlawful in 2005.

After over a decade of dead-lock the UK government introduced proposals to satisfy this judgement in 2017. These proposals gave the right to vote to those on remand, civil prisoners (normally those in prison for failure to pay fines or debts), and offenders on home detention curfew or released on temporary licence.<sup>2</sup>

The franchise for local elections is devolved in Scotland and Wales. In 2020 the Scottish Parliament legislated to allow Scottish prisoners serving a sentence less than 12 months the right to vote in Scottish and local elections.

# Which prisoners can vote, and how?

The current system is complex and varies across the UK. This flowchart shows which prisoners maintain their right to vote:



The latest statistics show that around 21,473 prisoners and over 15% of the prison population in England and Wales are entitled to vote. Research has shown though that in reality, very few are able to access this right.

The current prisoner voting framework states that people in prison should be registered to vote at their home address. In the absence of a home address they should be registered in an area they have a local connection to. Prisoners would require a postal vote, which should be sent to their prison.<sup>3</sup>

# Failures of the current system

Academic studies have shown that prisoners in the UK who are entitled to vote struggle to do so due to an unfamiliarity of the rules by Electoral Registration Officers and administrative failures.<sup>4</sup>

There is very little data on how many eligible prisoners have been able to register to vote. We do know however that for the 2021 Scottish Parliament elections only 38 prisoners were able to register to vote.<sup>5</sup>

From speaking with prisoners it is clear that few are made aware of their voting rights. Prison staff are not aware that they are supposed to assist eligible prisoners who would like to register to vote.

Beatrice was able to vote in the 2024 general election while in prison and has shared her experience:



"Prisoners and staff are unaware of the limited voting rights that do exist.

When I asked a member of staff if I could vote, they told me no. They were sure that as a prisoner I wasn't allowed. My peers all believed the same and it was easy to see why. There was no information anywhere.

Voting rights were never discussed, never displayed, and the Prisoner Voting Policy Framework - the document that sets out who can and can't vote in custody was gathering dust somewhere in a locked cabinet unread and forgotten.

Voting in that election was about more than politics. It was about belonging and feeling like a member of society again."

**Beatrice on trying to access her  
right to vote in prison**

Research by Unlock has also shown that many Electoral Registration Officers across the country are not aware of the current prisoner voting rules and are not complying with their duties as set out by the Electoral Commission.<sup>6</sup>

Freedom of Information requests we sent to several local authorities found:<sup>7</sup>

● **Birmingham City Council** were not aware of any postal votes sent to prisons at the last local election. Prisoners who have the right to vote in England and Wales will often have to do so via a postal vote. This suggests that none of the prisoners entitled to vote in the Birmingham City area were able to access this right at the last local election.

● **Brighton and Hove Council** wrongly assumed that, as there are no prisons in Brighton, they did not need to send any postal votes to any prisons. Most prisoners who are entitled to vote will be registered at their former residential address, with the postal vote sent to their prison address. So any resident of Brighton and Hove Council who is currently in prison and entitled to vote should have their postal vote sent to their prison by Brighton and Hove Council.

● **Croydon Borough Council** told us that they were doing no work to encourage voter registration for prisoners entitled to vote. The Electoral Commission sets out a duty on Electoral Registration Officers to encourage the participation of eligible electors.

# Why does this matter?

*This harms a democracy, already under attack*

The strength of our democracy is determined by how many of us participate in it. Against a backdrop of declining trust in our institutions and in democracy, this is more vital than ever. The healthiest democracies around the world have strong and engaged voter franchises. It's not an accident that in many of these, prisoners retain the vote.

*Voting aids rehabilitation and resettlement*

Not only are over 21,000 people missing out on a key democratic right, but they are also having their chances of rehabilitation and resettlement harmed. Numerous academic studies have shown the positive impact that democratic participation by people in prison has on rehabilitation and resettlement.

Prisoners who keep the right to vote have an enhanced sense of civic responsibility and are more likely to be successfully reintegrated following release.<sup>8</sup>

## How do other democracies compare?

In the world's strongest democracies many more prisoners retain the right to vote than in the UK.<sup>9</sup> In fact, all prisoners retain the right to vote in many of the countries consistently rated as having the healthiest democracies.

Closer to home, in Guernsey all prisoners have had the right to vote since 1996. In Jersey all prisoners serving a sentence of less than four years keep their right to vote, with plans announced in 2025 to extend the right to vote to all prisoners. All prisoners in Ireland can vote via post.

Across Europe all prisoners have the right to vote in Croatia, the Czech Republic, Denmark, Finland, Latvia, Lithuania, Macedonia, Montenegro, Serbia, Spain, Sweden, Switzerland and Ukraine. In France disenfranchisement is considered as an additional penalty in some sentences, however the vast majority of prisoners retain the right to vote. In Germany all prisoners retain the right to vote unless they have been convicted of an offence targeting the state or democracy.

In the United States, rules vary across states with prisoners in some states retaining their right to vote and prisoners in other states losing this right.

## PRISONER VOTING AROUND THE WORLD

| All prisoners retain the right to vote | Lighter restrictions than the UK | Blanket ban or similar restrictions to the UK |
|----------------------------------------|----------------------------------|-----------------------------------------------|
| Canada                                 | Australia**                      | Japan                                         |
| Denmark                                | France***                        | USA****                                       |
| Germany*                               | New Zealand**                    |                                               |
| Ireland                                |                                  |                                               |
| Spain                                  |                                  |                                               |
| Switzerland                            |                                  |                                               |

\*All prisoners retain the right to vote unless they have been convicted of an offence targeting the state or democracy.

\*\*All prisoners serving a sentence of less than three years retain the right to vote.

\*\*\*Disenfranchisement is considered as an additional penalty in some sentences, however the vast majority of prisoners retain the right to vote.

\*\*\*\*Varies across states. Prisoners in some states retain their right to vote, in most states prisoners lose their right to vote.

## How can this be fixed?

The current voting system for prisoners needs urgent reform. It is failing those in prison who maintain their right to vote, does not serve aims to bring down reoffending, and weakens our democracy. To widen participation, restore faith in our democracy, and strengthen civic society we are calling for:

- **A review of the current system** of prisoner voting in the UK, so that prisoners who have the right to vote are actively encouraged to register to vote by prisons and electoral administrators.
- **Extending prisoner enfranchisement across the UK**, so all prisoners serving a sentence of four years or less will retain their right to vote. Increasing the number of prisoners eligible to vote will increase awareness of voting rights among prisoners and prison staff, strengthening participation.

If you have any questions or would like to know how you can help, please contact us on [policy@unlock.org.uk](mailto:policy@unlock.org.uk).

# References and evidence

- 1) Figures taken from Offender Management Statistics for England and Wales. Remand population (16,628, 19%) plus non-criminal population (386, >0.5%) and individuals released on temporary licence (3,992). We have then subtracted the number of foreign nationals on remand and non-criminals in prison (3,917) to arrive at our estimate of 21,473. Prisoners released on temporary licence are not included in the overall prisoner population. So the 15% figure is the percentage of remand population and non-criminal population minus the foreign nationals who are on remand and non-criminal.
- 2) "Prisoners' voting rights" House of Commons Library briefing paper.
- 3) "Restrictions on Prisoner Voting Policy Framework" Ministry of Justice.
- 4) 'Prisoner Voting in the United Kingdom: An Empirical Study of a Contested Prisoner Right', Robert Jones and Gregory Davies, Modern Law Review, Vol 86, Issue 4 (July 2023) pp 900-926.
- 5) "Prisoner voting in Scottish devolved elections" Scottish Government report.
- 6) "Running electoral administration" Electoral Commission.
- 7) FOIs available on request.
- 8) Milena Tripkovic, Punishment and Citizenship - A Theory of Criminal Disenfranchisement, Oxford University Press (2019) and Jeff Manza and Christopher Uggen, 'Punishment and Democracy: Disenfranchisement of Nonincarcerated Felons in the United States', Perspectives on Politics , Vol 2 , Issue 3 , (September 2004), pp. 491 - 505.
- 9) To compare prisoner voting rights with the strength of a democracy in any given state we have looked at each individual state's legislation on prisoner enfranchisement and the Economist Intelligence Unit's Democracy Index.