

UK Electoral Commission under fire as citizens denied vote in EU elections

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News

The UK Electoral Commission has been accused of failing to make timely and adequate preparations for EU citizens to take part in the European elections and not being properly held to account.



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The allegation comes after it emerged on Wednesday that British expats in France might not get a vote in the European elections because their postal voting forms have arrived late, or not at all.

Some local councils in the UK used a postal service called Adare, rather than Royal Mail, to send them.

Envelopes, according to reports, indicate they were sent via the Netherlands. Voters must have their

papers back in the UK by election day which, in Britain, is tomorrow (23 May).

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Adare said all ballots were posted "in line with the election and council timetables".

The company insisted they had used "reputable mail handlers" whose job it was to "assess the best route through other European countries before the mail arrives at the final destination".

Expat voters who want to participate in European elections, which take place from 23-26 May, can register in the British constituency where they or their parents were last registered to vote but they must have their completed ballot paper returned to the local electoral returning officer by the time polls close on election day.

Meanwhile, calls are growing for the UK government to "take immediate action" to prevent millions of EU citizens in the UK being denied a vote in this week's elections.

"As a result of the late confirmation [of the UK's participation], a large number of local authorities have failed to send out forms or adequately ensure that the millions of EU citizens in the UK entitled to vote will be able to vote on 23 May" **Mike Gapes MP**

UK MP Mike Gapes said, "It has been apparent for some months that it was almost certain that we would be fighting the European elections, but as a result of the late confirmation, a large number of local authorities have failed to send out forms or adequately ensure that the millions of EU citizens in the UK entitled to vote will be able to vote on 23 May."

EU citizens did not have the right to vote in the EU referendum but they do have the right to vote in the EU elections and Gapes said, "It is vitally important that EU citizens participate in large numbers and make their voices heard."

His intervention was prompted by a campaign led by New Europeans, a leading civil rights organisation based in Brussels and London.

Former Labour MP Roger Casale, who is founder and Secretary General of New Europeans, wrote to David Lidington, effectively the UK's deputy PM, calling on the government to take remedial action.

Casale said, "I am not surprised the UK government is burying its head in the sand. Any reasonable and democratically-minded person would want to do everything possible to increase participation in elections. The Government has done the reverse."

He added, "There can hardly be a more important duty than ensuring that all citizens can exercise their right to vote. If postal vote papers arrive late, citizens are denied that right. On the face of it this represents a serious dereliction of duty on the part of the local authorities concerned and those who have lost out should be entitled to compensation."

"But there can be no compensation to those who suffer the result of an election the result of which has been affected by such an unwarranted distortion of the effective franchise."

"Any reasonable and democratically-minded person would want to do everything possible to increase participation in elections. The [UK] Government has done the reverse" **Roger Casale, New Europeans**

A similar problem arose in 2014 when up to one million EU citizens were unable to vote in the European elections in the UK due to a failure on the part of many local authorities to send out the additional form.

At the time, both the Government and the Electoral Commission promised a change.

However, UK MP Bridget Phillipson, representing the parliamentary committee to which the Electoral Commission is accountable, said, "Following the EU referendum, the UK government made it clear that the parliamentary elections to the European Parliament in 2019 would not take place, and therefore the commission did not continue to develop any further recommendations in this area."

About the author

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