

Overseas voters will again be hampered in UK election, say campaigners

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News

Campaigners have warned that up to 3 million overseas voters will again be prevented from participating in the UK general election next month.



Photo credit: Press Association

This is because Britons who have lived abroad for more than 15 years are barred from voting in UK general elections.

Boris Johnson's government is now being urged to overturn the ban.

The UK government first announced it would bring forward a so-called Votes for Life Bill in the Queen's Speech after the 2015 election.

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However, it failed to introduce the legislation in time for the 2016 EU referendum, a decision campaigners say had "dire" consequences for Britons abroad, who not only lost the right to vote but will, it is claimed, also lose their free movement rights if the UK leaves the EU.

When it came to the 2017 general election, a commitment to implement Votes to Life was reinstated in the Conservative manifesto.

Despite this commitment, Britons who have lived abroad for 15 years or more will still not be able to register to vote in the general election which will take place on 12 December.

Commenting on the government's failure to implement Votes for Life, former Labour MP Roger Casale, founder and CEO of the campaign group New Europeans, said, "Just as with the mass disenfranchisement of EU citizens from the European elections in the UK in May 2019, we once again see a systematic failure by this government to make proper provision for all those who are or should be entitled to vote to be able to do so in practice."

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Overseas voters, he says, "may feel even more aggrieved" by the position of the Labour Party which has traditionally opposed the abolition of the 15-year rule.

Labour MP Cat Smith said in a letter to Harry Shindler, a 97-year-old war veteran in Italy who has campaigned on the issue since 1997, "Abolishing the 15-year rule would completely overstretch electoral administrators who have described the sector as 'pushed to the limit.' The current 15-year rule strikes the right balance between allowing expats to maintain strong links with the UK and ensuring the integrity of the electoral system."

Conservative MP Glyn Davies introduced a Private Members' Bill in 2018 to give overseas voters a vote for life but the Bill was talked out by Brexiteer MP Philip Davies (also a Conservative), with the passive support of the Labour Party.

Commenting on the collapse of the Private Member's Bill proceedings, electoral reform expert Dr Sue Collard of Sussex University, told this website, "The question of overseas voting rights continues to be dominated, as in previous parliamentary debates, by party politics. It is those who will become, or remain, disenfranchised by the 15-year rule that have paid the highest price."

“The current 15-year rule strikes the right balance between allowing expats to maintain strong links with the UK and ensuring the integrity of the electoral system” **Cat Smith, UK Labour MP**

Campaigners say they will continue to press all parties to include a commitment to abolish the 15-year rule in their manifestos for the 2019 election.

Casale added, “In a properly functioning, modern democracy, the default position should be to make sure that all citizens and all permanent residents are able to vote. Instead of that, we have a government that continues to break its promise to overseas electors and find every possible means to exclude people from voting.”

“The Labour Party position in relation to overseas electors is disappointing and based on a misperception that UK overseas residents are likely to vote Conservative. That is hardly a democratic argument for excluding them even if it was true, which it is not.”

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“At least Labour and indeed all opposition parties are in favour of enfranchising EU citizens and 16-year-olds in the UK. Labour should now support the enfranchisement of overseas voters too and call for the abolition of the 15-year rule.”

About the author

Martin Banks is a senior reporter at The Parliament Magazine

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