



Briefing for panellists - launch of “Let us Vote” campaign 8 May 2019 6pm-8pm (Committee Room 10)

The current situation

Broadly speaking, there are two ways to define who can vote in elections and referendums:

- The citizenship principle, under which all citizens can vote. This is the norm in places like France and the United States.
- The residency principle, under which anyone living in a place, regardless of where they are from. This was the case for the Scottish Independence referendum.

At the moment, the UK applies both of these principles, but neither consistently. Most citizens can vote, but not anyone who has been abroad for more than 15 years. Some residents can vote, but only those from Ireland and Commonwealth countries. EU citizens can vote, but only in local and European elections as a matter of EU law. As a result of this, millions and millions of people are denied a vote in elections and referendums that directly affect their lives.

Group voting rights by nationality

- British, Irish, and qualifying Commonwealth citizens* (incl. Irish, Cypriot and Maltese citizens) who are living in the UK can vote in all elections taking place that cover the area where they live.
- Citizens of the European Union (who are not Citizens of the Republic of Ireland, Cyprus or Malta) living in the relevant countries, regions or areas of the UK are eligible to vote in:
 - [European Parliament elections](#)
 - [Local council elections \(these rights are cast into doubt by Brexit\)](#)
 - [London Mayor and Assembly elections](#)
 - [Scottish Parliament elections](#)
 - [National Assembly for Wales elections](#)
 - [Northern Ireland Assembly elections](#)
 - [Police and Crime Commissioner elections](#)
- British citizens living outside the UK lose the right to vote in UK general elections after 15 years of living abroad. Only around 40% of British citizens living abroad retain the right to vote in the UK.
- EU citizens (who are not Citizens of the Republic of Ireland, Cyprus or Malta) are not able to vote in [UK Parliament elections](#).

*A qualifying Commonwealth citizen is someone who has leave to enter or remain in the UK, or does not require such leave.



If you are not a British, Irish or qualifying Commonwealth or EU citizen, you cannot vote in any elections.

Our demand

Our demand is for the UK to apply both the citizenship and residency principles consistently, and to grant the vote to all citizens of the UK and all residents of the UK.

Adopting either principle in full while abandoning the other would actively disenfranchise either some residents or some citizens, and pit Brits abroad against migrants living in the UK.

Neither of the demands we are making should be regarded as radical, and both are winnable. By bringing them together, we can make the campaign for both of them stronger.

Why 10 million?

Oxford University's Migration Observatory [estimates](#) that there are 9.4 million foreign-born people living in the UK. Approximately 1 million of these [are](#) Commonwealth citizens, and 400,000 [are](#) Irish-born. The rest – around 8 million – cannot vote in general elections and could not vote in the 2016 EU referendum.

There are around 4.9 million British people living abroad. 60%, or 3 million of these [have been](#) abroad for more than 15 years and so cannot vote in any elections or referenda in the UK. Altogether, this amounts to more than 11 million people. We round down to 10 million to take account of factors like those not yet of voting age.

Why now? Is this winnable?

Extending the franchise is an absolutely relevant political discussion to be having at a time of a political crisis in the UK, a time of radical change and constitutional shifts.

We are having a debate about our democracy, what citizenship means, our place in the world and how we are governed. In this context, raising important democratic demands to extend the franchise makes sense.

We are also debating the rights and freedoms of migrant communities who have settled in the UK and preparing the ground for a major upheaval of our immigration policy as a country. Now is the time for political parties across the spectrum to demonstrate that they reject the rhetoric that mobile citizens are simply bargaining chips, or useful units of economic contribution. It is time to confer rights to all people directly impacted by the decisions of governments in the UK.

The voting rights of UK citizens abroad

There are many stereotypes about British people living abroad. But the vast majority are not tax dodgers or even wealthy expats, as the majority go abroad to find work. Nearly 80% of



them are working age or younger, with the largest group consistently being that under 45. In any given year, around a third of them leave for clerical or manual work.

Even when they leave, they are deeply affected by the results of elections and referendums as the most recent votes in 2015, 2016 and 2017 have shown. Many expect to return. And even where they don't, they may be integrated into British pension and welfare systems or have caring responsibilities for elderly parents in the UK.

But at the moment, millions of Brits abroad don't get a vote in the UK. This particularly affects younger economic migrants as they reach their 40s, as well as their children. And post Brexit, Brits in the EU will also lose the current rights they have to vote in local and European elections in the countries where they live.

What will happen to local election voting rights after Brexit?

Nationals of all EU member states currently have the same rights as UK citizens to vote or stand as a candidate at the local, municipal and European Parliament level. Instead of offering firm guarantees that local voting rights will continue after Brexit, the UK government is seeking "bilateral arrangements" with EU member states. So far, the only agreement has been with Spain. Citizens of the remaining countries were able to vote in May 2019 local elections, and will be able to participate until December 2020 if there is a Withdrawal Agreement – beyond that, no assurances have been given. The governments of Wales and Scotland have stated that they will maintain the voting rights of EU citizens in the Welsh Assembly and Scottish Parliament.

What does it mean to be a resident of the UK?

We have not taken a position on the threshold for acquiring the vote in the UK, preferring to leave this open for discussion. One possible option is to restrict the franchise to residents granted indefinite leave to remain or settled status, after living in the UK for a minimum of five years. However, it is worth remembering that voting rights for Commonwealth citizens are not subject to this restriction and only require valid leave to enter or remain.

Why can't British citizens abroad simply take citizenship and vote where they live?

It is often suggested that taking citizenship is the answer for Brits abroad. But this fails to take into account how difficult this may be. In some countries, the process can take years; in others, it means giving up British citizenship. Mobile citizens, especially millennials, may not even be in the position to meet the conditions. And it fails to address the fact that British citizens abroad remain deeply affected by decisions taken in the UK.