

# Grant immigrants the right to vote, say researchers

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Credit: University of Bristol

National election results in the UK could look vastly different if all immigrants had the right to vote, which they should, according to new research.

The researchers, from the School of Geographical Sciences at the University of Bristol, found that if all of England and Wales' estimated

2.3 million adult immigrants had been able to vote in the 2015 general election, up to 95 parliamentary seats could have been won by a different party.

They argue that all 'legally resident aliens' (i.e. immigrants) who contribute to the UK economy and are directly affected by the decisions of the UK government ought to have the right to vote. Under the current status quo, some immigrants can vote in UK national elections but others cannot.

Dr Sean Fox, lead author of the study, said: "This inequality of access to political voice is inconsistent with the core principle of equality that underpins democracy, as is restricting the right of any legal resident alien to vote in UK general elections."

The authors argue that the right to vote in UK national elections should be extended all to adults with a proven residence and legal presence in the United Kingdom as well as any adult UK citizen living abroad with a proven and direct material interest in the UK.

Co-author Professor Ron Johnston said: "Anybody meeting either of these criterion has a clear stake in decisions made by the UK government, and is subject to the coercive authority of the state. The legal presence rule would prevent (for example) a non-UK citizen buying – but not living in – an official residence in the UK for the sole purpose of political influence.

"Of course, the precise criteria for this would need working out, but a good starting point for the legal presence criterion could be the existing rule for many of those on work visas in the UK: a minimum presence on UK soil of 180 days per year."

Dr Fox said: "After losing a legal challenge, the 2.15 million adult EU

citizens living and working in Britain at the time of the election were not able to vote in the EU membership referendum. The Leave campaign won by 1,269,501 votes—a significant margin, but one that could easily have been reversed if resident EU citizens had been granted the right to vote in a referendum in which they had a clear, direct and personal interest. Their exclusion is in direct conflict with the underlying principles of democracy."

Dr Fox said: "Giving all resident adults in the UK the right to vote would make the system more truly democratic than it is today. It would change the electoral map, increase the relative voice in Parliament of those living in large cities, and change the incentives of politicians seeking office and parties looking to form a government.

"It could mean the two main parties may choose to temper their anti-immigration rhetoric in order to appeal to these voters. On the other hand, competitive marginal parties such as the Liberal Democrats, or new political entrepreneurs, may target urban areas with large immigrant voting blocs. In closely fought elections, these parties could hold the balance of power if a coalition were necessary.

"One thing is clear: the integrity of British democracy is under threat in this age of increased international mobility; electoral reform is necessary to save it."

**More information:** Sean Fox et al. *If Immigrants Could Vote in the UK: A Thought Experiment with Data from the 2015 General Election*, *The Political Quarterly* (2016). [DOI: 10.1111/1467-923X.12309](https://doi.org/10.1111/1467-923X.12309)

Provided by University of Bristol

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