

Prisoners' rights – which way would you vote?

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It's not surprising that the current debate on prisoners' voting rights is dividing opinions not just between political parties but also within the parties themselves.

The origins of this issue lay at the feet at the European Court of Human Rights but this is not just about the enfranchisement of the estimated 30,000 people who may now have the right to vote. In May of this year we have significant local elections in England and, whilst this sensitive debate may not be fully resolved by then, the precipitous balance in local elections could be substantially affected in some communities by those incarcerated.

I can recall a visit to one of Her Majesty's institutions to discover that a number of inmates came from one specific locality. Assuming they had the opportunity to vote for a local candidate and they all cast their votes in one direction – how much political mileage could be made of this by the 'unsuccessful' candidate(s)? There is also potential that it would bring a renewed level of interest to the often lacklustre way that the media treats local politics. You can just imagine the headlines.

So, the debate is not just about the rights and the wrongs of prisoners having access to the ballot box, but how local elections could be significantly affected by re-enfranchisement of the incarcerated population. The fearful are making noises about the 'footpads' of society holding political views that stray from the mainstream of politics – but there are many who freely walk the streets who hold dearly to political views that perhaps the silent majority find less than tasteful, but is that not the nature of a democracy? On the positive side – if prisoners are encouraged to explore their role as active citizens and what that means, a positive outcome may be that they will cast their vote with a level of discretion and understanding that many of the free fail to do.

By extending the right to vote to prisoners, perhaps we are sending a positive message that everyone in society can have a say in the way that the country and communities are run. Would a released prisoner not feel better disposed to re-entering society knowing they had a say in who governs them?

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