

New Zealand government legislates to restrict voting rights

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8 August 2025

New Zealand's far-right government has introduced legislation to sharply restrict voting rights in time for the 2026 election. The changes to the law target layers of the population, particularly the working class and youth, who are likely to be hostile to the government, and more broadly, the entire political establishment.

The Electoral Amendment Bill passed its first reading in parliament on July 29, supported by the governing coalition parties: National, NZ First and Act. The government claims the current legislation is "outdated and unsustainable" and its changes will "support the timeliness, efficiency, integrity, and resilience of the electoral system."

In fact, the restrictions echo moves elsewhere, in particular by the US Republican Party, to systematically suppress voting rights. They could disenfranchise over 100,000 New Zealand voters. The amendments include closing voter enrolment 13 days before Election Day, reinstating a ban on prisoners voting and prohibiting anyone from offering purported inducements, such as free food, drink or entertainment within 100 metres of a voting station.

The bill's most contentious provision is to end "same day" enrolments. Since 1993, voters have been able to enrol to vote during the two-week advance voting period and, more recently, on Election Day itself. The government wants to close enrolments before the 12-day advance voting period begins.

The justification is to reduce an "administrative burden" and speed up the vote count. While the bill will take voter entitlements back more than 30 years, Prime Minister Christopher Luxon airily dismissed objections, declaring: "They can participate in the voting, they just need to do it and get themselves organised earlier, that's all."

The changes are designed to impact on the results. Since 1999 special votes have favoured the nominally "left" capitalist parties, Labour and the Greens, resulting in their

taking one or two more seats in parliament at the expense of the main right-wing parties.

Significant numbers of people not properly enrolled when voting commences will now lose the right to have their vote counted. At the 2023 election nearly 21 percent, or 603,257 of all votes cast, were "special" votes, of which 78,030 were lodged from overseas. On Election Day, 110,000 people registered and voted, a 46 percent increase on the 2020 election. During the two-week period beforehand, 454,000 people had registered.

Analysis by the Electoral Commission indicates that the change will disproportionately affect Māori, Asian, Pacific Island people and younger voters, who tend to be the hardest to reach through voter enrolment campaigns. Some 48 percent of Māori voters aged 18 to 19 have in the past either enrolled or changed their details during the early voting period.

Newsroom contributor Toby More noted that renters, who must re-register whenever they change address, will be particularly affected. Official statistics indicate that 20 percent of the population had lived in their house for one year or less, and 53 percent for less than five years. During the 2023 election, special votes included 134,000 people who had to change their electorate during the voting period.

The bill further disqualifies prisoners convicted and sentenced from enrolling and voting while in prison. In 2020, the then Labour government amended the law so that only people serving a term of three or more years were disqualified.

This attack on the basic democratic rights of people in prison is being justified with populist appeals for retribution. "Everyone understands that if you violate the rights of others, you surrender certain rights of your own," ACT's justice spokesperson Todd Stephenson declared. "Reinstating the ban on prisoner voters makes the consequences for crime clearer."

Criminologist Roger Brooking told the *Listener* this year that from a total of about 10,000 inmates, 4,000 were at any one time on remand and half of these would not deserve a prison sentence. Of 29,000 imprisoned each year most are “low risk” offenders, given a sentence of two years or less and released half-way through. Many are victims of the brutality of class society and more than a few will have been wrongfully imprisoned.

A further provision of the bill absurdly prohibits seeking to influence voters on their way to the ballot box. So-called “treating” is already an offence, but the new offence creates a 100-metre buffer around polling stations, in which free food, drink and entertainment will not be allowed, with a maximum penalty of \$10,000.

Highly restrictive electoral rules already require all hoardings and advertising material removed the day before polling and ban any political campaigning on Election Day itself. Additionally, during the advance voting period no campaigning, or doing anything which “obstructs or influences voters,” is allowed within 10 metres of the entrance of a polling station.

Hostile to anything that may be construed as influencing voters, the “libertarian” ACT party cynically boasted: “The bill to ban hangi (traditional Māori food), coffee, ice cream, donuts, haircuts, and similar freebies at voting stations has today passed its first reading. This will help uphold public confidence that elections are free from manipulation.”

ACT Party leader David Seymour contemptuously declared the changes would only affect “dropkicks,” while Stephenson dismissed such voters as “lazy” declaring: “It’s outrageous that someone completely disengaged and lazy can rock up to the voting booth, get registered there and then, and then vote to tax other people’s money away,” that is by not voting for ACT.

Finally, the government will also increase the threshold for anonymous political donations from the current \$5,000 to \$6,000, “to account for inflation,” according to Justice Minister Paul Goldsmith. This will make it easier for the wealthy to donate to parties without being identified.

The suite of amendments is a response to growing alienation from the bourgeois political establishment among broad sections of workers and youth. As the National Party-led government becomes increasingly unpopular, ACT is playing a central role in sweeping attacks on the working class, despite it receiving just 8.64 percent of the vote in 2023.

In 2023 thousands of workers either abstained or cast a

protest vote against the incumbent Labour Party’s attacks on living standards, abandonment of the COVID-19 elimination strategy, and support for imperialist war. While Labour’s vote plummeted from 50 percent in the 2020 election to 26.9 percent, National received only 39 percent of the votes. More than 1 million eligible voters, one in four, did not vote, while an estimated 7 percent did not even enrol.

A section of the ruling establishment, including the opposition parties, has expressed concern that attacks on voting rights could further erode trust in the political system. Human Rights Commissioner Stephen Rainbow, declared that the institutions “are really struggling to maintain their legitimacy and their people’s faith in them,” and warned the proposed changes made it “even more difficult for people to participate in voting, which is a critical part of faith in our democratic institutions.”

The government’s Attorney General Judith Collins told parliament the legislation “appears to be inconsistent” with the Bill of Rights, including the right to vote and the right to freedom of expression. The further out the registration deadline from polling day, she said, “the greater the disenfranchising impact is likely to be,” and proposed that a seven-day period would “impose less onerous limits on the right to vote.” Collins also warned that the blanket ban on prisoner voting “cannot be justified.”

There is widespread popular opposition to the suppression of the right to vote, as well as the ACT Party’s blatant anti-working class rhetoric and anti-Māori dog-whistles.

Whatever differences exist on the law change within the political establishment are of a tactical, not fundamental character. The Labour Party agrees with deepening attacks on democratic rights—including censorship of the internet, boosting the intelligence agencies, and attacking free speech in the name of stopping “foreign interference.” The ruling classes internationally are resorting to ever more authoritarian measures to advance its agenda of austerity at home and war abroad.



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