

UK civic space: what is happening? 2024-2025



About Bond

Bond is the UK network for organisations working in international development. We connect and champion a diverse network of over 350 civil society organisations to help eradicate global poverty, inequality and injustice. We work to influence governments and policymakers, develop the skills of people in the sector, build organisational capacity and share expertise.

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May 2025

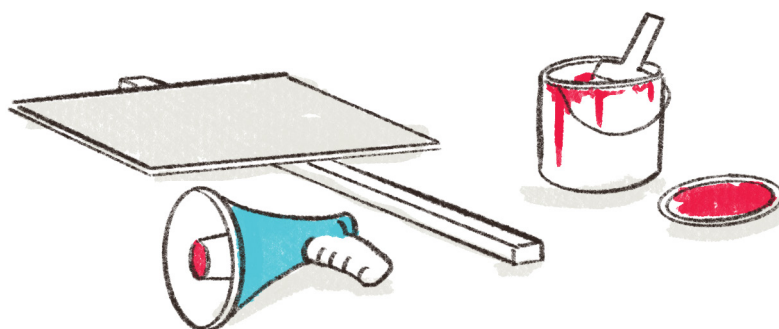
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Introduction

In 2024, the UK saw a change in government, but little has changed for our civic space, which we define as the political, legal and regulatory environment in which civil society exists. UK civic space remains 'obstructed' according to the CIVICUS Monitor, after it was downgraded in 2023.

Bond has continued to track and analyse changes to civic space in the UK over the last 12 months.¹ We have identified nine new trends which we believe are shaping the environment for civil society in the UK, from growing concerns over protest rights, to the rollout of new technologies such as facial recognition and artificial intelligence (AI), and a change in tone from the government towards some in civil society but not others.



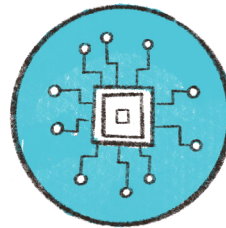
Protest rights

Trend 1:

Climate and environmental protestors handed longer sentences and stricter penalties

Trend 2:

Concerns over policing of pro-Palestine demonstrations



Technology

Trend 3:

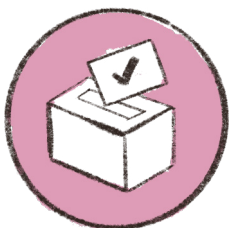
Facial recognition and surveillance technology becoming more widespread

Trend 4:

Increased understanding of the possible impacts of artificial intelligence

Trend 5:

First attempts at regulating artificial intelligence prioritise growth and security over human rights



General Election 2024

Trend 6:

Civil society less outspoken during general elections

Trend 7:

A growing call for increased integrity of elections



Government and civil society

Trend 8:

A change in tone towards some in civil society but few policy changes yet

Trend 9:

Stigmatisation of campaigners and communities who challenge government reforms

1. This report roughly covers the period of May 2024 – April 2025



Protest rights

Protesters continue to face arrest for activities deemed too disruptive under new, stricter measures brought in by the Police, Crime, Sentencing and Courts Act (PCSCA) 2022 and the Public Order Act 2023. Over the last 12 months, we have seen how this new legislation has enabled judges to hand out much longer sentences to protestors. At the same time, there have been high profile incidents and increased attention on the disproportionate use of public order measures at pro-Palestine demonstrations.

Trend 1: Climate and environmental protestors handed longer sentences and stricter penalties

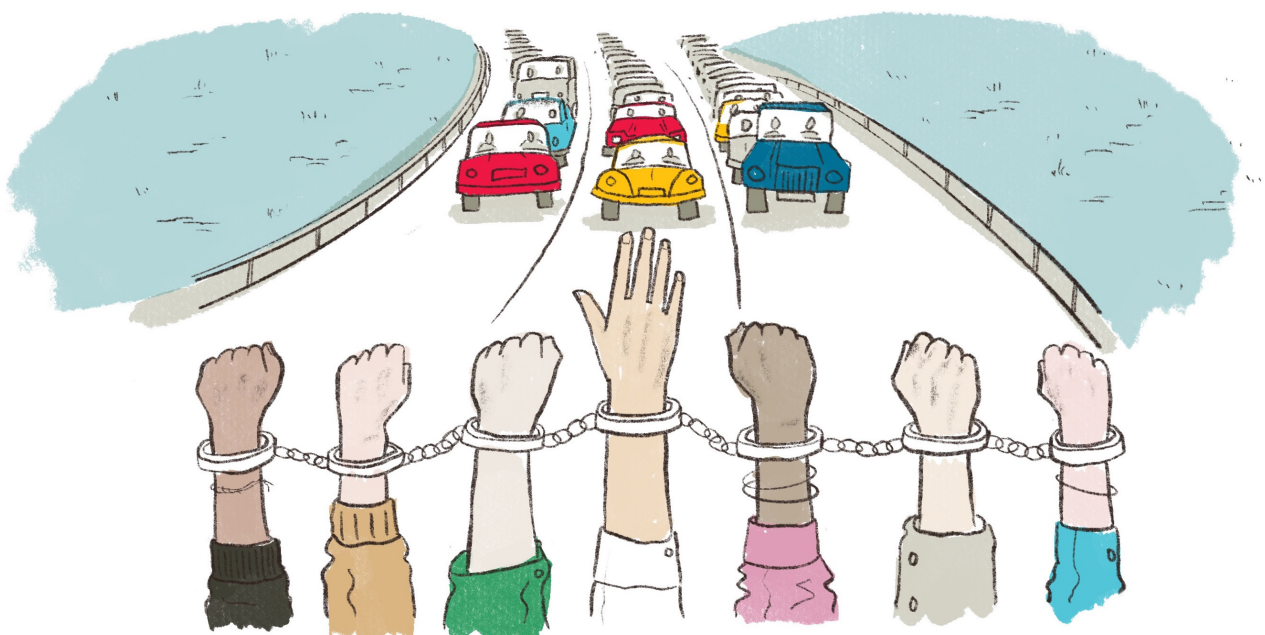
A global study released in 2024 found that police in the UK are arresting environmental and climate protestors at three times the average global rate, and that climate protestors are receiving disproportionate sentences.¹

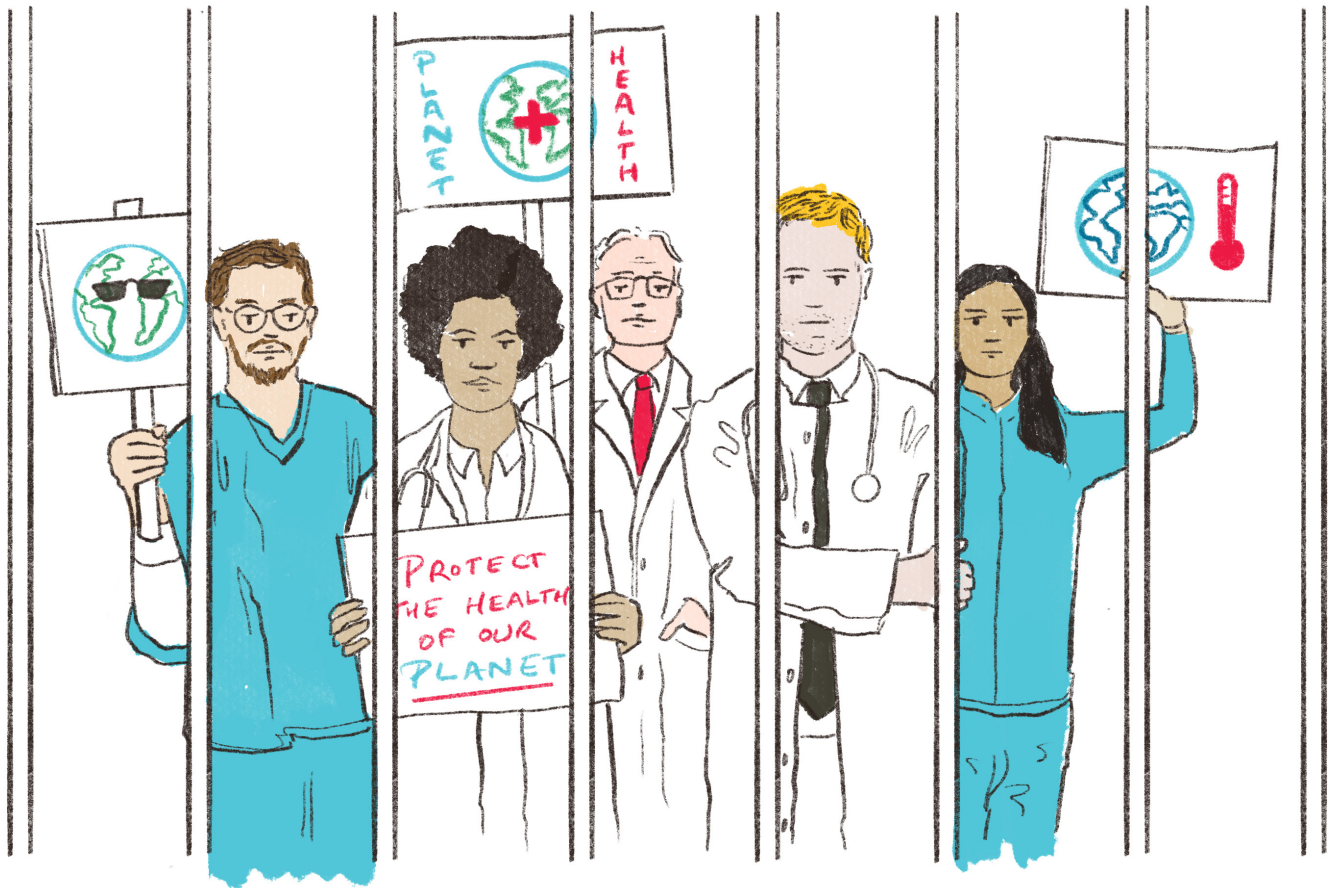
In July 2024, five climate protestors were convicted under Section 78 of the UK's contentious PCSCA for participating in a video call in which they planned to block the M25 during a protest. These sentences set a new precedent as the longest ever prison terms given to peaceful protestors in the UK, with four individuals each receiving a four-year sentence and one receiving five years for public nuisance. The judge ruled that

the defendants could not mention their motivations in court, and information relating to climate breakdown could not be entered into evidence, presenting further challenges to the protestors' legal defence. The number of defences available to protestors in court have been steadily eroded in recent years, a trend we identified in our 2023-4 annual review.

In March 2025, six people were arrested at a Quaker meeting house while attending a gathering organised by the activist group, Youth Demand. The public meeting ended with their arrest on suspicion of conspiracy to cause a public nuisance – a worrying sign of the increasing criminalisation of protest.

Labour donor Dale Vince raised concerns about sentencing inconsistencies after those taking part in race riots in August 2024 received noticeably shorter sentences for violent and racist crimes than peaceful protestors.² The race riots, which were fuelled by misinformation, caused widespread unrest across the UK and resulted in communities fearing for their safety as vehicles were burned and people attacked. An estimated 29 anti-immigration demonstrations and riots took place in 27 towns and cities and were predominately violent and largely attended by far-right activists. Over 1,000 rioters were arrested and more than 700 charged. While the longest sentence handed out was six years in prison, the average was just two years.³





The Medical Tribunal has also imposed additional penalties on some medical doctors who participated in climate protests, such as the suspension of their medical licenses. In May 2024, a doctor had her license suspended for five months as an additional punishment alongside her prison sentence. In August, a second GP was jailed for participating in climate protests and had their license suspended for three months.⁴ By voluntarily issuing further penalties beyond imprisonment, and describing the protestors' actions as damaging public trust in doctors, the tribunal may deter other medics from joining protests.

A protester's right to mention their motivations in court continues to be impacted by judge rulings, and those protesting outside of court against rulings also face restrictions. In July 2024, police arrested 11 individuals for holding signs outside Southwark Crown Court about the rights of a jury to hear the whole truth and acquit according to their conscience. A positive development occurred in August 2024, when the new Solicitor General informed the Court of Appeal they would not pursue the high-profile contempt of court case against Trudi Warner who had ignored this restriction and addressed the jury directly about her motivations to protest.

In May 2024, the High Court ruled that the government had acted unlawfully when it passed an anti-protest measure in 2023 which significantly lowered the threshold for serious disruption. This measure, introduced through secondary legislation, was successfully challenged in court by human rights organisation Liberty. The previous government lodged an appeal against the ruling. Following a pause, the new Labour government has chosen to pursue the appeal, which is very concerning. The appeal hearing has now taken place, and at the time of writing all parties are waiting a decision.

If the ruling is upheld, the threshold for arrest at many protests will remain much lower. We are concerned that this, combined with changes to how the courts treat protesters, will act as a further deterrence to protesters and stop people from exercising their right to peaceful assembly. Together, these reforms mean that protesters are more likely to be detained and, if charged, they are more likely to be convicted. Those convicted will now face much longer sentences and, in some cases, additional penalties, such as the suspension of their professional license.

Trend 2: Concerns over policing of pro-Palestine demonstrations

There have been several high-profile incidents at Pro-Palestinian demonstrations, which have been subject to strict restrictions and policing. In May 2024, the Metropolitan Police published data on the policing of protests and demonstrations between 14 October 2023 and 31 March 2024 relating to the ongoing conflict between Israel and Hamas. The report recorded that police made 305 arrests.⁵ However, 136 of those individuals (44%) were wrongly arrested and released because they had not committed a crime. Reports from eyewitnesses and legal observers indicate the threshold for arrest at these marches is alarmingly low.

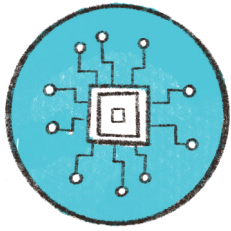
In January 2025, over 70 protesters were arrested at a pro-Palestine demonstration, and MPs Jeremy Corbyn and John McDonnell, who attended the demonstration, agreed to be interviewed under caution by police. The Metropolitan Police said the protests had become “out of hand”, leading to the mass arrests. However, this was disputed by Corbyn as an inaccurate description of events.⁶

In May 2024, Marieha Hussain attended a pro-Palestine solidarity march holding a placard with the faces of Rishi Sunak and Suella Braverman depicted as coconuts. After a photograph of the placard went viral on social media, the Metropolitan Police charged her with racially aggravated public order offences, accusing her of using hate speech. Hussain argued that the charge misinterpreted the term, which is commonly used within Black and Brown communities and carries nuanced meanings best known in those communities.⁷ In September, a judge ruled that the placard was “part of the genre of political satire” and Hussain was acquitted.⁸ Although the charges were dropped, the heavy policing of these protests and the resulting court case could discourage people from participating in demonstrations. The media and politicians have contributed to the attack of pro-Palestine demonstrations by labelling them as “hate marches”.⁹

Academics and MPs have raised concerns about the policing of these protests. This includes 40 legal academics¹⁰ and 50 MPs who have written open letters to the Home Secretary demanding an investigation into the policing of the January 11 protest and a review of public order legislation.¹¹

A report published in February 2025 shows that universities are cracking down on pro-Palestine demonstrations by launching disciplinary investigations on students and staff in connection to their involvement with pro-Palestine activism. As many as 113 students and staff have faced disciplinary action in connection with their activism since the conflict began in 2023.¹²





Technology

The use of surveillance technologies has been growing over the years, as is an understanding and awareness of the extent that surveillance technologies are being used to curtail civic space. In the past year, police forces in the UK have continued to introduce facial recognition technology and are using it to monitor peaceful gatherings and identify those attending them. Meanwhile, civil society is becoming increasingly aware of the possible impacts of AI on civic space and is advocating for global and national regulation. While many governments also recognise the need for regulation, and the first international AI agreements have been signed, the UK appears to be prioritising growth and security over human rights protections.

Trend 3: Facial recognition and surveillance technology becoming more widespread.

UK police forces' use of facial recognition technology is becoming more widespread, with some forces piloting it in new areas in the last year. Between January and March 2024, UK police forces accessed the facial recognition site PimEyes 2,447 times.¹³ Between January and August 2024, the Metropolitan Police used live facial recognition technology, which is different from the more commonly used retrospective facial recognition technology, 117 times, compared to just 32 times over the three-year period between 2020 and

2023. By August 2024, this form of technology had scanned 771,000 faces across London.¹⁴

This technology is extremely controversial, and campaigners have raised concerns about its impact on civil liberties and human rights. It has the potential to infringe upon privacy rights, and the use of facial recognition can deter campaigners from participating in demonstrations. In July 2024, an investigation led by Liberty uncovered evidence of university staff monitoring student pro-Palestine protestors through campus security and offering the intel to the police.¹⁵ In December, it found that images of people who had been arrested and released without charge were still being stored on police databases for facial recognition purposes.¹⁶

Facial recognition technology can be deeply flawed. It has been found to disproportionately misidentify people of colour, which puts people of colour at a greater risk of being wrongly arrested than other people. In a parliamentary debate in November 2024, concerns were raised that increased use of facial recognition could further contribute to the over-policing of communities that are already being marginalised. This is concerning as it may reinforce conscious or unconscious bias among those interpreting the software's data. There is currently no overarching legislation governing the use of facial recognition technology, so safeguards are ad hoc and inconsistently applied.¹⁷





Trend 4: Increased understanding of the possible impacts of artificial intelligence

AI technologies are developing rapidly. While misconceptions and hyperbole about AI persist, parts of civil society are becoming more aware of its potential impact, both positive and negative, on civic space. We have also seen the emergence of the first international treaties and agreements seeking to regulate AI and mitigate its impacts on democracy, human rights, the rule of law and the environment.

AI refers to the machine-based systems that are trained to process and analyse information and data, find patterns, and generate predictions, recommendations or decisions or other outputs, such as text, audio or images, as requested by a human and with varying degrees of autonomy.¹⁸

AI has the potential to both protect and restrict civic space. Concerns include its potential to exacerbate discrimination (particularly against marginalised groups and minorities) and aid the spread of misinformation or disinformation. For example, many live and retrospective facial recognition technologies use AI to automatically scan video footage of crowds, including protesters, and compare their images to specific lists of people wanted by the police.

However, there are also positive uses, such as its ability to speed and scale-up fact checking to help

counter disinformation. One example of this is Full Fact AI, an AI-enabled software developed by Full Fact, the independent fact checking organisation. Full Fact AI is designed for fact checkers worldwide to use to save time, money and effort by identifying the most important disinformation to address.¹⁹

When AI systems are used to make decisions autonomously, or assist humans to make decisions, there is a risk that these decisions will be unfair as the AI systems may be biased, either because of inherent biases in the data used to train the models, because they amplify the conscious or unconscious biases of the people who developed them or because they are used for a different purpose to the one they were developed for. We are not always sure when an AI system is being used to make decisions. Even when the final decision is made by a human, it is unclear to what extent this decision has been assisted or influenced by the output the AI system has generated.

There is limited transparency around the design, development, testing and use of AI, which are often conducted without the meaningful participation of relevant stakeholders, including human rights experts and civil society representatives. Because many of the processes used are opaque, it can be difficult to contest or challenge them.

Finally, there are concerns about privacy and the use of personal data to train AI systems.



Trend 5: First attempts at regulating artificial intelligence prioritise growth and security over human rights

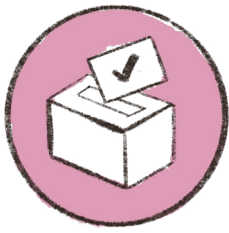
In 2024, governments signed the first international agreements seeking to regulate AI. The Council of Europe Framework Convention on Artificial Intelligence, Human Rights, Democracy and the Rule of Law was opened for signatures in September 2024 and signed by the UK. The EU AI Act was also passed in 2024. While both these measures have many positive requirements, such as stipulating that AI deployers (including states) carry out risk and impact assessments in relation to human rights, they both include blanket exemptions for national security and national defence as well as sweeping loopholes for law enforcement.

In July 2024, the new UK government made a commitment to introduce an AI bill in the King's Speech, which would both "harness the power of artificial intelligence" and "strengthen safety frameworks". While it was anticipated that the government would introduce the

legislation before Christmas, it has been delayed and will not be published before summer 2025. It also appears that the legislation considered by the government will not cover all AI systems in general but will only focus on specific models (e.g. large language models such as Chat GPT) and sectors (e.g. healthcare).²⁰

Another related trend is that the political discourse around AI has shifted from promoting "safety" to fostering "security" of AI as well as prioritising innovation over possible negative impacts. Examples of this include the AI Opportunities Action Plan, unveiled in January 2025, and the UK AI Safety Institute transitioning to the UK AI Security Institute.

In February 2025, the UK and the US both refused to sign an international declaration agreed at the Paris AI Action Summit, which 66 countries endorsed. The UK cited concerns about national security and global governance as the reasons for not signing the agreement.²¹



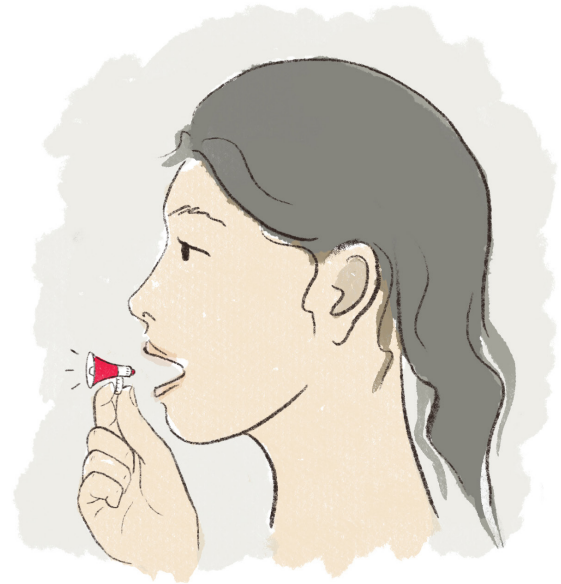
General Election 2024

A UK general election was called in May 2024 and polling took place on 2 July that year. The election reinforced longer-term trends that both civil society and the public are becoming less engaged in elections, in part due to restrictions imposed by voter ID in 2022 and the expansion of non-party campaigning rules in 2014.

Trend 6: Civil society less outspoken during general elections

Civil society can and should campaign at general elections. Registered charities can campaign on issues that are in line with the organisation's charitable purpose and should continue campaigning in the run-up to an election as long as they maintain their independence from political parties and electoral candidates. Civil society brings diverse voices to public debate, which is beneficial for a healthy, democratic environment and essential during elections. However, since the expansion of non-party campaigning rules in 2014, civil society appears to have become less active and outspoken at each general election.

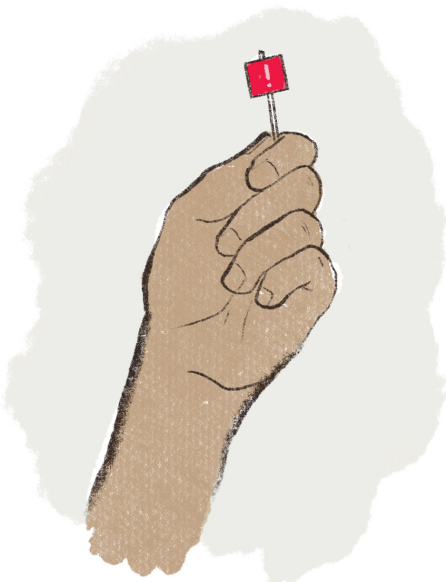
A year ahead of an election, strict rules come into force that govern the way non-party campaigners, including many civil society organisations, advocate for key issues. The new rules were first enforced during the 2015 election, and then during the snap elections in 2017 and 2019. Although fresh Electoral Commission



guidance helped improve the situation in 2019, some organisations still reported that the fear of inadvertently getting it wrong limited how they participated in some democratic functions.²² The rules were changed again ahead of the 2024 election following the passing of the Elections Act 2022 and introduction of a code of practice for non-party campaigners in 2024.

The presence of multiple layers of campaigning rules during an election period, which are often complex to understand and sometimes contradictory, can make campaigners nervous about speaking out or engaging in campaigning in case they accidentally overstep the mark. Previous research undertaken by the Sheila McKechnie Foundation found that many chose to take a long step back from undertaking any activity that could potentially be regulated by electoral law, even though they are permitted to engage in these activities by both the Electoral Commission and the Charity Commission.²³ This chilling effect is often cited by campaigners as one of the main reasons they step back from engaging in key debates ahead of elections.

The chair of the Charity Commission reported that the 2024 general election saw a notable decrease in high-risk cases compared to the 2019 election, and it received considerably fewer serious incident reports from charities. There could be several reasons for this, one of which is that fewer charities chose to engage in campaigning or political activity at this election.



Trend 7: A growing call for increased integrity of elections

A high turnout to a general election means a large portion of the population has participated in decision making, which is a sign of a healthy democracy. Despite the Labour government winning by a significant majority, voter turnout in the 2024 general election was the lowest it has been since 2001, and was 7.6% lower than the 2019 election.²⁴

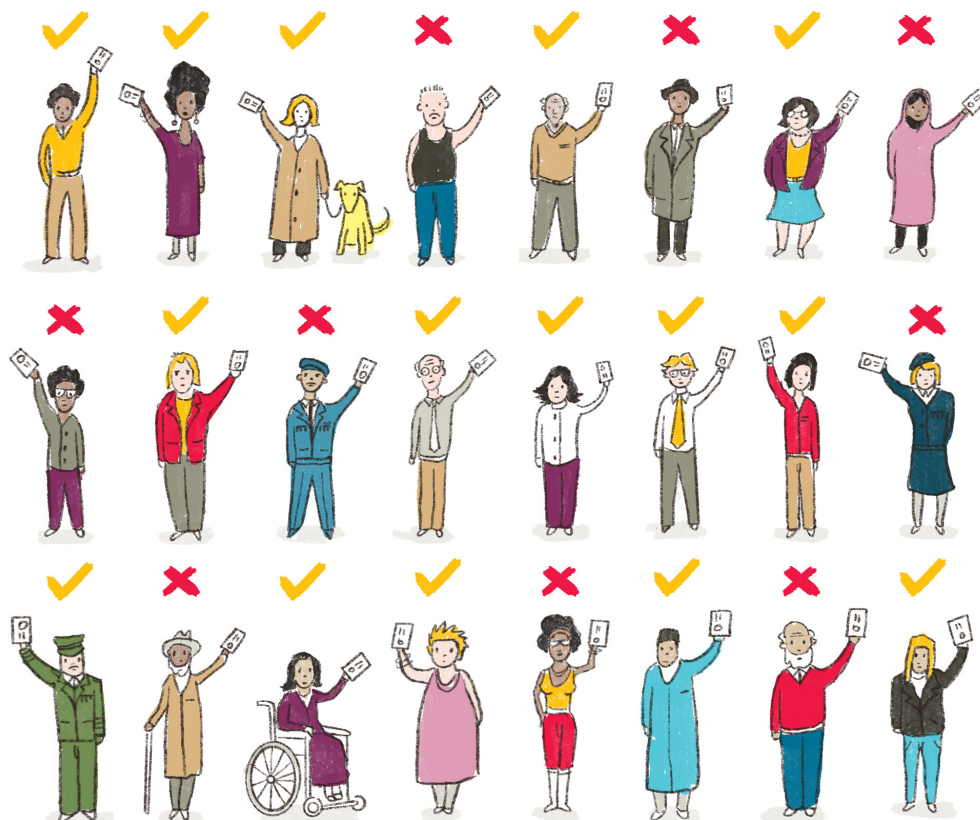
Voter turnout across different constituencies is largely impacted by factors such as age, financial status, race and ethnicity. Constituencies where the majority of people are older, white and own a home have a higher turnout than other constituencies.²⁵ The Electoral Commission also noted that the 2024 election falling in the summer may have contributed to lower turnout, and the incoming government also pointed to a lack of trust in politics.²⁶

A large concern among civil society organisations is that a low turnout during an elections can undermine the legitimacy of that election.²⁷ In the 2024 general election, only 52% of eligible voters participated in choosing a new government. While some individuals chose not to vote, others were prevented from taking

part due to strict regulations.²⁸ In 2022, the government introduced voter ID requirements. These requirements have deterred and prevented some legitimate voters from voting. Some people were denied the right to vote even when possessing valid ID because they were told their photo did not match their appearance.²⁹

During the May local elections, veterans discovered that their veterans ID was not considered a valid form of identification, preventing some from voting. Meanwhile, at the general election, 16,000 people who tried to vote were unable to do so due to voter ID restrictions, an increase of 2,000 compared with the May 2023 elections.³⁰ Many more voters may have stayed home and have not even attempted to vote due to voter ID requirements.

Although veterans ID was debated in government in November, and changes have been made through statutory instruments,³¹ strict voter ID requirements continue to disproportionately affect voters who are young, disabled, unemployed or from an ethnic minority.³² In July 2024, over 50 actors, campaigners and artists wrote an open letter to the prime minister calling for restrictions to be scrapped, as people of colour are 2.5 times more likely to be stopped from voting due to voter ID, which disproportionately impacts their democratic participation.³³





Government and civil society

The new government has brought in a change in tone in relation to working in partnership with civil society. However, the government has only taken limited action to address the policies that are restricting civic space in the UK. At the same time, the prime minister has repeatedly stigmatised environmental campaigners and communities opposing his plans for infrastructure development.

Trend 8: A change in tone towards some in civil society but few policy changes yet

In July 2024, Lisa Nandy, the new culture secretary, defended charities' right to campaign, describing it as critical to a healthy and functioning democracy. She stated that charities should be at the beating heart of the new government's renewal plans, which gave charities hope for a better relationship with the government.

In October 2024, No.10 re-enforced positive messaging when it announced it would work with civil society to create a Civil Society Covenant which would reset the relationship between government and civil society. The Covenant Framework, made up of four key principles, was shared publicly between September and December 2024 when civil society had the opportunity to input into the framework. The government is expected to publish the finalised Civil Society Covenant later in 2025.

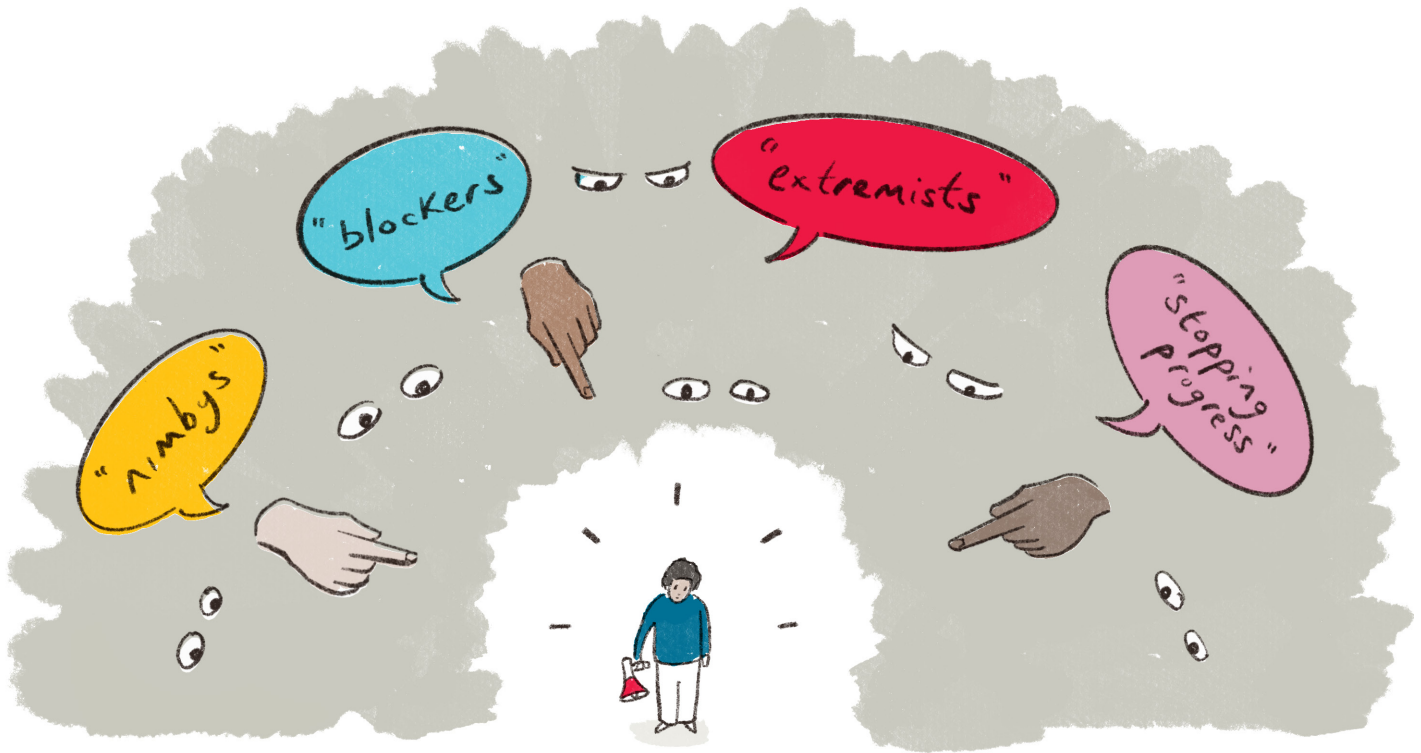
However, despite the shift in tone regarding charity campaigning, as well as the promise of a stronger relationship with civil society, the government is yet to take any action to address and reverse the repressive laws and policies previous governments have brought in. This includes Section 16 of the government's 2016 Grant Standards, which prohibits public grants being used for advocacy. Other examples include explicit anti-advocacy clauses in contracts, the non-party campaigner rules and laws that restrict protest rights.³⁴

Despite the government making a commitment to collaboration and partnership under the Civil Society Covenant Framework, issues around a lack of consultation persist, with civil society organisations frequently excluded from key decision-making processes. For example, the abrupt announcement of international aid cuts occurred without prior consultation with civil society.

Many pre-election promises which would have a positive impact on civic space are yet to be fully delivered. In the 2024 King's Speech, the government pledged to rebuild trust in politics and foster respect. While it has published a slightly tighter Ministerial Code and granted the Ethics Adviser the authority to initiate investigations, it has failed to follow through on a manifesto promise to establish a new, independent Integrity and Ethics Commission.

In July 2024, shortly after the election victory, the prime minister delivered a strong defence of human rights and committed to remain in the European Convention on Human Rights. The government also scrapped the Rwanda scheme within their first month; a move welcomed by many campaigners. However, in February 2025, the government introduced new guidance, without consultation, which prevents asylum seekers from gaining British citizenship.³⁵





Trend 9: Stigmatisation of campaigners and communities who challenge government reforms

Government ministers have continued to stigmatise campaigners and parts of civil society who challenge their agenda.

In October 2024, the prime minister referred to those opposing his plans for carbon capture storage and usage technology as “net zero extremists”.³⁶ In January, he labelled those challenging his infrastructure projects as “nimbys” and “blockers”, describing them as “self-righteous virtue signalling” protestors, “hell bent on slowing down our progress”, and vowed to take protestors on for slowing down the development process.^{37 38} The language the prime minister uses to refer to those who challenge his opinion is concerning and raises questions about whether the government truly supports campaigning as a vital part of democracy. It also undermines the legitimacy of those raising their concerns, and their right to do so.

In February 2025, a leaked video showed Wes Streeting, the health secretary, saying he would like to break the culture of the way charities lobby the government, and specifically referred to the charity Royal Osteoporosis Society as a “stakeholder” rather than a partner.

The term ‘partner’ has been intentionally used within government language to describe how civil society can work with the new government as more than a provider of services. It also adds a sense of legitimacy and respect to the sector and a sense that the government would listen and work with civil society.³⁹

The hostile rhetoric against campaigners is beginning to translate into legal changes which will make it harder to bring a legal challenge against the government for major infrastructure projects. The reforms will scrap the initial paper-permission stage, which removes a less costly entry point to hearings. Additionally, primary legislation will be changed so that, if a High Court judge deems a case ‘totally without merit’ in an oral hearing, it will no longer be possible to appeal to the Court of Appeal, which limits the routes available to challenge decisions. While a second attempt at appeal will still be allowed in other cases, these changes significantly raise the barriers to contesting government-backed developments.⁴⁰

At the same time, to speed up infrastructure developments, the government is working to remove three charities from the list of statutory consultees, which further weakens independent scrutiny of planning decisions.⁴¹ These decisions will make it harder for local communities and environmental groups to have a say in projects that affect their lives.

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