

Introduction

The government piloted mandatory ID at the 2018 English local elections. In Gosport, Swindon, Woking, Watford and Bromley, voters were required for the first time to bring a form of identification.

The voter ID pilots saw 688 people across just five areas turned away for not having the right ID. Half (340) did not return to vote.

We do not know how many legitimate voters were discouraged from turning up to the polling station in the first place because they did not have the right type of ID, were put off by the changes, or had simply forgotten their ID and were unable to get it in time.

As (potential) voters on the day told us:

“I could not vote as I’ve not got photo ID and pay my bills by direct debit so did not have any letters. I think it’s all wrong”

“I knew I didn’t have the correct ID, as I don’t drive, I don’t have a passport, and am a Lodger so no bills in my name. I chose to postal vote instead. Which is ironically where most voter fraud happens. I think voter ID is a terrible idea, and I know when I was younger it would have made me not bother.”

“It was much more hassle. I passed the polling station twice and both times I would have just voted but I didn’t have ID with me. It meant I had to consciously go home, get ID and go back out to vote. In a stronghold area where my vote doesn’t feel it counts anyway it made motivation to vote incredibly hard.”

Across the trial areas journalists and official observers saw numerous absurd examples of people turned away: a police officer refused his right to vote despite showing his police ID, a nurse sent home despite having her NHS card and many more.

The 2018 pilots

A disproportional response

Of the 44.6 million votes cast in 2017, only 28 allegations of personation were made, of which only one resulted in a conviction. This is equal to 0.000063% of votes.

In the Voter ID pilots last month, across just five council areas, 340 people were unable to vote. Hundreds of legitimate voters were prevented from casting their ballots in areas where there has been no personation fraud in the last ten years¹.

1. <https://www.theguardian.com/politics/2018/apr/29/england-voter-id-trial-discrimination-fears-electoral-fraud>

2. Bromley council sent five separate communications and liaised with 500 community groups <https://www.theguardian.com/politics/2018/apr/29/england-voter-id-trial-discrimination-fears-electoral-fraud>

Turnout: a flawed measure

It has been suggested that increased turnout is enough to prove the success of the trials. This is a flawed measure of success. The Councils involved in the pilots spent additional funds (provided by the Cabinet Office) on promoting the trials with voters contacted numerous times² – this would have artificially

stimulated turnout. It is unlikely that similar funds will be made to all electoral offices on an ongoing basis should the scheme be rolled out nationally.

Moreover, the self-selecting trial areas do not provide the required data to test whether the ID requirements have had a negative effect on those most likely to be affected.

Please note

This polling is embargoed to the press until Wednesday 6th June 2018

A public concern?

Public confidence in elections is important, and is routinely given as a reason for introducing voter ID. However, our polling (*to be published on Wednesday 6th June*) shows that amongst other concerns about the conduct of our elections, voter ID is the least of voters' worries.

Just one in 25 (4%) people chose additional identity checks at polling stations as the most important aspect for the conduct of elections in the UK – placing it second from bottom of 10 issues. The top issues for voters were ensuring that elections are free from the influence of large financial donations (17%), an accurate voting register (16%) and balanced media coverage (13%).

Surveys of UK poll workers³ found that less than one percent of poll workers were concerned about electoral fraud in their polling stations. The study concludes that 'more liberal voting procedures such as the absence of voter ID does not necessarily go hand in hand with low levels of confidence and trust in the electoral process' (Clark and James, 2017).

Voter ID will not necessarily improve voters' perception of security. Electoral Commission research on the 2017 General Election⁴ finds that 86% of people in England and Scotland think that voting at the polling station is safe, the figure is the same in Northern Ireland (86% safe) where ID is required. More people in England think voting at the polling station is very safe (44%) compared to Northern Ireland (40%) according to this poll.

Of those who are dissatisfied with the procedure for voting in elections, only 4% of people in England give their reasons as 'the system is open to abuse', this figure is 8% in Northern Ireland where voter ID is required.

The basis for change

One of the key pieces of evidence used to support the need for the Government's voter ID pilots has been discredited by the UK Statistics Authority (UKSA)⁵. The government claimed that in-person voter fraud more than doubled between 2014 and 2016. While the statistic is technically accurate – a rise from 21 cases in 2014 to 44 in 2016 – the Cabinet Office failed to mention that the number of allegations then fell by more than a third in 2017, to 28.

Voter ID laws would make no difference to allegations of fraud with postal votes, proxy votes, breaches of secrecy, tampering with ballot papers, bribery, undue influence, or electoral expenditure. But it would make it harder to vote for millions of legitimate voters.

A barrier to democracy

There's evidence that strict voter ID rules in the USA disproportionately disadvantage already marginalised groups. Unlike in mainland Europe where everyone has a national ID card, in the UK and USA the richer you are the more likely you have ID. Many citizens who can't afford to go on foreign holidays don't have passports, and those that can't drive don't have driving licences.

In the 2011 Census, 9.5 million people stated they did not hold a passport, 9 million do not have a driving licence and in 2013/14 1.7 million lack even a bank account. That makes mandatory voter ID – with no free provision – a

3. Alistair Clark and Toby James, (2017), 'Poll Workers' in Pippa Norris and Alessanadro Nai (2017) (eds) Watchdog Elections: Transparency, Accountability and Integrity, New York: Oxford University Press

4. Electoral Commission, (2017), Electoral Commission Public Opinion research UK Parliament general election – June 2017 https://www.electoralcommission.org.uk/_data/assets/pdf_file/0007/234943/UKPGE-June-2017-Public-opinion-survey-Topline.pdf

5. <https://www.statisticsauthority.gov.uk/correspondence/presentation-of-electoral-fraud-statistics/>

barrier to many people exercising their right to vote.

Tackling fraud

Trust in our democratic system is vital, which is why scaremongering about the extent of fraud is dangerous. We need to be combatting the huge challenges that undermine our democracy, not preventing legitimate voters from exercising their democratic right.

Clearer guidance and better training of election staff, and making it easier to launch ‘election petitions’ to report fraud are very much worth trialling. It is also worth considering the impact of cuts to electoral offices⁶. But the government needs to think very carefully before using an extremely blunt instrument to deal with a complex and varied issue. While voter ID might sound like an easy option, raising barriers to voting is rarely something to be welcomed.

6. “It is getting more and more difficult to meet the statutory requirements of delivering elections and registration, especially with the combination of IER and the financial cuts each authority is facing” according to the Association of Electoral Administrators <https://www.aea-elections.co.uk/wp-content/uploads/2014/10/nw-min-mgmt-board-130614.pdf> and <https://www.aea-elections.co.uk/wp-content/uploads/2014/10/so-min-130614.pdf>

FAQ

Why is impersonation fraud so rare?

Requirements to show ID at polling stations would only stop people pretending to be somebody else in order to cast one fake vote. This is an incredibly rare crime because it is such a slow, clunky way to steal an election – and requires levels of organisation that would be easy to spot and prevent.

With no evidence of widespread fraud, even a handful of people not voting as they left their ID at home would have a far bigger impact on election results than alleged fraud.

What about Northern Ireland’s scheme?

Faced with extremely high levels of documented in-person electoral fraud, Northern Ireland introduced mandatory ID in 1985 and – crucially – a free Electoral ID Card in 2002.

At the 1983 General Election, nearly 1,000 people arrived at polling stations in Northern Ireland only to be told a vote has already been cast in their name. Police made 149 arrests for personation, resulting in 104 prosecutions.

Faced with military-style organisation of in-person fraud, investing millions in the ID scheme was a proportionate response.

But with only 28 allegations of fraud in 2017 across a population roughly 40 times larger, the same response would be a sledgehammer to crack a nut for the rest of the UK.

Don’t you need ID to vote in Europe?

Nearly all European countries have mandatory ID card schemes with either free or low-cost cards. As the ID cards are mandatory, all voters have ID cards, so no groups of voters are discriminated against.

In the UK we do not have mandatory ID cards and certain groups are far less likely to have ID than others. The elderly and those on low income are less likely to drive or go on holidays abroad for instance.

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