Electoral Reform Society

Briefing on Mandatory Voter ID at the Polling Station

July 2021

1   Prime Minister's Office (2021). *Queen's Speech 2021: background briefing notes.* https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/queens-speech-2021-background-briefing-notes

2   Prime Minister's Office (2019). *The Queen's Speech 2019.* https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/853886/Queen_s_Speech_December_2019_-_background_briefing_notes.pdf

As set out in the Queen's Speech, the government is committed to introducing mandatory voter identification requirements at the polling station as part of its Elections Bill.[1] This legislation was previously trailed in the December 2019 Queen's Speech background briefing notes, where the government set out its plans to require photographic ID at polling stations at UK parliamentary elections in Great Britain and local elections in England.[2]

The policy of mandatory strict ID presents a significant risk to democratic access and equality. Possession of ID is not universal and is particularly low among certain groups of voters. Millions of people lack the strictest forms of required documentation, such as a passport or driving licence. If mandatory ID were to be rolled out nationally, it could potentially result in significant numbers of voters being denied a say.

Identification requirements risk undermining the principles of fair and equal participation that have been at the heart of British democracy since the adoption of universal, equal suffrage in 1928.

This briefing sets out the background to the current voter ID proposals, including the pilots held in 2018 and 2019, and what the impact of a voter ID policy is likely to be.

Key findings:

- **Possession of ID is not universal in the UK.** Research by the Electoral Commission in 2015 found that around 3.5 million citizens (7.5% of the electorate) do not have access to photo ID. If voter identification requirements were restricted to passports or driving licenses, around 11 million citizens (24% of the electorate) could potentially be disenfranchised. More recently, government-commissioned research on possession of photo ID found that 2% of people do not have any form of ID (including expired/unrecognisable) and 4% do not have recognisable ID – roughly 2.1 million people could risk not being able to vote in a general election due to not having recognisable photo ID.

- **Free or low-cost ID cards are not available in the UK, unlike most countries which require ID to vote.** If a free elector card were to be provided to support the roll-out of voter ID, it is unlikely that all those without ID will apply for one. 56% of respondents to the government-commissioned survey said they would be unlikely or very unlikely to apply for a free elector card, and 42% of those with no photo ID said they would be unlikely or very unlikely to apply for this. The Electoral Commission's 2021 winter tracker found that 23% of respondents with no existing photo ID said they were not sure whether they would apply for local ID and 17% said they would probably/definitely not apply for this.

- **Requiring photo ID has the potential to discriminate against marginalised groups.** The Electoral Commission's 2021 winter tracker found that more disadvantaged groups are more likely to not have ID, including the unemployed (11%), those renting from a local authority (13%) or housing association (12%), as well as disabled people (8%). The government's commissioned research found that older voters (aged 85+) were less likely than those in younger groups to have ID that was recognisable (91% compared to 95%–98%). It also found that those with severely limiting disabilities, the unemployed, people without qualifications, and those who had never voted before were all less likely to hold *any* form of photo ID.

- Groups most likely to be adversely affected by voter ID are also the least likely to be registered to vote. **Around 17% of eligible voters in Great Britain are missing from the electoral register.**

- Voter ID pilots were held in a handful of local authorities in 2018 and 2019. **Across both sets of pilots, more than 1,000 people were effectively denied a vote due to lack of ID.**

- Research by the Cabinet Office following the 2018 voter ID pilots showed that **implementing mandatory voter ID across Great Britain could cost up to £20m per general election.**

- **Voting is safe and secure in Britain and the public confidence in the running of elections is the highest since 2012.** According to the Electoral Commission's latest tracker of public opinion, 80% of people are confident that elections are well run. Perceptions of electoral fraud almost halved between 2020 and 2021, with only 20% thinking this is a problem. 87% of people think voting in general is safe from fraud and abuse, and 90% of respondents said that voting at the polling station is safe.

Background

The government announced its intention to hold pilots of voter identification requirements in 2017, following a review into electoral fraud by Sir Eric Pickles set up in 2016.[3] Highlighting the trust-based nature of polling station voting and lack of checks of people's identity, the review argued that this could give rise to the electoral offence of personation, where a voter pretends to be someone else to use their vote. Out of the 50 recommendations made in the review, the government decided to pilot voter ID requirements.

Much of the impetus for tackling electoral fraud, and the main example adduced as evidence of a problem, stemmed from the highly publicised case of fraud which took place in 2014 in Tower Hamlets.[4] However, this case (where allegations were made in 2010/12 and again in 2014) was atypical and one which the current laws were able to address – indeed the 2014 election was declared void. It is also not a case in which personation fraud was the primary type of fraudulent activity – the 2014 Tower Hamlets court ruling covers postal vote fraud, illegal provision of false information, illegal voting, making false statements about candidates, illegal employment of paid canvassers, bribery and undue spiritual influence, as well as personation.[5]

Voter ID pilots

The government piloted mandatory voter ID in selected local authorities during the 2018 and 2019 local elections in England. In both pilot years, participating local authorities tested three different types of identification requirements: a photo ID model; a mixed model where voters presented either one piece of photo ID or two pieces of non-photo ID before casting their vote; and a poll card model. In the areas piloting the photo ID and mixed ID models, voters who did not have the required identification could apply for a locally issued certificate of identity.

Table: Voters without ID and who did not return to vote in the 2018 and 2019 pilots

	Voters without correct ID	Voters turned away who did not return to vote	Proportion of voters without correct ID who did not return to vote
2018 pilots: Bromley, Gosport, Swindon, Watford, Woking	1,036	326–350	31%–34%
2019 pilots: Braintree, Broxtowe, Craven, Derby, Mid Sussex, North Kesteven, NW Leicestershire, Pendle, Watford, Woking	1,968–2,083	740–758	~36%–38%

2018 data available from: https://www.electoralcommission.org.uk/sites/default/files/pdf_file/May-2018-voter-identification-pilots-evaluation-report.pdf
2019 data available from: https://www.electoralcommission.org.uk/who-we-are-and-what-we-do/our-views-and-research/our-research/voter-identification-pilots/may-2019-voter-identification-pilot-schemes/impact-voters-experience

Compared to allegations and verified cases of personation,[6] the number of those turned away in both pilot years are extremely high. The 2018 voter ID pilots saw more than 1,000 voters being turned away for not having the correct form of ID – of these, an average of 338 voters did not return to vote (32.6 percent of those turned away). In 2019, around 2,000 people were initially refused a ballot paper, of which roughly 750 did not return with ID and did not therefore take part in the election (around 37 percent of those turned away). Across both sets of pilots, this means that more than 1,000 people were effectively denied a vote due to lack of ID, in just a handful of council areas – spread over a general election, this could lead to hundreds of thousands of voters being turned away.

3   Cabinet Office (2016). *Securing the ballot Report of Sir Eric Pickles' review into electoral fraud.* https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/securing-the-ballot-review-into-electoral-fraud

4   White, I. and Johnston, N. (2017). Electoral fraud since 2010. *House of Commons Library Briefing Paper, number 6255.* http://researchbriefings.files.parliament.uk/documents/SN06255/SN06255.pdf

5   http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/shared/bsp/hi/pdfs/judgment.pdf

6   https://www.electoralcommission.org.uk/who-we-are-and-what-we-do/our-views-and-research/our-research/electoral-fraud-data

7   Electoral Commission (2018). *May 2018 voter identification pilot schemes: Findings and recommendations.* https://www.electoralcommission.org.uk/sites/default/files/pdf_file/May-2018-voter-identification-pilots-evaluation-report.pdf

8   Cabinet Office (2019a). Evaluation of Voter ID Pilots 2019. https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/819404/2019_Voter_ID_Pilots_Evaluation.pdf; Electoral Commission (2019a). May 2019 voter identification pilot schemes. https://www.electoralcommission.org.uk/who-we-are-and-what-we-do/our-views-and-research/our-research/voter-identification-pilots/may-2019-voter-identification-pilot-schemes

9   Cabinet Office (2019b). Another success for the government's voter ID pilots: 22 July 2019. https://www.gov.uk/government/news/another-success-for-the-governments-voter-id-pilots-22-july-2019

10   Electoral Commission (2019a).

11   Electoral Commission (2018).

12   Ibid.

13   http://www.bailii.org/ew/cases/EWHC/Admin/2019/641.html

14   Local Government Lawyer (2019). High Court rejects legal challenge over Voter ID pilot. 20 March 2019. https://www.localgovernmentlawyer.co.uk/governance/396-governance-news/40122-high-court-rejects-legal-challenge-over-voter-id-pilot

15   Siddique, H. (2021). Supreme court to hear challenge to UK's voter ID trial in 2019 election. *The Guardian*, 18 March. https://www.theguardian.com/politics/2021/mar/18/supreme-court-hear-challenge-uk-voter-id-trial-2019-election

Further, this does not take into account the number of people who did not turn up at the polling station at all because they did not have acceptable ID. As the Electoral Commission stated in its 2018 evaluation of the trials, the 'data on turnout and participation cannot tell us much about people who may have decided not to go to their polling station at all because of the identification requirement.'[7] In 2019, both the Electoral Commission's and the Cabinet Office's evaluations of the trials found that around two percent of people said they did not vote in the pilots because they did not have the right ID.[8]

Lack of evidence

The 2018 and 2019 trials failed to provide evidence to support the roll-out of mandatory ID across the UK – the impact of ID requirements on instances of fraud, turnout and public confidence in the integrity of elections cannot be ascertained, in large part because the number of alleged cases of fraud in Great Britain is miniscule.

While the Cabinet Office declared the 2019 trials to have been a 'success' for the government's voter ID pilots,[9] the Electoral Commission was more cautious in its judgement, stating that it was unable 'to draw definitive conclusions, from these pilots, about how an ID requirement would work in practice, particularly at a national poll with higher levels of turnout or in areas with different socio-demographic profiles not fully represented in the pilot scheme.'[10] It also highlighted 'the importance of ensuring that the ID requirements are suitable for all and any public awareness activities are genuinely effective across all communities'.

In its evaluation of the 2018 pilots, the Electoral Commission found that 'there is not yet enough evidence to fully address concerns and answer questions about the impact of identification requirements on voters'.[11] It also found 'inconsistent evidence' about whether mandatory voter ID would increase public confidence in the security of the voting system overall, and very limited evidence of whether ID requirements prevented people from attempting to commit electoral fraud, which is one of the government's primary policy objectives for the pilots.[12]

The legal challenge

The government faced a legal challenge to its voter ID plans in the run up to the 2019 local elections over claims that they were 'unlawful' and would 'serve to further disenfranchise the poor and vulnerable who already struggle to have their voices heard'.[13] The case was brought by Neil Coughlan, a voluntary worker from Braintree (one of the trial areas) who did not have access to photo ID, following an online fundraising campaign which raised more than £30,000.

The High Court dismissed the challenge on the grounds that the ID pilots were lawful under section 10 of the Representation of the People Act 2000.[14] But in February 2021, Mr Coughlan was granted permission to take his claim to the UK supreme court.[15]

Voter ID is an expensive distraction

Research by the Cabinet Office following the 2018 voter ID pilots showed that implementing mandatory voter ID across Great Britain could cost up to £20m per general election, with the main drivers being additional staff costs.[16]

Updated data on the cost of the national rollout of voter ID, based on the 2019 pilots, have not been published, despite repeated requests, including by parliamentary committees.[17]

As part of its 2015 research on how to deliver voter ID in Great Britain, the Electoral Commission worked with a financial modeller to determine the cost of implementing a Northern Ireland-style free elector card.[18] They estimated the cost of implementing this would range between £1.8m and £10.8m per annum, depending on the method of implementation. The Commission's recommended options would cost between £1.8m and £2.9m per year for a stand-alone option (where a new 'stand-alone' organisation would be established and assume primary responsibility for the receipt and processing of applications, and printing and distribution of elector cards) and between £2.4m and £6.4m per year for an option involving the outsourced production and distribution of voter cards, with local Electoral Registration Officers retaining control over the application process.

A barrier to participation

Possession of ID is not universal in the UK and getting ID costs time and money, which some citizens may not be able to invest. Research by the Electoral Commission in 2015 shows that around 3.5 million citizens (7.5 percent of the electorate) do not have access to photo ID.[19] If voter identification requirements were restricted to passports or driving licenses, around 11 million citizens (24 percent of the electorate) could potentially be disenfranchised.

More recently, the government itself commissioned external research on possession of photo ID.[20] It found that 98 percent of respondents had some form of photo ID, including expired or one in which the photo was not recognisable. However, this decreased to 96 percent of respondents for photo ID that was recognisable (both in-date and expired), which is what is likely to be allowed under the current voter ID proposals – meaning that roughly 2.1 million people could risk not being able to vote at a general election.[21] The government-commissioned research found that 91 percent of respondents had in-date, recognisable photo ID – with almost one in 10 respondents not having this form of ID.

In its latest winter tracker, the Electoral Commission also asked about possession of photo ID and found that four percent of people currently eligible to vote said they do not have any of the existing forms of ID which may be required under the government's proposals.[22]

Free or low-cost ID cards are not available in the UK, unlike most countries which require ID to vote. An oft-repeated argument in support of mandatory ID in the UK is that you need to show ID to vote in elections in most European countries. But what supporters of voter ID fail to mention is that all EU member states, with the exception of Denmark and Ireland, have universal ID card schemes that are either free or low-cost.[23] Furthermore, possession of some form of ID is mandatory in 21 EU states, which means that everyone has them and no groups are discriminated against.

Even if a free elector card were to be provided, this is yet another barrier for exercising one's democratic right, particularly for those who might find it hard or costly to go to a council office and request an elector card during

16   Cabinet Office (2018). *Electoral Integrity Project – Local Elections 2018 – Evaluation.* https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/733128/Electoral_Integrity_Project_-_Local_Elections_2018_-_Evaluation.pdf

17   https://committees.parliament.uk/publications/1584/documents/15057/default/

18   Electoral Commission (2015). *Delivering and costing a proof of identity scheme for polling station voters in Great Britain.* https://www.electoralcommission.org.uk/sites/default/files/pdf_file/Proof-of-identity-scheme-updated-March-2016.pdf

19   Ibid.

20   IFF Research (2021). *Photographic ID Research – Headline Findings.* https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/984918/Photographic_ID_research-headline_findings_report.pdf

21   Walker, P., Stewart, H. and Siddique, H. (2021). More than 2m voters may lack photo ID required under new UK bill. *The Guardian,* 11 May. https://www.theguardian.com/politics/2021/may/11/more-than-2m-voters-may-lack-photo-id-required-under-new-uk-bill

22   Electoral Commission (2021). Public Opinion Tracker 2021. http://www.electoralcommission.org.uk/who-we-are-and-what-we-do/our-views-and-research/our-research/public-attitudes

23   https://www.statewatch.org/media/documents/news/2010/jun/eu-council-ID-cards-9949-10.pdf

24 IFF Research (2021).

25 Electoral Commission (2021).

26 Electoral Commission (2019a).

27 Elgot, J. (2020). MPs may have been misled over BAME voter ID claims. *The Guardian*, 28 July https://www.theguardian.com/politics/2020/jul/28/mps-may-have-been-misled-over-bame-voter-id-claims; https://hansard.parliament.uk/Commons/2020-06-11/debates/CC9F6ACA-9E14-441D-A487-CFF14B911CB0/VoterIdentification

28 Walker, P. (2021). Using photo ID in British elections will harm democracy, say US civil rights groups. *The Guardian*, 28 February. https://www.theguardian.com/politics/2021/feb/28/using-photo-id-in-british-elections-will-harm-democracy-say-us-civil-rights-groups

29 Electoral Commission (2021).

30 ERS (2020). Has the Government misled Parliament over voter ID?. 28 July. https://www.electoral-reform.org.uk/has-the-government-misled-parliament-over-voter-id/

31 https://www.ethnicity-facts-figures.service.gov.uk/culture-and-community/transport/driving-licences/latest#by-ethnicity-over-time

32 Davies, C. (2021). Number of young people with driving licence in Great Britain at lowest on record. *The Guardian*, 5 April. https://www.theguardian.com/money/2021/apr/05/number-of-young-people-with-driving-licence-in-great-britain-at-lowest-on-record

33 Electoral Commission (2015).

34 https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/673176/young-peoples-travel-whats-changed.pdf

35 IFF Research (2021).

opening hours. Indeed, when asked about whether they would apply for a free elector card, 56 percent of respondents to the government-commissioned survey said they would be unlikely or very unlikely to apply for this.[24] Among respondents with no photo ID, 42 percent said they would be unlikely or very unlikely to apply for this, leading the researchers to conclude that this 'would suggest that close to half of those without photo ID would not seek to apply for the Voter Card, and therefore be at risk of ending up without photo ID.'

The Electoral Commission's 2021 winter tracker found that 60 percent of those without existing photo ID would definitely/probably apply for a local ID card.[25] However, 23 percent said they were not sure whether they would apply for local ID and 17 percent said they would probably/definitely not apply for this.

As the Electoral Commission cautioned in its 2019 evaluation of the voter ID trials, '[b]efore introducing a requirement for elections in Great Britain, the Government and Parliament should consider carefully the available evidence about the impact and proportionality of different approaches on the accessibility and security of polling station voting.'[26]

Unfair discrimination

Marginalised groups are less likely to have ID and requiring identification has the potential to discriminate against certain groups, despite claims to the contrary. In July 2020, it was reported that the government may have misled MPs when it claimed that the 'evidence shows there is no impact on any particular demographic group', given that the demographic data used to back this up was not collected as part of the pilot evaluations.[27] Earlier this year, three leading US civil rights groups criticised the UK government's ID plans and highlighted how ID laws disproportionately affect people from poorer and marginalised communities.[28]

In its 2021 tracker, the Electoral Commission found that the proportion of people without existing ID is 'higher among certain, more disadvantaged groups', including the unemployed (11 percent without required ID), those who rent from a local authority (13 percent) or housing association (12 percent), as well as disabled people (eight percent).[29] Dennis Reed, Director of Silver Voices, told the Electoral Reform Society that 'Up to 2 million pensioners do not possess photo ID'.[30]

A survey by the Department for Transport found that 76 percent of the white population hold a driving licence compared with just 53 percent of black people.[31] Recent data from the Driver and Vehicle Licensing Agency (DVLA) has shown that the number of young people with a driving licence has fallen to a record low, with just 2.97 million people aged 16–25 having a full licence, compared to 3.42 million in 2012.[32] This chimes with previous research by the Electoral Commission in 2015, which found that women and those under 20 and over 65 are less likely to hold a driving licence.[33] Indeed, since the 1990s, possession of a driving license has dropped by 40 percent among under 20s,[34] making it a poor basis for a voter ID policy.

The government's own commissioned research finds that certain groups are less likely to hold ID.[35] For example, older voters (aged 85+) were less likely to have ID that was recognisable (91% compared to 95%–98% for those in younger age groups). Those with severely limiting disabilities, the unemployed, people without qualifications, and those who had never voted before were all less likely to hold *any* form of photo ID.

In addition to unfairly discriminating against certain groups' participation in elections, voter ID has the potential to further erode trust in these very same processes. As the Electoral Commission stated in its 2019 evaluation: 'If

36   Electoral Commission (2019a).

37   ERS (2019b). Millions missing from the electoral register in event of snap election. 27 September. https://www.electoral-reform.org.uk/latest-news-and-research/media-centre/press-releases/millions-missing-from-the-electoral-register-in-event-of-snap-election/

38   Electoral Commission (2019b). 2019 report: Accuracy and completeness of the 2018 electoral registers in Great Britain. https://www.electoralcommission.org.uk/who-we-are-and-what-we-do/our-views-and-research/our-research/accuracy-and-completeness-electoral-registers/2019-report-accuracy-and-completeness-2018-electoral-registers-great-britain

there were to be a disproportionate impact on particular groups of voters this could also have a negative impact on public confidence; we know that problems at elections can affect voters' and non-voters' overall perceptions of the poll.'[36]

What makes matters worse is the fact that the groups most likely to be adversely affected by voter ID are the same groups who are already least likely to be registered to vote.[37] According to the latest data from the Electoral Commission, around 17 percent of eligible voters in Great Britain are missing from the electoral register.[38] White people are most likely to be on the register at 84 percent, compared to those from 'other' ethnic backgrounds with nearly 40 percent missing from the register (just 62 percent are registered to vote). Those from Asian and Black ethnic backgrounds each have a similar level of completeness (76 percent and 75 percent respectively) to those who are white, while completeness stands at 69 percent among those from mixed backgrounds. Registration levels are also low among those aged 18–34, with only 71 percent correctly registered, compared to 94 percent for people aged 65 and over.

For these reasons, groups as wide ranging as the LGBT Foundation, Age UK, Shelter and the National Union of Students have spoken out against these proposals. Civil society groups across the spectrum are understandably more concerned about the fact that an estimated nine million people are missing from the electoral roll, due to the lack of automatic voter registration in the UK.

Voting at the polling station is safe and secure in Britain

39   Electoral Commission (2021).

Overall, electors in the UK consider voting to be safe from fraud and abuse. The Electoral Commission's latest tracker of public opinion found that public confidence in the running of elections is the highest since 2012 – with 80 percent of respondents confident that elections are well run (up from 71 percent in 2020).[39] Perceptions of electoral fraud almost halved between 2020 and 2021, with only one fifth of respondents agreeing it is a problem (down from 39 percent in 2020). Eighty-seven percent of respondents said voting in general is safe from fraud and abuse (up from 80 percent in 2020), and 90 percent of respondents said that voting at the polling station is safe (up from 85 percent in 2020).

In contrast, the real concern among voters is not the potential for personation, but the very real problems of political finance. Trust in party and campaigner spending and funding is at rock bottom, according to the Electoral Commission, having been in decline since the watchdog's research

40   Ibid.

began.[40] In 2021, only 14 percent of respondents said they believed political finance was transparent, down from 37 percent in 2011.

In both sets of pilots, requiring voter ID had only a small effect on voter confidence among voters in pilot areas. Though the evaluations conducted by the Cabinet Office and Electoral Commission indicate a slight increase in perceptions of polling stations being safe from fraud and abuse as a result of the pilots, pre-existing levels of confidence in the security of polling station were already very high. In 2019, the Cabinet Office report found that the perception of the polling station being safe from fraud and abuse increased by around 2–5 percentage points across the pilot areas. But levels of confidence in safeguards at polling stations were already high – with between 85 percent and 87 percent of people saying that voting at polling stations was safe from fraud

41   Cabinet Office (2019a).

42   BMG Research (2019). *Voter ID Pilot Evaluation. Prepared for: The Electoral Commission.* https://www.electoralcommission.org.uk/sites/default/files/2019-07/ID%20pilots%20post%20wave%20report%20BMG_FINAL_pdf.pdf

and abuse before taking part in the pilots.[41] Similarly, the Electoral Commission's post-poll research found that 77 percent of electors thought voting in general is safe, particularly at the polling station (81 percent).[42]

43 Cabinet Office (2021). May 2021 Elections - Joint statement from the UK Government, Scottish Government and Welsh Government. 9 March. https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/may-2021-elections-joint-statement-from-the-uk-government-scottish-government-and-welsh-government/may-2021-elections-joint-statement-from-the-uk-government-scottish-government-and-welsh-government

44 IFF Research (2021).

45 Ibid.

46 Wilks-Heeg, S. (2018). Voter ID at British Polling Stations – Learning the Right Lessons from Northern Ireland. Policy @ Manchester Blog, 1 March. http://blog.policy.manchester.ac.uk/posts/2018/03/voter-id-at-british-polling-stations-learning-the-right-lessons-from-northern-ireland/

47 Uberoi, E. and Johnston, N. (2021). Voter ID. House of Commons Library Briefing Paper, number 9187. https://commonslibrary.parliament.uk/research-briefings/cbp-9187/

48 Wilks-Heeg (2018).

49 James, T., Wilks-Heeg, S. and Clark, A. (2021). The UK Electoral Integrity Bill. https://static1.squarespace.com/static/58533f31bebafbe99c85dc9b/t/609d4a88bd37ac77240b91b1/1620920970763/UK+Electoral+Integrity+Bill+1.00.pdf

50 Ibid.

51 https://www.electoralcommission.org.uk/who-we-are-and-what-we-do/our-views-and-research/our-research/electoral-fraud-data

52 https://www.electoralcommission.org.uk/who-we-are-and-what-we-do/our-views-and-research/our-research/electoral-fraud-data/2019-electoral-fraud-data

53 Uberoi and Johnston (2021).

54 Ibid.

55 https://www.electoralcommission.org.uk/who-we-are-and-what-we-do/our-views-and-research/our-research/electoral-fraud-data/2018-electoral-fraud-data

56 ERS (2019a). Latest voter fraud stats show mandatory ID proposals are still a 'solution looking for a problem'. 22 March. https://www.electoral-reform.org.uk/latest-news-and-research/media-centre/press-releases/latest-voter-fraud-stats-show-mandatory-id-proposals-are-still-a-solution-looking-for-a-problem/

Voting in the UK is safe and secure, as the government itself recognises,[43] but requiring photo ID at the polling station might put people off voting altogether. The research commissioned by the government asked respondents about their likelihood to vote and ease of voting if ID were to be introduced.[44] It found that over a quarter (27 percent) of those without any form of photo ID and a fifth (19 percent) of those with not recognisable photo ID would be less likely to vote if they had to present photo ID. This compares to four percent of those holding recognisable photo ID.

Overall, five percent of respondents said that having to show ID would make voting at a polling station difficult, with three percent of these saying it would be very difficult. But almost four in 10 of those without any photo ID said they believed the requirement for photo ID would make voting more difficult, with a quarter of those with unrecognisable ID stating the same.[45]

The case of Northern Ireland

Faced with extremely high levels of documented in-person electoral fraud,[46] taking place on a 'planned and well organised basis',[47] Northern Ireland introduced mandatory ID in 1985. 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.[48] In Northern Ireland, mandatory ID was thus a proportionate response to the significant problem of personation.

It is important to note that Northern Ireland did not move immediately to a requirement for photographic ID – elections took place for almost 20 years with a less stringent ID requirement.

It is only since 2003 that voters in Northern Ireland have had to show photo ID at the polling station in order to vote.[49] The first election to require photo ID was the 2004 Northern Irish Assembly election, with estimates showing that around 25,000 voters did not vote because they did not have the required ID. Further, almost 3,500 people (2.3 percent of the electorate) were initially turned away for not presenting the required ID.[50]

Electoral fraud in Great Britain

Elections in the UK have extremely low levels of proven electoral fraud. Data provided by the Electoral Commission each year consistently show that there is no large-scale evidence of electoral fraud.[51]

For elections conducted in 2019, 595 alleged cases of electoral fraud were investigated by the police – campaigning offences comprised a majority of alleged cases of fraud in 2019 (54 percent), followed by alleged voting offences (24 percent).[52] Almost all offences (97.6 percent) either involved no further action being taken (64 percent of the total) or were locally resolved (33.6 percent). Four offences resulted in a conviction, including one for personation at the polling station in the European Parliament elections, and two individuals were given police cautions (one for personation in the same election).[53]

Out of all alleged cases of electoral fraud in the 2019 elections, only 33 related to personation fraud at the polling station[54] – this comprises 0.000057% of the over 58 million votes cast in all the elections that took place that year.

Comparable figures for elections conducted in 2018 show that, of the 266 cases investigated by the police, more than half were campaigning offences and just one in five (57) related to complaints made about the voting process.[55] Personation fraud at the polling station accounted for just eight of the 266 allegations made in 2018, with no further action being taken for seven of these allegations and one being locally resolved.[56]

57 https://www.electoralcommission.org.
uk/who-we-are-and-what-we-do/
our-views-and-research/our-research/
electoral-fraud-data/2017-electoral-fraud-
data.

Of the 44.6 million votes cast in 2017, only 28 allegations of personation were made, of which only one resulted in a conviction.[57] This is equal to 0.000063% of votes.

Further information

- Our evaluation of the 2019 voter ID pilots can be found here: https://blogs.lse.ac.uk/politicsandpolicy/five-things-we-have-learnt-about-englands-voter-id-trials-in-the-2019-local-elections/
- Our report on the 2018 trials is available at: https://www.electoral-reform.org.uk/latest-news-and-research/publications/a-sledgehammer-to-crack-a-nut-the-2018-voter-id-trials/
- The House of Commons Library has produced a briefing paper on voter ID: https://commonslibrary.parliament.uk/research-briefings/cbp-9187/