

Parliamentary briefing

Introduction of Voter ID – Westminster Hall Debate

4.50pm-5.50pm, Tuesday 13 July 2021

Introduction

Voter ID: An expensive distraction that undermines the right to vote

The Elections Bill was introduced to parliament on 5 July 2021.¹ The bill contains proposals to require photographic ID at polling stations for UK parliamentary elections in Great Britain, local elections in England, and Police and Crime Commissioner elections in England and Wales.

The policy of mandatory photo 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 – as well as making it harder for everyone to vote.

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.

Key findings:

Voter ID poses a serious risk to democracy in the UK

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 found that around 3.5 million citizens (7.5% of the electorate) do not have access to photo ID.²

More recently, government-commissioned research on possession of photo ID found that two percent of people do not have *any* form of ID (including expired/unrecognisable) and four percent do not have recognisable ID (whether in-date or expired).³ Almost one in 10 respondents did not have in-date, recognisable photo ID. **This means roughly 2.1 million people risk not being able to vote in a general election due to not having recognisable photo ID.**⁴

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.⁵

Voter ID would unfairly discriminate against marginalised groups

Requiring photo ID has the potential to discriminate against marginalised groups, who are less likely to have ID, despite claims to the contrary. In July 2020, it was reported that the government may have misled MPs when it claimed that the evidence from the voter ID trials it conducted 'shows there is no impact on any particular demographic group', given that the demographic data needed to make such an assessment was not collected as part of the pilot evaluations.⁶ Earlier this year, three leading US civil rights groups criticised the UK government's ID plans and highlighted how ID laws

1. <https://bills.parliament.uk/bills/3020>

2. 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

3. 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

4. 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>

5. 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>

6. 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>

7. 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>

8. Electoral Commission (2021).

9. 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

10. <https://committees.parliament.uk/publications/1584/documents/15057/default/>

12. 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.

13. 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>

14. Electoral Commission (2021).

15. Ibid.

16. IFF Research (2021).

17. 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/>

18. Traveller Movement (forthcoming). *Access Denied?: The introduction of voter ID laws and the potential impact on Gypsy, Roma and Irish Traveller people*.

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

20. 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>

disproportionately affect people from poorer and marginalised communities.⁷

The Electoral Commission's 2021 winter tracker found that **more disadvantaged groups are more likely to not have ID**, including the unemployed (11% without existing ID), those renting from a local authority (13%) or housing association (12%), as well as disabled people (8%).⁸

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**, depending on the model used, with the main drivers being additional staff costs.⁹

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.¹⁰

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.¹¹ They estimated the cost of implementing this would range between £1.8m and £10.8m per annum, depending on the method of implementation.¹²

Voting in the UK is already safe, secure, and trusted

Voting is safe and secure in Britain, as the government itself recognises,¹³ and **public confidence in the running of elections is the highest since 2012** – according to the Electoral Commission's latest tracker of public opinion, 80 percent of people are confident that elections are well run.¹⁴

Perceptions of electoral fraud almost halved between 2020 and 2021, with only 20 percent thinking this is a problem. Eighty-seven percent of respondents said voting in general is safe from fraud and abuse, and 90 percent of respondents said that voting at the polling station is safe.

Where confidence has fallen is in Britain's political funding system, where trust levels are at their lowest on record.¹⁴ The Elections Bill fails to properly tackle the loopholes in the UK's campaign finance system.

FAQs

Who will this policy affect?

Certain groups are less likely to hold ID. The Electoral Commission's 2021 winter tracker found that more disadvantaged groups are more likely to not have ID, including the unemployed, those renting from a local authority or housing association, as well as disabled people.

The government's own commissioned research finds that older voters (aged 85+) were less likely to have ID that was recognisable (91% compared to 95%–98% for those in younger age groups).¹⁶ 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.

Further, Dennis Reed, Director of Silver Voices, told the Electoral Reform Society that 'Up to 2 million pensioners do not possess photo ID',¹⁷ while Traveller Movement research found that implementing mandatory voter ID could 'permanently lock many GRT people out of a system they already struggle to participate in'.¹⁸

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,¹⁹ and the number of young people with a driving licence has fallen to a record low.²⁰

21. 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>

22. Electoral Commission (2021).

23. IFF Research (2021).

24. Ibid.

25. Berlinski, N. et al. (2021). The Effects of Unsubstantiated Claims of Voter Fraud on Confidence in Elections. *Journal of Experimental Political Science*, pp. 1-16. <https://www.cambridge.org/core/journals/journal-of-experimental-political-science/article/effects-of-unsubstantiated-claims-of-voter-fraud-on-confidence-in-elections/9B4CE6DF2F573955071948B9F649DF7A>

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

27. IFF Research (2021).

28. Ibid.

29. 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/>

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

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 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."²¹

Isn't mandatory ID about giving voters confidence?

Voting is safe and secure in Britain, and public confidence in the running of elections is the highest since 2012. According to the Electoral Commission's latest tracker of public opinion, 80 percent of people are confident that elections are well run, 87 percent said voting in general is safe from fraud and abuse, and 90 percent that voting at the polling station is safe.²² Perceptions of electoral fraud almost halved between 2020 and 2021, with only 20 percent thinking this is a problem.

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.²³ It found that over a quarter (27%) of those with no photo ID and a fifth (19%) of those with no recognisable photo ID said they would be less likely to vote if they had to present photo ID. This compares to four percent of those holding recognisable photo ID.

Almost four in 10 of those without any photo ID (39%) said they believed the requirement for photo ID would make voting difficult, with a quarter of those with unrecognisable ID stating the same.²⁴

Recent studies in the US have found that talking up claims of voter fraud reduces confidence in electoral integrity and has a 'corrosive effect' on trust in the system.²⁵

Will people have access to free ID?

Free or low-cost ID cards are not available in the UK, unlike most countries which require ID to vote.²⁶ 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 to support the roll-out of voter ID, it is unlikely that all those without ID will apply for one – some might find it hard or costly to go to a council office and request an elector card during opening hours. The localised nature of the planned free elector cards risks leading to a 'postcode lottery' in how difficult they are to obtain, with over 300, often financially-constrained councils, potentially implementing the scheme in different ways. And if people are unable to apply for free ID online, there will be additional barriers that may render the scheme far less effective.

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 a free elector card.²⁷ And 42 percent of those with no photo ID said they would be unlikely or very unlikely to apply for this – suggesting 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.'²⁸

What about Northern Ireland's scheme?

Faced with extremely high levels of documented in-person electoral fraud,²⁹ taking place on a 'planned and well organised basis',³⁰ Northern Ireland

31. Wilks-Heeg (2018).

32. James, T., Wilks-Heeg, S. and Clark, A. (2021). *The UK Electoral Integrity Bill*. <https://static1.squarespace.com/static/58533f31bebafe99c85dc9b/t/609d4a88bd37ac77240b91b1/1620920970763/UK+Electoral+Integrity+Bill+1.00.pdf>

33. Ibid.

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

35. 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

36. <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>

37. Cabinet Office (2019). *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).

38. Electoral Commission (2019a).

39. Electoral Commission (2018).

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 had already been cast in their name. Police made 149 arrests for personation, resulting in 104 prosecutions.³¹ In Northern Ireland, mandatory ID was thus a proportionate response to the significant problem of personation – unlike in mainland Britain.

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.³²

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% of the electorate) were initially turned away for not presenting the required ID.³³

What happened in the voter ID pilots?

The government piloted mandatory voter ID in a handful of local authorities during the 2018 and 2019 local elections in England.

Compared to allegations and verified cases of personation,³⁴ the number of those turned away in both pilot years were 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% of those turned away).³⁵ 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% of those turned away).³⁶

Across both sets of pilots, 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.

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. 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.³⁷

Turnout: A flawed measure

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.

Supporters of voter ID point to the fact that turnout was largely unaffected as a sign of the pilots' success. But using turnout as a measure of 'success' is misleading. The ID pilots took place during low-salience and low-turnout local elections. They could thus not have picked up on the discriminatory effects of voter ID on the wider range of people who turn out at general elections.

In its 2019 evaluation of the pilots, the Electoral Commission said 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.'³⁸

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'.³⁹

40. 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>

41. <http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/shared/bsp/hi/pdfs/judgment.pdf>

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

43. <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>

44. Uberoi and Johnston (2021).

45. Ibid.

46. ERS (2019). 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/>

48. Electoral Commission (2021).

49. 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>

50. <https://www.electoral-reform.org.uk/latest-news-and-research/media-centre/press-releases/poll-need-for-voter-id-should-be-least-of-our-worries-say-voters/>
<https://www.electoral-reform.org.uk/latest-news-and-research/media-centre/press-releases/buried-official-figures-demolish-government-case-for-mandatory-voter-id/>

What about the Tower Hamlets case?

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.⁴⁰ 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.⁴¹

Electoral Integrity

Data provided by the Electoral Commission each year consistently show that there is no evidence of large-scale electoral fraud.⁴²

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%), followed by alleged voting offences (24%).⁴³ Almost all offences (97.6%) either involved no further action being taken (64% of the total) or were locally resolved (33.6%). 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).⁴⁴

Out of all alleged cases of electoral fraud in the 2019 elections, only 33 related to personation fraud at the polling station⁴⁵ – this comprises 0.000057% of the over 58 million votes cast in all the elections that took place that year.

Personation fraud at the polling station accounted for just eight of the 266 allegations made for elections conducted in 2018, with no further action being taken for seven of these allegations and one being locally resolved.⁴⁶

Of the 44.6 million votes cast in 2017, only 28 allegations of personation were made, of which only one resulted in a conviction.⁴⁷ This is equal to 0.000063% of votes cast that year.

What should the Election Bill address instead?

Voting is safe and secure in Britain, and public confidence in voting is at record levels. But trust in our democratic processes is being slowly eroded by outdated campaign rules, scandals around the misuse of personal data, and the millions missing from our electoral registers.

Among voters, the real concern 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 began.⁴⁸ In 2021, only 14 percent of respondents said they believed political finance was transparent, down from 37 percent in 2011.

Around 17 percent of eligible voters in Great Britain are missing from the electoral register,⁴⁹ due to the lack of automatic registration. Groups most likely to be adversely affected by voter ID are also the least likely to be registered to vote. 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.

Polling has consistently shown that the public views the need for voter ID as far down its list of priorities for cleaning up politics in the UK.⁵⁰

The Elections Bill should address the challenges that undermine our democracy, not prevent legitimate voters from exercising their democratic right.

Further information

- For more information, see our new in-depth briefing on voter ID: <https://www.electoral-reform.org.uk/latest-news-and-research/parliamentary-briefings/briefing-on-mandatory-voter-id-at-the-polling-station/>
- 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/>