



Electoral Integrity Project

# The UK Electoral Integrity Bill

## *Policy Brief #1*

Background academic research to the UK government's proposals to introduce voter ID in Britain.

*By Toby S. James, Stuart Wilks-Heeg and Alistair Clark*



# The Electoral Integrity Bill

---

The UK government has introduced the Electoral Integrity Bill into parliament. This briefing summarises key background research relating to the Bill. Research shows that there is little evidence of personation in polling stations, but that there is a risk that strict photographic identification might reduce participation. Drawing from overseas experiences it is suggested that allowing citizens to use their poll card as a form of identity, cast provisional ballots or vouch for their identity could overcome these problems.

---

## What is the Electoral Integrity Bill?

Full details of the Electoral Integrity Bill are still to be announced, however, the government has indicated that:

- Voters will be required to show ID before being issued at polling stations for UK Parliamentary elections, local council elections in England, and Police and Crime Commissioner elections in England and Wales.
- Photographic identification will be required, such as a passport, driver's licence, concessionary travel pass, or Blue Badge parking permit.
- Local authorities will produce voter cards for citizens who do not have access to the required form of ID but who are eligible to vote.

The government argues that this is a necessary step to prevent electoral fraud, specifically the offence of personation (voting in someone else's name) because

'we need only to walk up to the polling station and say our name and address'.<sup>1</sup>

## How common is personation?

Different data sources show that personation in polling stations is exceptionally rare.

Statistics from the Electoral Commission show that there were 33 allegations of personation in 2019 and one conviction where a man voted in both his own name and his son's name.<sup>2</sup> A police caution was also issued in another case where a man voted in his father's name, knowing that he was not on the register himself. There were 47 million people registered to vote in 2019 in the general election.

The number of proven cases of personation in 2019 was not usually low. From 2010-18, there were a total of 5 police cautions issued for personation at polling stations in the UK and a total of 4 criminal convictions for this electoral offence.<sup>3</sup>

---

<sup>1</sup> [Hansard](#), Volume 658: debated on Wednesday 10 April 2019

<sup>2</sup> See: House of Commons Library (2021) *Voter ID Briefing paper 9187* and Electoral Commission (2021). 2019 *Electoral Fraud Data*. [https://www.electoralcommission.org.uk/who-](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)

[we-are-and-what-we-do/our-views-and-research/our-research/electoral-fraud-data/2019-electoral-fraud-data](#)

<sup>3</sup> Maria Sobolewska and Stuart Wilks-Heeg (2019) [Written evidence submitted to the House of Commons Public Administration Select Committee](#).

A second data source is surveys of poll workers, which shows the frequency of different types of problems in polling stations in election day. Table 1 summarises data from poll worker studies in the 2018 local elections in England.<sup>4</sup> This shows that the most common problem was citizens missing from the electoral register.

| Potential Problem  | Percentage of respondents reporting at least one problem |
|--|--|
| People asking to vote but not on register                          | 52   |
| Disabled voters having problems competing ballot papers            | 14   |
| Members of parties being where they shouldn't be                   | 9  |
| Disabled voters having problems with access to the polling station | 9  |
| People taking photos of ballot/polling stations                    | 8  |
| Members of parties intimidating public                             | 8  |
| People ask to vote whose identity I was unsure of                  | 5  |
| Suspected cases of electoral fraud                                 | 1  |

### What did the pilots show?

Pilots of mandatory voter identification were run in five local authorities in 2018 and ten in 2019. A mix of identification requirements were tested, including photographic Identification, a mixed model and a poll card model.

A poll worker study<sup>5</sup> showed that over half of poll workers reported turning away at least one voter for not having the required form of identification. A small proportion, 1.3% of poll workers, turned more than 10 voters away. This was a more frequently experienced problem than citizens being turned away because of incomplete electoral registers, as discussed above, and does therefore represent a new problem.

The study also showed that most poll workers (76.7%) experienced at least one citizen declining to provide voter identification because they did not want to comply with the requirements. This suggests that there might be considerable philosophical resistance to voter ID in Britain.

### Does voter ID work in Northern Ireland?

Voter ID requirements have been in place in Northern

Ireland since 1985.<sup>6</sup> The Electoral Fraud (Northern Ireland) Act 2002 restricted the accepted forms of Voter ID to specific forms of photographic identification, which currently include:

- A UK, Irish or EEA driving licence (photographic part) (provisional accepted)
- A UK, Irish or EU passport (note: EU passports are not accepted at UK Parliamentary elections)
- An Electoral Identity Card
- A Translink Senior SmartPass
- A Translink 60+ SmartPass
- A Translink War Disabled SmartPass
- A Translink Blind Person's SmartPass

An Electoral Identity Card can be obtained for free from the Electoral Office for Northern Ireland. Since 2002, around 350,000 of these cards have been issued, an average of about 19,000 per annum.

The requirement for photo ID was first used at the Northern Ireland Assembly Elections in 2004. Driving licences were the most produced form of identification (52.4%), followed by a passport (26.5%) Translink Senior SmartPass (11.8) and electoral identity card (9.3%).

It was estimated that around 25,000 voters did not vote because they did not have the required form of identification. Almost 3,500 people were initially refused a vote for not presenting the required identification requirements.<sup>7</sup> This was 2.3% of the electorate.<sup>8</sup>

The Chief Electoral Officer for Northern Ireland has not routinely published information about the number of voters turned away at polling stations and no poll worker survey has been run. The longer-term effects of voter ID in Northern Ireland are therefore largely unknown.

There is very little current controversy about the use of voter ID in Northern Ireland. However, it is important to underline that Northern Ireland did not move

<sup>4</sup> Based on Toby S. James and Alistair Clark (2020) 'Electoral integrity, voter fraud and voter ID in polling stations: lessons from English local elections', *Policy Studies*, 41 (2-3) p.190-2019.

<sup>5</sup> Based on Toby S. James and Alistair Clark (2020) 'Electoral integrity, voter fraud and voter ID in polling stations: lessons from English local elections', *Policy Studies*, 41 (2-3) p.190-2019.

<sup>6</sup> Stuart Wilks-Heeg (2018), [Voter ID at British Polling Stations – Learning the Right Lessons from Northern Ireland](#), Policy@Manchester Blog.

<sup>7</sup> Electoral Commission (2004) *The Electoral Fraud (Northern Ireland) Act 2002: An Assessment of its First Year in Operation*. Electoral Commission: London, pp/61-102.

<sup>8</sup> Electorate of 1,097,526, based on Colin Rallings and Michael Thrasher (2003) [Voting at the Northern Ireland Assembly Election 2003](#), p. 13.

immediately to a requirement for photographic ID. Elections in Northern Ireland were run for almost twenty years with a less stringent voter ID requirement before legislation was passed to restrict this to photographic ID only. It is also clear that the provision of free Electoral Identify Cards, and the ease of the procedure for obtaining them, has been crucial to minimising the exclusion of electors from voting.

#### Who has the required identification in Britain?

Research commissioned by the Cabinet Office showed that 2% of the population had no form of photographic identification. A larger proportion (4%) had no photographic identification in which they were recognisable. Meanwhile, 9% had no identification in which they were recognisable and which was in date.<sup>9</sup>

Those who were more likely to not have photographic identification were older citizens, white, those with a disability and those not in employment.

#### Is voter ID required in other countries?

There is considerable variation worldwide in whether voter ID is required or not.

In the US, 17 states had no voter identification requirements as of 2019. By contrast, 6 states had strict photographic requirements such as those proposed in the UK.<sup>10</sup>

Many other US states required identification but non-photographic forms are allowed. Alternatively, some US states ask citizens without identification to sign an affidavit of identity and then allow them to cast a provisional ballot. After the day of the poll, either:

- The citizen could be asked to return to an election office to present identification for the ballot to be counted
- Electoral officials could rule adjudicate on whether to include ballot.

Outside of the US, voter identification requirements is very common in Europe. However, national identity cards are common meaning that a much higher proportion of citizens have the required Identity and are used to producing it.

## Conclusions and recommendations

- Personation in polling stations is a very rare problem and issues with non-registered citizens are more common. Introducing voter identification does not therefore address the more pressing issues experienced on election day.
- Strict photographic identification requirements could lead to large numbers of eligible citizens not casting a vote on election day.
- There have been no recent cases of large-scale electoral fraud involving personation at polling stations in Great Britain. The small number of documented cases of organised electoral fraud since the 1990s have all centred on postal or proxy voting irregularities.
- While the additional postal and proxy voting safeguards proposed in the Electoral Integrity Bill are to be welcomed, legislation should focus on other areas of the electoral process, notably consolidating electoral law and enabling automatic voter registration.
- If voter identification is introduced then mechanisms should be put in place to ensure all citizens can still participate. This could include:
  - o Allowing citizens to present their poll card.
  - o Allowing citizens to cast provisional ballots.
  - o Providing a 'vouching' system whereby a fellow citizen can attest for the identity of other voters and their vote can still be cast.

**The views expressed in this policy brief are those of the authors and not those of the Electoral Integrity Project.**

<sup>9</sup> IFF Research (2021) [Photographic ID Research - Headline Findings](#). Cabinet Office.

<sup>10</sup> <https://www.ncsl.org/research/elections-and-campaigns/voter-id.aspx#Two>