

Voter Registration and Older People Briefing Paper October 2019 update



Introduction

Among the proposals set out in the Queen's speech on 14 October 2019, were "steps to protect the integrity of democracy and the electoral system in the United Kingdom", which amounts to plans to pass legislation requiring voters to present photo ID at polling stations.

In England, Scotland and Wales voting in an election does not require the production of identification. Northern Ireland has required paper ID to vote since 1985 and photo ID since 2003. However, in 2018 local council elections, the Electoral Commission and Cabinet Office launched a trial scheme with regards to voter identification. This took place in 5 trial areas: Bromley, Gosport, Swindon, Watford and Woking.

For the local council elections in May 2019, the trial was extended to 10 trial areas. In Broxtowe, Craven, Derby, North Kesteven and Braintree, voters had to show either one piece of photo ID or two forms of non-photo ID. In Mid Sussex, Watford and North West Leicestershire, people needed to take their polling cards or photo ID. Voters in Pendle and Woking needed only to show photo ID at the polling station to be given a ballot paper. If they do not have any ID, voters will have to apply for a postal vote or a local elector card for free from the council. Two other councils, East Staffordshire and Ribble Valley, pulled out of the trial.

In addition, Peterborough and Pendle ran a separate postal vote pilot. This included officers, hand delivering postal voting packs and completing face-to-face surveys to stress the importance of completing the vote themselves. Proxy voters in Peterborough were also required to show ID before being issued with a ballot paper to vote on another's behalf.

Is there a big issue with voter fraud?

There is no evidence of widespread fraud in UK elections. Cases of in-person voter fraud are extremely rare. In 2017, there was one conviction of in-person voter fraud, with just 28 allegations of it. This was out of the 44.6 million votes cast in 2017.

How does this affect older people?

Older people are less likely to have a passport or driving licence. The 2011 census shows that while 83% of adults have a passport, this falls to 70% of the over-65s and 46% for those aged 85 and over. For driving licences, the National Travel Survey shows 73% of those aged 17-plus hold one, but this falls to 62% for those 70 or older, and to 50% for women of this age group.

The costs of therefore getting mandatory documentation to exercise their democratic right to vote could well be too high for many older and young people alike, who do not already hold these documents. These changes to the electoral voting system would add barriers to voting, whilst not dealing with any of the alleged problems.

What are the issues with the trials?

The areas in the trials did not have the same mandatory documents that would be accepted in order to cast a vote. Allowing the use of non-photographic ID documents such as a utility bill or debit card, does not prove who someone is. In fact, it negates the whole purpose of the trial, which was to try to ensure the correct person was voting.

Why not have a mandatory electoral ID card?

Many countries already have a mandatory ID card system in place. However, it will be costly to implement, at a time when there are better things that the money could be spent on. As with any new system, there will also be errors, and these could prevent vast numbers of people from voting, by adding a major barrier to democratic engagement. There is simply insufficient evidence to show that there is any widespread issue that needs such a heavy-handed approach.

Conclusion

In the 2019 local council elections, 2,083 people were initially turned away for not having the necessary ID with them, and as many as 758 never returned and therefore were prevented from voting in the 10 trial areas. It was estimated in the Electoral Commission study and also in opinion polls among people who did not vote that 1% of them said it was because they did not have the right ID. The figure was 340 for the 5 trial areas in 2018. This is an enormous number more than those who were alleged to have committed in-person voter fraud (28) in 2017. In-person voter fraud would have to take place on an almost incredible scale to affect a result of an election, whereas preventing people from voting could clearly impact on the outcome of an election.

In March 2019, the Voter ID trials were ruled lawful at the High Court and the Electoral Commission report on the 10 trial locations from May 2019 stated:

'The pilots have provided further evidence, but they do not allow for definitive conclusions to be drawn in all areas; several important questions remain about how an ID requirement would work in practice, particularly at a national poll with higher levels of turnout.

Before 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'. The government has said it wants to roll out mandatory voter ID nationally by 2022.

Vast numbers of people, particularly older people, do not have photographic ID, and allowing non-photographic ID, simply doesn't address the issue, as they do not prove identity. Furthermore, it excludes those unable to get ID, for instance those affected by the recent Windrush debacle, leading to people being further disenfranchised from the political process.

The NPC has agreed to:

- Seek feedback from NPC members in those areas affected and from the Electoral Reform Society
- Examine any campaigns on this issue by other organisations
- Consider Equality aspects i.e. unfairly discriminating against older voters
- Find a form of photo ID that is both suitable and acceptable for older people

Further Information

Electoral Commission (2018) - May 2018 Voter Identification Pilot Schemes Findings and Recommendations https://www.electoralcommission.org.uk/_data/assets/pdf_file/0006/244950/May-2018-voter-identification-pilots-evaluation-report.pdf

Office for National Statistics (2011) - Census

https://webarchive.nationalarchives.gov.uk/20160107124139/http://www.ons.gov.uk/ons/dcp171776_310441.pdf

Electoral Reform (2018) – Voter ID

<https://www.electoral-reform.org.uk/campaigns/upgrading-our-democracy/voter-id/>

Electoral Commission (2019) – May 2019 Voter Identification Pilot Schemes

<https://www.electoralcommission.org.uk/find-information-by-subject/electoral-fraud/may-2019-voter-identification-pilot-schemes>

Local Government Chronicle (2019) – REVEALED: Hundreds disenfranchised in voter ID pilots

<https://www.lgcplus.com/politics/revealed-hundreds-disenfranchised-in-voter-id-pilots/7028913.article?blocktitle=Top-stories&contentID=20100>

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