Poll Workers and the Implementation of Voter Identification:

Lessons from England

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Abstract

The balance between participation and security of the ballot is a central issue for electoral integrity and the design of electoral institutions around the world. Voter ID has been proposed as a method to reduce opportunities for fraud but concerns have been raised about the impact on turnout. This paper uses original data from poll workers about the effects of voter identification at the first country-wide English elections which made voter ID a formal requirement. It argues that poll workers' perspectives are important to facilitate some bottom-up policy design and learning. Poll workers reported virtually no suspected cases of personation - although this was no different to previous elections. Voter identification did, however, restrict legitimate participation. Poll workers made several suggestions for improving the voter experience. These provide an important opportunity for evidence-based and bottom-up decision making.

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1. Introduction

The balance between participation and security of the ballot is a central issue for electoral integrity and the design of electoral institutions around the world. Many advocates and reformers stress the need for voting procedures to be secure enough to deter and prevent potential electoral irregularities such as stuffed ballot boxes and impersonation at the polls. Thus, processes around ID verification are often justified as means to secure the ballot (Alonso-Curbelo, 2022). Meanwhile, there are simultaneous concerns that the introduction of too onerous administrative burdens and bureaucratic procedures could prevent legitimate voters from casting a ballot (Herd and Moynihan, 2019). The implementation of these procedures might also have discriminatory effects on those least able to comply with the requirements.

The requirement for citizens to provide identification to exercise their right to vote has proved one of the most contentious election administration issues in many countries. Globally, there is enormous variation in practices. While some countries routinely require photographic forms of identification, others either do not, or have lesser requirements (Barton 2022). Following several pilots of voter identification in 2018 and 2019, Britain legislated to require compulsory identification at UK parliamentary elections and some local elections from 2023 onwards. The English local elections of May 2023 were therefore the first major public elections at which these voter identification requirements were implemented. The effects of voter identification in these local elections was the source of considerable debate pre-election.

Electoral laws tend to be designed at the elite level by executives, party-bosses, legislatures and senior civil servants. Literatures from within public administration, however, warn against not including the views of street-level officials in the design and evaluation of policy. If voter ID was to work effectively, a crucial aspect would be how it was implemented in polling stations across England. Polling stations are staffed by many thousands of polling station workers. These poll workers are recruited for the short-term conduct of the election. They are volunteers, working long hours on polling day, performing a civic duty to enable their fellow citizens to vote. The introduction of voter ID had been predicted to increase considerably the pressure they would experience in the 2023 local elections, as poll workers took on the responsibility of turning away would-be voters who did not have the requisite identification. Poll workers are therefore akin to 'street-level bureaucrats', whose discretion about how administrative rules work in practice, can have a potentially profound effect on the implementation of electoral reforms (Clark and James, 2014; 2023).

How poll workers implement such electoral reforms and the effects of this are therefore of considerable interest. This article integrates discussion of the implementation of voter ID, alongside discussion of the potential effects of voter ID. We present original data from a poll worker survey conducted in the immediate aftermath of the 2023 local elections. This provides important, and policy relevant, knowledge about the effects of introducing and implementing tighter voter identification requirements in an area where there remains relatively little research internationally, yet where the exercise of democratic rights are directly at stake.

The article progresses in part 2 by describing the existing literature on voter identification requirements. Part 3 then provides the theoretical framework. Part four introduces the methodology used in the article, before parts five provides the case study background. Parts six and seven describe the results and the conclusions which can be drawn from the case both for academic research and policy, both within the UK but also internationally.

2. Voter Identification and Implementing Electoral Administration

There is a deep-rooted acknowledgement of the importance of the effects of election administration for democracy and elections in the historical literature in the development of early democratising states such as the USA and UK. The secret (or 'Australian') ballot was one of the key measures to clean up electoral politics by preventing voter intimidation and other offences during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. Other reforms such as grandfather clauses, poll taxes, delays to naturalisation papers, restricting the location of ballot boxes and voter registration times were amongst those used to restrict electoral participation for political ends. The mass extension of the franchise posed a political challenge for those in power – and reform and implementation of electoral administration was a method for restricting this participation (James 2012: 88-91).

Political science and policy debate grew in modern times with a range of studies examining various aspects of electoral administration. Research was accelerated by the administrative problems experienced at the 2000 US presidential election – but also the more partisan approach that emerged to policy making as the 'Voting Wars' broke out in the US (Hasen 2012). A key aspect of this has been the introduction of voter identification laws in various states across the USA. Critics have argued that the introduction of voter ID is little short of vote suppression, while advocates have argued that it is necessary in order to secure the ballot and to remove concerns about electoral fraud. Given that it became the centre of political attention, academic interest has followed to try to examine the effects of voter ID.

The literature, however, has remained divided and contradictory on the effects of voter identification laws. Highton (2017) reviewed the literature to suggest that the effects tend to be low, but can vary according to type of identification requirements involved. Hajnal, Lajevardi, and Nielson (2017) found that strict identification laws have a differentially negative impact on the turnout of racial and ethnic minorities in primaries and general elections. They also found that voter ID laws skew democracy toward those on the political right. Kuk, Hajnal, and Lajevardi (2022) reported further evidence that they can discriminate. Importantly, Atkeson et al. (2014) highlight the importance of how voter ID laws are implemented by poll workers in practice. They observe that there is considerable discretion used by poll workers in deciding on the permissibility of assorted identification, with minority voters treated more stringently.

Research outside of the US has been limited. Barton (2022) provided a dataset of international practices and found a negative relationship between photo ID laws and turnout. Within the UK, voter identification was piloted in 2018 and 2019. Three models were used: a photographic ID model required electors to bring one form of photographic ID to the polling station; a mixed ID model required electors to bring either one form of photographic ID or two forms of non-photographic ID to the polling station; and the poll card model required electors to bring poll cards to the polling station. James and Clark (2020b) used evidence from poll worker surveys to conclude the requirements led to some voters not casting their ballot, either for reasons of convenience and availability of suitable forms of ID, or reasons of principle and protest about the procedures.

The UK government undertook its own evaluation of the pilots using public opinion surveys and data from polling stations and other sources. It concluded that the 'proportion of people who did not return to the polling station varied by model, and across all models accounted on average for under 0.5% of those who were checked at polling stations'. Its range of estimates was as low as 0.1% and as high as 0.7% (Cabinet Office 2019: 4). The Electoral Commission, meanwhile, noted that 'some groups of people can find it harder than others to show ID' (ELectoral Commission 2019b).

There were some early assessments of the introduction of voter identification at the May 2023 polls. Democracy Volunteers, a citizen electoral observation group, reported immediately after the election that 1.2% of those attending the 879 polling stations they observed were turned away for not holding the necessary form of identification (Democracy Volunteers 2023). The Association for Electoral Administrators (AEA), a membership body for electoral officials, issued a report pointing to the pressures faced by members but that the election was safely and successfully delivered (AEA 2023). An initial Electoral Commission analysis reported data collected in polling stations to estimate that at least 0.25% of people who tried to vote at a polling station were not issued with a ballot paper because of the ID requirement (Electoral Commission 2023). This equated to around 14,000 voters. However, their public opinion surveys estimated that many may not have attended the polls in the first instance because they did not have identification. Around 4% of all non-voters said they didn't vote because of the voter ID requirement.

3. Theory and Research Questions

The theoretical framework used to understand the effects of voter identification on electoral integrity are bottom-up studies of policy implementation combined with the human reflexivity approach (James and Garnett 2023).

Bottom-up implementation studies

Electoral laws tend to be drawn up by stakeholders at the highest level of government. Given their potentially partisan nature, key decision-makers and policy influencers include the executive, cabinet members, and parliamentarians (Renwick, 2010) There can be a wider policy network of actors involved including civil society groups, international bodies and practitioner organisations (James, 2020). Nonetheless, policy making is generally elite-centered – and there has been a long-documented tradition within the UK of narrow decision making (Marsh and Hall, 2015).

Bottom-up models of policy implementation developed in the 1970 and 1980s to provide a critique of policy making which did not give voice to those who were involved in implementing policy on the ground. Decision-makers can be limited in their knowledge of practical policy challenges involved in implementing a policy on the ground because of their experience tends to be removed from delivery. They have finite time and information, but also no lived-experience of implementing policy themselves. By contrast, those who are involved in implementing a policy on the ground develop 'local knowledge' which comes from 'being there'. They are the 'street level bureaucrats' (Lipsky, 1980) who make the real-life decisions which execute policy in practice. According to Durose, local knowledge is 'the mundane, yet expert, understanding front-line workers develop from their own contextual experiences' (Durose, 2009) It follows that research which can mine the experience of those involved in delivering elections can strengthen our understanding of the effects of voter identification laws. Such street level bureaucrats will not necessarily have the complex legal and logistical knowledge for why processes are designed as they are. However, they will have vital front-line knowledge for understanding how implementation systems are working and how they could be improved.

Human reflexivity

The human reflexivity approach holds that rules such as electoral laws shape the structural context in which actors including electoral officials, media, civil society groups and most obviously the citizen find themselves. Electoral rules can alter incentives but their implementation is also mediated through human agency and reflexivity. Actors have agency and ability to reflect, consider meanings and act reflexively. Voters might be counter-mobilised by campaigners which can make them more

likely to vote, despite the administrative costs involved. The meanings that citizens attach to the requirements are important in how they understand and re-interpret them.

The actors that we focus on in this study are electoral officials, specifically poll workers. Electoral officials play the critical role in implementing and delivering democracy (James 2020; Pastor 1999; Clark 2014). The provision of training, resources, independence, capacity and management practices are all known to be important factors in shaping the overall quality of the election (Garnett 2019; James et al. 2019; van Ham and Garnett 2019; Loeber 2020; Clark 2017).

Electoral integrity

Electoral integrity is the realisation of principles in the conduct of elections that are necessary to support the broader realisation of democratic ideals.[1] According to James and Alihodzic (2020), this involves five components: opportunities for deliberation, equality of contestation, rule institutionalisation, equality of participation and electoral management delivery. It is the latter three principles which are of key focus in this study since the introduction of voter identification was not likely to have important effects on deliberation and campaigning.

- *Rule institutionalisation* refers to whether constitutional rules surrounding elections should provide institutional certainty and clarity about the rules of the game (James and Alihodzic 2020). Introducing late rules and legislation can be unfair to candidates because they do not know the rules within which they are competing. There is also a problem for citizens and electoral administrators. Late legislation is often discouraged by international best practices because it can create pressures and increase risk in the effective delivery of elections.
- *Electoral management delivery* refers to whether citizens experience well run elections characterised by convenience, quality of service, transparency, professionalism, probity, cost-effectiveness, citizen and stakeholder satisfaction (James 2020: 66). There might be important effects of new laws on the administration of elections. For example, the introduction of individual voter registration in 2014 was shown to have initially substantially increased the costs of compiling the electoral register and led to many staff leaving the profession (James 2014). These are important effects themselves, but they can also affect the voter experience directly and indirectly.
- *Equality of participation* refers to whether there is high turnout and equal levels of participation across different groups in a society (James and Garnett 2020). As noted, the central concern in much of the research on voter identification has centered around whether it would prevent voter participation and whether this burden would affect specific groups or individuals more than others.

There are multiple points at which citizens could be deterred from voting using voter identification, as illustrated by figure 1. A large number of people who are deterred from voting by the requirements may plausibly be deterred at stage 1, before they attend a polling station. Citizens without the necessary identification and who consider it too burdensome to apply for free forms of identification are likely not to vote at all at the polling station. A second stage at which citizens may be deterred is outside of polling stations if they are informed by party agents, electoral officials or other voters about the requirements. The final stage is within the polling station – either when they ask for a ballot to cast a vote, or perhaps prior to this, for example when they see other citizens being asked for identification. This is an important (if obvious) distillation because analysis which focusses on one part of the electoral process, such as the experience of poll workers, will therefore only provide a partial, but important, view of the voter experience and how electoral laws affect electoral integrity. We explore this further below.

| Stage 1: Prior to polling station | → | Stage 2: Outside of polling station | → | Stage 3: Polling station |
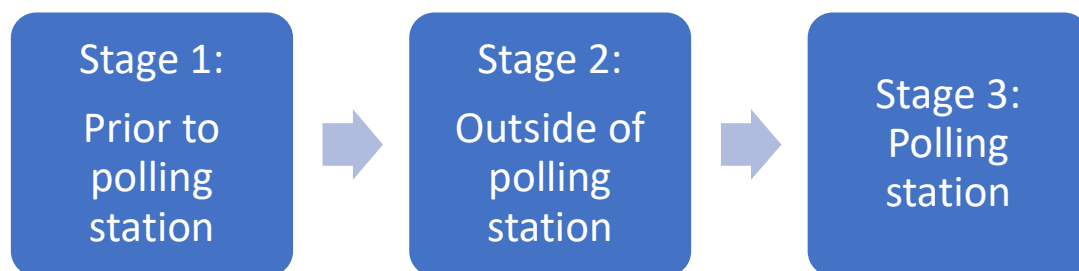
4. British Elections and the Elections Act 2022

British elections are decentralized. They are run by returning officers (ROs) who are responsible for delivery, alongside local authorities who muster the resources and personnel and have discretion within statutory requirements for how elections are implemented. This means that there can often be variation in how elections are administered and implemented, with some councils better resourced than others (Clark, 2015, 2019, 2023). Local authorities are directly responsible for recruiting and training sufficient polling station workers and count staff to deliver elections. Electoral registration is run by Electoral Registration Officers (EROs) in local authorities.[2] The government department with responsibility for these English local elections was the Department for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities (DLUHC) which oversees local government.[3]

The cycle of local elections is messy and confusing. In most of England there is a four-year cycle of local elections. Twenty-six county councils have whole council elections every four years, as do 131 district councils and 38 unitary authorities. Thirty-three metropolitan district councils elect a third of seats annually, missing every fourth year, as do 54 district councils and 17 unitary authorities. Seven district councils elect by halves every two years (Clark and Middleton 2022). In some places, directly elected mayors are elected separately to councils.

In May 2023, 230 councils were scheduled to hold elections. These included 152 district councils, 32 metropolitan district councils, and 46 unitary authorities. There were also four local mayoral elections. Underlining the scale of the challenge, seven in ten English voters were eligible to vote in these local elections.[4] Given that England had a total electorate of 40.8m in December 2022, this meant that around 28.6m would be eligible to vote in these first voter ID elections.[5] Easing the pressure on polling stations however was the fact that local elections are low turnout contests, often returning turnouts around the mid-30% range (Clark and Middleton, 2022).

The government introduced the Elections Bill which legislated for voter ID into parliament on 5 July 2021. It was met by considerable opposition within both parliament and civil society. Opposition MPs from the Labour Party, SNP, Green Party and Liberal Democrats referred to the proposed requirements as 'voter suppression' throughout the debates. Chloe Smith, the minister introducing the Bill, cited throughout a 2016 report by former Conservative party chair Lord Pickles (Pickles 2016)

to justify the reforms, alongside an international observation report from the OSCE (Alonso-Curbelo 2022).[6] The bill received heavy scrutiny and criticism from cross-party parliamentary committees. The Joint Committee on Human Rights (Joint Committee on Human Rights 2021) received evidence from academics and civil society groups about the low rates of personation and risk that voter participation might be affected. The Committee therefore called for the Government to:

> 'produce clear and detailed plans ascertaining if there is hesitancy amongst Black, Asian and minority ethnic backgrounds who may not engage with the electoral process if they are required to show photo ID at polling stations. The Government should also make clear why it has determined that a photographic identification requirement at polling stations is necessary and proportionate given the low reported cases of fraud at polling stations and the potential for the requirement to discriminate against certain groups.' (Joint Committee on Human Rights 2021: 4).

Meanwhile the Public Administration and Constitutional Affairs Committee (PACAC 2021) also called for the government to 'not proceed with this proposal until it has set out the criteria it used in its assessment of the proportionality of introducing the voter ID requirements on voter turnout and participation' (p.4)

A Democracy Defence Coalition was formed by civil society groups including the Electoral Reform Society, Unlock Democracy, Fair Vote and the Electoral Integrity Project. They produced parliamentary briefings and organised protests in London against the Bill. Some of these amendments were proposed by MPs in the Commons and by peers in the Lords. The Lords rejected the Bill, insisting that Amendments were made. This included an amendment to allow a longer list of documents that could be used as a form of identification at polling stations.[7] However, the government whipped its MPs to reject this and other amendments. The Bill was therefore passed back to the Lords in the final minutes of the parliamentary session as originally proposed by the government. The final vote in the Lords on party lines with the Conservative peers outvoting the opposition by 208 to 150.[8] The absence of Labour peers in the final vote (only 59 of 173 Labour peers voted) enabled the law to pass.

One important feature of the legislative process around voter ID was that the detailed legislation only came into force very close to the elections. The Elections Act 2022 received royal assent by Parliament on 28th April 2022.[9] The Act amended the Representation of the People Act 1983 to state that voter identification would be required at parliamentary and other elections in Britain. Schedule 1 of the Act set out that applications for electoral identity documents could be made those who are registered to vote to the electoral registration officer.[10] However, the detailed secondary legislation required to actually implement the new voter identification procedures did not follow for some time afterwards. The Voter Identification Regulations 2022 and The Voter Identification (Principal Area, Parish and Greater London Authority Elections) (Amendment) Rules 2022 only came into force on 16 January 2023, which was less than four months before polling day (AEA 2023: 6). This was a breach of the best practices from the Venice Commission and 2007 Gould Report which stated that there should be six months between electoral law being passed and the first election using those laws being run (Gould 2007). As a result, the website through which a free Voter Authority Certificate could be applied for was not live until 16th January 2023 and needed various patches and updates– with the last taking place on 12 April 2023, less than two weeks ahead of the polls (AEA 2023: 7).

The growing pressures that electoral officials were facing when the legislation was introduced are also noteworthy. Public services were facing considerable economic pressures with exceptionally high levels of inflation – which was accompanied with declining grant levels for local government (Wallis 2023). This followed evidence of earlier cost pressures across local electoral services departments

(Democracy Volunteers 2021) and evidence that the complexity of electoral laws were making elections more difficult to implement (Public Administration and Constitutional Affairs Committee 2019). Other problems with the electoral machinery were also noted such as a high volume of citizens either inaccurately or not registered. The Electoral Commission estimated that this might be as much as 9 million people (Electoral Commission 2019a).

In addition to voters being turned away on polling day, there were various additional expectations about how election day might develop. Implementation was central to these expectations and concerns. Among these were that processing voters would take longer, meaning that queues would build up. An additional worry was that some voters may be aggressive if turned away because they didn't have ID. One local newspaper, somewhat overdramatising the case, reported that 'bouncers' might be deployed in polling stations to deter such behaviour.[11] In the event, many councils deployed 'greeters' or 'information officers' to help manage footfall. This was to become controversial in efforts to establish the effects of the voter ID law, as discussed below. Provision was made for voters to remove face coverings in private, necessary for instance for Muslim women, to have their ID checked. Some councils had gone to considerable lengths to consider difficulties with implementation, with at least one elections manager visiting their local airport for best practice advice on ID checking. Effective training of poll workers to deal with these new demands was likely to be crucial.

In short, the new voter identification requirements were to be implemented in an extremely challenging context for electoral officials. A major change was to be implemented which was politically controversial, beset by delays and uncertainty, and scrutiny of performance of those delivering the elections on polling day was likely to be high.

5. Research Questions and Methods

Several research questions arise about the implementation of voter ID from this discussion:

- Q1: Who were the poll workers that implemented voter ID?
- Q2: What training did they go through before such a contentious election, and how effective was it?
- Q3: What problems were faced by poll workers on polling day?
- Q4: How did poll workers evaluate the overall experience, having administered the first major test of the voter ID law?
- Q5: What recommendations do poll workers have for improving the election-day experience?

Taken together, data on these questions help establish how the implementation of new administrative burdens impact upon the service received by voters from election administrators. Such data help build a picture of the place the new law had in contributing to electoral integrity.

To do so, the article reports data from a survey of poll workers who worked at the election. Poll worker studies have become an established method for identifying the frequency and nature of problems with electoral integrity in polling stations (Burden and Milyo, 2015; Clark and James 2017; Högström and Jerhov, 2023; Partheymuller et al, 2022). The officials working in polling stations on the day can be conceptualised as front-line workers who have intimate knowledge of the mundane everyday practice of elections (Durose 2009). They crucially therefore have a different vantage point from which we can see the electoral process than voter surveys. They are also actors who are much closer 'to the ground' than experts, whose opinions are often used to assess the frequency of other forms of electoral integrity (Martínez i Coma and van Ham 2015). Poll worker surveys may, however, underestimate the effects of voter ID on participation, as noted above.

A poll worker survey was designed in collaboration with the Electoral Commission, based on previous surveys run at elections across the UK since 2015 (Clark and James 2017; James and Clark 2020b, 2020a). A QR code was made available for each Returning Officer to circulate to their poll workers. Those who responded did so online. The sample was therefore an opt-in convenience sample. The response was from 2,694 poll workers. In addition to multiple-choice questions, respondents were given the opportunity to provide free text comments. Overall, 4,060 qualitative comments were made. There were 29 comments about general problems experienced, there were 221 comments in response to disabled voters having a problems voting, 2,017 comments about improvements to the system and 1793 other comments. A thematic analysis was undertaken of the 2017 suggested improvements comment based on the approach developed by Braun and Clarke (2016). Codes were developed inductively from the text.

6. Results

Understanding the profile of poll workers has been highlighted as an important part of understanding the role they play in election administration, and, in particular, the role they play in serving voters (Burden and Milyo, 2015; King and Barnes, 2019). Earlier evidence from England has suggested that over half took time off work to serve voters on polling day, while around a third were retired and their average age was 53. Most who worked at other jobs did so in a routine technical or administrative role (Clark and James, 2023).

The current survey asked about aspects likely to be important to the implementation of voter ID. As per previous elections, over three fifths of poll workers in May 2023 were female (64.4%, N=2431), with only 34.5% being male. More than half of respondents (58% N=2431) fell between the ages of 50-70. Much of the concern about the effects of voter ID focused, albeit often implicitly, on high density, diverse and less well-off inner-city areas, which were perceived to have electorates more likely to not have the requisite ID. Survey responses cover this concern well, with 62.1% of respondents working in an urban polling station, and 37.9% (N=2675) working in a rural setting.

There are two main types of polling station worker in British elections, both of which work in tandem. Presiding Officers are more senior and have overall responsibility for running and maintaining order in the polling station. Polling clerks undertake more routine aspects of voter processing such as checking electors' eligibility and marking them off the register. More rarely, in particularly contentious elections electoral services teams have been known to also appoint 'greeters', 'marshals' or 'information officers' to help guide voters within the building the polling station is located in, ensuring they get to the correct desk for example.[12] In the 2023 survey, 58.8% of respondents were polling clerks, 39.9% Presiding Officers, and 4.2% worked as greeters (N=2694). This seemed to be an experienced volunteer elections workforce. Indeed, 81.5% had worked at a polling station before, while this was the first experience of doing so for only 18.5% (N=2655).

Despite this previous experience, the May 2023 implementation of voter identification meant that there were various aspects of the electoral process that would be new to presiding officers and other staff. This meant that poll worker training would take on added importance, not least around what ID was acceptable given the seemingly arbitrary range that the government had approved, but also around procedures for recording the numbers of voters turned away for not having the correct ID. The picture around poll worker training prior to the introduction of these new processes was not entirely reassuring. Table 1 shows data from previous poll worker studies which suggests that a sizeable proportion of between 15-19% thought that election law was already too complex to understand quickly and easily. This was a consistent finding; those surveys were conducted across different level elections.

	Training spent enough time covering electoral law & procedures	Election law too complex to understand quickly & easily	N
2015 general election	70.5	19.3	1258/1295
2018 local elections	73.5	15.2	2149
2016 Scottish parliament election	77.6	16.9	425

Sources: authors, based on: Clark and James 2017; James and Clark 2020b.

Superficially, it seems that there was a high level of attendance at training organised by electoral services teams in councils for the 2023 English local elections. Asked whether they had attended training, 97.7% (N=2649) said that they had done so. The survey probed further about the type of training that poll workers had received. The surveys reporting confusion amongst a sizeable minority in table 1 above were all pre-pandemic, when most poll worker training was conducted present in-person. Such training often included aspects such as mock polling stations to give poll workers some sense of their actual working practices on election day. As with other forms of learning, this all moved online during the pandemic and particularly for the complex pandemic elections held just after lockdown was lifted in May 2021. Figure 2 reports the modes of training used to prepare poll workers for the elections implementing voter ID in 2023. The findings are stark. Only 12.6% of poll workers received in-person training. Over four-fifths received training by remote means: 25.9% by Zoom or other video-conferencing facility; and 55.7% via a link to watch a recorded presentation (N=2582).

There are likely to be two causes for this change in poll worker training. Firstly, the legacy of the pandemic with council staff conducting business remotely, often by Zoom or MS Teams. Secondly, such training is cheaper to deliver. With a severe budget squeeze on council finances, cost savings are imperative. Training those who administer elections is likely to have been an aspect of this, despite the democratic rights potentially at stake in May 2023. While 93.7% thought that their training prepared them well for polling day (N=2,577), there is an important question about the effectiveness of this in practice. Much research on online training finds positive effects. Yet, many educators forced to teach online during the pandemic have struggled with student engagement. Indeed, some studies have found that learning gain with online teaching depends on the quality of internet access and the ability of the recipient to adapt to this mode of training (Chisazda et al, 2021). Others have found in-person training more effective at imparting knowledge than online (Gross et al, 2023). Online training is not therefore a panacea, particularly where a consistent minority already showed some degree of confusion about electoral law.

Figure 2: Methods of Poll Worker Training

How did you primarily receive your training?

How did you primarily receive your training?

Problems experienced?

Problems in polling stations are only occasionally reported on. They do exist however, and did so prior to the introduction of voter ID. For example, in the 2010 general election, the close of poll was marred by queues building up in some places, notably in inner-city student areas. Presiding Officers were unsure how to react. While some would-be voters were turned away, others were given ballot papers. Electoral law about the close of poll was subsequently clarified. The Scottish Independence Referendum of 2014 saw poll workers in some places having to deal with some angry voters. The social media #UsePens has regularly challenged poll workers about the use of pencils to mark ballot papers. The 2019 European elections saw many disgruntled EU citizens being turned away because of an obscure registration procedure. Observers have pointed to 'family voting' in some polling stations.[13] Occasionally, polling stations are late to open, or have to deal with some local emergency. Any such difficulties are widely perceived to be localised and not widespread. Poll worker studies since the 2015 general election have sought to develop a wider view of the difficulties experienced on polling day. The main difficulty has consistently been polling station workers having to turn some would-be voters away because they are not registered. Issues around personation fraud in polling stations, often cited in justifying voter ID, have essentially been non-existent.

As noted above, the introduction of voter ID was expected to make this picture worse, by introducing potential conflict points where poll workers were having to use their discretion to turn away or accept voters. This would take longer than usual. Queues were a potential outcome, as were aggrieved voters who have been turned away. Contrary to overall expectations of a chaotic set of elections, a positive picture was painted by poll workers of how the election went. For example, 95.5% (N=2550) agreed or strongly agreed that 'the public were respectful to polling station staff'. In total, 98.8% agreed or strongly agreed that 'overall the election was well run at the polling station I worked at' (N=2,579). Moreover only 6.3% disagreed or strongly disagreed with the statement that 'Very few people who turned up to vote were turned away without being allowed to vote' (N=2550).

Nonetheless, these statements are not incompatible with polling station staff having to deal with various difficulties. Table 2 reports responses to three questions which are comparable with those asked in previous poll worker studies. This permits some indication of whether these problems either improved or deteriorated in the 2023 local elections held with voter ID. In terms of suspected cases of personation, it remains the case that poll workers have very little concerns about the key form of electoral fraud voter ID was meant to address. More than 99% of poll workers had no cases of suspected personation electoral fraud. This was already a rare problem even before voter ID, and its introduction seems to have done nothing in polling stations to change this.

Table 2: Polling Day Problems Comparison

%	Column A			Column B		Column C	
	Suspected cases of personation[14]			People being turned away because they did not have the appropriate identification		People coming to the polling station but deciding not to vote as they did not want to comply with the ID verification requirement	
	2015	Pilots	2023	Pilots	2023	Pilots	2023
None	99.1	99.3	99.2	47.6	29.5	76.7	84.6
1	0.9	0.6	0.7	22.2	29.5	18.6	11.3
2-5	0.0	0.1	0.1	24.5	35.4	3.7	3.6
6-10	0.0	0.0	0.0	4.3	3.6	0.8	0.4
10+	0.0	0.0	0.0	1.3	1.9	0.2	0.2

Table 2: Frequencies of personation and cases of citizens not being able to vote because of voter ID. Percentage of all responses shown. Question wording in 2015 asked about incidence of suspected cases of electoral fraud (What did the other two surveys ask again – check). *Sources: additional data from: Clark and James 2017; James and Clark 2019.*

Questions about voters either being turned away because they did not have the appropriate ID, or not wanting to comply with the voter ID requirement show a different picture. In 2023, fewer poll workers report no instances of people being turned away because of inappropriate ID than in the pilots. Put differently, a greater proportion of poll workers (70.5%) experienced at least one case of this, by comparison with 50.4% in the pilots in 2018/19. As one poll worker said, that:

> 'Women were turned away because they got married and changed their names then their id and register names were different is gender discrimination!! I'm quite upset that I've turned voters away and particularly discriminating against woman.

This increased incidence is likely to be a consequence of implementing voter ID in major public elections for the first time, confirming expectations about increased numbers of potential voters turned away. Nonetheless, given the amount of expenditure on a public information campaign, it ought to be a concern, not least since those who turnout to vote in local elections are often among the more motivated and informed voters in the wider electorate (Clark and Krebs, 2012).

The proportion of poll workers experiencing any cases of people coming to the polling station, but then deciding not to vote seemed to have fallen between the pilots in 2018/19 and the actual elections in 2023. In the pilots, 23.3% of poll workers experienced at least one instance of this during election day. This fell to 15.4% in 2023. While this reduction could be interpreted positively by government,

the counter-argument is that this still represents a worryingly high number of occasions where people decide not to exercise their democratic rights because of a newly introduced administrative burden, not least at a time when there is regular concern about how disengaged people can be with politics.

The question of when and where potential voters were turned away is vital in evaluating the implementation of voter ID. The legislation set out requirements for returning officers to record the amount of voters turned away.[15] These records were to be completed in polling stations by poll workers. However, they were only required to keep a record of those that made it to the desk in the polling station where registration and ID was checked and ballot papers issued. This is where the employment of information officers or greeters became controversial. These staff met voters *before* they arrived at the polling desk. The worry was that information staff would remind people that they had to have ID, leading to people to either being turned away or deciding not to vote, crucially before the presiding officer or polling clerk were able to check their ID and accurately record those turned away. There was also concern in some locations about party activists performing a similar role and reminding voters about ID outside polling stations. Put simply, voters being turned or turning away before reaching the desk would mean that any subsequent estimate of the effects of voter ID could only ever be an underestimate. The magnitude of this underestimate was unknown.

Figure 3 demonstrates that concerns on this point were valid. Respondents observed that the vast majority of voters were reminded about the need for ID either outside the polling station, or before they got to the polling desk where any voters being turned away could be recorded. Only around 15% of poll workers indicated that voters would have made it to the desk before being reminded about the need for voter ID. Nonetheless, poll workers seem to have concluded, contrary to academic suspicions, that this did not lead to an under-estimate. Only 7.2% thought there was a slight or large underestimate, while more than two-thirds (67.0%) thought estimates were about right, and 5.8 thought numbers had been overestimated, by a slight or large margin. A further 19.9% didn't know (N=2125).
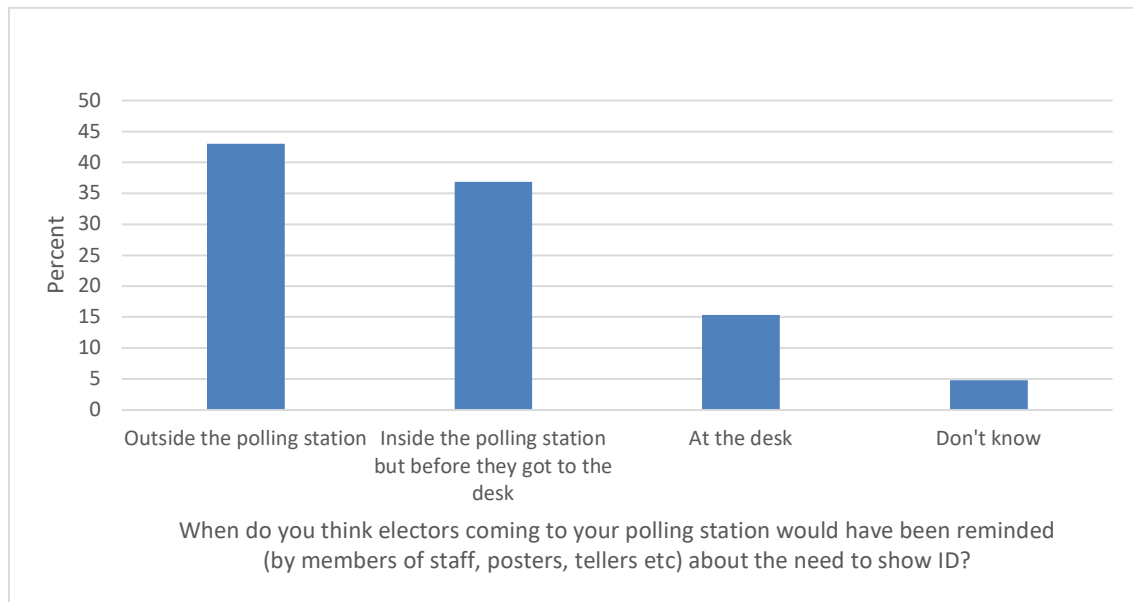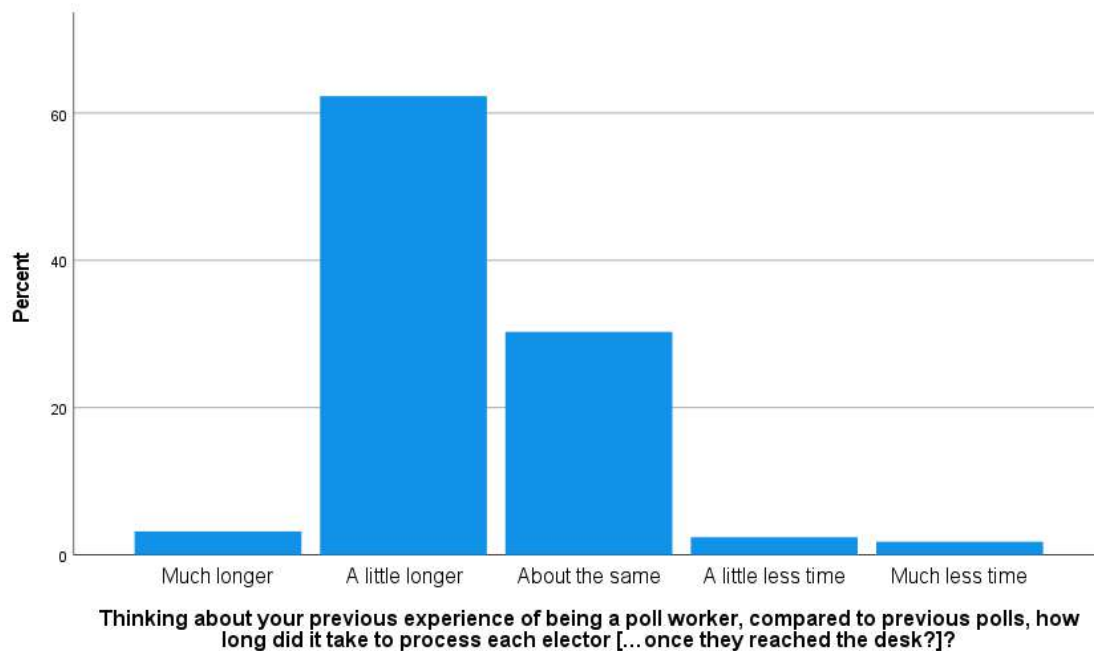
Figure 3: When Were Reminded about ID?

Figure 4: Time Taken to Process Voters

Thinking about your previous experience of being a poll worker, compared to previous polls, how long did it take to process each elector [... once they reached the desk?]?

Increased time taken to process voters can lead to queues developing. Queues in polling stations have, in American election administration research, been highlighted as a potential disincentive towards voting for electors who might be, for example, time poor (Highton, 2006). Increased time taken to vote adds to the potential cost of voting. In Britain, issues around election queues have been relatively rare. As noted above, queues in the 2010 general election hit the headlines at close of poll when queues built up in mainly inner-city areas towards close of poll, with varying degrees of response by polling station staff. However, only 5.6% of poll workers indicated that they had problems with queues during polling day in the 2015 general election, while only 2.5% said they had problems with queues at close of poll in that same election (Clark 2016) (Ns = 1295/1276).

Figure 4 reports the effect of voter ID on the time taken to process voters in polling stations. Introducing a new process like voter ID, should mean that it will take longer to do so. Recent evidence from the May 2021 local and devolved Scottish and Welsh elections, held just after COVID-lockdown eased, illustrates this point well. COVID procedures and social distancing meant that it took longer to for voters to cast their ballot. One polling station in Newport, Wales, closed a full two hours and forty-five minutes after the normal 10pm closing time. In the 2023 local elections, voter ID also led to it taking longer to process voters. Indeed, over 60% of respondents indicated this had been the case where they were working. Nonetheless, only 1.4% (n=2548) indicated that 'long queues caused voters considerable inconvenience at my polling station'. It is worth recalling that local elections often experience low turnouts. While a longer processing time might be manageable in low turnout local elections, in a general election where turnout is often almost double that for local councils, this will inevitably lead to queues, particularly at pinch points during the day such as the end of the working day, or close of poll.

Finally, what was the overall experience of working on polling day during the first large scale implementation of voter ID like for poll workers? Respondents were asked how their experience in May 2023 compared with previous elections they had worked at. Only 10.7% said that their experience was a bit or a lot easier. Otherwise, responses were divided between 'about the same' (44.6%) and

either a lot or a bit more difficult (44.7%; N=2009). Even though local authorities already find it difficult to recruit sufficient poll workers to staff elections, this increased difficulty noted by many did not seem to act as a deterrent to working in future elections; 94.8% of respondents said they would either definitely or probably be willing to do so again.

Poll worker suggestions for improvements

Poll workers were asked for suggestions on how to improve the process. Responses were coded inductively using thematic analysis by one researcher. Table 3 summarises the frequencies of the most commonly cited themes. It also lists the recommendations under each theme. Overall, there were 1,381 references made to 59 codes.

A large number of 322 poll workers said that no improvements could be made and 16 'did not know'. Many poll workers were therefore very positive:

> 'I personally wouldn't change anything at our station. It worked like clockwork.'

Many comments did not directly relate to voter identification. Working conditions were commonly cited. Many poll workers reported having to work in poor conditions which could have been made more comfortable. They requested heating, shorter working hours or better facilities. Polling station locations were sometimes poor. One requested:

> 'Help locking up, two women alone in the middle of nowhere and no street lights was a little nervous.'

The format of the electoral register was commonly suggested to be problematic. Poll workers suggested that a digital electoral register would be useful – or at least one ordered by name rather than address as it would make electors easier to find and reduce delays. Asking electors to bring their polling card was suggested so that they could easily be identified on the electoral register. While these suggestions do not directly relate to Voter ID, they may help smooth the running of the polls which would effect the delivery and use of ID.

Greater use of technology was often suggested:

> 'Modernize the process, so much can be done digitally to improve everyone's overall experience. The set up is long and tedious and the day runs like it's in the 1800's.'

Improving voter identification

In terms of direct comments about the voter identification requirements, many poll workers felt that voter identification should not be required:

> 'forget the need for ID, it was very upsetting to turn away people without the right ID and some of them did not return. This is not democracy.'

> 'Get rid of the pointless ID requirements. It's a solution looking for a problem that doesn't exist. I've never had a case of personation in the 25 years I've been a Presiding Officer.'

> 'Get rid of voter id requirements. It is not necessary, it causes delays in processing votes and is obviously a ploy by the current Government to bring in voter suppression.'

Others suggested that more forms of ID should be allowed, especially those which younger people were more likely to have: 'if over 65 bus passes count as ID, why don't young person railcards?' Poll workers in rural areas emphasised the value of allowing gun licences to be included. Some poll workers described the requirements as 'discriminatory'.

Some were uncertain about what to do and there was some evidence variation in implementation:

> From talking with other presiding officers, [there was] confusion over what ID was acceptable – [I] erred on the side of giving the people the vote, but this would have been inconsistent across polling station. E.g. what bus passes (nationally or regionally issued) were acceptable.

Another poll worker made the point that recognising voters in multiple forms of id was difficult:

> Be mindful that not all ID is recognizable for the person especially for expired Passports and Driving license's that show their Picture to have been taken decades previously. It is easy to offend elderly voters whose ID is not recognizable with so many years having passed yet they do provide their address and Poll Card to confirm they are the voter.

It was commonly suggested that that more greeters would be useful to check whether electors had their voter identification before entering the polling station. More publicity about the voter identification requirements was suggested. There were also concerns about the amount of paperwork that officials needed to complete for each polling station.   Further innovative use of technology used included biometric voter data was suggested in a very small number of cases:

> 'the ability for voters to scan their ID in so that this checks them off on the electoral roll on a computer so poll clerks can then issue ballot paper'

It was suggested that the overall administration of elections needed to be eased to enable voter identification to be implemented smoothly:

> I have many years' experience of running a busy station (over 50% turnout this year). In order to process the voter ID requirement we need to have shorter registers to administer. I think that will continue to be true even as voters become familiar with the requirement down the coming years. Currently, the first clerk met by the voter has to check that they are on the register, that they are entitled to vote, and that they have presented the correct ID, before another member of staff can assist. There is no apparent way these tasks can be shared easily, so having a shorter register ie fewer streets for one person to search through, will cut down on queues. We therefore need more staff at every station to look after the new registers.

Training with regards to the voter identification laws was also flagged:

> 'train staff better to know the guidance on ID. Most did not know expired ID could be accepted meaning people were turned away. Others thought they had to have the correct address on driving licenses, this meant some were challenged.'

> 'The training on identifying fake ID was not adequate to honestly guarantee I could recognise one.'

Meanwhile, staffing was flagged as being likely to be a greater problem with a more high-profile election:

> 'More staff may be needed if a general election as voter uptake is always higher and delays would be longer checking ID'

Theme	Theme definition	Frequent suggestions	Count
Voter identification	The voter id process should be changed	- Voter identification requirements should be scrapped (126) - Additional forms of voter Id should be allowed (student identification, young people's travel cards, gun licences) (54) - Better guidance on spotting fake identification (8) - Other (8)	196
Working conditions	Working conditions were poor	- Pay was too low - Training was unpaid - There was no heating - There were poor facilities for staff e.g. kitchens - The hours were too long – shorter polling hours/shifts - Few/no breaks - Uncomfortable furniture	176
Register format	The electoral register was difficult to use for pollworkers	- Electoral register should be listed by surname - A searchable digital register should be used - Poll cards should be requested to find electors more easily	159
Paperwork	There were too many forms to complete	- There was too much paperwork to complete - Some paperwork could have been easier with the use of colours - Some forms/envelopes were mislabelled - Too many bags, forms and envelopes to juggle	109
Polling station layout	The polling station was poorly designed or located.	- Polling stations were too small - Polling stations were poorly lit, or had faulty facilities such as doors that did not close. - There were too few/many polling stations per elector. - Health and safety needs to be checked	74
Signage	Signs were inadequate	- More signage inside and outside - Less signs - Signs promoting/thanking participation - Laminated plastic signage for weather - Signs explaining voter ID requirements	66
Publicity	Voters needed more information	- National campaign about voter ID requirements - Publicity about changed polling station locations - Communication to minority communities - Reminders that poll cards are not needed	59

Staffing volume	Staff volume was problematic	- There were insufficient staff - There were too many staff - More staff would be needed if it was a general election	59
Training	Training was inadequate	- Better training quality - Face-to-face training - Training on how to spot fake identification - More experienced co-workers - Follow up for poll workers who do not perform well - More training on being prepared for unusual scenarios	56
Disability	Voters with disabilities received poor service	- Better access for people in mobility scooters - Better wheelchair access - Polling booths at wheelchair height - Better parking facilities - Ballot paper colours to account for colour-blind	39
Greeters	Greeters at the doors were needed	- Greeters at the door would help voters and make the process more efficient - Greeters could check that voters had brought ID - More greeters needed for a general election day	36
Environment	Election day was not environmentally friendly.	- Recyclable signs, bags and paper should be used - Digital technology would be more sustainable	33

Table 3: Frequencies of suggested improvements to the voting process by poll workers. Please note that figures are provisional: coding still in progress. Top twelve themes provided, ranked by frequency.

7. Conclusion

The balance between participation and security of the ballot is a central issue for electoral integrity and the design of electoral institutions around the world. Voter ID has been proposed as method to reduce opportunities for fraud but has also been claimed to lead to reduced turnout by others. Electoral laws, however, tend to be designed at the elite level by executives, legislatures and senior civil servants. This paper used extensive original data, both quantitative and qualitative, from a survey of poll workers to document the experience of implementing voter identification for the first time across England. It thus provides a bottom-up perspective about the experiences of poll workers which is directly necessary for understanding the effects of policy – and can be helpful for developing policy in the future.

The results showed that a largely experienced workforce was used. Poll workers reported virtually no suspected cases of personation - although this was no different to previous elections. Over 70 per cent reported turning away at least one voter because they did not have identification and qualitative comments provided further evidence that voter identification could restrict legitimate participation.

Poll workers suggested various general improvements to the polling process including the better working conditions, the use of a reformed (potentially digital) register and more staffing. Many signalled that more staffing would be important if voter identification was to be implemented in a general election. Some suggested that voter identification was not needed - or at a minimum that other forms of identification should be allowed.

These comments cannot be read in isolation to the elite and media policy debates which may have shaped their views, as the reflexivity model suggests. Poll workers also do not have the full knowledge of the legal and logistical rationale behind some procedures. However, they provide an important source of information about the effects of voter identification. Voter identification did indeed seem to be an unnecessary reform which stands to further negatively affect equality of participation in British elections. It also stands to create deeper electoral management delivery challenges.

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[1] We therefore follow: James and Alihodzic (2020); Garnett and James (2021).

[2] In Scotland, registration is the responsibility of Valuation Joint Boards.

[3] Prior to DLUHC taking responsibility, the voter ID reform had been responsibility of the Cabinet Office. DLUHC took responsibility after the Elections Act had completed its parliamentary passage..

[4] See: Michael Thrasher & Colin Rallings (2023) Local Elections 2023: What's at Stake? https://ukandeu.ac.uk/local-elections-2023-whats-at-stake/ [17/8/23].

[5] Office for National Statistics figures, calculation by the authors. https://www.ons.gov.uk/peoplepopulationandcommunity/elections/electoralregistration/datasets/electoralstatisticsforuk [17/8/23].

[6] https://hansard.parliament.uk/commons/2021-09-07/debates/D24D6DE7-5D14-46F1-B2C5-A0B756B94249/ElectionsBill

[7] Amendment 86, tabled by Lord Willetts, Lord Woolley, Baroness Lister of Burtersett and the Lord Bishop of Coventry proposed a longer list of new documents that could be used as a form of identification at polling stations, including non-photographic documents such as a bank statement, a council tax letter, a P45 or P60 form. See: https://hansard.parliament.uk/commons/2022-04-27/debates/219DACED-AF3E-47DD-86EE-31E134FEB805/ElectionsBill

[8] https://hansard.parliament.uk/Lords/2022-04-27/division/FA02C8D7-0F9A-40FC-B5D3-ABA68F721DE1/ElectionsBill?outputType=Party

9 https://bills.parliament.uk/bills/3020/stages/16438

10 https://www.legislation.gov.uk/ukpga/2022/37/schedule/1/enacted

11 Newcastle Chronicle, 16th March 2023, https://www.chroniclelive.co.uk/news/north-east-news/voter-id-polling-station-bouncers-26489184 [21/8/23].

12 There was widespread use of such staff in, for example, the Scottish independence referendum in 2014.

13 See, for example, Democracy Volunteers' press release on elections in 2022 across Britain https://democracyvolunteers.org/uk-2022-final/ [12/9/2023].

14 The question wording in 2018 and 2019 was 'suspected cases of electoral fraud'.

15 See Schedule 4 of The Voter Identification Regulations 2022, https://www.legislation.gov.uk/ukdsi/2022/9780348240504/schedule/4 [12/9/2023].