

Democracy Volunteers – written evidence (VID0007)

Submitted by Dr John Ault, Director, Democracy Volunteers

House of Lords Constitution Committee inquiry into voter ID

Following your call for evidence, we hereby attach responses to your questions, based on the email we received from committee staff on 19th October. As an election observation organisation, we base our findings on the evidence we collect in polling stations, and through interlocutor interviews, we collect before and during elections. In answer to your questions, we offer the following answers:

a. What steps need to be taken to raise awareness of the voter ID requirement and the existence of the Voter Authority Certificate (VAC).

During Democracy Volunteers' observations in May 2023, the team was aware of the relatively low number of applications for VACs compared to the section of the electorate which, based on general Cabinet Office statistics, would not have appropriate ID¹. Whilst efforts were made by the Electoral Commission, local councils, and political parties to inform the electorate, to inform voters of their right to apply for a VAC, we would encourage all of these bodies to repeat their efforts at subsequent elections, particularly in areas of the country that were not going to the polls in May 2023 when most advertising of the VAC was in place.

Our observers, who attend polling stations as accredited observers by the Electoral Commission, deployed across England on May 4th, 2023, and they reported very few cases where voters presented a VAC compared to the three most used forms of ID, namely driving license, passport, and old persons bus pass.

b. Are changes required to the application/issuing process for VACs?

Prior to the elections that took place across England in May 2023, Democracy Volunteers held a series of interlocutor interviews with several stakeholders focussing on the administration of elections, these include the Electoral Commission, the Association of Electoral Administrators, and others.

Although there was some concern about the increased workload of the issuing of VACs by councils and the additional strain this would place upon their resources, the process seemed to work smoothly from both the perspective of voters, and administrators, to the extent we were able to observe this. Of course, this is not an exhaustive view of how the process worked in its entirety and only a small snapshot based on our own observations of the process.

¹ [Photographic ID Research - Headline Findings \(publishing.service.gov.uk\)](https://publishing.service.gov.uk)

c. Whether, and if so how, the forms of acceptable ID should be expanded.

In our post-election report² from May 2023, our team made the following recommendation:

'Valid forms of ID should be extended to include equality between those IDs issued to older and younger people – such as the 18+ student Oyster photocard' – (Recommendation 3, p.25)

This might also for example include such examples as the 'Young Scot' card. There does appear to be some idiosyncrasies in the process. Some official forms of ID, which are approved by security and policing authorities, for example civil service identity cards, parliamentary passes, etc. are not acceptable ID, despite having higher requirements than passports and driving licenses. The ID issued to election observers, which allows observers to spend all day in a polling station to observe the process, is not acceptable ID to vote. These seem odd contradictions.

Following subsequent observations at Parliamentary by-elections across the country since May, we would also contend that other forms of ID from trusted institutions, such as valid student ID and council staff passes might also be acceptable.

d. The merits of alternatives to presenting ID--e.g. statutory declaration by the voter/attestation by another registered voter.

We have noted the ability of voters in some other countries we observe to 'cure' their ballot following polling day by bringing in valid ID following election day itself.

Whilst we are aware that procedures for election day and counting, in the UK, make this much more difficult, we would encourage legislators to look at ways that a system like the use of tendered ballots, could allow for those who have forgotten their ID to validate their vote at a later time. We are conscious this might lead to a proliferation in the use of tendered ballots, which would not be ideal as they are rarely considered an important aspect of the electoral process.

Attestation by another registered voter, even with their own acceptable ID, would not resolve the identified challenge that voter ID was introduced to prevent.

e. The likely impact of voter ID on turnout for the next general election, including any differential impact on certain demographics.

In May's 2023 council elections, our teams of observers found the following, as can be seen on pages 22-24 in our full report³:

² [Democracy Volunteers FINAL REPORT – English Local Elections 2023](#)

³ [Democracy Volunteers FINAL REPORT – English Local Elections 2023](#)

'Democracy Volunteers identified 110 voters who were turned away because they lacked ID. These were generally, but not exclusively across urban areas... this constituted almost 1.2% of all the voters observed.

However, we also asked our observers to assess different aspects of those voters being excluded. As we evaluated, even with a large-scale observation of over half of the council's conducting elections on 4th May, the capacity to see large-scale exclusions was relatively low.

As part of our pre-deployment discussions with external interlocutors, we discussed other ways of seeing if this policy was affecting some groups within society more than others.

As such, we asked our observers to report broad ethnicity descriptions for those turned away. To classify, we used the phrases 'white passing' and 'non-white passing' to see if there was evidence of this policy being more impactful on voters from ethnic minorities.

Our observers discovered that 20% of those excluded were 'white passing' males, 30% were 'non-white' passing males, 27% were 'white passing females' and 23% were 'non-white' passing females. Whilst the totals of male and female being excluded were equal, the majority of those excluded were from ethnic minorities, disproportionate for their number in the wider demographic.

We also observed that 5 voters were not asked for ID before being allowed to vote during our observation; all of them were white passing.'

Thus, we found that over 50% of voters turned away on polling day were 'non-white passing', a disproportionate number when compared to demographics across the population. This statistic was the case even though ethnic minority groups are more likely to hold a form of photo ID when compared to the white population⁴. This is likely to be a greater problem at a General Election where voters are going to the polls in more diverse areas such as London & Birmingham, that did not vote in May.

It is impossible to say if turnout will be affected at the next general election. Voter ID will, without doubt, prevent some voters from casting their ballot due to them not owning or having, the correct form of ID with them. However, the extent to which this will affect turnout is unknown. There have been documented cases as in Georgia's 2022 USA midterm elections where turnout increased in response to tighter Voter ID laws⁵, though identifying any single variable as to what caused this increase despite tighter laws (Voter awareness, interest in candidates, weather on polling day, etc.) is difficult.

⁴ [Photographic ID Research - Headline Findings \(publishing.service.gov.uk\)](https://publishing.service.gov.uk)

⁵ [Why Georgia's Turnout Numbers Don't Tell Us Enough About the Effect of Restrictive Voting Laws | FiveThirtyEight](https://www.fivethirtyeight.com/news/why-georgia-turnout-numbers-dont-tell-us-enough-about-the-effect-of-restrictive-voting-laws/)
[How did Georgia voting laws affect voter turnout in midterm elections? \(usatoday.com\)](https://www.usatoday.com/story/news/politics/elections/2022/11/02/how-did-georgia-voting-laws-affect-voter-turnout-in-midterm-elections/1000000001/)

f. The likely impact of voter ID on the administration of the next general election (e.g. overstretched polling station staff unable to seek help from neighbouring areas) and the impact on local areas' ability to recruit and retain polling staff.

In advance of changes to Voter ID rules, our teams became aware of the informal discussions between polling staff at by-elections at their unwillingness to perform their roles once the new Voter ID laws were enacted. At both the May 2023 elections and following by-elections, we have seen the sharing of polling day staff across council areas, both to learn about the new process and to fill gaps in staffing. This would seem to stem from the unwillingness of staff to act as 'border guards' or 'bouncers' in their role, and associated worries of arguments, and even violence, if they were required to deny people their right to vote. This has also seemed to be a bigger concern with older, more experienced Presiding Officers, and therefore there is the risk that institutional knowledge is lost as they decide not to take up their roles at subsequent elections.

It is therefore possible that staffing polling stations will become a concern when elections are held across the whole country as in a general election.

g. The cumulative impact of changes to the voting system--including voter ID, the process for obtaining a VAC, IT systems, potential greater use of postal voting--on the ability of election staff and suppliers to conduct the next general election.

At many observations in the UK our team has noted the concerns of council elections teams and bodies, such as the AEA, surrounding funding, lack of time to implement changes in legislation in a 'no-fail' service, and the increasing complications of implementing the UK's unsystematic election laws.

Democracy Volunteers conducted research in 2021 entitled 'Democracy Under Stress: A report into elections funding in England'⁶, which revealed a reduction in staffing numbers across elections teams and a below inflation increase in funding over the past 5 years. Alongside its release, our Director Dr John Ault commented that:

'Over the coming months and years, the Government is going to expect elections staff to do even more work with the introduction of the Electoral Integrity Bill – with funding not keeping pace with inflation and staff reductions we should be aware that this will mean even more pressure on already overworked elections staff.'⁷

It is essential that elections departments in councils, tasked with delivering elections, are supported in order to ensure the changes on the ground stemming from the Elections Act 2022 are delivered. This regards both permanent funding from within councils as well as timely payments for previous elections from central government.

⁶ [Democracy Volunteers Democracy Under Stress: A report into elections funding in England](#)

⁷ [Democracy Volunteers Democracy Under Stress: A report into elections funding in England](#)

h. Whether Elections Act tranche 2 measures (extension of overseas franchise, online absent vote applications) should be delayed to ease pressure.

At the time of response to this call for evidence, Democracy Volunteers has not researched or reported on this question.

i. The adequacy of data collection on the impact of these changes and how it can be improved, including whether legislative change is necessary to allow data collection in May 2024 (if there is no general election then)

As a non-partisan, independent, election observation group, we collect data to inform government, parliament, local authorities, and the general public, on ways to improve the electoral process based on our observations. Any data collected, whether by us, polling staff, or by other means, is clearly welcome.

There are several challenges to the collection of data by polling staff, which we identified in May. The official form issued by the Electoral Commission for data collection, the Ballot Paper Refusal List (BPRL), was inconsistently completed by polling staff. Some councils, but not all, had so-called 'greeters' outside polling stations, and these invariably asked voters if they had their ID with them. If they did not, they did not enter the polling station and would not be recorded on the BPRL, thus skewing the data collected by polling staff.

7 November 2023