

Written evidence from Mermaids (TEB 38)

Public Administration and Constitutional Affairs Committee The Elections Bill inquiry

1. About the Runnymede Trust

The Runnymede Trust is the UK's leading race equality think tank. We were founded in 1968, to provide evidence on racial inequalities, to inform policymakers and public opinion about the reality of those inequalities, and to work with local communities and policymakers to tackle them. We hold the secretariat for the APPG on Race and Community, chaired by Clive Lewis MP, and publish reports, briefings and research on race equality issues.

2. Voter registration rates for ethnic minority groups

In the UK, Black and ethnic minority groups are less likely to be registered to vote than their white counterparts. 76% of Black people and 75% of Asian people are registered to vote, in comparison to 84% of white people.¹ Only 69% of those from mixed heritage backgrounds are registered². A recent Cabinet Office study found that barriers for to registering to vote for ethnic minority groups included age and generational differences, economic and social disparities and differences in housing.³

Evidence also illustrates that Black and ethnic minority groups are significantly less likely to be satisfied with the voter registration system than White people⁴. In the 2019 general election, IPSOS Mori estimated a lower turnout amongst Black and ethnic minority voters, as well as young people and renters.⁵

A 2013 study found that 25% of first-generation and 20% of second-generation ethnic minority groups are not registered to vote who are eligible in comparison with 10% of the white population⁶.

3. The potential impact of the Elections Bill on ethnic minority groups

Proposals outlined in the Elections Bill to introduce mandatory voter identification requirements poses a risk for Black and Ethnic Minority groups, who already face barriers to registering to vote.

¹ <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-2018-electoral-registers-great-britain/completeness-great-britain>

² Ibid

³ https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/828863/Registering-to-vote-research-report-1.pdf

⁴ Electoral Commission, UK Parliamentary Election Post poll Public opinion, 2020

⁵ <https://www.ipsos.com/ipsos-mori/en-uk/how-britain-voted-2019-election>

⁶ <https://oxford.universitypressscholarship.com/view/10.1093/acprof:oso/9780199656639.001.0001/acprof-9780199656639-chapter-7>

Possession of a form of photo ID is not even across the population. The Government's own figures show that 24% of white people in England do not possess a full driving license, compared to 39% Asian and 47% of Black people.⁷ According to the 2011 census, only 66% of those of Gypsy or Irish Traveller background hold a passport⁸.

Latest statistics suggest that the introduction of voter ID could lead to 2.1 million people being unable to vote, a figure equivalent to 4% of the electorate⁹. 11% of those unemployed, 13% of those renting from the local authority, and 12% of those renting from a housing association lacking any form of ID.¹⁰ Black and ethnic minority communities are likely to be overrepresented amongst these groups.

Obtaining a new form of photo ID takes time away from work and caring responsibilities and is difficult to do even if it is free. If a free photo ID card were made available, over half of respondents to a government-commissioned survey stated that they would be unlikely to apply for an ID card. Almost 40% of those without photo ID stated that the introduction of voter ID would make it more difficult to vote¹¹.

Evidence from the United States shows that strict photo identification laws have a negative impact on the turnout of Black, Hispanic and mixed heritage Americans¹². Leading US civil rights groups have highlighted that using photo ID in British elections will harm democracy, citing its impact on marginalised and ethnic minority groups.¹³

The government's figures suggest the scheme will cost up to an extra £20 million per general election¹⁴. Given the low rates of registration for ethnic minority communities, this money could be used to scale up voter participation which is a pressing challenge for UK democracy. In an analysis conducted on the advertising campaign ran by the Electoral Commission for the 2019 local elections, the Commission noted:

- 56% of those classified as BAME were likely to have seen some form of advertising during the campaign.
- 44% of BAME respondents and 31% of white respondents learnt something that they did not know beforehand from the advertisements¹⁵.

Evidence suggests that a mass registration campaign directed at under-registered BME communities is likely to prove particularly effective.

4. Recommendations

⁷ <https://www.ethnicity-facts-figures.service.gov.uk/culture-and-community/transport/driving-licences/latest#by-ethnicity-over-time>

⁸ https://www.electoralcommission.org.uk/sites/default/files/pdf_file/Proof-of-identity-scheme-updated-March-2016.pdf

⁹ <https://www.electoral-reform.org.uk/campaigns/upgrading-our-democracy/voter-id/>

¹⁰ <https://www.electoral-reform.org.uk/latest-news-and-research/parliamentary-briefings/briefing-on-mandatory-voter-id-at-the-polling-station/>

¹¹ https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/984918/Photographic_ID_research_headline_findings_report.pdf

¹² <https://www.journals.uchicago.edu/doi/abs/10.1086/688343?mobileUi=0&journalCode=jop&>

¹³ <https://www.theguardian.com/politics/2021/feb/28/using-photo-id-in-british-elections-will-harm-democracy-say-us-civil-rights-groups>

¹⁴ <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/electoral-integrity-project-local-elections-2018-evaluation>

¹⁵ <https://committees.parliament.uk/writtenevidence/11633/html>

- The UK government should immediately halt proposals in the Elections Bill that would require voter ID at polling stations for every national and local election.
- The UK government should consult on positive proposals to introduce automatic voter registration of all British citizens (in the British Isles and abroad) once they reach the age of 18, as well as all eligible foreign nationals residing in the UK.
- Institute a bank holiday for general election day: Provision of a statutory holiday to coincide with the general election could prove to be one solution to increasing voter turnout.

August 2021