

Voter ID is a risky reform when 8m people are already missing from the electoral register

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By Democratic Audit UK

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*In a 2018 pilot, voters in a few areas will have to show some sort of identification at the polls – a major change to voting arrangements. Yet voter fraud is not widespread in the UK. **Toby S James** welcomes the fact the plans will be extensively piloted, but warns they will lead to more voters being turned away from polling stations. What's more, they come at a time when eight million Britons are already missing from the electoral roll.*



ID, please? Photo copyright and used with the permission of the [Electoral Commission](#)

Christmas is a time for tinsel, presents and major policy announcements about British electoral law, it seems. Yesterday, [the government announced](#) it would accept many of the policy proposals laid out by Eric Pickles in his report on [Securing the Ballot](#). The headlines focussed on the decision to pilot a requirement for voters to show ID before being given their ballot paper in polling stations.

The lines of a fierce partisan debate were drawn. The proposals were [welcomed by the Electoral Commission](#), but the Electoral Reform Society blasted that this was '[like a sledgehammer to crack a nut](#)'. Diane Abbott claimed the policy was '[just borrowing from the US Republican playbook](#)' in the US. Eric Pickles, meanwhile, claimed before Christmas that there was evidence that turnout would be affected. What is the reality ?

The pilots will need careful evaluation

First things first: pilots are good. Pilots allow opportunities for learning and establishing 'what works'. It is only a test and a practice. If policies don't work, they need not be rolled out nationwide. The New Labour government undertook electoral pilots between 2000-2007 and this [allowed lessons to be learnt](#) about the feasibility of voting online, via mobile and other means. None of these were rolled out after piloting, and the government should remain open minded about the lessons of piloting voter ID too.

Yet the New Labour experiments were a missed opportunity. Had the pilots and evaluations been better designed,

more could have been learnt. In a [forthcoming publication](#), Alistair Clark and I suggest these policies could be tested through poll worker surveys. These surveys are circulated to staff in polling stations so that the real problems on the ground can be identified. Myths can be debunked and partisan claims be challenged. This should form an essential part of the piloting and evaluation of the voter ID experiments.

Poll worker surveys, it should be noted, have so far shown that electoral fraud is not widespread. Less than 1 per cent of electoral officials reported suspicions about fraud in their polling station at the 2015 general election, we showed. Those concerns that did arise were mostly the result of administrative error. Instead, we found that a far greater number of unregistered voters are turned away from the polls. Two-thirds of polling stations turned away voters at the last general election. This also happened at the [EU referendum](#). The risk is that voter ID measures could lead to more voters being turned away because they lack the necessary forms of ID or are put off because they don't have them to hand on election day.

The pilot proposals overlook other options

'Voting ID' is a blanket phrase and the devil is in the detail. The requirements placed on citizens at polling stations vary enormously between countries and often within them. It is helpful to think of this in terms of a scale from 1-8, as [R. Michael Alvarez and colleagues](#) have done, according to how stringent the requirements are (see Table 1).

The more liberal procedures come first, the more stringent (which are more likely to affect turnout) come last.

Voter ID options

- 1 Voter must state his/her name
- 2 Voter must sign his/her name in a poll-book
- 3 Voter must sign his/her name in a poll-book and it must match a signature on file
- 4 Voter is requested to present proof of identification or voter registration card
- 5 Voter must present proof of identification or voter registration card
- 6 Voter must present proof of identification and his/her signature must match the signature on the identification provided
- 7 Voter is requested to present photo identification
- 8 Voter is required to present photo identification

from R Michael Alvarez et al. 2007

At the moment, requirements for citizens in Britain are very liberal (1 on the scale) since voters must only state their name. It is not surprising that many international observers remark on the 'trust-based' nature of the system. [The proposals](#) from the government, however, are to implement two different models for the pilots. The first model is that citizens need to produce one of four pieces of photographic identification. This is the most extreme jump from one end of the scale to the other. The second model is that citizens should produce two forms of non-photographic ID and a signature. One item should be from 'list A' (a utility bill; a council tax bill; bank or building society statement; or letter confirming Electoral Registration), and one from 'list B' (a bank or building society card or another suitable official document with a signature). This sounds like a jump from 1 to 4 on the list. Less severe, but still a major jump.

The proposals are therefore very major changes, and there are less stringent options which could be explored in the pilots. It is also important to note that the government is ruling out providing citizens with a free voter registration

card to smooth over the process because of the 'financial and administrative burden.' This is a concern because the issuing of these cards was seen as essential for the roll out of voter ID in Northern Ireland.

Other pilots?

An iron law about administrative reforms is that they inevitably displace other reforms. Earlier in the year, the [All Party Parliamentary Group on Democratic Participation](#) published a report that outlined the problem of the millions of people missing from the electoral register. The [Missing Millions](#) report made 25 recommendations about reforms that could be introduced to increase democratic participation, many of which could be piloted. With the parliamentary boundaries being drawn around a register missing an estimated 8 million people, there are more pressing and serious problems with the electoral process.

This post represents the views of the author and not those of Democratic Audit.

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