

Government ID plan could exclude two million voters

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Four years ago, the Government formally unveiled a plan to carry out pilot ID checks at polling stations across England. This took place in some parts of the country in 2019. The Government have now published a Bill recommending that this ID plan be rolled out nationally at a cost of up to £21m, with critics warning this could freeze out over two million voters. The Government claim that electoral fraud, intimidation and impersonation are endemic in the UK's electoral system. Voters will have to provide 'valid' ID such as a passport or driving license as proof of identity when voting in person. Yet evidence by the impartial Electoral Commission notes that the extent of fraud in British elections has been grossly over-exaggerated.

True, there have been cases in one London borough, Tower Hamlets, and in a dozen council wards in the Midlands way back in 2012, but across the North East there's been not one proven case of 'electoral malpractice'. Outside the region, only 28 claims of impersonation were reported in the 2017 General Election. And in 2019, only eight fraud claims were reported - 3 per cent of alleged electoral offences. No action was taken.

Voter checks may appear attractive. The independent thinktank, the Electoral Reform Society, believes that tackling fraud, which is negligible, will simply deter millions of disadvantaged citizens from exercising their democratic right: people who don't drive or travel abroad. Practice experience born out of decades of electoral behaviour shows this to be a sledgehammer to crack a nut. This is counterproductive to 'democratic participation' - the very cause it seeks to achieve!

Universal suffrage has been attained for the vast majority of working people aged 18 and over. Yet some people still find it difficult to vote in elections. For example, people with physical disabilities sometimes face barriers (despite the 2010 Equality Act), with over half of polling stations not being accessible. Partially sighted or blind people experience obstacles to even make it onto the electoral registration system, especially during the pandemic lockdown. In some councils, mostly outside the NE region, the forms aren't easy to read or understand.

In 1918, all men and women over the age of 30 got the vote thanks to the Suffrage movement and the impact of World War One. A decade later, all women aged 21 and over were 'enfranchised'. In 1969, the voting age was reduced from 21 to 18.

Yet there are legitimate concerns that proposals to roll out photo ID checks nationally at designated

polling stations could further disenfranchise over two million people, including the disabled, people with mental health issues, the homeless and older citizens and the very poorest in society. Age UK argue that 'it risks being a barrier to some older people exercising their democratic right to vote', while Shelter, the housing charity, is calling for more action to stop 'vulnerable and low-income groups being potentially excluded from having a say'.

Reports reveal that disabled and older people are less likely to possess driving licenses or passports. Only 46 per cent of people aged over 85 hold a passport and half of women over 70 don't have a driving licence. For the homeless, losing their ID and then having to apply and pay for new ID is problematic. As the charity CentrepoinT warns, people may no longer have an acceptable form of ID due to the unpredictable and chaotic lifestyles the problem of homelessness can bring.

The chasm between voting intention and actual electoral involvement remains stubbornly deep among people with physical, mental and learning disabilities, despite the excellent work done by voluntary bodies like the Tyneside-based Skills for Life to explain the voting process. According to Scope, fewer than a third of people with a learning disability reported that they voted in the 2019 General Election, in comparison to 66 per cent of the electorate.

Research by Mencap found that three-quarters of adults with learning disabilities stated that they intended to vote in the 2019 election. But six out of ten claimed they found the process and related procedure too hard. Some 17 per cent claimed they had been turned away from a polling station. It's becoming clear that promoting electoral participation won't happen if ID is expanded across the nation.

Rather than tinkering with a broken system through costly ID checks, several experts believe that UK society has a moral and civic duty to address the 'participation crisis' and 'democratic deficit'. According to the campaign group Education4Democracy, between six and eight million people aren't on the official voting register. And one third consistently don't vote even if they are on it.

Failure by central government to address this issue will only increase the underlying malaise of discontent with electoral politics and British liberal democracy. The time is now to abandon mandatory ID.