

Local elections and voter ID pilots¹

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Introduction.

The local elections held on the 3rd of May in 150 councils across the UK saw the implementation of a pilot programme to reduce fraud. Five councils volunteered to pilot a voter id scheme where voters were asked to show photographic ID - usually a passport or driving licence - in order to cast their ballot. However, at the same time there has been widespread concern that such requirements could further increase barriers to voting and reduce turnout particularly amongst groups already less likely to vote. Exploiting a natural experiment and using data from a postal survey of ~450 respondents across the five pilot councils and three matched councils, we assess the impact of the pilot.

Elections and voting.

- **Awareness of ID requirements.** 75% of respondents in voter ID pilots were aware that new ID requirements would be in place. The most popular source of information about the new ID requirements is, by far, the Council or Borough Election Services with 41.4% mentions; followed by Television, with 16.8%; and by all other outlets with 11% or less mentions each.

The turnout in voter ID pilots (75%) and control councils (70%) and the percentage of respondents contacted by a party before the elections (pilots = 70, controls = 68) are quite similar. This may suggest that the voter ID campaign did not drive down turnout, but instead had a positive impact on it ("novelty effect").

- **Voting and safety.** Respondents are concerned about voting and safety: "Voting being safe from fraud" is the most popular category (38% in pilot and 46% in control councils).

Overall however, most respondents believe fraud is either not at very big problem or not a problem at all in both Great Britain and their local area. At the same time, respondents also report less confidence in how elections are conducted at the national level, with either 18% (control) or 23% (pilot) describing fraud as a big or fairly big problem in Great Britain – compared to 16% (control) and 8% (pilot) for the category "Your area".

¹ Reference: Testa, Livia and Susan Banducci. 2018. "Local elections and voter ID pilots". Exeter Q-Step Centre. University of Exeter, Available at www.exeter.ac.uk/q-step/voterid_report.pdf.

Moreover, both voting (in general, by post or in person) and registering to vote are considered rather safe. At the same time, voting by post seems to be the least safe way of casting the ballot – and voting at the polling station seems the safest. The difference between pilots and controls for voting at the polling station is small but significant, meaning that pilot councils are seen as slightly safer.

- **Equally Applied** We also asked whether the voter identification requirement was applied equally across all voters by examining any differences in a request to show an id among subgroups of the population. The figure shows the probability of being asked for those who identified as White British versus those who identified their background as something other than white British. It is evident that the probability of being asked does not vary between these groups in the pilot councils. Indeed, the probability of being asked for an id is slightly higher amongst white British (though the difference is not statistically significant). In our sample, 4 respondents indicated that they were not allowed to vote after not being able to present id in the voter id.

Appendix:

Our approach to the analysis was to compare the voter id pilot councils to similar councils where the id pilots were not taking effect. In this way, we can hold constant a lot of the factors related to the conduct of elections but see the effect of the ‘treatment’ (in this case the voter id pilot) across a range of factors.

The following describes the sample of respondents.

Demographics.

- **Age.** The largest of three categories is “60+” - in both control (48%) and pilot (58%) councils. Smaller percentages are reported for the two other categories – especially for “18-38”, which counts 17% in controls and 14% in pilots. Overall, pilot councils respondents are slightly older than respondents in control councils.
- **Employment status.** The distribution of respondents in the age categories above is consistent with the distribution of respondents in employment status – with either 48% (pilot) or 42% (control) selecting “Retired”. The other main category - “Working” - reports similar numbers in both pilot and control councils.

- **Education.** The highest level of education attained is also quite evenly split between two categories – with slightly less than half of the respondents reporting no formal qualification, GCSEs or O levels; and slightly more than half either A levels, a University degree or a higher qualification.

Thank you to the citizens of the eight boroughs who completed our survey.