

FINAL REPORT

English Local Elections
2nd May 2019



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30th May 2019



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Final Report on English Local Election Observation 2019

Objectives

1. To objectively observe the electoral process across a number of local authorities in England on May 2nd 2019.
2. To advise the local council and national electoral bodies on the results of the observation for the improvement of electoral practice within the UK.
3. To support the local council and national election bodies with constructive feedback on areas of concern so that they may consider remedial action.

Training and Pre-deployment

All observers were trained and briefed on the process of observation in the days before polling day. A series of recruitment and training events were held across England to deploy sufficient numbers of observers as to visit all polling stations in the areas of observation and to spend as long as possible in each.

Methodology in Voter ID Pilot Areas

Democracy Volunteers deployed teams across the four councils conducting Voter ID Pilots on May 2nd. Teams of observers were deployed to Derby, Pendle, Mid-Sussex and Woking.

The selection of these four councils was partly based on the specific nature of Derby and Pendle, having previously been identified as areas of concern in the so-called “Pickles Report”. The inclusion of Woking and Mid-Sussex was primarily to have a comparison with the data from 2018, but also to add a comparatively rural area.

In total in excess of 40 observers were deployed across the 4 councils with the vast majority of these being in Derby and Pendle. The number of stations observed in each was:

- Derby 71
- Mid-Sussex 12
- Pendle 53
- Woking 27

Observers attended polling stations in teams of two. This started with the opening of polls at 7am and ended at 10pm. Normally our observations last no less than 30 minutes and no more than 45 minutes per polling station. However, in order to see as much of the process in such focused areas, where there was the chance of relatively low turnouts, we requested that our observers spend a minimum of an hour in each station. In some cases, they remained for considerably longer than this. On exiting the polling station, the two observers completed an online form with their immediate report of their observations at that polling station.

What is Voter ID – The 2019 UK Local elections

Ten areas across England took part in Voter ID trials for the 2019 local elections on the 2nd of May 2019. These involved voters bringing personal identification documents with them to their polling station in order to vote in the council elections. The local authorities which took part are Broxtowe, Craven, Derby, North Kesteven, Braintree, Mid Sussex, Watford, North West Leicestershire, Pendle, and Woking¹.

The expansion of voter ID trials in 2019 followed the first of such voter ID pilots carried out during the 2018 UK local elections in the councils of Bromley, Gosport, Swindon, Watford and Woking. The greater number of pilot areas for the 2019 local elections in England took in a wider range of rural and urban areas, as well as areas with a number of different demographic profiles than was the case for the 2018 pilots. This therefore should provide greater evidence of the impact of voter ID requirements on different groups and areas than the previous pilots.

The ten local authorities piloted the voter ID requirement according to one of three models – the poll card model, mixed ID model, and the photo ID model.

The poll card model was trialled in Mid Sussex, Watford, and North West Leicestershire. This model requires voters to show their poll card in order to be issued with a ballot paper. If a voter has lost their poll card, then they may bring an acceptable form of photo ID (see *List 1*) or in the case of a voter not having an acceptable form of photo ID they will be issued with a replacement poll card up to 9pm on polling day. This method requires the biggest IT spend, as the poll cards have barcodes that will be scanned with tablets on election day. In the previous trials, the cost of the software licences and hiring the IT kit and other equipment was, on average, £659 per polling station in Swindon and £332 in Watford, where no additional licenses were needed. (Hill, 2018)

The mixed ID model requires the electorate to show either one piece of photo ID (see *List 1*) or two forms of non-photo ID (see *List 2*). If a voter does not have an accepted form of ID, the voter can apply for an electoral identity document, free of charge, up until 5pm the day before polling day². The mixed ID model was carried out in the local authorities of Broxtowe, Craven, Derby, North Kesteven, and Braintree.

¹ Two other councils, East Staffordshire and Ribble Valley, pulled out of the trial. East Staffordshire was concerned it would not have enough time to tell the electorate about the forms of ID needed, while Ribble Valley believed it was too much work on top of a boundary review.

² Each authority piloting the photo ID model and mixed ID model issued a local form of ID to an eligible voter who did not think they have the required forms of ID to ensure they could still vote.

List 1 - (Photo ID, Mixed ID Model, Poll Card)

Where List 1 applies, an elector needs to bring one form of ID from List 1 to verify their identity in order to be issued a ballot paper. The following forms of ID will be accepted:

- (a) a passport issued by a Commonwealth country or a country within the European Economic Area;
- (b) a photocard driving licence (including a provisional licence) issued in the United Kingdom or by a Crown Dependency or by a Member State of the European Union;
- (c) an electoral identity card issued under section 13C (Electoral identity card: Northern Ireland) of the Representation of the People Act 1983;
- (d) a biometric immigration document issued in the United Kingdom in accordance with regulations made under section 5 of the UK Borders Act 2007⁽¹⁾;
- (e) an identity card issued in the European Economic Area which bears a photograph of the voter;
- (f) a PASS scheme card (national proof of age standards scheme);
- (g) a Ministry of Defence Identity Card;
- (h) a concessionary travel pass funded by HM Government;
- (i) an Oyster 60+ pass;
- (j) a photocard parking permit issued as part of the Blue Badge scheme.

List 2 - (Mixed ID Model)

Where List 2 applies, an elector needs to bring two forms of ID from List 2 to verify their identity in order to be issued a ballot paper. At least one form of ID must contain the elector's registered address.

- (a) a valid bank or building society debit card or credit card;
- (b) a mortgage statement dated within 12 months of the date of the poll;
- (c) a bank or building society statement, or a letter from the bank or building society confirming the opening of an account, dated within 3 months of the date of the poll;
- (d) a bank or building society cheque book or building society pass book;
- (e) a credit card statement dated within 3 months of the date of the poll;
- (f) a council tax demand letter or statement dated within 12 months of the date of the poll;
- (g) a utility bill dated within 3 months of the date of the poll;
- (h) a Form P45 or Form P60 issued within 12 months of the date of the poll;
- (i) a poll card for the election;
- (j) a birth certificate;
- (k) a marriage certificate or civil partnership certificate;
- (l) an adoption certificate;
- (m) a firearms certificate granted under the Firearms Act 1968⁽¹⁾;
- (n) the record of a decision on bail made in respect of the voter in accordance with section 5(1) of the Bail Act 1976⁽²⁾;
- (o) a driving licence (including a provisional licence) which is not in the form of a photocard;
- (p) a statement of benefits or entitlement to benefits, such as a statement of child benefit within the meaning of section 141 of the Social Security Contributions and Benefits Act 1992⁽³⁾, or a letter confirming that the voter is entitled to housing benefit, within the meaning of section 130 of that Act;
- (q) a student loan statement issued by the Student Loan Company dated within 12 months of the date of the poll;
- (r) a National Insurance Number card or letter issued by Her Majesty's Revenue and Customs.

Finally, the photo ID model was undertaken in the areas of Pendle and Woking. This method requires voters to show one form of photo ID (see *List 1*) before being issued with a ballot paper. If a voter does not have an accepted form of ID, they can apply for an electoral identity document, free of charge, up until 5pm the day before poll.

Furthermore, Pendle also ran a postal vote pilot that aimed to assess the security of postal votes. Postal voters did not need photo ID but random checks were made to make sure postal voters applied and voted themselves, and that there was no undue pressure put on them.

The arguments for and against

The implementation of voter ID pilots has been controversial, with many pros and cons having been identified by those against voter ID and those in favour of the trials. In March, following a legal challenge by campaigner Neil Coughlan, the High Court ruled the voter ID scheme was lawful and would be carried out.

The primary reasons for the introduction of voter ID are echoed by the reasons the UK government have given for the implementation of the pilots in 2018 and 2019. Indeed, they argue it has been brought in to combat potential electoral fraud, as well as the perception of its threat. Similarly, the government says it has expanded upon the 2018 voter ID trials as part of an ongoing process to reduce the risk of voter fraud and ensure voter security, as well as providing greater insight into which method of ID required works best. Supporters argue its implementation would not deter the electorate in a modern society where ID is already required for a range of reasons, from picking up parcels to applying for benefits. Moreover, it has already been introduced in the UK in Northern Ireland, where paper ID has been required to vote since 1985 and photo ID required since 2003, without any apparent adverse effect on turnout or participation. Equally, the government contend that the 2018 trials were a success, with the overwhelming majority of people able to cast their vote without a problem.

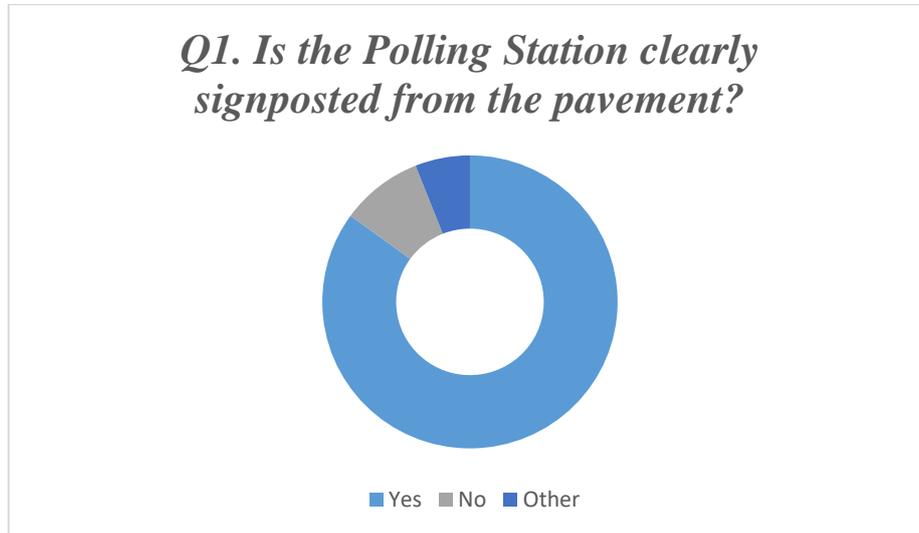
Nevertheless, 340 people were turned away from voting in the 2018 council elections because of the Voter ID trials (BBC, 2018). Additionally, at least 688 were initially stopped but later returned to the polling station with the required documents.

One of the key pieces of evidence used to support the need for voter ID pilots was questioned by the UK Statistics Authority (UKSA). The government claimed that in-person voter fraud more than doubled between 2014 and 2016. While the statistic is technically accurate – a rise from 21 cases in 2014 to 44 in 2016 – it fails to account for the fact that the number of allegations then fell by more than a third in 2017, to 28 (Society, 2018). Simply, the voter ID trials have been criticised for addressing a problem that doesn't exist and instead preventing people from voting.

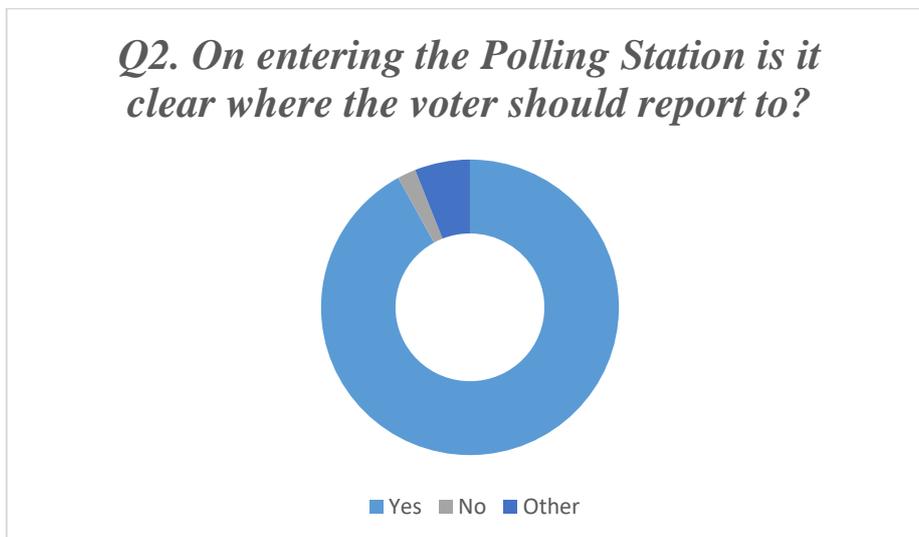
Those from ethnic minority backgrounds, elderly people, and those who are economically disadvantaged have been shown to be the least likely to hold forms of photo ID. Furthermore, attitudinal problems related to the requirement of ID in order to vote could prevent people from applying for the various forms of ID needed. This may be due to previous negative experiences and may also put off some groups of the electorate from turning up to vote in the first place. Those who may be deterred from voting due to the requirement of ID's would also not show up in any data gathered from the pilots.

Results of the Observation

The observers answered the following questions in order as they progressed with each observation at each polling station:

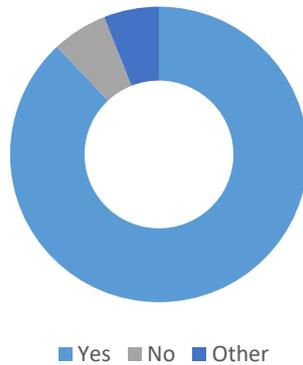


QUESTION 1: Signposting of the polling stations was generally good.



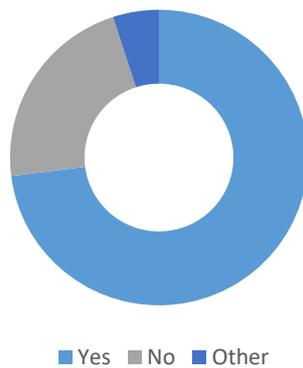
QUESTION 2: Observers identified some issues in terms of where voters should report in the polling stations.

Q3. Was it clear how disabled voters would access the Polling Station?



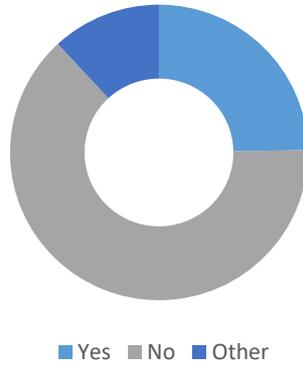
QUESTION 3: 88% of observations indicated that access to the polling station was clear.

Q4. Did the polling staff ask to see your ID on arrival?



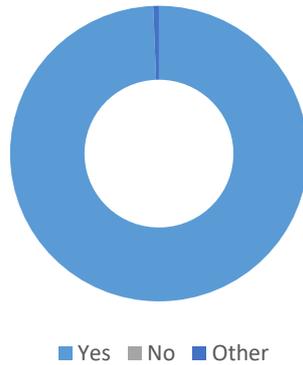
QUESTION 4: Polling staff were generally aware that election observers would be active in the area and were prepared, in general, for the process of checking accreditation when observers presented themselves.

Q5. Did the staff record your ID number on a form?



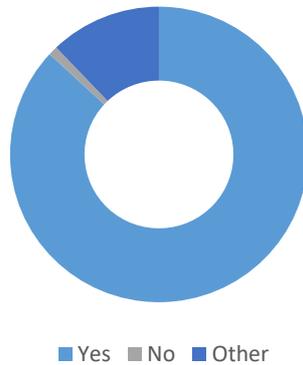
QUESTION 5: However, despite checking the existence of accreditation very few, in reality, recorded it.

Q6. Are there two staff on duty in the polling station as you arrive?



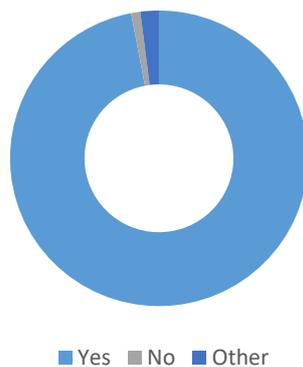
QUESTION 6: All but one polling station had two staff on duty when the observer team arrived.

Q7. Is the Ballot Box clearly sealed with cable ties?



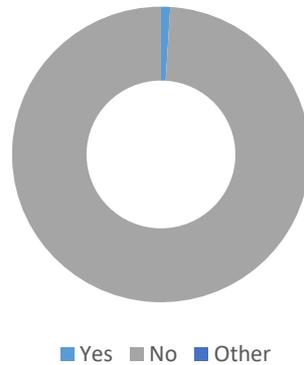
QUESTION 7: An important aspect of the electoral process is that the ballot should be secret and maintained as such, allowing no one access to the ballot papers. The process for closing and sealing a ballot box, from the opening of the polls at 7am and closing at 10pm, was observed. All but two of the ballot boxes observed were sealed. However, in Woking, often padlocks were in use, and we have identified these as ‘other’ as padlocks can be opened with the key by the presiding officer, without evidence of it being opened, whereas a cable tie would have to be broken to open the box. Some did have tamper proof equipment on the padlocks to prevent this.

Q8. Is each polling booth equipped with an explanatory poster and a pen/pencil?



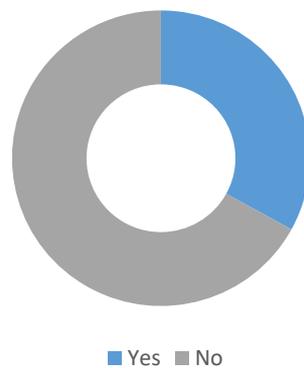
QUESTION 8: Nearly all of the polling stations were properly equipped with the requisite pencil and poster. However, one polling station was missing 50% of the required equipment.

Q9. Are there any political leaflets in sight within the Polling Station?



QUESTION 9: This question was asked primarily to elicit whether improper political activity was taking place within the polling station.³ On only one occasion did observers identify literature within the polling station which was biased towards one candidate.

Q10. Was there evidence of 'family voting' in the polling station?

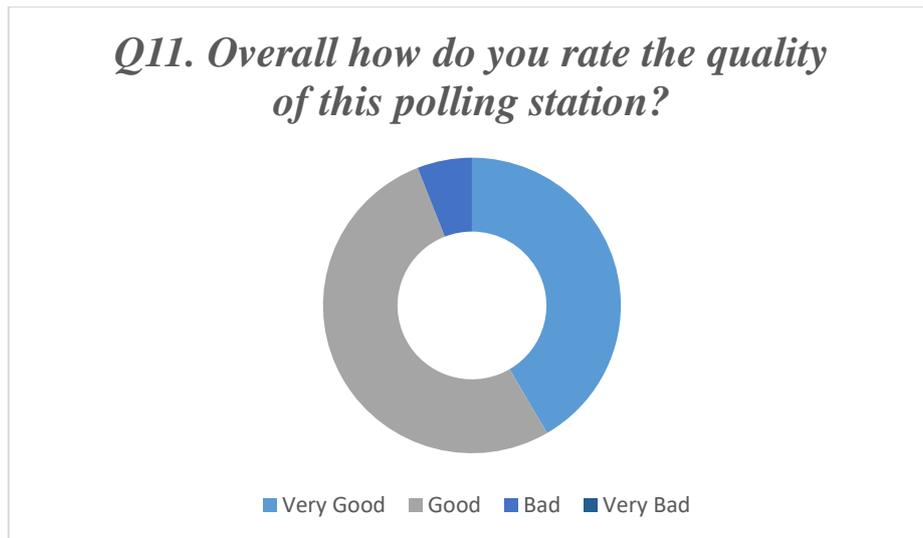


QUESTION 10: In 33% of polling stations, our observer team identified so-called 'family voting'. In total, the observation team observed 90 separate cases of 'family voting' across the four areas. The most cases observed in one polling station was 10. As the team observed 4,029 individual voters attending the polling station this constituted 4.5% of all voters observed were directly involved in 'family voting'. This was predominantly family members sharing polling booths, several spouses viewing the voting intentions of their spouse or direct collusion. The OSCE/ODIHR, which assesses elections within the UK, describes 'family voting' as an 'unacceptable practice'.⁴

³ This question did not just relate to literature specific to this election but observers were also asked to identify if other literature, such as MP or councillors' surgeries were on public display – advertising the names of candidates and/or parties.

⁴ <http://www.osce.org/>

Q11. Overall how do you rate the quality of this polling station?



QUESTION 11: Observers were asked for an overall rating of the polling station they had attended. 42% of polling stations were reported to be ‘Very Good’, 53% ‘Good’, 6% ‘Bad’, and none were ‘Very Bad’.

As well as the standard questions, we asked our observers to record those who were unable to vote as they were unable to present the correct ID, as required by the pilot voter ID project in their area. In total the observer teams identified 58 voters who were unable to vote due to the lack of their ID. There were 31 in Derby, 24 in Pendle, 3 in Woking and 0 in Mid-Sussex. Having observed similar areas in 2018, “Observers were asked to identify those voters who were refused a ballot paper because they did not have the correct ID. Across the five councils voters were refused a ballot paper in 21% of polling stations...of the 1.67% of voters who were excluded we cannot assert the number that later returned, if at all. Although the numbers are quite small, in terms of how these figures break down, we also asked observers to count the male/female ratio of those without an acceptable ID and also those from BAME communities. Of those turned away 61% were women and 52% were from BAME communities. Both figures are significantly higher than the general population. However, we should make clear that the sample size is quite small at 54 out of 3,229 voters.”⁵

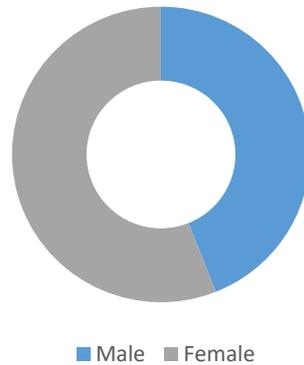
In 2019, the sample of voters was 4,029 compared to the 3,229 observed in 2018. In this number 58 were excluded. In 2018, we did ask whether voters were male/female or from BAME communities, but we felt with the sample size this was not sufficient to base our report on this evidence. As such, in 2019, we asked our observers to complete a secondary survey about/with those unable to vote due to the lack of ID and this data is presented here.

SUPPLEMENTARY SURVEY DATA

Whilst direct comparisons are difficult to between the data collected in 2018 with that in 2019, we include it here so that those assessing the impacts of the Voter ID trials have the evidence before proceeding to the possible next stage of this process – presumably legislation.

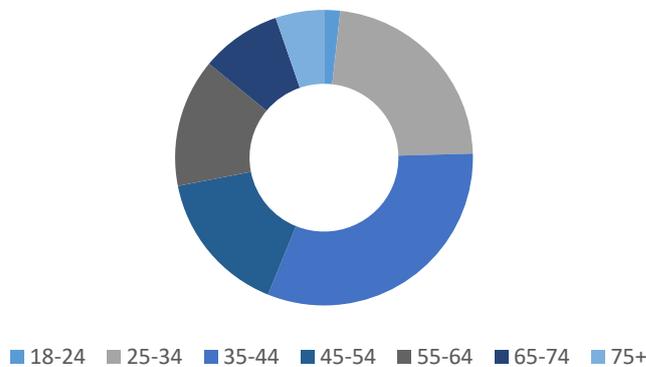
⁵ <https://democracyvolunteersdotorg.files.wordpress.com/2018/05/english-local-elections-2018-final-report6.pdf>

Q12. What is the sex of the 'excluded' voter (2019)?



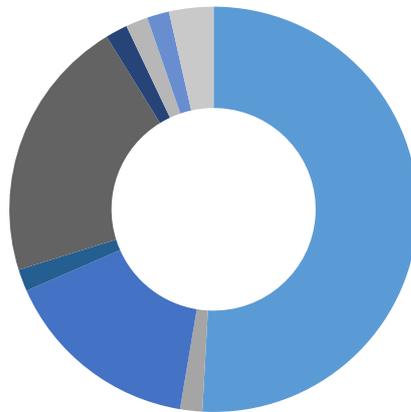
QUESTION 12: In 2019, 56% of those voters who were unable to vote were female, compared to 61% in 2018. Whilst more women may present themselves at polling stations than men, not that we evidence to this effect, we would suggest that this suggests that women are more affected than men by the potential introduction of Voter ID.

Q13. What was the age range of the 'excluded' voter (2019)?



QUESTION 13: In 2019, we also asked the observer team to assess, as part of their interviews with excluded voters, how the age profile of those that were excluded. Generally, those that were excluded were in the age groups 25-34 (23%), 35-44 (32%) and 45-54 (16%). Whilst we did identify voters in all age groups that were excluded this did suggest that age might not be a significant factor in those that were unable to vote.

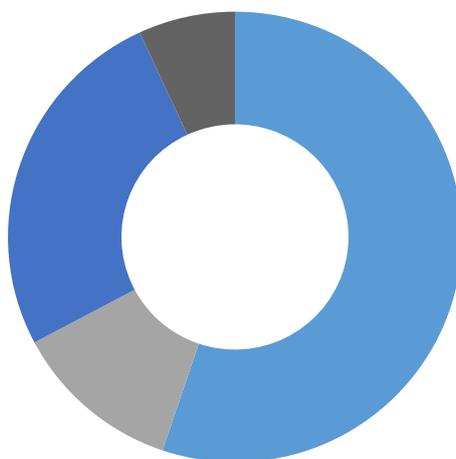
Q14. What was the ethnic group of the 'excluded' voter (2019)?



- White
- Mixed / Multiple ethnic groups
- Asian / Asian British
- Indian
- Pakistani
- Bangladeshi
- Chinese
- Any other Asian background
- Black / African / Caribbean / Black British
- African
- Caribbean
- Any other Black / African / Caribbean background

QUESTION 14: Whilst the ethnic origin of most voters was White, namely 51%, 49% of all voters were from other ethnic groups. The second largest group of those unable to vote were Pakistanis, which make up a significant part of the local population in Derby and Pendle. Notably this percentage is higher than the census data for these areas. Whilst it was difficult to assess other aspects of data related to those voters who were excluded our observers did report that those voters who were excluded from White backgrounds tended to be in more economically challenged areas.

Q15. What was the cause of the voter being unable to vote? (2019)



- Did not have the correct ID with them
- Does not own the correct ID
- Was unaware that ID was required and did not bring it
- Refused to give ID
- Other (please specify)

QUESTION 15: Finally, we asked each voter why they were unable to vote. 55% indicated it was because they did not have the correct ID with them. 26% indicated it was because they were not aware it was a requirement despite local publicity campaigns on the issue and 12% informed our observers it was because they did not own the correct ID. Although the sample is small this number is concerning as it suggests that they would not be able to vote unless this was more actively arranged for them. One voter has also recently changed her name and so her ID, whilst being her, was not enough to pass the ID test.

CONCLUSIONS

As in 2018, the Voter ID trials that Democracy Volunteers observed were well conducted and administered by those in polling stations. They seemed to be well-resourced and had increased numbers of staff to manage the process. Queuing was often observed by the team but this did not seem to be directly related to the process of ID checking. We observed a number of voters who were unable to pass the test for ID because they either did not possess it, have it with them or they had not been informed that they needed it. Neither voters nor staff seemed entirely aware of the potential of local certification of voters and this did lead to some confusion. The form and type of ID was also something which exercised voters as some clearly believed that this change gave an impression that they were somehow criminal and that some IDs were not included as acceptable despite being issued by public bodies. The various tests of ID do suggest that there are several possible ways forward that would minimise the possibility of exclusion of voters through the introduction of ID to vote on a wider national scale. The challenge for the UK authorities is evaluating whether the stated objective of reducing voter personation fraud is outweighed by the number of exclusions that seem to be generated through the harder forms of Voter ID, as was seen by Democracy Volunteers, especially in Derby and Pendle.

RECOMMENDATIONS

As we believe the next intended step planned by the UK Government is to legislate on this matter, whether future pilots are included or not, some consideration should be given to the issues which the data collected indicates. Whilst we concede that we did not observe every excluded voter we also believe there were some concerning aspects of the process which would need to be remediated before legislation.

R1 We would encourage the UK Government to explain how the introduction of Voter ID will not exclude a higher proportion of BAME voters compared to the rest of the population.

R2 We would further encourage the UK Government to explain how the introduction of Voter ID will not exclude a higher proportion of those who cannot afford a passport or driving licence or who are no longer able to access these forms of ID due to limited or restricted income.

Whilst we have not seen direct evidence that this is a stated objective of possible legislation there is evidence that voters from BAME communities are more affected by the introduction of the hard forms of Voter ID. Often individuals do not drive or travel internationally and do not have the resources to fund these forms of ID. If hard ID is introduced then it should be on a basis that voters have equal access to it. Thus, if legislation is brought forward to require hard ID to vote we would recommend:

R3 The UK Government should issue photo ID to all those without a UK passport and/or driving licence free of charge – as previously recommended by the UK's Electoral Commission.

Not to do so would have the possibility of actively restricting the franchise to only those that have and can afford ID. Whilst we understand that there is a cost to this, as previously costed by the Electoral Commission, we also believe this could save the UK Government money from applications for provisional driving licences amongst some parts of the population. Without this remediation we believe the UK Government could be accused of acting in a manner intended to suppress voter access to the voting process – something that it would be unwise to do.

However, we also believe that the process of making scannable polling cards an aspect of voting, going forward, has some merit. At the moment, no polling card is required, indeed having observed numerous UK elections we know that statistically only about two-thirds of voters attend with their card. However, possession of the polling card, and it being scanned at polling stations, would add greater accuracy to the marking of the register during polling day limiting the chance of inaccurate recording and the unintentional exclusion of voters through administrative error – which we do observe on occasions.

However, this introduction would have a cost, as all polling stations would be required to have the necessary equipment to achieve this, but it would allow for other possible voting options such as advanced voting, thus helping to reduce the need for extensive postal voting, as well as allowing voters to vote in any polling station in their council area. This could also help to increase voter turnout.

R4 We believe the UK Government should move to introduce barcoded polling cards as standard and support this with the necessary IT funding that would be caused by this change. We further believe that this change would make administration more accurate, voters would need to bring it with them and that this could lead to wider options for voters accessing the polls.

Although we believe that further pilots are unlikely, we do believe that the pilots undertaken so far do not really take place in a context that would be normal if Voter ID were to be introduced more widely. Invariably extra staff are available to conduct the trials, often double the normal number. They are also only conducted in the context of local elections which generally only have a limited turnout. We question how ID would practically work in the context of a UK general election or referendum which see significantly higher turnouts when staff will just be two per polling station.

FUNDING

Much of the work conducted across the English local elections was supported by the Joseph Rowntree Reform Trust Ltd. This funded the observation work in both Pendle and Derby. It led to a greater observation than would have been possible otherwise. This allowed longer and broader observation than was possible in 2018 and allowed us to see significantly higher numbers of voters. Those observations in Mid-Sussex and Woking were self-funded although some funds from general income did go to all four observations to recruit and train new observers.