

# No ID? No vote! Voter ID comes to Great Britain

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*The passing of the Elections Act 2022 means that individuals in Great Britain will be required to show photographic identification when voting at polling stations in some elections from May 2023. Ben Stanford explores the issues arising from the changes and suggests that rushing the introduction of voter ID in Great Britain is indicative of a wider pattern of recent democratic backsliding.*



Beginning in May 2023, individuals in Great Britain will be required to show photographic identification for the first time when voting in polling stations in some elections. This is because the [Elections Act 2022](#), passed in April this year, has introduced the requirement of identification at polling stations for general elections across all of Great Britain, as well as local elections in England and Police and Crime Commissioner elections in both England and Wales.



Whilst the origins for this can be traced back several decades, [proposals began in earnest in 2017](#) when the Conservative Party pledged to legislate in this area and a series of pilot schemes were held in the 2017 and 2018 English local elections to [test out voter ID systems](#). The practice is already well-known in Northern Ireland, but the new law will radically alter how voters cast their ballots in England, Wales and Scotland. The UK's electoral law framework is already notoriously [fragmented and in need of consolidation](#). This new requirement, which is inconsistently applied across different types of elections in the four nations of the UK, complicates matters even further.

The changes are massively controversial, with arguments in favour of voter ID generally stressing the [improved security and integrity](#) brought by eliminating voter fraud. Those against criticise the [true motivations](#) of the changes amidst concerns that the demographics least likely to possess ID are generally not Conservative Party voters. Concerns over the practical changes and the voting process have been raised by the [Association of Electoral Administrators](#), who stressed that the projected implementation timelines for the Elections Act 'are optimistic at best, undeliverable at worst'. Some election officials and elected councillors have also voiced mounting concerns and even urged the Government to delay the introduction of voter ID or [risk legal challenges](#).

To mitigate the risk of voters arriving at polling stations unprepared and potentially disenfranchised, publicity and absolute clarity over the acceptable forms of identification are needed. [Schedule 1](#) of the Elections Act 2022 lists the following, exhaustive, types of identification that will be accepted at polling stations:

- A passport issued by the UK, Commonwealth or EEA state.
- A driving licence issued by the UK, Channel Islands, the Isle of Man or EEA state.

- A biometric immigration document issued by the UK.
- A Proof of Age Standards Scheme hologram card.
- A Ministry of Defence identity card.
- A concessionary travel pass, including an Older Person's Bus Pass, Disabled Person's Bus Pass, Oyster 60+ Card, Freedom Pass, or one of several issued by the devolved Governments in Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland.
- A disabled person's blue badge.
- A national identity card issued by an EEA state.
- An electoral identity document or card.

The list includes a range of concessionary travel passes provided for the elderly and disabled people, which is to be welcomed, but it curiously excludes student or young person's travel cards. University ID cards are also excluded which is disappointing, given that to be issued with one requires enrolment and approval by a recognised institution. This only adds weight to criticisms that the new voter ID requirement is politically motivated and that the list of acceptable identification has been deliberately limited, ultimately disadvantaging younger people and minorities.

Moreover, in contrast to many other democracies, the UK does not provide a free, mandatory national identity card which may help to mitigate some of these problems. Acquiring the acceptable identification may pose a challenge, not just in financial terms, but also practically: for example, when the massive backlogs of passport applications and renewals reported recently are factored in. Further squeezing of the budgets of Government departments expected in the coming months and years will only place further pressure on the administrative functions of crucial state service providers.

We may look to the free electoral identity document as the guarantor that no voter will be disenfranchised, similar to the practice in Northern Ireland since 1985. However, the process of acquiring the document and the format of the document itself also raise numerous problems. First, the responsibility to provide the free identity document will place further pressure on cash-strapped local authorities that often need to process last-minute voter registrations, in addition to all other ongoing essential services. Second, when applying for the document, the individual must provide their national insurance number and the address where they are registered to vote, which can be a particular challenge for transient individuals. Some have argued that the process of registration should be simplified and automatic to mitigate this risk and encourage wider participation. In this respect, the Welsh Government recently announced its intention to hold automatic voter registration pilots which is to be welcomed. Finally, the free electoral identity document will be provided in physical A4 format only, with no digital copy or mobile phone app provided for. Whilst this may be due to legitimate security concerns, such a move would again seem to disproportionately impact younger people generally more reliant on electronic devices.

The introduction of voter ID may bring Great Britain in line with Northern Ireland and the established practices of other democracies, but the process of doing so has raised many problems. It is also important to consider these reforms in the context of recent

democratic backsliding in the UK. There have been mounting restrictions on the ability to protest, seeming disregard for international law in the context of UK-EU relations, a breakdown of integrity and standards in Government and parliament and a reduction of independence for the UK's elections watchdog, the Electoral Commission. In this context, rushing through the introduction of voter ID in Great Britain is more than just problematic, it is indicative of an alarming pattern of recent democratic backsliding.

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### **About the Author**

Dr Ben Stanford is a senior lecturer in law, specialising in matters of public law and human rights. He is also a lay observer appointed by the Ministry of Justice to monitor the welfare of people held in court custody.



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