

Mandatory Voter ID Reduces Turnout: Evidence from the UK Voter ID Reform

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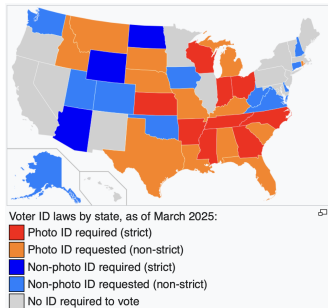
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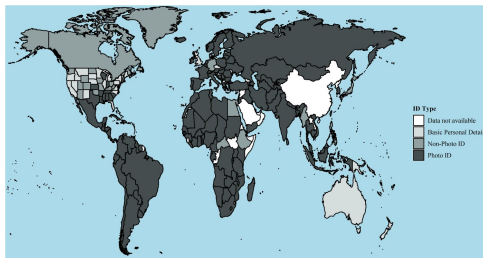
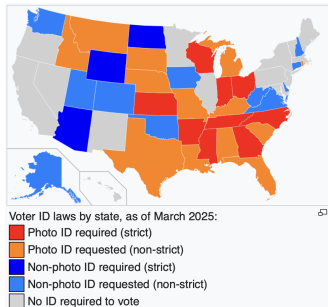
Motivation: Voter ID in the World

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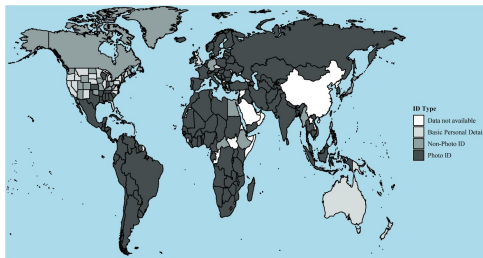
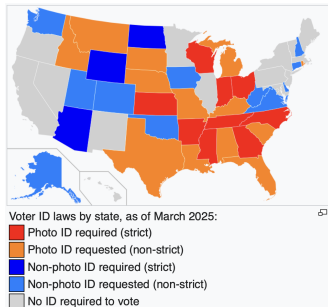
- ▶ In recent years, elections and fundamental democratic rights have become politicized in many democracies.
- ▶ Current debates about introducing, altering, or tightening mandatory voter ID affect over a billion voters worldwide (e.g., the UK, Australia, India, US).



Source: Barton (2022)

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Does mandatory voter ID reduce electoral participation when ID ownership is not universal?

Motivation: Gap in Theoretical Understanding

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- ▶ Expressive theory:

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- ▶ **Rational choice theory:** Voters participate when the (small) benefits of voting outweigh the costs. Minor increases in the cost of voting (e.g., requiring ID) can reduce turnout (Aldrich 1993).
- ▶ **Expressive theory:** Psychological (Schuessler 2000) and social-group concerns (Schram 1991) may motivate participation, e.g., when debates about voter ID and fraud cause fear of disenfranchisement, or parties prime this concern (Atkeson et al. 2014).

Motivation: Contradictory and US-Focused Empirical Evidence

Evidence regarding turnout effects is contradictory:

- ▶ Voter ID suppresses participation (Alvarez et al. 2011, Darrah-Okike et al. 2021, Grimmer and Yoder 2022, Hanjal et al. 2017)
- ▶ But: Hanjal et al.'s (2017) findings are methodologically contested (Grimmer et al. 2018) and a recent large scale panel study (1.6bn obs.) finds strict voter ID does not affect turnout (Cantoni and Pons 2021)

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Evidence of the motivational effects of also contradictory

- ▶ Emotional reactions to the voter ID debate mobilize *Democrats* (Valentino and Neuner 2017)
- ▶ ID requirements mobilize supporters of *both parties* with null effects on their relative support overall (Harden and Campos 2023)
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The empirical literature has two main limitations

- ▶ Causally identified research is rare (Grimmer et al. 2018, Highton 2017, Burden 2018)
- ▶ US centrism and exceptional nature of the US case (high polarization and a history of racialized voter suppression) (Wilson et al. 2014)

Studying the Voter ID Reform in the UK

We examine whether mandatory voter ID depresses turnout in the UK, a case that does not share these exceptional features

- ▶ Elections Act 2022 required mandatory photo voter ID for in-person voting in general elections and English local elections
- ▶ Background: independent Pickles Review (2016); no prominent incident of personation fraud; no major mobilization

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Personation (polling stations) allegations and outcomes				
	All voting offences	Personation		
	Allegations	Allegations	Convictions	Cautions
2014	73	21		3
2015	123	26		2
2016	113	44	1	3
2017	104	28	1	0
2018	57		0	0
2019	142		1	1
2020	0		0	0
2021	79			2
2022	38	13	0	0

Notes: general election years highlighted.

1. Three voting cases resulted in police cautions: this includes personation as well as other voting offences. Allegations of personation in polling stations made up 29% of voting cases.

Boris Johnson turned away from polling station after forgetting to bring photo ID

Former PM made the requirement to bring photo ID a stipulation of the Elections Act in 2022

● [Local and mayoral elections - live updates](#)

Jessica Elgot *Deputy political editor*

Thu 2 May 2024 15.41 EDT

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📷 A source close to Johnson confirmed that he had forgotten the photo ID but did later vote.
Photograph: Andrew Boyers/PA

Boris Johnson was turned away from his local polling station when trying to cast his vote in Thursday's elections after forgetting to bring the required photo identity.



Harry Horton

@harry_horton · [Follow](#)



Don't forget that you need to bring ID when you vote tomorrow - unlike this Tory MP who is tonight asking local members for help (after he voted for it!)



Tom Hunt MP

Bit of drama. Turns out I have no appropriate id to vote tomorrow.

21:52

However. There is an emergency proxy option if you lose your id. Deadline tomorrow. Who would like the honours?

21:52



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→ This makes the UK an ideal case to study the potential suppressive effect of voter ID in the absence of significant partisan polarization and mobilization around it, the central confounding factor in the US

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- ▶ Government estimated that 4 to 9 percent of UK voters lacked ID
 - ▶ First time voters, unemployed, low education, disabled, ...
- ▶ These voters could apply for a VAC (free, takes 6 working days)
- ▶ First implemented in the English local elections in May 2023
 - ▶ → Nationwide at the same time ⚡ causal identification

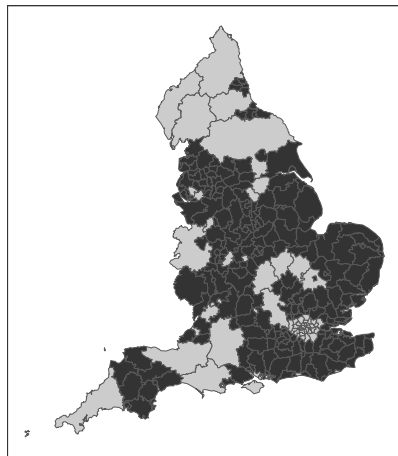
Research Design: Three strands of evidence

Empirically, we estimate regression analyses of turnout in the English local elections (2023):

- (i) at the local authority level
- (ii) at the individual level using BES panel survey data
- (iii) effect of voter ID ownership around an age-based discontinuity in photo ID driving licence ownership

Study 1: Local Authority Turnout

- ▶ Data source: Elections Centre (Rallings & Thrasher)
- ▶ Time frame: 22 years, 2001 – 2023
- ▶ Sample: 230/296 English local authorities that held local elections in 2023



Local Election
in 2023?



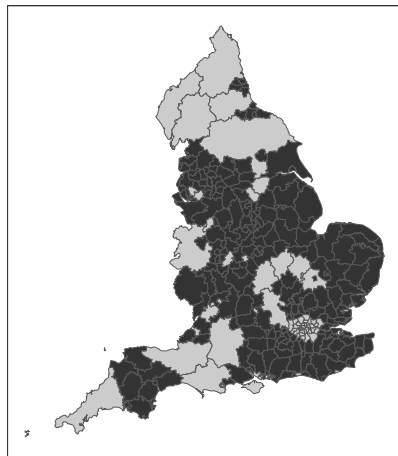
No



Yes

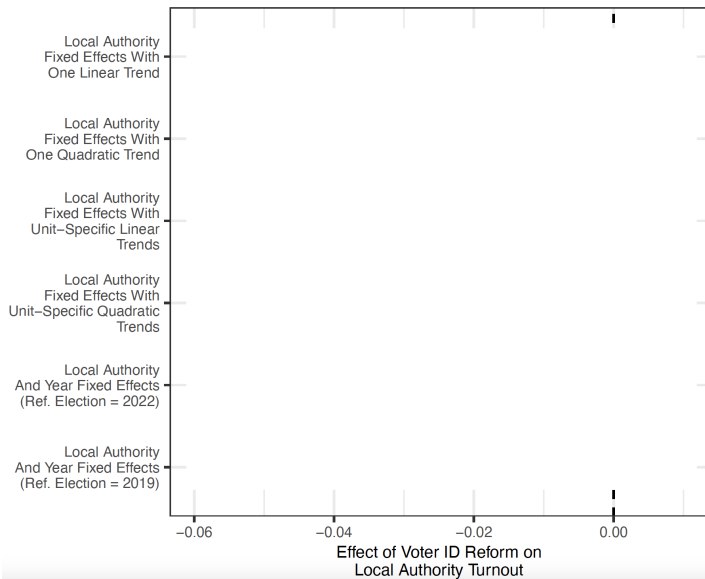
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- ▶ Time frame: 22 years, 2001 – 2023
- ▶ Sample: 230/296 English local authorities that held local elections in 2023
- ▶ We evaluate **within local authority changes** in turnout
 - ▶ Compare pre- and post-reform turnout at local authority level
 - ▶ Local authority FEs, different ways to account for time
 - ▶ Time-varying controls: election related (e.g., GE) and demographic (e.g., LA population, gender ratio, % white, unemployment, education, etc.)

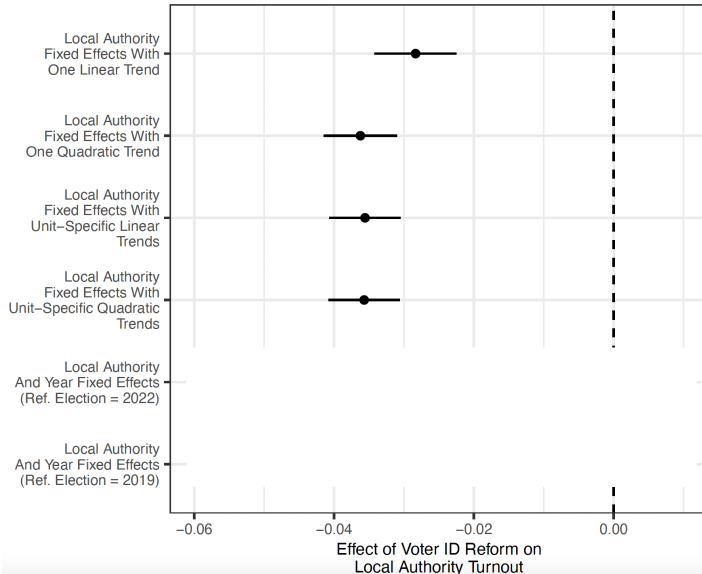


Local Election in 2023?  No  Yes

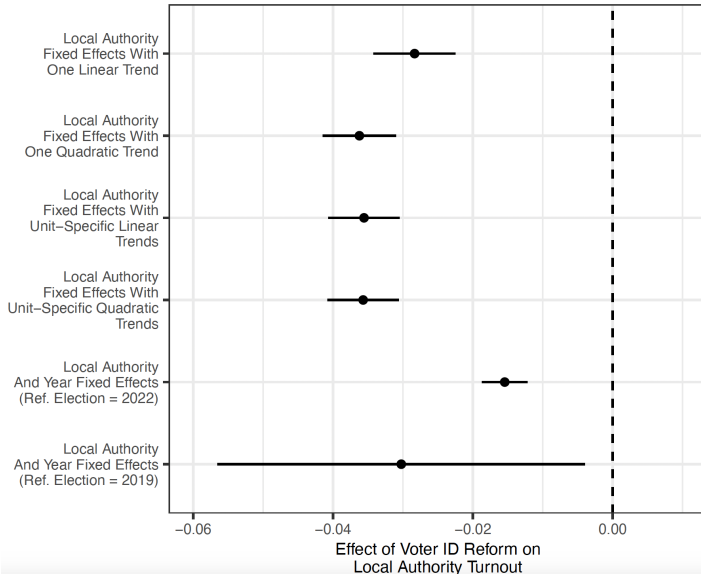
Study 1: Findings



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- ▶ Time trends: Voter ID reform decreased turnout by 2.8-3.6 percentage points
- ▶ Event study: Voter ID reform decreased turnout by 1.5-3.0 percentage points

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Robustness tests:

- ▶ Different interpolation methods for Census data
- ▶ Local authority random (instead of fixed) effects
- ▶ Inverse weights for number of observations (different electoral cycles)
- ▶ Pairwise comparison: 2023 vs all previous elections
- ▶ Placebo outcome: 2022 local election turnout

Study 2: Individual Level Turnout

- ▶ Data source: British Election Study (BES) panel data
 - ▶ National representative survey tracks political behavior & attitudes
- ▶ Time frame: 9 years, 2014 – 2023
- ▶ Sample: 13,616 unique respondents from local authorities that held elections in 2023
- ▶ Longitudinal approach facilitates evaluation of **within-person changes in turnout** over time in response to the reform

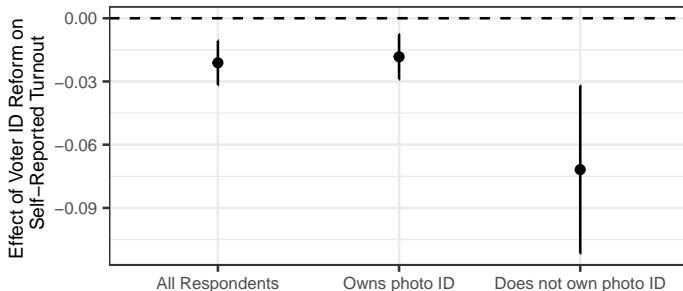
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Similar empirical approach to Study 1

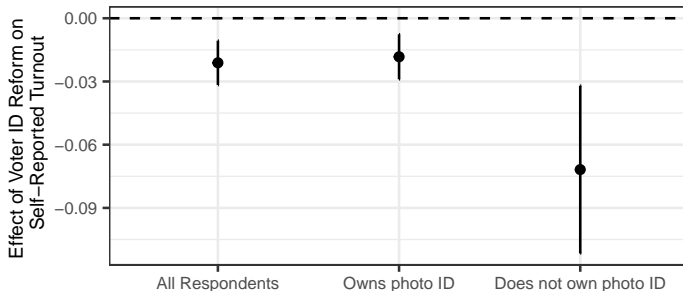
- ▶ Compare pre- and post-reform (self reported) turnout
 - ▶ at individual level
 - ▶ in local elections
 - ▶ for respondents with vs without ID
- ▶ Respondent FEs, different ways to account for time
- ▶ Time-varying controls: election related (e.g., GE) and demographic (e.g., political attention, income, disability)

Study 2: Findings



- ▶ On average, individuals were 2.1 percentage points less likely to vote in 2023 than in previous election years
- ▶ Larger effect among those who do not own photo ID
 - ▶ Own ID: turnout decreased by 1.8 percentage points in 2023
 - ▶ Without ID: turnout decreased by 7.2 percentage points in 2023

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 - ▶ Own ID: turnout decreased by 1.8 percentage points in 2023
 - ▶ Without ID: turnout decreased by 7.2 percentage points in 2023
- ▶ **Robustness tests:**
 - ▶ Respondent-level linear or quadratic time trends
 - ▶ Respondent random (instead of fixed) effects
 - ▶ Inverse weights for number of observations
 - ▶ Placebo outcome: 2022 local election turnout

Study 3: ID Ownership & Turnout

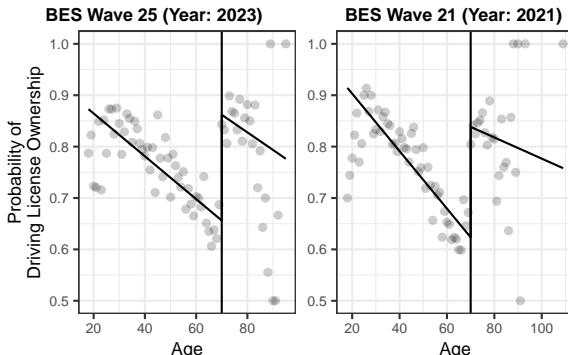
Natural experiment based on UK driving licence requirements

- ▶ Drivers have to renew their driving licence on 70th birthday
- ▶ Many in that age bracket still have paper licences, upon renewal photo licences are issued
- ▶ Unlike paper licences, photo licences are valid voter ID
- ▶ → Turning 70 is a quasi-random event that should not affect voting by people just above and below 70 other than through driving license ownership

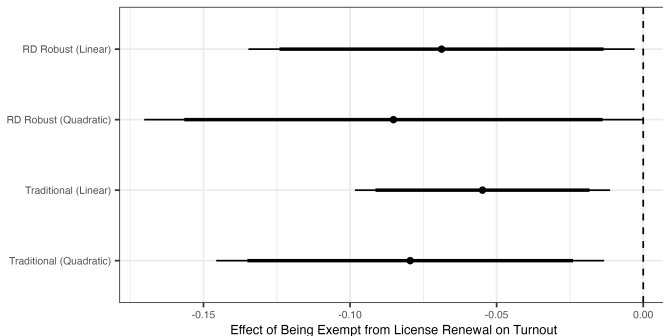
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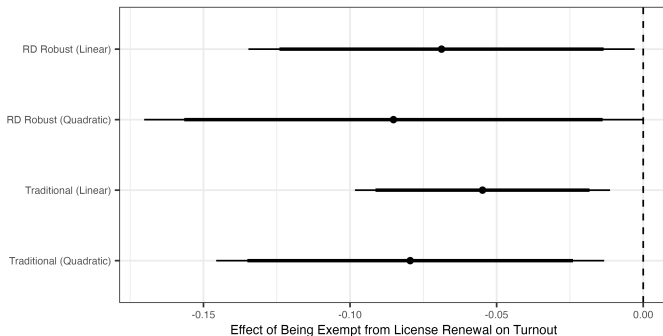


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- ▶ Consistent: different polynomial spec’s, kernel weights, bandwidths

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- ▶ Consistent: different polynomial spec’s, kernel weights, bandwidths
- ▶ **Robustness tests:**
 - ▶ Fuzzy RDD design
 - ▶ Different age cut offs (60, 65, 75, 80 – no policy change)
 - ▶ Placebo outcome: 2021 local election turnout (no ID required)

Summary of findings from three studies

- ▶ Across all three studies, introduction of mandatory voter ID requirements reduced turnout
- ▶ Results hold regardless of
 - ▶ Different empirical designs (observational and natural experimental)
 - ▶ Different levels of analysis (aggregate- and individual-level)
 - ▶ Different operationalizations of turnout (actual and self-reported)

Study	Comparison	Design	Unit of Analysis	Turnout	Effect Size (% points)
1	Pre- and post-reform	Observational	Local authority	Actual	−(1.5-3.6)
2	Pre- and post-reform	Observational	Individual	Self-reported	−(1.8-7.2)
3	Without vs with ID	Natural Experimental	Individual	Self-reported	−(5.5-8.5)

Conclusion

In the UK context without universal ID, voter ID law

- ▶ significantly reduces aggregate turnout
- ▶ disproportionately impacts ID-poor voters – primarily less educated, poorer, and younger/older voters in the UK, exacerbating existing turnout inequalities and further skewing representation towards resourceful and wealthy groups
- ▶ these sizable effects are specific to LE. Effects might be even larger in GE in which the average voter is less politically engaged

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- ▶ these sizable effects are specific to LE. Effects might be even larger in GE in which the average voter is less politically engaged
- ▶ ⇒ Need for mitigating measures. Without, strict voter ID risks reinforcing socio-economic and demographic biases in political participation

Thank you!