

BRIEFING PAPER

London's civil society has deep concerns about the equality implications of photo voter IDs and supports residence-based voting rights for all Londoners



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The Elections Bill poses two key questions: who should vote, and how should we vote? This briefing outlines the views of London's civil society to potentially unprecedented changes to democratic rights in England, and thus in London, especially on photo voter ID proposals, and a range of possible electoral reforms.

The London Voices Project

London Voices is a comprehensive research project exploring the views of third sector organisations in London on civic and democratic engagement and the journey to full, equal, accessible, representative participation in local communities, in decisions impacting London and the UK. It is funded by the Trust for London, on behalf of the Citizenship and Integration Initiative, and the UK Democracy Fund, a Joseph Rowntree Reform Trust initiative⁽¹⁾. It has the support of the GLA, and following a competitive process it is delivered by young researchers with lived experience from the Young Europeans Network at the3million.

109 civil society organisations of various sizes and from across London completed a stakeholders' survey in the summer of 2021 with questions ranging from funding, the impact of COVID on activities and views on electoral reform. Overall, these organisations comprised a total of **4,087 full time employees**⁽²⁾ and mobilised 5,611 volunteers across London in the last 12 months. The surveyed organisations self-reported supporting over **5 million Londoners** in the last 12 months. The organisations surveyed focus on a

range of areas, with strong representation from advice and support services (in particular health and wellbeing advice) and equalities and civil rights organisations led by un- or under-represented communities. The survey had **respondents from across London** – over a third of the organisations worked London-wide, **and at least two local civil society organisations completed the survey per London borough**.

Alongside the stakeholders' survey, **20 follow-up interviews** were conducted with representatives of organisations who completed the survey, to add lived experience perspective and qualitative insight. In addition, peer research focus groups were conducted with particular under-registered and under-represented groups, such as EU Londoners and young Londoners, to capture lived experience and structural barriers to civic and democratic participation. The full report and co-produced recommendations will be disseminated in the second half of November. This briefing only analyses the questions on voter ID and electoral reform part of the stakeholder survey and interviews.

Voter ID

The Elections Bill proposes to introduce photo voter ID. One of the key arguments from the Government is that photo voter ID will prevent voter fraud. However, a research briefing from the House of Commons Library shows that the number of allegations of voting offences has averaged 106 over the 6 years between 2014 and 2019. There have been only 3 convictions for voter fraud in the UK since 2016⁽³⁾.

63% (69 civil society organisations) surveyed for the London Voices research project disagreed with the introduction of photo voter ID requirements. The survey, as well as some follow-up interviews, illustrated the lack of awareness of this issue for some organisations – 15%

(16 organisations) did not know and 3% (3 organisations) did not answer the question. When we consider only those organisations whose beneficiaries include Black Londoners and other ethnic minorities, around 74% disagree with the introduction of voter ID requirements.

As a follow up in the survey, organisations were asked to describe the impact they think photo voter ID would have. The key concerns expressed in the comments are that **photo voter ID would reduce democratic participation thus widening the democratic deficit, and impose unfair barriers on already marginalised communities, such as disabled Londoners and Black, Asian and ethnic minority Londoners.**

(1) The UK Democracy Fund funded the work reported in this publication. The material presented here represents the views of the author(s), not necessarily those of JRRT or other UK Democracy Fund contributors.

(2) Respondents ranged from volunteer-only organisations to large organisations of 430 full time employees

(3) <https://researchbriefings.files.parliament.uk/documents/CBP-9304/CBP-9304.pdf>

Figure 2: Word cloud on voter ID open question



IN THEIR OWN WORDS

Southwark Travellers Action (STAG). Beneficiaries: gypsies, travellers and Roma Londoners

The women who we work with, not all of them, but some of them don't have either passports or driving licences. So that would be an extra barrier for them. Also just the expense of getting those things. So sometimes we have people who want to get a new passport, but can't afford it at the moment. So that's a real problem.

Haringey Welcome. Beneficiaries: migrant and refugee Londoners

Loads of people don't have a passport, have never travelled outside of the country. I think that's the main thing. And I think, you know, that it's clearly the poor and the disadvantaged, who are least likely to be able to prove their identity in that way.

Central YMCA. Beneficiaries: young Londoners

We do have an informal economy in London. Anybody who doesn't want to accept that is just not facing reality. So, the people in that economy will be very reluctant. And quite a lot of people in that economy tend to be from BAME communities, or from poorer communities. And therefore, you're actually saying to quite a large part of the demographic that they are going to be excluded from the democratic process.

Jackie Peacock, Advice for Renters. Beneficiaries: private renters

Fewer people will vote – some won't have photo ID, some (particularly refugees) have lived in authoritarian countries and are fearful while for others it's just one more small deterrent.

Voice4Change. Beneficiaries: Black Londoners

In a vibrant civil society, it is incumbent on the government to endeavour to increase political participation by expanding voters' rights. The US case rightly highlights that the introduction of voter ID legislation reduced voter participation, and it is suggested that this was disproportionately high among racial and ethnic minority groups. Attempting to impose more barriers to entry will only cause a groundswell of political apathy, and it will serve to disenfranchise those wanting to exercise their suffrage who will now not have the means to do so. The government should instead look to address the fact that millions of people are left off the electoral register, to review anachronistic campaign laws and to empower the Electoral Commission with investigatory powers comparable to those of the Information Commissioner's Office to tackle the new battleground of digital campaigning.

Rachel Coates, Advocacy for All. Beneficiaries: disabled Londoners

I think less people with disabilities will vote as this will make it more complicated.

APPENDIX

The wider potential impact of the Elections Bill on voter registration rates and turnout in London

Research from the Electoral Commission⁽¹⁾ and the Cabinet Office⁽²⁾ shows that London has the lowest voter registration rates across the UK regions and nations. Leading academics have stressed that, in its current form, Elections Bill measures could further reduce voter registration and turnout rates⁽³⁾.

ONS data from December 2018 shows that EU Londoners make almost 12% of the London electorate, but are the most under-registered community by nationality with only 69% registered.

The Survey of Londoners⁽⁴⁾ has identified the most **under-registered groups** as:

- **Young people** – one in three (72%) of eligible 16- to 24-year-olds are registered to vote compared to 97% of those aged 65+;
- **Black Londoners** – 83% of Londoners from a Black ethnic background are registered to vote;
- **Non-British nationals** (including EU Londoners) – 80% of eligible non-British nationals are registered, compared to 94% of eligible White British Londoners;
- **Social and private renters** – 85% of social renters and 86% of private renters are registered to vote compared with 93% of homeowner- occupiers.

The GLA City Intelligence team has estimated that:

- If Londoners had to present a **passport** in order to vote, then over half a million (around 550,000) Londoners would not have this documentation (Data source: Detailed EU/EFTA Passport held – Ward Tool, 2018);
- If Londoners had to present a **full driving licence** in order to vote, then over two and a half million (over 2,600,000) Londoners would not have this documentation. Females are less likely to have a driving licence (42%) compared with males (32%). (Data source: National Travel Survey: 2019);
- Thirteen per cent (13%) of 60 – 64 years old Londoners do not have an **Oyster photocard**. (Data source: TfL – active cards in 2020/21);
- Only around one in five (18%) disabled Londoners would be able to present a **Freedom Pass** as ID, if required. (Data source: Taxicard and Freedom Pass usage statistics 2020 – 21, London Councils).

(1) Voter registration rates in London are 76%, compared with 91% in the North East and 83% the England average. Electoral Commission, September 2019. <https://www.electoralcommission.org.uk/who-we-are-and-what-we-do/our-views-and-research/our-research/accuracy-and-completeness-electoral-registers/2019-report-2018-electoral-registers-great-britain/completeness-great-britain>

(2) "Atlas of Democratic Variation", Cabinet Office, January 2019. <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/atlas-of-democratic-variation>

(3) Toby James, Stuart Wilks-Heeg, Alistair Clark, "The UK Electoral Integrity Bill", University of East Anglia, May 2021.

<https://tobysjamesdotcom.files.wordpress.com/2021/05/02e03-ukelectoralintegritybill1.00.pdf>

(4) "Survey of Londoners", GLA, June 2019. <https://data.london.gov.uk/dataset/survey-of-londoners-headline-findings>