

The value of poll worker voice in the delivery of elections

Abstract

Elections are the pivotal political institution used to confer legitimacy in almost all states. Decision-making on election policy is usually elite-driven and top-down in nature. This article applies the concept of workplace democracy, originally proposed by Carole Pateman, to explore the voices of poll workers involved in delivering elections on the ground. Theories of workplace democracy argue participation should not be limited to the ballot box – but should also include other voices with views on how an organisation is run. The article uses original data from poll workers who implemented an important election policy reform, voter identification, at the first country-wide English elections which made this a formal requirement. It explores their views about how the electoral process could be improved. It argues that poll workers' perspectives are important to facilitate bottom-up policy design and learning – and to detect democratic defects. Poll workers reported virtually no suspected cases of personation - although this was no different to previous elections. Voter identification did, however, restrict legitimate participation, particularly women. Poll workers made several suggestions for improving the voter experience. Listening to these voices provides an important input to strengthen electoral democracy with bottom-up voices contributing to the design of political institutions.

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1. Introduction

Elections are an important moment in a democracy when citizens can express their voice. However, they are also a political space where citizens can be prevented from voting because of restrictive administrative practices, burdensome voter identification, manipulation of ballot boxes – or under-resourced and inadequate polling locations (Birch 2011; Brown, Hale, and King 2020; Norris 2014).

Electoral laws which impact upon the voter experience tend to be designed at the elite level by governments, parties, parliaments, and civil servants with limited wider consultation. Proponents of participatory and workplace democracy, first developed by Carole Pateman (1970), argue that democracy should not start and end with elections. Electoral democracy, where citizens chose between candidates and leaders constituted ‘elite democracy’. Citizens and workers should also be enabled to participate in decisions in the workplace as well as at the ballot box. This article therefore explores whether workplace democracy could be used to inform policy-making in designing the voting process. It considers the inherent dangers of workplace democracy inside a foundational democratic practice – and suggests some ways in which the practical knowledge of frontline workers could be used to provide a vital firewall against autocratic meddling.

This article argues that full workplace democracy, in which poll workers are treated as equals in the decision-making process, could undermine other dimensions of democracy. Poll workers may not have full knowledge, may promote ideas which will undermine fundamental rights or equality in the electoral process, may maximise self-interest– and may even favour particular parties. However, poll workers have unique frontline knowledge of the electoral process which is indispensable for identifying problems, foremost, the undermining of electoral rights such as citizens unable to vote or voter fraud. A revised approach is proposed in which *the views of poll workers should be independently collected and systematically fed into the decision making process*. Listening to poll worker voice therefore provides a fresh bottom-up perspective to the reality of election delivery. It can also act as a firewall against incumbent attempts to ‘bend the rules of the game’ for political advantage by painting myths and mistruths about the frequency and nature of problems inside polling stations. It can enable better deliberation and evidence-based decision making.

This article examines the voices of English poll workers from the 2023 local elections to illustrate these arguments and provide more specific lessons for the design of elections in Britain. These were significant elections because they were the first time that controversial photographic identification requirements were implemented nationally. They were also heavily politicised by debate about whether they were necessary to stop ‘voter fraud’ or were acts of ‘voter suppression’. We present original data from a poll worker survey conducted in the immediate aftermath of the 2023 local elections.

The article progresses by describing the existing literature on nature of electoral governance before introducing the concept of participatory and workplace democracy and considering the (mis)fit with elections. The more specific literature on voter identification and UK election administration is then introduced before the methods, results and lessons from the empirical study are described. Lessons for the theory and practice of British elections, but also internationally are reflected on in the conclusion.

2. The top-down nature of electoral governance

Elections allow citizens to choose their representatives, and hold politicians to account. They are an indispensable part of the democratic process. However, there are variations in the delivery of elections worldwide. Problems include gerrymandered electoral districts, poor quality electoral registers or political violence at the polling stations. Studying the factors that can contribute towards the delivery of elections is crucial – especially in an era where there are concerns about democratic deconsolidation and declining election quality – even in the so-called established democracies (Birch 2011; Norris 2013). The design of the polling process is an important factor in shaping election quality because it impacts upon trust in elections, voter participation and opportunities for electoral fraud. Concerns about electoral fraud in polling stations has developed in established democracies in recent years (Farrall et al. 2021; Hill et al. 2021; Norris 2024). A focus on voter identification requirements has become a growing area of academic research.

Election policy tends to be top-down and centrally determined (James and Matlosa, forthcoming). Electoral rules can have decisive consequences for who wins the election or their seat share within the forthcoming Parliament. The literature on design of electoral rules emphasises that incumbent governments, party leaders and party bosses tend to be important actors because the stakes are high (Renwick 2010). The need to legislate for most electoral reforms means that if a party has a legislative majority, then they are often able, and tempted, to pass electoral reforms which maximise their chances in the next election. Civil servants who design the detail of electoral laws are accountable to their ministers in the government. An open and pluralistic process for determining electoral rules is vital for democracy given that they shape who is in power. It is especially important against a context of global concerns about democratic erosion (Bermeo 2016).

3. Participatory and Workplace democracy

Carole Pateman's *Participation and Democratic Theory* developed the first fully developed theory of participatory and workplace democracy (Pateman 1970). Pateman contrasted this with what she described as 'elite' and 'pluralist theories'. These mainstream theories held that democracy involved little more than periodically voting at election time. If there were low levels of participation then these perspectives would suggest that this should not be a source of concern because democracy had delivered its minimum requirement of organising polls and enable citizens to vote.

By contrast, Pateman argued that the realm of the 'political' extended outside of national government to include the private spheres such as the workplace. A more participatory democracy should include maximising opportunities for citizens to express voice and deliberate – which would include the workplace.

The advantages of participation included psychological effects for the individual. However, there were also benefits to society. Pateman argued that by democratising the workplace there would be spillover effects to the broader democratic system as citizens learn how to be involved in decision making. Moreover, it represented a wider opportunity for a better democracy:

'The aim of organisational democracy is democracy. It is not primarily increased productivity, efficiency, or industrial relations (even though these things may even result from democracy); rather it is to further justice, equality, freedom, the rights of citizens, and

the protection of the interests of citizens, all familiar democratic aims' (Pateman 1976, 22–23).

Workplace participation would require the coming together of 'two or more parties to 'influence each other in the making plans, policies or decisions' (French, Israel and Aas, 1960, cf Pateman, 1970, 68). For full participation (as opposed to 'partial' or 'pseudo' participation) employees should have access to information to make decisions. Decisions must be about future plans – rather than validating past decisions which management has already made. Furthermore, there should be equal power between power actors to influence decisions. A system of workplace democracy could harness full participation either by allowing workers to replace senior management from their position, thereby picking their own representatives, just as voters would chose their governments. Alternatively, it could involve workers being directly involved in decisions themselves.

These arguments were widely considered as a radical and 'leftfield' by contemporaries. Nonetheless, arguments for participatory governance have now been incorporated into widely used policy innovations worldwide. Workplace democracy later saw support from Robert Dahl who stated that 'if democracy is justified in governing the state, then it must also be justified in governing economic enterprises' (1985, 111). Returning to her work in 2012, Pateman noted that participatory practices were now recommended and embedded into organisations at the highest level (Pateman 2012). The World Bank had developed a Participatory Sourcebook by the mid-1990s (World Bank 1996) claiming that 'participatory approaches to development activities have been pioneered and practiced for many decades by community workers, government bureaucrats, nongovernmental organization (NGO) practitioners, and academics'. Workplace democracy has also been considered by wider management and industrial relations literature to bring about greater productivity (Levin 2006).

4. Workplace democracy in elections?

Given that elections are designed to enable democracy, it is ironic that there has been little consideration of whether workplace democracy might exist in election delivery. Cross national evidence has found that Electoral Management Bodies that enable greater opportunities for employees to be involved in decision-making processes perform better (James, 2019). Beyond this little has been said about what workplace democracy might involve.

Workplace democracy within elections would face some significant challenges. Firstly, there is the danger of *inadequate knowledge*. Poll workers are typically appointed on a short-term basis and may have little prior knowledge of the electoral system, the detail of electoral law and democratic values. Technical detail may have been developed over several years by senior managers and civil servants which will be essential for running elections.

Secondly, there is the danger of *undermining fundamental rights*. Worker voice may have value in an industrial or commercial setting where the outputs are consumable goods. Worker knowledge about the causes of production(in)efficiency and the subject quality of products may be relevant. However, we hold that fundamental rights, such as the right to vote, should not be qualified by worker voice. Poll workers may make problematic recommendations which might undermine the fundamental rights of voters or cause disfunction in the polling station. They might suggest, for example, removing the accessibility features of polling stations to reduce costs which would undermine the ability of many citizens to vote.

Thirdly, there is the danger of *voter equity being undermined*. Electoral law prescribes common practices and procedures to be followed across a polity to enable citizens to have the same experience. This is essential to help to ensure political equality. Enabling poll worker voice may bring about variations in the equity of the experience if they had greater control of the local process.

Fourthly, there is a danger that poll workers may *maximise self-interest and shirking*. They may privilege private rather than public interests by proposing reduced voting hours so that they can return home early – even if that restricted participation. They may boycott recounts because of the additional labour involved.

Fifthly, there is the danger that they might *favour particular parties and candidates*, especially if the body of poll workers have a strong party political composition (Ascencio and Rueda 2019).

These threats mean that full workplace democracy, defined as giving equal decision-making power to those involved in running elections, would not be compatible with democracy. This is not proposed here. There is a need for the involvement of other actors such as civil society groups, academics, EMBs and other stakeholders as part of a pluralistic decision making process. Electoral rights should also be enshrined and not compromised.

Nonetheless, we argue that enabling polling staff to express their voice as to what works – and what does not work - on election day can help to identify ways in which political equality and other principles of democracy are realised on the ground. Poll workers are the closest to the democratic process. They are also much closer ‘to the ground’ than experts, whose opinions are often used to assess the frequency of other forms of electoral integrity (Martínez i Coma and van Ham 2015). Any attempts at election manipulation in polling operations are necessarily witnessed by poll workers – and their peers may be complicit in them. Public knowledge of any such problems only emerges significantly after the fact. Meanwhile, election observers only observe a small sample of polling locations. Listening to poll workers can therefore enable a form of workplace democracy which can act as a firewall against incumbent attempts to ‘bend the rules of the game’ for their advantage. Poll workers often have rich longitudinal knowledge – since many have worked over multiple elections. Thus, while the knowledge of poll workers is limited in the ways noted above, the knowledge of other actors is limited too.

We therefore argue that workplace democracy in election delivery requires that that the *views of poll workers should be independently collected and systematically fed into the decision making process*. Independent collection means that the organisation responsible for collecting their views should be independent from political parties and the government of the day. Poll worker studies can be a useful method for identifying the frequency and nature of problems in polling stations (Burden and Milyo, 2015; Clark and James 2017; Högström and Jerhov, 2023; Partheymuller et al, 2022). The officials working in polling stations on election day can be conceptualised as front-line workers who have intimate knowledge of the mundane everyday practice of elections (Durose 2009). They crucially therefore have a different vantage point from which we can see the electoral process than voter surveys.

Poll worker views can be introduced into multiple stages of the decision making process to enable better deliberation and evidence-based decision making. Decision and public discussion points at which poll worker views would be useful include:

- Post election audits and reviews undertaken by relevant statutory bodies.

- Electoral observation reports written by international organisations and domestic observer groups
- Parliamentary select committee enquiries on issues of electoral laws.
- The legislative process for proposals for new legislation relating to elections.

Poll workers views could be presented in summary format as evidence. However, poll workers could also be given formal representation and opportunity to speak at relevant hearings. A poll workers council could be formed to give such formal representation.

5. Electoral Integrity in Polling Places

The voice of poll workers is important because there are ongoing debates about how to run elections and avoid problems which undermine the voters' experience. This is taking place in the context of widespread examples of democratic backsliding around the world as would-be autocrats have sought to undermine the right to vote in polling stations (Bermeo, 2016; Cheesman and Klass, 2018).

The balance between participation and security of the ballot is a central issue for the design and integrity of electoral institutions. Many advocates and reformers stress the need for voting procedures to be secure enough to deter and prevent potential electoral irregularities such as stuffed ballot boxes and impersonation at the polls. Thus, processes around ID verification are often justified as means to secure the ballot (Alonso-Curbelo, 2022) amongst wider concerns about electoral fraud in established democracies (Farrall et al. 2021; Hill et al. 2021). Meanwhile, there are simultaneous concerns that introducing too onerous administrative burdens and procedures could prevent legitimate electors from voting (Herd and Moynihan, 2019). The implementation of these procedures might also have discriminatory effects. They may therefore breach principles of inclusive voting practices (James and Garnett 2020; Rabitsch et al. 2023). The literature has remained contradictory on the effects of voter identification laws. Highton (2017) suggests that the effects tend to be low, but can vary according to type of identification requirements involved. By contrast, Hajnal, Lajevardi, and Nielson (2017) reported that the strict voter ID laws had a negative impact on the turnout of racial and ethnic minorities in US primaries and general elections. This could skew democracy to the right because they 'appear to diminish the participation of Democrats and those on the left, while doing little to deter the vote of Republicans' (p.377). Kuk, Hajnal, and Lajevardi (2022) later reported that states which enacted new strict photo ID laws saw a gap in turnout between more racially diverse and less racially diverse counties grow more in than it did elsewhere. Importantly, Atkeson et al. (2014) highlighted the importance of how voter ID laws are implemented by poll workers in practice. They observed considerable discretion used by poll workers in deciding on the permissibility of assorted identification, with minority voters treated more stringently. Research outside of the US has been limited (although see: Barton (2022), James and Clark (2020) and Barton (2025)).

Stricter identification laws have been thought to increase confidence and trust in elections by eliminating opportunities for personation. This could lead to increases in voter turnout. Studies do not necessarily always support this, however (see: Bowler and Donovan (2016), Van der Eijk and Rose (2020), Rose and Van der Eijk (2022)).

6. UK Electoral Administration

The article now aims to illustrate the value of poll worker views through a case study of Britain. British elections are run by returning officers (ROs), alongside local authorities who provide the

resources and personnel. Variation exists in how elections are administered and implemented, with some councils better resourced than others (Clark 2024). Local authorities are directly responsible for recruiting and training sufficient polling station workers and counting staff to deliver elections.

There are two main types of polling station worker in British elections, both of which work in tandem. Presiding Officers are more senior and have overall responsibility for running the polling station. Polling clerks undertake more routine aspects of voter processing such as checking electors' eligibility and marking them off the register. More rarely, in particularly contentious elections electoral services teams have been known to also appoint 'greeters', 'marshals' or 'information officers' to help guide voters within the building the polling station is located in, ensuring they get to the correct desk. In the 2023 survey, 58.8% of respondents were polling clerks, 39.9% Presiding Officers, while 4.2% worked as greeters (N=2694). This seemed to be an experienced volunteer elections workforce; 81.5% had worked at a polling station before, while this was the first experience of doing so for 18.5% (N=2655).

Despite this previous experience, the May 2023 implementation of voter identification meant that there were important aspects of the process that would be new to presiding officers and other staff. This meant that poll worker training would take on added importance, not least around what ID was acceptable given the seemingly arbitrary range that the government had approved, but also around procedures for recording the numbers of voters turned away for not having the correct ID. The picture around poll worker training prior to the introduction of these new processes was not entirely reassuring. Table 1 shows data from previous poll worker studies which suggests that a sizeable proportion of between 15-19% thought that election law was already too complex to understand quickly and easily. This was a consistent finding; those surveys were conducted across different level elections.

Table 1: Poll Worker Training Effectiveness Prior to May 2023

	Training spent enough time covering electoral law & procedures	Election law too complex to understand quickly & easily	N
2015 general election	70.5	19.3	1258/1295
2018 local elections	73.5	15.2	2149
2016 Scottish parliament election	77.6	16.9	425

Sources: authors, based on: Clark and James 2016, 2017; 2020.

Policy background

Electoral administration saw major changes under the New Labour governments 1997-2010 who sought to make voting more convenient by piloting internet voting, supermarket voting and early voting. Postal voting on demand was adopted permanently and there has been a considerable rise in the proportion of votes by this method since 2001 (James, 2011). There were high profile cases of electoral fraud in the early 2000s which led many to question the 'purity of elections' (Wilks-Heeg 2008, 2018). Hill et al. (2017) reported evidence of 'family voting' facilitated by Biraderi structures within the British South Asian communities. The Conservative-led

governments from 2010-2014 subsequently focussed on measures to reduce electoral fraud. This included the introduction of individual voter registration in Britain from 2014. Former Conservative Party Chair Erik Pickles published a report which served as a blueprint for their Elections Bill (Pickles 2016). The argued for the introduction of (non-photographic) voter identification, which was also supported by the Electoral Commission in it's 2014 report on *Electoral fraud in the UK*.

The government introduced an Elections Bill which legislated for voter ID into parliament on 5 July 2021. It was met by considerable opposition. Opposition MPs referred to the proposals as 'voter suppression' throughout and a Democracy Defence Coalition was formed by various civil society groups. Amendments were proposed in both the Commons and the Lords to allow a longer list of documents that could be used as a form of identification at polling stations. However, the government whipped its MPs to reject this. The Bill was therefore passed back to the Lords in the final minutes of the parliamentary session as originally proposed by the government. The Elections Act 2022 received royal assent on 28th April 2022. However, detailed secondary legislation required to implement the new voter identification procedures only came into force on 16 January 2023, less than four months before polling day. Consequently, the website through which a free Voter Authority Certificate could be applied for was not live until 16th January 2023 and needed various patches and updates– with the last taking place on 12 April 2023, less than two weeks ahead of the polls (AEA 2023: 7).

The May 2023 Local Elections

In May 2023, 230 councils were scheduled to hold elections. These included 152 district councils, 32 metropolitan district councils, and 46 unitary authorities. There were also four local mayoral elections. Underlining the scale of the challenge, seven in ten English voters were eligible to vote in these local elections.ⁱ Given a total English electorate of 40.8m in December 2022, this meant that around 28.6m were eligible to vote in these first voter ID elections.ⁱⁱ Easing the pressure on polling stations was the fact that local elections have low turnouts, often around the mid-30% range.

The growing pressures that electoral officials were under in implementing the legislation are also noteworthy backdrop to the election. Public services were facing considerable economic pressures with exceptionally high inflation, accompanied by declining grant levels for local government (Wallis 2023). This followed evidence of earlier cost pressures across local electoral services departments (Democracy Volunteers 2021) and that the complexity of electoral laws were making elections more difficult to implement (Public Administration and Constitutional Affairs Committee 2019). Other problems with the electoral machinery included up to 9 million people either inaccurately or not registered (Electoral Commission 2019a).

In addition to voters being turned away on polling day, there were various additional expectations about how election day might develop. Among these were that processing voters would take longer, meaning that queues would build up. An additional worry was that some voters may be aggressive if turned away because they didn't have ID. In the event, many councils deployed 'greeters' or 'information officers' to help manage footfall. This was to become controversial in efforts to establish the effects of the voter ID law, as discussed below. Provision was made for voters to remove face coverings in private, necessary for instance for Muslim women, to have their ID checked. In short, the new voter identification requirements were to be implemented in an extremely challenging context for electoral officials. Scrutiny of those delivering the elections on polling day was likely to be high.

7. Research Questions and Methods

Several research questions arise about the implementation of voter ID from this discussion, which poll worker views may help to ascertain:

- Q1: What problems were faced by poll workers on polling day?
- Q2: What effects did voter identification requirements have?
- Q2: What recommendations do poll workers have for improving the election-day experience?

To address these questions, the article reports data from a survey of poll workers who worked at the election. A poll worker survey was designed in collaboration with the Electoral Commission, based on previous surveys run at elections across the UK since 2015 (Clark and James 2017; 2020). A QR code was made available for each RO to circulate to their poll workers. Those who responded did so online. The sample was therefore an opt-in convenience sample. 2,694 poll workers responded. In addition to multiple-choice questions, respondents were given the opportunity to provide free text comments. Overall, 4,060 qualitative comments were made. There were 29 comments about general problems experienced, there were 221 comments in response to disabled voters having a problems voting, 2,017 comments about improvements to the system and 1793 other comments. A thematic analysis was undertaken of the 2017 suggested improvements comments based on the approach developed by Braun and Clarke (2016). Codes were developed inductively from the text.

There are some limitations to using the data-source. No data about the population of poll workers in the UK exist so we do not know how representative the survey is. Responses were collected on the day – but others may have relied upon recollection. However, this remains the most comprehensive dataset on comments from poll workers to date. It is therefore an important and significant source of information about poll worker views.

8. Results

Poll Workers and their Training

Understanding poll worker training is important to understand the source of the knowledge that they use on polling day. Superficially, it seems that there was a high level of attendance at training organised by electoral services teams in councils for the 2023 English local elections. Asked whether they had attended training, 97.7% (N=2649) said that they had done so. The survey probed further about the type of training that poll workers had received. The surveys reporting confusion amongst a sizeable minority in table 1 above were all pre-pandemic, when most poll worker training was conducted present in-person. Pre-pandemic training often included aspects such as mock polling stations to give poll workers some sense of their actual working practices on election day.

As with other forms of learning, this all moved online during the pandemic and particularly for the complex pandemic elections held just after lockdown was lifted in May 2021. Findings on the modes of training used to prepare poll workers for the elections implementing voter ID in 2023 are stark. Only 12.6% of poll workers received in-person training. Over four-fifths received training by remote means: 25.9% by Zoom or other video-conferencing facility; and 55.7% via a link to watch a recorded presentation (N=2582).

Front Line Problems Experienced by Poll Workers

Problems in polling stations are only occasionally reported. They do exist however, and did so prior to the introduction of voter ID. Queues, angry voters, ‘family voting’, administrative difficulties and incorrectly or unregistered voters being turned away have all been experienced in British polling stations in recent years. Issues around personation fraud in polling stations, often cited in justifying voter ID, have however essentially been non-existent.

The introduction of voter ID was expected to make this picture worse, by introducing potential conflict points where poll workers were having to use their discretion to turn away or accept voters. This would take longer than usual. Queues were a potential outcome, as were aggrieved voters who had been turned away. Contrary to overall expectations of a chaotic set of elections, a positive picture was painted by poll workers of how the election went. For example, 95.5% (N=2550) agreed or strongly agreed that ‘the public were respectful to polling station staff’. In total, 98.8% agreed or strongly agreed that ‘overall the election was well run at the polling station I worked at’ (N=2,579). Moreover only 6.3% disagreed or strongly disagreed with the statement that ‘Very few people who turned up to vote were turned away without being allowed to vote’ (N=2550).

These statements are not incompatible with polling station staff having to deal with various difficulties. Table 2 reports responses to three questions which are comparable with those asked in previous poll worker studies. This permits some indication of whether these problems either improved or deteriorated in the 2023 local elections held with voter ID. In terms of suspected cases of personation (Column A), it remains the case that poll workers have very little concerns about the key form of electoral fraud voter ID was meant to address. More than 99% of poll workers had no cases of suspected personation electoral fraud. This was already a rare problem even before voter ID, and its introduction seems to have done nothing in polling stations to change this.

	<i>Column A</i>			<i>Column B</i>		<i>Column C</i>	
	Suspected cases of personationⁱⁱⁱ			People being turned away because they did not have the appropriate identification		People coming to the polling station but deciding not to vote as they did not want to comply with the ID verification requirement	
%	<i>2015</i>	<i>Pilots</i>	<i>2023</i>	<i>Pilots</i>	<i>2023</i>	<i>Pilots</i>	<i>2023</i>
None	99.1	99.3	99.2	47.6	29.5	76.7	84.6
1	0.9	0.6	0.7	22.2	29.5	18.6	11.3
2-5	0.0	0.1	0.1	24.5	35.4	3.7	3.6
6-10	0.0	0.0	0.0	4.3	3.6	0.8	0.4
10+	0.0	0.0	0.0	1.3	1.9	0.2	0.2

Table 2: Frequencies of personation and cases of citizens not being able to vote because of voter ID. Percentage of all responses shown. Note that the question wording in 2015 asked about incidence of ‘suspected cases of electoral fraud’. Sources: additional data from for 2015 from Clark and James 2017 and the pilots from Clark and James 2020.

Questions about voters either being turned away because they did not have the appropriate ID, or not wanting to comply with the voter ID requirement show a different picture (Columns B and C). In 2023, fewer poll workers report no instances of people being turned away because of inappropriate ID than in the pilots. Put differently, a greater proportion of poll workers (70.5%) experienced at least one case of this, by comparison with 50.4% in the pilots in 2018/19. As one poll worker said, that:

‘(That) Women were turned away because they got married and changed their names then their id and register names were different is gender discrimination!! I'm quite upset that I've turned voters away and particularly discriminating against woman.

This increased incidence is likely to be a consequence of implementing voter ID in major public elections for the first time, confirming expectations about increased numbers of potential voters turned away (See: Fieldhouse et al, 2024). Given the amount of expenditure on a public information campaign, this ought to be a concern, since those who turnout to vote in local elections are often among the more motivated and informed voters in the wider electorate (Clark and Krebs, 2012).

The proportion of poll workers experiencing any cases of people coming to the polling station, but then deciding not to vote seemed to have fallen between the pilots in 2018/19 and the actual elections in 2023. In the pilots, 23.3% of poll workers experienced at least one instance of this during election day. This fell to 15.4% in 2023. While this reduction could be interpreted positively by government, the counter-argument is that this still represents a worryingly high number of occasions where people decide not to exercise their democratic rights because of a newly introduced administrative burden, not least at a time when there is regular concern about political disengagement.

The question of when and where potential voters were turned away is vital in evaluating the implementation of voter ID. The legislation set out requirements for ROs to record the number of voters turned away.^{iv} However, poll workers were only required to keep a record of voters that made it to the desk in the polling station where registration and ID was checked and ballot papers issued before being turned away. This is where the employment of information officers or greeters became controversial. These staff met voters *before* they arrived at the polling desk. The worry was that information staff would remind people that they had to have ID, leading to people either being turned away or deciding not to vote, crucially before the presiding officer or polling clerk were able to check their ID and accurately record those turned away. There was also concern in some locations about party activists performing a similar role and reminding voters about ID outside polling stations. Put simply, voters being turned or turning away before reaching the desk meant that any subsequent estimate of the effects of voter ID could only ever be an underestimate. The magnitude of this underestimate was unknown.

Figure 1 demonstrates that concerns on this point were valid. Respondents observed that the vast majority of voters were reminded about the need for ID either outside the polling station, or before they got to the polling desk where any voters being turned away could be recorded. Only around 15% of poll workers indicated that voters would have made it to the desk before being reminded about the need for voter ID. Nonetheless, poll workers seem to have concluded, contrary to academic suspicions, that this did not lead to an under-estimate. Only 7.2% thought there was a slight or large underestimate, while more than two-thirds (67.0%) thought estimates were about right, and 5.8 thought numbers had been overestimated, by a slight or large margin. A further 19.9% didn't know (N=2125).

Figure 1: When Were Voters Reminded about ID?

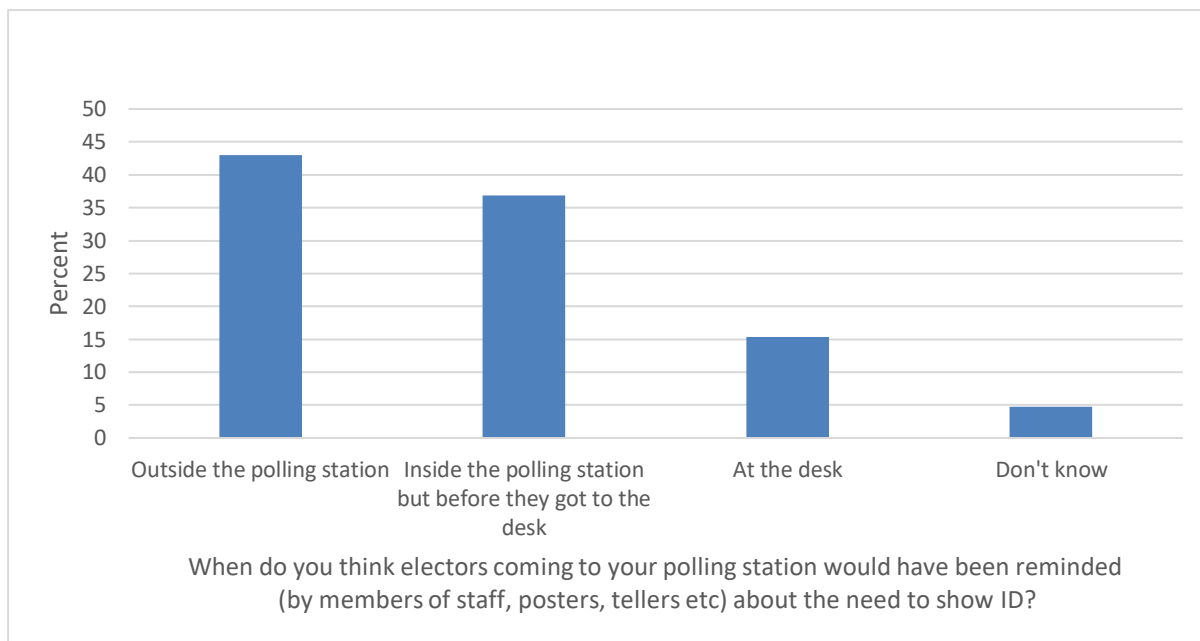
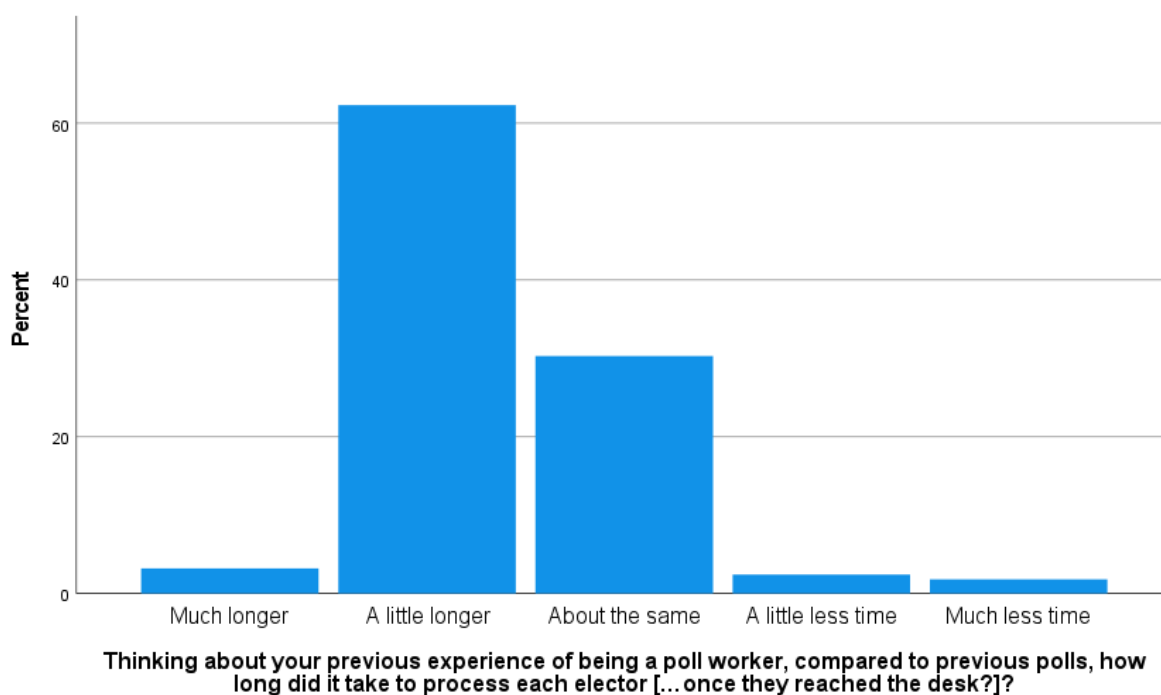


Figure 2: Time Taken to Process Voters



Increased time taken to process voters can lead to queues developing. Queues in polling stations have, in American election administration research, been highlighted as a potential disincentive towards voting for electors who might be, for example, time poor (Highton, 2006). Increased time taken to vote adds to the potential cost of voting. In Britain, issues around election queues have been relatively rare. As noted above, queues in the 2010 general election hit the headlines when

queues built up in mainly inner-city areas towards close of poll, with varying degrees of response by polling station staff. However, only 5.6% of poll workers indicated that they had problems with queues during polling day in the 2015 general election, while only 2.5% said they had problems with queues at close of poll in that same election (Clark and James 2017) (Ns = 1295/1276).

Figure 2 reports the effect of voter ID on the time taken to process voters in polling stations. Introducing a new process like voter ID should mean that it will take longer to do so. Evidence from the May 2021 local and devolved Scottish and Welsh elections, held just after COVID-lockdown eased, illustrates this point well. COVID procedures and social distancing meant that it took longer to for voters to cast their ballot. One polling station in Newport, Wales, closed a full two hours and forty-five minutes after the normal 10pm closing time. In the 2023 local elections, voter ID also led to it taking longer to process voters. Indeed, over 60% of respondents indicated this had been the case where they were working. Nonetheless, only 1.4% (n=2548) indicated that 'long queues caused voters considerable inconvenience at my polling station'. It is worth recalling that local elections often experience low turnouts. While a longer processing time might be manageable in low turnout local elections, in a general election where turnout is often almost double that for local councils, this will inevitably lead to queues, particularly at pinch points during the day such as the end of the working day, or close of poll.

Finally, what was the overall experience of working on polling day during the first large scale implementation of voter ID like for poll workers? Respondents were asked how their experience in May 2023 compared with previous elections they had worked at. Only 10.7% said that their experience was a bit or a lot easier. Otherwise, responses were divided between 'about the same' (44.6%) and either a lot or a bit more difficult (44.7%; N=2009). Even though local authorities already find it difficult to recruit sufficient poll workers to staff elections, this increased difficulty noted by many did not seem to act as a deterrent to working in future elections; 94.8% of respondents said they would either definitely or probably be willing to do so again.

Poll worker suggestions for improvements

Poll workers were asked for suggestions on how to improve the process. Responses were coded inductively using thematic analysis by one researcher. Table 3 summarises the frequencies of the most commonly cited themes. It also lists the recommendations under each theme. Overall, there were 1,381 references made to 59 codes.

A large number of 322 poll workers said that no improvements could be made and 16 'did not know'. Many poll workers were therefore very positive:

'I personally wouldn't change anything at our station. It worked like clockwork.'

Many comments did not directly relate to voter identification. Working conditions were commonly cited. Many poll workers reported having to work in poor conditions which could have been made more comfortable. They requested heating, shorter working hours or better facilities. Polling station locations were sometimes poor. One requested:

'Help locking up, two women alone in the middle of nowhere and no street lights was a little nervous.'

The format of the electoral register was commonly suggested to be problematic. Poll workers suggested that a digital electoral register would be useful – or at least one ordered by name rather than address as it would make electors easier to find and reduce delays. Asking electors to bring their polling card was suggested so that they could easily be identified on the electoral register.

While these suggestions do not directly relate to Voter ID, they may help smooth the running of the polls and use of ID.

Greater use of technology was often suggested:

'Modernize the process, so much can be done digitally to improve everyone's overall experience. The set up is long and tedious and the day runs like it's in the 1800's.'

Improving voter identification

In terms of direct comments about the voter identification requirements, many poll workers felt that voter identification should not be required:

'forget the need for ID, it was very upsetting to turn away people without the right ID and some of them did not return. This is not democracy.'

'Get rid of the pointless ID requirements. It's a solution looking for a problem that doesn't exist. I've never had a case of personation in the 25 years I've been a Presiding Officer.'

'Get rid of voter id requirements. It is not necessary, it causes delays in processing votes and is obviously a ploy by the current Government to bring in voter suppression.'

Others suggested that more forms of ID should be allowed, especially those which younger people rely upon: 'if over 65 bus passes count as ID, why don't young person railcards?' Poll workers in rural areas emphasised the value of allowing gun licences to be included. Some respondents described the requirements as 'discriminatory'.

Some were uncertain about what to do and there was some evidence of variation in implementation:

From talking with other presiding officers, [there was] confusion over what ID was acceptable – [I] erred on the side of giving the people the vote, but this would have been inconsistent across polling stations. E.g. what bus passes (nationally or regionally issued) were acceptable.

Another poll worker made the point that recognising voters in multiple forms of ID was difficult:

Be mindful that not all ID is recognizable for the person especially for expired Passports and Driving license's that show their Picture to have been taken decades previously. It is easy to offend elderly voters whose ID is not recognizable with so many years having passed yet they do provide their address and Poll Card to confirm they are the voter.

It was commonly suggested that that more greeters would be useful to check whether electors had their voter identification before entering the polling station. More publicity about the voter identification requirements was suggested. There were also concerns about the amount of paperwork that officials needed to complete for each polling station. Further innovative use of technology used included biometric voter data was suggested in a very small number of cases:

'the ability for voters to scan their ID in so that this checks them off on the electoral roll on a computer so poll clerks can then issue ballot paper'

It was suggested that the overall administration of elections needed to be eased to enable voter identification to be implemented smoothly:

I have many years' experience of running a busy station (over 50% turnout this year). In order to process the voter ID requirement we need to have shorter registers to administer. I think

that will continue to be true even as voters become familiar with the requirement down the coming years. Currently, the first clerk met by the voter has to check that they are on the register, that they are entitled to vote, and that they have presented the correct ID, before another member of staff can assist. There is no apparent way these tasks can be shared easily, so having a shorter register ie fewer streets for one person to search through, will cut down on queues. We therefore need more staff at every station to look after the new registers.

Training with regards to the voter identification laws was also flagged:

‘train staff better to know the guidance on ID. Most did not know expired ID could be accepted meaning people were turned away. Others thought they had to have the correct address on driving licenses, this meant some were challenged.’

‘The training on identifying fake ID was not adequate to honestly guarantee I could recognise one.’

Meanwhile, staffing was highlighted as being likely to be a greater problem with a more high-profile election:

‘More staff may be needed if a general election as voter uptake is always higher and delays would be longer checking ID’

Theme	Theme definition	Frequent suggestions	Count
Voter identification	The voter id process should be changed	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Voter identification requirements should be scrapped (126) - Additional forms of voter Id should be allowed (student identification, young people's travel cards, gun licences) (54) - Better guidance on spotting fake identification (8) - Other (8) 	196
Working conditions	Working conditions were poor	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Pay was too low - Training was unpaid - There was no heating - There were poor facilities for staff e.g. kitchens - The hours were too long – shorter polling hours/shifts - Few/no breaks - Uncomfortable furniture 	176
Register format	The electoral register was difficult to use for pollworkers	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Electoral register should be listed by surname - A searchable digital register should be used - Poll cards should be requested to find electors more easily 	159
Paperwork	There were too many forms to complete	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - oo much paperwork to complete - Some paperwork could have been easier with the use of colours - Some forms/envelopes were mislabelled - Too many bags, forms and envelopes to juggle 	109
Polling station layout	The polling station was poorly designed or located.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Polling stations were too small - Polling stations were poorly lit, or had faulty facilities such as doors that did not close. - There were too few/many polling stations per elector. - Health and safety needs to be checked 	74
Signage	Signs were inadequate	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - More signage inside and outside - Less signs - Signs promoting/thanking participation - Laminated plastic signage for weather - Signs explaining voter ID requirements 	66
Publicity	Voters needed more information	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - National campaign about voter ID requirements - Publicity about changed polling station locations - Communication to minority communities - Reminders that poll cards are not needed 	59

Staffing volume	Staff volume was problematic	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - There were insufficient staff - There were too many staff - More staff would be needed if it was a general election 	59
Training	Training was inadequate	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Better training quality - Face-to-face training - Training on how to spot fake identification - More experienced co-workers - Follow up for poll workers who do not perform well - More training on being prepared for unusual scenarios 	56
Disability	Voters with disabilities received poor service	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Better access for people in mobility scooters - Better wheelchair access - Polling booths at wheelchair height - Better parking facilities - Ballot paper colours to account for colour-blind 	39
Greeters	Greeters at the doors were needed	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Greeters at the door would help voters and make the process more efficient - Greeters could check that voters had brought ID - More greeters needed for a general election day 	36
Environment	Election day was not environmentally friendly.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Recyclable signs, bags and paper should be used - Digital technology would be more sustainable 	33

Table 3: Frequencies of suggested improvements by poll workers. Top twelve themes provided, ranked by frequency.

9. Conclusion

Elections are the pivotal political institution used to confer legitimate power in almost all states. They have been subject to administrative reforms in many countries, with inevitable partisan debates about the value of reforms. The voices of the people delivering elections on the ground in polling stations are virtually never heard in debates around electoral integrity and reform. This is a major gap in knowledge about the electoral process. This article has innovated by considering the value of workplace democracy to validate the use of poll worker opinions in ‘what works’ and ‘what fails’ at the coal face of elections. It has argued that although poll worker opinions cannot be accepted uncritically in every situation, their views and evidence should also be weighed up amongst other sources of evidence. Unsurprisingly, poll workers overwhelmingly suggested that they should be awarded more pay and reduced hours. This does not necessarily lead to a better experience for the voter. Although it may indicate that poll workers feel underpaid – and this can turn affect how they execute their role. Political parties are involved in recruiting and training of poll workers in some countries, although not in Britain (Clark, forthcoming). More power to poll workers may therefore strengthen parties and undermine democracy. Poll workers may not have

the full knowledge of the legal and political rationale behind some procedures. Giving poll workers ultimate authority might undermine a range of safety mechanisms.

Nonetheless, poll workers can be an important source of information and should have a voice. Enabling their input into the decision-making process is compatible with conceptions of workplace democracy. There is an irony that the decision-making process for elections can often be the least democratic in decision-making because of the politics involved. There is therefore scope for a more participatory process in the design of elections. Listening to poll workers can help this. A workplace democracy approach, this article has argued, involves systematically integrating these views into the decision-making process.

Using poll workers' views in the 2023 English local elections generates a number of important insights about how voter identification worked on the ground and potential areas for reform. Respondents reported virtually no suspected cases of personation - although this was no different to previous elections. Over 70 per cent reported turning away at least one voter because they did not have identification and qualitative comments provided further evidence that voter identification could restrict legitimate participation.

Importantly, poll workers suggested various general improvements both around voter ID and to the polling process more generally. These included: concerns about the effectiveness of training, better working conditions, the use of a reformed (potentially digital) register and more staffing. Many signalled that more staffing would be important if voter identification was to be implemented in a general election. Some suggested that voter identification was not needed - or at a minimum that other forms of identification should be allowed.

Around the world, there are major concerns about democratic backsliding. Scholarship has pointed to how bureaucrats can serve as an important firewall to would-be autocrats by speaking up and flagging potential compromises in democratic quality (Bauer et al. 2020). Poll workers are important bureaucrats without which democracy would administratively not function. They should also be given a voice to defend and enrich it.

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ⁱⁱⁱ The question wording in 2018 and 2019 was 'suspected cases of electoral fraud'.

^{iv} See Schedule 4 of The Voter Identification Regulations 2022,

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