

## How is voter ID framed in UK news coverage?

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### **Extended Abstract**

The UK government passed the Elections Act in April 2022, making voter ID mandatory from 2023. This new rule was brought in on the insistence that the "integrity of elections" needs to be protected. Whilst it is normal to be concerned about something we all hold so dear, that is, democracy, research has found voter fraud by impersonation—which is the only type of electoral fraud a voter ID requirement can prevent—is extremely rare in the UK (James and Clark, 2020). In the past seven years, there have been only three convictions of voter impersonation. Concerns have been raised around whether asking people to show photo ID to cast their ballot might make it harder for people to vote, specially people from minority backgrounds and who are less well-off, all of whom are statistically less likely to own a photo ID. Official data shows that currently only 1% of the estimated 2 million voters who do not have an acceptable form of ID to vote, have applied for a free voter ID card to be able to vote in the upcoming May election.

There is evidence that the voter ID policy was made despite the research, with a recent study highlighting the ‘framing contest’ and polarisation present in political debates about voter ID (Alonso-Curbelo, 2022). As the news media plays a key role in communicating party elite policy frames to the public, this study analyses UK news coverage to understand how news media frames voter ID requirements.

The way the public makes sense of voter ID is important as arguments around public support for voter ID, as well as low confidence in the electoral system, were used by political elites to justify passing these potentially discriminatory laws. While parliamentary debates over voter ID were taking place (2018-2021), there was a concerning rise in people’s beliefs in electoral fraud, despite no correlating increase in cases of voter fraud. In 2021, perceptions of electoral fraud as a problem in the UK almost halved. The Electoral Commission (2022) thinks one possible reason behind this unexpected change is that, because electoral fraud is something that most people don’t directly experience, news media can be a source of influence, so perhaps the absence of widespread elections in 2020 and accompanying media coverage could help explain this shift. The Electoral Commission further speculates the situation in the US could be another contributing factor, as allegations of widespread voter fraud by Donald Trump at the US presidential election were widely dismissed in the UK.

Whilst some literature has emerged in the UK around the legality of the voter ID pilots, the effect of voter ID on voter turnout and around political elite framing of the policy, this study is the first to analyse news media coverage of voter ID. This study builds on findings around political elite framing of voter ID (Alonso-Curbelo, 2022) to better understand the narrative landscape of this controversial policy in the UK. Do frames vary depending on the ideological orientation of the news source? Has this framing changed overtime? Is there a link between frames used by political elites and those present in news media? Which sources or evidence (political figures, organisations, etc.) are used by different news media to support their frames?

### **THEORETICAL CONTRIBUTION**

While traditional news media and social media are blending in a web of “inter-referencing, linking, and sharing” (Zhang et al., 2022), recent work finds mass media still play an important role in legitimizing, amplifying, and spreading disinformation, including election-related

conspiracies (Benkler et al., 2020). This study contributes to the literature on the interlinking between policy, party cues and the media, a topic that is receiving increased attention with the rise of new media and new forms of ‘conspiracism’.

## DATA AND METHODS

We analyse news media coverage since 2014 of 8 top UK news media sorted by ideological orientation; right-leaning (The Sun, The Daily Mail, The Financial Times, Daily Telegraph and The Times) and left-leaning (The Daily Mirror, The Guardian and The Independent).

We follow recent developments in NLP and combine qualitative and inductive computational content analysis techniques to identify frames and map their temporal and ideological dynamics. To understand the discursive context of voter ID, i.e. what topics the issue of voter ID is linked to in news coverage, we first (1) generate semantic networks from headlines for each sub-corpus. We also conduct (2) a keyness analysis of coverage to identify differences in language use depending on the news media’s ideological orientation. To identify ways in which the different sets of media specifically frame this policy (3) we train word2vec models for each sub-corpus. These models map words into a high-dimensional vector space so that words that are used in a similar way are close to each other. We analyze the word context of voter ID (the most similar words of the term “id/identification”) to observe these contextual differences. Following this, (4) we use term frequency-inverse document frequency (tf-idf) scores to visualize and understand how the importance of these specific frames and narratives identified changes over time.

## PRELIMINARY FINDINGS

Descriptive statistics show news coverage about voter ID has progressively increased since the recommendation for voter ID was first published in an Electoral Commission report in 2014, and drastically increased in 2021 by 360%. Early findings also lend support to the hypothesis that the news media in the UK has picked up on allegations of voter fraud by Donald Trump and voter ID laws in the US. From 2018 to 2020, 47.11% of stories by UK media focus on the US compared to 41.19% of stories in the UK, with the focus increasingly moving local in recent years.

## References

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