

The Voter ID Debate: An Analysis of Political Elite Framing in the UK Parliament

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In 2021, the Conservative UK government announced a proposal to introduce mandatory voter identification (ID) in elections, raising concerns around how these measures might disenfranchise already marginalised groups. Using computational content analysis techniques, this study analyses all parliamentary debates to date on voter ID to understand how political elites frame these requirements. Despite voter ID being justified as necessary to tackle voter fraud when the new Elections Bill was first announced, this study instead finds both Conservative and Labour Members of Parliament agree voter fraud numbers are small. Conservatives nevertheless significantly frame voter ID as necessary to strengthen public confidence in the electoral system, which contrasts Electoral Commission's 2021 data instead finding 90% of the public consider voting to be safe from fraud at the polling station. Overall, this study sheds light to the 'framing contest' and polarisation present in parliamentary debates about voter ID, an increasingly contentious issue of the proposed Elections Bill.

Keywords: Computerised content analysis, Framing, Parliamentary Debates, Political Discourse, Voter Identification

1. Introduction

In May 2021, the Conservative government announced a new Elections Bill which aims to make photo ID mandatory from 2023 to 'ensure the integrity of elections' (Gov UK, 2021). Unlike most countries where ID is required to vote, Great Britain¹ has no free or low-cost ID option, and therefore critics warn about potential voter suppression and disenfranchisement, specially of already

¹Northern Ireland introduced mandatory voter ID in 1985 and a free Electoral ID Card in 2002 after extremely high levels of in-person voter fraud at the 1983 General Election. 949 people arrived at polling stations to be told a vote has already been cast in their name and the police made 149 arrests for voter impersonation, resulting in 104 prosecutions (PACAC, 2021, p. 23).

marginalised groups. UK census data show the elderly, people from ethnic minority backgrounds and less well-off are less likely to own a photo ID (ONS, 2011). Shortly after the Bill was first announced, a petition was sent to Parliament to scrap the Bill, which gained over 100,000 signatures in less than five months.

Examining British elite framing of voter ID is crucial as evidence from the USA, where voter ID laws have been increasingly implemented across Republican states over similar concerns around voter fraud, suggests that party elite cues transmitted through the media are important for explaining public perceptions towards election integrity and voter ID laws (Stewart *et al.*, 2016). Moreover, studies on other issues in the UK have shown British elites play a key role in shaping public attitudes (Stevens, 2013; Stoeckel and Kuhn, 2018).

This study is the first to systematically analyse the ways in which political elites justify and challenge voter ID requirements in the UK in the build-up to the proposed legislation. It analyses all parliamentary debates to date about voter ID which span from February 2017 until September 2021 and combines quantitative and qualitative analytical approaches to identify narratives British political elites have used to frame voter ID requirements. This study also brings together cognitive and discourse-based approaches to the study of frames to better understand the role and interlinking of both psychological (cognitive, affect, emotion) and social (discourses, power, legitimacy) attributes framing the issue of voter ID.

2. Why are voter ID requirements so controversial?

The decision to implement voter ID requirements in Great Britain can be traced back to two reports by the Electoral Commission (2014, 2015), where the authors identified 11 areas with ‘Pakistani and Bangladeshi Origin Communities’ as having a greater probability of electoral fraud being reported and listed seven main sources of vulnerability, including community loyalties and pressures from kinship networks. A few months later, this issue became national news when the Bangladesh-born Mayor of the London Borough of Tower Hamlets was removed from office after he was found guilty of electoral malpractice (*BBC News*, 2015). The 2014 ‘Tower Hamlets Scandal’ prompted the Government to commission a review into electoral fraud entitled *Securing the Ballot* (2016), the first of its kind, which was carried out by Conservative Communities Secretary Sir Eric Pickles and concluded with 50 recommendations, including the suggestion for the Government to ‘consider the options for electors to have to produce personal identification before voting at polling stations’ (R8: Pickles, 2016, p. 4). Following this, voter ID trials were held in 5 and then 10 local authorities across England in the 2018 and 2019 UK local elections.

Whilst it is normal to be concerned about something we all hold so dear, that is, democracy, research has found in-person impersonation fraud—which is the

only form of electoral fraud voter ID laws can prevent—is extremely rare in the UK (James and Clark, 2020). In 2020, the police issued a total of one caution for voter impersonation (Electoral Commission, 2020). In the past seven years, there have been only three convictions of voter impersonation (Johnston and Uberoi, 2021). Voter fraud is similarly rare in the USA, which has led voter ID opponents, mainly Democrats and liberals, to claim Republicans use voter fraud allegations as a partisan strategy, as the people more likely to be affected by these laws historically tend to vote Democratic (Hicks *et al.*, 2015). Similar partisan arguments have been recently raised in the UK; representatives of major opposition parties sent a joint letter to the Cabinet Office minister where they described implementing ID requirements as ‘a blatant attempt by the Conservatives to rig the result of future elections’ (Walker, 2019). Shadow home secretary Diane Abbott also claimed the policy was ‘just borrowing from the US Republican playbook’ (*BBC News*, 2016). The potential disenfranchising effects of voter ID requirements were also voiced during the 2018 and 2019 trials. James and Clark’s (2020) study finds voter ID requirements had little effect on the security of the electoral process yet prevented some voters from casting their ballot. Across both pilots, around 2000 citizens did not return to vote after being refused a ballot for not having ID (Palese, 2019). Whilst government ministers claimed the pilot scheme was nevertheless a success, Stanford (2020) notes that given the complexities of voter turnout and the lack of diversity in the participating areas, the statistics concerning voter turnout in the voter ID trials do not tell us enough about the impact of voter identification laws at a national level. The Electoral Commission’s 2018 and 2019 voter ID pilot schemes reports also provide mixed evidence around voter turnout and voter confidence.

3. Framing Voter ID

The adoption of voter ID laws has risen in recent years across the USA, and therefore academic interest in the topic of voter ID has increased considerably in the US context. Whilst some literature has emerged in the UK around the legality of the voter ID pilots (Stanford, 2018*a, b*, 2020), and around the effect of these requirements on voter turnout (James and Clark, 2020), this study is the first to analyse the ways in which political elites frame voter ID. Like Great Britain, the USA also lacks a free or low-cost ID option, and therefore voter ID requirements share similar complexities in the voting system. This study draws on US literature insofar as it enables a better understanding of the issue in the British context.

In the USA, two dominant partisan frames have been identified structuring the elite debate over voter ID laws (Conover and Miller, 2018): the ‘voter fraud frame’ (Republicans argue that voter fraud justifies voter ID laws) and the ‘voter

suppression frame' (Democrats argue the laws are discriminatory). Table 1 displays the key attributes and effects of each frame.

According to Conover and Miller (2018, pp. 492–493), these two competing frames greatly vary in complexity. The 'voter fraud' frame appears straightforward and commonsensical, as it resonates with personal experiences using an ID when, for example, travelling or buying alcohol. According to Chong and Druckman (2007, p. 640), this emphasis on 'available and applicable considerations' disproportionately strengthens the 'voter fraud' frame. The 'voter suppression' frame, however, is more complex, as it entails an understanding of how voter ID laws affect different groups, even when not personally experiencing any negative consequences of the policy.

Whilst the 'voter fraud' and 'voter suppression' frames are identified as the main ways political elites make sense of voter ID in the USA, these two main frames contain and work together with others to the overall frame voter ID positively or negatively. For example, whilst voter fraud is framed as the overarching reason for implementing voter ID, other narratives support this positive framing of the law, such as voter ID being framed as commonsensical, as a public good and as a moral good. The arguments raised by the defendant in Coughlan's High Court case in the UK, which challenged the legality of the Cabinet Office's power to authorise the May 2019 voter ID pilot schemes, highlight the multiple ways in

Table 1 Framing of Voter ID in the USA

Voter fraud frame	Voter suppression frame
(1) Voter ID laws are a <i>public good</i> . They are framed as a 'valence' or impartial issue; they benefit all citizens as they purportedly improve electoral integrity (Hicks <i>et al.</i> , 2015)	(1) Voter ID laws are <i>discriminatory</i> as they disenfranchise minorities (Conover and Miller, 2018)
(2) Voter ID laws are a <i>moral good</i> , as they ultimately help prevent and deter crime (Skitka, 2010)	(2) Voter ID laws are a <i>partisan strategy</i> to suppress Democratic votes (Hicks <i>et al.</i> , 2015)
(3) Voter ID laws are ' <i>commonsensical</i> ' (Lurie, 2014), as citizens are used to showing their ID	(3) Voter ID laws' emotional reaction varies as target groups of the policy vary in vulnerability. Voter ID laws disproportionately anger Democrats (Valentino and Neuner, 2017)
(4) Voter ID laws are <i>affective</i> as both 'fraud' and 'electoral integrity' prompt emotional reactions (Conover and Miller, 2018, pp. 492–493)	
(5) Voter ID laws are linked to 'illegal immigrants' and racial minorities (Dreier and Martin, 2010), implicitly evoking racial bias (Banks and Hicks, 2016)	

which the issue of voter ID has been framed in the British legal context (*R (on the application of Coughlan) v Minister for the Cabinet Office*, 2019). Whilst similar arguments around improving electoral integrity and reducing voter fraud were used, the voter ID pilots were also framed as legitimate through claims around them serving a ‘public interest’ as they represent a ‘modernisation’ of the electoral system, increase ‘voter confidence’, which the defendant argued would in turn increase ‘voter turnout’. The judge ultimately agreed with the defendant, finding that Parliament had ‘intended for pilot schemes to test a range of matters’ (ibid., in Stanford, 2020).

These multiple frames also fall under several framing paradigms. For example, framing voter ID as commonsensical follows a cognitive approach to frames, which tends to focus on the role the ‘receiver’ plays in their interpretation. Contrasting the focus on frames ‘in *thought*’ characterising cognitive approaches, voter ID in the USA is also framed discursively by associating voter fraud with ‘illegal immigrants’ (Dreier and Martin, 2010; Udani and Kimball, 2018), even though they are no more likely to commit a non-immigration-related crime than other groups (Lee and Martinez, 2009). Discourse and corpus approaches developed from the late 1990s onwards place more attention to the socio-cultural dimension of frames, understanding these as ‘powerful units of discourse’ (D’Angelo, 2002). Studies influenced by this discursive dimension of framing analyse choices and patterns of expressions to consider their implications for rhetorical effects, identities, social relations, ideologies, etc. In the USA, whilst studies have found political ideology to be a key driver of misperceptions of voter fraud and attitudes towards voter ID laws (Stewart *et al.*, 2016; Gronke *et al.*, 2019), implicit immigrant and racial bias has also been found to influence beliefs and attitudes towards voter ID, which shows the potential rhetorical effect of associating voter fraud to specific minority groups (Wilson and Brewer, 2013; Banks and Hicks, 2016). A 2010 Cooperative Congressional Election Study also found racial resentment to be a significant influence of perceptions of electoral malfeasance, even after controlling for political predispositions (Wilson and King-Meadows, 2016).

In the UK, Sir Eric Pickles’ report driving the implementation of voter ID, specifically links electoral fraud to South Asian ethnic minority communities. Whilst research is needed to assess the impact of racial resentment on perceptions of fraud in the UK, a report by the Electoral Commission (2014) finds that even though police data and prosecutions show that people accused of electoral fraud and people convicted of fraud come from a range of backgrounds (Electoral Commission, 2014, p. 17), some interviewed campaigners and elected representatives held strong views about electoral fraud being more likely to be committed by or in support of candidates in areas predominately populated by Pakistani and

Bangladeshi South Asian communities.² Indeed, the consequences of linking racial and immigrant minorities to voter fraud in public perceptions in the USA raises questions around the ways in which voter fraud is discursively framed by political elites in the UK's different socio-cultural context.

The presence and overlap of cognitive and discursive frames defining the issue of voter ID in the USA, demonstrates that these varying approaches to frames are not necessarily mutually exclusive, which creates theoretical and empirical ground for viewing frames as both a kind of reasoning based on the underlying embodied experience (Lakoff and Johnson, 1999) and a social linguistic act in the communicative setting (Chilton, 2004). Moreover, the notion of multiple and intersecting frames is often disregarded in current frame analyses (Vliegenthart and van Zoonen, 2011). Combining cognitive and discursive approaches provides a suitable framework to understand the ways in which both psychological (cognitive, affect, emotion) and social (discourses, power, legitimacy) frames shape the debate around voter ID in the British context. This study therefore follows recent applications of framing within cognitive, constructivist and critical perspectives (Omrow, 2018; Semino *et al.*, 2018).

4. Data and methodology

4.1 Data: UK Parliamentary Debates

Policies are outcomes of contests over meaning, of struggles between different ways of tactically framing the interpretation of an issue (Loizides, 2009). This is specially the case in the framing of electoral policies, as they directly influence levels of political participation and therefore affect electoral outcomes (James, 2012, p. 50). Despite perceptions of electoral fraud almost halving in 2021 compared to 2020, and public confidence in the running of elections being at its highest, a majority of the British public still believe a voter ID requirement would make them more confident in the security of the voting system. Whilst research on what drives public attitudes towards voter ID is still needed in the UK, studies in the USA show support for voter ID is largely explained by party elite cues transmitted through the media and driven by voters' political ideology (Bowler and Donovan, 2016; Udani and Kimball, 2018, p. 403).

Political elites play an important role in establishing the primary interpretation of a political issue (Hall *et al.*, 2013). This interpretation then 'commands the field' and sets the terms of reference or parameters within which all further

²Overall, however, elected representatives and campaigners had reservations about the voter ID measures proposed, viewing them as disproportionate to the scale of the problem and expressing concern about their possible impact on accessibility and participation.

coverage or debate takes place (Greenwood-Hau and Gutting, 2021). Speeches in parliamentary debates are therefore not only useful to understand how politicians strategically frame crucial political phenomena like voter ID, but also set the political agenda and play a key role in attracting media attention and shifting public opinion (Eggers and Spirling, 2014).

The corpus for analysis contains all parliamentary debates to date about voter ID in both the House of Lords and Commons, which span from February 2017 until September 2021.³ A search through *Hansard* with the key words ‘voter ID’ or ‘voter identification’ returned 16 debates, comprising a total of 420 MP statements (70,742 words). To compare how the major right- and left-wing parties frame voter ID, the corpus is subdivided to contain statements from Conservative and Labour MPs. Only the major right and left-wing parties are included in the analysis as 87% of statements came from MPs from these parties.

4.2 Methodology: Computational frame analysis

This study combines principles of quantitative and qualitative analytical approaches to frame analysis. Research is conducted using inductive computerised content analysis methods, which are particularly well-suited to analyse emerging phenomenon, combined with a critical qualitative inquiry of the text.⁴ Whilst the role of the researcher is crucial to interpret the meaning of the outputs, computerised text analysis methods enable a more reliable and valid combination of quantitative/empirical and qualitative/interpretative examination.

As in other forms of automatised analysis of large textual corpora, its use involves pre-treatment and modification of the original text to reduce complexity. IRaMuTeQ does lemmatisation (grouping together the inflected forms of a word so they can be analysed as a single item) and therefore the analysis is subject to a degree of language dependence. Function words that have little or no substantive meaning and re-occurring expressions used by both parties (e.g. Hon. Member, Hon Friend, Hon. Members, etc.) are also removed in pre-processing. The term ‘identification’ is also analysed as ‘id’.

A keyness analysis is first conducted to identify which words are more frequently used by Conservative MPs when discussing voter ID compared to Labour MPs. Keyness is a statistical index used to evaluate how significant a word is to a document (Bondi and Scott, 2010). The statistical significance of the frequency

³The Elections Bill debate held on the 7 September 2021 was included as 78% of MPs statements discussed voter ID. Statements about other topics concerning the Bill such as campaign finance and voting age were removed from the corpus to keep only statements about voter ID.

⁴The analyses are conducted using the *quanteda* package in R, and *Iramuteq*, a quantitative text analysis software based on the R statistical software and on Python language.

difference is reported through Chi-squared values. Positive values mean that the keyword appears more often than would be expected by chance (i.e. in Conservative MP's statements) in comparison with the reference corpus (i.e. in Labour MP's statements). Likewise, a word which is negatively key occurs less often than would be expected. Although keywords will not readily reveal frames, unusually frequent words direct the researcher to important concepts in a text which may help diagnose and nominate central ideas around which the frame is constructed. The most significant keywords are further explored by analysing their concordances through the keyword-in-context (KWIC) function, which returns a list of sentences with keywords in their immediate context. The keyness analysis, complemented with the analysis of keyword concordances, is used to identify the most predominant narratives used to frame the adoption of voter ID by both parties.

Following the initial keyword analysis, two co-occurrence networks are generated, one for each sub-corpus. Co-occurrence networks map not only the varying prominence of words, or how *key* words are (signalled by relative word size), but the structure of association between words in the texts (signalled by the thickness of the connection or 'edge'). Contrasting the keyness analysis, which quantitatively compares word frequencies between the two sub-corpora, co-occurrence networks allow to contrast the way the same keyword (e.g. 'people'), even if used to a similar extent, might be used differently by each party. Abercrombie and Batista-Navarro's (2020) review of analyses of legislative speeches to date finds most approaches tend to disregard the debate's discourse structure. Filling this methodological gap, co-occurrence networks not only enable to identify other frames used to make sense of voter ID, but also to visualise the ways these are structured or related to each other. The aim of this analysis is not to quantify the extent to which these frames are used or their salience, but to identify them and situate them in the debate. The KWIC function is used again here to verify whether the interpretation of the frames at face value holds when confronted with concrete formulations in the texts under analysis.

5. Findings

Figure 1 displays the results from the keyness analysis and shows that the word Conservative MPs most frequently use when discussing voter ID compared to Labour MPs is 'system'. Other significant keywords are 'confidence', 'welcome', 'important', 'ensure' and 'reasonable'. The Labour Party's most significant keyword is 'government', with other significant words such as 'million', 'people', 'money', 'disproportionate', 'human rights', 'barrier' and 'suppression'. Exploring these keywords through the KWIC function reveals how these terms work together to construct two main partisan frames. As aforementioned, in the

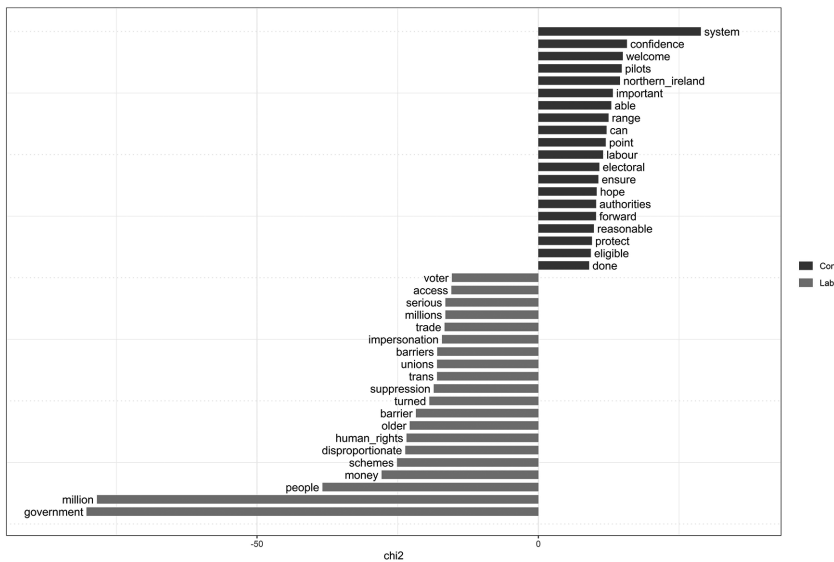


Figure 1. Keyness output. The bars represent the top 20 words with the largest statistically significant differences between Conservative and Labour MPs.

USA, the debate about voter ID revolves around two dominant frames: the voter fraud frame (Republicans claim voter ID laws are necessary to prevent widespread voter fraud), and the voter suppression frame (Democrats instead argue the laws are ‘discriminatory’ as they disenfranchise minorities).

From the keyness analysis, we find a similar partisan picture, with the Conservative Party in favour of voter ID and the Labour Party showing awareness of its potential negative effects. However, contrasting the predominant Republican framing of voter ID as necessary to prevent widespread voter fraud, Conservative MPs key justification for voter ID revolves around strengthening public confidence in the system, and not only the integrity or well-functioning of the electoral system itself. Echoing Democratic framing in the USA, Labour members position themselves against the Government⁵ and warn about the disproportionate impact of this policy in terms of voter suppression and disenfranchisement. These results suggest British elite framing is structured around two main frames: a ‘voter confidence’ frame (Conservative Party) and a ‘voter suppression’ frame (Labour Party).

Figures 2 and 3 display the co-occurrence networks generated from Conservative and Labour MP statements, respectively. Conservatives’ sub-corpus

⁵The timeframe for analysis is entirely during a Conservative government period and therefore the term Government is used by Labour MPs to refer to the Conservative government specifically.

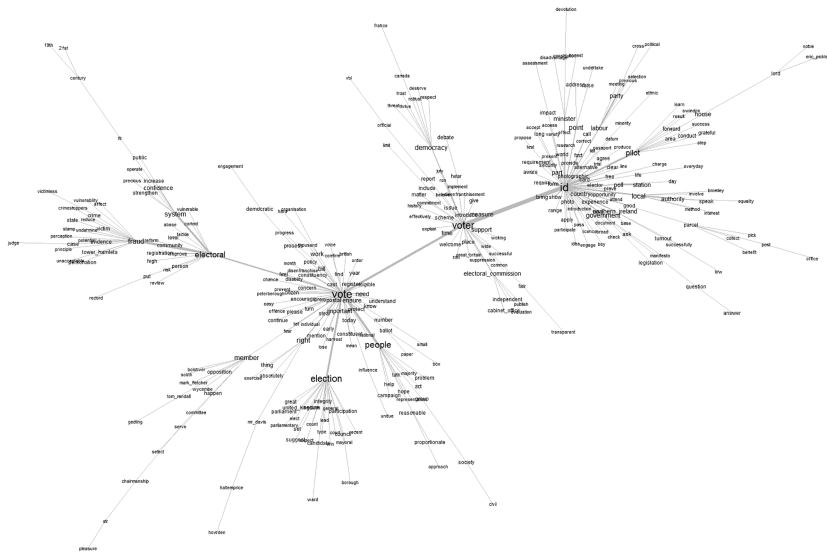


Figure 2. Co-occurrence network of Conservative MP statements. The figure has an edge threshold of four (words with at least four connections) and uses the layout algorithm Fruchterman–Reingold. The thickness of the connections (or ‘edges’) between words denotes the strength of the association.

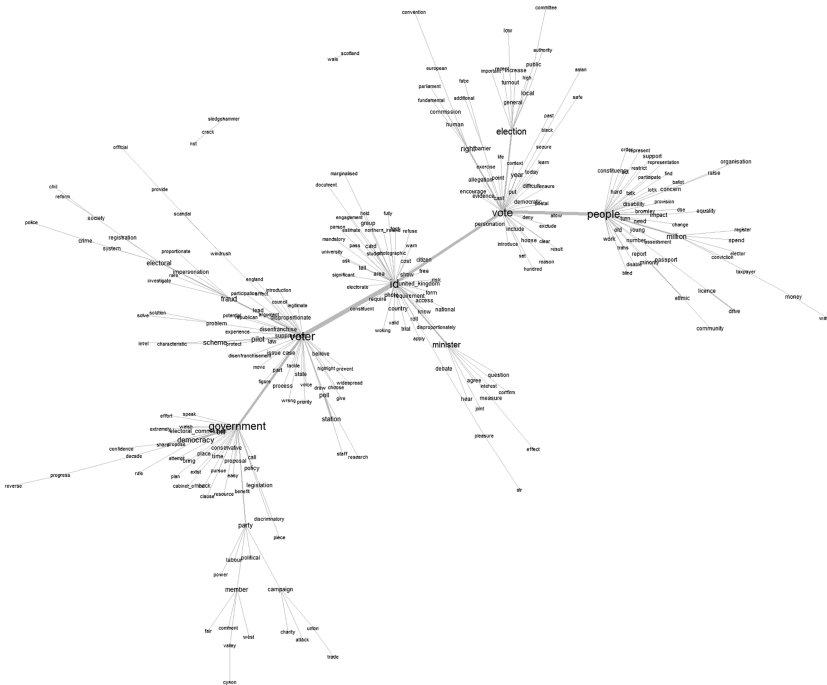


Figure 3. Co-occurrence network of Labour MP statements. The figure has an edge threshold of three and uses the layout algorithm Fruchterman–Reingold.

is structured around four three organisational axes: ‘vote’, ‘voter’ and ‘id’. From these main hubs, a number of connections emerge, some of which become distinct enough to form discrete hubs, for example the main axis ‘vote’ is connected to hubs around the terms ‘electoral’, ‘election’ and ‘people’. The co-occurrence network generated from Labour MP statements shows that Labour’s sub-corpus is structured around five main organisational axes: ‘government’, ‘voter’, ‘id’, ‘vote’ and ‘people’.

The KWIC function is again used to find the immediate context of words appearing in the networks. Frames are not only constantly negotiated *within* political parties but also contested *between* them. The two co-occurrence networks are explored simultaneously to more readily identify counter-frames that might have developed to rebut, undermine or neutralise another group’s frames. To account for this ‘framing contest’, the following section presents and discusses the frames identified in both outputs concurrently. Whilst the keyness analysis reveals that Conservatives’ largely frame voter ID as necessary to strengthen public confidence in the electoral system, with Labour MPs warning about potential voter suppression, other frames are identified that play a role in positively/negatively framing the policy. The following section presents the frames identified in each sub-corpus. It is important to note that whilst the frames and narratives are grouped and presented thematically, these often work together and interlink to support the overall evaluation of voter ID as positive or negative.

5.1 Framing voter ID as a public good/bad

Conservative MPs present voter ID as a public good in three main ways: First, they argue that implementing voter ID ultimately strengthens public confidence in the system (in network: connection between ‘system’ and ‘confidence’). Conservative MPs cite public perceptions of fraud, instead of actual numbers of voter fraud cases, to justify the law (in network: connection between ‘fraud’ and ‘perception’). Their insistence on strengthening public confidence is also often paired with the argument that voter fraud could potentially occur. This potentiality not only threatens democracy, they argue, but also ‘ultimately undermines confidence and promotes perceptions of vulnerability’ (Chloe Smith, Conservative MP, 23 April 2018). We can visualise this frame through the connection between ‘fraud’ with ‘potential’ and ‘vulnerability’. Secondly, Conservatives claim voter ID is necessary to strengthen the integrity of the system and therefore protect democracy for all. This is visualised in the network through the connection between the words ‘system’–‘precious’ and ‘strengthen’, the connection between ‘democracy’–‘deserve’, ‘respect’ and ‘threat’ and between ‘fraud’–‘unacceptable’ and ‘reduce’. Contrasting the dominant US Republican elite narrative about voter fraud being ‘widespread’, in the UK, there is a cross-

party consensus that numbers of reported fraud are small. Conservative MPs argue however that, despite this, voter ID is necessary as a single vote could shift an election result. They do so by quoting rare close victories such as ‘Woking’ where ‘one of the candidates won by just 10 votes and another by just 16 votes’ (Mr Jonathan Lord, Conservative MP, 6 June 2018), a constituency name appearing connected to the main axis ‘voter’. Thirdly, Conservatives claim ‘most voters regard this [measure] as a reasonable and sensible step’ (Chloe Smith,⁶ Conservative MP, 27 June 2018), and position themselves as giving voice to what ‘the people’ want (in network: connection between ‘vote’ and ‘people’, the latter also appearing connected to ‘reasonable’, ‘proportionate’ and ‘majority’).

Whilst Conservative MPs frame voter ID as a public good and position themselves as giving voice to the people (namely, the general voting public) we can see the word ‘people’ is central in Labour’s network, a key word to their discourse as shown in the keyness analysis. The connection between ‘people’ and ‘restrict’, ‘impact’, ‘disabled’, ‘trans’, ‘young’, ‘old’ and ‘ethnic–community’, highlight how Labour is standing for the people disenfranchised or affected by the policy. Whilst Conservatives frame voter ID as necessary to prevent voter fraud and strengthen the system’s integrity, the connections in Labour’s co-occurrence network between ‘fraud’ and ‘rare’ highlight Labour’s counter-frame. Labour MPs instead frame voter ID as a disproportionate measure when considering the actual small numbers of fraud cases. The metaphor of ‘cracking a nut using a sledgehammer’, entitling Electoral Reform Society’s (2018) report on the 2018 Voter ID trials, is used to illustrate the disproportionality of the law considering the extremely rare incidence of voter fraud (in network: connections ‘nut-crack-sledgehammer’). This triggers the construction of a mental image or picture (Carston, 2018), and leads us to ‘see’ one thing (the implementation of voter ID requirements) as another (cracking a *nut* = voter fraud cases, using a *sledgehammer* = voter ID).

5.2 Framing voter ID as ‘commonsensical’/barrier

Voter ID is further framed by Conservative MPs as commonsensical, by arguing that citizens are used to showing their ID in their daily lives (in network: connection between ‘id’ and ‘everyday-life’). The connection between the main axis ‘vote’ and ‘difficult’ highlight Labour’s counter-narrative and key frame identified in the keyness analysis, i.e. voter ID is not common sense, as it ‘can be difficult for some communities to provide official documentation’ (Cat Smith, Labour

⁶The prevalence of Chloe Smith’s statements throughout the discussion is due to her being the Conservative Minister responsible for all Cabinet Office policies and leading the department, and therefore the MP who made the most statements about the reform (110 out of a total of 420 statements).

MP, 10 April 2019). Labour MPs instead frame voter ID as an unnecessary barrier to voting (in network: connection between ‘bill’ and ‘discriminatory’, ‘voter’ and ‘disenfranchise’, ‘affect’, ‘prevent’ ‘suppression’, between ‘vote’ and ‘barrier’, ‘difficult’, ‘exclude’ and ‘deny’).

Conservatives further strengthen their framing of voter ID as commonsensical by maintaining the British system needs to be updated and modernised, presenting voter ID as a natural progression of a well-functioning democracy (in network: connection between ‘electoral’ and ‘system’, the latter linked to ‘fit’, ‘century’—‘19th’ and ‘21st’). Labour argues the opposite, claiming the proposed bill ‘reverses decades of democratic progress’ (Rachel Hopkins, Labour MP, 7 September 2021) (in network: ‘Government’—‘decade’—‘progress’—‘reverse’). Moreover, the connection between the term ‘voter’ and ‘Republican’ in Labour’s network highlights Labour MPs comparison of the proposed voter ID legislation to the ‘dangerous laws passed by the Republican party’ in the USA (Fleur Anderson, Labour MP, 7 September 2021). Conservatives instead cite other countries where voter ID is in place, for example, France, Canada and Northern Ireland, and argue that implementing voter ID will bring the British ‘electoral system in line with others’ (Lord Young of Cookham, Conservative MP, 24 April 2018) (in network: connection between ‘ID’ and ‘Northern Ireland’—‘turnout’ and ‘democracy’—‘Canada’ and ‘France’). At times, these countries are mentioned to directly counter Labour MPs comparison to the USA:

You said that it is a racist policy to bring back Jim Crow laws from the United States. Are you aware that the world’s most successful multi-racial democracy, Canada, uses voter ID, as well as highly respected democracies such as Sweden, Norway, the Netherlands, Italy and France? (Anthony Browne, Conservative MP, 7 September 2021)

5.3 *Framing voter ID as a moral good/bad*

Conservatives further strengthen their frame of voter ID as a public good by also portraying the policy as a moral good. Conservative political elites claim that, despite its small numbers, voter fraud is still a ‘crime’ that should be taken seriously, i.e. if you are against crime, you should be against the crime of fraud (despite small number of incidences), and therefore, you have a moral obligation to support voter ID laws (in network: connection between ‘electoral’ and ‘crime’, the latter also connected to ‘unacceptable’). The word ‘principle’ connected to ‘fraud’ highlights this moral dimension, as Conservatives insist voter ID is ‘not about statistics; it is about the principle’ (Chloe Smith, Conservative MP, 6 June 2018).

Conservatives further stress that voter fraud is not a ‘victimless’ crime (in network: connection between ‘crime’ and ‘victimless’, and ‘fraud’ and ‘victim’).

Categorising fraud as a ‘crime’ also provides a common ground in which to compare this type of crime to others. These comparisons are often made through emotive language. For example, the small numbers of voter fraud allegations are compared to rape allegations, which tend to be under-reported. This arguably strengthens the moral obligation to support the law.

The hon. Lady asks whether we should be focusing on crime that involves small numbers. Well, really—I ask her whether she would have said that decades ago about, for example, *rape*. Would she have said that about a crime that was under-reported? Would she have said that about a crime that involves small numbers simply for that reason? Of course, she would not. *Nobody would do so because it would of course be disgraceful*. It would be disgraceful to make that argument about small numbers, and that is the argument that Labour Members are making. Crimes with small numbers should not be ignored, *people should none the less be protected against them*, and that is what we are doing. (Chloe Smith, Conservative MP, 10 April 2019)

Similar to Conservatives’ network, we also find ‘fraud’ linked to ‘crime’ in Labour’s co-occurrence network. Under closer examination, this reflects Labour’s direct disputing of Conservatives’ accusation that they are ‘disgraceful’ or immoral for not supporting a law used to prevent a crime, despite its small incidences. Whilst ‘electoral fraud is a serious crime and every allegation must be investigated fully’, they argue ‘the proposals outlined by the Government are clearly disproportionate’ (Laura Smith, Labour MP, 6 June 2018). Paralleling Conservatives moral framing of voter ID and insistence that the law should be supported in principle, Labour also provides a moral counter-frame by depicting voter ID requirements as a violation of human rights. As Campbell (2004) claims, ‘the very concept of human rights is, at base, a moral one’ (in network: connection between ‘vote’ and ‘human-right’, and ‘people’ and ‘equality’).

5.4 Framing voter ID by mobilising the past

By categorising voter fraud by impersonation under the broad umbrella of electoral fraud (in network: connection between ‘electoral’ and ‘fraud’), Conservatives are also able to operationalise cases of fraud such as the Tower Hamlets electoral fraud scandal, which do not correspond to the fraud the law actually prevents, namely, *voter* fraud or fraud by impersonation. Nevertheless, Conservatives bring up the Tower Hamlets 2014 electoral fraud case implying the proposed law would help prevent similar cases (in network: connection between ‘electoral’, ‘fraud’ and ‘Tower-Hamlets’).

Studies based in the USA have found racial resentment to significantly influence perceptions of electoral malfeasance (Wilson and Brewer, 2013; Banks and Hicks, 2016) and that the voter fraud frame implicitly evokes racial bias because of its recurrent association to 'illegal immigrants' and racial minorities. By mobilising people's historical imaginary of the Tower Hamlet's electoral fraud case, Conservative MPs strengthen the association between voter fraud and minorities, specifically the South Asian community, which, as evidenced in official police statistics, is no more likely to commit fraud than other groups. Reinforcing their key 'voter confidence' frame, Conservatives further argue that such electoral fraud cases have strained public confidence in the voting system, given 'examples such as the electoral fraud in Tower Hamlets, which was extensive and of grave concern to many people' (Chloe Smith, Conservative MP, 23 April 2018).

Labour also effectively mobilises the past by referring to the 2018 Windrush Scandal (in network: connection between the main axis 'voters' and 'Windrush-Scandal'). The Windrush scandal involved British subjects from the Windrush generation and their descendants being wrongly declared illegal immigrants, and therefore detained, deported and denied legal rights by the Home Office. Labour MPs therefore use the specific immigration-related 'hostile environment' policy as an example of the diverse ways discrimination is still prevalent in British polity (Bowling and Westera, 2020), reinforcing their key 'voter suppression' frame, by criticising the Government as disregarding the impact of the ID scheme and its potential to exclude minorities from voting (in network: connection between 'voter' and 'exclude').

The Windrush scandal demonstrated that it can be difficult for some communities to provide official documentation. This is the same hostile environment all over again, and it is shutting our fellow citizens out of public life. (Laura Smith, Labour MP, 6 June 2018)

5.5 Framing voter ID through legitimisation/de-legitimisation strategies

Conservatives also strengthen their stances and support their frames by bringing voices of expertise to the debate. This 'authorisation' or legitimisation is used to show the audience that experts in a specific field are backing the politician's proposal (Van Leeuwen, 2007). Conservative MPs cite Electoral Commission data as key evidence to justify voter ID requirements, stressing they are an independent body, and by doing so, they also reinforce the frame of voter ID laws as a public, impartial good (in network: connection between 'voter'–'electoral_commission' and 'independent'). Whilst not citing specific evidence, Conservative MPs also

assert that the ID pilots were a success, arguing ‘the overwhelming majority of people were able to cast their vote with no impediment’ (Chloe Smith, Conservative MP, 10 April 2019) (in network: connection between ‘id’–‘pilot’ and ‘success’). These factual statements are problematic as the Electoral Commission has confirmed their reports on the pilots (2018: 2019) did not measure the effect of voter ID on minority ethnic communities’ votes (Elgot, 2020).

Labour MP’s also use voices of expertise and data to strengthen their counter-frames, citing instead evidence from Electoral Reform Society (2018) to challenge Conservatives’ statements about low public confidence in the system. Electoral Reform Society’s data instead highlights ‘just 4% of voters believe ID is the most important priority for our democracy’ (Laura Smith, Labour MP, 6 June 2018) (in network: connection between ‘electoral’–‘society’ and ‘reform’). Labour uses data and numbers not only to authorise their statements, but also to underscore numerically the disproportionality between the number of those at risk of disenfranchisement versus the number of allegations of voter fraud. This is a key strategy of *de*-legitimation, that is, the effort to undermine the opponents’ credibility by portraying them as irrational, immoral or lacking authority (Van Leeuwen, 2007).

0.000063% of overall votes cast were allegedly fraudulent is set against data that shows that 7.5% of the electorate do not hold any photographic ID. (Ellie Reeves, Labour MP, 6 June 2018)

Conservatives also de-legitimise the Opposition by claiming that the Labour Government introduced similar ID laws in Northern Ireland in 2002 (a key word also identified in the keyness analysis). Conservatives reference to Labour’s shift in position on the matter of ID not only strengthens the view that voter ID makes sense, as they are already in place in one of UK’s nations, but also frames the Opposition as hypocritical and inconsistent. Conservatives further de-legitimise the Labour Party’s statements by claiming they use the same voter ID scheme in their selection meetings, thus further framing the Opposition as hypocritical (in network: connection between ‘labour’–‘party’ and ‘selection’, ‘meeting’, ‘political’).

Despite all the heckling and scaremongering from the Opposition, not all hope is lost for the Labour party, as only last week, the North Swindon Labour party used exactly the same voter ID scheme for the selection of my latest parliamentary opponent. (Justin Tomlinson, Conservative MP, 23 April 2018)

High turnout in Northern Ireland is also used by Conservatives as evidence that the ID scheme works (in network: connection between Northern Ireland and ‘turnout’). Labour MPs do not explain the differences in voter fraud levels when

voter ID was implemented in Northern Ireland, with their counter-frame instead focusing on the costs of such laws, for both individual voters and for the state (in network: connection between ‘million’ and ‘taxpayer’, ‘money’ and ‘waste’, and connection between ‘ID’ and ‘cost’). Labour MPs claim that Northern Ireland invested millions of pounds to implement their ID scheme, and argue that ‘in these austere times we are led to believe that we do not have the money for our NHS’, perhaps such quantities of money should ‘be spent on much worthier causes, such as our National Health Service (NHS) and our education system’ (Mr Dhesi, Labour MP, 6 June 2018), therefore framing the Conservative Government as inconsistent and hypocritical.

6. Conclusions

This study analysed parliamentary debates to examine the way British political elites, specifically MPs from the Conservative and Labour parties, frame the issue of voter ID. Despite voter ID being justified as necessary to tackle voter fraud when the new Elections Bill was first announced, this study finds there is a cross-party consensus among British elites that actual voter fraud levels in the UK are small. Conservatives nevertheless insist voter ID is necessary to deter potential fraud and strengthen public confidence in the electoral system, and thus not solely for the integrity or well-functioning of the electoral system itself. The Labour Party instead warns about the serious disproportionate impact of this policy in terms of voter suppression and disenfranchisement of marginalised groups.

Through co-occurrence networks, various frames were identified that played a role in supporting this partisan evaluation of voter ID as positive/negative. These revolved around first, framing voter ID as a *public* good/bad. Conservative MPs portray voter ID as a benefit to all British voters and therefore position themselves as speaking for them, contrasted to Labour MPs, who specifically speak for or give voice to the ‘people’ impacted or disenfranchised by the law (trans people, old people, minorities and disabled people). Secondly, British elites use moral frames to try to legitimise or challenge voter ID; Conservative MPs portray voter ID as a moral good, as the measure should be placed by ‘principle’ to tackle ‘unacceptable’ crime, despite its small numbers, contrasted to Labour MPs, who draw on a human rights discourse, with its inherent moral dimension, to instead depict voter ID requirements as immoral. Thirdly, voter ID is framed through claims about the accessibility of ID. Conservatives claim showing an ID to vote is common sense, whilst Labour MPs refer to the 2018 Windrush scandal to highlight how voter ID requirements can be a barrier to voting. Labour MPs mention of the Windrush Scandal corresponds to the fourth frame identified, which revolves around framing voter ID through mobilising the past. Whilst Labour MPs refer to the Windrush Scandal, Conservatives instead refer to the 2014

Tower Hamlets Scandal. By doing so, Conservatives not only incorrectly imply the proposed law would help prevent similar cases, but also implicitly strengthen the association between voter fraud and minorities, namely, the South Asian community, which, as evidenced in official police statistics, is no more likely to commit electoral fraud than other groups.

To legitimise their frames, Conservatives cite the Electoral Commission as key evidence to justify voter ID. Labour MPs instead cite evidence from the Electoral Reform Society to challenge Conservatives claims, using data and numbers to represent the disproportionality of the law. To de-legitimise the Opposition and counter their frames, Conservative MPs portray the Labour Party as hypocritical by stressing that the Labour Government introduced similar ID laws in Northern Ireland in 2002 and currently the party uses the same ID scheme in their selection meetings. Similarly, Labour MPs highlight Conservatives hypocrisy by numerically underscoring the disproportionality between the number of those at risk of disenfranchisement versus the number of allegations of voter fraud, also noting their push for an expensive law while at the same time arguing there is no money available to fund other public services such as the NHS.

Although the exploratory text analysis techniques used do not permit the generalisation of these results, the aim of this study was instead to offer a comprehensive analysis of the ways in which voter ID requirements have been framed in parliamentary debates in the specific UK context. Through inductive computerised text analyses, this research has addressed the methodological gap identified by Abercrombie and Batista-Navarro (2020), whose review of analyses of legislative speeches finds most approaches tend to disregard the discourse structure of the debates. Moreover, combining cognitive and discursive approaches to frames allowed to recognise both psychological (cognitive, affect, emotion) and social (discourses, power, legitimacy) frames through which understandings of voter ID are constructed, and the way these interlink and reinforce each other. How these frames were actually interpreted by those experiencing them, whether in the audience or via the mediation of the debates in television news, the press or social media, is outside the scope of this study. Investigating how British political elites frame voter ID has, however, raised various issues.

Justifying voter ID requirements to remedy low public confidence in the electoral system, instead of factual evidence of voter impersonation (the only type of fraud voter ID can prevent), raises questions around whether policy congruence, i.e. where representatives take actions and decisions in line with the preferences of citizens, necessarily justifies the policy. Linde and Peters (2020) argue that while responsive and responsible decisions may sometimes overlap, when they do not, governments should 'make a choice between what people want and what is the responsible thing to do'. This is specially the case if public opinion on voter

ID might be in part explained or influenced by political elite framing of this issue, a matter to date still unexplored.

This study has also highlighted the ‘framing contest’ and polarisation present in political debates about voter ID. As Gilbert (2015, p. 752) underlines, the ‘sophisticated narrative’ of the voter ID dispute is that it is likely that these laws both ‘deter some fraud, however little, and they simultaneously depress some lawful votes, however few’. The normative question, therefore, becomes evaluating this trade-off. This study shows this nuance is lost in the debate, with political elites substantially framing voter ID on moral rules and as a matter of principle and not fact.

Most concerningly, despite Conservative MPs referring to data from the Electoral Commission to support their key framing of voter ID as necessary to increase public confidence in the electoral system, Electoral Commission data instead shows around 90% of electors considered voting to be safe from fraud at the polling station when the debates analysed were taking place (2018–2021), and that public confidence in the running of elections is currently at its highest (Electoral Commission, 2021). Considering the potential impact of voter ID on certain groups, the Electoral Commission has warned that the mixed evidence from the voter ID trials do not allow for definite conclusions to be drawn on the impact of voter ID on voter confidence and turnout if the requirements were to be introduced at a national level (Electoral Commission 2018, 2019).

These findings therefore also speak to the topic of evidence provision in the electoral policy process, an area that would benefit from further research. Research on electoral systems and electoral laws is deeply political as it can be used to affect legislative changes or public opinion. However, as James (2018) notes, people in power may not benefit from research-based recommendations. He highlights the legislation of voter ID as an example, as ‘significant policy progress was introduced despite the research’. This study finds that even when evidence was used by each party to support their respective frames, these did not interact with, and at times contradicted, each other, underscoring what Larsen describes as ‘my team-your team’ facts, which serve to entrench thinkers into their respective camps. It concerningly parallels Larsen’s (2018, p. 215) description of constitutional debates on voter ID in the USA, where the two sides speak ‘past each other’ and the debate reaches an unhealthy stalemate, and bring Larsen’s (2018, p. 215) anxieties around the way policies such as voter ID are debated and legislated in the USA, to the British context, in that ‘there is reason to be concerned that the facts on the ground will just cease to matter at all.’

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