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RESEARCH ARTICLE

Trans* people's perceptions of political participation in the wake of voter identification requirements: evidence from the UK

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The UK Elections Act 2022 introduced a photo identification (ID) requirement for voting in person in UK general elections and local elections in England and Wales. Fiercely debated, civil society groups raised concerns that voter ID would disproportionately impact minorities, including trans* people. Exploring trans* voters' responses to the new rules, this article presents data from an online survey ($n = 205$) and semi-structured interviews ($n = 15$) collected in the aftermath of the English local elections in May 2023. Findings lend support to concerns that voter ID could contribute to voter suppression among trans* people in the UK. Participants anticipated a shift towards postal voting and an overall decrease in the likelihood of voting. Barriers to participation centred on anxiety about presenting photo ID due to the potential for dysphoria, misgendering and challenge. We argue that understanding these affective responses is an important element in unpicking how the new rules will affect trans* people's voting behaviour.

Keywords trans* • voter ID • UK • political participation • voter suppression • emotion

Key messages

- One in four trans* voters in our sample said they were less likely to vote following the introduction of voter ID.
- Trans* people face specific administrative challenges in obtaining a representative photo ID.
- Additional barriers to trans* voters presenting photo ID include fear of dysphoria, fear of misgendering and conflict.
- Trans* voters anticipate making more use of postal votes rather than voting in person.

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Introduction

The UK Elections Act 2022 introduced a requirement for voters to produce photographic identification (ID) when voting in person in UK general elections and local elections in England and Wales. Voter ID has been in place in Northern Ireland since the 1980s, with photographic voter ID required since the Electoral Fraud (Northern Ireland) Act 2002 (Wilks-Heeg and Morris, 2024). However, the rules that applied to local elections in England and Wales from May 2023 and to general elections from October 2023 were new to England, Scotland and Wales.

Reflecting debates in US states where photo ID requirements have been introduced for voters (Ansolabehere, 2009; Hajnal et al, 2017), British civil society groups emphasised that voter ID rules could disproportionately impact minorities (Electoral Commission, 2022), including transgender and non-binary (trans*) people. Researching the new laws before their enactment, UK LGBTQ+ (Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Queer, Trans*, Intersex, Asexual +) organisations Stonewall and the LGBT Foundation found that 'Nearly a quarter of trans respondents (24%) and nearly one in five non-binary respondents (19%) said they do not own usable photo ID, compared to 3% of non-trans respondents' (Robinson Rhodes, 2021: 5). To date, no research has engaged directly with trans* people in the UK about the implications of the new voter ID rules for their political participation.

Beginning to address this gap, we present findings from an exploratory study on trans* people's perceptions of voter ID in the aftermath of England's local elections in May 2023, combining descriptive data from an online survey with qualitative accounts from 15 semi-structured interviews with trans* voters in England, Scotland and Wales. We show that trans* people in the UK anticipate changes to their political participation in the wake of voter ID rules, including a reduction in perceived voting likelihood and a shift towards postal votes instead of voting in person.

Although our sample had high levels of access to authorised forms of voter ID, there was a clear distinction between 'legally accepted' ID and photo ID that participants considered acceptable to use, with a significant portion (one fifth) of participants indicating that they planned to update their photo IDs. Discomfort in showing existing photo IDs to others emerged as a key potential barrier to trans* people voting in person in future. Participants listed dysphoria, anticipated challenge by polling officials and ID that does not represent them accurately as factors dissuading them from future in-person voting. These concerns are shaped by broader barriers faced by trans* people, including administrative barriers to changing official documentation and a hostile climate towards trans* people in the UK. We argue that understanding trans* people's affective (emotional and psychological) responses to requirements to present photo ID is essential to unpicking how the new rules affect voting behaviour within this group. Our work builds on previous scholarship that has highlighted the negative emotional impact of gendered official documentation (Davis, 2017) and voter ID legislation (Bowers and Whitley, 2020). While the exploratory nature of the research prevents strong claims making about the impact of voter ID laws on trans* people's electoral participation, we make an original contribution to emerging literature about trans* voters' relationship to voter ID laws, which has to date been predominantly US focused and favoured quantitative methodologies (Herman, 2012; Davis, 2017; Herman and Brown, 2018; Bowers and Whitley, 2020; O'Neill and Herman, 2020; Strode and Flores, 2021; O'Neill et al, 2022). In particular, our

qualitative data explain how difficulty in navigating bureaucracy and anxiety when presenting ID can contribute to voter suppression within this population, helping to unpick the factors beneath statistical trends and contributing to wider UK and US public and academic debates about voter ID laws and voter suppression (Hicks et al, 2015; Conover and Miller, 2018; Green, 2021; Alonso-Curbelo, 2023; Hansard, 2023; Fieldhouse et al, 2024). Trans* people's access to ID is also particularly timely internationally. In the US, President Trump has signed an executive order that defines sex on a 'biological' basis, which will have significant impacts for trans* people, including the loss of access to appropriate accommodations in spaces like refuges and prisons (Boso, 2025).

We first review extant literature on the relationship between voter ID rules and trans* people's political participation and voting behaviours. Next, we explore the introduction of voter ID in England, Scotland and Wales, detailing key changes to the process of electoral participation and highlighting questions raised about the implications of these legislative changes for trans* voters. After explaining our approach, we describe the characteristics of our study sample, contextualising it within census data from England and Wales (in 2021) and Scotland (in 2022). We then present our findings on, first, anticipated changes in trans* people's political participation following the introduction of voter ID and, second, how voter ID requirements spur anxious affective responses and interact with administrative bureaucracy to create barriers to voting for trans* people.

Voter ID and political participation

Much literature on voter ID laws focuses on the US, where rules vary by state and their impact is hotly contested (see, for example, Hajnal et al, 2017; Grimmer et al, 2018). It has been suggested that voter ID rules contribute to voter suppression, particularly among marginalised groups, including African American and Latinx communities (Hajnal et al, 2017; Valentino and Neuner, 2017; Coll, 2024). This claim is empirically plausible, being supported by evidence about access to photo ID (Highton, 2017; Fraga and Miller, 2022). Studies of voter surveys (Darrah-Okike et al, 2021) and electoral turnout (Kuk et al, 2022) have indicated that voter ID laws can suppress minoritised voters' political participation. Democrats have also suggested that Republicans' promotion of strict ID laws constitutes 'voter suppression for electoral gain' (Fieldhouse et al, 2024: 1), as minorities, who may be discouraged by voter ID laws, are more likely to vote for the Democrats (see also Hajnal et al, 2017).

A second body of literature contends that the putative discriminatory or suppressive impacts of voter ID laws are not actualised (Mycoff et al, 2009; Cantoni and Pons, 2021; Komisarchik and White, 2024). Some argue that the suppressive effects of voter ID are too small to be significant (Grimmer and Hersh, 2024), while others puzzle at the absence of suppression effects and offer potential explanations. Examples include mechanisms that might have masked voter suppression effects, such as the prevalence of campaigns directly targeting affected communities (Cantoni and Pons, 2021) and psychological theories of emotionally driven counter-mobilisation (Valentino and Neuner, 2017). Our work is similarly concerned with the potential suppression effects of voter ID laws, highlighting cases in which trans* people are less able to vote and, like Valentino and Neuner (2017), emphasising how emotional responses can inform voting behaviour.

Marginalisation and mobilisation: factors affecting trans political participation*

Work on the impact of voter ID on trans* people is still a nascent field. However, literature on political participation in LGBTQ+ and trans* communities suggests factors that may mediate the influence of these rules. LGBTQ+ people have been shown to be more likely to be politically engaged (Bowers and Whitley, 2020; Jones, 2021). Some have linked this to demographic factors, highlighting intersecting identities that shape rates of political participation and voter registration: ‘LGBT (Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, and Transgender) people are younger, more ethnically and racially diverse, more educated, and more Democratic than non-LGBT people’ (Strode and Flores, 2021: 914). Higher rates of political engagement among LGBTQ+ people may also reflect group self-interest, as LGBTQ+ communities are motivated to participate at higher rates to fight discrimination and for greater inclusion in social, political and legal spheres (Strode and Flores, 2021). When Bowers and Whitley’s (2020) study on the impact of US state voter ID laws on trans* people did not find evidence of reduced voter registration, they explain their results in terms of ‘oppositional consciousness’, that is, political engagement and networking motivated by social exclusion:

[Alt]hough individuals are less likely to participate if they lack gender-conforming identification, on the whole trans/GNC [gender non-conforming] individuals in this survey register at rates that are consistent with or higher than the general population. The evidence points to the importance of the trans political movement in activating and developing oppositional consciousness in its members. (Bowers and Whitley, 2020: 143)

Similarly, Hunklinger and Ferch’s (2020) investigation into issues valued by trans* voters found that they prioritised transphobia and discrimination over other political issues, suggesting that trans* people are more likely to be politically mobilised by topics framed in these terms.

Political participation varies among and within LGBTQ+ populations, with factors including community ‘embeddedness’ (Swank, 2018; Strode and Flores, 2021), exposure to discrimination (Strode and Flores, 2021) and, for some, the experience of intersecting forms of oppression (Vincent, 2018). Equally, analysing LGBTQ+ voting patterns as a single category risks obscuring differences in political orientation and motivation between subsets of this group (Jones, 2021). For example, Bowers and Whitley (2020) have suggested that non-binary and gender non-conforming people experience different barriers to trans* people whose presentations fit within binary norms.

Trans people and voter ID*

Trans* people face unique barriers to political participation relative to other LGBTQ+ people, particularly in navigating administrative bureaucracies associated with voting under photo ID laws. Gendered ID documents can create administrative barriers to trans* participation in daily life: where a discrepancy is perceived between trans* people’s gender identity or presentation and the gender markers on their documentation, they may be subject to discrimination (Davis, 2017; Maier, 2020). For instance, Heath Fogg Davis’s (2014) work records instances of identity markers

'outing' people as transgender when applying for work or registering to vote. Accessing accurate ID also creates an administrative burden for trans* people (Adair, 2019; Maier, 2020); changing a gender marker can require medical evidence, such as proof of gender confirmation surgery or a doctor's note, which can be difficult to obtain (Maier, 2020).

Estimating the impact of this administrative barrier, Jody L. Herman and colleagues have produced bi-yearly reports from 2012 onwards on the potential impact of state voter ID legislation on trans* voters, using estimates of how many trans* people eligible to vote have access to the requisite IDs (Herman, 2012; Herman and Brown, 2018; O'Neill and Herman, 2020; O'Neill et al, 2022). Their most recent analysis, assessing voter eligibility for the November 2022 midterm elections, estimated that 43 per cent of trans* people lacked identity documents that accurately represented their name and gender (O'Neill et al, 2022). Furthermore, they noted intersectional effects wherein multiply-marginalised trans* people, including 'trans people who are Black, indigenous, or people of color, young adults, students, people with low incomes, people experiencing homelessness, and people with disabilities' (O'Neill et al, 2022: 2), were over-represented among those without suitable ID.

Studies of voter ID laws for trans* people have generally focused on voter registration as a site of discrimination. Researching US registration rates by sexuality and gender expression, Strode and Flores (2021) report that trans* people and people who selected 'prefer not to answer' to the Cooperative Congressional Election Survey question about gender identity and expression were less likely to be registered to vote than cisgender people. Similarly, Bowers and Whitley's (2020) research on voter registration based on the 2011 National Transgender Discrimination Survey found that binary trans people were nearly 40 per cent less likely to register to vote if they did not have ID that matched their gender identity and expression.

It is challenging to interpret data on voter registration rates for trans* people because people's names and lived genders may not match 'official government data or documents' (Strode and Flores, 2021: 915). The vote-validation process may therefore capture trans* registration rates less accurately than self-reporting. Moreover, inferences from voter registration to voter participation may be negatively affected by mismatches between trans* people's official documents and their lived genders. As Gabriel (2020) observes, presentation at a polling station is a site of potential discrimination for trans* people. If a polling clerk perceives a disparity between the gender marker on a voter's identity documents and the voter's gender expression, they could prevent the voter from casting their ballot. Trans* voters therefore risk potential confrontation, including misgendering, hostility and being turned away (Gabriel, 2020). This US evidence, which points to barriers for trans* people in obtaining ID, registering to vote and at the polling booth, raises important questions about the potential for analogous effects in the UK context.

Voter ID in the UK

In the UK, political interest in voter ID arose during David Cameron's 2012 coalition government, where questions about electoral security prompted research on instances and public perceptions of voter fraud (Johnston and Uberoi, 2023). Although they found 'no evidence to suggest there had been widespread, systematic attempts to undermine or interfere with recent elections through electoral fraud' (Johnston and

Uberoi, 2023: 54), in 2018 and 2019, the government instituted pilot schemes testing voter ID as a measure of reducing voter ‘personation’ (assumption of another’s identity with intent to deceive). Despite considerable contestation, including partisan debate about the potential for voter suppression and disenfranchisement, the Conservative government passed voter ID into law via the Elections Act 2022, framed as a means of preventing voter fraud and ensuring electoral integrity (Green, 2021; Alonso-Curbelo, 2023). Mandatory presentation of photographic voter ID, implemented in Northern Ireland in 2002, became required in England, Scotland and Wales for the first time (PACAC, 2021). The local elections held in parts of England in May 2023 were the first major test of the new legislation prior to the UK’s July 2024 general election.

The Elections Act 2022 did not change voter registration. When registering to vote in the UK, individuals must supply their name, age, address, nationality and national insurance number but no specific information on gender (Information Commissioner’s Office, 2024). Instead, the big-ticket change under the new legislation required voters intending to vote in person to present one of an authorised list of photo IDs. Postal voting was unaffected and still does not involve a photo ID process.¹ The government-issued list of eligible IDs included the Voter Authority Certificate (VAC), which is available to people without other eligible ID (Electoral Commission, nd). However, it also stoked controversy due to perceptions that options favoured traditionally Conservative-voting demographics (James, 2022; Francis, 2023); for instance, 60+ travel cards are accepted, while young people’s travel cards are not (Stanford, 2022). As Fieldhouse et al (2024) argue, debates in the UK mirrored those in the US: Conservatives initiated the reforms, citing fraud prevention and electoral modernisation, and voters less able to access ID – including less-educated and lower-income demographics – have historically been less likely to vote for the Conservatives.

Reporting on the impact of voter ID in the UK, the Electoral Commission (2023) found generally high awareness of the ID requirement (87 per cent) in the run-up to the May 2023 local elections, a period contemporaneous with our research. However, this was lower among certain demographics, including young (18–24) people (82 per cent), Black and ethnic minority people (82 per cent) and people who had not previously voted (84 per cent). Despite this, awareness of the VAC as an alternative to photo IDs was less widespread (57 per cent). On that occasion, at least 0.25 per cent of voters were prevented from casting a ballot due to the voter ID requirement (Electoral Commission, 2023).

A similar report on the 2024 UK general election found that overall awareness of voter ID requirements had slightly risen (87 per cent) but remained lower among young people and Black and minority ethnic people, with no significant change in awareness of VACs (Electoral Commission, 2024). This report highlighted compound barriers to voting among groups, including disabled people, Gypsy, Romani and Traveller communities, and trans* people. It found that at least 16,000 people in England, Wales and Scotland were turned away due to a lack of accepted ID (Electoral Commission, 2024), which is likely to be an underestimate, as it does not capture people who realised that they could not vote before visiting a polling station. This resonates with Fieldhouse et al’s (2024) analysis of the British Election Study Internet Panel (BESIP), which found that 5 per cent of the voting-age population lack photo ID, with links to age, education, socio-economic class and social grade. Moreover, they note that while only 0.5 per cent of potential voters were turned away due

to ID requirements, up to 1.3 per cent were discouraged from voting (Fieldhouse et al, 2024). As a result of the issues identified, the Electoral Commission (2024) recommended that the government (1) improve take-up of VACs, (2) review the list of accepted IDs and (3) provide options to voters who do not have or cannot access one of the forms of accepted ID.

Accessing photo ID can present a challenge to trans* people in the UK. Changing the gender marker on a passport requires either a Gender Recognition Certificate (GRC), a new birth or adoption certificate (for which a GRC is required), or a letter from a medical professional confirming the applicant's 'change of gender is likely to be permanent', alongside evidence of using their new name (GOV.UK, nd[a]). Obtaining a new passport incurs a fee of at least £88.50 and takes around three weeks using the standard (cheapest) service. The evidence threshold for changing the gender marker on a UK driving licence is slightly lower – deed polls or statutory declarations are accepted as well as GRCs – and is free of charge, but updating a photo costs a minimum of £14 (GOV.UK, nd[b]).

Early evidence of the impact of the new voter ID rules did little to abate fears of unequal treatment for minority groups. Qualitative reports cited instances of gendered discrimination, for example, affecting women who did not have eligible ID following marriage (Clark and James, 2023). Fieldhouse et al (2024: 8) found gendered and racialised patterns in lack of access, echoing previous work by Atkeson and colleagues (2014) on poll workers' discretion in the application of electoral law – including enforcement of photo ID policies – which suggested that variations in implementation can disadvantage minority groups. These studies show the broader pattern of unequal access to ID and dissuasion from voting across demographic groups in the UK, providing valuable context for our study, which is the first to assess trans* people's experience with voter ID in the UK.

Significantly, trans* people's fears about voter ID in the UK play out against a backdrop of moral panic (Amery, 2023). In legacy and social media sources (Gwenffrewi, 2022; Montiel-McCann, 2022), trans* people, particularly trans* women, have been positioned as a threat to (cisgender) women and to children (Amery, 2023; Owen, 2022). The proliferation of anti-trans* discourses (Turnbull-Dugarte and McMillan, 2023) coincided with an increasingly hostile legal landscape in the UK, for instance, the ruling that 'gender critical' speech can be protected on the grounds of 'freedom of religious or philosophical belief' (Cowan and Morris, 2022). Consequently, trans* people are understandably concerned about protecting and maintaining their rights. In this context, reforms that may make it more difficult for trans* people to vote are likely to be viewed with additional fear and suspicion, rendering it imperative to better understand trans* people's perceptions about the introduction of voter ID.

Our work builds on literature in the UK and the US by questioning the relationship between voter ID, voter suppression and voting likelihood (see, for example, Valentino and Neuner, 2017; Stanford, 2022; Clark and James, 2023) and by assessing trans* people's experiences with voter ID laws (see, for example, Bowers and Whitley, 2020; Gabriel, 2020; O'Neill et al, 2022). We contribute to the early literature on voter ID under the Elections Act 2022, as well as providing the first study of UK trans* people's experiences of political participation under this law. Significantly, we also build on and extend discussions on affective influences on minoritised groups' voting behaviours (Valentino and Neuner, 2017; Bowers and Whitley, 2020) by exploring

trans* people's emotional responses to voter ID and the ways in which these can impact voting behaviour, method and likelihood.

Methodology and method

Reflecting the limited academic research on the impact of voter ID on trans* people in the UK (Robinson Rhodes, 2021), the work presented here is exploratory, seeking to provide an initial description of trans* voters' responses to the introduction of voter ID laws in England, Scotland and Wales, including how the changes are understood, perceptions of their likely impact and some tentative insights into the reasons for these perceptions. These aims inform a two-phased research design, combining data from a largely quantitative online survey ($n = 205$) with 15 semi-structured follow-up interviews. Project data were collected in two phases: Phase 1 comprised an online survey approved by the University of Birmingham's ethics committee, and Phase 2 involved semi-structured qualitative interviews approved by the University of York's ethics committee. These separate stages of data collection enabled us to obtain an initial overview of trans* people's perceptions of voter ID via the survey sample, which then informed the development of interview topic guides to explore people's experiences in greater depth.

Phase 1: Online survey

Trans* people are a 'hard to reach' population (Henderson et al, 2019; Russomanno et al, 2019). A history of stigmatising or otherwise problematic research and widespread discrimination means that, as a population, trans* people are vulnerable to 'research participation fatigue' (Vincent, 2018; Ashley, 2021). Online surveys can be effective for reaching marginalised populations. These surveys can reach large, geographically dispersed populations, and their scope is also useful for diverse or unknown populations (Braun et al, 2021). They also create a sense of 'felt anonymity', which can facilitate discussion of sensitive topics and enable participation by people who may not participate in face-to-face research (Braun et al, 2021). The two-phased survey and interview design thereby supported recruitment (see Baird et al, 2021; Perrenoud et al, 2023), as the low-barrier survey in Phase 1 created opportunities to engage prospective interview participants for Phase 2 (see later).

Survey participants were recruited online using convenience sampling methods. Four UK trans*-led organisations disseminated the invitation to participate and link to the survey via their internal networks and promoted it on social media platforms, including Facebook and X (formerly known as Twitter). The process resembled river sampling, as organisations respected by trans* people signal-boosted the survey, placing it where it is likely to be visible to the target population (Lehdonvirta et al, 2021). Such methods have a long history of use in research with trans* and non-binary people (Rosser et al, 2007; Miner et al, 2012; Haase et al, 2022), reflecting a lack of national-level data and a small population size that is less likely to be adequately captured in probability samples (Henderson et al, 2019).

The survey had two core inclusion criteria. Participants had to identify as one or more of the following: (1) transgender (including non-binary); (2) a person of transgender experience; (3) non-binary; and/or (4) gender non-conforming. This choice of options helped to reduce the possibility of excluding participants who may

not identify as transgender but whose gender identity and/or expression differs from their assigned gender at birth (Henderson et al, 2019). Participants also had to be over the age of 18 and eligible to vote in England, Wales or Scotland – the nations in which voter ID laws represented a new requirement.

Data were collected via a Qualtrics survey that ran for four weeks during May–June 2023. It was designed to take ten minutes or less, with attention paid to survey value and burden to aid motivation, participation and completion rate (Galesic and Bosnjak, 2009; de Leeuw et al, 2019). We developed a two-step measure for gender identity, which followed best practice in allowing participants to identify with any/all categories that resonated with them and avoiding a design that made assumptions about the identities that people could possess (Morgan et al, 2020; Marshall et al, 2022).

Survey questions were constructed to reflect the exploratory research aims and captured the following: demographic information; historical voting trends, including frequency, method and party preferences; understanding of voter ID rules and access to eligible photo ID; future voting intentions; affective responses to the new rules; and perceived impacts, if any, of voter ID on anticipated voting behaviours. A small number of open-text boxes allowed participants to supply additional information about voting history, perceptions of voter ID rules, future voting intentions and overarching feelings about political participation.

The total number of participants was 211, of whom 205 submitted complete responses. These 205 were given a unique ID and anonymised by separating response data from participant names and contact information prior to analysis. Quantitative data were prepared and analysed using Excel and SPSS, while qualitative data from text boxes were processed in NVivo.

Phase 2: Semi-structured interviews

The second phase of research comprised semi-structured qualitative interviews during August–September 2023. Interview participants were recruited from a pool of survey respondents who 'opted in' to invitations for future research. Purposive sampling was adopted to maximise the depth and breadth of data collection (Etikan, 2016), prioritising invitations to interview to solicit a spread of demographics and views among participants who had supplied additional information in open-text boxes. A total of 53 survey respondents were invited to participate, of whom 15 were available for interview. The 15 semi-structured interviews were conducted online via Zoom and audio-recorded with participants' consent. Conversations lasted approximately 60 minutes, and each participant received a £25 voucher for their time.

The interview topic guide was informed by survey data, covering self-described political engagement, understanding of voter ID rules, perceptions about voting in person at a polling station under the new rules, perceptions of overall impact and affective responses. The semi-structured interview format supported the exploration of individual experiences, including sensitive topics and key themes, in depth and detail (Galletta, 2013; Kallio et al, 2016).

Audio recordings were professionally transcribed, and the researchers pseudonymised the transcripts to remove any identifying information before importing them into NVivo for analysis. Qualitative data from both the survey and interviews were analysed thematically (Braun and Clarke, 2006). Data were initially coded by topic using both 'top-down' coding informed by the topic guide and 'bottom-up' coding

to capture emergent themes. Transcripts were divided between the two researchers for coding, and co-coding of two transcripts showed very high levels of inter-coder agreement of 98.04 per cent (Kappa 0.62), with differences primarily due to the breadth of the coding area. Topic codes were then reviewed to draw out and refine dominant themes prior to reporting.

Findings

Respondent characteristics

The survey collected the following demographic information about respondents: country of residence; gender identity (expansive options)²; legal sex; possession of a GRC; age bracket; disability; ethnicity; educational attainment; and income bracket. We compared our sample demographics to the UK population averages, where possible, using data from the England and Wales Census 2021 (EWC21) and the Scottish Census 2022 (SC22) (for a full breakdown, see the Online Appendix³). The survey sample was on average younger than the general population, with 71.2 per cent of respondents falling into age brackets 18–24 and 25–34. White people were over-represented (93.1 per cent compared to 82.6 per cent when the England and Wales and Scottish census data are combined). After removing people who selected ‘Unsure’ or ‘Prefer not to say’, there were more people who considered themselves disabled in our sample than not (51.4 per cent), compared to 17.5 per cent reported as disabled under the Equality Act in the EWC21. Although people in our sample had above-average levels of higher education (62.9 per cent had undergraduate degrees or further degrees, compared to 27.9 per cent across England, Wales and Scotland), almost a third had low incomes, earning less than £12,000 per year (32.2 per cent).

We could make some tentative comparisons between our sample and the trans* population in England, Scotland and Wales because an optional question on gender identity was included for the first time in EWC21 and SC22. Based on the proportion of responses, approximately 42.9 per cent of our sample identified as ‘Female (including trans woman)’, 17.1 per cent as ‘Male (including trans man)’ and 40.0 per cent as ‘Non-binary’. These counts suggest that trans women and non-binary people are over-represented in our sample, compared to the national data, where trans women account for 34.6 per cent and non-binary people for 27.2 per cent of all trans* people, while trans men (35.4 per cent nationally) are under-represented. This disparity may be shaped by women’s increased likelihood of completing online surveys compared to men (Becker, 2022). As with the broader trans* population (33.0 per cent aged 16–24; 22.6 per cent aged 25–34), our sample skewed young (26.3 per cent aged 18–24; 44.9 per cent aged 25–34). However, differences in counting method and caution around the use and interpretation of EWC21 data (which are considered official statistics in development)⁴ mean that these comparisons are not like-for-like, so it is not possible to draw strong conclusions about differences in the populations. In terms of legal sex, 36.5 per cent of respondents reported that they are registered as male and 46.4 per cent as female, while 14.2 per cent preferred not to say. Only 17 survey respondents (8.3 per cent) reported that they had a GRC.

Survey respondents reported high levels of turnout in previous elections. Participants recorded whether they voted in the most recent general election (86.3 per cent voted), the most recent local election (74.1 per cent voted) and the Brexit referendum (70.7

per cent of our sample voted in total, but discarding the 18–24 age bracket, who would not have been eligible to vote at that time, the reported turnout was 96.6 per cent). These figures were consistently higher than population-level data, for which turnout was 67.3 per cent for the 2019 general election, 35.9 per cent for the 2021 English local elections and 72.2 per cent for the 2016 Brexit referendum (Uberoi, 2023). Several of our interview participants were particularly politically engaged, for example, as members of political parties who were active in their local branch.

Higher levels of political engagement and participation have previously been observed among LGBTQ+ voters (Page, 2018; Bowers and Whitley, 2020; Turnbull-Dugarte, 2020; Albaugh et al, 2023). As noted earlier, this may relate to such factors as demographic intersections with more politically active groups and/or group self-interest in advocacy for LGBTQ+ (or, in our sample, specifically trans*) rights and freedoms. Equally, however, surveys using non-probability sampling tend to attract participants with stronger views, and this likely applies here.

Trans people's perceptions of voter ID*

Navigating new requirements

Perhaps reflecting high levels of engagement, almost all our respondents (95.1 per cent) were aware of the new voting rules before participating in the survey. Many participants discovered the voter ID requirements through social media (54.3 per cent). Fewer people mentioned learning about them through LGBTQ+ organisations (18.8 per cent), government awareness campaigns (15.2 per cent) or other routes (11.7 per cent). Survey respondents reported high levels of access to photo ID that met government eligibility criteria (96.6 per cent), though, as we discuss later, this may not entail that they are comfortable presenting that ID. Seven respondents had no eligible ID at all, of whom six planned to obtain photo ID due to the voter ID rules.

Despite widespread awareness of the rules and access to eligible photo ID, qualitative data indicated substantial uncertainty in navigating the new requirements. Participants commonly focused on passports or driving licences as the relevant documentation, and some exhibited confusion about what was eligible or found the list of acceptable IDs difficult to navigate or understand. For example, one survey respondent appeared unaware of alternative ID options:

I have not yet updated my passport or provisional driver's licence to reflect my name change. Therefore, they are under my deadname and not the name under which I am entered on the electoral register. I hope to sort this out before the general election, but as I understand the voter ID rules, I would currently be unable to vote in a hypothetical election held tomorrow. (Survey respondent, 18–24, genderfluid, trans-feminine)

Few interview participants demonstrated awareness of VACs, a form of ID without a gender marker that was introduced to comply with the voter ID rules and made available through local councils. This resonates with the Electoral Commission's (2023; 2024) findings about the lack of knowledge of VACs among the public. Comments that did address VACs indicated that they were not necessarily considered a viable alternative to conventional forms of photo ID. The process of obtaining a VAC was

viewed as bureaucratic, disincentivised by the assumption that it would include a gender marker or impeded by administrative confusion about what documents were acceptable proof of name change:

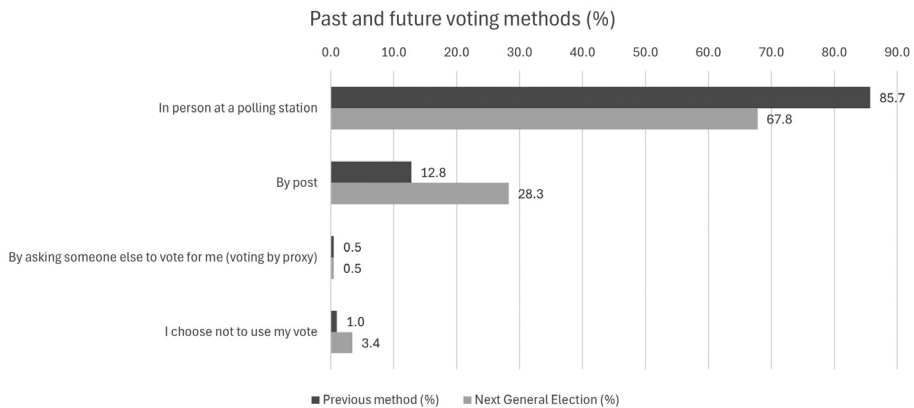
Yes, I did briefly Google it, and I just got really annoyed because, obviously, we didn't used to need this. As far as I can tell, it proves your identity for the purpose of voting but not for anything else. So, it seems like you have to apply for the certificate, and then you're only going to use it very infrequently. It just feels like an extra unnecessary barrier to voting. (James, 25–34, male, trans-masculine)

Discussion with participants who had not previously heard of VACs indicated that they could be an attractive option for trans* voters, specifically because they do not include a gender marker. However, as Kirsten and Jules observed, they 'didn't seem to be very well publicised' (Kirsten, 55–64, female); 'it certainly wasn't advertised in a way that I noticed' (Jules, 55–64, non-binary, genderfluid, trans-feminine). This chimes with research from the [Electoral Commission \(2023; 2024\)](#) and [Democracy Volunteers \(2024\)](#), indicating that poor public awareness had undermined any prospective benefits of this gender-marker-free photo ID for trans* people. Indeed, one interview participant who had considered a VAC expressed fears that using one could lead to greater scrutiny at a polling station because it is a less typical form of ID. Taken together, participants' lack of clarity around what constituted acceptable ID and how to obtain it appeared to contribute to expressions of anxiety around the new rules.

Changes to political participation

The new voter ID requirements apply only to people voting in person at a polling booth, not to those using a postal vote. A comparison between historical voting methods and how participants anticipated voting in future showed a significant shift away from the former and towards the latter (Chi-Square 7.3, 3 df, $p < 0.01$). As shown in [Figure 1](#), our survey found that while 85.7 per cent of participants had typically voted in person in previous elections, only 67.8 per cent planned to do so in the next general election (–17.9 per cent). There was a corresponding increase in plans to vote by post (+15.5 per cent) and not to vote at all (+2.4 per cent).

Figure 1: Self-reported past and future voting methods (%)



Reflecting the general population, most participants had previously voted in person and intended to continue doing so. Rationales for maintaining in-person voting included personal preference, for instance, valuing the public performance of voting, and the ease of accommodating last-minute changes in voting intention. Some participants, such as Kirsten and Jules, linked the habit to a degree of defiance in the face of trans*-hostile critique or commitment to being 'out' in public:

I'm too old and too ugly to let the bastards get to me. (Kirsten, 55–64, female)

I will probably vote in person, and that would probably be influenced by the unlikelihood of there being a lot of people around and a determination that I have to present myself in public as I am. (Jules, 55–64, non-binary, genderfluid, trans-feminine)

One participant who already voted by post indicated that their choice was administratively driven: 'It's the ease of doing it that makes it much more appealing for me' (Ariel, 25–34, female, genderfluid, trans-feminine). However, others, such as the following survey respondent who intended to maintain a postal vote, indicated that concern showing ID contributed to their choice:

I prefer to vote by post anyway, but the new ID rules put me off voting in person even more since I've had issues in the past with people not believing my ID belongs to me (the photo is from before I started socially transitioning and I'm not in a position where I can change my name/gender marker). (Survey respondent, 25–34, non-binary, genderqueer, trans-masculine)

A small number of participants planning to switch from voting in person to a postal vote explained the decision in practical terms, particularly in relation to managing their disabilities: 'I don't know how I'm gonna feel physically on any given day, and it can be really problematic' (survey respondent, 45–54, non-binary, genderqueer, trans-masculine). However, outdated ID with the wrong gender marker or gender presentation and the concomitant risk of challenge was a dominant theme among many accounts:

While I have ID, it's in the wrong name, and I'd be worried about being denied my right to vote based on either my name or photo or gender marker not quite being as expected. I'll register for a postal vote to avoid this. If I could afford it, I would update my passport. (Survey respondent, 25–34, male, non-binary, trans-masculine)

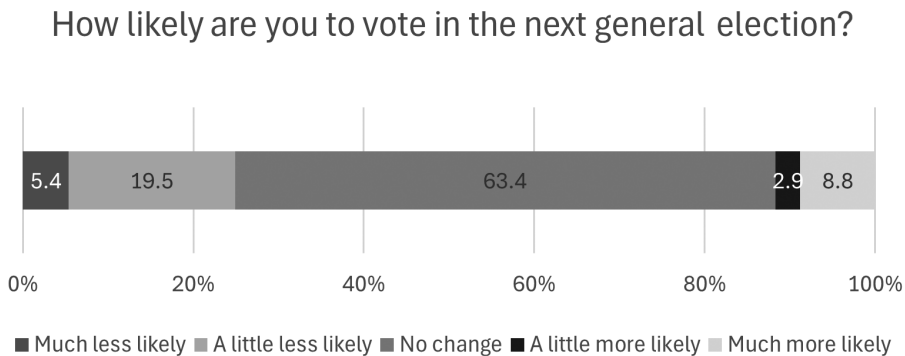
Voting in May 2023, I was anxious that I might be challenged in the polling station because my photo ID does not closely resemble my current presentation.... I wonder what will happen if I am presenting fully femme. Will I be denied a vote? (Jules, 55–64, non-binary, genderfluid, trans-feminine)

Themes of anxiety and conflict avoidance appear to have played a significant role in driving trans* voters away from voting in person at a polling booth and towards the use of postal votes. This shift also reflects advice given by some UK trans*

organisations; for example, in the run-up to the English local elections in May, [TransActual UK \(2023\)](#) ran an awareness campaign about the new voter ID rules and posted information about how to register for a postal vote as a means of bypassing potential problems with photo ID.

Most (63.4 per cent) of our survey respondents did not expect the voter ID rules to affect their likelihood of voting in the future. Yet, as shown in [Figure 2](#), 24.9 per cent said that they were less likely to vote, while a smaller number (11.7 per cent) indicated that they were more likely to vote in the next general election. This increased determination to vote, characterised by the spirit of defiance mentioned earlier, resonates with [Bowers and Whitley's \(2020\)](#) theory of oppositional consciousness, that is, that (some) trans* people see barriers to voting as politically motivating.

Figure 2: Self-reported likelihood of voting in the next general election (%)



Qualitative evidence showed that some participants were unswayed by voter ID rules: ‘My feeling has always been that it is extremely important to vote, and this feeling will not be changed by voter ID rules’ (survey respondent, 55–64, female). Whereas others acknowledged a small increase in discomfort but did not anticipate a change in behaviour: ‘I’ll feel more trepidation but ultimately believe I’ll still vote’ (survey respondent, 18–24, male). One participant described how advancement through their transition meant that they felt unimpeded by the new rules:

I have been out for nearly ten years, so I am fortunate to be in a place where all of my ID has matched my identity as best it currently can for several years. This means that the voter ID laws have not impacted my ability to vote, and I will continue to do so. (Survey respondent, 25–34, agender, trans-masculine)

On the other side of this experience, participants who felt that they were less likely to vote in the wake of voter ID rules frequently tied this position to concerns about being misgendered, challenged or discriminated against due to mismatches between their ID and gender presentation:

Getting deadnamed and misgendered at the polling station by having to show my ID will be distressing and will discourage me from voting. (Survey respondent, 25–24, female)

It's made me scared (and therefore less likely to vote). My current ID is under my deadname and gender, but I'm scared of both boymodding with that ID and of being clocked with a female ID. (Survey respondent, 18–24, female)

Once again, disability was an intersecting factor in some participants' decision making. One survey participant described how the administrative aspects of complying with voter ID rules could be a struggle due to their neurodivergence, potentially thwarting their voting intentions: 'I'm quite forgetful and can struggle with anything involving extra steps of organisation, presumably due to my ADHD and autism, so having to remember the correct-named photo ID makes me slightly less likely to follow through with voting' (survey respondent, 25–34, non-binary, genderqueer, trans-masculine).

The reported reduction in the likelihood of voting among a quarter of our research participants resonates with existing evidence around the barriers that voter ID requirements can create for trans* people (Adair, 2019; Bowers and Whitley, 2020; Gabriel, 2020; O'Neill et al, 2022). In particular, participants' experiences of anxiety around presenting ID and potential confrontation reflect those described by Heath Fogg Davis (2017), who also presents evidence that these fears are well founded, with some officials displaying hostility when reviewing trans* people's documents.

Interestingly, as evidenced in Figure 2, a difference in strength of feeling is apparent between those reporting that they are less likely to vote (5.4 per cent 'much less likely' and 19.5 per cent 'a little less likely') and those more likely to vote (8.8 per cent 'much more likely' and 2.9 per cent 'a little more likely'). Comments from participants indicating that they were more likely to vote emphasised the importance of ensuring that minority voices are heard and/or resisting what was perceived as an attempt at gerrymandering by making it harder for marginalised groups to vote. Jackie's comment is typical of such survey responses:

It makes me feel like it is more important for me to vote as a person from a minority who is privileged enough to have access to ID, as I know many people who are trans, young or from an ethnic minority will have their right to vote suppressed, so I should use my vote on behalf of those people. (Jackie, 45–54, non-binary, trans-feminine)

Literature on high political engagement and participation among LGBTQ+ people has linked political activation among minorities to the desire to resist discrimination (Bowers and Whitley, 2020; Thompson and Turnbull-Dugarte, 2021). In particular, Jackie's sentiment evokes Bowers and Whitley's (2020) argument about 'oppositional consciousness', wherein a sense of collective identity as a member of a minority group is argued to have a politically mobilising effect for trans* people. This speaks to the broader literature on counter-mobilisation effects that seeks to explain resistance to voter suppression among minority groups (Valentino and Neuner, 2017; Cantoni and Pons, 2021).

Barriers to participation: showing photo ID

Many people who already possessed eligible ID also reported plans to obtain new photo ID in response to the voter ID rules: in total, 20.0 per cent of our survey sample. As already indicated by participants quoted earlier, qualitative evidence highlighted

that there is often a difference between what photo ID would be ‘acceptable’ to a polling clerk, that is, meeting government eligibility criteria, and what photo ID our trans* participants would feel comfortable presenting. Only 25.9 per cent of participants agreed with the statement, ‘I am comfortable showing my photo ID to others’, compared with 63.4 per cent who disagreed and 10.7 per cent who had no opinion.

Agender, genderqueer and genderfluid people are often understood as being under the ‘non-binary umbrella’ and share the challenge of being ‘administratively illegible’, with no option of having their identity recognised on official documentation in the UK: ‘I identify as genderqueer, so there is no option for that on any kind of ID we have in this country’ (Kai, 25–34, non-binary, agender, genderfluid, genderqueer, trans-masculine). Discussing whether their photo ID is a good representation of their gender identity and expression, Kai goes on to expand on the particular challenges that photo ID creates for people with their gender identity:

So, they’ve got the name, but, obviously, you can’t have a gender marking that isn’t; I’m non-binary and so not able to change it ... but the best out of the bad situation that we’re getting, I think. So, I guess it reflects bits of it but not others, i.e., I was gonna say passing becomes a very complicated [laughs] thing when you’re non-binary. (Kai, 25–34, non-binary, agender, genderfluid, genderqueer, trans-masculine)

In addition, people with a genderqueer or genderfluid identity may have less ‘fixed’ gender presentations, meaning that they face additional challenges in ‘matching’ a photo ID with their appearance.

Participants’ desire for new ID often related to a need to update it to reflect their everyday presentation or the name they use in daily life. ‘Outdated’ ID or a ‘mismatch’ between ID and gender presentation creates multiple points of potential discomfort, including exacerbating participants’ experiences of gender dysphoria or pressures to present in a certain way and creating fear of external scrutiny (Davis, 2017):

I have to present myself as the gender mark on my ID. So, I have to pretend to be that person that I have left behind. This increases my gender dysphoria and makes the vote casting an uncomfortable experience. To be looked at and compared to my old self is dehumanising. (Survey respondent, 65 and over, female, trans-feminine)

I am dysphoric about my appearance and, because of the rules about driving licence photos, could not wear my usual hat for the photo. I really hate it. (Jackie, 45–54, non-binary, trans-feminine)

Survey respondents and interview participants also reported concerns that presenting their photo ID could lead to them being misgendered at the polling booth or else ‘outed’ as trans:

I am likely to feel uncomfortable voting since I was repeatedly misgendered when I voted in the most recent local government elections. (Survey respondent, 18–24, non-binary)

I believe it makes it more likely for people to realise that I am trans when they see my photo ID, and it makes me uncomfortable. I still vote, but I hate how something that was once an opportunity to exercise my rights now carries anxiety and a small amount of fear. (Jackie, 45–54, non-binary, trans-feminine)

As Edith (55–64, female) commented, no one enjoys the scrutiny of ‘Some bod from the council peering at you’, but the process of presenting photo ID presented additional risks for trans* voters. Related to fear of being outed, and echoing previous work on polling booths as a site of discrimination (Atkeson et al, 2014; Gabriel, 2020), fear of challenge and a need to prepare for conflict were particularly emotive drivers of trans* people's decision making around voter ID:

I have been challenged when showing photo ID before because I am a woman with a feminine name and female gender marker on my ID, but I have quite a masculine appearance. I have decided not to vote in any UK elections going forward because I am frightened of getting into a confrontation over my ID in the polling station. I have voted in every UK general election from 2005 onwards. (Reese, 35–44, female, non-binary, trans-feminine)

The rules stated photo ID was needed, not a sex/gender check, in order to vote, and I am confident and settled in my rights enough to be prepared to argue with polling staff if I need to. (Survey respondent, 35–44, male)

In particular, if they are concerned that the photo ID they possess is no longer a good likeness, trans* people might self-exclude, choosing not to vote rather than risk being challenged or triggering dysphoria by presenting ID that is a poor representation of themselves.

Access to photo ID that is deemed ‘acceptable’ or representative of their gender identity is bound up with broader barriers that trans* people in the UK encounter in obtaining legal ID. One participant commented that it can feel like ‘ID with accurate gender information is locked behind a GRC’ (survey respondent, 25–34, female). As noted earlier, passports and driving licences are the two forms of photo ID that participants most often described as fulfilling voter ID requirements. As our literature review highlights, changing the photo and gender marker in each requires supporting evidence and a fee. As such, trans* people updating their details must make strategic decisions about what to update and when, balancing multiple considerations, including what evidence is required for each document, the order in which they seek to document changes, the time it takes to send evidence away and obtain a new document, and the costs involved: ‘My passport has expired, and I don't want to renew it until I do my deed poll, but I'm waiting to do my deed poll until I have the energy to do all the paperwork’ (James, 25–34, male, trans-masculine). Several people highlighted how the nature of their transition meant their appearance was likely to change in the future:

I am concerned that I may have difficulty voting as my transition continues and my appearance and presentation differ more and more from my documentation. (Survey respondent, 18–24, female)

I am going to go private for at least to see whether I can get the hormone therapy, and when/if I manage that, that will change my appearance as well, so there will be another – that is like a negative on that sort of ID. If you are going through transition, your appearance can change fairly frequently, and if you're having to pay each time– (Kirsten, 55–64, female)

This reflects a reality that obtaining representative ID is not a one-off activity for trans* people, and difficulties obtaining ID due to bureaucratic and financial barriers⁵ mean that people must make strategic decisions about when to update it. However, as described earlier, the absence of ID that is a good match to gender presentation is a significant barrier to some trans* participants feeling comfortable presenting at a polling booth. As such, administrative barriers to accessing photo ID create further barriers to trans* participants participating in elections.

Conclusion

This article has used an online survey and semi-structured interviews to explore trans* voters' perceptions about and affective responses to the introduction of mandatory photo ID for voting in person at a ballot box in England, Scotland and Wales. Using a two-phase combination of quantitative and qualitative data collection and analysis, we have shown that the introduction of voter ID is associated with trans* voters' self-reported plans to move from in-person voting to using postal votes and an expectation of reduced turnout at elections. The core theme underlying this evidence is significant anxiety around the introduction of photo ID among trans* people and, in particular, about the prospect of presenting their ID for official inspection. This anxiety is perhaps epitomised by our findings that despite almost all survey participants having access to eligible voter ID, one fifth planned to update their ID in light of the voter ID rules and only just over a quarter reported feeling comfortable showing their photo ID to others.

This evidence echoes commentary in US literature on the relationship between trans* voters and voter ID laws, where scholars have observed that administrative bureaucracy creates photo IDs as a potential site of discrimination (Davis, 2017), that trans* people may struggle to meet voter ID requirements because of difficulties accessing identity documents that accurately represent their gender identity (O'Neill et al, 2022) and that trans* people may be less likely to register to vote (Strode and Flores, 2021), particularly where their ID does not match their gender identity and expression (Bowers and Whitley, 2020).

Our research builds on this literature by contributing rich qualitative data from trans* voters that describe the affective factors influencing these statistical observations. Our two-phase approach enabled us to identify key trends among trans* voters through our online survey, going on to explore these in depth and detail in semi-structured interviews. In so doing, we have unpacked the ways in which voter ID requirements trigger negative expectations related to gender dysphoria, potential misgendering and risks of discrimination by challenge from or even conflict with officials. Meanwhile, the bureaucratic structures governing access to common forms of photo ID in the UK preclude simple solutions. As such, our evidence suggests that it is both structural factors and the psychosocial terrain perceived by trans* voters that are likely to mediate whether voter ID rules contribute to voter suppression among this group. Moreover,

articulations of minority solidarity among those who reported that they were more likely to vote provide some modest support for theories of counter-mobilisation in response to voter ID laws (Valentino and Neuner, 2017; Bowers and Whitley, 2020).

Reflecting the exploratory nature of the study, these conclusions remain tentative. Our survey sample is not representative of trans* people across the UK, and, as such, it is not possible to generalise from these data. As is common with online surveys and non-probability methods, self-selection bias is likely to inform our sample and influence the findings (Bethlehem, 2010). Some groups are under-represented, particularly people of colour (POC) (Lehdonvirta et al, 2021), meaning that this study is unlikely to have captured important experiences arising from the intersection of trans* and POC identities. Equally, as social desirability bias can shape the self-reporting of turnout intention (Holbrook and Krosnick, 2010), it is possible that participants' self-reports of their voting behaviour and intentions were influenced by a desire to conform with the perceived aims of the study. Future research on trans* people's experiences of voter ID could therefore benefit from using techniques to account for and minimise these factors.

Nonetheless, we believe that this early evidence of perceptions of voter ID among trans* voters points to further avenues for research and policy development on this topic, particularly in a UK context. First, self-reports of reduced turnout raise questions about the degree to which trans* voters actually participated in recent elections and will do so in future. Second, our evidence of trans* people's negative affective responses to the process of presenting photo ID points to a need for further exploration of the nature of this impact and potential means of reducing this anxiety in both research and policy arenas. Finally, the paucity of awareness around VACs indicates a gap in public understanding of the range of options for voter ID. Trans* people are particularly likely to welcome forms of ID that do not include a gender marker.

Notes

¹ In the UK, postal voters must register to vote by post as well as registering to vote, and, typically, postal votes should be returned by a set date in advance of polling day (GOV.UK, nd[c]).

² We asked, 'What is your gender?', and invited participants to select all the terms that apply to them from the following list: 'Male (including trans man)' (reported as 'Male'); 'Female (including trans woman)' (reported as 'Female'); 'Non-binary'; 'Agender'; 'Genderfluid'; 'Genderqueer'; 'Trans-feminine'; 'Trans-masculine'; and 'Other'. Participants who selected 'Other' could use an open-text box to self-describe.

³ The Online Appendix is available at: https://figshare.com/articles/journal_contribution/Trans_people_s_perceptions_of_political_participation_in_the_wake_of_voter_ID_requirements_evidence_from_the_UK_-_Supplementary_Material/28608290?file=53048096.

⁴ For further explanation of the treatment of EWC21 data and the preparation of census comparisons, see the Online Appendix.

⁵ The availability of VACs, which are free, can help to reduce the financial barriers to voting. As discussed, however, the knowledge of VACs was comparatively low among participants. Further, accessing a deed poll, which is needed for correct information on ID, including VACs, and on the electoral register, may also involve a cost, as free deed polls are not accepted evidence by all organisations (TransActual UK, 2023; 2024).

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Conflict of interest

The authors declare that there is no conflict of interest.

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