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**The Voter ID Debate:
Exploring News Media and Political Elite
Framing of Voter ID Laws in the US and the UK**

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Submitted in fulfilment of the requirements of the Degree of Doctor of Philosophy

School of Social and Political Sciences

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University
of Glasgow

“We shall not cease from exploration,
And the end of all our exploring
Will be to arrive where we started,
And know the place for the first time.
Through the unknown, remembered gate,
When the last of earth left to discover
Is that which was the beginning.”

—T.S. Eliot, extract from “Little Gidding”, *Four Quartets* (Gardners Books; Main edition, April 30, 2001). Originally published in 1943.

Abstract

This thesis analyses the discourse surrounding voter identification (ID) requirements in the United States (US) and the United Kingdom (UK), focusing on how this controversial voting law is framed by political elites and portrayed in the news.

Over the past decade, conservative elites in the UK and US have passed voter ID requirements (Brennan Center for Justice, 2023b; Elections Act, 2022), on the insistence that the “integrity of elections” needs to be protected. However, voter fraud by *impersonation*, which is the only form of fraud a voter ID requirement can address, is extremely rare in both countries (The Heritage Foundation, 2023; Electoral Commission, 2022a). Concerns have been raised around the potential impact of these electoral measures on the access to voting of already disadvantaged groups, who are statistically less likely to own the ID required to vote (Combs, 2016; Hicks et al., 2015; Stanford, 2022a; Wang & Nittoli, 2012).

Voter fraud allegations have also gone hand in hand with a decrease in public confidence in elections (Berlinski et al., 2023; Clayton et al., 2021). Despite evidence of voter fraud being extremely rare in both countries, opinion polls show that sections of the British and American public view voter fraud as more common (Electoral Commission, 2022b; Fisher & Sällberg, 2020; Pew Research Centre, 2021). This gap between reality and perceptions is a disconcerting trend for the legitimacy of elections and trust in democratic systems.

This raises the following questions: If there is no available evidence of widespread voter fraud, on what grounds do those who advocate for voter ID laws justify them? What arguments inform the formulation of these electoral reforms? And what is driving differences in public confidence in electoral integrity? While experimental and survey-based studies find political elite’s framing and news consumption to influence public trust and attitudes towards electoral reform, research on these areas, especially in the UK, remains sparse.

To examine political elite rhetoric over voter ID, the key research questions are: (1) How do political elites in the UK and the US frame the issue of voter ID in legislative debates? (2) How does political elite framing of the policy *differ* based on party

affiliations? To examine news coverage of voter ID requirements, as well as to trace temporal changes in news media framing of the issue, the key research questions are: (1) How has the level of *attention* from news outlets to the issue of voter ID evolved over time? (2) How does the framing of voter ID differ based on the *ideological* orientation of outlets? (3) Has news *framing* of voter ID changed over time, i.e. are there any notable shifts in the way these voting requirements are covered?

This thesis is presented in four standalone research papers, each applying a range of computerised content analysis methods to inductively explore language in political debates and news coverage. The first two studies analyse legislative speeches and news media coverage in the US, respectively, and the last two explore Parliamentary debates about voter ID in the UK and coverage by British news media.

The results from the analyses demonstrate attention to this issue has substantially increased and a more complex framing of voter ID requirements than previously theorised. News media is also mirroring elite debates about voter ID and substantially reporting on Donald Trump's allegations since 2016, particularly left-leaning media in the US and also British news outlets. Overall, the findings presented in this thesis help contextualise links identified in the literature between elite framing, individual predispositions and public support for voter ID and provide important insight into key, yet understudied domains shaping public opinion and electoral reform.

Foreword

We are surrounded by stories. From the moment we are born, our lives are moved by narratives. Some of these help us navigate our lives and find some structure within ordinary chaos, some of these stories are hindering. At this point you might be thinking, what does any of this have to do with a thesis that's meant to be about voter ID? Perhaps this story that I'm telling is not the right story to tell, or a story that doesn't fit the storytelling genre of academic writing. Rest assured I will stick to this mode from the Introduction onwards. But I wanted to use this space as an opportunity to reflect on the power of stories, an issue so central to the debate over voter ID and its implementation, by telling a story.

A few years ago, a friend pointed out that there is no row 13 in most airplanes. Every time I board on a plane, I look out for it, and I am always surprised when row 12 becomes row 14, with no row 13 in between. The reason for this seems obvious; 13 is considered an unlucky number and maybe if you get a seat on that row, you might think you're more likely to die.

The contrast between stepping into one of the biggest advances of technology, a machine that flies across the air to transport humans from one place to the next, with this absence of a row 13 because of a superstition, amused and baffled me at once.

What first surprised me was that until this physical absence of the row 13 in a plane, I had only ever been 'told' the superstition verbally, for instance by someone pointing out it was Tuesday 13th (in Spain it's Tuesday and not Friday) or when learning how to count (with the number 7 being the lucky number). These stories surrounding numbers and luck have manifested in my life on various occasions, luck being in itself a superstition associated with many other things, most notably, poo (I must admit that when I first visited Glasgow to see whether I would imagine myself living there, I was shat on by a seagull and that 'lucky' experience became an unexpected factor in my decision to move and start the PhD journey).

Seeing an absence of a row 13 surprised me because until then, I had placed these stories and superstitions above our physical, material reality. As I sat on my seat, wondering about the absent row 13, I imagined the plane being built, how at some point there must have been a discussion about removing the number 13 to alleviate passengers' unease (and perhaps to increase flight bookings), and how that decision trickled down. How that must have impacted, in turn, the process of printing the row numbers, - I wondered here where

all the number 13s went- and how removing the number 13 must have also impacted the online booking system, which would need some kind of clause in the backend code to not book any seats on the row 13, and all the rest.

This reification of a story into a material reality is, of course, not new, or unique. And even though this link may seem far-fetched, as I wondered about the absent row 13, only made absent because of a story, a belief, a superstition, I thought about the issue of voter ID and voter fraud. I thought about how conspiratorial narratives seep into legislative processes we are told are guided by the most rational and evidence-based deliberations. I thought about how the legislation of controversial laws like voter ID in the US and UK has been closely tied to myths around voter fraud, and how these stories have not only impacted people's beliefs in the legitimacy of elections (beliefs which have, in turn, been used to justify passing these laws), but also reified into practical consequences.

It is the process of creating a reality from a story that I find most intriguing, the reification of discourse into the material and practical functioning of society, the impact that some stories and language can have, and importantly, the power of telling stories, of deciding the character and presence of such narratives that guide us all. It is within these issues of discourse, language, law, and power where, in my view, the myth of voter fraud and the legislation of restrictive electoral laws lie. Despite the project being supervisor-led, meaning I didn't write the original research proposal, and knew little about the debate over voter ID or electoral legislation when I first started, I soon found the issue fascinating.

I thought about the legislation of voter ID on the plane, while thinking about the absent row 13 (in an interesting diversion of thought, I remembered my trip to the Highlands a few months earlier and how we drove through Loch Ness and passed too many monster-themed tours and gift shops). I imagined all the pieces at play in the obscure process of reifying a myth, how stories influence policymaking, and in turn, determine the parameters in which we all exist, what we can and can't do, what we can and can't be. My head hurt thinking about all this, and maybe yours does too. At this point, I had only started the PhD a few months earlier. I was suddenly hit by the realisation of how complex the topic I was meant to shed some light onto was, and how difficult this task would be.

As I write this now, a few years have passed since I had this voter ID / row 13 / Nessy monster induced headache on the plane, and I can now confirm that the pieces at play I imagined then have since substantially increased. This headache especially increased when I watched an episode from the series 'Abstract' a few months later, which explored how typeface and fonts influence people's responses to what's written. Since one of my thesis'

main ingredients (to put it somehow) is language in news articles, I sighed, as I saw yet another clear sign of how complex things are.

I have had to come to terms with the fact that this thesis only scratches the surface, and in trying to shed light onto these issues, has created more questions than answers. This, as you can imagine, might not seem a satisfying conclusion. At points, I've wished I'd had a Eureka moment, that moment when you step back and see everything coming together before your eyes. But the reality is that I have stepped back and realised that what I've done looks more like an abstract chaotic collage, than the beautiful impressionist landscape painting I hoped to achieve.

I am now finding beauty in this strange image, which evidences the multitude of methods (or paints) I have learnt and tried, and the various theoretical frameworks (or styles) I have applied. Doing a PhD thesis is a unique opportunity to study and learn, and at times, to unlearn. It is no surprise that this thesis has ended up as a collection of papers, each containing and reflecting the methods and frameworks I have used to make sense of a topic that has in time increased in relevance and complexity. Like scratching an itch, scratching the surface can be a satisfying conclusion. I will forever notice the absent row 13 and take with me the sufficient certainty that I can never know enough.

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For me, accepting Doubty Doom’s annoying company involved realising that “no one cares”. This sounds a bit dramatic, I know. When I tell myself that “no one cares”, I don’t really mean that there’s no point and that we’re all doomed and insignificant (that would be Doubty Doom’s take), it’s instead a shortcut to reminding myself that generally no one cares more than *you* do about something that *you* do. This seems obvious put that way, but completing a PhD is such a big laborious task, that when tackling it alone for such a long time, it can for many, end up taking on the centre stage. At times, Doubty Doom convinces you to care *too much* and centre your experience in a way that is unhelpful. But everyone has their own stage, their own pressures, commitments, deadlines, worries, all of which substantially increase post-PhD and at later stages in (academic) life.

It sounds absurd to say that I have felt great relief by telling myself that “no one cares”, and the reason for this is that underlying this seemingly existentialist take on a PhD, there is a certainty that people *do* care. Maybe not about spending too much time cleaning data, about having too many slides on a presentation, or the un-replied email I sent 3 weeks ago without a clear statement of what I needed, it is a form of care in a more fundamental sense.

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1. Introduction

1.1. Why study the discourse on voter ID?

This thesis explores the discourse surrounding voter identification (ID) laws in the United States (US) and Great Britain, focusing on how this controversial issue is framed by political elites and portrayed in the media. It comprises four standalone research papers, each offering a distinctive analysis and contributing individually to the overall aim of understanding how news outlets and political elites frame voter ID requirements.

Voter ID laws require citizens to present a specific form of ID at the polling station in order to vote. While voter ID laws go back to the 1950s in the US, there has been a surge in the adoption of voting restrictions across Republican states since 2021, including an increase in voter ID requirements (Brennan Center for Justice, 2023b). Great Britain has also seen an increase in concerns around voter fraud over the past decade, leading to the passing of the Elections Act in 2022. This legislation made photo ID mandatory from 2023 in English local and UK general elections, on the insistence that the “integrity of elections” needs to be protected (Elections Act, 2022).

Despite variations in voting systems across countries, the arguments for and against voter ID requirements follow a similar pattern. This electoral policy issue is often highly polarised amongst political elites, particularly involving conservative parties endorsing restrictive or stringent voting measures like voter ID (Bentele & O’Brien, 2013) and liberal or progressive parties advocating for expansive voting procedures and opposing voter ID requirements. This international trend has been discussed in relation to Canada and Australia, but most notably the US, where voter ID laws are extremely partisan and have been rampantly implemented across states controlled by the Republican party.

Normatively, the main value of voter ID laws is protecting the integrity of the vote (Banks & Hicks, 2016; Dawood, 2022) by making sure only eligible individuals are able to cast their ballot. Yet, while it is reasonable to be concerned about something we all hold so dear, that is, democracy, available data finds extremely low levels of

voter fraud by impersonation in both the US (The Heritage Foundation, 2023) and UK (Electoral Commission, 2022a), which is the only form of fraud a voter ID requirement can address. In both countries, voter fraud is statistically less common than being struck by lightning and rarer than UFO sightings (Essex Police, 2023; Meyers & Swarner, 2020), making these concerns more alike to, at best, paranoia and, at worst, conspiracy.

While many countries worldwide require individuals to show an ID to vote, particularly across Europe (see Dawood, 2022: 8, for an overview), those are largely countries that require all citizens to have government-issued identification, by law. However, not all countries require all citizens to possess a specific government-issued ID. The US and Great Britain¹ are two such countries. In such instances, voter ID becomes a highly controversial matter, whereby critics and opponents warn about the potential impact of these electoral measures on the access to voting of already disadvantaged groups, who are statistically less likely to own the required ID to vote (Combs, 2016; Hicks et al., 2015; Stanford, 2022; Wang & Nittoli, 2012).

Legislating electoral laws is a deeply political process. Political elites can, to a certain extent, shape the electorate through electoral rules and laws (James, 2012). Voter eligibility laws, in particular, play a key role in shaping the franchise by determining who is able to cast a ballot (Dawood, 2022). Voter ID can further shape the franchise by restricting voting access for *eligible* individuals when they arrive at the polling booth. While various electoral laws could address different types of electoral fraud, conservatives in the US and the UK have notably focused on voter ID, despite voter fraud by impersonation being the least common form of fraud affecting their respective elections (Electoral Commission, 2022a; The Heritage Foundation, 2024).

This raises the following questions: If there is no available evidence of widespread voter fraud, on what grounds do those who advocate for voter ID laws justify them? What arguments inform the formulation of these electoral reforms? In the US, where

¹ Northern 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.

most of the literature on the subject is focused, elite rhetoric over voter ID has drawn arguments voiced in the first ever Supreme Court case, *Crawford v. Marion County Election Board*, that challenged a voter ID requirement in 2008 (see Atkeson et al., 2014). Various studies have since defined elite rhetoric on the issue as consisting of two main frames: the Republican argument that voter ID laws prevent voter fraud (the 'voter fraud frame') and the Democratic argument that the laws are discriminatory (the 'voter suppression frame') (Ash & Lamperti, 2013; Atkeson et al., 2010, 2014; Beaulieu, 2014; Bentele & O'Brien, 2013; Bowler & Donovan, 2016; Conover & Miller, 2018; Fischer et al., 2016; Gilbert, 2015; Gronke et al., 2019; Heller et al., 2019; Hicks et al., 2015; Houck et al., 2021; Kane & Wilson, 2021; Minnite, 2012; Wilson & Brewer, 2013).

However, these two often-used frames seem to omit other arguments used to support or challenge voter ID. For example, public confidence in the integrity of elections was also leveraged in legal proceedings in support of these laws (Ash & Lamperti, 2013). This rationale was notably also emphasised in the landmark Supreme Court case *Crawford v. Marion County Election Board* (2008) underpinning the frame binary (Spakovsky, 2023). The US Supreme Court agreed that “public confidence in the integrity of the electoral process has independent significance, because it encourages citizen participation in the democratic process” (553 US 181, 2008: 197). In fact, according to Gilbert (2015), framing voter ID laws as a means to enhance not only the actual integrity of the electoral system but also the *perceived* integrity of elections played a pivotal role in the widespread adoption of such laws across states.

Moreover, beyond protecting public confidence in the electoral system, voter ID laws have been justified not based on actual recorded instances of voter fraud, but by arguing that voter fraud could *potentially* occur. For example, in *ACORN v. Bysiewicz* (2004), the US district court concluded that: “...although elections in the United States are far from driven by fraud, the *potential* for voter fraud exists, and states are, therefore, right to be concerned about it and to take steps to minimize it.”

Similar arguments have been articulated by conservative elites in the UK. In the UK Parliament website, Chloe Smith (Conservative Minister responsible for Cabinet Office policies and leading the department) states that “there is undeniable

potential for electoral fraud and the *perception* of this undermines public confidence in our democracy” (United Kingdom Parliament, 2021, emphasis added). These arguments highlight a nuanced framing of voter ID that transcends the binary categorisation defining elite rhetoric used to date.

There is also a complexity in the debate that the prevalent frame dichotomy fails to capture fully. Public opinion studies find public support towards voter ID and beliefs in voter fraud are associated with anti-immigrant attitudes and racial bias (see for example, Chouhy et al., 2023; Gronke et al., 2019; Udani & Kimball, 2018; Valentino & Neuner, 2017). Similarly, Wilson and Brewer (2013) found frames that emphasised harm to voters in general and, specifically, African Americans, had differing impacts in public opinion along partisan lines. This suggests that the specific ways in which voter ID laws are framed - i.e. to curb unproven widespread voter fraud or reduce voter fraud *by illegal immigrants*, or as causing voter suppression, or voter suppression of *African Americans*, can have different impacts on public opinion. Defining elite rhetoric as a broad binary (preventing voter fraud vs causing voter suppression) therefore misses how arguments interact and relate to other issues, influencing the overall evaluation of voter ID as a positive or negative policy.

Analysing legislative debates is important not only to understand how politicians frame crucial political phenomena like voter ID, but also to explore how these frames shape the political agenda (Clark & Krebs, 2012), attract media attention, and shift public opinion (Eggers & Spirling, 2014). Unlike the complex legal arguments presented in court that underpin the binary frames used to define elite rhetoric on this issue, the arguments used by politicians in policymaking are also more likely to reach the public.

This project therefore sets out to explore the political elite discourse surrounding voter ID requirements through two main research questions: How do political elites in the UK and the US frame the issue of voter ID in legislative debates? Moreover, how does the framing of this policy differ based on the political party affiliations of elites? Through these questions, the analyses conducted on Congressional debates in the US (Study 1) and Parliamentary speeches in the UK (Study 3) seek to better understand the ways in which voter ID is debated within legislative settings.

As voter fraud is not something that people often directly experience or observe, the news media is likely a key source of information about voter ID laws and voter fraud (Udani et al., 2018). News coverage can index, select, reproduce, renegotiate and/or translate frames by political elites on policy issues to the general public (Beaulieu, 2014; de Vreese, 2014; Merkley & Stecula, 2021). Across various policy domains, the media serves as a mediator between citizens and elites, influencing how policy issues are understood by framing them in particular ways (Neuman et al., 1992). This dynamic is explored further in section 2.4, which discusses the relationship between elites, mass media, and the public.

News framing of voter ID requirements has not been systematically studied to date in the US, despite survey and experimental studies demonstrating the media's crucial role in influencing public confidence in the electoral system and shaping levels of support towards voter ID requirements, often in ways that align with partisan affiliations (see for example, Atkeson et al., 2014; Beaulieu, 2014; Clayton et al., 2021; Conover & Miller, 2018; Hollander, 2018; Merkley & Stecula, 2021; Schemer et al., 2022; Wilson & Brewer, 2013, 2016).

Although the link between attitudes towards voter ID in the UK and specific political affiliations, demographics, or ideologies has not yet been investigated, a post-implementation survey following the introduction of voter ID requirements in the 2023 May local elections finds support for voter ID is mixed (Electoral Commission, 2023). While 30% of respondents viewed the voter ID requirement as strengthening electoral integrity, 46% cited the belief that “some people were unable to vote due to the ID requirement” as their main reason for lacking confidence in the electoral system (ibid.). James’ (2020) analysis of the 2018 and 2019 voter ID trials also found that a quarter of poll workers experienced a voter able to provide ID but who refused to comply out of ideological reasons. These findings highlight significant differences in public opinion towards voter ID in the UK context and underscore the need to explore the information environment that may shape individuals’ opinions on this controversial policy. Understanding this information environment is crucial to determine the extent to which news media framing might align with political elite rhetoric on the issue.

Therefore, apart from exploring political elite framing of voter ID laws, this project also analyses news coverage of voter ID requirements through several research questions: Does news media coverage of voter ID vary depending on the ideological orientation of outlets in both the US and the UK? How has the level of attention from news outlets evolved over time? Are there any temporal shifts or trends in news framing of voter ID requirements, indicating changes in the way these voting requirements are covered?

Overall, this project analyses legislative debates over voter ID and news coverage on the issue in the US and UK by using a range of inductive computerised content analysis methods. The main research in this thesis is presented in four related, but distinct research papers. The key aim is to better understand how news outlets and political elites frame voter ID requirements and therefore gain deeper insights into key yet understudied domains shaping public opinion and electoral reform.

1.2. Organisation of the thesis

The previous brief introductory section presented the main research topic and introduced key gaps in the literature, outlining the thesis' main aims in relation to these gaps. The next chapter, Chapter 2, entitled 'Background and Literature' discusses the choice of case studies and reviews existing literature related to voter ID laws. Each standalone paper presents a tailored literature review specific to each area of inquiry, and therefore some of the literature presented in this chapter may also be reviewed in the individual papers. As this thesis primarily focuses on political rhetoric and news media coverage, Chapter 2 also presents a review of literature associated with these two research areas.

Following on from Chapter 2, Chapter 3 presents an overview of the research Methodology, including data collection, analysis techniques, similarities and differences in the methods used across the studies presented, along with a justification for their suitability. The key concepts used throughout the research project are also introduced and defined here.

Following on from Chapter 3 (Methodology), Chapter 4 briefly summarises the four papers and outlines their key findings and contributions. The remainder of the thesis

comprises the four manuscripts. The first two studies centre on the US, while the final two focus on the UK. Each study is preceded by a 1-page visual abstract summarising each study's aims, methods, and key findings. The final chapter of the thesis brings together the separate studies by discussing their findings and implications. This concluding chapter also includes a discussion of the thesis' main contributions, limitations, and avenues for further research.

2. Background and Literature

This chapter discusses the choice of case studies and presents a review of existing literature related to voter ID laws, followed by a review of literature on the areas of political elite rhetoric and news media. This section concludes by highlighting the key gaps and scholarly controversies this thesis aims to address.

2.1. Why study the US and UK?

The prevalence of voter fraud in established western democracies is minimal, with virtually no effect on election outcomes (Norris, 2016). However, over the past decade, conservative political elites in the UK and US have increasingly pushed concerns regarding electoral and voter fraud onto the mainstream political agenda (Fogarty, 2016; Hajnal et al., 2017).

Voter ID requirements are at the centre of contemporary political debates about voting practices (James & Garnett, 2020). Studying how voter ID requirements are framed within the specific geographical contexts of the US and the UK is important for various reasons: Research has found voter impersonation fraud - which is the only form of electoral fraud voter ID laws can prevent - is extremely rare in both the US and UK (Brennan Center for Justice, 2017; Christensen & Schultz, 2014). Yet, both countries share a disparity between allegations of voter fraud on the one hand, and actual occurrences of voter fraud on the other (Eggers et al., 2021). In the US, Levitt's report (2014) found only 31 instances of proven voter fraud between 2000 and 2014 out of one billion votes cast. According to the Heritage Foundation's database on electoral fraud, there have only been 16 cases of proven voter fraud by impersonation from 2014 to 2022 in the US (The Heritage Foundation, 2023). In the UK, only 13 cases of alleged impersonation fraud were recorded in 2022 by the police, and no further action was taken due to an insufficient or lack of evidence (Electoral Commission, 2022). In the last general election in 2019, there were only 33 allegations of impersonation out of over 58 million votes cast (*ibid.*), with only 1 of these allegations resulting in a conviction.

Despite voter fraud being extremely rare, allegations of voter fraud have been associated with electoral reform in both countries, specifically with an increase in

the legislation of restrictive voting measures. In the US, at least 14 states enacted 17 restrictive laws between January and October 2023. This surpasses the number of restrictive voting laws enacted in every year since the Brennan Center for Justice started monitoring voting legislation in 2011, with the exception of 2021, which holds the record (Brennan Center for Justice, 2023). In the UK, the Elections Act passed by the Conservative Government in April 2022, also brought about substantial changes in the way elections in the UK are administered and run, including the implementation of a voter ID requirement in English local and UK General Elections from 2023.²

Voter ID requirements pose similar challenges in both countries' voting systems. Critics, including opposition parties and civil rights organisations, warn of the potential impact of these laws on the ability to vote for people from disadvantaged backgrounds (Bentele & O'Brien, 2013; Stanford, 2022). Government-commissioned research found that around 4% people (2.1 million) don't have an acceptable ID (Hewitt, 2021). In the UK's May 2023 local elections, the Electoral Commission found that, on average, more deprived areas had a higher proportion of individuals turned away compared to less deprived areas (Electoral Commission, 2023). In particular, this was disproportionately experienced by disabled people, people from ethnic minority communities, unemployed people, and younger age groups (Electoral Commission, 2023). Although the impact of voter ID requirements on voter turnout in the US remains open to scholarly debate³, there are significant variations in access to ID across demographic groups (Fraga & Miller, 2022), underscoring the potential practical implications of these laws (Pabayo et al., 2021). In the US, 11% of eligible voters (25.85 million) do not have the form of ID required by states with strict ID requirements (Brennan Center for Justice, n.d.). In particular, people from black and ethnic minority backgrounds, individuals with lower levels of education, the elderly, young people, women, trans people, people with disabilities, and those with

² The voter franchise is partly devolved in Scottish local and Holyrood elections, meaning that while there will be consistency across Britain for UK general elections, there are variations across the nations for local and national elections.

³ See Appendix E for a review on specific scholarly controversies around voter ID and turnout.

a low income are statistically less likely to have the ID required to vote (Fieldhouse et al., 2021; Brennan Center for Justice, n.d.).

Concerns have been raised regarding the politicisation of election rules in both the US and the UK. In the US, election administration is decentralised and partisan-based. Those involved in administering elections are either elected or are appointed by election officials (James, 2012).⁴ While the UK has a less decentralised system compared to the US, the rejection of the 2022 Elections Act by left-leaning governments in Scotland and Wales highlights the importance of studying electoral reform, especially given the rarity of such refusals in devolved nations; out of over 350 legislative consent motions⁵, only 13 have been denied (Sullivan, 2021).

Moreover, both countries have plurality voting systems, also known as “first-past - the-post”, increasing the potential for election administration to impact election outcomes⁶. A plurality system can result in close electoral contests, especially when it is coupled with a limited number of dominant parties, and in constituencies or states where support for different parties is evenly divided (Cox, 1997). The US operates a two-party system, predominantly led by the Democratic and Republican parties, while the UK features a multi-party system with the Conservative and Labour parties dominating since the 1920s (Casiraghi & Cusumano, 2023; Loeber, 2023).

In the US, critics argue that the potential impact of voter ID on turnout is not merely an oversight of well-intentioned policy but an intentional effort to suppress the participation of individuals less likely to vote for Republican candidates (Hicks et

⁴ Each state manages its own electoral processes (electoral laws and regulations) within the wider framework of federal laws. Some states elect officials such as secretaries of state or boards of elections members who are directly responsible for administering elections. In other states, these actors can be appointed by the Governor or other state authorities, which can introduce partisan dynamics into electoral administration.

⁵ Legislative consent motions are a procedural mechanism through which devolved governments in the UK can express their agreement or objection to Westminster legislation that impacts their areas of autonomous governance. The refusal to grant legislative consent represents a formal objection to the proposed law, indicating significant political or policy disagreements.

⁶ In the UK, most urban elections are held under first-past-the-post rules. In Scotland and Northern Ireland, these are held under the Single Transferable Vote (STV). Those for the London Assembly are held under Mixed-Member Proportional (MMP). The London mayor, and all other directly elected mayors, are elected by Supplementary Vote (see Clark & Krebs, 2012, for more details).

al., 2015). Studies find that the enactment of voter ID laws is not associated with instances of voter fraud but is significantly influenced by Republican Party control of state government and electoral competition (Hicks et al., 2015; Rocha & Matsubayashi, 2014). Similar claims about the political or partisan intent of voter ID measures have been raised in the UK, for example by shadow Home Secretary Diane Abbott, who likened the policy to borrowing from the “US Republican playbook” (BBC News, 2016). Further adding to the controversy, Jacob Rees-Mogg, a Conservative government minister who defended the policy in the UK, described the electoral reforms associated with voter ID as a “clever scheme” designed to “gerrymander” in favour of the Conservative Party (Cowan, 2023): “We found the people who didn’t have ID were elderly and they by and large voted Conservative”, he claimed, “so we made it hard for our own voters and we upset a system that worked perfectly well”. Rees-Mogg’s comments at the National Conservatism Conference in May 2023 intensified the debate over the political intentions behind voter ID laws in the UK. In these contexts, researching electoral laws such as voter ID requirements is crucial to understand how parties might engage in elite statecraft to “change the rules of the game” (Clark, 2017; James, 2012).

In both countries, the enactment of voter ID requirements and other restrictive voting laws has been characterised as part of a contemporary era of “voter suppression” and “democratic contraction” (Ross & Spencer, 2019), exposing a pattern of “democratic backsliding” (Garnett & James, 2023; Stanford, 2022). In the UK, the Elections Act is contextualised against a backdrop of other controversial policies and political scandals, including the 2018 Windrush scandal, the government’s ‘hostile environment’ policy, restrictions on the right to protest introduced by the Police, Crime, Sentencing and Courts Act 2022, and the Illegal Migration Act of 2023. These legislations have similarly faced significant backlash from parliament’s Joint Committee on Human Rights and various civil society and human rights organisations (The Constitution Unit, 2022). Studying the discourse surrounding voter ID laws is particularly important within such contexts marked by broader trends of controversial governmental actions impacting democratic processes.

Finally, claims about electoral fraud have not only been associated with an increase in voting restrictions but also with a concerning decrease in public confidence in the electoral system. Despite evidence of voter fraud by impersonation (the only form of fraud a voter ID can address) being extremely rare in both countries, opinion polls show that sections of the British and American public view voter fraud as a credible concern (Electoral Commission, 2022b; Fisher & Sällberg, 2020; Pew Research Centre, 2021). This gap between reality and perceptions is a disconcerting trend for the legitimacy of elections and trust in democratic systems. In the US, various experimental studies find that the way electoral policy issues are framed can impact citizens public confidence in the electoral system and the need for electoral reform (Clayton et al., 2021; Conway-Silva, 2019; Dreier & Martin, 2010; Goidel et al., 2019; Wilson & Brewer, 2016). Therefore, studying how the media and political elites frame voter ID requirements can provide insights into the potential influence of these domains on public support for restrictive electoral policies and levels of confidence in the electoral system.

To sum up, studying voter ID laws in the contexts of the US and the UK is crucial due to high contemporary relevance and controversies of these policies in both countries. Both nations have a plurality voting system, which can impact election outcomes through election administration. Exploring the way voter ID laws are framed by political elites and news media in the UK and US is important, considering its potential to influence public attitudes, and the broader context of democratic backsliding in which these laws are adopted. While this section primarily underscored the importance of studying voter ID requirements in the contexts of the US and UK, the following section further delves into the crucial role of elite and media discourse in the debate.

2.2. The Voter ID Debate: Political Elite Rhetoric and News Media

The previous section primarily outlined reasons for studying voter ID within the US and UK contexts. This section reviews available literature on voter ID laws and voter fraud, to outline reasons for focusing on political elite rhetoric and news media coverage (see Appendix A for details on how this systematic review was conducted). The literature on voter ID requirements reviewed in this section is presented in a

visualisation in section 2.3 (page 19). Throughout this section, terms are formatted in bold when they correspond to a key domain highlighted in the visualisation.

Scholarly attention on issues related to voter fraud has substantially increased since **Donald Trump's widespread voter fraud allegations** (see for example, Berlinski et al., 2023; Craig & Gainous, 2024; Goidel et al., 2019; Justwan & Williamson, 2022; Pillai et al., 2023), with over 50 studies published from 2020-2023 on Trump's fraud claims. While Republican and conservatives rank-and-file had previously voiced widespread voter fraud as a pressing issue and electoral conspiracies around widespread voter fraud pre-date Trump, 2016 marked the first time such allegations were made by a major party presidential candidate (Udani et al., 2018: 206). These claims gained momentum during his presidency and reached an unprecedented level in the 2020 General Election. Various studies find Trump's unfounded voter fraud allegations have significantly influenced public perceptions of voter fraud, leading to significant sections of the American public having **low confidence in elections** in the US (Berlinski et al., 2023; Clayton et al., 2021; Justwan & Williamson, 2022; Pennycook & Rand, 2021; Pillai et al., 2023). Survey data following the 2020 General election finds that most of Trump voters believe that fraud is common in US elections (>77%) and that Trump won the 2020 election (>65%)(Pennycook & Rand, 2021).

Beyond support for Donald Trump, research finds beliefs in voter fraud have also been associated with other **factors**. These include attitudes and psychological influences such as anti-immigrant sentiments (Udani & Kimball, 2018), conspiratorial thinking (Edelson et al., 2017; Norris et al., 2020), psychopathy (Enders et al., 2023) and anti-establishment views (ibid.). Other drivers include strategic reasoning (Beaulieu, 2014; Edelson et al., 2017), as well as social and political factors such as having a lower income (Atkeson et al., 2014), conservative ideology (Enders et al., 2023), Republican affiliation (Atkeson et al., 2014; Edelson et al., 2017; Enders et al., 2023; Stewart et al., 2016), and lower political knowledge (Pennycook & Rand, 2021).

Studies find that people believing in voter fraud are also more likely to **support voter ID requirements** or other restrictive voting measures (Alvarez et al., 2021; Gronke et al., 2019; Wilson & Brewer, 2013). However, despite the substantial, growing partisan divisions over many other electoral policies and the increasing

controversy over voter ID among political elites (Pew Research Center, 2021), there is a surprising broad bipartisan consensus among the American public in support of voter ID laws (Kane & Wilson, 2021; Pew Research Center, 2021). Somewhat paradoxically, most Democrats (61%) support voter ID requirements while simultaneously advocating for expansive voting processes, and despite being generally less inclined to believe in widespread voter fraud (ibid.).

Various studies have therefore aimed to identify **factors** underlying public support for voter ID, especially from Democratic voters. A variety of psychological, social and political factors have been found to contribute to shaping support for voter ID requirements. These include racial bias (Banks & Hicks, 2016; Brown-Iannuzzi et al., 2023; Chouhy et al., 2023; Gronke et al., 2019; Stewart et al., 2016; Valentino & Neuner, 2017; Wilson et al., 2014; Wilson & Brewer, 2013), anti-welfarism (Chouhy et al., 2023), lack of education (Atkeson et al., 2014; Gronke et al., 2019) and moral conviction (Conover & Miller, 2018).

While there is a consensus of support for voter ID among the American public, public opinion on voter ID requirements appears to be more divided in the UK. 43% of the public believe that a voter ID requirement would improve the way elections are run, but 31% disagree (Electoral Commission, 2022). Moreover, after its initial implementation in English local elections in 2023, voter ID had mixed effects on public confidence in the electoral system, with both positive and negative effects (Electoral Commission, 2023). While individuals expressing lower confidence were primarily concerned (46%) about people being unable to vote due to the ID requirement, those expressing higher confidence (30%) attributed their reassurance to the ID requirement (ibid.)

Low public confidence and support for voter ID share various key drivers in the US (for example, anti-immigrant attitudes and strategic reasoning), but most notably, *partisanship* and political ideology, with many studies and national surveys showing that Republican and conservative voters are more likely to believe in voter fraud and also support voter ID requirements. While we know little about what shapes support towards voter ID in the UK, research finds that British citizens prefer rules that benefit their preferred parties (Heller, 2021) and that Conservative voters in the UK are also more likely to perceive fraud (Fisher & Sällberg, 2020).

However, in the US, the extent to which *partisanship* shapes both beliefs in voter fraud and attitudes towards voter ID is subject to debate, with some studies arguing partisanship plays an important role in shaping public opinion towards voter ID requirements and voter confidence (Atkeson et al., 2014; Bowler & Donovan, 2016; Carey et al., 2022; Edelson et al., 2017) and others concluding that these beliefs are likely founded in variables beyond partisanship and political ideology (Enders et al., 2023). Analysing survey data from the 2014 Cooperative Congressional Election Study, Gronke et al., (2019) find that partisanship influences attitudes about the effects of voter ID laws, but in varying ways. While republicans are substantially unified in their support for voter ID requirements, Democrats are divided, with their views differing depending on their education level, ideology, attention to politics, and racial resentment. They conclude that these differences are “consistent with an elite-to-mass message transmission reflecting the current context of polarized party politics” (Gronke et al., 2019: 1).

Findings from various studies suggest that the influence of partisanship or political ideology in shaping public opinion may not be static. In 2016, Stewart et al. (2016) speculated that as the issue becomes increasingly salient and partisan in tone, partisan identity would increasingly predict both beliefs in widespread voter fraud and support for voter ID laws. However, recent studies suggest that Trump’s rhetoric (which grew from 2016 onwards) might have disrupted this trend (Goidel et al., 2019). These studies argue that, by blaming “the elite” at large—including Republican politicians—for not addressing (unsubstantiated) high levels of voter fraud, Trump’s rendition of voter fraud in 2016 transcended partisanship, contributing to the large coverage by mainstream media on the issue (Goidel et al., 2019; Pyrhönen & Bauvois, 2020). This rejection of the ‘system’ and political elites in Trump’s voter fraud allegations may explain why anti-establishment views have been found to underpin voter fraud perceptions (Enders et al., 2023).

In conjunction with individual predispositions, the **information** (or lack thereof) to which individuals are exposed to influences their opinions (Wilson & Brewer, 2013). Experimental and survey-based research find public support for voter ID and beliefs in widespread voter fraud is shaped by a variety of information effects, including information exposure and framing.

Various studies have set out experiments to explore the association between political elite framing and public opinion for voter ID and voter fraud, aiming to understand the influence of partisanship and partisan frames (Berlinski et al., 2023; Conover & Miller, 2018; Edelson et al., 2017; Merkley & Stecula, 2021; Pillai et al., 2023; Stewart et al., 2016; Wilson & Brewer, 2013). To analyse elite rhetoric, these studies often use a frame dichotomy built from two key arguments. These include the Republican argument that voter ID prevents voter fraud, the ‘voter fraud frame’, and the Democratic argument that voter ID causes voter suppression, ‘the voter suppression frame’ (ibid.).

Research in this area demonstrates that public opinion on voter ID laws can be significantly influenced by how the issue is framed, particularly when it involves emphasizing specific demographic groups. Wilson and Brewer (2013) find that public support for these laws varies depending on whether the voter suppression narrative emphasises the potential negative impact on certain groups such as the elderly, college students, African-Americans, and Hispanics. This effect varies across partisan affiliation. While Democratic and independent supporters tend to reduce their support for voter ID laws when potential harm is emphasised, particularly towards African Americans, Republican support remains largely unaffected (ibid.)

In a related study, Wilson et al. (2014), analyse data from the 2012 Cooperative Congressional Election Study (CCES), finding that imagery also plays a role in shaping attitudes. Among white respondents, those exposed to an image of an African American voter were more likely to support voter ID laws compared to those who were not shown any image. These findings linked to framing align with previous studies (Banks & Hicks, 2016; Wilson et al., 2014) finding that racial sentiments or bias, in this case exposed through imagery, shapes attitudes towards voter ID requirements. These attitudes contributing to low confidence in elections and support for voter ID laws outlined above, especially anti-immigration sentiments and racial bias, also seem to reflect framing by political elites.

Kane and Wilson (2021) tested whether different information cues, particularly low public support, and higher burdens for obtaining ID, could disrupt the “easy issue” (Carmines & Stimson, 1989) nature of voter ID laws and found that once voter ID

laws are framed as controversial or burdensome and costly, public support substantially declined, even from Republicans.

The studies described above highlight the potential of framing to change public attitudes towards voter ID. The fact that a majority of Democrats endorse voter ID requirements has led various scholars to suggest that Democratic voters may not be ‘in tune’ with the party and are less likely to receive cues from party leaders (Boudreau, 2009; Boudreau & MacKenzie, 2014; Udani, 2017). In other words, Democrats might lack exposure to information from Democratic elites on this issue. Research by the Pew Research Center (2021) in the US finds that among both Republicans and Democrats, those who only consume news from outlets with right- or left-leaning audiences, respectively, are the most likely to have heard a lot about mail-in voter fraud on the 2020 election. Moreover, a larger proportion of respondents believing in widespread voter fraud cite “reports on the news” (73%) compared to those citing Donald Trump as their source (43%) (Pew Research Center, 2021). Alvarez et al. (2021) similarly find that news and social media consumption is associated with low voter confidence in election administration at the national level.

This has led various scholars to conclude that either Republicans have won the “framing war” over voter ID (Conover & Miller, 2018; Fogarty et al., 2015; Udani, 2017) or that the conflict over voter ID at an elite level has not “filtered down to the mass public” (Kane & Wilson, 2021). However, to date, research has predominantly integrated political elite rhetoric as a component of public opinion studies, rather than examining it independently. Similarly, news coverage of voter ID laws has also remained unexplored. The few studies analysing news coverage have largely focused on *voter fraud* coverage (Benkler et al., 2020; Faris et al., 2017; Fogarty et al., 2022; Van Der Meer et al., 2023), missing the broader debate about voter ID within which voter fraud conspiracies are embedded.

Contrasting the situation in the US, public confidence in UK elections is high. However, there was a worrying rise in people’s beliefs in electoral fraud while parliamentary debates over voter ID were taking place in the UK (2018-2021), despite no correlating increase in cases of voter fraud. Interestingly, in 2021, perceptions of electoral fraud as a problem in the UK halved, all before the voter ID

bill which aimed to address these concerns, was enacted into law (Electoral Commission, 2022). The Electoral Commission (2022) points at the news media as one possible reason behind this unexpected change, as there might have been a lack of news coverage about voter fraud due to the absence of an election in 2020. They further speculate the situation in the US might have been a contributing factor, as allegations of widespread voter fraud by Donald Trump at the US presidential election were widely dismissed in the UK. This raises questions around how electoral fraud is covered by British news media and the extent to which political elite framing of voter ID requirements is reaching the public in the UK. The similar ideological divide present in the British public's attitudes towards voter ID requirements further underscores the need to explore political elite framing and news media coverage of this controversial policy issue in the British context.

To sum up, analysing news coverage and elite rhetoric over voter ID is crucial to determine how the framing of voter ID is ideologically structured. My analysis of the US furthers the growing literature on this subject, and acts as a starting point for research on this issue in the UK.

2.3. Visualisation of the literature about voter ID laws

To identify agreements, controversies, and gaps in the literature about voter ID requirements, the findings and conclusions from the studies reviewed in Section 2.2. are displayed in the visualisation below.

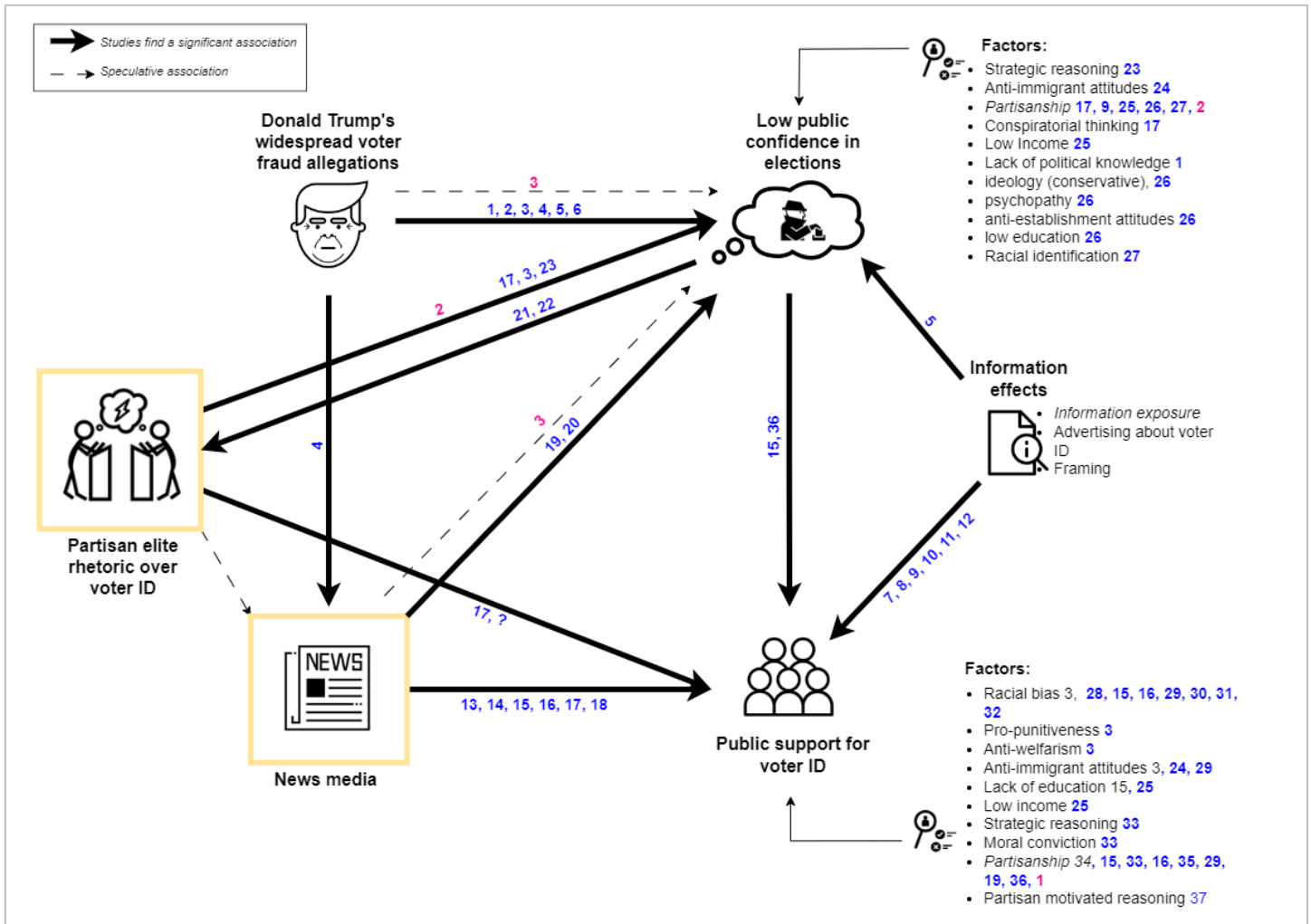


Figure 1. Visual Review of Voter ID Literature

In Figure 1, both ‘Partisan Elite Rhetoric over voter ID’ and ‘news media’ appear in yellow boxes to highlight the focus of the research presented in this thesis. As reviewed in the previous section, various studies analysing public attitudes towards voter ID, via experiments or survey analyses, have found news consumption plays a role in shaping opinions towards voter ID, and therefore the ‘News Media’ and ‘Support for voter ID’ are connected.

Each source is numbered according to its corresponding number in Appendix B. The source number is coloured depending on the geographical focus of the study, i.e. in blue or in pink if the association is relevant to the US or UK context, respectively. For example, two studies, 15 and 36, which are both analyses of US national survey

data⁷, find beliefs in widespread voter fraud influence support for voter ID laws. Study 15 also finds partisanship influences support for voter ID, and therefore this study also appears next to the term '*partisanship*'. Italicised text represents a contested or disputed finding in the literature, i.e. some studies find an association while others do not.

Finally, the dashed lines represent a *speculative* connection between the two areas identified or discussed by sources. These connections are made without primary empirical analysis, meaning studies or reports speculate on other possible links beyond those directly analysed. These connections are specifically relevant to the UK context where not much literature on the issue currently exists. For example, the Electoral Commission's (2022) speculation that the sudden increase in public confidence could be linked to voter fraud in the UK not being covered in the news and/or the allegations of voter fraud by Donald Trump in the US, which were widely dismissed in the UK. The dashed lines connecting '**Donald Trump's widespread voter fraud allegations**' and '**news media**' to '**public confidence**' in the UK context signify the Electoral Commission's speculative connection.

The literature review presented in the previous section highlighted areas of agreement and contention within scholarly inquiry on the issue of voter ID. What is clear from the literature and the resulting visualisation is that the **news media** and **partisan elite rhetoric** are intertwined with a number of issues, including decreasing public trust in elections and support for voter ID requirements. However, there are important gaps in the literature in relation to how news media and politicians actually frame voter ID. Despite survey experiments and public opinion studies finding political elite rhetoric and the news media are important domains explaining public opinion towards policy issues such as voter ID, political elite rhetoric or news media coverage of voter ID have not been systematically analysed to date.

⁷ Study 15 is an analysis of questions in the 2014 Cooperative Congressional Election Study and 36 uses data from a national telephone survey.

2.4. Political Elite Rhetoric and News Media Coverage

The previous section focused predominantly on existing literature related to voter ID, emphasising how the ways that political elites and news media frame this controversial issue can impact public support for voter ID and public confidence in elections. As highlighted, however, there is limited literature focusing on political elite rhetoric and news media coverage. Both subjects are often examined as extensions of public opinion rather than as independent subjects of inquiry. This section delves deeper into literature related to these research areas. The aim is to give an overview of the theoretical connections between these two domains and apply these to better understand the potential links between news media, public opinion, and elite rhetoric shaping the discourse over voter ID.

2.4.1. Legal and legislative discourse

Policies are, in part, outcomes of contests between different ways of framing the interpretation of an issue (Loizides, 2009). As discussed above, experimental research demonstrates a variety of framing and information effects related to the issue of voter ID, with some attitudes and predispositions linked to low confidence in elections and support for voter ID (most notably, anti-immigration attitudes, and racial bias) mirroring the way political elites have publicly framed the issue.

However, studies exploring the influence of elite rhetoric on public opinion of voter ID have largely applied a dichotomy of frames based on the legal arguments raised in the first Supreme Court case challenging a voter ID requirement, the 2008 *Crawford v. Marion County Election Board*. The central issue of this seminal case was whether Indiana's voter ID law was constitutional or if it burdened voters. It is perhaps not surprising that the key frames identified in this setting revolve around the *effects* of voter ID on preventing voter fraud or causing voter suppression.

Even though the processes of constructing the law and interpreting it are conceptually and practically interrelated (Moor, in Makouar et al., 2023), the kinds of arguments made in legislative settings (e.g. in Congress or Parliament) likely cover a broader range of considerations beyond the practical consequences of the laws (ibid.). Legislators may also debate the social and political values associated

with these laws. The recent increase in the enactment of voting restrictions associated with Donald Trump's rhetoric raises further questions around the applicability of the frames identified in 2008 for understanding the current political environment. Studying debates over voter ID beyond court settings is therefore important as the arguments used by politicians in policy debates are more likely to reach the public compared to complex legal arguments presented in court.

2.4.2. Public opinion, news media and elites

Political elites can communicate directly to the public about policy issues via social media platforms like Twitter (Payson et al., 2022). However, in an increasingly hybrid media system, most often communication flows from elites to the public are further mediated by news media. News media serve as a vital source of information about changes in policies (Soroka & Wlezien, 2022) and play an important role in setting the agenda (Iyengar, 1991) by communicating party elite cues to the public (Langer & Gruber, 2021; Merkley & Stecula, 2018; Taber & Lodge, 2016; Zhang et al., 2022).

The dynamics between the public, news media, and elites underpinning the debate over voter ID have been theorised in several ways. Bennett's (1990) indexing theory focuses on the independence (or lack thereof) of news media from elites, specifically on whether news media follow elites in their coverage. If news coverage is "indexed" with the position of political elites, public opinion becomes largely a result of elite framing, with the media serving as a channel for elite framing rather than as an independent "watch dog" (Bennett, 2016).

The indexing theory (Bennett, 1990) further hypothesises that attention and content of media coverage on an issue reflect its levels of controversy among political elites. While news editors in mainstream national news media do not necessarily strategically communicate to push a particular policy framing (Entman, 2010), journalists' framing choices are constrained by the elite discourse available to them. If there is a broad elite consensus, news coverage is likely to be narrow and uncritical, and manufacture consent for policy. If there is significant disagreement among political elites, media coverage is more likely to be diverse and critical. As Langer and Gruber (2021: 318, emphasis in original) contend, "there can no longer

be assumed to be one centralized media flow, but multiple flows; rather than A framing cascade, there are several”. This is especially the case with highly contested political issues such as voter ID requirements, as political actors likely use the media strategically to advance their position (Benkler et al., 2018; Entman, 2010; Sevenans, 2018; Van Aelst & Walgrave, 2016).

Findings from public opinion studies in the US suggest that the debate surrounding voter ID among political elites has been somewhat indexed following partisan lines, as there appears to be a partisan divide among the public on voter ID laws that mirrors party positions. While this issue is yet to be explored in the UK context, the debate over Brexit in the UK saw elite cues from politicians shaping media framing (Daddow, 2012). Studies have found multiple policy areas where British news media coverage follows the parameters of elite debate, including climate change (Gillings & Dayrell, 2023), immigration (Cooper et al., 2021), austerity (Basu, 2019), and the COVID pandemic (Matthews et al., 2023), among others.

However, questions have been raised around the extent to which Democratic elite framing of voter ID is effectively reaching (or being “indexed” to) their constituents. While nearly all Republicans strongly support voter ID requirements, indicating successful indexing by conservative political elites, many Democrats also support these controversial measures, despite the strong opposition from their party.

Research in the US speculates that Democratic elite framing of voter ID might not have been as effectively communicated to the public compared to Republican elites’. While there may be multiple cascades, the water pressure flowing through each can be asymmetric. Conover and Miller (2018) argue that this asymmetry might be due to frame-setting, which suggests that the effectiveness of political elite frames in the media somewhat depends on their appeal. If elite frames are compelling, easily understandable, and resonate with the public, they are more likely to be picked up and reinforced by the media (ibid.). Conover and Miller (2018) argue that the ‘voter fraud frame’s’ appeal to bipartisan universal principles, such as the integrity of the electoral process, may have facilitated its spread. In contrast, individuals are often unaware of how groups are disproportionately affected by voter ID (Lurie, 2014), making the Democratic ‘voter suppression frame’ more complex.

Moreover, water from one cascade can flow into the other. Benkler et al. (2020) studied news coverage of voter fraud finding that Trump blamed “the elite” at large—including establishment Republicans—for not addressing (unsubstantiated) widespread voter fraud. As a result, he was able to transcend partisanship and expand his reach beyond the right-wing media ecosystem to outlets used and trusted by Americans outside his political base (Pyrhönen & Bauvois, 2020; Goidel et al., 2019).

As discussed in the previous section, arguments around public confidence have been used to justify voter ID in legal settings in the US. Mass media is therefore arguably serving a dual role as both a source of information regarding policy *output* (Soroka & Wlezien, 2022) and also an *input* into the policymaking process. This aligns with Entman's (2003) ‘cascading activation model’. Studying US foreign policy making, Entman builds on the work of Hallin (1986), Bennett (1990), and Mermin (1999) to highlight how the public’s reaction to an initial frame fed back to the media and other elites, who then influenced the administration’s (revised) view. The public’s reaction to political elite framing or partisan cues is therefore not passive but can feed back to influence politics and policy (Aday, 2014; Chong & Druckman, 2007).

To sum up, the complex interplay between elite rhetoric, the news media and public opinion shaping the voter ID debate exemplifies various theoretical frameworks; While the influence of partisanship in public opinion underscores a level of indexing on this issue (where elites shape the agenda and framing of news media), public opinion seems to also be entering the debate. Studying how political elites and news media frame voter ID is crucial to continue shedding light to these dynamics.

Research Questions

To examine political elite rhetoric of voter ID, the key research questions are:

- How do political elites in the UK and the US frame the issue of voter ID in legislative debates?
- How does the framing of the policy differ based on political party affiliations?

To examine news coverage of voter ID requirements, as well as to trace how news media framing of the issue changes over time, the key research questions are:

- How do news media in the UK and US frame the issue of voter ID?
- How does news media coverage differ based on the ideological orientation of outlets?
- How has the level of attention and framing from news outlets changed over time? i.e. are there any notable shifts in news attention and in the way these voting requirements are covered?

3. Methodology

In the previous section, I argue that understanding the ways political elites and news outlets frame voter ID requirements can give insights into dynamics in public opinion about ID laws and shifts in public confidence. This section discusses the research design, data and methods used to explore political discourse and news coverage of voter ID, considering the research aims and objectives outlined. In short, the design involves the case study of two countries, the US and UK, and analyses text from legislative speeches and high circulation mass media news outlets. The aim is to inductively explore political elite and news media framing in both countries and understand how the debate is ideologically structured. While each individual paper within the thesis presents a detailed discussion of the specific methods applied in their respective analyses, this chapter takes a more comprehensive view and instead offers an overarching take on the research approach.

This chapter is divided into four parts. The first section outlines the methodological approach, considering how it aims to overcome limitations and gaps in the existing literature. The second section provides information about the data analysed, including the search terms used and timeframe selected. The third and fourth sections discuss similarities and differences across the studies presented, and the key theories and concepts underpinning the research, respectively.

3.1. Methodological Approach

This thesis follows a corpus linguistic methodology. As a methodological approach, corpus linguistics adopts an empirical epistemology (Lin & Adolphs, 2023, in Curry et al., 2024) in which large collections of texts are analysed systematically using computational methods (Biber, 1993; Curry et al., 2024; Gabrielatos & Baker, 2008; Pollach, 2012; Trastulli & Mastroianni, 2024). This methodology is considered appropriate because it is particularly well-suited to analyse emerging phenomena (Walter & Ophir, 2019).

A corpus linguistic methodology not only provides powerful tools for data analysis, but also a structured framework of interpretation (López-Carrión & Martí-Sánchez, 2024). By using computational methods, researchers can identify patterns and

relationships in texts that may not be immediately apparent through traditional methods of language analysis (Grimmer & Stewart, 2013) and follow a more systematic approach to analysing and making sense of the data. Corpus linguistic analysis reduces the potential for researcher bias as the primary data analysis is conducted by computer software, rather than by individual researchers themselves (Baker, 2006: 12). Given the aim of this research is to identify differences in texts along ideological lines, these methods also offer a quantifiable way of comparing and contrasting different datasets (Hannaford, 2021).

However, language patterns do not arise spontaneously and are influenced by the research questions posed and the interpretation of the outputs generated (Rybak & Hassall, 2023). This interpretation is, in turn, informed by both the immediate linguistic context, the broader social context in which the discourse unfolds (Bremner, 2023) and the researcher's understanding of the analysed texts and relevant literature (Gries, 2017; Partington, 2013).

Similar methodologies have been applied in various relevant studies. Focusing on news media language, recent works include Liu & Yu's (2023) analysis of news coverage employing corpus linguistic techniques such as keyword lists, collocation, and concordance analysis. Chuaikun and Wijitsopon (2023) and López-Carrión and Martí-Sánchez (2024) combined quantitative and qualitative approaches in their corpus-based study of LGBT and sustainability-related news, respectively. Mastawi and Al-Abbas (2023) also applied corpus-assisted content analysis techniques to examine news coverage of COVID-19 and Swine Flu.

While literature on news media is vast and growing, analyses of Congressional or Parliamentary speeches are less common (Casiraghi, 2021). Focusing on political elite rhetoric, recent relevant works using computational content analysis methods include Amaireh (2023) rhetorical analysis of Joe Biden's speeches, Moilanen and Østbye's (2021) analysis of political discourse in Norwegian Parliamentary Speeches from 2009 to 2016 using unsupervised text mining techniques, and Tucker et al.'s (2020) quantitative text analysis of US congressional speeches over 138 years. Another relevant study is Makouar et al.'s (2023) analysis of French parliamentary debates concerning online hate speech regulation. It similarly combines quantitative and qualitative approaches, adopting a "global to local approach" where

computational methods are used to first identify the major themes and characteristics within the debates (global) to then consider their semantic features (local) by identifying collocates, n-grams, and frequencies.

Ontology and Epistemology

A broad repertoire of computational methods have been used to systematically analyse large quantities of text in multiple disciplines, many of which use different terminologies to describe similar corpus-based approaches (e.g. NLP, Computer Aided Text Analysis, Corpus-assisted text analysis, Computational linguistics, Quantitative Corpus Linguistics, Quantitative Text Analysis, etc.) and rely on different ontological and epistemological assumptions about language (Brookes & McEnery, 2019; Gillings & Hardie, 2023). This makes it important to be explicit about the assumptions underpinning this thesis.

Ontologically, this thesis adopts a critical realist perspective, which sits between “empiricist and constructivist accounts of scientific explanation” (Pawson, in James, 2018). When it comes to the analysis of text, a critical realist aims to expose how linguistic practices relate to deeper layers of reality by revealing, reinforcing, or challenging social structures and power relations (James, 2021; Pawson, 2006). This involves not only observable phenomena (texts) but also the unseen mechanisms (social, psychological, cultural) that produce these observable phenomena (Archer et al., 1998; Bhaskar, 2013; Collier, 1994; Joseph, 2014). Language is therefore understood as both a product of and a vehicle for underlying social mechanisms.

Epistemologically, meaning is understood as arising from the word’s context and not an inherent feature of the word itself (Jacobs & Tschötschel, 2019: 473). As Firth (1957) famously claimed, “you shall know a word by the company it keeps”. As aforementioned, language is not merely a tool for communication but a mechanism for constructing reality. According to this view, words acquire their meanings not as isolated units but through how they are distributed and patterned across texts. Therefore, the researcher’s role is not merely to observe but to interpret the meanings behind these patterns (Byrne, 2022).

3.2. Data

3.2.1. Timeframe

The period of analysis for both the news media and congressional debates studies in the US starts from 2013. The key rationale for the timeframe was that 2013 marks a turning point in the context of voter ID laws, coinciding with the Supreme Court's decision in *Shelby County v. Holder* (Figure 3). This decision effectively struck down section 5 of the Voting Rights Act of 1965, which meant that the federal preclearance required by states with a history of racial discrimination was effectively removed, allowing these states to enact voting laws without first getting approval by the Justice Department or a Federal Court. This ruling opened the gates for states, especially southern states formerly needing federal preclearance, to pass restrictive voting laws.

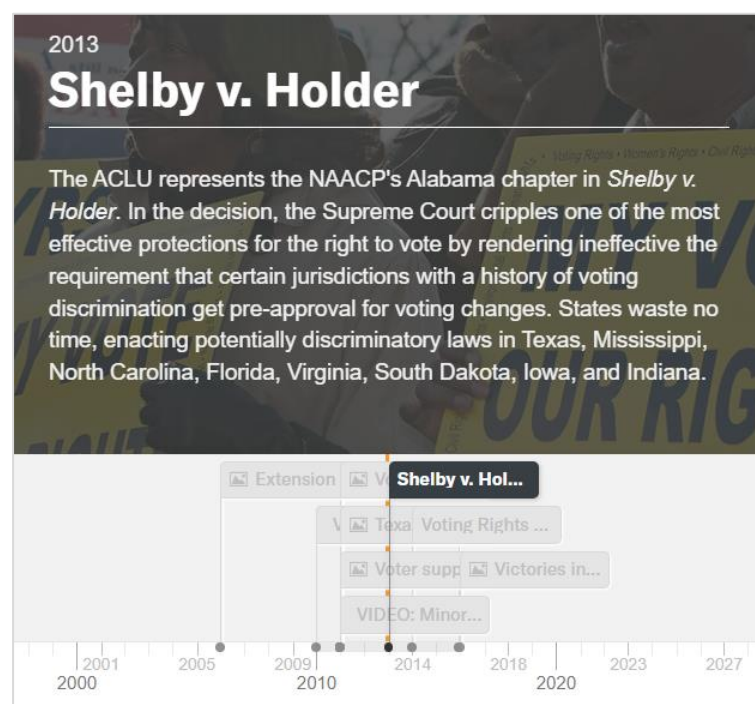


Figure 2. Timeline of Events in US from American Civil Liberties Union, n.d.⁸

⁸ see also <https://www.carnegie.org/our-work/article/voting-rights-timeline/>

For the legislative speech analysis in the UK, the timeline starts in 2017, which is the year when the first Parliamentary debate regarding voter ID took place. The timeframe for the UK news media analysis begins in 2014. This is because the decision to implement voter ID requirements in Great Britain can be traced back to two reports by the Electoral Commission, published in 2014 and 2015. Figure 3 displays a timeline of key events leading to the legislation of voter ID requirements in Great Britain.

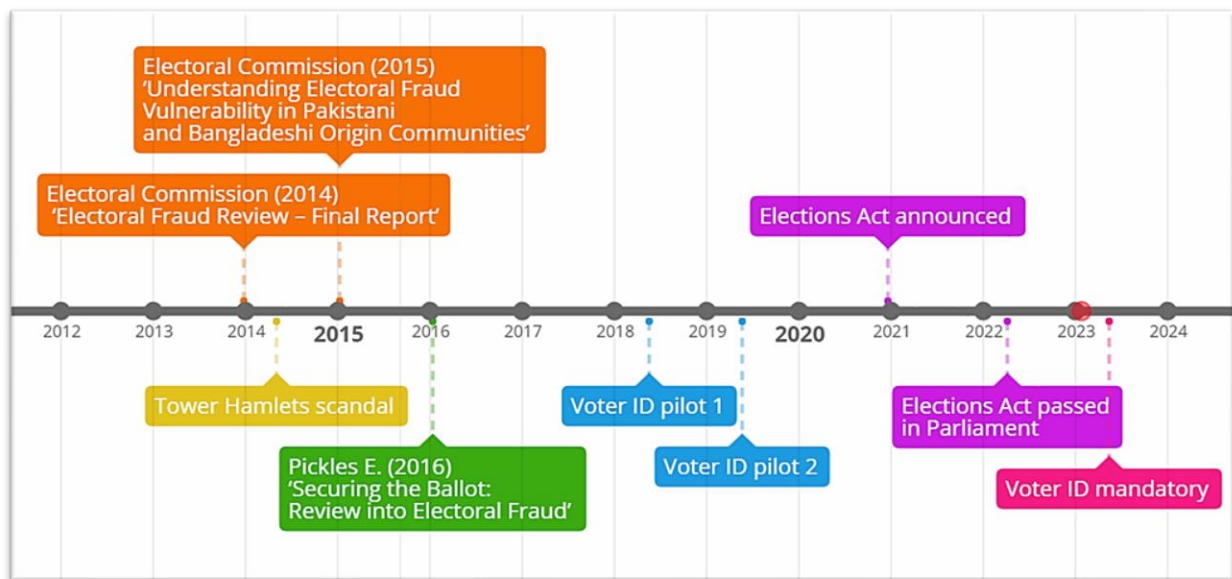


Figure 3. Key events marking the legislation of voter ID requirements in the UK

The Electoral Commission reports (2014; 2015) identified 11 areas with ‘Pakistani and Bangladeshi Origin Communities’ as having a greater probability of electoral fraud being *reported* (Electoral Commission, 2014, 2015), based on interviews with campaigners and elected representatives. However, official police data instead shows that those accused of electoral fraud come from a diverse range of backgrounds (Electoral Commission, 2014: 17).

In 2014, the ‘Tower Hamlets Scandal’ (BBC News, 2015) prompted the Government to commission a review into electoral fraud, entitled *Securing the Ballot* (Pickles, 2016). The first of its kind, this 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”. Following this, voter ID trials were held in 5 and then 10 local authorities across England in the 2018 and 2019 UK local elections. These pilots were voluntary, with a majority of councils

choosing not to participate. Four of the five pilot authorities participating had Conservative majorities in the 2018 local elections (James & Clark, 2020).

In May 2021, the Conservative government announced the Elections Bill which aimed to make photo ID mandatory from 2023 (Gov UK, 2021). This bill was passed in April 2022 and first implemented on 4 May 2023 at England's local elections.

3.2.2. Search Terms

The primary rationale guiding the methodological approach was to adopt an inductive strategy for exploring the framing of voter ID requirements, with the aim of potentially uncovering ways of framing the policy beyond the traditional binary frame dichotomy of “voter fraud” vs “voter suppression” observed in legal contexts. To identify appropriate search terms, I used the open-source platform MediaCloud (2024), designed to track, analyse, and compare media coverage. As a case study, I used MediaCloud's explorer function, which allows users to input keywords related to their research interest, to identify key terms linked to “voter fraud” and “voter suppression” coverage, the two main elite frames theorised in the literature. The presence of 'voter ID' and 'ID' as top terms in both search results indicated that using “voter ID” (and its variations) as a search term to gather data could be a robust approach to capture established frames and potentially uncover others (see Appendix D for more details). These search terms were consistently employed in subsequent analyses, including the studies of the UK context where the policy has the same name.

3.2.3. Legislative Corpus

For the US, the legislative corpus analysed contains all legislative speeches mentioning voter ID⁹ in both the Senate and House of Representatives from January 2013 until October 2021, corresponding to the 113th- 117th Congresses. These were manually retrieved through govinfo, which provides free public access to official publications from all three branches of the US Federal Government. Using keywords related to voter ID returned 740 *records*. Some of these records only contained a single speech, others contained multiple remarks from senators/representatives. To

⁹ “voter ID” OR “voter identification” OR “voting law” OR “voting id” OR “voting identification” OR “voters identification” OR “voters ID” OR “ID laws” OR “ID law” OR “photo ID” OR “photo identification”

ensure a comprehensive data capture, not only sentences or paragraphs about voter ID were collected but all speeches or remarks linked to elections and voting. The data is therefore not exclusively about “voter ID” but captures topics where voter ID is mentioned and brought up in the debate. The final US legislative corpus contains 743 *statements* from Democratic and Republican speakers (414,375 words).

For the UK, the legislative corpus for analysis contains *all* parliamentary debates about voter ID in both the House of Lords and Commons that had been published at the time, which spanned from February 2017 until September 2021. These were also manually retrieved through *Hansard* with the key words “voter ID” or “voter identification”. The final UK legislative corpus contained a total of 16 debates, comprising 420 MP statements (70,742 words).

3.2.4. News Corpus

News articles were retrieved from NexisUni online newspaper archive (LexisNexis, 2024) and MediaCloud (2024). All news articles mentioning the keywords “voter ID” or “voting ID” or “voter identification” at least once were selected. The software package LexisNexisTools (Gruber, 2021) was used to convert articles from NexisUni into a dataframe and to remove duplicates, and the module newsplease to retrieve articles from urls exported from Mediacloud.

For the US, the news corpus contains coverage of voter ID from 2013 to 2023 by 10 mass-market news media across the partisan spectrum (news outlets on the right: *Breitbart, Daily Caller, Fox News, NY Post, Washington Times*, and left: *Washington Post, USA Today, The New York Times, Huffington post, CNN*). To determine the ideological orientation of news sources, I followed the media partisanship scale of Faris et al. (2017), derived using the sharing patterns of Twitter users who retweeted Trump or Clinton during the 2016 US election (see also Bakshy et al., 2015). Based on this, outlets were selected considering the available of data for the time period of interest.¹⁰ The final US news corpus without duplicates contains 4,255 articles

¹⁰ Gathering historical news media data is challenging due to issues like limited archives, access restrictions, technological obsolescence, and copyright issues. The University of Glasgow has access to a few databases, some with limitations on the accessible publication years. For more information, visit

(6,137,399 words), 2,547 articles from left-leaning and 1,708 articles from right-leaning news media.

For the UK, coverage from 2014 to 2023 by a combination of broadsheet and tabloid newspapers was selected to make sure the corpus was as representative of general press coverage as possible (Hannaford, 2021). Eight UK newspapers were chosen - *The Daily Mail*, *The Daily Mirror*, *The Guardian*, *The Independent*, *The Times*, *The Sun*, *The Telegraph* and *Daily Express*. To understand variations in salience and content by newspapers' political alignment, the newspaper outlets were divided into right-leaning (i.e. closer to the Conservative party) and left-leaning (i.e. closer to the Labour party) (Smith, 2017). The final UK news corpus without duplicates contains 2,129 articles (2,622,673 words), 1,434 from left-leaning media and 695 from right-leaning media.

3.3. Similarities and differences across studies

3.3.1. Similarities

Table 1 presents the research design of the four papers in this thesis. The studies are displayed in four columns, including information about the data (data source, timeframe, number of statements/news articles and word count) and the specific methods used for every step of the analysis. These are presented in order of analysis, with the first studies analysing on legislative debates on the left side of the table, and the news media studies on the right¹¹. A more comprehensive explanation of each method used for the different steps is given in each individual paper.

<https://www.gla.ac.uk/myglasgow/library/specificsearch/newspapers/#archivesandcurrentavailability>

¹¹ ChatGPT 3.5 (Open AI, <https://chat.openai.com>) was used in the final two news media studies to develop pre-processing coding scripts and troubleshoot errors.

Table 1. Corpus and Methodology

	Legislative Speeches		News Coverage	
<i>Order of Analysis</i>	UK	US	US	UK
	1. Data collection			
<i>Corpus</i>	Parliamentary Debates	Congressional Debates	10 news media outlets	8 news media outlets
<i>Data source</i>	<i>Hansard</i>	<i>Govinfo</i>	<i>Mediacloud & NexisUni</i>	<i>Mediacloud & NexisUni</i>
<i>Timeframe</i>	2017 - 2021	2013 - 2021	2013 - 2023	2014 - 2023
<i>Statements / Articles</i>	420	743	4255	2130
<i>Word Count</i>	70,742	414,375	6,137,399	2,682,672
	2. Descriptive Analysis			
	N / A	Statements per Party/Congress (R)	Monthly article counts per media outlet (Python)	
	3. Pre-processing			
	4. Analysis			
<i>STEP 1: Keywords</i>	Keyness Analysis (R)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Keyness Analysis (R) Target keyword analysis (R) 	Keyword analysis of headlines & word embeddings of “identification” (Python)	Keyword analysis of headlines & keyword context of “identification” (Python)
<i>STEP 2: Collocates</i>	Semantic networks (IRaMuTeQ)		Semantic networks of headlines / main body (Python / Gephi)	
<i>STEP 3: Context & meaning</i>	Key-word-in-context (R)		Key-word-in-context (R) and targeted network visualisation (Gephi)	
<i>STEP 4: temporal variations</i>	/		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Article counts per month & media ideology (Python) TF-IDF scores of top keywords over time (Python) 	

As shown in Table 1, a descriptive analysis is first performed on the data, involving a simple count of speeches per Congress and articles per month. This is done to understand temporal variations in the levels of attention on the issue and determine whether shifts are consistent across the ideological spectrum.¹²

Corpus linguistic analysis operates through a set of tools, such as word frequencies, collocations and Key Word In Context (KWIC), which provide important quantitative information about the analysed text corpus (Trastulli & Mastroianni, 2024). While a variety of methods are used across all four papers to analyse the data (the reasons for this will be explained in due course), all studies follow the same three-step process:

STEP 1 involves comparing terms' frequencies based on the underlying political ideology of the corpus, distinguishing between right-leaning and left-leaning perspectives in both political speeches (in the UK, between Conservative and Labour speeches and in the US, between Republican and Democratic speeches) and news media (between right-leaning and left-leaning news outlets). The primary aim of this analysis is to identify differences in the language and framing of voter ID by political party affiliation, and by news outlets' ideological orientation.

STEP 2 involves accounting for the wider context in which keywords occur, allowing us to better understand how keywords are used (Baker et al., 2008). This step involves exploring the overall discourse of each corpus by generating semantic networks based on words' collocations¹³. While the first step highlighted differences in language, through these visualisations, we can begin to understand how the same word, even if used to a similar degree, can be used differently in each corpus. These two analyses provide an empirical examination of the dominant patterns in the corpus, and a "way in" to the data (Baker, 2006: 126).

¹² This descriptive analysis was not performed in the UK Parliamentary Debates analysis since the timeframe was shorter and the data comprises only 16 debates.

¹³ The word contexts or collocations for the political elite framing analyses conducted in IRaMuTeQ have three lines, which are automatically sized according to the corpus extension. For the news media analyses, collocations are defined as words occurring in the same sentence / headline.

STEP 3 involves analysing the word context of the term “ID”¹⁴. This involves zooming in and exploring how the issue of voter ID is specifically framed to understand how emerging key terms might relate to the broader themes identified in the overall corpus analysis.

The linguistic patterns and keywords identified in all the above analyses are explored in the original text to verify whether the interpretations hold when presented with concrete formulations in the text under analysis. The aim of this step is to understand the symbolic meaning-making of the text in its specific context, acknowledging the multidimensionality and the dynamic nature of meaning (Makouar et al., 2023). The role of the researcher is crucial to interpret the meaning of the linguistic patterns identified and to situate the findings within their wider socio-political context and related literature on the subject. As McEnery & Baker (2017: 57) put it, these outputs “presents us with some high-level linguistic abstractions from the text, but it is the analyst’s interaction with those abstractions and, crucially, their close reading of texts which are linked to those abstractions which guide the process of meaning making from the corpus”. Therefore, the critical interpretation of the outputs not only complements the findings from the quantitative analyses but also provides a deeper understanding of the framing and discourse.

3.3.2. Differences

While all the analyses conducted share the same research approach, the specific methods conducted vary between the studies of legislative debates and the studies of news media coverage, as described in the papers that follow. While legislative debates were analysed using R and IRaMuTeQ, the subsequent analyses of news media were conducted in R, Python and Gephi, driven by a commitment to have as much agency as possible in the analysis.

IRaMuTeQ (2024), which stands for Interface de R pour les Analyses Multidimensionnelles de Textes et de Questionnaires (Interface for Multidimensional Analysis of Texts and Questionnaires), is a free software used for text analysis.

¹⁴ Each individual paper provides specific information on how this targeted analysis was performed.

IRaMuTeQ offers a specific set of text analysis tools and visualisations, which include hierarchical clustering, word cloud generation, and correspondence analysis. However, there is limited choice when requiring functionalities beyond those provided. While the analyses conducted in IRaMuTeQ are still useful to explore large amounts of textual data, the shift to Python and Gephi allowed me to create and customise semantic networks from scratch. The aim here was to combine the analytical steps previously described into a unified approach, by visualising the results from the analyses of keywords within the semantic networks.

The network analysis software used to generate the networks, Gephi, further enables users to select and isolate specific words within the network. For example, focusing on the term “voting” allows to easily identify words frequently co-occurring with it, which helps better understand its context and associations with other topics or themes. The studies of news media, which were the final two analyses conducted, also incorporate a **STEP 4**, the temporal dimension, to understand whether certain terms gain or lose importance in news coverage over time. IRaMuTeQ is not designed for temporal or diachronic analysis which also influenced my choice to transition towards coding to perform such an analysis.

The software IRaMuTeQ also only supports plain text files and lacks the ability to directly import data from various file formats. Considering the substantial increase in corpus size, the data preparation to be able to run the news media analyses on IRaMuTeQ was also considered too time consuming and resource intensive.

3.4. Key Concepts

The previous section outlined the research design, data and methodology used to explore political discourse and news coverage of voter ID, and highlighted similarities and differences across the studies conducted to explore this issue. This section discusses the key concepts underpinning the project. Since the thesis explores the framing of voter ID by news outlets and political elites, this section discusses the key concepts of *frames* and *framing*.

As explained above, all four papers use computerised content analysis methods to inductively explore text. However, no algorithm can independently interpret the

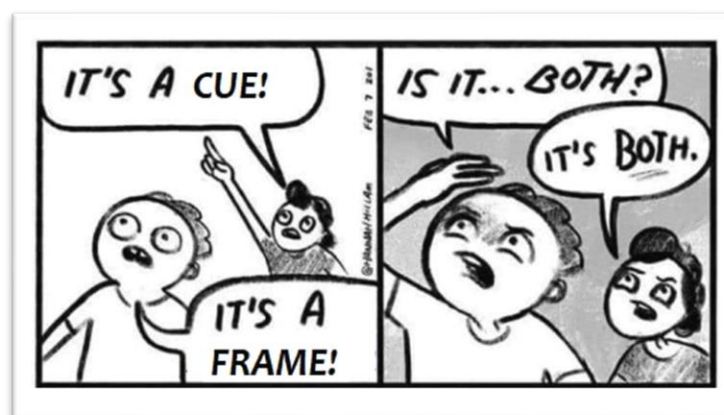
lexical patterns generated by these methods (Baden, 2018); any analysis of *framing* must confront the challenge of relating lexical cues and patterns to meaning (Baden, 2018). This section therefore aims to provide more comprehensive definitions of the concepts and terms used, which guided the interpretation and discussion of the outputs from the computerised content analyses.

Frames and Framing

The study of frames can be traced back to the sociologist Erving Goffman (1974), who described them in relation to information processing (Goffman, 1974: 18-19). Goffman defined frames as structures that organise experiences, providing a “primary framework” to understand and interpret events. By linking new information to existing knowledge, it can be processed more easily (Scheufele, 2004: 30).

Since Goffman’s writings in 1974, scholars across numerous disciplines, from communication, political science, linguistics to economics, have applied the concept of “frame”. There seems to be no limit to the number of studies applying the term (Hertog & McLeod, 2001) or to the issues analysed. A quick search on the database Scopus using the terms “frame” or “framing” results in almost 100,000 results across the social sciences. However, this disciplinary richness has meant there has been a lack of a consistent conceptualisation and operationalisation of what’s understood as a “frame” across different fields, which has led to multiple disagreements and debates around how to best apply the term.

15



¹⁵ Image [Source](#) (text my own).

The table below highlights some of the most prominent differences in the use of the term within scholarly literature:

<i>Debate</i>	<i>Key References</i>
Equivalency vs. emphasis framing	Cacciatore et al. (2016)
General frames vs. context-specific frames	Boydstun & Glazier (2013)
Inductive vs. deductive nature of frame identification, extraction, and measurement	Matthes & Kohring (2008)
Mechanisms of framing effects	Chong & Druckman (2010)
Relationship between framing, agenda setting, and priming	Scheufele (2000)
Framing effects in digital media vs. traditional media	Strömbäck & Esser (2009)
Cross-cultural applicability of framing concepts	Pan & Kosicki (1993), Weaver (2007)

The debates highlighted above relate to both the conceptualisation (e.g. whether frames should be understood as generalisable across contexts or specific to a particular discourse) and operationalisation of the concept (e.g. around the methodology used to identify and measure frames). As Walter & Ophir (2024) note, these debates have in turn led some to stress that the disagreements justify the complete rejection of the theory or term (Cacciatore et al., 2016; Van Dijk, 2023). Others however express concern that these claims can downplay the benefits of a rich research field and, as a result, dissuade scholars, especially in early career stages, from exploring and employing the concept (D'Angelo, 2002; Reese, 2007). Along these lines, D'Angelo argues “there is not, nor should there be, a single “mended” paradigm of framing research” and that the research field benefits from

a varied use of the concept to “progressively explicate a complex process” (D’Angelo, 2002).

This lack of a unified definition however led Entman (1993) to famously describe framing theory as a “fractured paradigm” in the 90s, and in an effort to achieve conceptual clarity, he provided his definition:

“To frame is to select some aspects of a perceived reality and make them more salient in a communicating text, in such a way as to promote a particular problem, definition, causal interpretation, moral evaluation, and/or treatment recommendation for the item described.”

Entman (1993: 52)

Entman’s definition above sparked a wave of renewed interest and application of the concept. Walter & Ophir’s (2024) meta-theoretical analysis of framing research identifies Entman’s work as part of the core canonical community of scholars who have contributed to establishing a shared set of conceptual and theoretical foundations (which include Gitlin (2003), Iyengar (1991) and Tuchman, (1978)). This has in turn facilitated the development of bridges between cognitive, constructivist, and critical perspectives.

In the communication sciences, a frame is often defined following Entman’s (1993) definition, and understood as a conceptual lens through which specific aspects of a message or narrative are highlighted, influencing how information is perceived and interpreted by the audience. Every issue can be interpreted in multiple ways. A frame can therefore influence an individual by emphasising certain aspects of reality and pushing others into the background (Lecheler, 2010) - it has a selective function (Berinsky & Kinder, 2006; Chong & Druckman, 2007; de Vreese, 2014; Lecheler & De Vreese, 2012; Scheufele, 2000).

Frames emerge as the result of a *process* - an act of communication - called *framing* (Matthes, 2012; Scheufele, 2000; de Vreese, 2005). Overall, the studies in this thesis focus on this process, aiming to better understand how political elites and news media shape the discourse surrounding voter ID. I move away from identifying “frames” per se to explore the dynamic complex process of framing, which involves not only identifying explicit frames but also delving into the subtler cues used to guide interpretation. As Van Dijk (2023: 171) claims, “there is no such thing as a

single frame”. Salience, both cognitively and discursively, can manifest in a multitude of ways such as in topics, themes, keywords, repetition, and use of metaphors (ibid.).

For clarity, Table 2 below provides definitions of key concepts used in this thesis:

Table 2. Definitions of Key Concepts

<i>Concept</i>	<i>Definition</i>
Discourse	Discourse includes how the issue of voter ID is discussed and represented in both political and media contexts, making it a comprehensive concept that covers various forms of communication (see for example, Mustafa-Awad et al., 2023; Pan & Kosicki, 1993; Sakieh, 2023; Van Duyn & Collier, 2019). The term political elite rhetoric is used to refer to political elites' discourse.
Topics / Issues	Topics which appear connected to voter ID laws. For instance, a politician may frame voter ID laws through drawing on other topics (i.e. immigration). By doing so, they divert the focus of the discussion, bringing in a policy issue or topic that is helpful for their purpose (Head, 2022).
Arguments	Arguments are justifications made in support or against voter ID requirements. These can be presented in various forms, including logical arguments and moral evaluations (Pandey, 2024; Zatoński et al., 2023). This concept is particularly relevant to the analyses of legislative debates.
Elite cues	This concept is particularly relevant in the news media studies, to highlight instances when political or party elite framing is identified in news coverage, particularly when elites' statements are paraphrased or quoted (Merkley & Stecula, 2018).
Frames	Frames highlight certain aspects of an issue while downplaying others to shape how it is interpreted. They are used by political elites and media outlets to influence public understanding (Entman, 1993) and largely discussed in this thesis on connection to available literature on voter ID using this term.
Framing	The <i>process</i> of emphasising or not aspects of an issue, thereby influencing opinion formation (Marcinkowski, 2014: 7). This includes themes, narratives, arguments, and cues shaping the discourse of voter ID laws (de Vreese, 2014: 139).

In the **discourse** surrounding voter ID laws, a range of **topics** were identified in political debates and media coverage. For example, in Congressional debates, Democrats introduced **topics** such as felon disenfranchisement or other forms of voter suppression, thereby connecting voter ID requirements to these **issues**. On the other hand, Republican elites largely structured their discourse around Democrats voter accessibility bills, which they **framed** as enabling voter fraud by removing key safeguards like voter ID requirements, thereby implicitly linking voter ID to narratives around voter fraud. In the UK, the Conservative Party referenced the **topic** of the Tower Hamlets scandal in debates over voter ID, even though voter ID policies would not prevent such cases of electoral fraud. By doing so, Conservatives not only incorrectly imply the proposed law would help prevent similar cases, but also implicitly strengthen the **framing** of voter fraud as linked to minorities, namely, the South Asian community, which, as evidenced in official police statistics, is no more likely to commit electoral fraud than other groups. The Labour Party instead referred to the **topic** of the Windrush Scandal, thereby using the specific immigration-related ‘hostile environment’ policy as an example of the diverse ways discrimination is still prevalent in British polity. This topic reinforces their **framing** of voter ID as causing voter suppression, by criticising the Government as disregarding the impact of the ID scheme and its potential to exclude minorities from voting.

Furthermore, in legislative debates, explicit **arguments** are also presented for or against voter ID requirements. For example, Conservative MPs appeal to the need for voter ID laws as a means to increase public confidence and strengthen electoral integrity. This argument helps **frame** voter ID as a valence, instead of a positional issue. In addition, **elite cues** appeared in news outlets, with news coverage echoing elite framing of the issue by paraphrasing statements by politicians. These elements together contribute to the complex **framing** of voter ID laws.

Overall, this thesis recognises that frames are not fixed but rather an evolving process. The conceptual approach used to interpret the outputs from the computerised content analysis methods goes beyond a static analysis of frames to delve into the dynamic interplay of cues, narratives, themes, topics, and metaphors that underlie the framing *process*.

4. The Four Papers

The previous section discussed the research methodology. This short section introduces the papers included in the thesis by briefly outlining their key aims, research questions and findings.

Study 1: When Facts Cease to Matter: An Analysis of Voter ID Debates in US Congress

Introduction

Party elite cues transmitted through the media are important for explaining public perceptions towards policy issues. This study analyses Congressional debates to explore how political elites frame controversial voter ID requirements in the US. While there is a consensus in the literature that elites frame voter ID laws through their effects, i.e. preventing voter fraud (Republican frame) or causing voter suppression of minority groups (Democratic frame), political elite framing of voter ID requirements has not been systematically studied to date.

Research Questions

- How do political elites in the US frame the issue of voter ID in legislative debates?
- How does the framing of the policy differ based on political party affiliations?

Key Findings

Statements by Republican elites have substantially increased in recent years, particularly centred around discussions of Democratic-backed voter accessibility bills. One of the most prominent bills in these discussions is the For the People Act (H.R. 1), which aimed to federalise elections and restore preclearance provisions of the Voting Rights Act (VRA), potentially infringing upon states' ability to enact voter ID laws. This study expands on the traditional frame dichotomy by demonstrating that political elites also frame voter ID requirements in terms of their impact on public perceptions. There is a lack of common ground in discussions about electoral laws and an absence of factual consensus between parties regarding the electoral system, with each party openly questioning the accuracy of statements made by the other. Overall, this study sheds light onto the “framing contest” and polarisation present in Congressional debates about voter ID, an increasingly contentious policy issue in US politics.

Study 2: Shaping the Narrative: Examining News Coverage of Voter ID Laws in the United States [*currently under review: Journalism Studies*]

Introduction

Study 1 highlighted how arguments around low public confidence in the electoral system are leveraged by political elites in Congressional debates about voter ID laws. Despite voter ID being an extremely polarised issue among political elites, there is an unexpected bipartisan support for these laws among the American public. The news media holds significant power in shaping public opinion and plays an important role in setting the agenda and communicating party elite cues to the public. This study is the first to examine how US news outlets with different partisan orientations frame voter ID requirements.

Research Questions

- RQ1: How has the level of attention in the coverage of voter ID changed over time, and are there differences in dynamics in media attention depending on the political orientation of news outlets?
- RQ2: How does the framing of the policy differ based on the ideological orientation of news outlets?
- RQ3: Has news framing changed or developed over time?

Key Findings

This study finds that media coverage on voter ID laws differs depending on the ideological orientation of the news outlets analysed, reflecting an alignment with elite rhetoric on the issue. Somewhat unexpectedly, left-leaning media covered voter fraud allegations more than their right-leaning counterparts from 2016. This finding raises concerns around whether left-leaning outlets might have helped amplify Donald Trump's electoral conspiracies, instead of offering the public alternative ways of thinking about voter ID laws.

Study 3. The Voter ID Debate: An Analysis of Political Elite Framing in UK Parliament [[Published: Parliamentary Affairs](#)]

Introduction

The UK government passed the Elections Act in April 2022, making voter ID mandatory from 2023 in English local and UK General Elections. This controversial new rule was brought in on the insistence that the “integrity of elections” needs to be protected, despite cases of voter fraud by impersonation being extremely rare in UK elections. This study explores how MPs in Parliament debated this controversial policy.

Research Questions

- RQ1: How do political elites in the UK frame the issue of voter ID in legislative debates?
- RQ2: How does the framing of the policy differ based on political party affiliations?

Key Findings

Similar to the situation in the US, there is a significant “framing contest” and polarisation in the UK’s parliamentary debates on voter ID requirements. A notable difference in the UK, however, is the cross-party consensus among political elites that voter fraud levels are low, contrasting with the traditional US Republican framing that voter ID is essential to prevent widespread voter fraud. This study finds that Conservative MPs distinctively argue for voter ID to increase public confidence in the electoral system. This approach parallels US Congressional debates on the issue and is particularly concerning given that a large majority of the UK public feel confident about the safety of voting. In fact, more people in the UK believe barriers to democratic participation for minority ethnic groups pose more of a problem than electoral fraud.

Study 4: To ID or not to ID? An Analysis of News Media Coverage of Voter ID in the United Kingdom

Introduction

Study 3 finds that Conservative political elites used arguments regarding public support for voter ID and diminished confidence in the electoral system as justifications for implementing voter ID requirements. While there was a concerning rise in people's beliefs in electoral fraud while parliamentary debates over voter ID were taking place (2018-2021), despite no correlating increase in cases of voter fraud, in 2021, perceptions of electoral fraud as a problem in the UK halved. The Electoral Commission (2022) suggests the news media could have played a role. There is also a divide in public support for voter ID in the UK, underscoring a need to explore the information environment that may be shaping individuals' opinions. This study analyses coverage from 2014 to 2023 of 8 high circulation UK news media to explore news framing of voter ID requirements.

Research Questions

- RQ1: How has the level of attention in the coverage of voter ID changed over time? Does it vary depending on the political orientation of news outlets?
- RQ2: Does coverage over voter ID vary depending on the political orientation of the news outlet?

Key findings

News coverage about voter ID has progressively increased since the recommendation for voter ID was first published in an Electoral Commission report in 2014, with left-leaning news media paying more attention to the issue than their right-leaning counterparts. There are important differences in news outlets coverage depending on their ideological orientation, mirroring the partisan discourse over voter ID in the US. Overall, the findings lend support to the Electoral Commission's speculation that the news media in the UK has picked up on allegations of voter fraud by Donald Trump and electoral controversies around voter ID laws in the US.

5. The Manuscripts

“When Facts Cease to Matter”:

An Analysis of Voter ID Debates in US Congress

AIM: To understand how partisan political elites frame voter ID requirements in the US.

DATA: Congressional speeches from January 2013 to October 2021

Motivation

Studies analysing the link between elite rhetoric and public opinion largely draw on a dichotomy of frames based on arguments from a 2008 Supreme Court case. Political elite frames however have not been systematically studied to date.

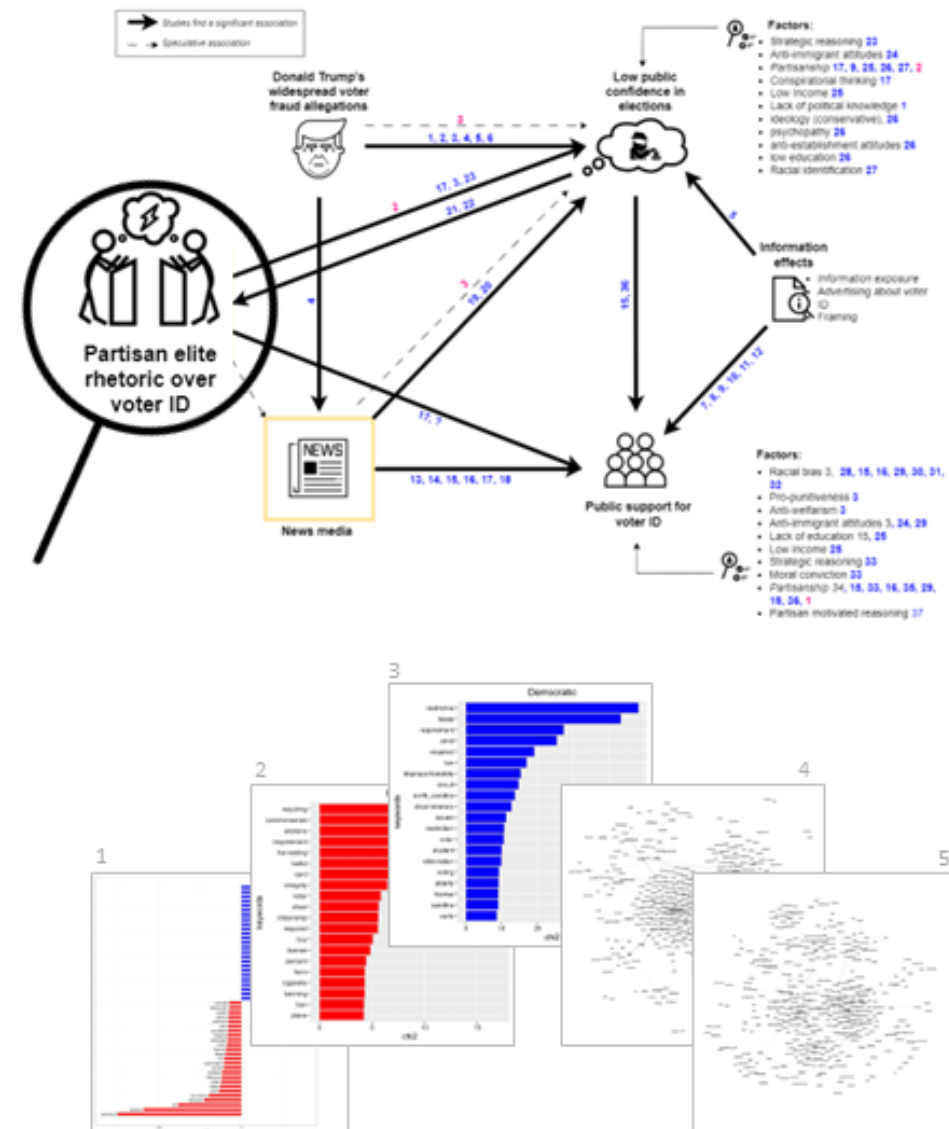
Methods

- Keyness Analysis¹
- Republican² and Democratic³ target keyword analyses.
- Republican⁴ and Democratic⁵ semantic networks.

Key findings

- ❖ Elite framing is more **complex** than previously theorised.
- ❖ Republicans also frame voter ID through their framing of Democratic-backed **voter accessibility bills**.
- ❖ Republicans have **re-appropriated** the “voter suppression frame”.
- ❖ There is a worrying **absence of a common factual** ground in discussions about voter ID requirements

Visual Review of Literature about Voter ID



“When Facts Cease to Matter”: An Analysis of Political Elite Framing of voter ID requirements in the United States

Abstract

This study analyses Congressional speeches from January 2013 to October 2021 to explore how political elites frame voter ID requirements. There is a consensus in the literature that elites frame voter ID by focusing on potential *effects*, i.e. preventing voter fraud (Republican frame) or causing voter suppression (Democratic frame). This study instead finds voter ID laws are also substantially framed on moral rules. The analysis also highlights a distinct absence of a common ground in the discourse surrounding these electoral laws. The starting point for debates on the state of the electoral system not only varies significantly between parties but also involves each party openly challenging the accuracy of the other’s factual statements. Overall, this study sheds light onto the ‘framing contest’ and polarisation present in Congressional debates about voter ID, an increasingly contentious policy issue in US politics.

1. Introduction

This study analyses political elites’ framing of voter identification (ID) laws in the United States (US), a restrictive voting policy which requires a registered voter to show a specific form of ID at the polls. While voter ID laws go back to the 1950s, the adoption of these laws has drastically risen in recent years in mainly Republican-controlled states, with 2023 marking a new record on the number of restrictive voting laws introduced (Brennan Center for Justice, 2023b). This wave of legislation began in 2021 when states enacted more restrictive voting laws than at any time since Brennan Center for Justice began tracking legislation in 2011, an upsurge largely attributed to Donald Trump’s electoral conspiracies around widespread voter fraud during the 2020 presidential election (Brennan Center for Justice, 2023a).

Studying the way political elites justify or challenge voter ID requirements is important because the way politicians frame electoral policy issues can influence how the public understand the state of the electoral system and the need for

electoral changes. This alignment between partisan elite rhetoric and public attitudes is evident in the substantial partisan divisions over many electoral policies in the public mirroring political elite dynamics, for example, with issues like automatic registration, early voting, removing inactive voters and absentee voting (Pew Research Center, 2021).

Although voter ID is one of the most polarised policy issues among partisan elites and Democratic voters generally strongly favour proposals aimed at making voting easier, there is a surprisingly broad bipartisan consensus of support for voter ID among the American public (Pew Research Centre, 2021). This has raised questions around the extent to which partisan frames on this issue are reaching the public.

Various recent experimental studies have focused on the link between elite frames of voter ID and public opinion, with mixed findings. Some find a clear connection between partisan frames and public support for voter ID (Atkeson et al., 2014; Bowler & Donovan, 2016; Carey et al., 2022; Edelson et al., 2017), while others do not (Enders et al., 2023). However, these studies have mainly used a dichotomy of frames based on arguments from a 2008 Supreme Court case concerning the effects of the policy in preventing voter fraud or causing voter suppression. This binary leaves a gap in our understanding of how *political* elites frame voter ID, as the language used in Supreme Court cases and by politicians may differ due to their distinct contexts. The gap grows larger given the implications of Donald Trump's rhetoric and the recent surge in voting restrictions.

Moreover, there is a complexity in the debate that the prevalent dichotomy of frames fails to capture fully. A number of survey-based studies analysing public attitudes towards voter ID find a variety of attitudes shaping public opinion. For example, public support towards voter ID and beliefs in voter fraud are both associated with anti-immigrant attitudes and racial bias (see for example, Chouhy et al., 2023; Gronke et al., 2019; Udani & Kimball, 2018; Valentino & Neuner, 2017). These findings echo associations of voter fraud with “illegal immigrants” (Bentele & O'Brien, 2013; Dreier & Martin, 2010; Udani & Kimball, 2018), despite evidence demonstrating “illegal” immigrants are no more likely to commit a non-immigration related crime than other groups (Lee & Martinez, 2009). Defining elite rhetoric as a

dichotomy (preventing voter fraud vs causing voter suppression) therefore misses how arguments might work together and link to other issues.

This study is the first to analyse systematically how US political elites justify and challenge voter ID requirements in Congress. It uses computational content analysis methods to identify arguments for and against the policy used in legislative speeches from January 2013 until October 2021. This study moves away from the traditional binary dichotomy of elite frames on voter ID and introduces a more comprehensive framework encompassing three dimensions (problem definition, causal interpretation and moral evaluation), building on Entman's definition of frames (Entman, 1993). Overall, the analysis reveals a wider range of arguments framing voter ID requirements than previously theorised, as well as a worrying absence of a common ground in discussions around electoral reform.

2. Background

2.1. *Electoral Laws and defining 'the franchise'*

Partisan battles over election administration have historically been entangled with the development of democracy in the US (Garnett & James, 2023; James, 2012). The US democratised by gradually extending the right to vote. While voting rights have been understood to remain once granted, over the past decade a wave of restrictive Republican-backed electoral laws¹⁶ have renewed concerns around voter suppression of marginalised groups (Darrah-Okike et al., 2021; Portillo et al., 2021; Anthony & Kimball, 2020)

Voter ID laws are controversial as they risk disenfranchising voters, particularly from minority groups who are statistically less likely to own the right form of ID to vote (Barreto et al., 2009). Critics and opponents, largely Democratic elites and civil rights groups, strongly oppose voter ID laws and claim that Republican elites are using voter fraud allegations as a partisan strategy to be able to pass them, since the people more likely to be affected are also more likely to vote for Democratic

¹⁶ Including limiting access to mail voting, registration and imposing new or stricter voter ID requirements.

candidates in elections (Fogarty et al., 2015; Hicks et al., 2015; Schultz, 2008; Wang & Nittoli, 2012),

Legislating electoral laws is a deeply political process. This is especially the case in the US, where election administration is decentralised and partisan-based, meaning that the actors involved in the running of elections are either elected or are appointed by elected officials (James, 2012). More than half the states that have enacted voter ID laws over the past decades have faced at least one legal challenge to their law (Shanton, 2014). A legal challenge that played a particularly prominent role in voter ID litigation is the 2008 *Crawford v. Marion County Election Board*, 553 US 181, a Supreme Court case launched by civil rights groups challenging Indiana's strict voter ID law. It was claimed that voter ID laws requiring photo ID imposed a burden on certain groups, particularly the poor, racial minorities, and the elderly. The Court however ruled that the law was constitutional, arguing that these burdens affected only a small percentage of the population and were justified by the state's interest in reducing voter fraud.

The rate at which states successfully passed voter ID laws intensified following the US Supreme Court case *Shelby County v. Holder* in 2013, which struck down section 5 of the Voting Rights Act of 1965. This meant that the federal preclearance required by states with a history of racial discrimination was effectively removed, having been deemed antiquated and “not responsive to current needs”. The removal of section 5 meant that these states were able to enact voting laws without approval by the Justice Department or a Federal Court. This ruling once again opened the gates for states, especially southern states formerly needing federal preclearance, to pass restrictive voting laws.

Former President Trump's unfounded claims of widespread voter fraud have triggered a new wave of restrictive voting laws, particularly following his 2020 election campaign. In 2023, legislators introduced more voter ID bills (51) than in previous years despite the absence of evidence of voter fraud by impersonation. Research finds that state decisions to adopt more strict forms of voter ID are not driven by levels of voter fraud but by Republican Party control of state government (Biggers & Hanmer, 2017; Hale & McNeal, 2010; Kamarck, 2021; Rocha &

Matsubayashi, 2014; Walker et al., 2023). This is especially the case in electorally competitive states (Hicks et al., 2015: 29; Rocha & Matsubayashi, 2014).

Faced with this rampant passing of restrictive voting laws, the For the People Act (H.R. 1) was introduced by Democrat John Sarbanes in 2019 as the first official legislation of the 116th Congress. For the People Act aimed to federalise elections and restore the VRA's preclearance, potentially compromising states' authority to enact voter ID laws. It was passed by the House in March 2019 by a party-line vote but faced a Republican Senate blockade. In 2021, the bill was reintroduced in Biden's administration and passed the House on a near party-line vote of 220-210, advancing to the Senate, which was evenly divided between Democrats and Republicans. On June 22, 2021, Senate Republicans employed a filibuster to block the bill, which had unanimous Democratic support. The bill fell short of the 60 votes needed to invoke cloture following a party-line vote.

2.2. Elite rhetoric and public attitudes towards Voter ID

The history of US electoral administration demonstrates how politicised electoral laws are, as well as the deep-seated polarisation surrounding voter ID requirements and other restrictive voting measures among political elites.

Research on voter ID laws has increased in recent years, with a focus on the impact of voter ID on voter turnout, the enactment of voter ID laws by US states, public opinion towards ID laws and/or electoral integrity and analyses of election officials' behaviour (from poll workers to judges and legislators) (Anthony & Kimball, 2020). These studies often include aggregate level analysis of participation levels in US states and individual level analysis of public opinion survey data and voting behaviour (James, 2012). They offer important insights into how procedures influence voter turnout and contribute to our understanding of what drives public perceptions of voter fraud and support for voter ID requirements (ibid.)

Various studies have demonstrated that elite policy messages can shape individuals' policy attitudes (Campbell, 2012; Chong & Druckman, 2010; Santoro et al., 2021). Studies on public opinion have found elite cues transmitted through the media are important for explaining differences in public attitudes towards voter ID along

partisan lines (Bowler & Donovan, 2016; Gronke et al., 2019; Stewart et al., 2016). However, evidence on the influence of partisan frames on public attitudes about voter ID is mixed. Conover and Miller (2018) find partisanship, strategic reasoning and moral conviction to exert significant influence on people's acceptance of elite frames about voter ID, though not always along predicted party lines. Kane & Wilson (2021) instead find that strong public support for voter ID laws may not simply be a product of partisan frames but is in large part a result of the public's limited awareness of the policy's controversy and the potential burdens for others to adhere to the law. They conclude that the conflict over voter ID among political elites has not thoroughly filtered down to the public.

To explore the link between elite rhetoric and public attitudes towards voter ID, these studies define partisan frames of voter ID as dichotomous: on the one hand, Republicans argue that voter fraud justifies voter ID laws (referred to as the 'voter fraud frame'), and on the other, Democrats argue the laws are discriminatory (the 'voter suppression frame')(Ash & Lamperti, 2013; Atkeson et al., 2010, 2014; Beaulieu, 2014; Bentele & O'Brien, 2013; Bowler & Donovan, 2016; Conover & Miller, 2018; Fischer et al., 2016; Gilbert, 2015; Gronke et al., 2019; Heller et al., 2019; Hicks et al., 2015; Houck et al., 2021; Kane & Wilson, 2021; Minnite, 2012; Wilson & Brewer, 2013). Studies applying this dichotomy of frames to analyse public attitudes on voter ID largely cite Atkeson et al.'s work (2014), which analyses public opinion but only defines elite frames with reference to segments from the 2008 Supreme Court case *Crawford v. Marion County Election Board* that upheld an Indiana photo ID law. Table 1 below presents the key attributes and effects of each party frame, summarised from Conover and Miller's (2018) study.

Table 3. Framing of Voter ID in the US (summarised from Conover and Miller, 2018)

VOTER FRAUD FRAME:	VOTER SUPPRESSION FRAME:
1. Public good: Voter ID laws are framed as beneficial for all citizens, enhancing electoral integrity and thus considered a “valence” or impartial issue (Hicks et al., 2015).	1. Discriminatory: Voter ID laws are framed as unfair and <i>discriminatory</i> . This frame is more complex as individuals are seldom aware of how groups are actually disproportionately affected (Lurie, 2014).
2. Moral good: Voter ID laws are framed as a <i>moral good</i> as they ultimately help prevent and deter crime (Skitka, 2010).	2. Partisan Intent: Voter ID laws are framed as <i>politically biased</i> which, according to Conover & Miller, (2018) reduces the frame’s universal appeal.
3. Common sense: Voter ID requirements are framed as a routine part of life, akin to showing ID for traveling, banking, or buying alcohol (Lurie, 2014).	3. Varying Emotional Responses: The emotional response to voter ID laws varies, depending on the perceived vulnerability of the affected groups, which can weaken the frame. It tends to generate anger among Democrats ; Valentino & Neuner, 2017).
4. Emotional Response: Terms like “fraud” and “electoral integrity” elicit strong emotional reactions, reinforcing the frame (Conover & Miller, 2018).	
5. Racial Bias: There’s an underlying racial bias in this frame (Banks & Hicks, 2016), arguably because of its recurrent association with “illegal immigrants” and racial minorities (Bentele & O’Brien, 2013; Dreier & Martin, 2010).	

As shown in Table 3, the 'voter fraud' and 'voter suppression' frames include several sub-frames. However, these sub-frames are complex and distinct enough to potentially be considered frames in their own right. For instance, framing voter ID laws as a measure to reduce voter fraud is arguably different from framing the measures to strengthen electoral integrity. While the former often relies on unfounded narratives around voter fraud being widespread, the latter instead positions voter ID laws as a proactive measure to strengthen the overall integrity of the electoral process and enhance procedural robustness, rather than to address alleged widespread voter fraud.

There have been instances when voter ID has been framed as a precautionary measure to ensure electoral integrity, while acknowledging fraud is not a widespread issue. For example, in *ACORN v. Bysiewicz* (2004), the US district court concluded that “although elections in the United States are far from driven by fraud, the

potential for voter fraud exists, and states are, therefore, right to be concerned about it and to take steps to minimize it.” This highlights how both these framings, while falling under the umbrella of ‘voter fraud’, diverge significantly in their underlying assumptions and appeals. The former taps into conspiratorial narratives, while the latter aligns with principles of good governance and preventive measures. This highlights how different narratives can shape public opinion and policy debates in fundamentally different ways, even when addressing the same issue.

Public confidence in the integrity of elections was also leveraged in legal proceedings in support of these laws (Ash & Lamperti, 2013). This rationale was notably emphasised in the landmark Supreme Court case *Crawford v. Marion County Election Board* (2008), underpinning the frame binary (Spakovsky, 2023). The US Supreme Court agreed that “public confidence in the integrity of the electoral process has independent significance, because it encourages citizen participation in the democratic process” (553 US 181, 2008: 197). In fact, according to Gilbert (2015), framing voter ID laws as a means to enhance not only the actual integrity of the electoral system but also the *perceived* integrity of elections played a pivotal role in the widespread adoption of such laws across Republican states.

Moreover, there is a complexity in the debate over voter ID that the prevalent dichotomy of frames fails to capture fully. The influence of implicit immigrant and racial bias on attitudes towards voter ID (Dreier & Martin, 2010; Udani & Kimball, 2018) shows the rhetorical effect of associating voter fraud with ‘illegal immigrants’ when justifying voter ID (Banks & Hicks, 2016; Wilson & Brewer, 2013). Similarly, Wilson and Brewer (2013) investigated the impact of frames by highlighting potential harm to specific groups of eligible voters. They considered frames that emphasised harm to voters in general and, specifically, African Americans, and which reduced support among Democrats and independents but not among Republicans. In other words, the specific ways in which voter ID laws are framed – either to reduce widespread voter fraud or reduce voter fraud *by illegal immigrants*, or as causing voter suppression or voter suppression of *African Americans* – can have different effects on public opinion.

This study therefore departs from the premise that political elite frames might not fall as neatly into the broad framing dichotomy (voter fraud vs. voter suppression) identified in legal settings and used to categorise elite frames of voter ID to date.

To examine political elite rhetoric of voter ID, the key research questions are:

- How do political elites in the US frame voter ID in legislative debates?
- How does the framing of the policy differ based on political party affiliations?

3. Methodology

This study analyses legislative speeches addressing the issue of voter ID by using inductive computational content analysis techniques. Inductive methodologies or bottom-up analyses are particularly well-suited to explore emerging phenomena. While the role of the researcher is crucial to interpret the outputs' meaning, this combination enables a more reliable and valid combination of quantitative/empirical and qualitative/interpretative examination.

3.1. Data

The corpus contains all legislative speeches mentioning voter ID¹⁷ in both the Senate and House of Representatives from January 2013 until October 2021, corresponding to 113th- 117th Congresses. The year 2013 marks a turning point in the context of voter ID laws, coinciding with the Supreme Court's decision in *Shelby County v. Holder*. This decision struck down section 5 of the Voting Rights Act of 1965 via the effective removal of the federal preclearance required by states with a history of racial discrimination, thereby allowing these states to enact voting laws without prior approval from the Justice Department or a Federal Court.

A search through govinfo, which provides free public access to official publications from all three branches of the US Federal Government, with keywords related to voter ID returned 740 records. Some of these records contained a single statement;

¹⁷ "voter ID" OR "voter identification" OR "voting law" OR "voting id" OR "voting identification" OR "voters identification" OR "voters ID" OR "ID laws" OR "ID law" OR "photo ID" OR "photo identification"

others contained multiple statements from senators/representatives. To ensure comprehensive data capture, not only were sentences or paragraphs about voter ID collected but all speeches or remarks linked to elections and voting. The data are therefore not exclusively about “voter ID” but capture topics where voter ID is mentioned and brought up in debates. The final corpus contains 743 statements from Democratic and Republican speakers (414,375 words).

3.2. *Conceptualising ‘frames’*

To explore framing of voter ID laws in the US, a three-dimensional framework based on Entman’s influential definition of frames is developed to interpret the findings from the analyses. Entman defines framing as encompassing the promotion of specific problem definitions, causal interpretations, moral evaluations, and treatment recommendations (Entman, 1993: 52).

Assuming the treatment recommendation is to pass or remove voter ID requirements, the three dimensions of interest are explained in turn below:

- **Dimension 1** focuses on how political elites define the problem (problem definition), which, in this context, pertains to the challenges affecting the electoral system that electoral laws seek to address.
- **Dimension 2** examines how political elites interpret the effects or causal mechanisms (causal interpretation) related to their proposed treatment recommendation, which in this context involves either passing or removing voter ID requirements. These first two dimensions contribute to a problem-solution framework and rely on factual considerations centred around the actual state of the electoral system and the practical effects of implementing or repealing voter ID requirements. It is therefore reasonable to expect that political elites would predominantly employ factual narratives within the first two dimensions.
- **Dimension 3**, in contrast, diverges from factual claims concerning the electoral system’s condition and the outcomes of electoral policy. Instead, it explores how political elites engage in moral evaluations by appealing to values and principles.

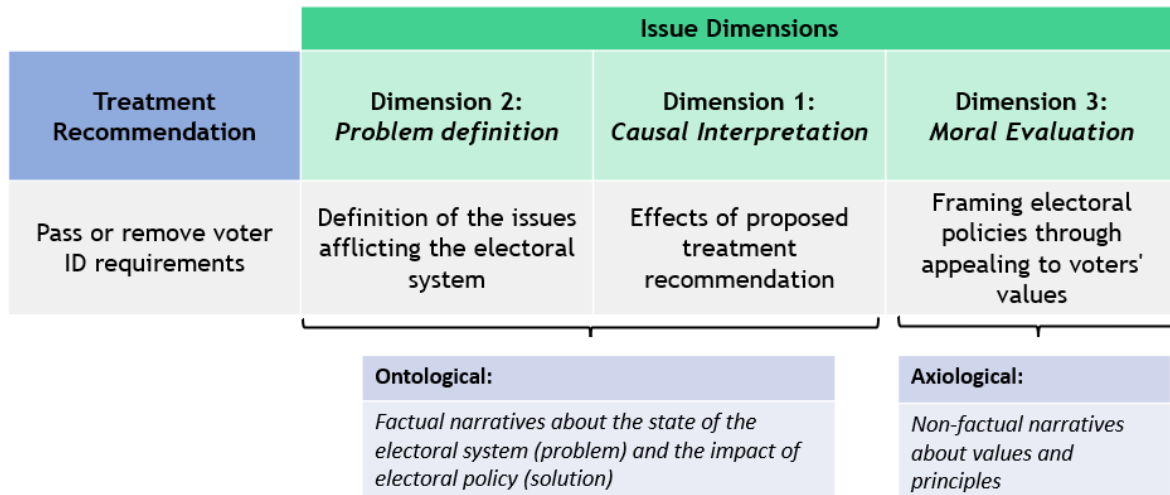


Figure 4. Conceptual Framework

Figure 4 summarises the conceptual framework developed from Entman's (1993) frame definition.

This study primarily focuses on the process of *framing* which encompasses the identification and analysis of themes, narratives, arguments, and cues that shape the dimensions presented above. While the analysis is pooled, meaning that all speeches are analysed together without focusing on framing over time, it hopes to serve as a starting point for a more comprehensive and nuanced understanding of the complex dynamics in political elite discourse over voter ID.

3.3. Methods

The aim of the analysis is to understand the way voter ID laws are justified and challenged by political elites, and specifically to identify differences in how the policy is framed by each Party (Republican vs Democratic Party). To do so, the analysis follows a four-step process:

STEP 1 involves identifying differences in the framing of voter ID by political party affiliation. Specifically, a keyness analysis is first conducted to identify words used more frequently by Republican than Democratic speakers. The statistical significance of the frequency difference is reported through chi-squared statistics.

Positive values mean that the keyword appears more often than would be expected by chance in comparison with the reference corpus (e.g. Democratic speeches). Likewise, a word which is negatively signed occurs less often than would be expected by chance. These unusually frequent words direct the researcher to important concepts in a text which may help identify central narratives, arguments or topics in the corpus (see for example Walker et al., 2023)

STEP 2 involves accounting for the wider context in which the identified keywords occur, allowing us to understand how keywords are used in context (Baker et al., 2008). This step involves exploring the overall discourse of each corpus by generating semantic networks. While the first step highlighted differences in language, through these visualisations we can begin to understand how the same word, even if used to a similar degree, can be used differently by each Party. Taken together, these two steps provide a 'way in' to the data.

STEP 3 involves understanding how the issue of voter ID is specifically debated. Two target keyword analyses of the term 'identification' are conducted for each party's speeches. In this case, the target corpus corresponds to sentences mentioning ID by members of each party, which are compared to those outside of this selected contextual window (20 words around the target keyword 'identification'). This target corpus of statements is also visualised through co-occurrence networks, allowing one to zoom in and explore the specific linguistic context of voter ID in each party's legislative speeches.

These analyses are interpreted in STEP 4 which involves categorising the patterns in the data within the dimensions presented (i.e. problem definition, moral evaluation, and causal interpretation). To verify whether the interpretation of the keywords at face value holds when confronted with concrete formulations in the texts under analysis, the linguistic patterns identified are analysed by generating a list of sentences containing words of interest in their immediate context (see for example Osama Ghoraba, 2023)

4. Results and Discussion

This section first presents the outputs from the computational content analyses, followed by a discussion of the implications and meanings underlying the keywords and linguistic patterns identified.

4.1. Outputs

As shown in Figure 5, speeches mentioning voter ID have drastically increased, from 42 remarks in the 113th Congress to 292 remarks in the 117th Congress. There has also been a notable shift in the partisan structure of these remarks. During the 113-115th Congresses most statements came from Democratic speakers, with a large increase in Republican statements from the 116th Congress onwards. This coincides with the final two years of Donald Trump's presidency (Jan 2019 - Jan 2021) and the 117th Congress (Jan 2021 - Jan 2023).

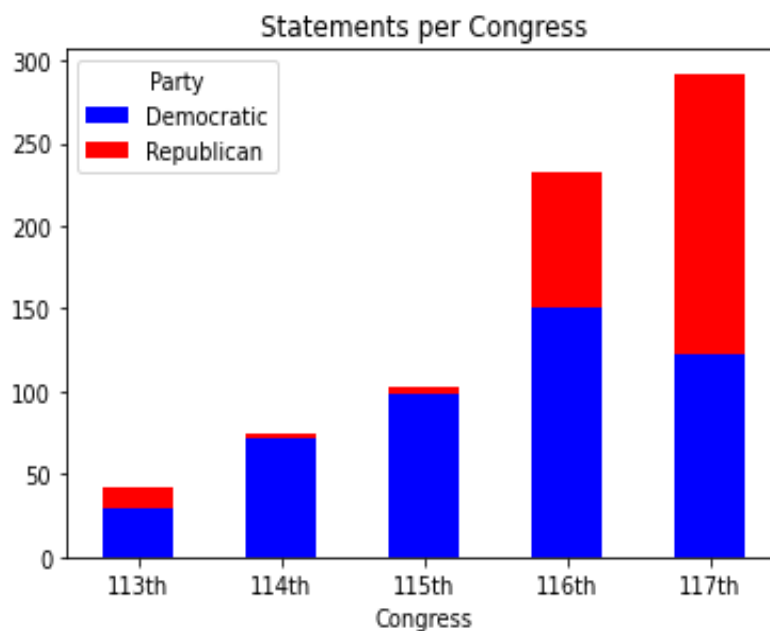


Figure 5. Legislative speeches mentioning voter ID per Congress

Figure 6, below, displays the top 25 key words associated with each party’s speeches mentioning voter ID. The word Republican speakers most frequently use compared to Democrats is ‘democrat’. Other significant keywords are *election, bill, taxpayer, harvesting, grab, partisan, and integrity*. Democrats most significant keyword is *right*, while others include *voting right act, African, black, suppression, discriminatory, minority, Shelby County, and democracy*.

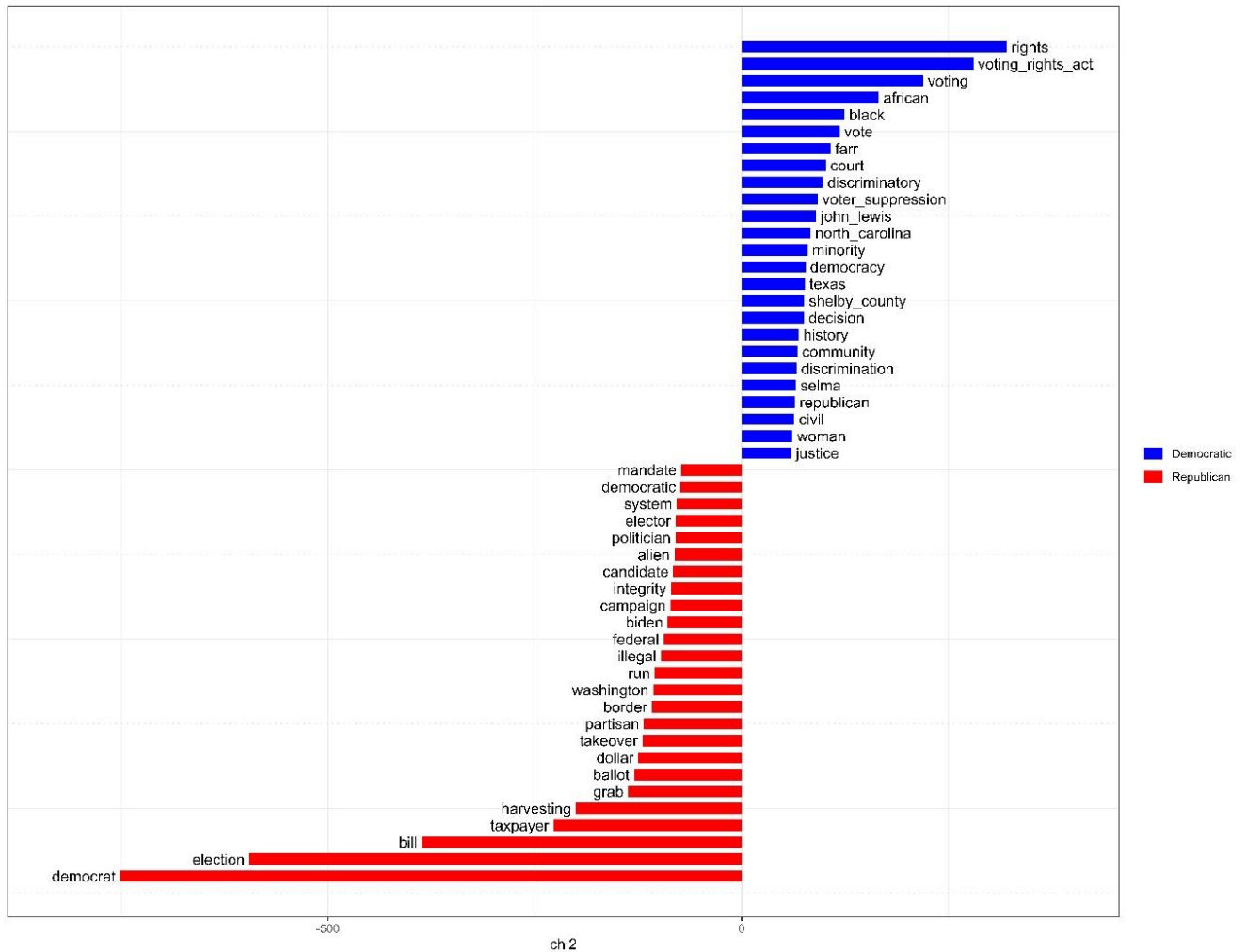


Figure 6. Keyness Output.

Note: The Chi-Squared value (*chi2*) returns the statistical significance of the frequency difference. The words above are significant as they exceed the ‘critical’ value of the chi-square statistic (+/-3.84).

Figures 8 and 9, below, display the semantic networks generated from Republican and Democratic speeches, respectively.

STUDY 1: Political Elite Framing of Voter ID in the US

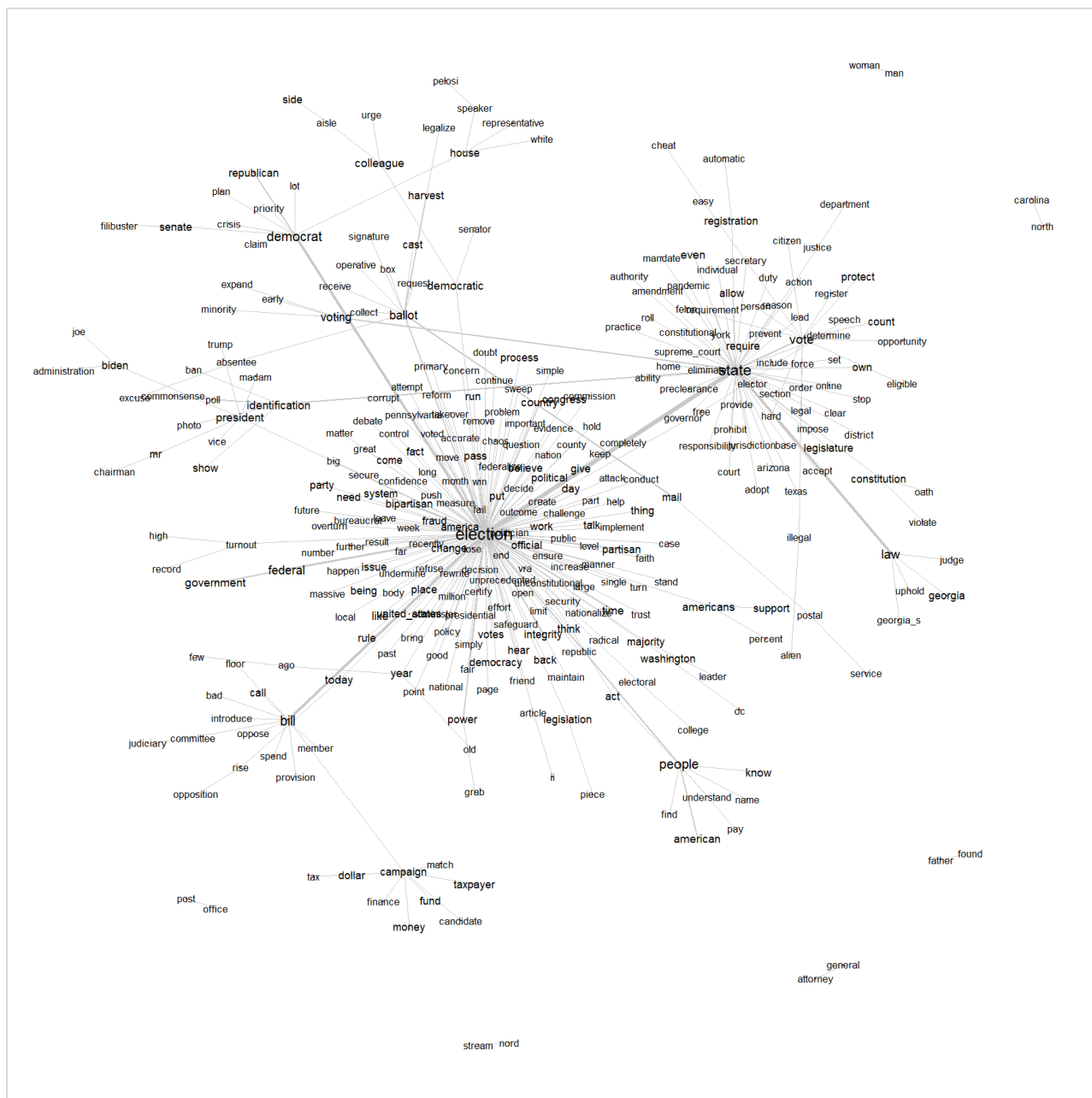


Figure 7. Co-occurrence network of Republican speeches.
Index: co-occurrence; edges threshold: 14; layout: graphopt; maximum tree. The thickness of the connections (or ‘edges’) between words denotes the strength of the association.

STUDY 1: Political Elite Framing of Voter ID in the US

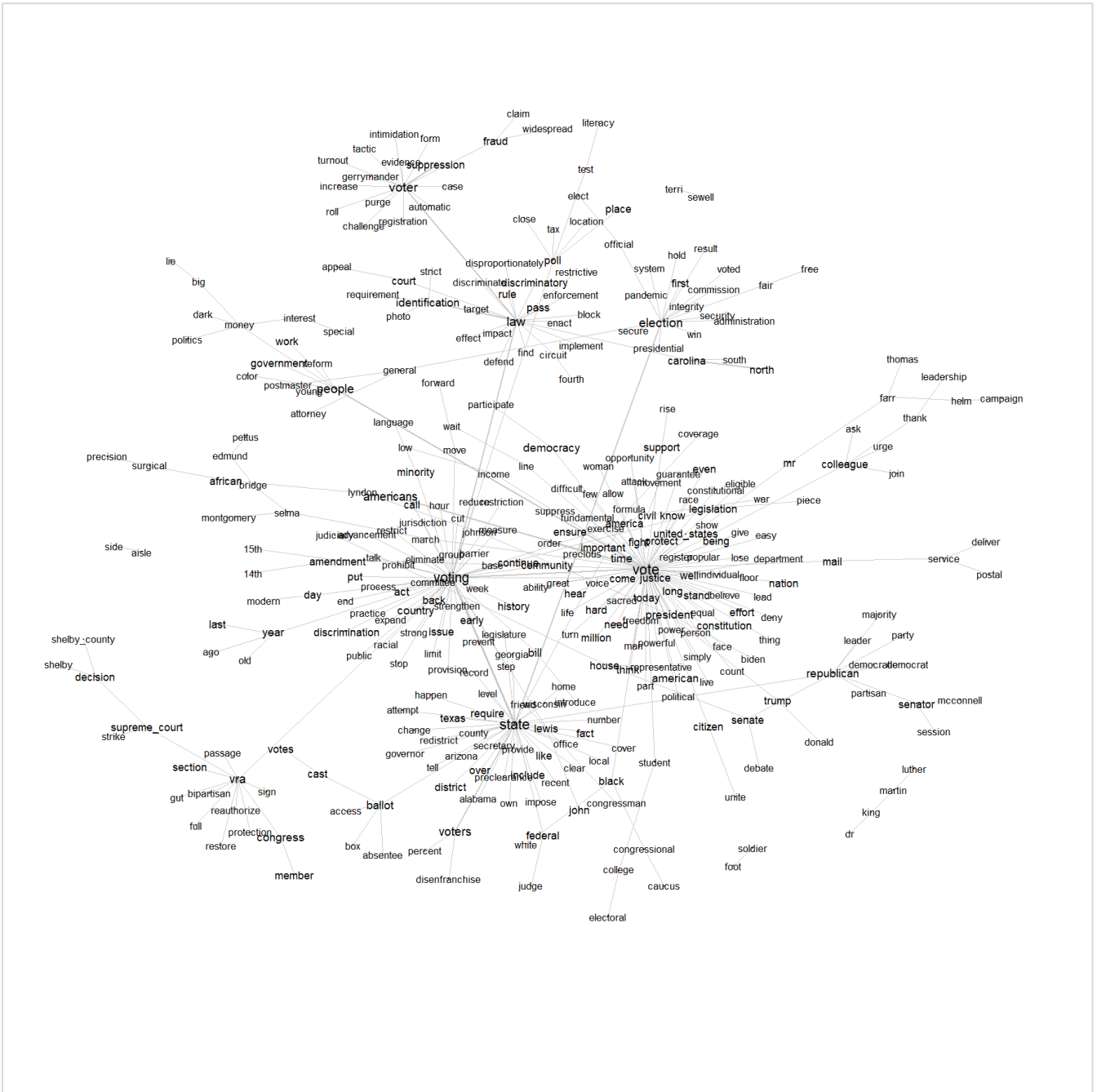


Figure 8. Co-occurrence network of Democratic speeches. Index: co-occurrence; edges threshold: 20; layout: graphopt; maximum tree.

There are re-occurring central terms in both semantic networks such as *vote*, *state* and *election*. From these main hubs, several connections emerge, some of which become distinct enough to form discrete hubs. In the Republican network, we find a hub around the term *bill* emerging from the key axis *election*, which is connected to terms *preclearance*, *design*, *introduce*, and *bad*. For Democratic speeches, the prevalence of discussions around the Voting Rights Act is also visible in the overall network, where *VRA* also appears as a distinct hub, in turn connected to words *violate*, *restore*, *gut*, and *Supreme Court-strike*.

Figures 11 and 12, below, present the results from the target keyword analysis conducted to understand how the issue of voter ID is specifically discussed by both parties. This analysis compared words appearing in proximity to the term “identification” with the rest of the corpus. While the previous keyness analysis compared Republican vs Democratic speeches, this targeted keyword analysis is conducted independently for each party’s speeches. The aim is to identify the specific terms used by each party when discussing ID requirements.

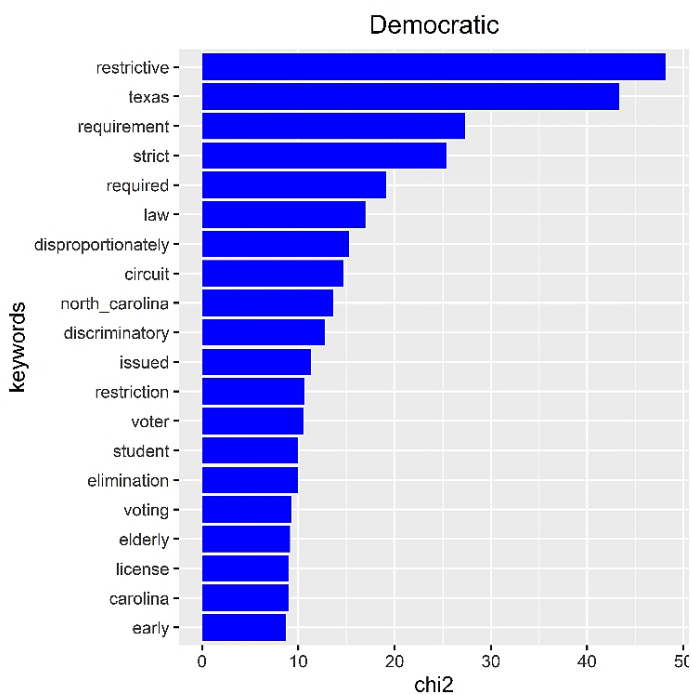


Figure 10. Democratic Target Keyword Analysis

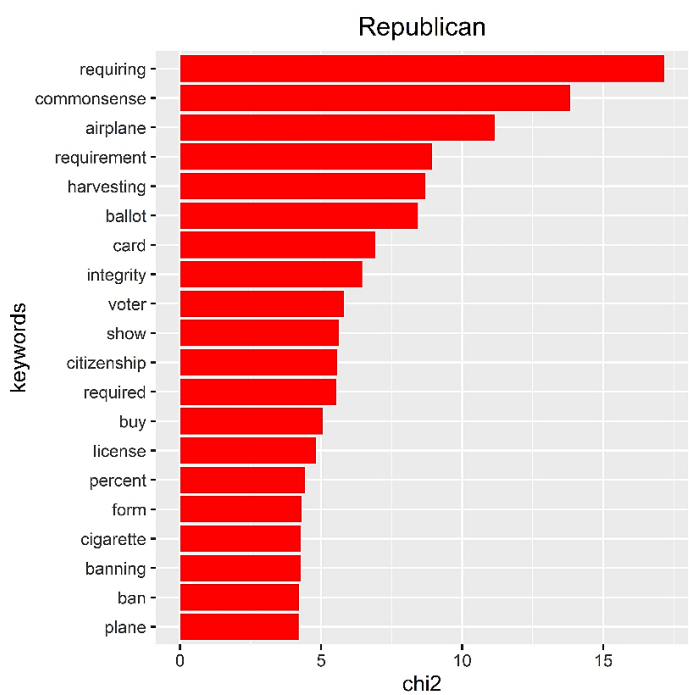


Figure 129. Republican Target Keyword Analysis

The most significant word Republicans use when discussing ID is *requiring*, compared to Democrats keyword, *restrictive*. Other Republican key terms include

commonsense, *airplane*, *license*, *cigarette*, *harvesting*, and *integrity*, and Democrats include *Texas*, *disproportionately*, *discriminatory*, *restriction*, *student*, and *elderly*. The connections between these key words and others are visualised in separate co-occurrence networks (Figures 12 and 13), where the central hub is the term ID, from which both other hubs and semantic connections emerge.

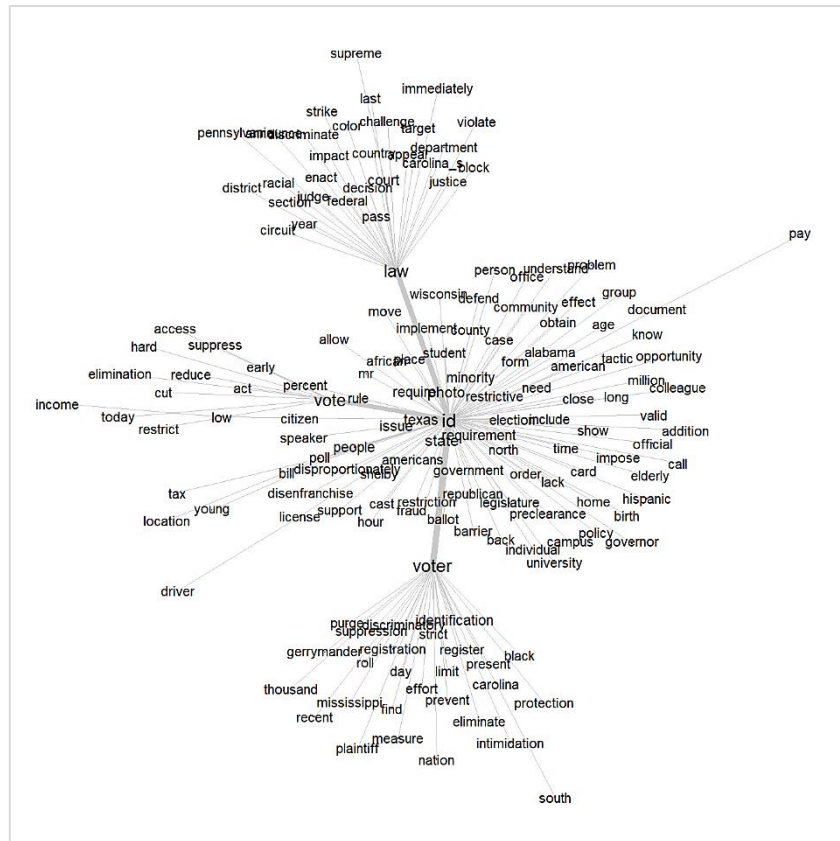


Figure 11. Democratic co-occurrence network around “id”/”identification” (edge threshold: 8)

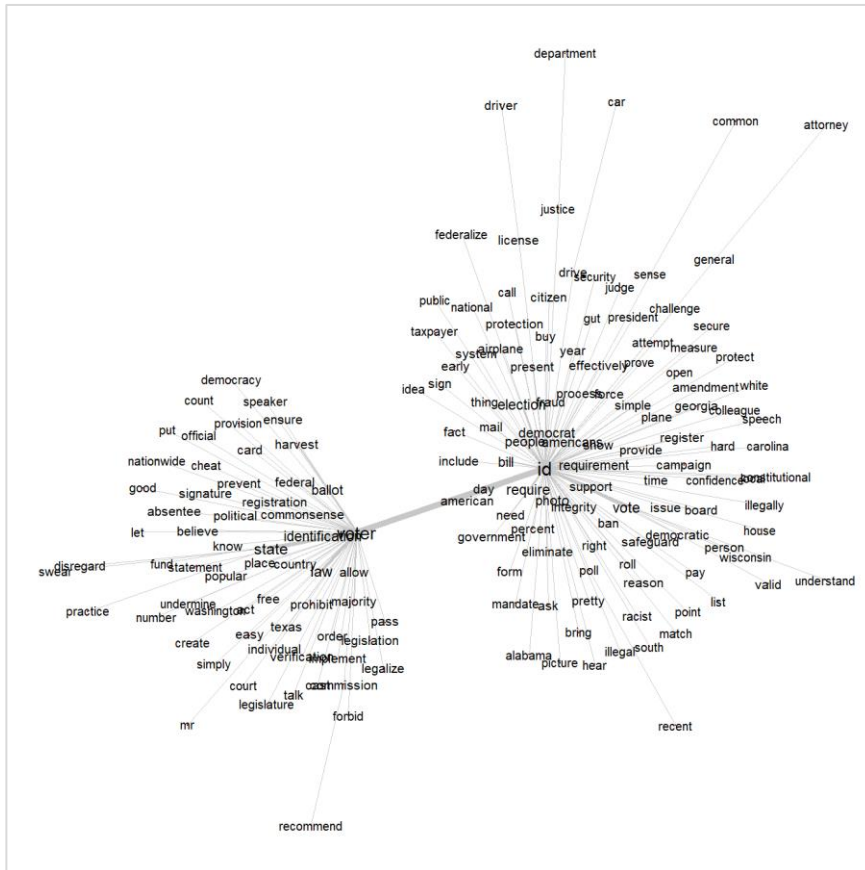


Figure 12. Republican co-occurrence network around “id”/”identification” (edge threshold: 8)

In Democrats' voter ID network, connections are found between: (1) *voter* and *suppression*, *discriminatory*, *prevent*, *gerrymander*, and *strict*; (2) *ID* and *restrictive*, *tactic*, *Shelby*, *minority*, *impose*, *barrier*, *disenfranchise*; (3) *vote* and *cut* and *reduce*, *restrict* and *suppress*; and (4) *law* and *racial*, *challenge*, *target*, *impact*, *block*, *discriminate*.

In the Republican voter ID network, key terms *common sense*, *airplane*, *license*, and *plane* are connected to the main axis *ID*. Terms *simple*, *right*, *integrity*, *fraud*, *secure*, *protect*, and *taxpayer* are also connected to *ID*. Terms connected to *voter* include *popular*, *commission-recommend*, *good*, *free*, *believe*, *democracy*, and *easy*.

4.2. Interpretation: political elite framing of voter ID

Not all legislative records resulting from the search were exclusively about voter ID. Rather, they captured topics where voter ID is mentioned and brought up in the debate. This section presents the findings from the interpretative stage of the analysis. This involved exploring the most significant key words and linguistic patterns identified by using the Key Word in Context (KWIC) function to return a list of sentences containing words of interest in their immediate context. In this way, occurrences of the keywords and connections identified are analysed in the original text and classified according to Entman's framing dimensions (problem definition, causal interpretation, and moral evaluation). While policy framing is grouped into the three dimensions, these often work in conjunction and overlap to frame, collectively, voter ID in a positive or negative light.

Dimensions 1 and 2: Problem Definition and Causal Interpretation

The definition of the problem (the issues affecting the electoral system) and the causal interpretation of the consequences resulting from the implementation of electoral policies are inherently interconnected.

Exploring the keywords from the keyness analysis reveals political elites framing of voter ID through the effects of the policy. Democratic keywords *black*, *suppression*, and *minority*, as well as connections in the overall co-occurrence network (for example between *voting* to *prevent* and *limit*), highlight Democratic elites discussions of voter suppression caused by voter ID laws. This "voter suppression" frame is also evident in the Democratic ID target keyword analysis and ID co-occurrence network, with significant terms such as *disenfranchise*, *restrictive*, *barrier*, *prevent*, and *suppression*. The connection within the overall network of Democratic statements between *people* and *color* and *young*, *Americans* and *African*, *native* and *minority* and *language*, and the key terms *elderly*, *student*, and *low-income* highlight how Democratic elites refer to the people they expect to be disenfranchised by voter ID laws.

The significant keywords in Democratic discourse, including *VRA*, *Shelby County*, *court*, *decision*, and *justice* reveal that, for Democrats, discussions are distinctively

defined by the 2013 Supreme Court ruling in *Shelby County v. Holder* and its implications for the Voting Rights Act of 1965 (mentioned 857 times throughout). This decision effectively granted states with a history of racial discrimination the authority to enact voter ID laws without needing approval from the Justice Department or a Federal Court. This historical context significantly shapes Democratic discourse on voter ID. Democrats' discourse emphasises the VRA and reference the *Shelby County v. Holder* case, with these key terms linked in the co-occurrence network (Figure 8), due to its pivotal role in striking down Section 5 of the VRA.

The states of *Texas* and *North Carolina* appear significant to Democrats' discourse, both in the overall keyness analysis and voter ID target keyword analysis, as they are used to exemplify the local impact or effects of the *Shelby County v. Holder* decision and to raise the important legal challenges faced by these states when trying to pass voter ID laws. This statement from a Democratic speaker highlights this emphasis:

"If there is any question about the major impact of this decision, just look at the statement released by the Texas Attorney General just hours after the Court's decision. He wasted no time announcing that the State would immediately implement its restrictive voter identification law. Now that the Supreme Court has gutted the most effective Civil Rights law in our Nation's history, hundreds of thousands of voters in Texas may not be able to cast a ballot in the next election."

Mr. Durbin, Democratic Speaker (House: 27/06/2013, 113th Congress)

In this extract, Mr. Durbin explicitly connects the adoption of a restrictive voter ID law in Texas with the Supreme Court's decision action to demonstrate the tangible repercussions of legal decisions on voter ID laws. The Republican framing is clearly different. The term 'integrity' appears in both the overall keyness analysis and ID target keyword analysis, underscoring the ways in which Republican elites are emphasising the importance of voter ID requirements to protect the integrity of the electoral system. Within the Republican network, the term *election* is connected to *integrity, security, fix, ensure, secure, and safeguard*.

While allegations of fraud by mail were notoriously voiced by Trump throughout his primary and general election campaigns during the 2020 pandemic, the analysis shows these claims are also voiced by Republican political elites who argue that

voting by mail or a lack of photo ID “opens the door to voter fraud” (in network: connection between *ballot* and *mail*).

Republican elites further frame voter ID as preventing fraud by, conversely, framing Democrats’ H.R. 1 bill as *enabling* fraud, specifically through fraudulent ballot harvesting. This legislation proposes federalising elections and restoring the preclearance provisions of the Voting Rights Act (VRA). Examining instances of Republicans’ top key words *democrat*, *election* and *bill* (see figure 8) in the original text shows how Republican voter ID discourse is linked to voter accessibility bills introduced by Democrats, in particular the For the People Act of 2021. Moreover, the significant increase in Republican statements from the 116th Congress (2019) onward underscores the recent association of discussions about voter ID with this specific bill.

Instances of the term *harvesting*, which is a key term in both the overall keyword analysis and target ID analysis, shows how Republican elites insist the H.R. 1 bill increases the likelihood of this form of electoral fraud from occurring, thereby implying voter ID laws cause the opposite effect. Republicans not only claim that the Democrats’ H.R. 1 bill increases the likelihood of electoral fraud through legalising ballot harvesting (in network: *ballot-harvest-legalize*), but also of fraud by “illegal immigrants”, thereby reinforcing the framing of voter ID as preventing fraud.

“Madam Speaker, voter fraud and election theft increasingly rot at the foundation of America’s republic: our elections. Voting by illegal aliens and other noncitizens is rampant and flipping elections because socialist Democrats have made it illegal to require proof of citizenship when illegal aliens and other noncitizens demand to be registered to vote.”

Mr. Brooks (R-AL) (House: 16/12/2020, 116th Congress)

The factual claims regarding the impact of voter ID requirements made by both political parties not only differ from each other but their veracity is also openly disputed by each party. Democratic speakers cast doubt on the key Republican narrative that voter ID is necessary to prevent widespread voter fraud and strengthen the electoral system. In the overall network, there are connections

between terms like *fraud* and *claim*. Instances of these terms in the original text demonstrate that Democrats reference Republican framing in order to undermine it by claiming Republicans are lying about widespread voter fraud and that this is therefore not a real problem worth addressing. Furthermore, the presence of terms like *big* and *lie* in the overall network indicates that Democrats also refer to “Donald Trump’s big lie” when challenging allegations of voter fraud. *Trump* appears in both Party’s networks and is referenced 237 times throughout, twice as many times by Democratic speakers than Republicans.

“Since the start of this year, Republican State legislatures, inspired by Donald Trump’s big lie that the election was stolen, have introduced more than 360 bills with restrictive voting provisions in 47 States.”

Mr. Durbin, Democratic Speaker (Senate: 12/04/2021, 117th Congress)

Similar to how Democratic elites stress that widespread voter fraud narratives are false, the connections between *democrat* and *crisis* and *plan*, *claim*, and *lie* in the overall Republican network reveal a similar framing by Republican political elites. Republican elites claim that voter ID laws do not lower turnout (in network: turnout-high) and that Democrat’s H.R. 1 bill is “based on a myth” and “on a lie...that voting rights are somehow under attack” (Mr. Wicker, R- MS, 117th Congress). These quotations illustrate how Republican elites contend that claims of discrimination behind voter ID laws are unfounded:

“They bring action against States like Texas, which simply want voter ID, and they allege that Texas is imposing a poll tax and that it is a racist plot--and by the way, we have evidence--you have places where photo IDs have been required, and there was actually an increase in minority voting.”

Mr. Gohmert, (R-TX) (House: 10/04/2014: 113th Congress)

“Reasonable people can disagree about the best way to conduct elections, but it is disingenuous to say that something is voter suppression or undemocratic just because you may not agree with it.”

Mr. Fischer (R- NE)(Senate: 15/06/2021: 117th Congress)

Beyond effects on the electoral system, arguments for or against voter ID also relate to public perceptions of electoral integrity and voter ID. Republican elites argue that by “neutering popular precautions like voter ID while legalizing shady practices like

ballot harvesting across the board”, the Democrats’ proposed bill is also “a recipe for undermining confidence” (Mr. McConnell, R-KY, 117th Congress), thereby framing voter ID as not just a way of increasing election integrity but of increasing voter *confidence* (in network, connection between *election* and *confidence*). Moreover, Republican elites further claim that Democrats’ “deceitful” narratives around voter suppression are also a means of undermining “people’s trust” and, as such, risk reducing people’s confidence in the security of elections:

“This legislation [H.R. 1] would undermine election integrity, making our elections less secure and more susceptible to fraud. And it would undermine voter confidence in our elections. The partisan divide in this country has reached new heights, and voters on both sides have lost confidence in our electoral process. Any election legislation that we take up should be focused on building voter confidence in the fairness of our electoral system, not undermining it.”

Mr. Thune (R-SD) (Senate: 22/06/2021, 117th Congress)

When discussing the effects of voter ID laws, Democratic speakers similarly frame voter ID as leading not only to voter suppression but also to low public confidence. While Republicans claim low public confidence is a result of voter fraud and Democrats’ “deceitful” suppression narratives, Democrats instead argue low public confidence results from citizens being denied their voting rights through barriers imposed by voter ID requirements and Republican lies about voter fraud.

“We want people to have total confidence in our voting system, and we want them to have confidence that every citizen has a right to cast a vote, and will not be turned away at the ballot box because of an artificial barrier.”

Ms. Cantwell (D-WA) (Senate: 6/2/ 2017, 115th Congress)

Moreover, Republican elites not only leverage low public confidence in the system to argue for voter ID but also point to public support for these laws. They argue that these laws are supported by the general population, thereby positioning the Republican Party as representing the desires of “the people.” This argument is reflected in the network by the associations between *election* and terms like *Americans*, *support*, and *percent*, as well as the connections between *people* and *understand* and *ID* and *popular*.

Framing voter ID laws through their effects, in both the running of elections and in public confidence, reveals how each party departs from very different constructions of the state of the electoral system. While Republicans claim the integrity of

elections is threatened by fraud, and therefore demands the implementation of voter ID laws, Democrats instead define the problem as voter suppression by voter ID requirements, fixed by restoring section 5 of the VRA and, more recently, by passing their proposed bill H.R. 1, For the People Act. Even in cases where both parties acknowledge that there is a problem of low public confidence in the electoral system, they diverge in their assessment of the underlying reasons for this low confidence and, consequently, in their proposed solutions to it.

Dimension 3: Moral Evaluations

The previous section highlighted a fundamental lack of common ground in discussions about electoral laws. Both parties hold differing views on the nature of the problem and its solution and also openly challenge the accuracy of each other's factual claims. When there is no consensus on the foundational facts, such as the nature of the problem riddling the electoral system and the potential outcomes of proposed solutions, policy evaluations become grounded more in moral principles rather than in considerations of their costs and benefits. This section presents the arguments identified that move away from examining the practical effects of electoral policies and instead focus on the partisan motivations behind them.

Terms such as *tactic*, *strategy* and *gerrymander* connected to the main axis *voter* (also *target* connected to *law*) in the overall Democratic network underscore that Democratic elites frame voter ID laws not only through discussions of their effect but also their intent, framing voter ID laws as designed to suppress votes by the Republican party to benefit their electoral performance. Terms associated with the framing of voter ID as enabling suppression by design or as a partisan strategy include *effort*, *prevent*, and *tactic*, which also appear in the targeted voter ID network (in network: 'republican' to 'partisan'). In contrast, Democrats stress the "Voting Rights Act has always been bipartisan" (in overall network: connection between *VRA* and *bipartisan*).

In a similar manner, Republicans not only undermine the veracity of Democrats' voter suppression claims but argue that Democrats are pushing "voter suppression conspiracies" as an "attempt to manufacture a crisis that will justify passing H.R. 1 or some variant" (Mr. Thune, R-SD, 117th Congress). Republican elites claim the

Democrats' bill is designed to benefit the electoral performance of the Democratic party through fraudulent ballot harvesting, which allows "political operatives with a partisan agenda to get involved in the collection and submission of votes" (Mr. Walker, R-NC, 116th Congress). By framing their Opposition's bill as a partisan measure that enables fraud, Republican elites strengthen the framing of voter ID as a public good that benefits all voters. While Republicans name the Democrats' bill the "corrupt politicians act" (in network: *corrupt - politician - act*), voter ID laws are by contrast often described as 'voter integrity' laws/measures, strengthening the framing of voter ID as non-partisan.

This polarisation of electoral laws, whereby each party claims their Opposition is driven by partisan interests, is most evident in Republican discourse, their most key word being *Democrat*. Relative frequencies show Republicans directly refer to their Opposition (democrat or democrats) and use the term *partisan* three times more often than Democratic elites.

The significance of the term *common sense* in the target ID analysis illustrates that Republican elites also portray voter ID laws as inherently sensible, an argument that is visualised in the network through the link between *ID* and *common sense*. Other key terms such as *airplane*, *cigarette*, and *plane* indicate that Republicans emphasise the common-sense aspect of voter ID by drawing parallels with situations where people are used to presenting identification, such as when buying cigarettes or travelling by plane.

"The bill takes aim at State voter ID laws, which are commonsense measures--strongly supported by the American people--to ensure that voters are who they say they are before they vote. The Pew Research Center reports that 76 percent of Americans, including 61 percent of Democrats, support voter ID requirements."

Mr. Thune (R-SD) (Senate: 13/04/2021, 177th Congress)

While Republicans frame voter ID as common sense, Democratic keywords *Selma*, *John Lewis*, and *history* from the overall keyness analysis show how Democratic elites frame voter ID as both a partisan strategy and a racist one. Democrats largely appeal to a public's memory of the history of racial discrimination in the US and the significance of the civil rights movement in the passing of the VRA (in overall network: *voting* connected to *John Lewis*; *civil* connected to *war* and *movement*;

vote connected to *injustice - march - Selma*). Representative John Lewis (D-GA, 1987-2020) was an American statesman and civil rights activist who initiated the first of three Selma to Montgomery marches over the Edmund Pettus Bridge in 1965. These marches were central to the voting rights movement in Selma and throughout Southern United States and significantly contributed to the passage of the Voting Rights Act that year.

Democrats reference to the US history of racial discrimination highlights the federal achievement of the civil rights movement with the passing of the VRA, but also underscores that racial discrimination is very much still present today in electoral laws such as voter ID requirements. This narrative is visualised in the co-occurrence network through the connection between *voting* and *design - modern - day*, exhibiting how Democratic elites frame voter ID as “just one example of a modern-day barrier to voting” (Ms. Sewell, D-AL, 114th Congress).

When further exploring Democrat keywords connected with US racial history, an interesting moral dimension emerges. This history is used as a rhetorical strategy to reignite the memory of the struggles that led to the passing of the VRA. The metaphorical language of violence is used by Democratic elites to frame the need for the VRA and in turn underscore the racism inherent in restrictive voting laws such as voter ID. These passages illustrate the presence of this type of language:

“I want to honor the legacy of Amelia Boynton, F.D. Reese, John Lewis, and so many; but we cannot honor their legacy without acknowledging that the Voting Rights Act of 1965, major sections of it, have been invalidated. We owe it to that legacy, the legacy and memory of those who fought so valiantly, that this body should once again work together to make sure that Federal protections are there because, as we know, progress is always elusive, all battles become new again, and there is a renewed assault on voting.”

Ms. Sewell (D-AL) (House: 02/02/2015, 114th Congress)

“The legislation we are introducing today responds to those calls from the grassroots and the community leaders on the ground who are today’s foot soldiers for justice.”

Ms. Jackson Lee (D-TX) (House: 06/12/2019, 116th Congress)

Metaphors such as *battle* and *assault*, combined with language around *honor*, *legacy*, and *memory*, work together to bring the past to the present, enabling a temporal

proximisation effect. Similar to the concept of spatial proximisation developed by Chilton (2004), which refers to when the speaker describes events as physically close to and thus consequential for the addressee, narratives about Selma and the civil rights movement effectively bring these events temporally close. The overall co-occurrence network of Democratic speeches further reveals this metaphorical violence language with the terms *people - die*, *vote - purge*, *fight* and *attack*, *life - risk*, *foot soldier* and *democracy - threat*. This history is not only conceptualised as a factor determining the development of the current situation but, as Cap (2008) highlights, temporal proximisation also entails an axiological or value-laden dimension where the antagonistic beliefs or ideology underlying the occurrence of this past event (for example, the Selma to Montgomery marches of 1965), in this case racism, are emphasised to criticise how current “reprehensible practices *continue* to plague our Nation’s minority voters”, and how we therefore ought to “*continue* to recommit ourselves to the ideals that were fought on that Bloody Sunday” (Ms. Sewell, D-AL, 114th Congress). Democrats’ use of metaphors for violence and narratives around war and legacy is interesting as this language has been typically associated with conservative moral systems and discourse (Lakoff, 2010).

The most distinctive word in Democrats’ discourse, *right* (lemmatised from rights), shows how these speakers also mount an appeal to a human rights discourse to challenge voter ID requirements. Relative frequencies show that Democrats mention the term ‘right’ almost four times as much as Republicans. The connections between *vote* and *sacred* and *honor*, *precious*, *important*, and *matter* further demonstrate Democratic elites’ moral framing of voter ID.

Violence metaphors are also present in Republicans’ discourse, visualised in the overall network with the connections between (1) *election to attack* and *chaos* (2) *state to force*, and (3) *election to power-grab* and *sweep*. When exploring formulations of these words in the original text, it becomes apparent how these terms work together to frame voter accessibility bills and by extension, Democrats, as creating chaos and attacking electoral integrity with their proposed ‘federal takeover’ of elections, constructed as a power move or ‘grab’ “away from the people”. The connections between *election - matter*, *important*, *fair*, *good*, *great*,

and words *founding - father*, further highlight Republicans' framing of voter ID as a matter of principle, and of H.R. 1 as the opposite. In the quote below, Republican speaker Mr. Loudermilk refers to the Founding Fathers to express concern about the Democrats' bill, stating that it would disrupt a long-standing principle of decentralised governance in voting regulations:

"I love the idea of our Founding Fathers, who made this Nation the greatest Nation in the history of the entire world. It is unique because our Founders understood that a government that is closest to the people is the most effective and the most efficient. This bill will undo 220-plus years of States setting their own voting requirements, running their own voter laws."

Mr. Loudermilk (R-GA) (House: 07/03/2019, 116th Congress)

Just as Democratic elite's re-appropriate metaphors for violence, which have previously been associated with conservative discourse, to frame voter ID, Republican elites have similarly re-appropriated Democrats' language around "voter suppression" and disenfranchisement to frame the H.R. 1 bill. According to Republicans, the H.R. 1 bill enables voter suppression of eligible voters by allowing "illegal immigrants" and criminals to vote, claiming "every fraudulent vote disenfranchises a legitimate voter" (Mr. McClintock, R-CA, 117th Congress). Key terms used by Republicans, such as *illegal*, *alien*, and *border* suggest that Republicans are linking voter fraud concerns to "illegal immigrants". These keywords are visible in the broader network, where they are connected to the 'vote' axis, in turn associated with terms like *illegal - alien*, *noncitizen*, and *easy - cheat*.

The quote below illustrates how "illegal alien" and felon voting are brought up by Republican elites to criticise the H.R. 1 bill (in network: 'vote'-'felon'):

"What does the 'Corrupt Politicians Act' do? It strikes all of those down and instead mandates that all felons should be allowed to vote--murderers, rapists, child molesters all allowed to vote because Democrats have made the cynical calculation that if millions of illegal aliens are allowed to vote and millions of criminals and felons are allowed to vote, that those individuals are likely to vote Democrat and Democrats want to stay in power."

Mr. Cruz (R- TX) (Senate: 22/06/2021, 117th Congress)

"Every fraudulent vote disenfranchises a legitimate voter".

Mr. McClintock, R-CA, 117th Congress.

Using the example of murderers, rapists, and child molesters reflects the extent to which the issue of voter ID is moralised by Republican elites. Despite many states already restoring voting rights to people convicted of felonies after their sentence, by claiming that Democrats bill enables felons to vote, Republicans at once frame the H.R. 1 bill as immoral and undermine Democratic values by stressing that murderers, rapists, and child molesters would vote for their party.

The frame dimensions identified are summarised and presented in the Table 4 below.

Table 4. Summary of results

		Republican Party	Democratic Party
FRAME DIMENSIONS	1. Problem definition: What are the issues afflicting the electoral system that voter ID or voter accessibility laws aim to address?	Problem 1: Voter fraud. Democrats voter suppression claims are false.	Problem 1: Voter suppression. Republicans voter fraud claims are false.
		Problem 2: Low public confidence - voter fraud leads to low public confidence of eligible voters.	Problem 2: Low public confidence - voter suppression of minority groups leads to low public confidence of eligible voters.
	2. Causal Interpretation: What are the consequences of passing voter ID or voter accessibility laws?	Effect 1: Voter ID reduces voter fraud and strengthens electoral integrity.	Effect 1: Voter ID causes voter suppression.
		Effect 2: Voter ID increases confidence of general public.	
		Effect 3: Voter ID prevents voter suppression, understood as a disenfranchisement of eligible voters by diluting their vote amongst fraudulent votes.	Effect 2: Voter ID undermines confidence of affected voters.
	3. Moral Evaluation: How are these electoral laws legitimised beyond arguments around specific problems and effects?	Voter ID is non-partisan, opposing voter ID is framed as a partisan strategy.	Voter ID is partisan.
		Voter fraud is linked to illegal immigrants, felons and criminals	Voter ID is racist: use of violence metaphors to draw links to US racial history
		Voter ID is framed as common sense - public support.	

5. Conclusions

This study employed computerised content analysis methods to analyse Congressional speeches addressing voter ID from 2013-2021, with the aim of exploring how political elites frame this controversial policy. The analyses demonstrate that the Republican discourse is largely defined by discussions around

Democratic-backed voter accessibility bills, most notably the For the People Act (H.R. 1). While the primary focus was on how both political parties articulate their stances on voter ID requirements, ways of framing voter ID are also implicit in the framing of legislative proposals such as the For the People Act.

Following Entman's (1993) seminal definition, this study classifies the framing of voter ID into three dimensions. Dimension 1 corresponds to the ways in which political elites interpret the effects of their proposed treatment recommendation. The analysis shows that Republican elites emphasise narratives around voter integrity, with *integrity* appearing as a key word in discussions about voter ID, more so than *fraud*. Democrats instead claim these laws suppress or disenfranchise marginalised groups.

Republican elites often link voter fraud to "illegal" immigrants, lending support to public opinion studies which find attitudes towards voter ID and voter fraud to be influenced by racial and immigrant resentment (Wilson and Brewer, 2013; Banks and Hicks, 2016; Wilson and King-Meadows, 2016; Wilson, Brewer and Rosenbluth, 2014). These partisan frames linked to the *effects* of voter ID echo the ones discussed in the literature known as the 'voter fraud' and 'voter suppression' frames (see for example, Atkeson et al., 2010, 2014; Beaulieu, 2014 Bowler & Donovan, 2016; Conover & Miller, 2018; Wilson & Brewer, 2013).

This study, however, further finds that both parties' framing of voter ID not only relates to the perceived effects of voter ID on the electoral system but also to public *perceptions* towards the electoral system, specifically public confidence, and public support for voter ID. While Republicans argue voter ID requirements are necessary to increase public confidence, Democrats instead argue that they reduce confidence. Justifying or challenging voter ID requirements through arguments around public opinion raises normative concerns around what should count as 'evidence' in the policymaking process, especially when these perceptions are potentially inaccurate (VanHeerde-Hudson and Fisher, 2013). Research finds that views about election integrity and voter ID laws are in part explained by party elite cues and driven by voters' political ideology (Udani and Kimball, 2018: 403; Bowler and Donovan, 2016).

Moreover, studies have found mixed effects of voter ID on confidence. Some studies find that voters living in states with stricter ID requirements still believe fraud is just as pervasive (Ansolabehere & Persily, 2008; Bowler et al., 2015; Stewart et al., 2016). Others find that strict photo ID laws do have an effect on confidence, but this effect is influenced by partisanship, with Republicans showing more confidence and Democrats showing less (Bowler and Donovan, 2016). This highlights how, despite voter ID laws being justified to increase public confidence, the effects of such law reforms on confidence levels cannot be generalised.

Partisan statements about the effects of voter ID are closely tied to and expose political elites' definition of what the problem is, specifically the issues afflicting elections that electoral laws aim to address (Dimension 2). While Republicans claim the integrity of the electoral system and public confidence is threatened by fraud, and therefore needs to be fixed by implementing voter ID, Democrats instead define the problem as voter suppression by voter ID, fixed by restoring section 5 of the VRA and, more recently, by passing the proposed H.R. 1 bill. These factual claims about the efficacy of the electoral system and around public perceptions/opinions differ and contradict each other. Moreover, they are explicitly undermined by each party, with both Democratic and Republican elites stressing claims of widespread "voter fraud" and "voter suppression" are false, respectively. This contest over the veracity of the Opposition's factual claims draws attention to a concerning absence of common ground from which discussions about electoral laws spring, leading to electoral laws being framed using moral terms and as a matter of principle.

Dimension 3 relates to the ways in which political elites move away from factual narratives and instead use moral narratives and emotional language to justify or challenge electoral policy. While Democratic elites claim voter ID laws are *designed* to lower minority turnout, Republican elites claim Democrats aim to pass their H.R. 1 bill to benefit their electoral performance, thereby strengthening their framing of voter ID as a public good and non-partisan.

Democratic elites frame voter ID through a human rights discourse and by arguing that the laws are racist, using appeals to a public's memory of the history of racial discrimination. Republicans similarly moralise the issue by arguing that the H.R. 1 bill enables voter suppression of eligible voters by allowing illegal immigrants and

criminals to vote. Emotions play a crucial role in cognitive processes of framing and reframing, mediating our cognitive judgements by redirecting and intensifying attitudes on a specific issue (Ervias et al., 2021; Moss et al., 2020). Democrats' moralisation of voter ID through narratives of justice and racism help explain Conover and Miller's (2018) unexpected finding that greater acceptance of the suppression frame increases Democrats moral conviction on voter ID.

Kane and Wilson (2021) find that public support for voter ID is driven by perceptions of these requirements as common-sensical, concluding that public support on voter ID laws may not simply be a product of partisan frames. However, given that Republican elites often frame voter ID as common-sensical, the impact of partisan framing on public opinion should not be underplayed.

Counter-framing emerged to challenge, undermine, or neutralise another group's arguments, adding an additional layer of complexity in the framing of voter ID, where one party's framing of the policy is repurposed by the other to challenge or weaken it (Benford, 1987). The Democrat use of violence metaphors and narratives around war and legacy to moralise voter ID shows a shift in partisan language, as conservatives have been typically associated with "speaking from a moral position and appealing to voters' values while liberals try to argue against them using evidence"(Lakoff, in Williams, 2014). Similarly, Republican elites have re-appropriated the traditionally Democratic "voter suppression" frame to portray Democratic-backed voter expansive bills as disenfranchising legitimate voters by allowing voter fraud to dilute their vote.

This finding exposes limitations of dictionary-based analyses of political speech, when a specific word or phrase is understood as intrinsically partisan without exploring its context (see for example, Laver et al., 2003). Gentzkow et al.'s (2019) study of partisanship of congressional speeches from 1873 to 2016 exemplifies such an approach. They find a sharp trend toward increasingly divided speech from 1994, yet defining partisanship as "the ease with which an observer could infer a congressperson's party from a single utterance" misses these instances where the same utterance (for example, "suppression" or "disenfranchisement") can be re-appropriated to develop a counter-frame. Parties may repurpose language typically associated with their opponents, not to reduce polarisation but to strengthen their

own framing of issues in a way that undermines that of the opposition. The use of similar language may on the surface appear as a consensus or convergence and a decrease in partisan polarisation. However, when this language is explored in its context, we instead find a shift in the way partisanship is linguistically constructed.

Future research could also explore the framing of expansive voting bills, since Republicans predominantly structured their discourse around these. While there has been an increase in the adoption of Republican-backed restrictive voting laws across states, at the same time, an increasing number of Democratic states have introduced laws aimed at making voting more accessible. Exploring the discourse of both restrictive and expansive bills is crucial to better understand the framing contests underpinning the electoral landscape.

This study aimed to offer a comprehensive analysis of the ways voter ID requirements are framed in US legislative speeches by political elites. How these frames were 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. By using various inductive content analysis techniques, this study has however transcended the conventional binary framing of voter ID, offering new insights into how the rhetoric of political elites can intersect with individual predispositions, influencing public attitudes towards electoral policies such as voter ID.

Shaping the Narrative: Examining News Coverage of Voter ID Laws in the United States

AIM: To understand how news media outlets frame voter ID requirements in the US.

DATA: News articles by 10 top news media outlets from 2013 to 2023

Motivation

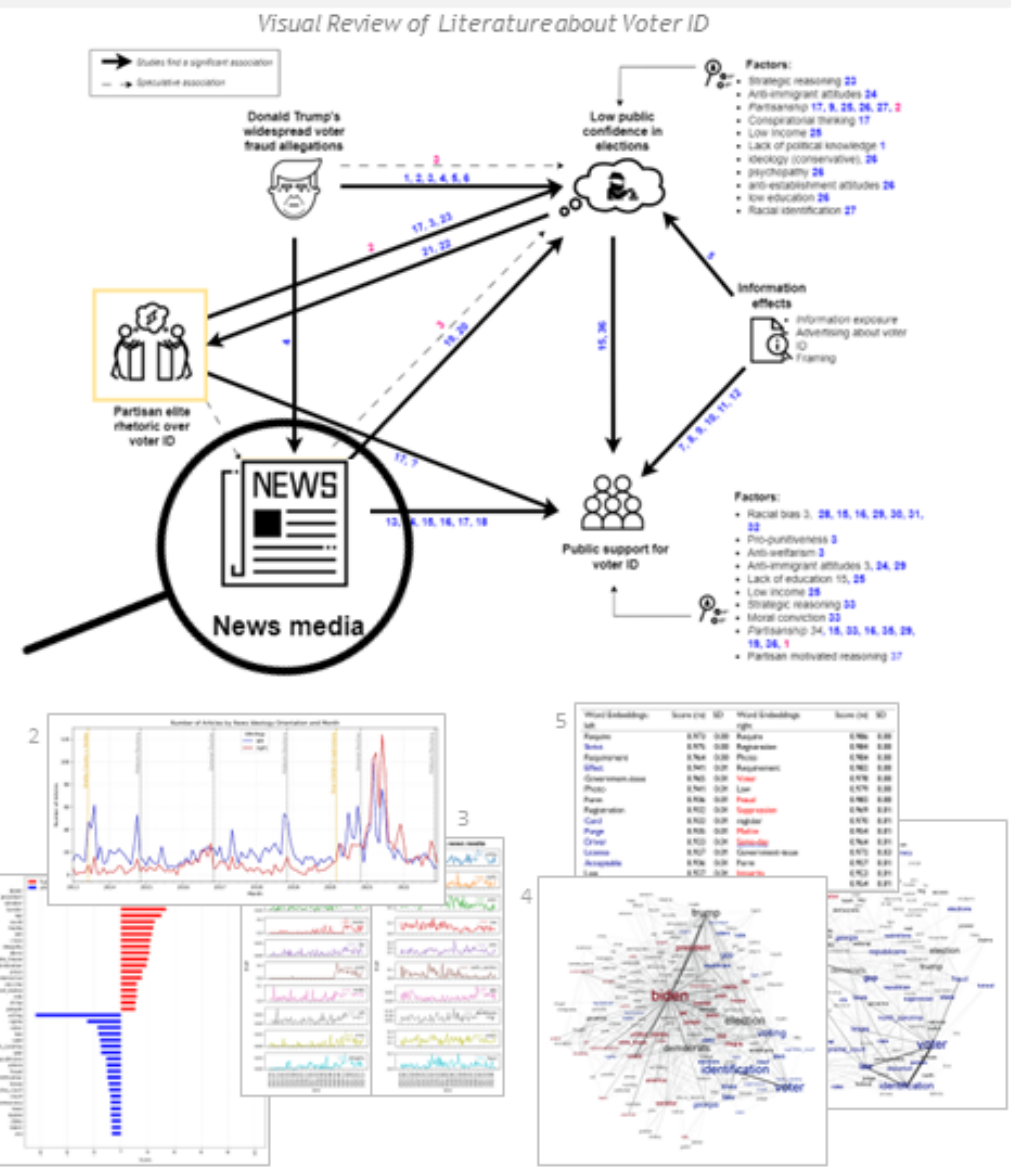
Voter ID is an extremely partisan issue among political elites. Yet there is a surprising bipartisan consensus of support among the American public. Studies suggest elite framing might not have been equally conveyed to the public via the news.

Key findings

- News coverage is mirroring **elite debates** on voter ID.
- Media on the left however placed more attention to **voter fraud allegations** compared to media on the right.
- There is a worrying **absence of a common factual** ground in coverage about electoral laws, echoing partisan elite rhetoric on the issue.

Methods

Proportion shift analysis¹; Article counts per month & media ideology²; TF-IDF scores of keywords over time³; Semantic networks of headlines⁴; Word embeddings of term “identification”⁵



Note on paper:

This work resulted from a collaboration during my research visit to Amsterdam University, with the support of the ESRC's Overseas Institutional Visit award. The paper presented is currently under review at *Journalism Studies*.

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Shaping the Narrative: Examining US News Coverage of Voter ID Laws

Abstract

This study is the first to examine US news coverage of voter ID laws. Over the past decade, voter ID requirements have increasingly been introduced across mainly Republican-led states. Despite rare cases of voter fraud and the strong partisan divide over voter ID among political elites, there is a surprising broad bipartisan support for voter ID among the American public. Using a range of inductive computational content analysis techniques, we analyse news coverage of voter ID requirements from 2013-2023. We find that coverage substantially differs by outlets political leaning and demonstrate a link between news media discourse and elite frames on the issue. False voter fraud allegations, however, appear to have been instrumental in shaping left-leaning media coverage from 2016, raising concerns around whether this might have helped amplify Donald Trump's electoral conspiracies, instead of offering the public alternative ways of thinking about voter ID laws.

1. Introduction

This study analyses news coverage of voter identification (ID) laws in the United States (US). Voter ID laws are part of a broader set of restrictive voting measures largely introduced across Republican-led states in response to concerns about voter fraud, despite voter fraud being extremely rare (Brennan Center for Justice, 2023a, 2017; Christensen & Schultz, 2014).¹⁸ While voter ID requirements date back to the 1950s, the rate at which these laws are passed has increased drastically. Far more laws that may limit voter participation were enacted in 2023 than in any year since the Brennan Center for Justice began tracking voting legislation (Brennan Center for Justice, 2023). This upsurge began in 2021 and is thought to be a response to false allegations of widespread voter fraud mobilised by Donald Trump in his electoral campaigns, especially in 2020.

False widespread voter fraud claims have not only been linked to shifts in policy, but also to changes in public perceptions. Almost a third of the American public

¹⁸ Examples of such measures include reducing early voting periods, implementing stricter voter registration requirements, and limiting access to absentee or mail-in voting.

believe in widespread voter fraud (Pew Research Center, 2021a). This gap between reality and perceptions has become a disconcerting trend for the legitimacy of democratic elections (Berlinski et al., 2023; Clayton et al., 2021), especially following the Capitol Attack when Trump supporters stormed into the Capitol Building on January 6, 2021, in an attempt to overturn his defeat.¹⁹

Studies find Republican voters are more likely to believe in widespread voter fraud than Democratic voters (Botvinik-Nezer et al., 2023; Monmouth University, 2023), and therefore also more likely to support voter ID requirements (Valentino & Neuner, 2017). Despite Democratic voters generally not believing in widespread voter fraud, there is a surprising *bipartisan* consensus of support for voter ID among the American public (Kane & Wilson, 2021; Pew Research Center, 2021a). Somewhat paradoxically, most Democrats (61%) support voter ID while simultaneously advocating for expansive voting processes, and despite the strong opposition from Democratic political elites (ibid.).

A possible explanation for this can be offered by looking at the extent to which political elite cues about voter ID are communicated through the media to the public. According to Fogarty et al. (2015) and Udani et al. (2018), cues used by both political parties might not have been conveyed equally to the public. Conover and Miller (2018) similarly find that “following the news” did not help Democrats decipher their party’s position on voter ID. And yet, despite various survey studies and opinion experiments having found the news to play an important role in forming opinions towards voter ID and voter fraud (Benkler et al., 2020; Goidel et al., 2019; Pennycook & Rand, 2021; Pew Research Center, 2021b; Pyrhönen & Bauvois, 2020), to date news coverage of voter ID remains unexplored.

This study examines news media coverage of voter ID requirements from 10 top US news media sources across the ideological spectrum between 2013 and 2023. We analyse variations in news attention to this contested policy issue and apply complementary content analysis methods to explore coverage. This research

¹⁹174 people arrested and charged for attacking the Capitol on Jan. 6, 2021 said they were responding to calls by Donald Trump, according to a new analysis by a government watchdog group: <https://www.citizensforethics.org/reports-investigations/crew-reports/trump-incited-january-6-defendants/>

contributes to the understanding of the role of news media coverage in shaping public opinion on voter ID requirements. Beyond voter ID, this research contributes to broader discussions on restrictive voting measures and literature on the political aspects of journalism and mass media coverage.

2. Background

Voter ID, election-related conspiracies, and the role of news media

Election-related conspiracies have received heightened attention since Donald Trump's "rigged-election" claims during his 2016, 2018, and, most notably, 2020 electoral campaigns. While Republican and conservative rank-and-file had previously voiced widespread voter fraud as a pressing issue, 2016 was the first time such claims were made by a major party presidential candidate (Udani et al., 2018: 206).

These allegations have been associated with a drastic increase in restrictive voting laws, including new and stricter voter ID requirements, introduced across the US (Brennan Center for Justice, 2023b). Opponents of voter ID, mainly Democratic elites, and civil rights groups, argue that the Republican Party are using false voter fraud allegations as a political strategy to pass restrictive voting laws. This is because people from black and minority ethnic backgrounds, individuals with disabilities, low-income individuals, and students, who have historically supported Democratic candidates (Fogarty et al., 2015; Hicks et al., 2015; Wang & Nittoli, 2012), are also statistically less likely to own the ID required to vote, thereby potentially benefiting the electoral performance of the Republican Party.

Voter fraud allegations have also gone hand in hand with a decrease in public confidence in elections (Berlinski et al., 2023; Clayton et al., 2021). A survey run three days after the 2020 election (Pew Research Centre, 2021) finds most Trump supporters believe voter fraud is common (>77%), with a surprisingly large proportion of these citing "reports on the news" as their source (73%) compared to those citing Donald Trump (43%). Pennycook and Rand (2021) also find Trump voters who consumed more election news were more likely to hold false beliefs about the election.

The news media still holds significant power in shaping public opinion (Langer & Gruber, 2021) and plays an important role in setting the agenda and communicating party elite cues to the public (Merkley & Stecula, 2021; Udani et al., 2018; Zhang et al., 2022). While it's often assumed that individuals who follow the news have greater political knowledge and are therefore less susceptible to conspiracy theories, research in the US finds a link between news consumption, particularly partisan cable television, and beliefs in conspiracies, *irrespective of political affiliation* (Hollander, 2018). News attention and framing of political issues can therefore be asymmetric and differ among news sources with varying political orientations. This is particularly the case with highly polarised political issues such as voter ID because political elites are more likely to use the media strategically to advance their position (Van Aelst & Walgrave, 2016). However, despite voter ID being an extremely partisan issue among political elites, there is a surprising bipartisan consensus of support for these requirements among the public (Pew Research Center, 2021).

Exploring news media framing of voter ID is crucial since various public opinion studies (e.g. Gronke et al., 2019; Valentino & Neuner, 2017) find the news to play a key role in shaping people's understanding and support of these laws. While most research on this topic is experimental and survey based, the few studies analysing news coverage have focused on *voter fraud* coverage (Benkler et al., 2020; Faris et al., 2017; B. J. Fogarty et al., 2022; Van Der Meer et al., 2023), meaning that the broader debate about voter ID within which voter fraud conspiracies are embedded remains largely unexplored. This leaves important gaps in our understanding of how news, particularly from left-leaning media, frames this policy.

To understand the agenda-setting dynamics surrounding the issue of voter ID by news outlets' partisan leaning, we pose the following questions:

RQ1: How has the level of attention in the coverage of voter ID changed over time and are there differences in attention dynamics depending on the political orientation of news outlets?

RQ2: Does the framing of voter ID vary depending on the political orientation of the news outlets?

Changes in public opinion over time

Partisan attitudes towards voter ID laws have changed over time. Gronke et al. (2015) find that from 2006 to 2008 the gap between Republican and Democratic voters supporting strict voter ID requirements was relatively small. Between 2008 and 2014, public opinion shifted significantly. By 2014, Democratic support for photo ID laws had fallen from 70% to 51.8% (ibid.). Stewart et al. (2016)'s study found a similar increase in the partisan divide over voter ID from 2008 to 2014. In 2016, however, this trend was disrupted. Despite growing partisan divisions over many electoral policies in the public mirroring political elite dynamics, such as automatic registration and early voting, there is currently a broad bipartisan consensus of support for voter ID laws among the public (Pew Research Center, 2021). Recent surveys show Democratic support is up to 61% while Republican backing remains high at 93%, with little change since 2018 (ibid.)

What is behind these temporal shifts in public attitudes, especially from Democratic voters? Conover and Miller (2018) theorise that the initial consensus of support occurred because the “voter fraud” frame dominated the news environment. While Democratic elites questioned voter fraud allegations, they did not promptly offer the public an alternative understanding of voter ID laws so the voter fraud frame “flooded the airwaves” (B. J. Fogarty et al., 2015).

Steward et al. (2016) argue that most of the movement in public opinion among Democrats was due to them becoming more likely to discern cues regarding the Democratic position on voter ID. They conclude by speculating that the partisan gap would continue to widen as Democrats become more likely to discern their party's position on voter ID.

However, according to various scholars, Trump's appropriation of the voter fraud narrative since 2016 disrupted this trend. Berkler et al.'s (2020) study of voter fraud news coverage finds that Trump employed fundamental journalistic practices to shape the agenda. By blaming “the elite” at large – including establishment Republicans – for not addressing (unsubstantiated) widespread voter fraud, Trump's

rendition of voter fraud transcended partisanship. As a result, he was able to effectively spread his ‘disinformation campaign’ about voter fraud by expanding his reach beyond the right-wing media ecosystem to outlets used and trusted by Americans outside his political base (Pyrhönen & Bauvois, 2020; Goidel et al., 2019).

Analysing both observational and experimental data on public attitudes collected between 2016 and 2019, Kane and Wilson (2021) tested how different information cues could disrupt the “easy issue” (Carmines & Stimson, 1989) nature of voter ID laws and lead to reduced support. They conclude that the strong public consensus on voter ID results from its costlessness to most citizens, combined with limited awareness of the policy’s controversy and potential burdens others may face to comply. These findings imply that the heated debate over voter ID at the elite level is not consistently reaching the public, particularly Democratic voters, which prompts questions about how the news media frames the issue and how this framing might have changed over time.

To understand how the framing of voter ID might have evolved in coverage, we pose the final research question:

RQ3: Has news framing changed or developed over time, particularly since Donald Trump mobilised false claims of widespread voter fraud?

3. Methodology

Justification of Inductive Approach: Beyond a dichotomy of frames

To date, various studies exploring public attitudes towards voter ID have employed a framing theoretical framework. They define elite rhetoric as consisting of two broad frames: the Republican argument that voter fraud justifies voter ID laws (the ‘voter fraud frame’ and the Democratic argument that the laws are discriminatory (the ‘voter suppression frame’) (see for example, Biggers & Hanmer, 2017; Conover & Miller, 2018; Edelson et al., 2017; Gronke et al., 2019). Despite the scholarly focus on frames in various experimental studies, though, the actual study of how voter ID laws are framed is limited. Studies using this dichotomy often build on Atkeson et al. (2014), but this study only briefly illustrates arguments used in a 2008 Supreme Court case (challenging a voter ID requirement) to analyse public attitudes towards

voter ID and does not provide a systematic study of how elites, in legal or legislative settings, frame the policy. This is an important gap since the language used in Supreme Court cases, by politicians, and by news outlets may differ due to their distinct contexts.

This study therefore departs from the premise that news coverage of voter ID might not fall as neatly into the frame dichotomy around their effect (preventing voter fraud vs. causing voter suppression) employed to classify elite discourse on voter ID to date.

Data

We explore news coverage of voter ID from January 2013 to January 2023 by 10 mass-market/top news media across the partisan spectrum (news outlets on the right: *Breitbart*, *Daily Caller*, *Fox News*, *NY Post*, *Washington Times*, and left: *Washington Post*, *USA Today*, *The New York Times*, *Huffington post*, *CNN*). To determine the ideological orientation of news sources, we followed Faris et al.'s (2017) media partisanship scale derived using the sharing patterns of Twitter users who retweeted Trump or Clinton during the 2016 US election. The outlets selected are based on the available data covering the timeframe of interest.

The year 2013 was chosen as the starting point because the rate at which states introduced voter ID laws substantially increased following the 2013 Supreme Court case *Shelby County vs. Holder*. The preclearance required by states with a history of racial discrimination (section 5 of the Voting Rights Act of 1965) was deemed unconstitutional, thereby permitting these states to enact voting laws without approval by the Justice Department or a Federal Court.

All articles mentioning the keywords “voter ID” or “voting ID” or “voter identification” at least once were collected. The articles gathered are not exclusively about voter ID but capture topics where voter ID is mentioned and brought up in coverage. This intentional decision was driven by a curiosity to explore the broader context in which voter ID is discussed and gain insight into why it is brought up in media coverage.

Articles were retrieved from NexisUni and Mediacloud. The software package LexisNexisTools (Gruber, 2021) was used in R to convert articles from NexisUni into a dataframe and to remove duplicates. The module newsplease (Hamborg et al., 2017) was used in Python to retrieve articles from Mediacloud urls. Excluding duplicates, the final corpus²⁰ contains 4,255 articles (6,137,399 words): 2,547 articles from left-leaning news media and 1,708 articles from right-leaning news media.

Methods and Analysis

As in other forms of computerised text analysis, the original text was pre-processed and modified to reduce complexity (see Appendix C). We explore news coverage by using a range of inductive content analysis methods. First, to address **RQ1** and examine news media attention towards voter ID over time, article counts per month are plotted by left and right-leaning outlets. We conduct a correlation analysis to examine the relationship between the news media sets (right-leaning vs left-leaning outlets). Second, to address **RQ2** and identify language variations between the two news media sets, three complementary computerised content analyses are conducted:

A **(2a)** proportion shift analysis of news headlines is first conducted to identify the words most strongly associated with each set of news media. Headlines play a crucial role in conveying information to readers, summarising and highlighting key topics or themes. To understand the context and meaning of these terms, we then generate a **(2b)** semantic network from headlines in each news media set. Unlike the proportion shift analysis, which compares word frequencies, semantic networks help us assess whether the same word is used differently, even if it's used to a similar degree. Using the Force Atlas algorithm in Gephi software, we position nodes (representing entities or words) closer together when more strongly connected. This makes it easier to capture semantic associations among words found in the headlines of each media set and to understand the ways in which these terms are used.

²⁰ All data supporting this study are available from the Enlighten: Researchdata repository at <http://dx.doi.org/10.5525/gla.researchdata.1569>

These complementary content analyses are used with the aim of inductively identifying linguistic patterns and key words. As aforementioned, the corpus contains articles where voter ID is mentioned at least once and therefore the article content might not be exclusively about voter ID. The linguistic patterns identified could therefore refer to important topics, narratives, or events connected to the issue of voter ID and/or potentially suggest ways in which the policy is specific framed.

To identify ways in which news outlets specifically cover voter ID requirements, we zoom into the word context of voter ID. To do so, the top words associated with the term “identification” are identified by (2c) training two separate word2vec embedding models on articles’ main body from left and right-leaning news media.²¹ Word embeddings are particularly useful to capture complex relationships between words. As results are highly sensitive to single documents, corpus size, and document length, a bootstrapping method is used to ensure stable, consistent results (Antoniak & Mimno, 2018)²².

To address **RQ3** and understand over-time language variations in news coverage, Term Frequency-Inverse Document Frequency (TF-IDF) scores are calculated for the key terms identified. Words with high TF-IDF scores are both frequent in a specific document and rare across the entire collection and are therefore considered more relevant to a specific document. To be able to visualise changes in TF-IDF scores over time, we combine articles published *per month* by each news media set. By

²¹ The data is processed in Python using the gensim package's word2vec implementation. To prepare the text for model training, NLTK's punkt tokenizer is applied for sentence segmentation. The chosen method for generating word embeddings is continuous skip-grams, a variant of n-grams. In this approach, contextual order is preserved, and similar words are mapped or embedded to proximate points in the vector space, sharing heightened cosine similarity values. This method relies on cosine similarity, a widely employed distance metric in embedding analyses.

²² We employ the bootstrap method to train 100 models. In each iteration, we print the top 20 words associated with the term “identification” using the `most_similar()` method of the `Word2VecKeyedVectors` object. A dictionary is constructed to tally the frequency of each word within the top 20 associated words with “identification” in each model. This process identifies the most common words. We extract the top 15 words linked with “identification” across all models, retrieve their scores in each model, and calculate the mean and standard deviation of these top words.

tracking changes in TF-IDF scores over time, we can determine whether certain terms gain or lose importance in news coverage.

The last analysis stage (RQ4) involves critically examining key terms and patterns in the original text to confirm if the initial interpretation aligns with concrete formulations within the text under analysis. To do so, we generate a list of sentences with the identified keywords in their immediate context.

4. Results

This section presents the findings from the analyses conducted. The subsequent Discussion section delves into the implications and meanings associated with the identified key words and linguistic patterns.

RQ1: Article counts per month and media ideology

Figure 13 below displays news article counts per month by left and right-leaning news media. The first vertical line shows the date in which the *Shelby County vs Holder* decision was made. The subsequent lines indicate Midterm and General Elections. Since voting procedures were substantially changed during the COVID-19 pandemic, the second yellow line shows when the first restrictions were implemented.

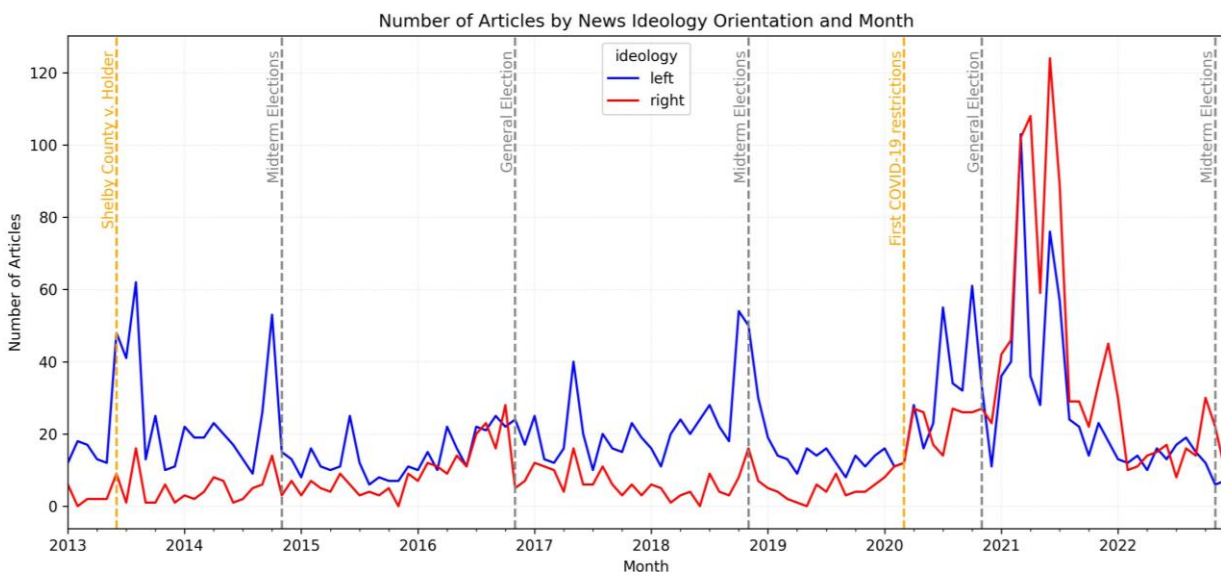


Figure 13. Article Count by News Media Ideological Orientation.

Overall, the analysis shows a surge in the number of articles mentioning voter ID in recent years, particularly since 2021. There's been a notable 173% increase in article counts across congressional sessions, increasing from 568 in the 2013-15 period (113th Congress) to 1557 in 2020-2022 (117th Congress). There has also been a shift in the ideological distribution of these articles. The 113-115th Congresses saw a higher proportion from left-leaning news media, while right-leaning coverage gained prominence from the 116th Congress onward. This coincides with the final two years of Donald Trump's presidency (Jan 2019 - Jan 2021).

The correlation analysis conducted resulted in a moderate positive relationship, with a significant correlation coefficient of 0.4 ($P < .001$)²³. This indicates that as news media coverage from the left increases, there is a tendency for news coverage on the right to increase too, and vice versa.

This relationship is particularly evident during the largest increase in attention from both media sets, which occurs from January 2021, marking the start of the 117th Congressional session. We see a drastic increase in coverage by both media sets from March to July 2021, which coincides with the passage of both expansive and restrictive voting bills. Notable instances include the For the People Act or H.R. 1 passed in March by a Democratic House majority, which aimed to expand voting rights and facilitate mail-in voting, alongside the controversial Republican-backed Texas voting bills such as HB 3 and SB 1, filed in June, which sought instead to impose stricter ID requirements for mail-in voting. Moreover, news attention generally increases around midterm and general elections for both sets of media, suggesting that the issue of voter ID becomes particularly salient during electoral periods. These instances highlight the interconnectedness of news media attention from news media on the left and right.

The moderate strength of correlation however suggests this association is not particularly strong and that there are differences in media attention that contribute

²³ Spearman's rank correlation coefficient was calculated, which is suitable when the relationship between the variables might not follow a straight line but could still show a consistent trend. Correlation coefficients can range from -1 to 1. 1 indicates a perfect positive relationship, -1 indicates a perfect negative relationship, and 0 indicates no relationship.

to this. For instance, we find that from May to July 2013 news attention is largely driven by left-leaning news media, right after the *Shelby County v. Holder* Supreme Court case decision in June 2013. Coverage from right-leaning media also increases from 2016, coinciding with Donald Trump's candidacy, and especially from March 2020 with the start of the COVID-19 pandemic.

RQ2: Language variations in coverage

Figure 14 below illustrates the 20 most significant terms differentiating voter ID coverage by news media ideology. Scores for each word are normalised on a 0-100 scale, with the highest absolute value set to 100 for comparative analysis. A positive score signifies a higher likelihood of usage in right-leaning media headlines, whereas a negative score suggests the word is more frequent in left-leaning news media. The magnitude of the score indicates the strength of the shift toward one side. Words with a score close to 0 are equally used by both left and right-leaning media outlets.

In Figure 14, the leading terms linked to right-leaning media are *Biden*, *coronavirus*, *senator*, *border*, and *Democrats*. *Biden* has the highest deviation from neutrality (score of 100), indicating more frequent use in right-leaning media. Other terms associated with right-leaning news include *media*, *crisis*, and *integrity*. In left-leaning coverage, the top 5 terms are *voting*, *voter*, *rights*, *vote*, and *law*. Additional key terms from left-leaning media are *North Carolina*, *G.O.P. (Grand Old Party or Republican Party)*, *Republican*, *Supreme Court*, *democracy*, *black*, and *VRA (Voting Rights Act)*. Surprisingly, the term *fraud* is more prevalent in left-leaning media than in right-leaning outlets.

RQ3: Key terms over time variations

Figure 16 shows the significance of key terms over time by plotting their TF-IDF scores within the article content, grouped by month. The importance of the term *fraud* in news coverage from the left jumps in 2016, with two spikes in November 2018 and November 2022. While the term *G.O.P.* becomes more frequent from 2020,

North Carolina diminishes in relevance. In right-leaning news coverage there are also temporal variations of key terms. For example, terms like *Biden*, *democrats*, *media*, *coronavirus*, and *integrity* have seen an increase in importance from 2020.

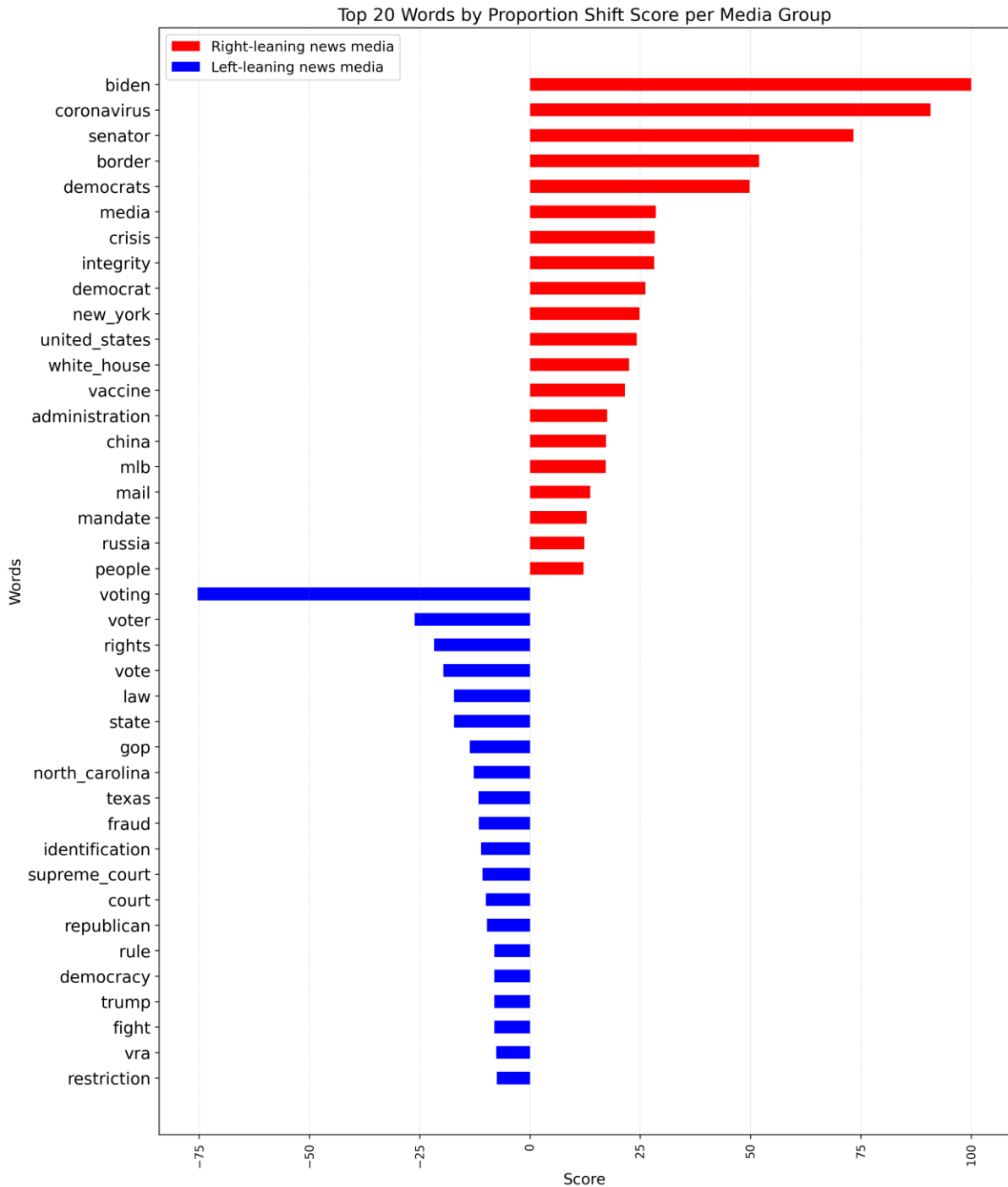
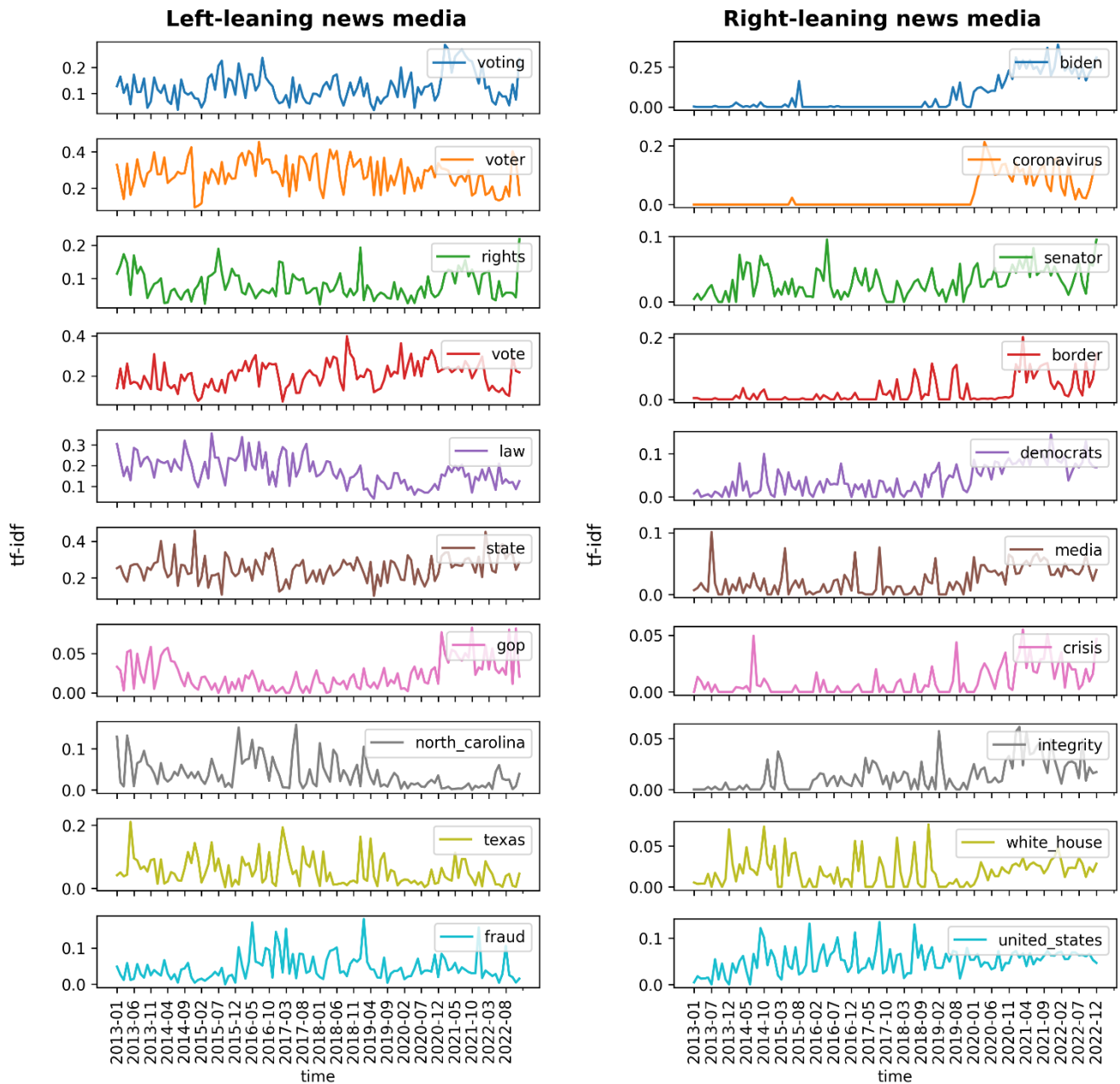


Figure 13. Word Shift Graph comparing Right vs Left-Leaning News Headlines.

Figure 14. Left and right news media key terms.
TF-IDF scores by month for top 10 words from proportion shift analysis.

STUDY 2: News Media Framing of Voter ID in the US



To understand the context in which these terms are used, two semantic networks are generated from right and left-leaning media headlines (Figures 17 and 18, respectively). The size of the word is determined by its count and coloured based on the proportion shift analysis scores (i.e. depending on whether they are relatively more frequent in one set of news media compared to the other). Terms scoring below 5 are considered neutral and coloured in dark grey.

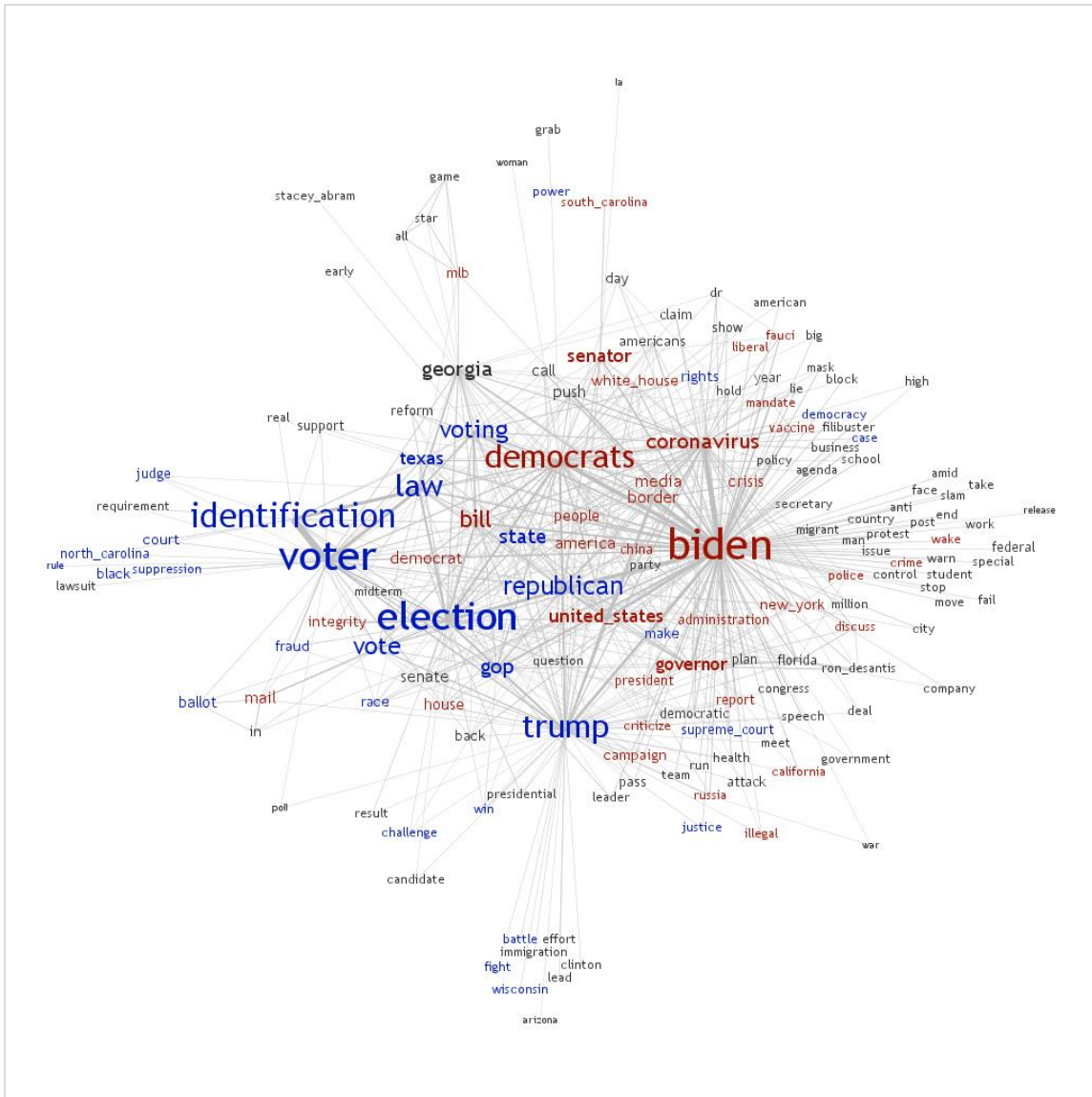


Figure 15. Semantic network of right-leaning news coverage.

Index: 160 visible nodes, minimum word count: 20; edges threshold: 13, layout: Force Atlas. The thickness of the connections (or 'edges') between words denotes the strength of the association. Red words are more likely to appear in right-leaning media, blue in left-leaning, and grey are neutral.

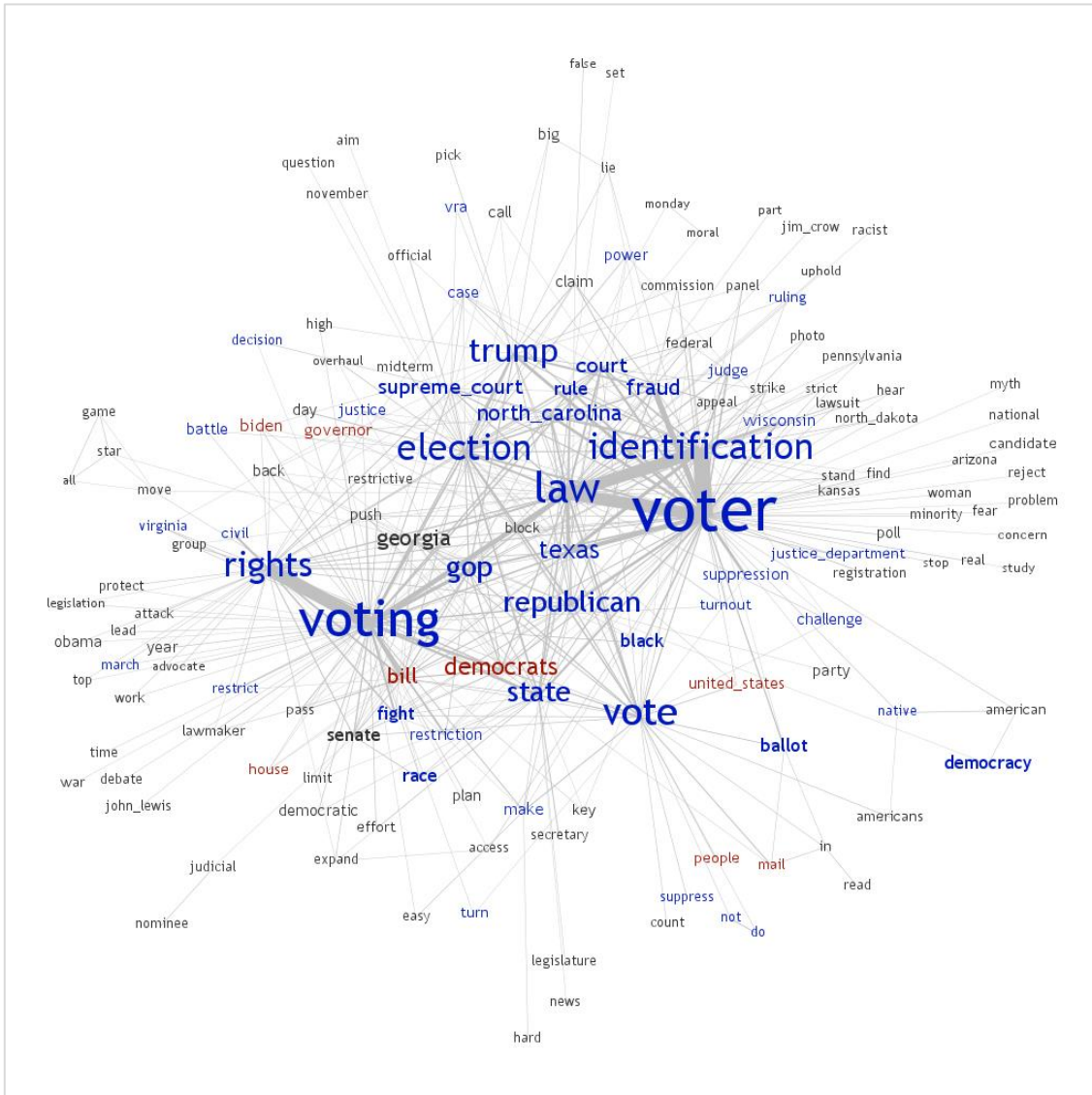


Figure 16. Semantic network of left-leaning news coverage.
Index: 150 visible nodes, minimum word count: 12, edges threshold: 6, layout: Force Atlas.

In the right-leaning semantic network, the key term *Biden* appears centrally and is closely linked to other key terms such as *president*, *democrats*, *United States*, *White House*, *administration*, *coronavirus*, *left*, and *border*. The key term *media* is connected to *left*, *crisis*, and *Biden*.

In the left-leaning semantic network, the key terms *voting* and *rights* appear frequently and are strongly connected to each other. *Supreme Court* is also connected to the terms *North Carolina*, *Texas*, *VRA*, and *decision*. The key terms *black* and *voter* also appear connected. *Trump* is also mentioned significantly by both media sets, slightly more so by media on the left.

The state of *Georgia* is also mentioned frequently by both media sets, with a score below 5, but appears in different contexts. In both networks, it's connected to the terms *all*, *star*, and *game*. While in the right-leaning network *Georgia* is connected to *democrats*, in the left-leaning network it is instead associated to *G.O.P.* We turn to a discussion of the relationship between voter ID and the All-Star Game in the section below.

To get a sense of how voter ID is specifically discussed in the main article body, Table 5 below shows the 15 words that are most associated with the target word “identification” based on their word embedding scores for left and right-leaning media. The standard deviations calculated using the bootstrap method are exceptionally low, indicating a high level of consistency across the different word embedding models. This analysis identified similar terms associated to the target word “identification” across both media sets which include *require*, *requirement*, *registration*, *form*, and *photo*. Different terms associated to “identification” by left-leaning media include *strict*, *purge*, *effect*, *acceptable*, *stringent*, and *disproportionately*. The terms *fraud*, *suppression*, and *integrity* are instead strongly associated with the target word “identification” in right-leaning news media coverage.

Table 5. Most similar or associated words to “identification”.

Word Embeddings: left	Score (m)	SD	Word Embeddings: right	Score (m)	SD
require	0.980	0.00	require	0.979	0.00
requirement	0.971	0.00	photo	0.980	0.00
strict	0.980	0.00	voter	0.971	0.00
purge	0.925	0.01	requirement	0.974	0.00
photo	0.956	0.01	law	0.970	0.00
effect	0.922	0.01	fraud	0.972	0.01
card	0.923	0.01	suppression	0.970	0.01
form	0.935	0.01	registration	0.969	0.00
law	0.938	0.01	register	0.949	0.01
Driver-license	0.916	0.01	form	0.949	0.01
roll	0.911	0.01	include	0.940	0.01
acceptable	0.931	0.02	poll	0.949	0.01
stringent	0.914	0.03	federal	0.946	0.01
registration	0.919	0.01	court	0.936	0.01
disproportionately	0.909	0.01	integrity	0.940	0.01

m= mean, SD = standard deviation. The similarity score is calculated as the cosine similarity between the two word vectors, indicating how similar each word is to “identification” according to the word embedding model. The higher the similarity score, the more similar the word is to “identification”.

5. Discussion

6. Conclusions

This study combined quantitative and qualitative approaches to explore news media coverage of voter ID requirements. We find differences in coverage content depending on the ideological orientation of the news media analysed, demonstrating that the news mirrors the parameters of elite debate on the issue of voter ID. Moreover, we find right-leaning coverage of voter ID is heavily connected to discussions about expansive voting bills introduced by Democratic elites, especially during the COVID-19 pandemic. The framing of voter ID is also implicit in how these are covered.

In their public opinion study, Conover and Miller (2018) conclude that “Republicans have won the “framing war” over voter ID, largely neutralizing the Democratic voter suppression frame, even among average Democrats”. This study adds to these findings, as we find that liberal news media significantly paraphrased Donald Trump’s voter fraud allegations to undermine them, raising questions around whether this might have helped further amplify false voter fraud claims, instead of offering the public alternative ways of thinking about voter ID laws. This is worrying considering that research finds that efforts to correct misperceptions about voter fraud do not decrease support for voter ID laws from Democrats and may paradoxically heighten Republicans’ support (Kane, 2017). Van Der Meer et al.’s (2023) recent findings also suggest that efforts to warn the public about the threat of misinformation can increase general distrust in authentic news. Juarez Miro and Anderson (2023) instead suggest news reports should refer to false information and provide correct data, without repeating false information, as a strategy that can contribute to reducing misperceptions.

We find that media on the right not only neutralised the Democratic “voter suppression” frame but explicitly questioned its veracity, frequently emphasising narratives about left-wing media bias and alleging conspiracy when covering Democratic voter accessibility bills. This dynamic adds a layer of complexity to the issue, as accusing ‘the other’ of conspiring could contribute to a further increase in distrust, particularly if it involves questioning the credibility of news outlets. This finding also raises methodological considerations regarding dictionary-based analyses of discourse, where specific words are seen as inherently partisan without examining their context. While the use of similar language in coverage may appear as a decrease in partisan polarisation, when explored in context this is not the case. Instead, it reveals a shift in how this partisanship is constructed linguistically. Measuring levels of polarisation through language differences (see for example, Gentzkow et al., 2019; Hart et al., 2020) might miss these instances where the same term (for example, “suppression”) can be re-appropriated to develop a counter-frame or paraphrased to undermine its veracity.

We find coverage of voter ID laws not only focuses on their effect but also their intent. While left-leaning news media portray voter ID laws as designed by

Republican elites to lower minority turnout, right-leaning news media similarly portray Democrats' electoral reforms as increasing voter fraud and therefore also as a strategy to benefit their electoral performance.

Electoral laws are also moralised and discussed as a matter of principle. Emotions play a crucial role in mediating our cognitive judgements by redirecting and intensifying attitudes on issues (Ervas et al., 2021). Conover and Miller (2018) find moral conviction has become important in shaping how citizens respond to elite messaging about voter ID. This study lends support to their findings and shows how voter ID laws are moralised in news coverage, with violence metaphors deployed across both media sets. These narratives might help explain Conover and Miller's (2018) unexpected finding that greater acceptance of the 'voter suppression frame' increased Democrats' moral conviction on the topic of voter ID.

While this study offers insights into the news discourse surrounding voter ID, the coverage of other bills, especially by right-leaning media, meant more rigorous qualitative investigation was needed to fully discern how these different electoral bills were covered. Further research would benefit from expanding the scope to include other contentious electoral laws and bills as search terms. This would allow one to explore how left-media covers Democratic-backed election bills.

Further attention should also be paid to the unique features and audience engagement strategies of each news outlet (Gil de Zúñiga et al., 2023) and consider including images in the analysis. Experimental research by Wilson et al. (2014) shows that white respondents exposed to an image of an African American voter and poll worker were more likely to support voter ID laws than those who were not shown any image, even after controlling for racial resentment and political ideology. Similarly, Brown-Iannuzzi et al. (2023) find that racially biased perceptions of illegal voters increases support for voter ID laws. These findings underscore the importance of accounting for non-verbal data alongside textual content. Visual elements and photographs can impact how viewers interpret and understand news content about voter ID requirements. Removing language from its original context therefore risks losing non-verbal information, such as photographs, that would otherwise be important in framing political issues (Jaworska, 2016)(Iyengar (1994).

Despite these limitations, this study highlights the potential for media bias to intensify partisan divisions and contributes to the growing literature on voter ID. By applying inductive computational analyses techniques combined with a qualitative approach, the analyses reveal a wider range of frames and narratives in news coverage than previously theorised. This includes associations of voter ID with effects extending beyond those directly linked to the policy and discussions around the intent behind voting restrictions and expansions. These findings underscore the need for more comprehensive understanding of how voting laws are framed in media coverage, better to understand the effect on public perception and policy outcomes.

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

AIM: To understand how political elites frame voter ID requirements in the UK.

DATA: Parliamentary debates from Feb 2017 until Sep 2021

Motivation

A literature gap exists in the UK context regarding voter ID requirements. Despite rare instances of voter fraud by impersonation, at the time the research was conducted, voter ID requirements were in legislative consideration. This study explores the arguments underpinning the UK's controversial electoral reform.

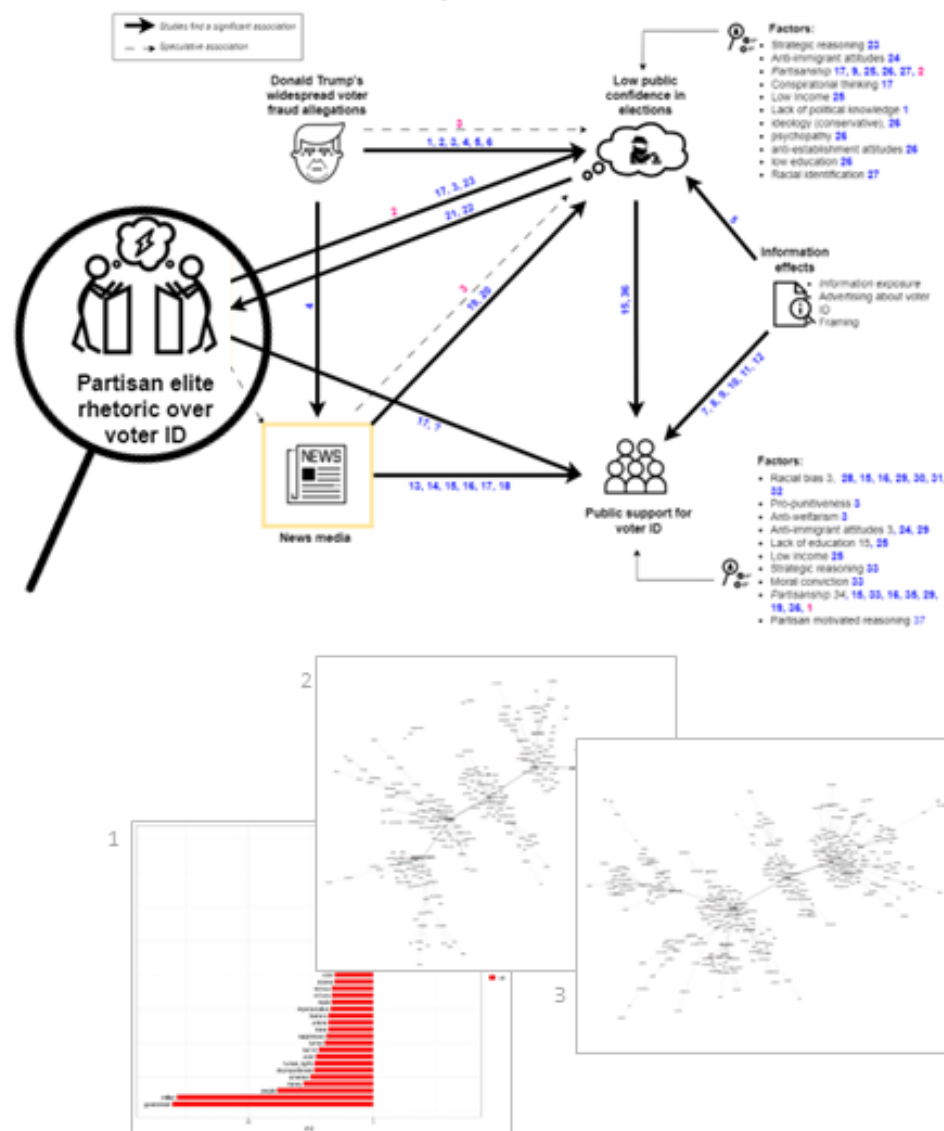
Methods

- Keyness Analysis¹
- Semantic networks from statements by Conservative² and Labour³ MP's.

Key findings

- ❖ Conservatives frame voter ID as necessary to strengthen **public confidence** in the electoral system, despite Electoral Commission data finding 90% of the public consider voting to be safe from fraud at the polling station.
- ❖ Findings shed light onto the partisan divide present in political debates about voter ID in the UK and speak to a broader normative debate on what should count as 'evidence' in the policymaking process.

Visual Review of Literature about Voter ID



Note on paper:

This paper is published in [Parliamentary Affairs](#).

I also shared the findings from this study in:

- A blog post at *LSE British Politics and Policy* published on 12th April 2022: <https://blogs.lse.ac.uk/politicsandpolicy/voter-id-parliament-debates/>
- A short article at *The Conversation* published on April 14th 2023: <https://theconversation.com/voter-id-analysis-shows-conservative-mps-offering-weak-justification-for-law-which-is-now-in-force-198950>

The Voter ID Debate:

An Analysis of Political Elite Framing in the UK Parliament

Abstract

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 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, these findings shed light onto the partisan divide present in political debates about voter ID in the UK and speak to a broader normative debate on what should count as 'evidence' in the policymaking process.

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 a government ID is required to vote, Great Britain²⁴ has no widely adopted free or low-cost national ID options, and therefore critics warn about potential voter suppression and disenfranchisement, especially of already 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 5 months.

Examining British elite framing of voter ID is crucial as evidence from the United States (US), where voter ID laws have been increasingly implemented across Republican states over similar unfounded concerns around voter fraud, suggests that party elite cues 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 & 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 at the time of analysis about voter ID which span from February 2017 until September 2021 and combines quantitative and qualitative analytical approaches to identify arguments 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.

²⁴ Northern 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).

2. Background

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. 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, 2016). 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: 4). Following this, voter ID trials were held in five and then 10 local authorities across England in the 2018 and 2019 UK local elections.

While 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 & Clark, 2020). In 2020, the police issued a total of 1 caution for voter impersonation (Electoral Commission, 2020). In the past seven years, there have been only three convictions of voter impersonation (Johnston & Uberoi, 2021). Voter fraud is similarly rare in the US, 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 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 2,000 citizens did not return to vote after being refused a ballot for not having ID (Palese, 2019).

Framing voter ID

The adoption of voter ID laws has risen in recent years across the US, and therefore academic interest in the topic of voter ID has increased considerably in the US context²⁵. Like Great Britain, the US 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 US, two dominant partisan frames have been identified structuring the elite debate over voter ID laws (Conover & 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). According to Conover and Miller (2018: 492-3), these two competing frames greatly vary in complexity. The 'voter fraud' frame appears straightforward and common-sensical, as it resonates with personal experiences using an ID when, for example, travelling or buying alcohol. According to Chong & Druckman (2007: 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.

While the 'voter fraud' and 'voter suppression' frames are identified as the main ways political elites make sense of voter ID in the US, these two broad frames contain and work together with others to positively or negatively frame voter ID. For

²⁵ A Scopus search using the terms 'voter ID' or 'voter identification' finds 138 articles focusing on the US and just 3 on the UK. Only one of these is relevant: James, T. S., & Clark, A. (2020). Electoral integrity, voter fraud and voter ID in polling stations: lessons from English local elections. *Policy Studies*, 41(2-3), 190-209.

example, while voter fraud is understood as the overarching reason for implementing voter ID, other narratives support this positive framing of the law, such as voter ID being framed as common-sensical, as a public good and as a moral good.

These multiple frames also fall under several framing paradigms. For example, framing voter ID as common-sensical 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 US is also framed discursively by associating voter fraud with ‘illegal immigrants’ (Dreier & Martin, 2010; Udani & Kimball, 2018), even though they are no more likely to commit a non-immigration related crime than other groups (Lee & Martinez, 2009b). Discourse and corpus approaches to framing analysis developed from the late 1990s onwards and 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 US, while studies have found political ideology to be a key driver of misperceptions of voter fraud and attitudes towards voter ID laws (Gronke et al., 2019; Stewart et al., 2016), 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 with specific minority groups (Banks & Hicks, 2016; Wilson & Brewer, 2013). 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 & 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. While 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: 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 communities²⁶. Indeed, the consequences of linking racial and immigrant minorities to voter fraud in public perceptions in the US 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 framing of the issue of voter ID in the US, demonstrates that these varying approaches to frames are not necessarily mutually exclusive. This study therefore approaches the process of framing as both a kind of reasoning based on the underlying embodied experience (Lakoff & 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 & Van Zoonen, 2011). Combining cognitive and discursive approaches provides a suitable framework to understand both the psychological (cognitive, affect, emotion) and social (discourses, power, legitimacy) framing of 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., 2016).

3. Data and Methodology

Data: UK Parliamentary Debates

Speeches in parliamentary debates are not only useful to understand how politicians frame crucial political phenomena, such as voter ID, but also set the political agenda and play a key role in attracting media attention and shifting public opinion (Eggers & Spirling, 2014). Political elites play an important role in establishing the primary interpretation of a political issue (Hall et al., 2019). This interpretation then 'commands the field' and sets the terms of reference or parameters within which all further coverage or debate takes place (Greenwood-Hau & Gutting, 2021).

²⁶ Overall, 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.

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 2021²⁷. 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.

Methodology: Computational Framing Analysis

This study combines principles of quantitative and qualitative analytical approaches to study the framing of voter ID. 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.²⁸ While 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 the pre-processing stage. 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

²⁷ The Elections Bill debate held on the 7 Sep 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.

²⁸ The 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.

is a statistical index used to evaluate how significant a word is to a document (Bondi & Scott, 2010). The statistical significance of the frequency 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 KWIC (Keyword-in-Context) 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. A co-occurrence exists between two words when they frequently occur in proximity to one another—but not necessarily adjacently (McEnery & Hardie, 2012: 123).²⁹ 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 (for example, 'people'), even if used to a similar extent, might be used differently by each party. Abercrombie & 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 arguments used by political elites to frame 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

²⁹ IRaMuTeQ identifies co-occurrences through identifying words appearing in the same text segment. Text segments, or words contexts, are automatically generated have three lines, automatically sized according to the corpus extension.

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.

4. Findings

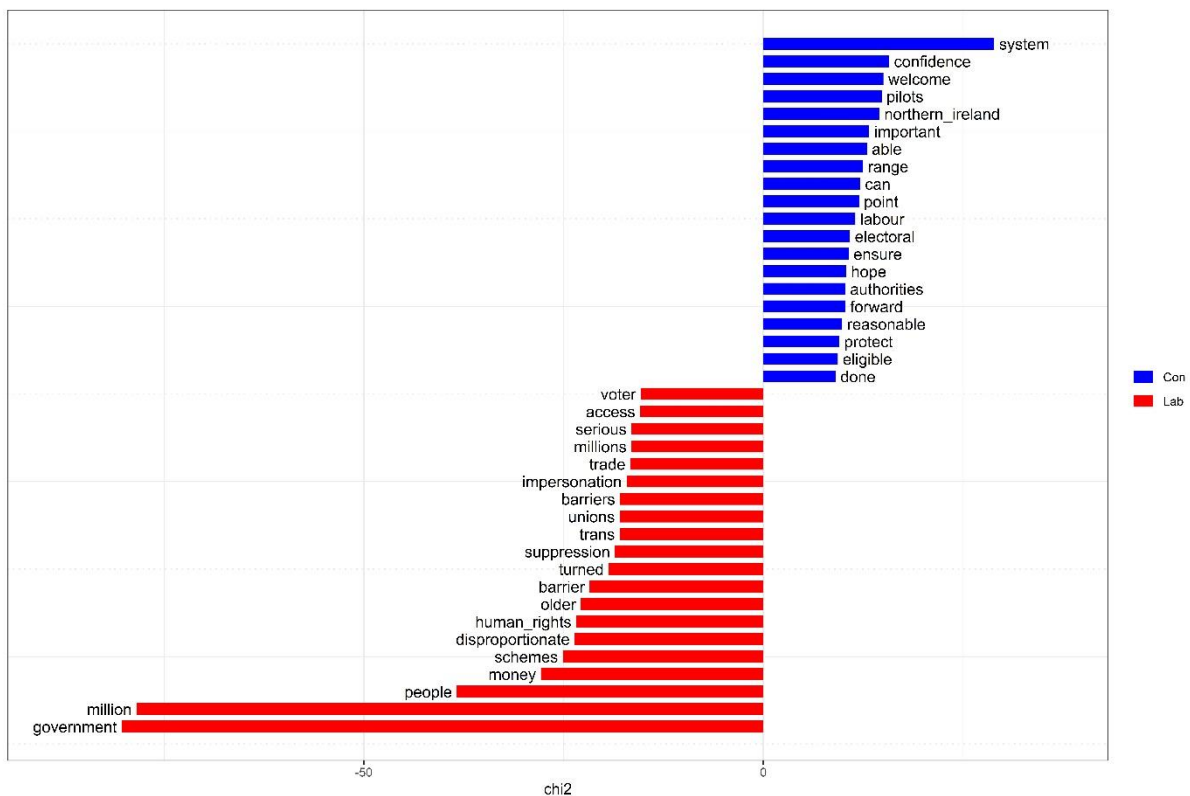


Figure 17. Keyness Output.

Note: The Chi-Squared value (chi2) returns the statistical significance of the frequency difference. The words above are significant as they exceed the “critical” value of the chi-square statistic (+/-3.84).

Figure 18 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. As aforementioned, in the US, 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 distinctively justify voter ID by claiming the measure would help strengthen public confidence in the system, and not only the integrity or well-functioning of the electoral system itself. Echoing Democratic framing in the US, Labour members position themselves against the Government³⁰ and warn about the disproportionate impact of this policy in terms of voter suppression and disenfranchisement. These results suggest British elite framing is distinctively structured around two main arguments, around ‘voter confidence’ (Conservative Party) and ‘voter suppression’ (Labour Party).

Figure 19 and 20 below display the co-occurrence networks generated from Conservative and Labour MP statements, respectively. Conservatives’ sub-corpus 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*.

³⁰ The 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.

STUDY 3: Political Elite Framing of Voter ID in the UK

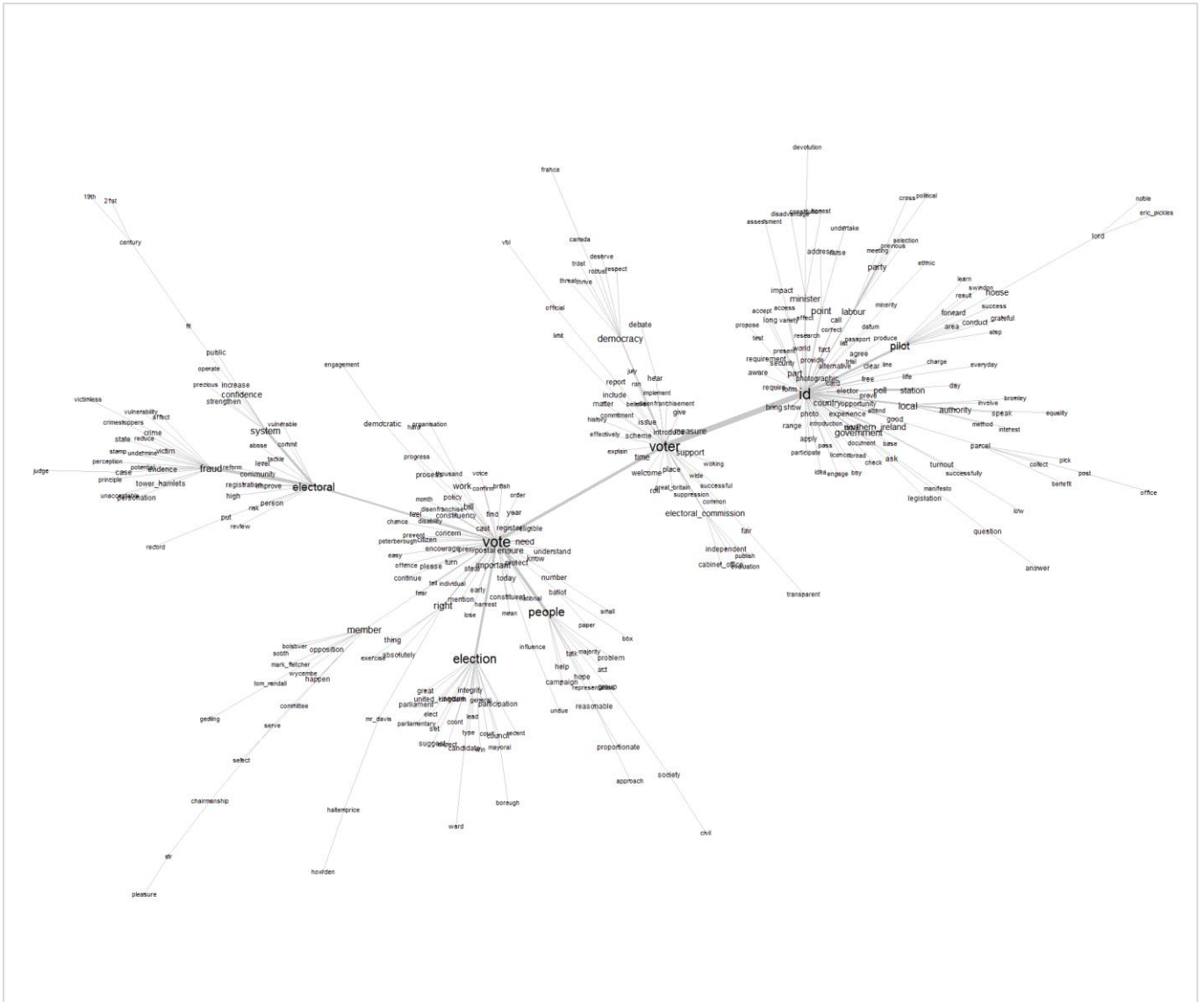


Figure 18. Co-occurrence network of Conservative MP statements. *The figure has an edge threshold of four (words with at least four connections) and uses the layout algorithm Fruchterman-Reingold.*



Figure 19. Co-occurrence network of Labour MP statements. The figure has an edge threshold of three and uses the layout algorithm Fruchterman-Reingold.

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-framing that might have developed to rebut, undermine, or neutralize another group’s arguments. To account for this ‘framing contest’, the following section presents and discusses both outputs concurrently. While the keyness analysis revealed that Conservatives’ distinctly frame voter ID as necessary to strengthen public confidence in the electoral system, with Labour MPs warning about potential voter suppression, other ways of framing voter ID are identified. The following section presents these findings. It is important to note that while the narratives are grouped and presented thematically, these

often work together and interlink to support the overall framing of voter ID as positive or negative.

Framing voter ID as a public good / bad

Conservative MPs frame 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*.

Second, 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. Nevertheless, Conservative MPs argue 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*.

Third, Conservatives claim “most voters regard this [measure] as a reasonable and sensible step” (Chloe Smith³¹, Conservative MP, 27 June 2018), and position

³¹ The 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

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*.)

While 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, which is one of the key terms they most use compared to Conservatives, 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. While 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-framing. 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” is used by Labour MPs to illustrate the disproportionality of the law (in network: connections *nut - crack - sledgehammer*). This analogy 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).

Framing voter ID as ‘common-sensical’ / barrier

Voter ID is further framed by Conservative MPs as a common-sensical measure, 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 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*,

therefore the MP who made the most statements about the reform (110 out of a total of 420 statements).

affect, prevent, suppression, between vote and barrier, difficult, exclude and deny).

Conservatives further strengthen their framing of voter ID as common-sensical 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 Sep 2021) (in network: *Government - decade - progress - reverse*). Moreover, the connection between the term *voter* and *Republican* in Labours network highlights Labour MPs comparison of the proposed voter ID legislation to the “dangerous laws passed by the Republican party” in the US (Fleur Anderson, Labour MP, 7 Sep 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 US:

“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 Sep 2021

Framing voter ID as a moral good / bad

Conservative MPs further strengthen their framing 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).

Conservative political elites 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. While “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-framing 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*).

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, in person *voter* fraud by impersonation. Nevertheless, Conservatives bring up the Tower Hamlets 2014 electoral fraud case, therefore implying the proposed law would help prevent similar cases (in network: connection between *electoral*, *fraud* and *Tower-Hamlets*).

Studies based in the US have find 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 with “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 framing of voter ID through arguments around public confidence, 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 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 use the specific immigration-related ‘hostile environment’ policy as an example of the diverse ways discrimination is still prevalent in British polity (Bowling & Westenra, 2020). In this way, Labour MPs reinforce their key framing of voter ID through arguments around ‘voter suppression’, 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* - *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

Framing voter ID through legitimisation/de-legitimisation strategies

To strengthen their arguments, both Conservative and Labour MPs bring 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 their framing of voter ID laws as a public, impartial good (in network: connection between *voter* - *electoral_commission* - *independent*). While 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 statements are problematic as the Electoral Commission has now confirmed their reports on the pilots did not measure the effect of voter ID on minority ethnic communities’ votes (Elgot, 2020).

Labour MP’s use voices of expertise and data by instead citing evidence from Electoral Reform Society to challenge or counter Conservatives’ framing of voter ID through arguments around public confidence. 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*). I find that Labour MPs use 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*-legitimisation,

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. Northern Ireland is among the top Conservative key words 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 MP'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, but instead frame voter ID through arguments around 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 - 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 NHS

and our education system” (Mr Dhesi, Labour MP, 6 June 2018), therefore framing the Conservative Government as inconsistent and hypocritical.

5. 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. Differing from the predominant US Republican elite framing of voter ID as necessary to prevent widespread voter fraud, 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 arguments were identified that played a role in supporting this partisan framing of voter ID. 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). Second, 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 frame voter ID requirements as immoral. Third, voter ID is framed through differing understandings of the accessibility of ID. Conservatives claim showing an ID to vote is common sense, while Labour MPs refer to the 2018 Windrush scandal to highlight how voter ID requirements can be a barrier to voting for many. While Labour MPs frame voter ID through mobilising the past by referring 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, 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 news 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 normative concerns on what should count as ‘evidence’ in the policymaking process. This is especially concerning as Electoral Commission 2018-2021 data, when these debates were taking place, shows around 90% of electors consider voting to be safe from fraud and abuse at the polling station. People’s confidence in the safety of voting by post was significantly lower (68%). (Electoral Commission, 2021) data shows public confidence in the running of elections is currently at its highest.

Despite perceptions of electoral fraud as a problem almost halving compared to 2020, a majority of the public believe a voter ID requirement would make them more confident in the security of the voting system. Research on what drives public perceptions towards electoral integrity and voter ID in the UK is needed. Studies in the US show views about voter fraud and voter ID laws are largely explained by party elite cues transmitted through the media and driven by voters’ political ideology (Bowler & Donovan, 2016; Udani & Kimball, 2018). Considering the potential impact of voter ID on certain groups 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 & 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 especially 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. It concerningly parallels Larsen’s (2018: 215) description of constitutional debates on voter ID in the US, where the two sides speak ‘past each other’ and the debate reaches an unhealthy stalemate. As Gilbert, (2015: 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. Even when factual narratives were used by each party to legitimise their respective stances, these did not interact with, and at times contradicted, each other, underscoring what Larsen describes as “my team-your team” facts. These findings therefore bring Larsen’s (2018) anxieties around the way voter ID laws and other policies are debated and legislated in the US, 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”.

To ID or not to ID? An Analysis of News Media Coverage of Voter ID in the UK

AIM: To understand how news media outlets frame voter ID requirements in the UK.

DATA: News articles by 8 top news media outlets from 2014 to 2023.

Motivation

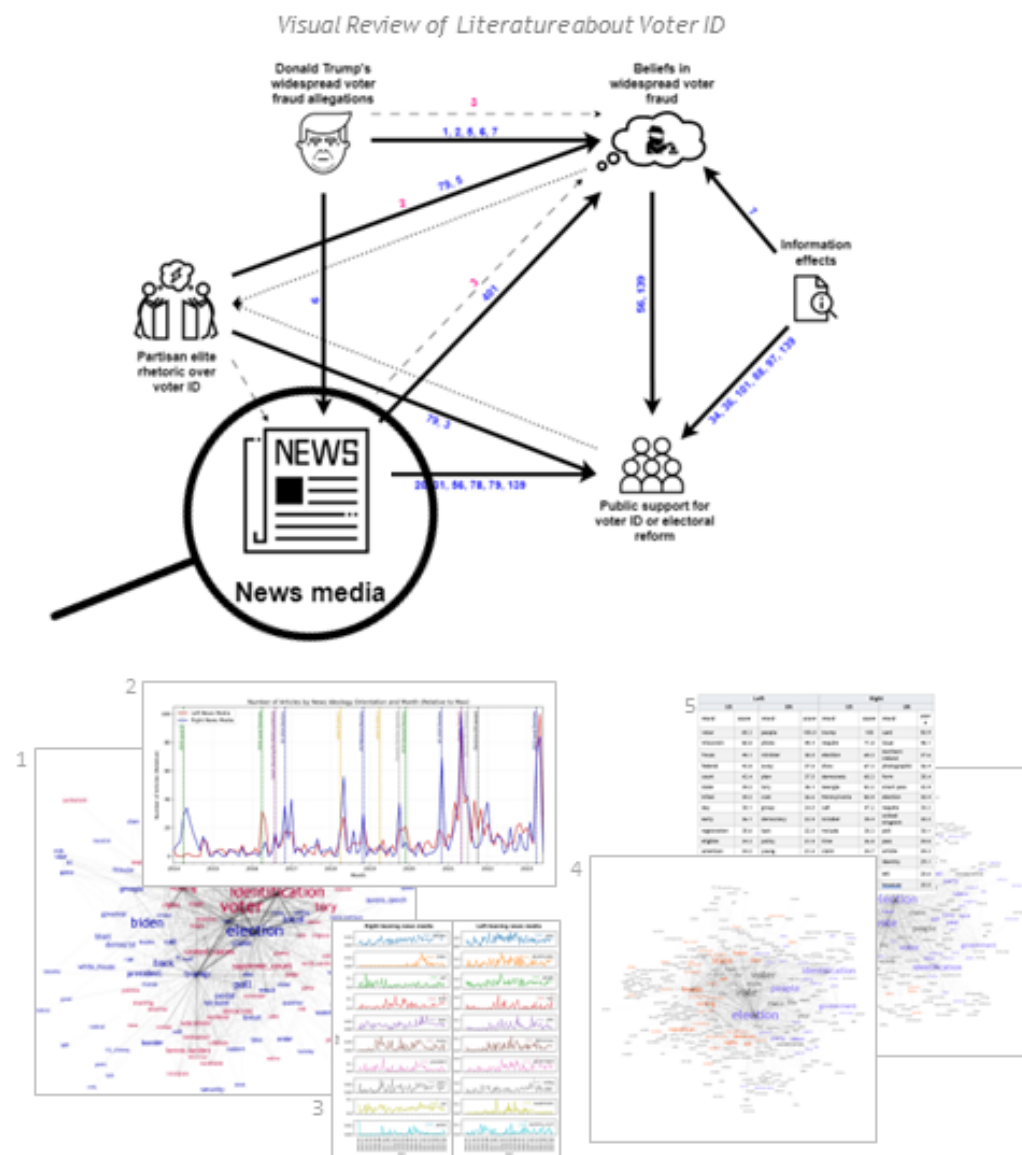
There is a divide in public support for voter ID in the UK. At the same time, public perceptions of electoral fraud drastically decreased in 2021. This unexpected boost in confidence could be linked to the coverage of Trump's voter fraud claims during the 2020 US presidential election, underscoring a need to study the information landscape influencing public opinions.

Methods

Proportion shift analysis¹; Article counts per month & media ideology²; TF-IDF scores of keywords over time³; Semantic networks of main text⁴; context of term "identification"⁵

Key findings

- ❖ There are differences in news outlets coverage by their ideological orientation, mirroring the partisan discourse over voter ID in the US.
- ❖ News outlets have picked up on allegations of voter fraud by Donald Trump and controversies around voter ID laws in the US.
- ❖ This transatlantic policy dialogue or cross-border cascade of media framing highlights how discourse about voter ID and electoral integrity traverse between the US and the UK.



To ID or not to ID? An Analysis of News Media Coverage of Voter ID in the United Kingdom

Abstract

Despite voter ID requirements being justified to increase public confidence in elections, perceptions of electoral fraud in the UK unexpectedly decreased in 2021. There is also a notable divide in support for voter ID by the British public. In the US, where most research on voter ID requirements originates, support for voter ID and perceptions of electoral fraud are influenced by partisan cues transmitted through the media. Through computational content analysis methods, this study inductively analyses news coverage of voter ID by mainstream British news outlets from 2014 to 2023, finding language variations aligned with outlets' political orientations. Notably, there is significant reporting on Trump's allegations of voter fraud in the US in UK coverage, especially by right-leaning news sources. This points to intriguing transnational agenda setting dynamics and raises questions around whether perceptions of electoral fraud and attitudes towards voter ID in the UK could be influenced by coverage of electoral controversies in the US.

1. Introduction

In April 2022, the UK's Conservative government passed the Elections Act, making photo ID mandatory from 2023 in English local and general elections. While this brings Great Britain in line with Northern Ireland³² and other democracies, the passing of voter ID has raised concerns. In-person impersonation fraud, the only form of electoral fraud that a voter ID requirement can address, is extremely rare in the UK (Electoral Commission, 2022). There were less than 10 convictions of electoral

³² Northern 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. In that year, 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).

fraud between 2018 and 2022 (ibid.). Contrastingly, approximately 2.1 million people do not possess the required ID to vote (Hewitt, 2021). Data from the May 2023 elections shows that around 14,000 people could not vote because of the new voter ID requirement, which particularly affected disabled people, people from ethnic minority communities, those with lower incomes, unemployed people, and younger age groups (Electoral Commission, 2023). This has led critics, primarily opposition parties in the government and various civil rights groups, to claim that a voter ID requirement deters or suppresses more legal votes than fraudulent ones (IFF Research, 2021), describing the policy as “a sledgehammer to crack a nut” (Electoral Reform Society, 2018).

Given these numbers, the previous study presented in this thesis explored how British political elites debated voter ID requirements in Parliament. This study found that, in contrast to the situation in the US, Conservative MPs did not overstate the issue of voter fraud beyond the existing limited evidence. Instead, their arguments, among others, related to public attitudes, claiming that voters *perceive* there to be a fraud problem and that this perception justifies electoral reform (Alonso-Curbelo, 2023).

The news media can play an important role in shaping public confidence in the electoral system and public support for electoral policies. Studies in the US, where most of the literature on voter ID requirements comes from, demonstrate that support for voter ID and perceptions of electoral fraud are influenced by party cues transmitted through the media (Boudreau & MacKenzie, 2014; Dreier & Martin, 2010; Pew Research Center, 2021a; Udani et al., 2018). While we know little about what shapes support towards voter ID and public confidence in the UK, a post-implementation survey following the May 2023 local elections finds voter ID had both positive and negative effects on people’s confidence, with large sections of respondents expressing lower (46%) *and* higher (30%) confidence due to the new voter ID requirement.

We do not yet know how these views are linked to key demographics or party affiliations. However, research finds that British citizens prefer rules that benefit their preferred parties (Heller, 2021) and that Conservative voters are also more

likely to perceive fraud in the UK (Fisher & Sällberg, 2020). Therefore, it is expected that the controversy among political elites about voter ID may have been conveyed to the public through the media, potentially underpinning the public divide over voter ID requirements in the UK.

While some literature has emerged in the UK about voter ID, with a focus on the legality of the voter ID pilots (Stanford, 2018, 2022), the effect of these requirements on voter turnout (James & Clark, 2020), and the framing of voter ID in parliamentary debates (the previous study presented), the framing of voter ID by British news media remains unexplored. This study is the first to examine news media coverage of voter ID in the UK.

This study explores variations in news media attention and language depending on the ideological leaning of the news outlets. To do so, a set of complementary content analysis techniques are used to inductively analyse news coverage about voter ID requirements from 8 legacy news outlets between 2014 and 2023.

This article begins by reviewing relevant literature on agenda setting and news framing. The second section outlines the methodology employed. The final sections present the findings from the inductive computerised content analyses and interpretation of the linguistic patterns identified. This article concludes by emphasising the presence of transnational intermedia agenda setting in British news coverage about voter ID and the significance of the findings in the context of increasingly enacted restrictive electoral policies.

2. Background

The agenda setting dynamics of electoral laws

News media serve as a vital source of information for the public about electoral laws. Survey and experiment-based studies conducted in the US have demonstrated the news media's crucial role in shaping confidence in the electoral system and attitudes towards voter ID requirements (Bowler & Donovan, 2016; Udani et al., 2018; Udani & Kimball, 2018: 403) along partisan lines.

This link between partisan elite cues and media frames has been evidenced in a range of topics in a British context (AI, climate change, Brexit, asylum seekers), with news media generally following the parameters of elite debates (Cavaille & Neundorf, 2022; Merkley & Stecula, 2018; Shaikh & Moran, 2022). Even though the media ecosystem is becoming increasingly complex, legacy news media still holds significant power in shaping public opinion in the UK (Langer & Gruber, 2021) and play an important role in communicating party elite cues to the public (Gil de Zúñiga et al., 2023; Hart et al., 2020; Merkley & Stecula, 2018; Taber & Lodge, 2016; Van Aelst & Walgrave, 2016).

The media can significantly influence public opinion and policymaking through agenda setting, by determining the prominence and perceived importance of policy issues like voter ID requirements and voter fraud. The attention news outlets place on political issues can also be asymmetric and differ among news sources with varying political orientations. As Langer and Gruber (2021) contend, rather than there being a singular framing cascade, there are multiple streams in the elite to media communication flow. This is especially the case with highly contested political issues like voter ID requirements, as political actors likely use the media strategically to advance their position (Sevenans, 2018; Van Aelst & Walgrave, 2016).

Therefore, examining the attention given to voter ID laws by UK news outlets depending on their political orientation can provide insights into whether there are variations in the perceived importance placed by different news sources on the issue. To determine if significant events led to an increase in salience from the media and whether this increase is consistent across the political spectrum, I pose the following research question:

RQ1: How has the level of attention in the coverage of voter ID changed over time? Does news attention vary depending on the political orientation of news outlets?

News framing of voter ID

While analysing levels of attention of voter ID in news coverage is crucial to understand the extent to which the issue is reaching the public, the way news media outlets frame voter ID can impact how people understand the issue. According to

Entman's (1993) popular definition, to frame means “to select some aspects of a perceived reality and make them more salient in a communicating text in such a way as to promote a particular problem definition, causal interpretation, moral evaluation, and/or treatment recommendation” (Entman, 1993: 52). While framing resembles agenda-setting in the sense that it relates to the salience of an issue, framing specifically relates to the way this process can shape interpretations and ultimately influence public opinion toward a particular issue *after* it enters the agenda. In other words, framing affects how the issue is portrayed, not just its salience.

While studies in the US highlight the important role the media plays in structuring public attitudes and perceptions (Entman, 2010; Pyrhönen & Bauvois, 2020; Van Aelst & Walgrave, 2016; Zhang et al., 2022), there are notable differences in public opinion dynamics in the UK, compared to the US. While there is a bipartisan consensus of public support for voter ID in the US, there is a strong divide in support for voter ID requirements among the British public. A survey conducted after the May 2023 local elections, when voter ID was first implemented in Great Britain, finds support for voter ID is mixed (Electoral Commission, 2023). While 30% of respondents viewed the voter ID requirement as enhancing electoral integrity, 46% cited the belief that “some people were unable to vote due to the ID requirement” as their main reason for lacking confidence (ibid.).

While in the US, perceptions of voter fraud are concerningly high, in the UK, the reverse is true. Public confidence in the electoral system is, at the time of writing, extremely high among the British population (Electoral Commission, 2022c). More people in the UK believe barriers to democratic participation for minority ethnic groups pose more of a problem than electoral fraud (ibid.). Further research is needed to disaggregate survey findings on public confidence to determine whether specific demographics or predispositions correlate with support for voter ID.

Moreover, levels of confidence have fluctuated in recent years. While public perceptions of electoral fraud being a problem in the UK did slightly increase while the first debates on the policy took place, this trend unexpectedly reversed in 2021. 2021 saw a drastic increase in confidence levels, with perceptions of electoral fraud

as a problem almost halving from 39% to 20%, all before the voter ID bill which aimed to address these concerns, was enacted into law (Electoral Commission, 2022). The Electoral Commission speculates that this unexpected increase in public confidence in elections in 2021 might be attributed, at least in part, to the discredited claims of widespread voter fraud made by Donald Trump during the 2020 US presidential election (Electoral Commission, in Nicolson et al., 2023). The suggestion is that British news media coverage of electoral controversies in the US could have played a role in influencing British public attitudes towards elections in the UK. This sudden shift in public confidence in 2021 raises further questions, pointing to an intriguing transnational intermedia agenda setting, where coverage of the US by British news outlets of events contributes to shaping public attitudes and opinions about voter ID requirements in the UK.

Examining coverage of voter ID requirements by British news outlets is therefore crucial to understand the link between political elite discourse, attitudes and perceptions among the British public, and the role of the information environment in shaping these. While the previous research question focuses on news attention, Research Question 2 explores the framing of voter ID, considering potential differences based on the political orientation of the news outlets.

RQ2: Does coverage over voter ID vary depending on the political orientation of the news outlet?

3. Methodology

Data

This study examines the coverage of voter ID in UK newspapers from 2014 to 2023. Articles were collected from 2014 as this is when voter ID was first brought into the policy table in Great Britain. All articles mentioning the keywords “voter ID” or “voting ID” or “voter identification” at least once were selected. The full text of the articles and headlines were included in the analysis.

To make sure the corpus was as representative of general UK press coverage as possible, a mixture of tabloid and broadsheet newspapers was selected. As the

media outlets were chosen because of their potential to influence and reflect the views of its audience, to understand the framing of voter ID, both opinion pieces and journalistic news are viewed as equally relevant (Hooper et al., 2022).

Coverage from eight UK newspapers was analysed - *The Daily Mail*, *The Daily Mirror*, *The Guardian*, *The Independent*, *The Times*, *The Sun*, *The Telegraph* and *Daily Express*.³³ To understand variations in salience and content by newspapers political alignment, news outlets were divided into right-leaning (i.e. closer to the Conservative party) and left-leaning (i.e. closer to the Labour party) (Smith, 2017).³⁴ Articles were retrieved using the newspaper database NexisUni, and the software package LexisNexisTools (Gruber, 2021) was used to convert these into a dataframe and to remove duplicates. The final corpus (without duplicates) contains 2,129 articles, 1,434 from left-leaning media and 695 from right-leaning media. The total word count in the article body is over 2 million words (2,682,672) and above 40,000 words in headlines (43,345).

Methods

The analysis is corpus-driven, meaning the data is inductively structured without using any pre-set keywords. As in other forms of computerised content analyses, the original text is initially modified to reduce its complexity.³⁵ For example, instances of “ID” or “voter ID” are analysed as “identification”. Words are also lemmatised, preserving certain words like 'media' and 'rights', so that these are not changed to 'medium' and 'right'. Common bigrams were also combined using an underscore.

To address **RQ1** and examine changes in news media attention towards voter ID over time, news article counts per month are plotted by left-leaning and right-leaning

³³ The BBC was excluded from the analysis to facilitate comparisons and maintain consistency with the research design applied to study news coverage in the US. Accessing BBC news data was also challenging as there are important limitations on its availability. The BBC does not offer a public API to gather their articles. The BBC website displays news articles for a limited time, after which they are archived and not accessible to the public, and therefore difficult to retrieve through web scraping.

³⁴ Partisanship is largely stable and rooted on traditional positions. However, the partisanship of some news media has been more variable than others, with the Sun famously switching support from Blair's Labour party to Cameron's Conservative Party. Changes of ownership can also often lead to changes in party endorsement.

³⁵ For more information on pre-processing steps, see Appendix C.

news outlets. A correlation analysis³⁶ is conducted to understand whether there are similarities in the patterns of news media attention between the two sets. As most British news media are situated moderately to firmly on the right of the political spectrum, a normalisation process was implemented on the data to prevent any potential skewing of results and to facilitate a more accurate comparison across the media sets.

To address **RQ2** and explore news framing of voter ID, news coverage is analysed by using a range of computerised content analysis techniques. To identify language *differences* depending on the news media's ideological orientation, a proportion shift analysis is first conducted on news media headlines. The headline is a critical indicator for news readers on the information contained in the article, summarizing, and directing attention to important topics or themes. By presenting the most 'newsworthy' information contained in the main article, news headlines can also considerably affect news selection by the audience (Liu & Yu, 2023). The analysis of headlines resulted in scores indicating words most strongly associated with each news media set. The scale of 0-100 is used to normalise the scores of each word, so that the highest absolute value in the dataset is set to 100. Using this scale allows us to compare the relative importance of words across both sets of news media, and to visualise the *differences* in language use between them.

To understand the context and meaning of these terms, an overall semantic network from the news media headlines is generated, where words appearing in the same headline are connected, and sized and coloured according to their proportion shift analysis scores, i.e. whether they are more present in left-leaning news coverage (red) compared to right-leaning news coverage (blue). The Force Atlas layout algorithm was used in the Gephi, so that the nodes or words are positioned closer when more strongly co-occurring.

To capture over time language variations of key terms in news coverage, articles published *per month* by each news media are combined and Term Frequency-Inverse

³⁶ Spearman's rank correlation coefficient was calculated which is suitable for detecting nonlinear relationships, i.e. the relationship between variables might not follow a straight line but may still show a consistent trend.

Document Frequency (TF-IDF) scores are calculated. Words with high TF-IDF scores are both frequent in a specific document and rare across the entire collection. Tracking changes in TF-IDF scores over time enables to determine whether certain terms gain or lose importance in news coverage.

The next stage involves separately exploring news coverage from the main article body by generating two semantic networks, one for each news media set. Words are sized according to their frequency. While the first stage highlighted *differences* in language between headlines by right and left-leaning outlets, generating separate visualisations for each set allows to examine how the *same* word, even if used to a similar degree, can be used differently by each news media set. The headline analysis revealed that a large proportion of differentiating words used in voter ID coverage by British news outlets relate to the situation in the US. Such high presence of terms related to the US led to manually code the articles based on geographic focus, finding both British news media sets devoted similar or more coverage to voter ID issues in the US than to those within the UK—with left-leaning media addressing the US context in 50% of cases, and right-leaning media doing so in 56% of instances. To identify potential differences in reporting by geographical focus, words are coloured in the separate semantic networks depending on whether they are more frequently used by news outlets when referring to voter ID in the UK context compared to the US.

Finally, to identify ways in which news outlets specifically cover voter ID requirements, the corpus is filtered to only contain sentences mentioning “identification”. Relative frequencies of words in this context are calculated to identify words more likely used by right and left leaning outlets when specifically discussing voter ID in both UK and US contexts.

When exploring the outputs from the analyses described above, key terms are also identified and analysed in the original text to determine if the initial interpretation aligns with instances within the text under analysis. This is done by generating a list of sentences with the identified keywords in their immediate context.³⁷

³⁷ This is done using the keyword-in-context (KWIC) function within the text analysis package *quanteda*.

4. Results

This section begins by discussing the findings from the analysis of article counts, addressing RQ1, which concerns shifts in levels of attention depending on the political orientation of news outlet. Following this, the findings from the analyses linked to RQ2 and RQ3 are presented, which explore the coverage of voter ID through a headline analysis and analysis of the main body coverage. The aim of these analyses is to identify potential linguistic variations depending on the political orientation of news outlet. The outputs from these analyses are interpreted and discussed in parallel.

4.1. RQ1: News attention over time

Figure 20 displays article counts per month by left-leaning and right-leaning news media. To compare article trends between the two, the data is normalised to show the month with the highest number of articles for each news media set as 100.

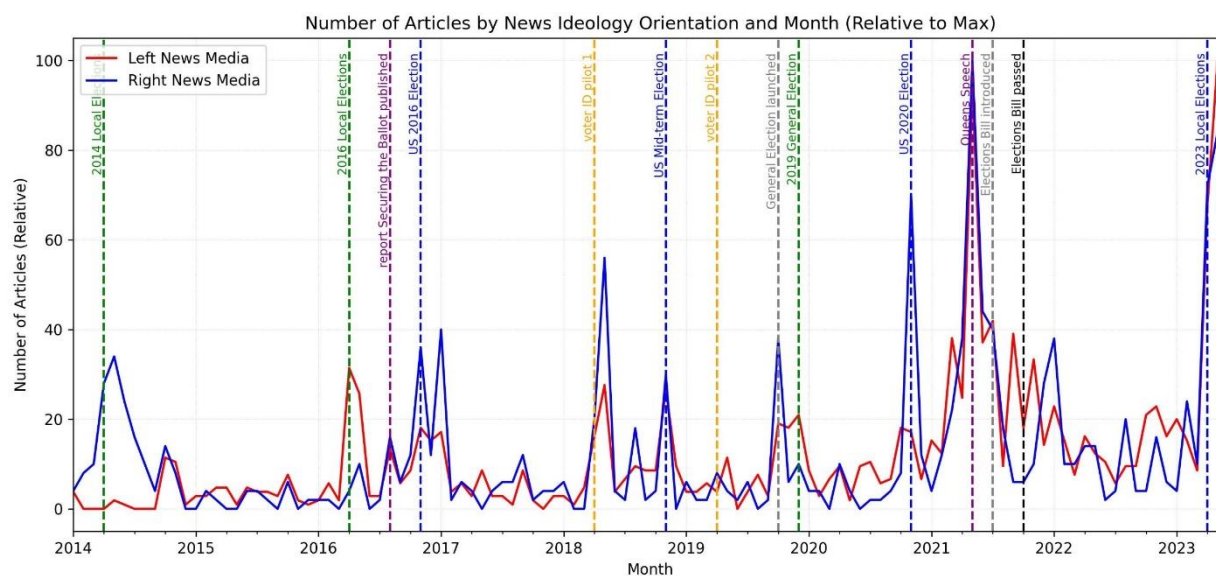


Figure 20. Normalised Article Count by News Media Ideological Orientation.

News media attention has fluctuated over time, with surges in attention coinciding with various elections, and a significant increase in media attention in 2021 and 2023. The correlation analysis conducted to test the relationship between the two media sets resulted in a moderate positive relationship, with a correlation

coefficient of 0.5015 ($P < .001$)³⁸. This indicates that as news media coverage from news media on the left increases, there is a tendency for right-leaning news coverage to increase, and vice versa.

This relationship is particularly apparent in the largest peak of news media attention, which occurs in May 2021. During this time, significant events (highlighted in the Figure 20's vertical lines) such as the 2021 English local elections and the Queen's speech, which outlined the government's post-pandemic priorities and their intention to pass a voter ID law, likely contributed to the simultaneous high levels of news media attention from both left-leaning and right-leaning outlets. A similar pattern can be seen in May 2023, when voter ID was first implemented in the English local elections, resulting in similarly high news media attention from both sets. Unsurprisingly, news coverage over voter ID generally increases around local or general elections for both sets of media, suggesting that the issue of voter ID becomes particularly salient during electoral periods.

While these instances highlight the interconnectedness of news media coverage from the left and right, the moderate correlation however also points to notable deviations. An early example of divergent news attention is the first peak from right-leaning outlets in the 2014 May local elections, with relatively little news attention from left-leaning media. This pattern reverses in the 2016 local elections, with media on the left driving news coverage. Another example of divergent attention is observed when the Elections Bill was passed in 2021. At that time, news media coverage from left-leaning outlets is higher compared to coverage from right-leaning outlets. Peaks in news media attention, particularly from right-leaning media also align with US elections, especially in 2020, where news media attention from right-leaning outlets tripled that from left-leaning media outlets.

4.2. RQ2: Coverage by news media ideological orientation

To identify words *differentiating* right and left-leaning news media coverage, relative frequencies of terms used in their headlines are calculated. A semantic

³⁸ Correlation coefficients can range from -1 to 1, where 1 indicates a perfect positive relationship, -1 indicates a perfect negative relationship, and 0 indicates no relationship.

network is generated to visualise the relative salience of terms and to better understand their meaning (Figure 22). The size of the words reflects their score, i.e. whether the term is more frequent in one corpus compared to the other. All the terms appearing in the network have a score above 10 and are therefore key differentiating terms. The words are coloured according to whether the term is more frequent in one news media set compared to the other (red = left-leaning news coverage, blue = right-leaning news coverage). The thickness of the connections (or 'edges') between words denotes the strength of their association. To understand variations in the salience of key terms over time, Figure 23 plots TF-IDF scores by month of the top 10 key words for each set within the main article body.

STUDY 4: News Media Framing of Voter ID in the UK

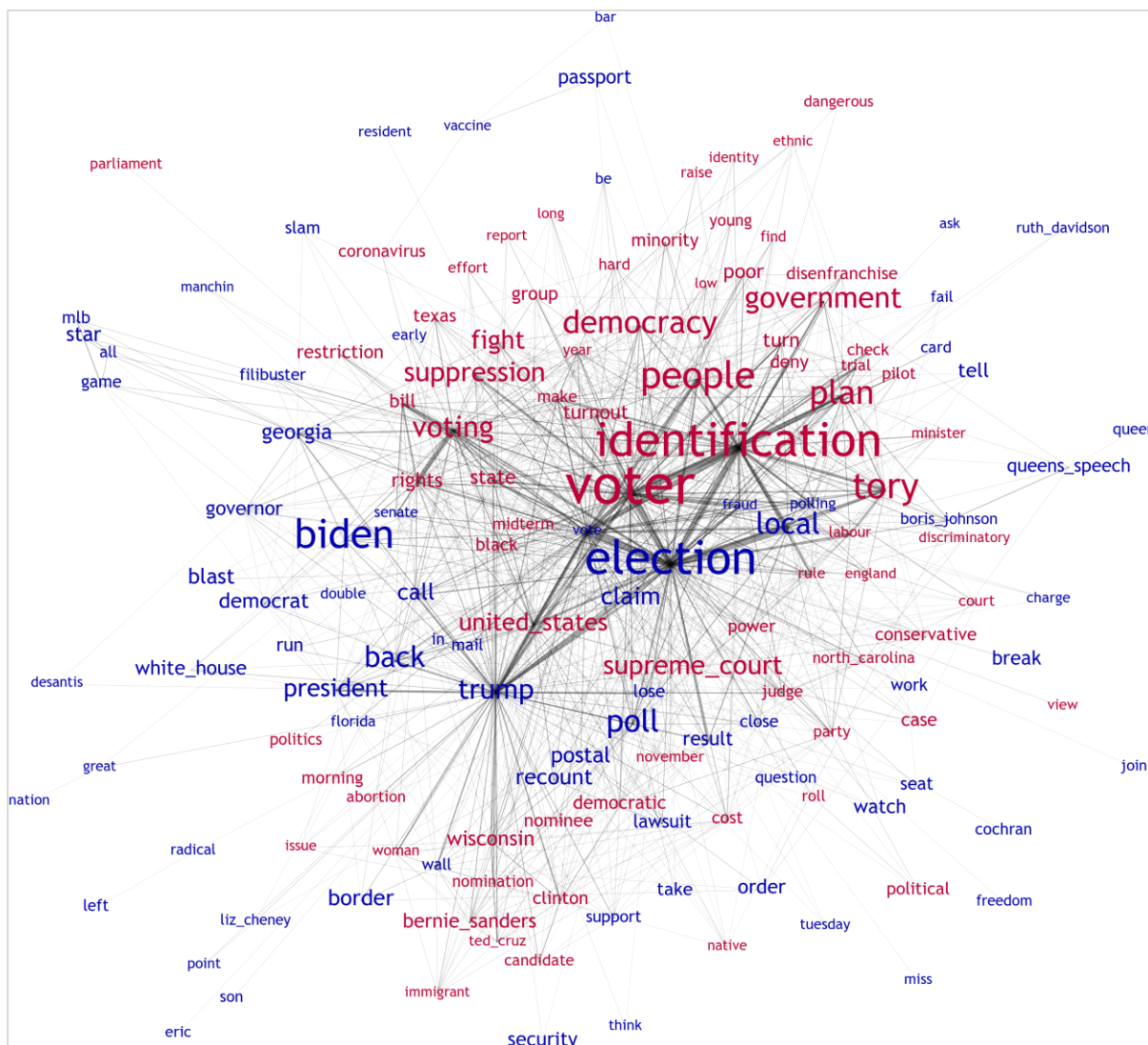


Figure 22. Semantic Network from News Media Headlines.
 Index: colour and size represent shifterator scores. Larger words have a higher score, meaning they are more likely used by left media (red) or right media (blue). Words scoring above 10 are displayed. The thickness of the connection (or edge) represents its weight or strength.

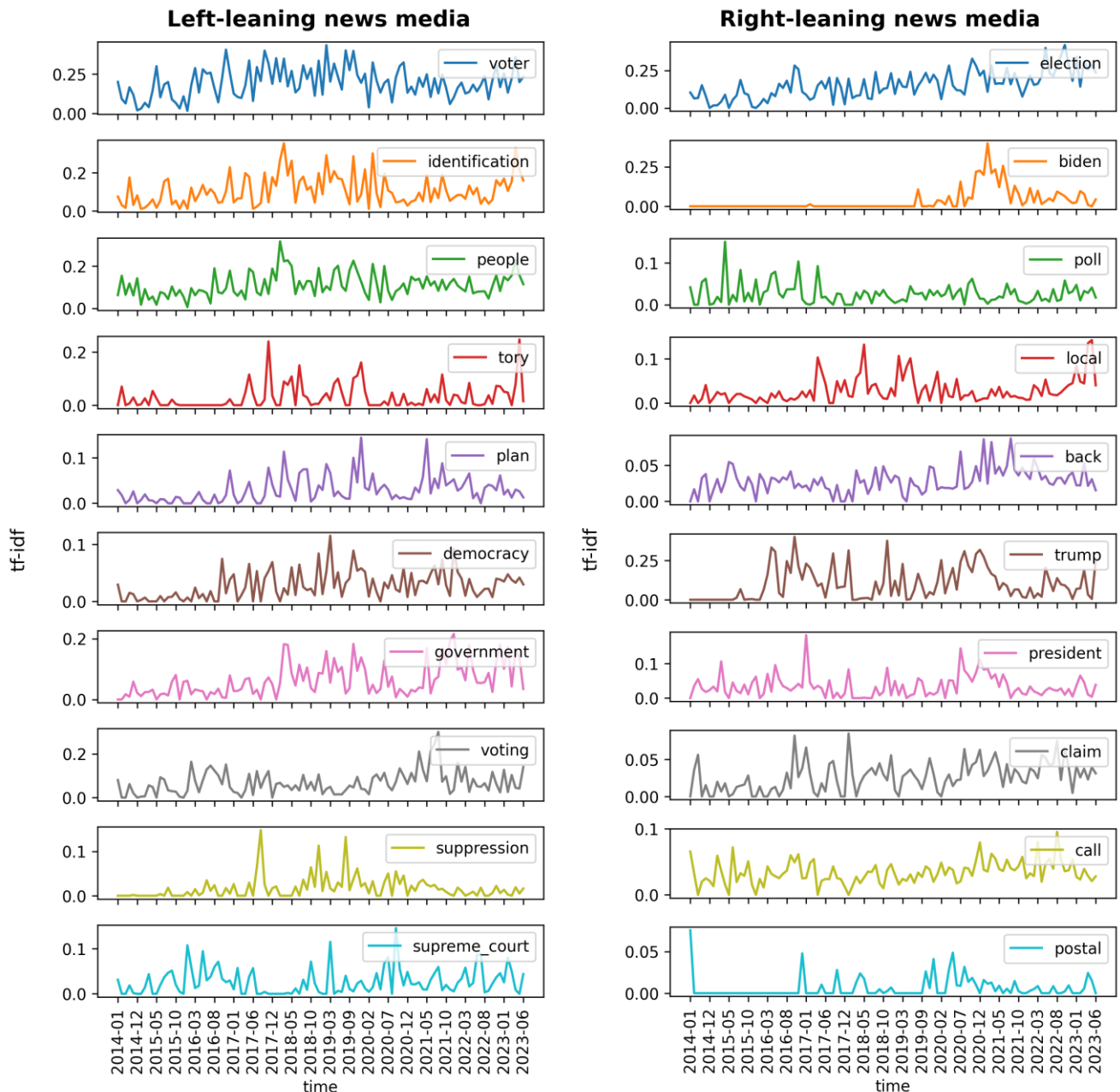


Figure 21. Left and right news media key terms.
 TF-IDF scores by month for top 10 words from proportion shift analysis.

Supporting the spikes in news media attention during US elections, the analysis of news headlines shows a substantial presence of differentiating terms referencing the situation in the US by both news media sets. Among right-leaning news media, the most frequently used words in headlines, compared to left-leaning outlets, are *election*, *biden*, *poll*, *local*, *back* and *trump*. These terms have scores above 40 and therefore appear larger in the semantic network. Other key terms indicating a focus on the US by right-leaning media are *president*, *democrat*, *georgia* and *white house*.

In left-leaning news coverage, the top key terms are *voter*, *identification*, *people* and *tory* (with scores above 60). Other significant terms include *suppression*, *poor*, *turnout*, *rights* and *restriction*. Various key terms in left-leaning headlines also relate to the situation in the US, including ‘*supreme court*’, ‘*united states*’ and ‘*wisconsin*’.

TF-IDF scores show the importance of some key words fluctuates over time in news coverage. For example, the salience of the right-leaning terms *trump*, *biden*, *president*, *claim* and *call* jumps in November 2020. There are also several spikes between 2016 and 2019 for the right-leaning key term *local*, which increases in importance from January 2023. Left-leaning terms including *tory*, *plan* and *democracy* similarly fluctuate, becoming more salient from 2016.

Media coverage is further explored by generating two semantic networks, one from each news media’s main article content. Figures 22 and 23 present the resulting networks. Words are sized according to their frequency and coloured depending on whether they are more frequent in news coverage about voter ID when referring to the policy in the UK context (purple) compared to the US context (orange). Words in grey are equally likely to be used by news media when covering voter ID in both contexts.

STUDY 4: News Media Framing of Voter ID in the UK

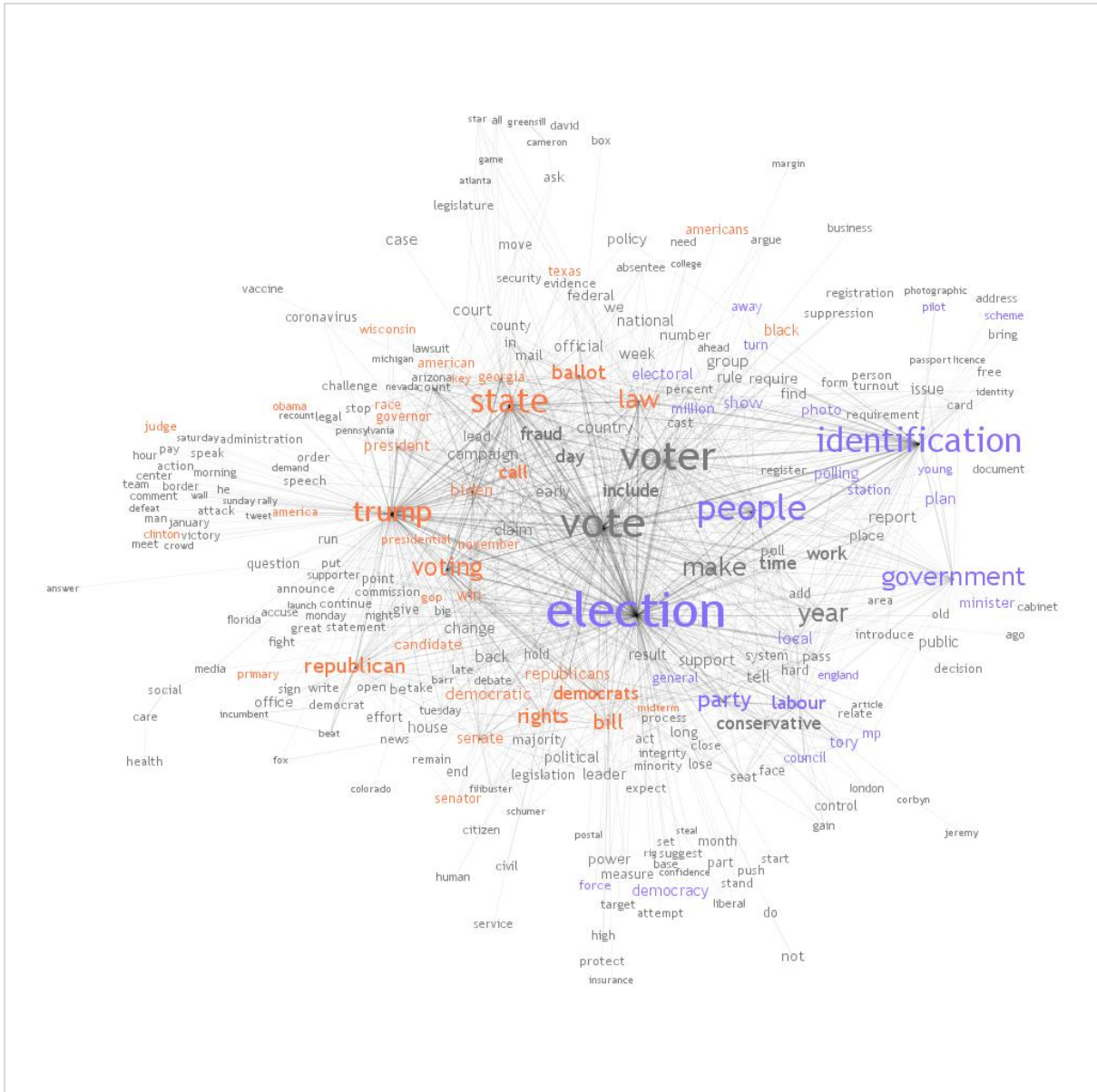


Figure 22. Left-leaning news media coverage.

Network from main article body, US (orange) and UK (purple) coverage. Words sized according to proportion shift analysis score. Edge weight: 80, count: 62. 283 visible nodes.

ID in the UK and the US.

Table 6. Top 10 words in context of "identification"

Left				Right			
US		UK		US		UK	
Word	score	Word	score	Word	score	Word	score
voter	65.3	people	100.0	trump	100	card	50.9
Wisconsin	50.8	photo	49.4	require	71.8	issue	45.1
Texas	49.1	minister	38.0	election	69.3	Northern Ireland	37.6
federal	43.8	away	37.8	show	67.3	photographic	36.4
court	43.4	plan	37.5	democrats	60.3	form	35.4
state	39.2	tory	35.1	Georgia	53.2	smart pass	32.9
tribal	39.2	cost	26.6	Pennsylvania	50.9	election	30.4
day	38.1	group	24.0	call	47.2	require	30.3
early	36.1	democracy	23.9	October	39.4	United Kingdom	30.3
registration	35.6	lack	22.8	include	38.3	poll	30.1

Terms associated to “identification” by left-leaning media in UK focused coverage include *people*, *photo*, *minister*, *away*, *plan* and *tory*. The terms *card*, *issue*, *northern_ireland*, *photographic* and *form* are used more often by right-leaning outlets in sentences about voter ID in the UK. In US focused coverage, terms associated to “identification” by left-leaning media include *trump*, *require*, *election*, *show* and *democrats*. The terms *voter*, *wisconsin*, *texas*, *federal* and *court* are used more often by right-leaning outlets when specifically discussing voter ID in the US.

The key terms and linguistic patterns identified in the above analyses are further explored through generating a list of sentences with the terms in their immediate context. Their implications are discussed below. Since the analyses underscore differences in coverage by media ideology *and* context (US vs UK context), the following subsections structure the discussion of the findings by country of focus.

Donald Trump and US Electoral Controversies on UK News Media Coverage

Overall, the key terms differentiating news coverage by media ideology largely relate to coverage about the US. The terms *election*, *biden*, *back*, *trump*, *claim*, and *call* are significantly more frequent in right-leaning media headlines. The terms *trump*, *claim* and *call* are also used more frequently by right-leaning outlets in sentences about voter ID. These terms appear connected to *fraud* in the headline network and increase in importance in coverage from 2016, indicating statements made by Donald Trump were paraphrased or reported on more often by right-leaning media compared to left-leaning outlets. Trump is also connected to *mail-in* and *postal*, indicating right-leaning news outlets also reported on Trump's fraud allegations linked to mail-in ballots, which he prominently amplified in the lead-up to and aftermath of the 2020 Presidential Election, warning that "people will grab them from mailboxes, print forgeries and 'force' voters to sign them" (Daily Mail, 24/05/2020).

The term *identification* is significantly more frequent in headlines by left-leaning media (score = 83). The relative absence of the term in right-leaning headlines suggests right-leaning media instead covered voter ID requirements and voter fraud as an extension of other topics. For instance, the key terms *border*, *order*, *wall*, and *security*, which appear connected to Trump in both the headline and right-leaning coverage networks, suggest right-leaning outlets frame coverage of voter ID within wider topics of national security and immigration control in the US.

The state of *Georgia* is also significantly referenced in right-leaning media coverage in relation to controversies about its voting bill. Known as the "Election Integrity Act of 2021", Georgia's voting law was passed by Governor Brian Kemp on March 2021 and introduced significant changes to Georgia's election procedures, including stricter voter ID requirements for requesting absentee ballots, and new ID requirements when casting provisional ballots. *Georgia* appears connected to the terms *governor* and *all-star-game*, which appear significantly more often in right-leaning headlines. These terms reference the Major League Baseball's (MLB) decision to move the All-Star Game from Georgia in response to the state's controversial voting law. When exploring instances of these terms in original headlines, news

media on the right further paraphrase *Trump*, the *GOP* and the *governor's* responses to this move, calling to “Boycott baseball and the woke companies interfering with elections” (Daily Mail, 03/04/2021) for “caving to fear and lies from liberal activists” (Daily Mail, 03/04/2021), and framing the lawsuit as a politically motivated move by the Biden administration and “proof the 'radical left' is 'politicizing the DOJ'” (Daily Mail, 25/06/2021).

Pennsylvania is also more frequently mentioned by right-leaning media in sentences about voter ID requirements in the US. The state of Pennsylvania played an important role in the outcome of the presidential election (James et al., 2023) and was at the centre of legal challenges and electoral controversies in both the 2016 and 2020 US general elections. In 2016, Donald Trump made claims ahead of the election which were picked up by the media, about the increased likelihood of in-person voter fraud to be committed in this state due to a lack of voter ID requirements, which he found “shocking” (Daily Mail, 13/08/2016).

The context of the 2020 election during the COVID-19 pandemic led to an unprecedented number of mail-in ballots. Despite the 2020 election being regarded as a success by impartial observers (Persily & Stewart, 2021), postal voting featured heavily in electoral controversies and litigation (James et al., 2023), with Trump alleging mail-in voter fraud, despite Pennsylvania requiring ID for mail-in ballot applications.

“The Trump campaign has dropped some claims of alleged fraud in the key swing state of Pennsylvania. More people have voted by post due to the coronavirus pandemic, creating counting delays. In most states, postal votes have favoured Joe Biden more than votes cast on election day. This is possibly due to the two candidates' different messages on coronavirus, but the Trump campaign has been alleging these votes are fraudulent for several weeks.”

Daily Telegraph, 16/11/2020

The relative salience and connections between the terms *recount*, *lawsuit* and *result* in right-leaning news headlines highlights right-leaning news media's emphasis of the controversies and legal disputes surrounding the use of postal ballots in the US 2020 election (Howe, 2020).

While right-leaning headlines place emphasis on Donald Trump's claims, left-leaning key terms indicate their coverage is different. The top terms significantly differentiating coverage by left-leaning media outlets include *democracy*, *people*, *suppression*, *fight*, *poor*, *rights*, *turnout*, and *restriction*.

“Midterms: how the votes of vulnerable groups are being suppressed. Measures range from voter ID laws to restrictive voter registration procedures and bids to exclude former felons from casting a ballot.”

The Guardian, 19/10/2018

In the headline analysis, both *ID* and *people* are linked with terms like *poor*, *black*, *ethnic-minority*, and *young*, which appear significantly more frequent in headlines from left-leaning outlets. This suggests these sources emphasise the effects of voter ID laws in the turnout of these specific demographics. These concerns are also raised about the UK policy, as detailed in the next section. The term *tribal* appears in the top 10 words frequently used in the context of “identification” in the US, particularly in relation to the voting rights of Native Americans and tribal nations, who are often less likely to possess IDs “with photos or addresses” (The Guardian, 25/10/2022).

In coverage about the US, left-leaning news media place more attention to narratives around voting rights, particularly in relation to legal challenges of passing voter ID requirements (in headline network: key term *supreme_court* is connected to *case*, *ruling*, *rights*, and *suppression*). The significant terms *selma*, *march* and *vra*, connected to *rights* in the overall headline network, reference the three Selma to Montgomery marches in 1965, which were part of a broader voting rights movement in Selma and throughout the American South, contributing to the passage that year of the Voting Rights Act.

Left-leaning news media discuss the impact of voter ID requirements on voting rights by frequently reporting on the states of *Wisconsin*, *North Carolina* and *Texas* in their coverage, which have been at the centre of legal challenges against voter ID legislation. These are also within the top terms in left-leaning sentences about ID in the US. Contrasting right-leaning coverage, these outlets instead display a critical stance on Georgia's voting law, described as forming part of “sweeping” restrictions on voting” and “an anti-democratic power grab” depicted as a strategic move by

Republican political elites to “gain greater control over elections” (The Independent, 26/03/2021). This framing of voter ID requirements as an attempt to gain more control over the election process is also underscored by connections in the left-leaning coverage network, between *power* and *grab*, in turn connected to *republicans*.

While left-leaning news outlets place more attention to narratives around voting rights, when exploring the separate networks, we find both media sets frequently discuss voting rights in their coverage. For both, the discourse around voting rights is more pronounced when reporting on the American context. The term *filibuster*³⁹, more frequent in right-leaning coverage and connected to *rights* in both the headline and right-leaning separate networks highlights right-leaning media's frequent use of the term in coverage about its use by Republicans to obstruct voting rights legislation introduced by Democrats.

As aforementioned, right-leaning media refer to Trump substantially more often in their headlines. However, the centrality of the term *trump* in left-leaning coverage indicates that these outlets also substantially reported on Trump. Exploring instances of the term *trump* in left-leaning coverage reveals a more critical stance on Trump's claims, often referred to as “lies” (The Guardian, 18/01/2021), “false” (The Mirror, 24/01/2017) and “propaganda” (The Guardian, 26/10/2020), and Trump's voter fraud commission as a “shameless white power grab” (The Guardian, 12/05/2017).

Framing of UK voter ID by British News Media

The previous section highlighted differences in the framing of voter ID coverage related to the situation in the US. These differences decrease when it comes to reporting on the situation at home. This section outlines the key narratives identified differentiating news coverage about the UK voter ID policy, introduced by the Elections Act in 2022 and first adopted in the May 2023 local elections.

³⁹ The filibuster is a procedural tool in the United States Senate that allows a minority of senators to extend debate on a piece of legislation and effectively block its passage.

Despite the substantial reporting of Trump’s voter fraud allegations in the US by right-leaning outlets, the term *fraud* is significantly more frequent when reporting on the UK (score = 13). Exploring instances of this term in UK coverage reveals how right-leaning news outlets attribute fraud to Muslim communities. The articles below coincide with the increase in news attention by right-leaning media following the publication of Sir Pickles report (Figure 20) entitled *Securing the Ballot* in 2016. This report raised electoral fraud concerns within Bangladeshi and Pakistani communities and argued for reforms to safeguard against electoral fraud including the implementation of voter ID requirements.

“PC culture let vote fraud in Muslim areas flourish: Police, election watchdog and council lambasted for ignoring evidence because of over-sensitivity about ethnicity.”

Daily Mail, 12/08/2016

“Voters will have to show passports to combat voter fraud in 'vulnerable' areas with large Muslim populations.”

Daily Telegraph, 27/12/2016

“Voter ID aims to prevent fraudsters 'playing race card'.”

The Times, 28/12/2016

“Voters in areas with high Muslim populations 'MUST show passports' amid voter fraud fears.”

Daily Express, 27/12/2016

These headlines demonstrate that right-leaning media not only amplified concerns about voter fraud in the UK, but also highlight how the coverage is racialised and intertwines with broader societal issues of race and Islamophobia.

In sentences about voter ID in the UK, right-leaning outlets also frequently refer to *Northern Ireland*. By referencing Northern Ireland’s history with voter ID, right-leaning media contribute to framing the policy as not only necessary for electoral integrity but also as practically feasible or viable. The frequent citations of government officials in coverage indicate elite cues are shaping media framing:

“A Cabinet Office spokesperson told Express.co.uk: "It's wrong to suggest that people will be adversely affected by our plans to strengthen the electoral system. "Voter ID has been operating in Northern Ireland successfully for decades and 99.6 percent of people cast their vote successfully in our pilots.”

Daily Express, 14/03/2021

Left-leaning media's key terms *tory*, *plan*, *pilot* and *trial* instead indicate these outlets reported more on the voter ID trials and the voter ID policy in its legislative stages. Left-leaning key terms *turnout*, *suppression*, *hard*, and *minority* are used to a similar degree in both US and UK focused coverage, suggesting the framing of voter ID as impacting turnout and suppressing votes overlaps in coverage across both countries. While the term *black* is more frequently used when reporting on the US, the term *young* is more frequent in UK-focused coverage. In the overall headline network, the term *democracy* appears connected to *dangerous*, indicating left-leaning media's more critical stance towards voter ID requirements, described as a "discriminatory plan" that "risks undermining democracy" (The Guardian, 13/02/2019) and as a "dangerous assault on democracy" (The Independent, 07/09/2021).

There are similarities in left and right-leaning news discourse, with the terms *turn away* and *democracy* used in coverage by both sets, especially when reporting on voter ID in the UK. When exploring instances of these terms in coverage, however, there are notable inconsistencies in how British right-leaning news media frame voter ID requirements. Some prominent conservative political figures in the UK have voiced criticisms against voter ID requirements, which have been picked up and amplified by right-leaning outlets. Most notably, Conservative politician *Ruth Davidson* is among the top key words associated with right-leaning coverage (connected to *ID* and *plan* in the *headline network*). Davidson dismissed voter ID proposals as "total bollocks" (The Sun, 13/05/2021), claiming that the "problem doesn't exist" (Daily Express, 13/05/2021), statements paraphrased in right-leaning news coverage.

"TOTAL B****CKS' Top Tory Ruth Davidson tears into Boris Johnson's plan to make voters show ID at polling stations."

The Sun, 13/05/2021

"Boris Johnson's plans to make Britons display photographic identification in order to vote are "total bollocks", Ruth Davidson has said. The former leader of the Scottish Conservatives lashed out at the plans, joining a burgeoning party rebellion that also includes David Davis, the libertarian former Brexit secretary."

The Times, 13/05/2021

Internal discord among conservative political elites is reflected in right-leaning media's contradictory coverage about voter ID, with outlets framing the policy as both a positive and negative measure. The two headlines below, only 6 months apart, highlight this:

“Voter ID will protect our democracy.”

The Times, 26/05/2021

“Voter ID will be a nail in the coffin for democracy and MPs' integrity.”

The Times, 18/11/2021

While across both media sets, the term *trump* is unsurprisingly mostly associated with reports about the situation in the US, there are instances when *trump* feeds into coverage about voter ID in the UK. Right-leaning news outlets display contention regarding the UK voter ID policy, especially since the 2020 US election and Trump's fraud claims.

“Prime Minister Boris Johnson has been warned not to roll-out voter ID laws, similar to those observed in many US states, following claims of "voter suppression" across America. It comes as the US election hangs in the balance. Incumbent President Donald Trump has already blasted the vote as a "fraud", claiming victory even before all the results have been announced.”

Daily Express, 04/11/2020

This explicit connection between the US and UK voter ID policies is especially prominent in coverage by left-leaning outlets. For example, Conservatives' election bill is framed as a “Trumpian plan” (Independent, 04/07/2021) or “strategy” (The Independent, 24/10/2019), which borrows heavily from “the Donald Trump playbook,” labelling it as a “blatant attempt to rig democracy” through vote suppression (The Guardian, 03/09/2021). Such comparisons extend to warnings against adopting “Trumpism” in UK politics, with calls for the Conservative party to see “events in US in recent years” as a “warning to conservatives” (The Guardian, 15/05/2023).

While the UK policy is often compared to the US, there is an instance when the *Daily Mail* paraphrases Trump advocating for the US to emulate UK's voter ID requirements:

“Donald Trump says US should follow UK's lead and REQUIRE voter ID for voting 'to eliminate any corruption and fraud'“.

Daily Mail, 12/05/2021

This transatlantic policy dialogue underscores how discussions about voter ID and electoral integrity traverse between the US and the UK, and raises difficulties in assessing the direction or flow of influence between the two (James, 2021).

5. Conclusions

The news media plays an important role in shaping public confidence in the electoral system and perceptions of fraud. This study explored news media coverage of voter ID requirements from 2014 to 2023 by 8 UK legacy news media using a range of computerised content analysis methods.

News coverage about voter ID has progressively increased since the recommendation for voter ID was first published in an Electoral Commission report in 2014, drastically increasing by 360% in 2021, with left-leaning news media paying more attention to the issue of voter ID than their right-leaning counterparts.

Overall, the findings lend support to the Electoral Commission's speculation that the news media in the UK has picked up on allegations of voter fraud by Donald Trump and controversies around voter ID laws in the US. This was specially the case for right-leaning media, with a majority of their top key differentiating terms referring to the situation in the US. UK readers were indeed exposed to news about the US, almost to the same degree or more so than the voter ID policy at home. Nwokora et al. (2022) study argues that foreign media who report on friendly countries are more likely to conduct unusually high-quality reporting. However, this study finds important differences in coverage by news outlets' ideological orientation, mirroring the partisan debate over voter ID in the US. Whereas left-leaning media pay more attention to arguments around voter suppression of marginalised groups, reporting on Supreme Court cases and voter ID litigations, right-leaning media instead more

frequently reported on Donald Trump's voter fraud allegations. This transnational media influence or "media contagion" in the framing of controversial restrictive voting measures expands the scope of agenda-setting theory, suggesting avenues for further research in understanding media framing and effects across national contexts (James, 2021).

The analyses demonstrate British news media coverage of the policy in the UK also varies based on the ideological orientation of the outlets analysed. Despite the prominence of reporting on Donald Trump allegations, right media more frequently refer to 'fraud' in the UK context, associating voter fraud with Muslim communities. Left-leaning outlets instead emphasise the negative effects of voter ID laws, particularly on young people's ability to vote. Despite this, right-leaning media occasionally display scepticism about the voter ID policy, referencing Conservative politicians' criticisms of the measures, notably Ruth Davidson. There are at times contradictory articles published by the same news outlets, the most extreme case being two articles published by *The Times* only 6 months apart, one entitled "Voter ID will be a nail in the coffin for democracy and MPs' integrity" (18/11/2021) and the other "Voter ID will protect our democracy" (26/05/2021).

Given the complexity of how events trigger media coverage, especially when considering cross-country influences, an avenue for future research could involve conducting a time series analysis to further explore temporal dynamics in coverage. The graph of monthly article counts, along with the correlation analysis of news attention across the two media sets served as a bottom-up exploration, revealing patterns that should be further investigated to gain a better understanding of how events shape news attention over time. Potential variables could include events not only within the UK but also in the US.

These findings contribute to the literature on the interplay between elites, mass media and public opinion. Specifically, the analysis of British news coverage demonstrates how agenda setting and issue framing can transcend national boundaries, resulting in a cross-border cascade of media frames. The extensive coverage by British media of US politics, especially Trump's allegations, highlights

the potential impact of international framing on domestic coverage and public opinion.

6. Conclusion

This project analysed policy debates and news coverage with the aim of understanding how news outlets and political elites frame controversial voter ID requirements in the US and UK. The thesis was presented in four standalone research papers, each employing a set of complementary computerised text analysis methods to inductively study political elites and news media discourses.

This final chapter summarises the key findings, contributions, acknowledges the project's limitations, and outlines avenues for further research. Since each separate paper contains a concluding section summarising its key findings and limitations, this chapter aims to provide instead a substantive and coherent overview of the project.

6.1 Key Findings and Contributions

This section discusses key substantive findings from the research conducted, how the results speak to the literature and addresses research gaps. It outlines key findings from the analyses of legislative debates about voter ID laws and then discusses the studies of news media coverage. Results and implications from the US and UK political elite studies are discussed in parallel to underscore similarities identified in the discourse across the countries.

6.1.1. *Political Elite Rhetoric: Beyond a framing dichotomy about voter ID*

Study 1 and 3 analysed legislative debates over voter ID in the US and the UK, respectively. Policy debates operate at the intersections between society, politics, and law (Makouar et al., 2023) and often serve as intermediaries between politicians and the public. Despite their crucial role in legislation and the influence of elite rhetoric on public attitudes (Rodrigo-Jusué, 2023), legislative debates have rarely been studied (Casiraghi, 2021). The UK's more recent adoption of such measures has resulted in limited research on this topic within the UK context. Knowledge on the case of the US is more developed as their voter ID laws date back to the 1950s.

An inductive methodological approach was adopted in analyses of Congressional and Parliamentary debates of voter ID requirements in the US and UK, respectively. To explore political elite rhetoric over voter ID laws, the first study analysed speeches

from Congressional debates in the US between 2013 and 2021. In the UK, all parliamentary debates about the voter ID policy available at the time of the study (2018-2022) were analysed.

Overall, key to the findings from both studies focusing on political elite rhetoric, is the need to extend our understandings beyond the conventional frame dichotomy often used to categorise elite discourse on the issue. The analyses demonstrate that political elites in both the US and UK frame voter ID beyond arguments concerning voter fraud or voter suppression, which are typically the main components of the conventional frame dichotomy used to categorise elite discourse. There is evidence that Republican and Conservative political elites mobilise arguments around strengthening the electoral system's integrity and preventing fraud, with the political opposition (Labour and Democratic speakers) raising concerns about the voter suppression and disenfranchisement of marginalised groups. However, these two arguments form only a portion of the multifaceted framing of the policy.

Constructing Consent: How Elites Frame Voter ID Through Public Perceptions

Alongside concerns about voter fraud and suppression, political elites also frame voter ID requirements through arguments around their impact on **public opinion and perceptions of fraud**. Voter ID is therefore not only justified by conservative political elites pushing this policy as a means to improve electoral integrity, but public *confidence in the system's integrity* and reduce *perceptions of fraud*.

This discussion surrounding public attitudes in the context of voter ID legislation reflects broader scholarly discussions on how political leaders' decisions are both shaped by and shape public opinion, and how this dynamic interaction influences the legislative agenda (Druckman & Jacobs, 2006; Shapiro & Jacobs, 2001). Research in the US finds public trust in the electoral process is significantly influenced by individuals' political ideology and by messages and cues transmitted by their respective political parties. These findings therefore underscore the need for caution when incorporating citizen perceptions into policy decisions (Fisher & Sällberg, 2020; Green, 2021), particularly when these views are potentially inaccurate (vanHeerde-Hudson & Fisher, 2013).

Similarly, voter ID laws are also framed by conservative political elites in both countries as a “common sense” measure, since people are required to show ID in activities such as driving, traveling, or buying alcohol. By demonstrating political elites are mobilising arguments around voter ID being “common sense” and responding to public support for the policy, this thesis helps situate findings from public opinion studies about voter ID requirements. For example, Kane and Wilson (2021) argue that, rather than seeing political elite rhetoric on the issue as the primary driver of public opinion, it is the understanding of voter ID as “common sense” that underpins the widespread support for the policy. However, given that political elites also frame these measures as “common sense,” the potential role of elite rhetoric on public opinion should not be underestimated.

Moreover, comparing voter ID requirements to other ID-based activities may seem logical, but this fails to recognise the crucial differences between voting, a fundamental right, and other activities considered privileges or commercial transactions. As Overton highlights, airlines and stores generally lack incentives to exclude legitimate consumers, “in the airline and commercial contexts, participants do not have ‘votes’ that are weighed relative to one another to assess the will of the entire citizenry and determine who will govern society” (Overton, 2007: 651).

From Tower Hamlets to Border Walls: Voter Fraud and Minority Communities

The analysis of framing by political elites further reveals that Republican and Conservative political elites often link concerns about voter fraud to minorities. The analysis of political elite framing in US Congress finds voter fraud is associated to “illegal immigrants”, with voter ID being discussed alongside border issues. These findings contextualise various studies in the US which find public support for voter ID laws and beliefs in voter fraud are associated with underlying anti-immigrant sentiments and racial biases (Chouhy et al., 2023; Gronke et al., 2019; Udani & Kimball, 2018; Valentino & Neuner, 2017; Wilson et al., 2014), and echo James’ (2021) finding of Trump’s instrumental use of the border wall to shift voter’s attention on migrants.

In the UK, Conservative MPs refer to the Tower Hamlets electoral fraud case, to argue that such electoral fraud cases have strained public confidence in the voting

system. This is despite the fact that public confidence in elections was already high when the debates took place (Electoral Commission, 2022) and despite the form of fraud from the Tower Hamlets case not being addressed by a voter ID requirement. This framing by Conservative MPs arguably reinforces the association of voter fraud with minority communities in the UK, particularly the South Asian community.

In the UK, Carl (2017: 135) finds that while the percentage of Pakistani and Bangladeshi populations significantly predicts electoral fraud allegations, they note this relationship may be “attributable to a form of xenophobia that is specific to the British the British Pakistani and Bangladeshi communities”, rather than general anti-immigration attitudes. Similarly, a report by the Electoral Commission (2014) finds various 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, despite police data showing that people accused or convicted of electoral fraud come from various backgrounds (Electoral Commission, 2014: 17). This disparity underscores the need to further examine public perceptions of electoral fraud in the UK, to understand the extent to which these may be influenced by biases towards specific minority communities.

The discursive association of voter fraud with minority communities identified in political elite debates can have important practical consequences, with racial bias, prejudices and xenophobia potentially affecting the way local officials deliver services (James & Garnett, 2020; Mendez & Grose, 2018; White et al., 2015). They can lead to idiosyncratic applications of election law (Suttman-Lea, 2020), with poll workers treating minority voters differently by for example, requesting more stringent forms of ID than required (Atkeson et al., 2014).

Fact or Faction: Polarised Truths in Voter ID Debates

There is also a concerning lack of agreement about what is “true” in political debates about voter ID. This divergence is particularly evident in the US, where factual statements by politicians from both political parties about the state of the electoral system and the effects of voter ID requirements not only differ from each other, but their veracity is also explicitly undermined by the opposing party. While

Republicans claim the integrity of the electoral system and public confidence is threatened by fraud, and therefore needs to be fixed by implementing voter ID, Democrats instead define the problem as voter suppression and low public confidence due to voter ID requirements, fixed by restoring section 5 of the VRA and adopting expansive voting bills. Democratic and Republican elites respectively claim “voter fraud” and “voter suppression” allegations are false. A similar situation is observed in the UK. Even when factual narratives and evidence are used by each party to legitimise their respective stances, these did not interact with, and at times contradicted, each other.

These findings support James’ (2018) observation that the legislative process often sidelines research-based evidence, citing the advancement of voter ID legislation in the UK as a prime example of significant policy progress being made “despite the research” (James, 2018: 17). They also underscore what Larsen (2018) describes as “my team-your team” facts in constitutional disputes in the US, where a question of legislative fact produces opposing narratives with expert authorities on each side. As Gilbert (2015: 752) underlines, the “sophisticated narrative” of the voter ID debate is 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. However, the studies of political elite framing presented in this thesis highlight this nuance is lost in debates over voter ID in both the US and the UK.

The Moral Framing of Voter ID

This concerning absence of common ground leads to electoral laws being framed on moral terms. For example, Conservative MPs in the UK frame voter fraud as a “crime” that is not “victimless” and that should be taken seriously despite its small numbers, thereby framing voter ID as a matter of “principle”. The political opposition, Democrats in the US, and the Labour Party in the UK, provide a moral counter-framing by depicting voter ID requirements as a violation of human rights and by mobilising histories of racial discrimination.

The moralisation over voter ID by political elites in both countries also involved a use of violence metaphors. While this form of metaphorical language is often linked

with the moral system and discourse of conservatives (Lakoff, 2010), this language is present across political parties. The moral framing and use of violence metaphors by Democratic elites might partly explain Conover and Miller's (2018) unexpected finding that greater acceptance of the suppression narrative strengthens Democrats' moral conviction on voter ID.

Morality can manifest not only in word choices but also in differences in their underlying meaning (Haidt, 2012). These findings therefore highlight the challenges raised by Kraft and Klemmensen (2024) of interpreting political language, particularly in discussions involving moral and ethical considerations, through standard text analysis methods such as "bag of words" approaches, which disregard the context in which words are used.

The Adoption of Opposing Frames in Voter ID Debates

The picture further complicates when exploring political elite rhetoric in the US, particularly in the context of recent expansive voting bills introduced since the COVID-19 pandemic. US elections have become increasingly litigious, with almost every attempt to expand voting access facing court challenges at some point in 2020 (James et al., 2023).

Similar to Democratic and Labour speakers using violence metaphors traditionally associated with conservatives' discourse, Republican political elites are also using the term "voter suppression", a phrase key to Democrats traditional framing of voter ID, to frame Democratic-backed voting bills. The "voter suppression" frame has historically referred to attempts by Republican elites to gain an electoral advantage by "suppressing" the vote of historically Democratic voting groups. However, in this new context, Republicans are redefining the term to suggest that Democrats are legislating for expansive electoral reform to benefit their electoral prospects through enabling fraud, thereby "suppressing" the voting power of legitimate voters. The re-appropriation of opposing or 'contesting' frames with the aim of redefining the terms and terrain of the debate marks a significant development in the political discourse around voter ID laws and further underscores the increasing complexity of partisan debates on electoral reform.

By exploring Congressional and Parliamentary debates, the findings from both studies highlight the complex framing of voter ID laws by political elites in both the US and the UK, and similarities in how the policy is debated across countries. By identifying ways of framing the policy beyond the conventional frame binary, these findings also help provide context to links identified in the literature between elite framing, individual predispositions, and public support for voter ID.

6.1.2. News media: The framing of electoral laws and cross-country contagion

The news media plays a key role in shaping people's understanding and support for policies, including voter ID laws. Scholarly attention to elite rhetoric has increased in the US, particularly since 2020, in the context of Trump's widespread voter fraud allegations. While various studies have since explored news coverage of voter fraud, this has left a gap in our understanding of the broader discourse about voter ID within which voter fraud conspiracies are embedded. In the UK, only a few studies and reports have been published about voter ID, none of which have analysed news coverage. Analysing news discourse is important given that the public is divided in their support for voter ID requirements, especially in the UK, a division that is likely influenced by the information environment.

Study 2 and 4 in this thesis presented analyses of news media coverage of voter ID laws in the US and UK, respectively. To study news media coverage of voter ID laws in the US, Study 2 analysed news data from 10 mass-market/top news media across the partisan spectrum between 2013 and 2023. In the UK, the analysis included all news coverage about voter ID from a combination of broadsheet and tabloid legacy news media available from 2014 to 2023.

As discussed in the previous section, the political elite studies shared multiple findings. However, unlike those studies, the analysis of news coverage revealed important differences between US and UK news discourse. This section first summarises and situates the findings of the US analysis, and then explores the findings from the UK analysis. The findings from the news media studies further contribute to the literature on the interplay between elites, mass media and public opinion, especially from the US.

Framing Voter ID: Partisan Divides in US News Coverage

Overall, Study 2 demonstrates there are differences in US coverage content depending on the ideological orientation of the news media analysed, mirroring political elite framing of the policy. Echoing Republican elite rhetoric on the issue, right-leaning news coverage of voter ID has also substantially increased in recent years and appears heavily connected to discussions about expansive voting bills introduced by Democratic elites and their ‘risks’. Left-leaning media instead emphasise arguments around voter suppression caused by voter ID laws in their coverage, thereby echoing the traditional Democratic “voter suppression” frame. However, left-leaning media outlets in the US surprisingly paid more attention to voter fraud conspiracies compared to their right-leaning counterparts, often paraphrasing these allegations to debunk or undermine them. While not referenced or discussed substantively in Congressional debates, the analysis of US news media demonstrates that Donald Trump’s voter fraud allegations largely structure voter ID news coverage.

News media discourse in the US is also mirroring the polarised dynamics identified in political elite debates, with media on the left reporting on voter fraud “myths” and referring to Donald Trump’s “big lie”, and media on the right similarly framing voter suppression claims by left media and Democrats as a “conspiracy” and false. The allegations by outlets that their counterparts are engaging in misinformation can contribute to the erosion of trust in the media at large (Van Der Meer et al.’s (2023). Studies find that an increase in audience distrust of the news media can further contribute to the growing polarisation of the American political system (Tsfati & Ariely, 2014) and further reduce citizens’ trust in democracy (ibid.)

These findings help contextualise various public opinion studies finding the news to play a role in forming opinions towards voter ID requirements. Research by the Pew Research Center (2021) in the US finds that among both Republicans and Democrats, those who only consume news from outlets with right- or left-leaning audiences, respectively, are the most likely to have heard a lot about mail-in voter fraud on the 2020 election. Alvarez et al. (2021) similarly find that news and social media consumption is associated with low voter confidence in election administration at

the national level. Moreover, a larger proportion of respondents believing in widespread voter fraud cite “reports on the news” compared to those citing Donald Trump as their source (73% / 43%) (Pew Research Center 2021). Wilson and Brewer (2013) similarly find Fox News viewers are particularly likely to support voter ID laws.

The findings from the analysis of US news media extends Berkler et al.'s (2020) study of news coverage of voter fraud, since I similarly find Trump expanded his reach beyond the right-wing media ecosystem in voter ID coverage (Goidel et al., 2019; Pyrhönen & Bauvois, 2020). Arguably, Democratic elite framing of voter ID requirements is not only failing to reach Democratic audiences, but it seems that Republican framing is reaching Democratic voters more effectively than Democratic framing itself.

Cross-border cascade of media framing: Coverage of US by British media

The analysis of UK news coverage finds a similar situation, with British media, especially on the right, extensively reporting on Donald Trump's allegations and the US political landscape, almost to the same degree as their coverage of the voter ID policy within the UK. British news media coverage of the situation in the US also varied based on the ideological orientation of the outlets analysed, mirroring the framing by partisan news sources in the US.

The findings from the analysis of British news coverage contribute to the literature by showing how agenda setting and issue framing can transcend national boundaries. While studies often focus on the impact of media on public opinion within a single country, the extensive reporting of voter ID within the US context by British news outlets and the centrality of Trump's allegations in coverage underscore the potential influence of international framing on domestic media and public opinion (Tsfati & Ariely, 2014). These findings therefore lend some support to the Electoral Commission's speculation that news coverage about the US may have inadvertently shaped British public's confidence in the UK's electoral system in 2021. Nwokora et al. (2022) study argues that the media reporting on friendly countries is usually of higher quality. However, the way in which coverage by UK media mirrored the

framing by partisan news sources in the US, highlights this might not always be the case, with media echoing ideologically structured framing from the US.

By highlighting the cross-border influence of media narratives, this research also expands our understanding of agenda setting beyond domestic contexts, suggesting that international news coverage can have far-reaching implications for national political discourses and public trust in democratic institutions.

While there are notable differences in the framing of the situation in the US between UK news outlets, these differences decrease when it comes to reporting on the situation at home. While media on the left are consistently critical of voter ID requirements, and mirror Labour's framing of the policy, there are notable inconsistencies within the British right-leaning news media regarding their framing of voter ID requirements. This may be because some prominent conservative political figures in the UK have voiced criticisms against voter ID requirements. Such internal discord among conservative ranks is reflected in the media's coverage, with news outlets on the right at times framing voter ID as both a positive and negative measure, even a few months apart.

6.2. Limitations

The conclusion of each study in this thesis includes a discussion of its limitations. This section considers limitations shared across the papers, specifically around the scope and methodology.

The use of inductive computerised text analysis methods always carries an inherent subjective dimension (DiMaggio et al., 2013; Poole & Adebayo, 2023). Even though all studies shared research questions regarding the ideological structuring of the language analysed which informed the research design, and therefore were not entirely deductive, the presence of recurring patterns in the data that match existing assumptions does not inherently validate their accurate representation of the text's meaning, as texts can have multiple interpretations (Oleinik, 2011; Jacobs & Tschötschel, 2019). My interpretation was therefore crucial to the analysis of the data, raising potential issues around the subjectivity and validity of the findings presented.

However, no research, deductive or otherwise, is entirely objective as subjective decisions permeate research design, from corpus construction, preprocessing steps, software choices to analytical procedures. Nevertheless, the hybrid approach of combining computerised content analysis methods with a close reading and analysis of the text not only enriched my understanding but also exposed a complexity in the discourse over voter ID that may have otherwise been overlooked if examining the research outputs in isolation. This approach also allowed me to uncover the framing strategies discussed in the previous section, whereby a party's language is reappropriated by the other. The findings demonstrate that exploring the context of a term is crucial to account for lexical ambiguity and better understand political positions and intentions (Kraft & Klemmensen, 2024). These findings therefore expose limitations of dictionary-based analyses of political communication when a specific word is understood as carrying an intrinsic meaning without exploring the context in which it emerges.

While generating semantic networks offered a visually efficient way of representing the data and enabled to capture and compare various meanings of the same term based on the ideological orientation of the analysed corpus, the dynamic shifts in the meanings of specific terms *within* each corpus were not captured fully by the analyses conducted (Yang et al., 2016). Nevertheless, by combining various methods at different levels of granularity, the inductive methodology applied allowed for a robust understanding of the complex framing of voter ID in the political and news domains.

Incorporating a systematic qualitative analysis of the text would have offered a deeper understanding of the patterns identified inductively, further validating the study's conclusions. Unfortunately, this was not feasible due to time constraints and the scope of this project. Nevertheless, this study's findings underscore the potential of an interdisciplinary approach in inductively exploring text, particularly in areas where existing knowledge is limited. However, integrating methodologies from different disciplines (political science, policy studies, communication studies, linguistics, text mining, computer science, sociology, discourse studies, information science, etc.), each with its own set of terminologies and theoretical assumptions, can be challenging (Gillings et al., 2023; Gillings & Hardie, 2023). As Gillings et al.

(2023) notes, “the reality of interdisciplinary research often falls short of both the idealistic vision of seamless integration and the dystopian view of complete disarray”. In practice, the barriers posed by disciplinary divides are substantial, hindering the fluid combination of methods from different fields. These lie not only in the technical aspects of merging different methodologies, but also in bridging the conceptual gaps between disciplines.

6.3. Future Research Avenues

There are several promising avenues for future research. Exploring framing variations across diverse media environments including social media could provide a more comprehensive understanding of the voter ID debate and offer insights into how the media landscape shapes and is shaped by political elite discourse. Burggraaff & Trilling (2020) find important differences in online news items compared to print items. By investigating how the structural dynamics of different media platforms (like different social media, news websites, and traditional print media) contribute to the framing and re-framing of voter ID, further research could extend the work of Benkler et al. (2018) which delves into the structural aspects of media and how they influence public discourse and policy framing, to the context of restrictive electoral policies.

Considering the polarisation found in news media coverage about voter ID, further research could examine if and how conservative and progressive media outlets employ reactive strategies (i.e. respond and adjust their framing to counteract the framing of their ideological counterparts) to control the narrative around voter ID, especially in response to significant political events or policy announcements. It would be particularly interesting to find if similar “reactive asymmetries” exist in the voter ID discourse, mirroring the patterns observed by Zhang et al. (2022) in their research on communication flows surrounding mass shootings in the US media system.

Another interesting research avenue could consider the use of evidence in policymaking and news coverage by analysing the extent to which empirical data, expert opinions, or partisan sources are referenced to reinforce or challenge particular policy framings. Future research could apply Seuri et al.'s (2023)

approach, used to examine the susceptibility of the media's role to stakeholder influence in Finnish alcohol policy, to the context of electoral policy. This could involve examining the influence of a range of stakeholders (including civil rights organisations, independent watchdog groups, policy experts, political elites, advocacy groups, etc.) in the framing of voter ID requirements and/or the relative amount of space devoted to particular subjects (Ban et al., 2019). Due to constraints in time and space, this comprehensive analysis was not feasible within the current study's timeframe.

While the studies that compose this thesis contributed knowledge to the framing of voter ID by political elites and news outlets, the way the public interpreted this discourse was also beyond the scope of the thesis. Future research should continue investigating how elite framing influences public attitudes and policy decisions, exploring the effects of other ways of framing the policy identified in this thesis, such as through arguments around human rights or voter confidence on public opinion for voter ID. This approach could shed light onto how framing affects attitudes and perceptions and how elite framing and key demographics are shaping differences in opinion about voter ID requirements.

Public opinion should particularly be analysed in the UK. Despite Conservative MPs advocating for voter ID as a means to increase voter confidence, there is a lack of understanding about what actually drives public confidence in the British electoral system, and whether UK media's coverage of voter ID issues in the US might be affecting British public opinion. Triangulating the findings with survey data and opinion experiments would provide crucial insights into how political and news framing shape public perceptions and attitudes (Jaworska, 2016).

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8. Data Accessibility Statement

Data supporting this study are available from the Enlighten: Research data repository at <http://dx.doi.org/10.5525/gla.researchdata.1569>

9. Appendices

A - Literature Review approach

The research platform Scopus was primarily used to find literature on the subject. Sources with the search terms “voting ID”, “voter identification”, “voter ID” or “voting restriction” in either their abstract, keywords or title were initially identified. Given the association of voter ID laws to concerns around voter fraud and electoral integrity, the terms ‘voter fraud’ and ‘electoral fraud’ were also used in a second literature search.

At this stage, titles and abstracts were reviewed to assess the sources’ relevance. The sources not considered relevant primarily included engineering papers on new technological developments of online voting systems (such as behavioural biometrics) and therefore were excluded from the review. Amongst the relevant literature, various research topics emerged, such as analyses of voter turnout, the enactment of voter ID laws by US states, public opinion towards ID laws and/or electoral integrity and analyses of election officials’ behaviour (from poll workers to judges and legislators). These studies largely included aggregate level analysis of participation levels in US states and individual level analysis of public opinion survey data and voting behaviour, providing a rich source of information on the relationship between voting procedures and turnout and contributing to our understanding of public perceptions of voter fraud and public support for voter ID requirements. Many sources also provided a theoretical understanding of the issue of voter ID by discussing the legitimacy or constitutionality of voter ID laws in more general terms, some using voter ID laws as an example of a broader phenomenon (i.e. discrimination, racism, ableism, misinformation).

The resulting literature was then sorted by relevance, topic focus, type of data analysed, methodology, timeframe, and geographic location.

B - Literature in the visual LR

1. Pennycook, G., & Rand, D. G. (2021). Examining false beliefs about voter fraud in the wake of the 2020 Presidential Election. *The Harvard Kennedy School Misinformation Review*.
2. Clayton, K., Davis, N. T., Nyhan, B., Porter, E., Ryan, T. J., & Wood, T. J. (2020). Does elite rhetoric undermine democratic norms?. In *Proceedings of the National Academy of Science* (Vol. 118, No. 10.1073).
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6. Aguado, N. A. (2022). When charismatic leadership Trumps social networking: Searching for the effects of social media on beliefs of electoral legitimacy. *Politics & Policy*, 50(5), 942-951.
7. Biggers, D. R. (2021). Can the backlash against voter ID laws activate minority voters? Experimental evidence examining voter mobilization through psychological reactance. *Political Behavior*, 43(3), 1161-1179.
8. Kane, J. V., & Wilson, D. C. (2021). Controversy and costs: Investigating the consensus on American voter ID laws. *Political Behavior*, 43, 397-421.
9. Stewart III, C., Ansolabehere, S., & Persily, N. (2016). Revisiting public opinion on voter identification and voter fraud in an era of increasing partisan polarization. *Stanford Law Review*, 68(6), 1455-1489.
10. Bright, C. L., & Lynch, M. S. (2017). Kansas voter ID laws: Advertising and its effects on turnout. *Political Research Quarterly*, 70(2), 340-347.
11. Wilson, D. C., & Brewer, P. R. (2016). Do Frames Emphasizing Harm to Age and Racial-Ethnic Groups Reduce Support for Voter ID Laws?. *Social Science Quarterly*, 97(2), 391-406.
12. Wilson, D. C., & Brewer, P. R. (2013). The foundations of public opinion on voter ID laws: Political predispositions, racial resentment, and information effects. *Public Opinion Quarterly*, 77(4), 962-984.
13. Jenkins, M. D., & Gomez, D. (2022). The effects of journalistic intervention and falsely balanced reporting on support for voter ID law. *Journal of Elections, Public Opinion and Parties*, 1-10.
14. Houck, A. M., King, A. S., & Taylor, J. B. (2021). Updating with others: testing the effect of informational social influence on political attitudes. *Politics & Policy*, 49(1), 87-125.
15. Gronke, P., Hicks, W. D., McKee, S. C., Stewart III, C., & Dunham, J. (2019). Voter ID laws: A view from the public. *Social Science Quarterly*, 100(1), 215-232.
16. Valentino, N. A., & Neuner, F. G. (2017). Why the sky didn't fall: mobilizing anger in reaction to voter ID laws. *Political Psychology*, 38(2), 331-350.
17. Edelson, J., Alduncin, A., Krewson, C., Sieja, J. A., & Uscinski, J. E. (2017). The effect of conspiratorial thinking and motivated reasoning on belief in election fraud. *Political Research Quarterly*, 70(4), 933-946.
18. Wilson, D. C., & Brewer, P. R. (2013). The foundations of public opinion on voter ID laws: Political predispositions, racial resentment, and information effects. *Public Opinion Quarterly*, 77(4), 962-984.
19. Aguado, N. A. (2022). When charismatic leadership Trumps social networking: Searching for the effects of social media on beliefs of electoral legitimacy. *Politics & Policy*, 50(5), 942-951.
20. Alvarez, R. M., Cao, J., & Li, Y. (2021). Voting experiences, perceptions of fraud, and voter confidence. *Social Science Quarterly*, 102(4), 1225-1238.
21. Crawford v. Marion County Election Board. 553 US 181 (2008).
22. Purcell v. Gonzalez, 549 US 1 (2006).
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30. Banks, A. J., & Hicks, H. M. (2016). Fear and implicit racism: Whites' support for voter ID laws. *Political Psychology*, 37(5), 641-658.
31. Wilson, D. C., Brewer, P. R., & Rosenbluth, P. T. (2014). Racial imagery and support for voter ID laws. *Race and Social Problems*, 6, 365-371.
32. Wilson, D. C., & Brewer, P. R. (2013). The foundations of public opinion on voter ID laws: Political predispositions, racial resentment, and information effects. *Public Opinion Quarterly*, 77(4), 962-984.
33. Conover, P. J., & Miller, P. R. (2018). How republicans won on voter identification laws: The roles of strategic reasoning and moral conviction. *Social Science Quarterly*, 99(2), 490-511.
34. Carey, J., Clayton, K., Helmke, G., Nyhan, B., Sanders, M., & Stokes, S. (2022). Who will defend democracy? Evaluating tradeoffs in candidate support among partisan donors and voters. *Journal of Elections, Public Opinion and Parties*, 32(1), 230-245.
35. Kane, J. V. (2017). Why can't we agree on ID? Partisanship, perceptions of fraud, and public support for voter identification laws. *Public Opinion Quarterly*, 81(4), 943-955.
36. Wilson, D. C., & Brewer, P. R. (2013). The foundations of public opinion on voter ID laws: Political predispositions, racial resentment, and information effects. *Public Opinion Quarterly*, 77(4), 962-984.
37. Vail III, K. E., Harvell-Bowman, L., Lockett, M., Pyszczynski, T., & Gilmore, G. (2023). Motivated reasoning: Election integrity beliefs, outcome acceptance, and polarization before, during, and after the 2020 US Presidential Election. *Motivation and Emotion*, 47(2), 177-192.

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1. Heller, A. L. (2021). Public support for electoral reform: The role of electoral system experience. *Electoral Studies*, 72, 102348.
2. Fisher, J., & Sällberg, Y. (2020). Electoral integrity—The winner takes it all? Evidence from three British general elections. *The British Journal of Politics and International Relations*, 22(3), 404-420.
3. Electoral Commission (2021) Public Opinion Tracker 2021. Available at: <https://www.electoralcommission.org.uk/who-we-are-and-what-we-do/our-views-and-research/our-research/public-attitudes>

C - Pre-processing steps

Preprocessing plays a crucial role in the effectiveness of natural language processing (NLP) tasks, serving as the foundational step that enhances the quality and reliability of subsequent analyses. In the context of text data, preprocessing involves a series of techniques designed to clean, structure, and standardise textual information. This is done to ensure that the textual data will lead to meaningful interpretation, by removing noise, irrelevant characters, inconsistencies and reducing the complexity of the data. This stage is critical as decisions regarding how to preprocess textual data can affect the outcome of subsequent analyses. For example, deciding whether to lemmatise or not directly influences the original text's structure, potentially altering linguistic subtleties in the original text. Preprocessing was conducted in Python using the modules pandas, NLTK (Natural Language Toolkit), spaCy, regex, matplotlib, shifterator, and numpy. Key preprocessing steps included tokenisation, lemmatisation, removal of stop words, and addressing issues like spelling variations. The step-by-step process is outlined below:

1. Removing Infrequent Words. Remove words in the main text occurring less than 3 times.
2. Removing Irrelevant Words: Remove specific words from the maintext and title columns. These are words that do not belong to the actual coverage but were picked up when scrapping the articles (for example, ADVERTISEMENT, VIDEO CLIP, BEGIN, etc.).
3. Capitalization Standardization: After removing these words, the corpus was converted to lowercase.
4. Removing Stopwords: Stopwords were removed from a list of predefined English stopwords.
5. Finding and Compounding Bigrams: frequently co-occurring bigrams in the corpus were identified and joined with _.
6. Symbol Removal: Symbols were removed from the corpus, keeping underscores, '@', '.', and '£.'
7. Word Replacement: Top words in the corpus were explored, finding instances of word abbreviations which were replaced with the full word (for example, dem. was converted to democrat).
8. Lemmatization: I apply lemmatization to the corpus using SpaCy and NLTK, preserving certain words like 'media', 'voting' and 'rights', so that these are not changed to medium and right.
9. Creating a Column with Full Stops: In order to run the word embedding analysis, I duplicated the maintext column, and removed fullstops from one of them. The presence of full stops is needed to split the corpus into sentences in the bootstrapping method.

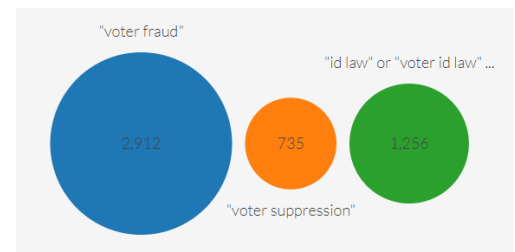
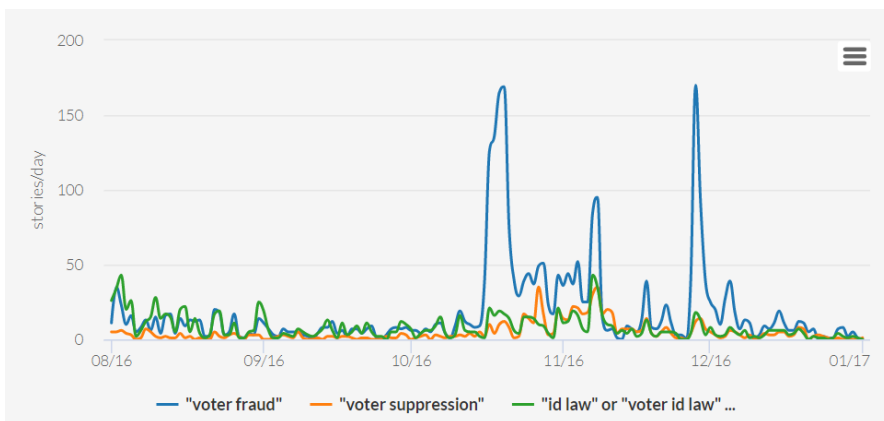
D - Key word selection

The original design of this research involved using “voter fraud” as a search term. However, I moved away from this approach in order to capture articles more critical of voter ID law. Even if “voter suppression” were to be included as another search term, an approach that could be justified as previous literature in the US defines there as the two main frames surrounding the voter ID law debate, the novelty of the research area encouraged me to adopt a more inductive approach, and therefore use more neutral search terms such as words related to the ID laws.

To check on whether this could be a feasible way forward, I used [mediacloud’s](#) ‘Explorer’ option (an open source platform for media analysis to create an instant analysis of how digital news media covers voter fraud, voter suppression and voter ID laws. I selected a sample of coverage during the 2016 US Presidential campaign period (August 1, 2016 - January 1, 2017), in US Top Online News 2017 (Top 32 news websites of the year by August 2017 in the United States, according to data from comScore, Activate and Alexa).

Attention

This chart shows the number of stories that match the queries.



Top Words

I identified the top words used in coverage for three separate search queries: “voter fraud”, “voter suppression” AND voter ID laws (“id law” OR “voter id law” OR “voter id” OR “voter identification” OR “voter-identification”):

The presence of ‘voter ID’ and ‘ID’ as top terms in both the search terms “voter fraud” and “voter suppression” suggested that using voter ID (and variations of it) as a key search term could be a good approach to capture both frames and potentially discover others.

E - Literature Summary on Voter ID and Voter Turnout

Empirical studies on this topic have reached mixed conclusions (Barreto et al., 2019; Pryor, Herrick and David, 2019). Some studies have found evidence that voter ID laws depress turnout for racial and ethnic minority groups (Vercellotti, T., & Anderson, D., 2006; Barreto et al., 2007; Sobel and Smith, 2009; Barreto et al., 2009; Hobby et al., 2015). Others have found little or no evidence of this effect (Alvarez et al., 2008; Mycoff et al., 2009; Alvarez et al., 2011; Hood and Bullock, 2012; Heller et al., 2019). Some argue that even when turnout decreases after the enactment of ID laws, campaigns can help counter their effect and at times increase turnout (for example, Neiheisel and Horner, 2019). Others instead have shown that while campaigns might shift public opinion on the matter, they do not influence voting behaviour (Biggers, 2019). Others that while campaigns might trigger countermobilisation among Democrats, this only lasts for a short period (Valentino and Neuner, 2017: 347). McConville et al. (2018: 2) suggest such conflicting findings are due to limitations in the data. Hajnal, Lajevardi, and Nielson (2017) further suggest that mixed results are due to studies being conducted before many states had passed strict ID laws.

The scholarly debate between Hajnal, Lajevardi, and Nielson (2017), Grimmer et al. (2018), Hajnal, Kuk, and Lajevardi’s (2018) response and Pryor, Herrick and Davis’s (2019) and Burden’s (2018) contributions highlight how, despite most states now having implemented ID laws, reaching definite conclusions about their actual effect on turnout remains a challenge.

Using validated voting data from the Cooperative Congressional Election Study (CCES) Hajnal, Lajevardi, and Nielson (2017) study the impact of the strictest voter ID laws in 2006 through 2014, finding turnout of racial and ethnic minorities disproportionately negatively impacted by strict ID laws. Replicating their analysis, Grimmer et al. (2018) claim their results are actually “a product of data inaccuracies”, finding that alternative models produced different results. Grimmer et al. highlight three additional concerns around the CCES national survey used: (1) its unrepresentative nature of state samples, (2) its general underrepresentation of low socioeconomic status (SES) respondents, and (3) systematic failures of the turnout validation component of the survey. Following this, Grimmer et al. (2018) conclude that no firm inferences can be made from the data. However, as noted by Burden (2018) and addressed by Hajnar et al.’s publication (2018), Grimmer et al.’s analyses

with their suggested solutions support the initial finding that voter ID laws increase the gap in turnout rates between (non-Hispanic) whites and Hispanics. Grimmer et al.'s replicated regression models also find that strict voter ID laws have a disproportionately negative effect on Latinos in general elections and on blacks, Latinos, Asian Americans, and multiracial Americans in primary elections.

Pryor, Herrick and Davis (2019) also replicate Hajnal et al.'s (2017) study and further support these findings. However, when they used CPS data (a representative phone and interview sample) as opposed to the original CCES, the results differed. Instead, they find no relationship between strict voter ID laws and turnout of minority groups. This reinforces McConville et al.'s (2018) above suggestion of looking into limitations in the data to explain the different, at times, contradictory results. Moreover, Burden (2018) highlights an area of concern none of these authors address, which regards differences between midterm and presidential elections. According to Burden (2018: 1061), "all of the analyses pool CCES surveys from 2006 to 2014 without regard for how the kinds of elections included could manifest different effects of voter ID."

Indeed, while these studies have resolved important methodological barriers to studying the effects of voter ID laws on turnout, as Burden claims, "data limitations and oversights of some important aspects of how voter ID operates leave open several central questions" (Burden, 2018: 1063).

Authors Declaration

I declare that, except where explicit reference is made to the contribution of others, that this dissertation is the result of my own work and has not been submitted for any other degree at the University of Glasgow or any other institution.