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# The perspectives of people with intellectual disabilities on their experience of voting in UK general elections

Nicholas Manktelow<sup>1</sup>  | Darren D. Chadwick<sup>2</sup>  | Stephanie Brewster<sup>3</sup>  |  
Liz Tilly<sup>4</sup> 

<sup>1</sup>School of Psychology, Faculty of Education, Health and Wellbeing, The University of Wolverhampton, Wolverhampton, UK

<sup>2</sup>School of Psychology, Faculty of Health, Liverpool John Moores University, Liverpool, UK

<sup>3</sup>School of Education, Faculty of Education, Health and Wellbeing, University of Wolverhampton, Walsall, UK

<sup>4</sup>Building Bridges CCI, Halesowen, UK

## Correspondence

Nicholas Manktelow, School of Psychology, Faculty of Education, Health and Wellbeing, The University of Wolverhampton, Wulfruna St, Wolverhampton WV1 1LY.  
Email: [n.manktelow@wlv.ac.uk](mailto:n.manktelow@wlv.ac.uk)

## Abstract

**Background:** People with intellectual disabilities' voting rate within the United Kingdom remains significantly below the population average despite government enacted voting promotion measures. No published academic literature directly involves people with intellectual disabilities when considering their UK general election experiences – this study aims to address this omission.

**Methods:** Semi-structured interviews were conducted with people with intellectual disabilities ( $N = 20$ ) about their election experiences during the 2017 ( $n = 18$ ) and 2019 ( $n = 8$ ) general elections. Six participants were interviewed around both elections. Data was analysed with template analysis.

**Results:** Eight themes were produced – election information, political knowledge, political opinions, voting choice process, polling station experience, voting outcome, capacity and support. Theme interactions impacted on election experiences.

**Conclusions:** While acknowledging diverse experiences, voting outcomes and experiences were particularly impacted by factor interactions concerning election information and/or polling station accessibility, capacity and support. Voting promotion interventions and future research should consider these areas.

## KEYWORDS

general election, intellectual disability, politics, voting

## 1 | BACKGROUND

'People's right to participate in the conduct of public affairs is a fundamental imperative. Genuine and credible elections remain the most compelling and effective way for people to participate in governance and have their voices heard.' (United Nations, 2021).

Voting is a human right with strong links to other rights, including the right to freedom from discrimination and to freedom of opinion and expression (United Nations, *n.d.*). The UK government has ratified the

United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities 2006 (UNCRPD). Article 29 of this concerns Participation in Political and Public Life, including obligations to promote political involvement. The UK government has responded by issuing guidance and voting promotion measures, currently including assistive technology and assistance in polling stations (The Electoral Commission, 2022).

Academic research consistently reports that people with intellectual disabilities in the United Kingdom vote significantly less than the general population. Such research includes secondary analysis of data collected by social workers through questionnaires and interviews (James, 2016; James et al., 2018), secondary analysis of quantitative

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data from the Intellectual Disability Supplement to the Irish Longitudinal Study on Ageing (McCausland et al., 2018) and the comparison of the register of a local government agency providing/commissioning services for people with intellectual disabilities with the marked electoral roll (Keeley et al., 2008). This is supported by the finding of a national survey concerning adults with intellectual disabilities (Emerson et al., 2005) as well as communications from support organisations (United Response, 2015., McClimens, 2010, Wallis & Hutson, 2005). This is reflective of the global voting trend (Bigby et al., 2019; Friedman & Rizzolo, 2017; Kjellberg & Hemmingsson, 2013; van Hees et al., 2019). This reduced voting rate suggests that government voting promotion measures have not successfully addressed voting barriers.

Some empirical work has considered potential barriers to voting for people with intellectual disabilities. Around the Scottish independence referendum, focus groups involving people with intellectual disabilities (Willis et al., 2016) and records of voting promotion workshops (Hood, 2016) highlighted difficulties obtaining information. Information being too complicated/confusing was suggested within focus groups involving people with intellectual disabilities in the United States (Friedman, 2018), Australia (Bigby et al., 2019) and the UK (Chadwick et al., 2017 – published solely as an easy read-report) as well as in the first-hand account of a person with intellectual disabilities from Ireland co-authoring a paper primarily focused on communication as a human right (Murphy et al., 2017). Poor physical accessibility at polling stations was also cited as a barrier by the USA focus group (Friedman, 2018).

The negative attitudes of those around people with intellectual disabilities are also a potential barrier. Evidence of support staff thinking people with intellectual disabilities lack capacity/understanding to vote was reported in semi-structured interviews with managers of residential and supported living services in the United Kingdom (James, 2016) and a survey of support staff in Australia (Bigby et al., 2019) – this latter survey also reporting support staff as having low expectations of people with intellectual disabilities. Non-empirical academic papers also propose support staff having concerns around people with intellectual disabilities' capacity/understanding (Redley, 2008) and thinking they are unable to make a choice (Bell et al., 2001).

People with intellectual disabilities in the United Kingdom have been reported to regard voting as important and to be interested in this (Bradford Talking Media, 2014, 2017, 2019a, 2019b; Capability Scotland, 2010; Mencap, 2019). Despite this interest, there has been limited voting research directly involving people with intellectual disabilities. Globally, people with intellectual disabilities have been involved in interviews conducted by Kjellberg and Hemmingsson (2013) in Sweden and focus groups conducted by Friedman (2018, 2019) plus semi-structured interviews conducted by Agran et al. (2016) in the United States. In the United Kingdom, Willis et al. (2016) reported on focus groups concerning the Scottish Independence referendum and Chadwick et al. (2017) published an easy-read report about focus groups and interviews concerning the 2015 general election.

Directly involving people with intellectual disabilities in research concerning their UK general election experiences is important to address this gap in current knowledge. Through gathering their views there is the potential to identify perceived barriers/

challenges to voting, which could inform voting promotion recommendations.

There may be some differences in the data obtained (e.g., interviews may be shorter and less detailed) but there is literature specifically concerned with interviewing people with intellectual disabilities available to guide such research (Perry, 2004; Prosser & Bromley, 1998) and previous voting research involving people with intellectual disabilities (Agran et al., 2016; Friedman, 2018; Friedman, 2019; Kjellberg & Hemmingsson, 2013; Willis et al., 2016) demonstrates that meaningful engagement is possible.

This research sought to address the question: What are people with intellectual disabilities' perspective of their own general election experiences? Sub-questions for the research focussed on:

- i. experiences of voting,
- ii. what voting support was received
- iii. what people would like to see the new government do to improve their lives.

Due to the paucity of prior research involving people with intellectual disabilities in the United Kingdom, this study adopted an exploratory design and no specific research hypotheses were formulated.

## 2 | METHODS

Semi-structured interviews with people with intellectual disabilities were conducted around the 2017 and 2019 UK general elections.

### 2.1 | Approach

This research adapts a contextual constructivist (Madill et al., 2000) epistemology. It does not reject an objective reality, but accepts the validity of multiple interpretations and acknowledges the role of the data collection/analysis context (Burningham & Cooper, 1999). For example, if an interview participant raised their voice, then it is an objective reality that this happened. However, this could be interpreted in multiple ways, for example, anger, emphasis, excitement. The researcher's views of the specific situation and life experiences determined how the meaning of raising a voice was interpreted. Consequently, reflection on alternate interpretations was conducted during analysis.

### 2.2 | Ethics

The research adhered to the BPS Code of Human Research Ethics (The British Psychological Society, 2021). Ethical approval was received from The University of Wolverhampton Faculty Ethics Committee for Health, Psychology, Social Care, Social Work and Public Health. Ethical issues are detailed in Table 1.

**TABLE 1** Potential ethical issues and control measures.

Ethical concern	How this was mitigated in the study
Informed consent	The interviewer verbally went through an Information Sheet with participants detailing what the research was about, what participating would involve, confidentiality, anonymity, safeguarding, researchers' contact details, making a complaint, withdrawing and what would happen afterwards. Participants were encouraged to ask questions. The option was given to involve somebody known to them, for example, organisation staff.
Confidentiality	Information that could identify participants (audio recordings, transcripts, and consent forms) was only available to the research team on a need-to-know basis. Participants were made aware that safeguarding requirements obliged the researchers to report any suspicion of abuse or harm to the relevant bodies (e.g., safeguarding boards).
Anonymity	Participants numbers were used rather than identifiable names/initials and any potentially identifiable information (e.g., locations, names of organisations) was altered during transcription. Demographic data of participants was not collected as there was too high chance of making them identifiable due to the small sample size
Data storage	Hard copy data (consent forms) was stored in a locked filing cabinet and electronic data (audio recordings, transcripts) in password protected files on a password protected computer. Data disposal procedures accorded with university guidelines.
Emotional harm	Participants were made aware they could stop participating at any point without giving a reason. The interviewer was vigilant to signs of distress from participants and used their judgement to change topics or pause the interview and check with the participant whether they wished to continue.

## 2.3 | Participants

A purposive non-probability sample was recruited from two organisations for people with intellectual disabilities that University of Wolverhampton staff had pre-existing links with.

Organisation A was a weekly employment skills workshop. Organisation B was a weekly group encouraging socialising alongside learning skills. Organisation A was from a substantially less affluent area than organisation B, as measured by Index of Multiple Deprivation data (Ministry of Housing, Communities, & Local Government, 2015, 2019).

Inclusion criteria were being adults, identifying as having an intellectual disability and having sufficient English language skills to participate in interviews. The interviewer considered the latter when discussing the information sheet/consent form; nobody was excluded on this basis.

Recruitment occurred around UK general elections in 2017 and 2019. Eighteen participants were interviewed in 2017. This was a

**TABLE 2** Interview script sections and question examples.

Section	Question examples
Opening	What has been your experience of the 2017/2019 general election?
2017/2019 election experiences	Do you intend to/did you vote? Have you seen/did you see any of the campaigning?
Support received	What support have you received voting at the 2019 General Election? How were you offered this support?
Support desires	What things do you think support staff should be doing for people with disabilities to support them to vote/understand politics?
Support received from people other than support staff	Have you received any help with voting from people other than support staff? Would you have liked other people to be involved?
Desires from the next government	If you were prime minister now – what changes would you make?

'snap' election – announced unexpectedly with 7 weeks' notice. Consequently, by the time this research was set-up, interviews occurred later after the election than ideal. Reflections post-data collection also considered that multiple interviews could have extended overall interview lengths, which were relatively short (range = 6 min 52 s–20 min 53 s,  $M = 13$  min 52 s,  $SD = 4$  min 4 s). However, interviews with people with intellectual disabilities may be shorter than typical due to shorter answers and the situation's unfamiliarity (Perry, 2004; Prosser & Bromley, 1998) and interview lengths were still comparable to similar published research interviewing people with intellectual disabilities about voting (Agran et al., 2016).

Another 'snap' general election in 2019 presented the opportunity of addressing these potential limitations, as research set-up was minimal. This allowed for multiple interviews to be conducted much closer to the election to give longer cumulative length (range 9 min 56 s – 40 min 6 s,  $M = 20$  min 56 s,  $SD = 10$  min 8 s). Eight participants were interviewed in 2019. Six of these were the same participants as in 2017, meaning that 20 different participants were interviewed across both years.

## 2.4 | Procedure

Research documents, including a recruitment letter, were shared with organisations. The researcher attended the organisation's workshops/sessions to explain the research and answer questions. Potential participants met individually with the researcher. The researcher verbally went through the Participant Information and Informed Consent Forms – which were in an easy-read, accessible format – and invited questions. If participants agreed to be involved, they signed the Informed Consent Form.

Interviews were audio recorded. An interview schedule guided conversation; details of sections are given in Table 2. Sections

included introductory, follow up and sub-questions to use as appropriate. A debrief sheet guided debriefing, including confirming consent for data to be used. Recruitment of new participants (2017 and 2019) and further interviews with existing participants (2019) ended when it was judged that no new data was being obtained.

## 2.5 | Transcription

Recordings were transcribed verbatim using Jefferson notation system (Woofit, 2005, pp. 211–212). Notation impacting meaning (e.g., pauses, emphasis) was retained and those not (e.g., stretched letter sounds, out-breaths) were removed. Transcription progressed through six (2017) and three (2019) stages, with the level of detail progressively increasing. This built familiarity with the data (Davidson, 2009; Halcomb & Davidson, 2006; ten Have, 2007) and helped control for errors through repeated consideration (ten Have, 2007).

## 2.6 | Analysis

Transcripts were analysed using template analysis (King, 2012). This thematic analysis type was most suitable because of its flexible theme and theme structure conceptualisation approach (Brooks et al., 2015; King, 2004, p. 256). Template analysis involved four stages (King, 2004, pp. 259–268):

### 2.6.1 | A-priori coding consideration

The author was conducting a literature review (Manktelow et al., 2023) concurrently with data analysis. Consequently, although there was insufficient relevant literature to base research hypotheses upon, it was decided to formalise reflexivity around the impact of this context upon analysis by recording a-priori themes – expectations of what themes would occur. Five a-priori themes were proposed. After analysis, one a-priori theme was retained, one discarded and three altered but still included as sub-themes.

### 2.6.2 | Initial template creation

Transcripts were coded using NVivo. With the 2017 data, four transcripts were selected. To reduce later changes, these transcripts were purposefully selected to contain data variety (what organisations participants were from, whether they voted, whether they had support to vote and whether they had voted previously). Each transcript was coded, resulting in four code lists. Coding used the deductive a-priori codes as well as new inductive codes derived from the transcripts. An initial template was constructed based on the similarity of codes between lists, as well as the frequency of codes between/within lists (King, 1998).

### 2.6.3 | Revising the template across multiple coding rounds

Progressively more transcripts were considered over a further five rounds. In each round, all included transcripts were coded/recoded using the most recent template. All data was coded at least twice (King, 2004, p. 263). Any new/changed coding was noted, along with observations about potential template restructuring. Templates were updated after each round through insertion, deletion, changing scope and changing higher-order classification (King, 2004, pp. 261–263). From the third template, maps were created visually representing themes/theme interactions. From the fourth template, it was systematically considered how each sub-theme coded only once/twice could be merged into others – allowing for recorded justifications where low frequency coding was retained.

An audit trail was maintained detailing all changes and the justifications for these, creating a clear record of changes between template versions. A reflections record was also maintained, including consideration of the researcher's position within analysis, for example, how expectations, prior knowledge and personal views were impacting interpretation and what other interpretations could be considered.

### 2.6.4 | Accepting a final template

After six rounds, no substantial template changes occurred. The research team reviewed the template and regarded it as credible. Consequently, the template was accepted as final.

### 2.6.5 | 2019

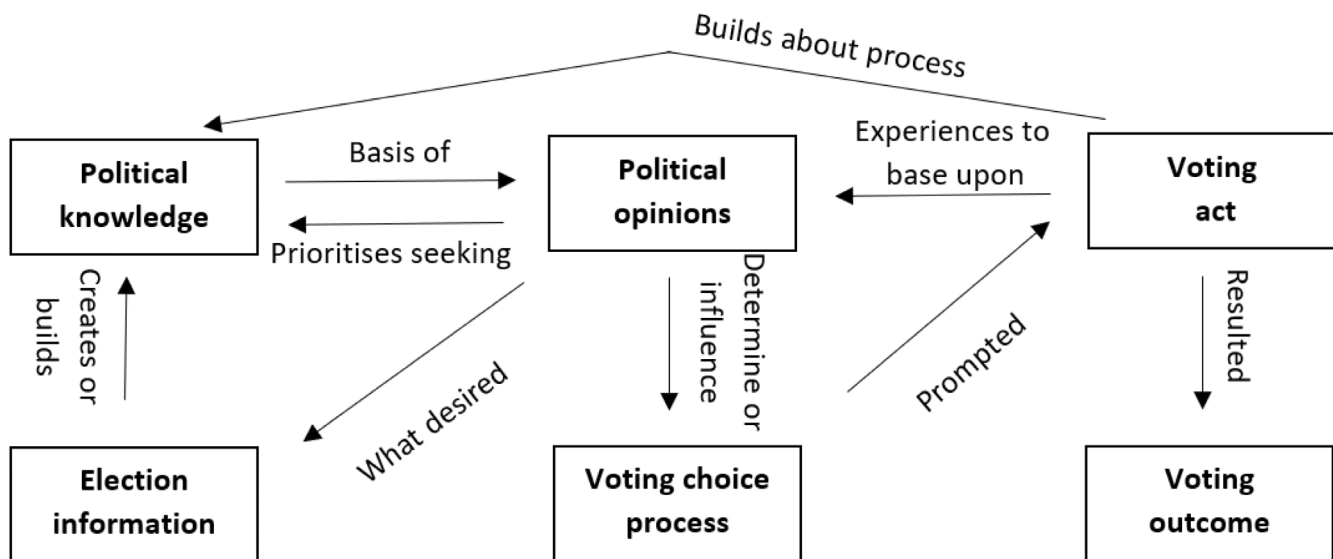
The 2017 template was applied to the 2019 data. The template was modified in the same ways described above – there were lower-level sub-theme changes (e.g., new types of election information) but no changes to higher-level themes or interactions. This fit to new data is strong evidence of the template's credibility.

## 3 | RESULTS

Template analysis (King, 2012) produced eight themes – election information, political knowledge, political opinions, voting choice process, voting act, voting outcome, capacity and support.

Theme interactions are illustrated in Figure 1. Capacity and Support had strong interactions with all other themes and will be considered separately.

An initial intuitive chronological process was evident within these themes-participants' election experiences started with election information, which created/built political knowledge, which is what political opinions were based on, which determined/influenced the voting choice process, which prompted the voting act, which resulted in the voting outcome. Not all themes needed to be experienced, for



**FIGURE 1** Theme interactions.

example, someone voting based on habit may not have experienced election information or someone actively choosing not to vote may have skipped the voting act.

Further analysis of interactions between themes revealed some more complex bidirectional and iterative relationships between themes. Political opinion impacted on engagement with election information, for example, choosing not to receive information from parties regarded negatively. Political opinion also impacted on how political knowledge was prioritised, for example, interest in healthcare policy leading to building political knowledge about this. Voting act impacted on political knowledge by building knowledge about this process. Similarly, it developed political opinions through providing experiences to base opinions on, for example, a positive/uneventful voting act resulting in a positive opinion of the political process.

In the next section, impactful points within themes are examined in more detail and illustrated with quotes.

### 3.1 | Election information

Participants received information from the media and from political parties. TV was the most common media source, with the news, manifesto segments, radio, reading, post, the internet, newspapers, results coverage, and social media also mentioned. Leaflets were the most common political party source, with meeting MPs, manifestos, banners, posters, phone calls, street campaigning, contacting MPs and door knocking also mentioned.

Almost all participants encountered election information unintentionally while going about their regular lives:

**Participant:** I've seen plenty of the campaigns on the TV  
2017 – Participant 7

**Participant:** I find it out...by watching the news...it's just something that's on  
2019 – Participant 1

Some participants also actively sought information:

**Participant:** if I missed them I look on the iplayer ain't it  
2017 – Participant 2

**Participant:** I looked on the internet like through papers and talked to people  
2019 – Participant 2

### 3.2 | Policy knowledge and opinions

Participants demonstrated knowledge of a wide spectrum of policy areas. Half of participants expressed typically brief positive opinions of policy areas, for example, 'good'. These concerned healthcare, leaving the EU (both pro/anti), immigration, environment, social support, employment and equality.

All but one participant expressed negative opinions of policy areas, most commonly about social support policies:

**Participant:** ...if people could get more support because, I mean, there is a lot of cutbacks as I said earlier on and its always vulnerable people who suffer  
2017 – Participant 1

**Participant:** in to your pocket one minute then out of your pocket the next minute

**Interviewer:** so it's costing you money?

**Participant:** yeah, cause I'm Supported Living I have to pay it  
2019 – Participant 7

Other negative opinions were given of policy concerning equality, healthcare, benefits, employment, immigration, leaving the EU, transport, terrorism, council tax, bills, cleaning public areas, crime, economy, education, emergency services, environment, foreign aid, foreign policy, law and order, prescriptions, price of products and roads/parking. Most negative policy opinions were discussed alongside the desire for these to change, that this was how the incoming government could improve their lives.

**Participant:** I would give the NHS the, you know, the money they deserve, cause like they are still pressed to breaking point  
2017 – Participant 7

**Participant:** ...and it's bad that, the train...speed train...

**Interviewer:** oh the...HS2? (*new train route being built*)

**Participant:** yeah it's just going to spoil the wildlife  
2019 – Participant 5

Just over a quarter of participants focused on spending cuts within policy areas, most commonly concerning social support. Reversing cuts was seen as a way governments could improve participants' lives:

**Participant:** more help with...mental health, like you know cause all of the services have been cut right down to the bone  
2019 – Participant 5

### 3.3 | Reasons for voting

Most voting decisions were based on opinions of policies or political parties:

**Participant:** Cause I did choose Conservative cause I think it would make economy better  
2017 – Participant 16

**Interviewer:** ...and you were sort of saying maybe Labour but not 100%?

**Participant:** yeah because I think they kind of present themselves more...I think the other parties seemed a bit too desperate  
2019 – Participant 1

Less common reasons for voting included always voting for the same party, speaking to family, friends or support staff and for reasons linked to human rights and advocacy goals:

**Participant:** I always vote for Labour  
2019 – Participant 5

**Participant:** to make changes...that's how elections are all about ain't it, to make changes for Britain and what people want  
2017 – Participant 2

### 3.4 | Reasons for not voting

A few participants actively chose not to vote whereas others lacked something they needed to be able to vote. Choices not to vote were based on politicians lying, there being too many elections, political systems preventing change and not being interested:

**Participant:** they say they're going to change something in order to gain power and then they forget what they said  
2017 – Participant 18

Things that participants lacked that they required to vote included not understanding the choice so deciding not to vote, forgetting to register, not knowing what an election was and lacking the support staff who had previously assisted them:

**Participant:** I did try but I had no idea who to pick so I just walked out...didn't have time to understand...  
2017 – Participant 1

**Interviewer:** has anybody every spoken to you about that?

**Participant:** nah I dunno

**Interviewer:** so I'm guessing you didn't vote?...

**Participant:** I don't know if I have  
2017 – Participant 6

### 3.5 | Voting accessibility

Accessibility issues were raised concerning accessing election information, polling stations and the political process.

Election information was consistently criticised by over half of participants, being seen as confusing, unhelpful, untrustworthy, biased, uninteresting, hard to remember, being overly focused on criticising other parties/politicians, using jargon and being in difficult

formats. There were also difficulties finding election information, including being nervous talking to candidates and finding large quantities of information difficult to access, comprehend and remember:

**Participant:** coming up that quick you can't catch what they're saying  
2017 – Participant 5

**Participant:** I found it hard to understand really... I wish it was put down into bite size for learning disability people, it's really too hard, physically reading through  
2019 – Participant 8

Polling stations were criticised for being busy, confusing and that polling card directions were unclear:

**Participant:** it was a bit busy...I got a bit confused  
2017 – Participant 13

Criticisms were made of the political process for being complicated and of the unusual frequency/timing of elections, in particular the 2019 election which unusually occurred in Winter:

**Participant:** well it's Christmas it shouldn't really be happening...we just want to relax not have an election  
2019 – Participant 7

Some participants related negative emotional responses – that the political process made them feel scared, unwelcome and bored and that polling stations made them feel nervous, anxious, awkward and frightened:

**Participant:** found it quite frightening really  
2017 – Participant 1

**Participant:** I was a bit nervous going in cause I don't know the layout of the place  
2019 – Participant 2

### 3.6 | Voting outcomes

Ten participants voted in 2017. In 2019 three participants voted and four reported that they intended to vote (these latter participants were not interviewed after the election). A pair of those who did not vote in 2017 had voted previously and had intended to again:

**Participant:** I went down to the *location name* council saying I want to vote, and they says you can't because you forgot to send the form back  
2017 – Participant 12

**Participant:** I had a really bad cold...I just didn't feel like moving at all  
2017 – Participant 17

In 2017, all but one participant who voted had done so previously and half of those who did not vote had never voted. Contrastingly, in 2019 all eight participants had voted previously. Of the six participants interviewed around both election, three voted both times, one made an active choice not to vote both times but had voted previously, one intended to vote in 2017 but did not due to illness then did vote in 2019 and one made an active choice not to vote in 2017 due to disliking the system then did vote in 2019.

### 3.7 | Integrative themes

Capacity and Support were integrative themes. While the non-integrative themes previously described are reasonably self-contained clusters of codes, integrative themes 'pervade much of the data, cross-cutting many or all of the other thematic clusters' (King, 2012, p. 432). Brooks et al. (2015, p. 204) describe integrative themes as tending 'to infuse much of the discussion whatever the foreground issue'. They are distinguished to highlight this important difference in interaction – by their strong interactions with all other themes Capacity and Support had a large impact on overall election experiences.

### 3.8 | Capacity

This concerned capacity to engage with the voting process and was divided into subthemes of understanding, remembering and not knowing. Interactions were coded through links to other themes, for example, remembering election information, not knowing political knowledge. There were also reciprocal interactions, for example, complex election information resulting in not understanding. Understanding/remembering vs. not understanding/forgetting were not mutually exclusive – participants were coded to both within the same theme and this could change throughout the interview. Not understanding and forgetting, despite being substantially less common than understanding and remembering, could have a large impact on election experiences, for example, forgetting to register to vote could result in not voting despite desiring to. Not knowing was more common than not understanding/forgetting but less common than understanding/remembering.

A few participants did not know how to express/articulate information it was implied they understood:

**Participant:** if I do it I do it but if I don't do it...but it be very hard for me to explain  
2017 - Participant 5

### 3.9 | Support

Most participants discussed receiving support, including election information assistance, polling station assistance, voting choice assistance, voting promotion support, postal voting information and registration form assistance. It was common for participants to receive multiple types of support, with over half of those receiving support received three different types.

Election information assistance was the most common type; this included verbal explanations, clarifications, breaking down complicated information and/or help finding information:

**Participant:** luckily I got family who can explain it to me  
2019 – Participant 7

The next most common support type was polling station assistance. All these participants were accompanied to the polling station, with other supportive actions including being physically supported to complete their ballot, being reminded who to vote for, practising using a model ballot and being assisted finding the location using Google maps:

**Participant:** she showed me the card and she explained it to me...and then I made a copy  
2017 – Participant 11

**Participant:** my husband he knows how to do it, google maps...better than me  
2019 – Participant 7

Less common support types included voting choice assistance (typically advice from family and friends), voting promotion support (including families encouraging voting and attending a voting promotion meeting) and verbal explanations concerning postal voting and registration forms:

**Participant:** they went through which ones...which parties would make the best leaders  
2017 – Participant 7

All different support types interacted with all themes, for example, election information assistance resulting in an increase in political knowledge and forming a political opinion. There were also reciprocal interactions, for example, participants' holding the political opinion that voting is pointless resulting in them declining support.

Support came from both informal and formal sources. Most commonly these were family/parents and advocacy group staff respectively. Half of participants receiving support got this from both informal and formal sources. Over half of participants receiving support described potential support sources they could utilise if the person/people currently supporting them were unavailable. Most described formal people (most commonly support workers), with some mentioning informal people. Notably, more participants had support

workers available but unneeded (due to receiving informal support) than were supported by support workers:

**Participant:** I sometimes go with me Mum and Dad if they are with me, if they aren't with me then I go with people like *supporter's name*  
2019 – Participant 3

**Interviewer:** if there was something you wanted that she couldn't provide...what would you do?

**Participant:** I would go to like my social worker or my key worker or friends  
2017 – Participant 13

### 3.10 | No support

Over half of participants discussed not receiving support. This included an almost equal mixture of participants who did not require specific types of support while still receiving other types of support and participants who did not require *any* support – all but one of this latter group voted. Whereas most of these participants declined support due to not needing it to vote, one participant actively declined support as they did not want to vote (they had voted previously with support). A few participants reflected on not desiring support, including being aware they could get support, having never desired support and having more time to think without the pressure of somebody being with them:

**Interviewer:** when you get to the polling station do you need any help?

**Participant:** no

**Interviewer:** no? just easy?

**Participant:** just easy to do it is  
2017 – Participant 16

In 2017, a pair of participants reported not being offered support. While one of these was not interested in voting, the other did not know an election had occurred and was provisionally interested after discussing this. A further participant gave the removal of their support worker, who had previously assisted them, as the reason they did not vote.

### 3.11 | Effectiveness

Almost all participants who received support positively evaluated this. A few participants regarded support as important because without it they would not have voted/understood election information. Some participants focused on positive attributes of the individual, including

knowing them well, them being politically knowledgeable or anticipating support requirements:

**Participant:** and he knows more and more information what's going on  
2017 – Participant 5

**Participant:** he knew how to word things so that I could understand better  
2019 – Participant 2

A few participants in 2017 made negative evaluations, including there being too much information, still being unable to understand information, and having issues arranging meeting politicians:

**Participant:** I didn't understand it cause there was so much going on I've no idea what they're talking about  
2017 – Participant 1

## 4 | DISCUSSION

This research represents the perspective of people with intellectual disabilities about their own UK general election experiences within the academic literature for the first time, building on previous academic research which does so beyond the UK (Agran et al., 2016; Friedman, 2018; Friedman, 2019; Kjellberg & Hemmingsson, 2013) and considering the Scottish Independence referendum (Willis et al., 2016).

Analysis resulted in eight themes. Diverse participant experiences should be acknowledged, for example, voting without any support, or encountering any problems. However, election information and polling stations' accessibility, plus the interaction of capacity and support with all other themes had a persistent impact on election experiences, including whether people voted.

Acknowledging that people with intellectual disabilities have wide-ranging political interests is relatively new (McNeish et al., 2016); this research adds to the literature demonstrating this (Bradford Talking Media, 2014, 2017, 2019a, 2019b; Capability Scotland, 2010; Mencap, 2019).

While there were some positive evaluations of election information, accessibility concerns were raised around finding information and its content. Concerns were also raised around polling stations being busy and confusing. This complements research proposing accessibility issues as a barrier to voting (Friedman, 2018; Hood, 2016; Willis et al., 2016). This suggests the UK government is not currently meeting its UNCRPD commitments to ensure voting access and suggests that the media and political parties need to focus more on making their election information accessible.

### 4.1 | Capacity

Capacity is a persistent concern within the literature (James, 2016; Redley, 2008; Willis et al., 2016). Capacity's sub-themes of

understanding, remembering and not knowing fundamentally change theme interactions, for example, an election flyer not being understood, forgotten or having never been read are distinct experiences. This challenges the negative interpretation that lacking capacity is analogous with lacking understanding. Voting restrictions based on assertions that people lack capacity are further challenged by instances of fluidity, for example, remembering after discussion or not knowing until discussion.

Not Knowing is particularly important. People with intellectual disabilities may have or be afforded less access to election information (Hood, 2016; Willis et al., 2016) and be more socially isolated (Emerson et al., 2005; Malli et al., 2018). Consequently, it is unsurprising that they may know less. However, this does not indicate how much they could potentially know.

There is an important link between this potential to know and the support theme. There are evident links between not knowing, forgetting, and not understanding with both negative election experiences and not voting. The supportive actions within the support theme aim to alter these capacity states to remembering and understanding, which are more likely to be linked with positive election experiences. This clearly shows the opportunities presented by support, the importance of considering how this is best enacted and the negative consequences of lacking support.

### 4.2 | Support

Participants were offered/received support across a variety of areas from both formal and informal people. Support was frequently positively evaluated, including that participants would not have been able to vote without this. One participant cited lacking support as the reason they did not vote. Support has a clear and important impact on election experience, including voting outcome. Understanding what makes support effective or not has clear implications for voting promotion interventions.

The quantity and availability of voting support links to social support, with people with intellectual disabilities generally being more socially isolated than the wider population (Emerson et al., 2005; Malli et al., 2018; Shessel & Reiff, 1999). More positively, almost half of participants described people who could have provided support but did not because someone else was already doing this. It could be hypothesised that the extent/reach of social networks impacts on political experiences, for example, the non-voting participant who cited lacking support may have voted if they were less socially isolated. Speculatively, the lack of social isolation evident through attending the organisations from which participants were recruited may go some way to explaining the higher than typical voting rates.

Defining 'support' is problematic, an illustrative example being accounts of people accompanying participants to polling stations and not providing explicit support (e.g., assistance marking ballots) but just being present being regarded as supportive. The lack of a consistent support definition means the same actions can be understood differently, for example, verbal explanations of election information could be seen as evidence of reliance on others and a lack of capacity or as

evidence of autonomy and interest in elections. More understanding of how people construct support ideas, and potentially what factors (attitudes, experiences) influence such ideas, is needed to know how these impact on election support.

### 4.3 | Quality limitations

Despite efforts from organisations to provide interview settings that were quiet, private and free from distractions (e.g., separate rooms) there were still distractions/interruptions in 16 interviews. Furthermore, four of the interviews in 2019 were interrupted by recorder errors, requiring restarting. While there was no perceived difference in data richness during analysis between interviews with/without interruptions, this quality shortcoming should be acknowledged.

Interviews were shorter than typical semi-structured interviews. As noted, this is not untypical of interviews with people with intellectual disabilities (Perry, 2004; Prosser & Bromley, 1998) and the lengths obtained were comparable to similar published research (Agran et al., 2016). The multiple interview design in 2019 aimed to consider whether interview length impacted the analysis; the template was still valid for longer interviews.

2017 data collection occurred later than was ideal due to the 'snap' election. While the validity of the 2017 template was confirmed by the 2019 data (collected closer to that election), 2017 data quality was potentially limited by forgetting – although the common assertion that people with intellectual disabilities have particularly impaired long-term memory is challenged as oversimplistic and reductive, with factors like verbal IQ (Morales et al., 2017) and intellectual disability type (Vicari et al., 2016) shown to influence individual memory performance.

An organisation staff member contributed during three interviews, potentially impacting participants' responses by offering suggestions/reminders. Quality could have been increased through formalising plans for supportive people contributing during interviews, for example, scripted/guided pre-interview conversation and planned responses, for example, what specifically to say if they made suggestions.

### 4.4 | Recommendations and future research

Recommendations derived from the findings include:

- Those providing support should consider a wide breadth of support types (including less practical/explicitly supportive actions e.g., being present at polling stations) and that people may benefit from multiple support types.
- Those providing support should know the person well.
- Formal support organisations should routinely consider voting when planning support, to avoid negative consequences of lacking support (e.g., not voting while desiring to).
- The media and political parties need to improve their election information's accessibility – making this simpler, shorter, more

trustworthy/unbiased, easier to remember, not including jargon and being easily available in different formats.

Several routes for future research are evident. A finer focus on accessibility would be useful – particularly how to address this potential voting barrier. More finely focused analysis of sub-themes generally could prove insightful, for example, why political information was helpful or not. Considering the important link between not understanding, forgetting and not knowing and negative election experiences, a better understanding of how these emerge within themes and how these can be altered could have a meaningful impact on designing voting promotion interventions. The important role of support makes it a clear priority for future research, including understanding what makes it effective or impedes it. Further research concerning the impact of the extent/depth of social networks could also provide insightful.

Speculatively, the relatively high voting rates amongst the sample of participants could reflect participants' membership of self-advocacy groups and the lack of more severe/complex needs. It would be worthwhile to consider experiences beyond self-advocacy groups and/or with people with more severe/complex needs. Additionally, the demographic makeup of participants, while not collected due to anonymity concerns, was observed by the researcher to be of predominantly white ethnicity, lacking participants aged in their 20s and 60+ and including slightly more female than male participants. Varying demographic characteristics could allow for incorporation of political psychology literature around gender, social status, and race (Beauregard, 2014; Dalton, 2017; Leighley & Nagler, 2013). How such factors interact with intellectual disability to create overall voting experience would be an insightful long-term research focus.

## 5 | CONCLUSION

Representing the perspectives of people with intellectual disabilities about their own UK general election experiences within the academic literature for the first time has resulted in greater understanding of these experiences. The themes emerging from analysis of their accounts suggest potential reasons for negative election experiences and reduced voting rates – including around accessibility and the way capacity and support interact with all aspects of election experiences. Voting promotion interventions and future research should consider these areas to enable people with intellectual disabilities to have more positive election experiences.

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### CONFLICT OF INTEREST STATEMENT

No conflicts of interest were identified by the authors.

## DATA AVAILABILITY STATEMENT

Research data are not shared.

## ORCID

Nicholas Manktelow  <https://orcid.org/0000-0001-6304-5183>

Darren D. Chadwick  <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-4963-0973>

Stephanie Brewster  <https://orcid.org/0000-0001-6853-1551>

Liz Tilly  <https://orcid.org/0000-0001-9977-5567>

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