

Local Elections 2006:  
Report to the Electoral Commission

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In 2006 local council elections were held for 176 authorities, mainly across urban England (there were no elections in Scotland and Wales). There were whole council elections in 32 London boroughs (three of which also held mayoral elections), which saw contests for 1,861 seats. Elsewhere, in 36 metropolitan boroughs, 20 unitary councils and 88 shire district councils, about a third of all seats were contested at this stage of the electoral cycle. Although this involved elections for over four thousand seats in more than three thousand wards this was not a busy year – only one in five council seats countrywide were at stake. However, because the elections were concentrated in urban areas some 21.7 million electors, 58% of the English electorate, had the opportunity to vote.

Establishing prior electoral benchmarks was difficult because the baseline comparison year was different for different authorities. For most the baseline year was 2002, reflecting the fact that councillors are normally elected for a four-year term. In that year, Labour performed relatively well and the scope for losses in 2006 was large. For more than fifty authorities, however, the baseline year was 2004, because ward boundary changes had interrupted the normal local electoral cycle.

This paper focuses on aspects of the 2006 local election results. The opening section provides an overview, assessing what the results mean for the current state of parties in local government and the dynamics of party competition. In the second section the outcomes in various types of local authority are considered in more detail, particularly the distribution of votes and seats. The third section focuses on candidate characteristics while the fourth addresses issues on turnout. A brief fifth section considers the results of mayoral elections.

### **Gainers and Losers**

The Conservatives made net gains of 320 seats and Labour a net loss of 350 seats. Labour lost majority control in 18 of its 46 councils. The Liberal Democrats recorded a very modest gain in seats and lower than that made by the Green party. There was a small decline in seats for Independents but this was more than compensated by a rise for smaller parties, including the British National Party (BNP).

Table 1 gives the overall state of the parties following the 2006 elections. The Conservatives are now ahead of Labour and the Liberal Democrats as the largest party in local government, both of council seats and councils controlled.

**Table 1: State of the Parties in Local Government, 2006.**

	<i>Councillors</i>					
	<b>Con</b>	<b>Lab</b>	<b>LD</b>	<b>Ind/Other</b>	<b>Nats</b>	
London Bors.	784	685	318	74	-	
Metropolitan Bors.	550	1,174	583	136	-	
Unitary Councils	805	768	655	176	-	
Shire Counties	1,147	575	469	78	-	
Shire Districts	4,972	1,998	2,375	1,223	-	
England (total)	8,258	5,200	4,400	1,687	-	
Scotland	126	497	175	234	190	
Wales	111	479	148	352	174	
GB	8,495	6,176	4,723	2,273	364	

  

	<i>Councils</i>					
	<b>Con</b>	<b>Lab</b>	<b>LD</b>	<b>Ind/Other</b>	<b>Nats</b>	<b>NOC</b>
London Bors.	14	7	3	0	-	8
Metropolitan Bors.	5	15	3	0	-	13
Unitary Councils	12	8	4	0	-	22
Shire Counties	23	6	3	0	-	2
Shire Districts	114	18	19	5	-	82
England (total)	168	54	32	5	-	
Scotland	0	13	1	6	1	11
Wales	1	8	0	3	1	9
GB	169	75	33	14	2	147

The London results provided the best outcome for the Conservatives. In these boroughs the party made 185 gains, three-quarters of which came from Labour and the remainder mostly from the Liberal Democrats. These were partly offset by losses, including 40 seats lost to the Liberal Democrats, bringing the Conservatives a net gain of 130 seats. The party gained control of four councils from Labour (Bexley, Croydon, Ealing, Hammersmith & Fulham) and a further three from no overall control (Harrow, Havering, Hillingdon). This takes the number of Conservative controlled boroughs in the capital from eight to fourteen. It would have been fifteen had not the Conservative administration in Richmond on Thames been defeated by the Liberal Democrats.

The Labour party made net losses of 177 seats across London. More than half of these net losses, 126 seats, fell to the Conservatives. Labour lost roughly one in five

of its seats and majority control of Brent, Camden, Hounslow, Lewisham and Merton, although there was the small compensation of re-gaining majority control in Lambeth.

While the Liberal Democrats gained 40 seats from the Conservatives it lost 45 in return. It gained 61 seats from Labour but lost 46 in exchange. It was a similar story for council control: the gain of Richmond was cancelled by the loss of Islington. The net gain of just nine seats for the Liberal Democrats was actually two fewer than the number made by the Greens (all from Labour) and fewer than the gain of 25 seats by 'others', most notably the BNP.

Outside London, however, Conservative progress was sporadic where it averaged less than two seats gained per council. Most gains were made in the shire districts. Only Coventry was added to the Conservative tally among the metropolitan boroughs. There are still no Conservative councillors in Liverpool, Manchester and also Newcastle where the party's vote fell five percentage points. There are no Conservative councillors currently in either of the university cities of Oxford or Cambridge. But the party won control in Bassetlaw, Nottinghamshire and Mole Valley, Surrey for the first time. A decade ago there were no Conservative councillors at all in Hastings but the party now forms the local administration.

Labour lost control of such authorities as Bury, Derby (which it had recently re-taken after a by-election victory), Plymouth (which it has since re-gained following a by-election), Stoke on Trent (re-gained in 2004 and now lost again) and Warrington. It only narrowly avoided defeat in Oldham. Gaining two councils from no overall control (South Lakeland and St. Albans) but losing two (Islington and Milton Keynes) aptly characterised the Liberal Democrats' election performance.

### **Votes, seats and party competition**

Almost eight million votes were cast with one in three of those going to the Conservatives whose candidates contested the most seats (Table 2). Despite elections in largely urban areas, Labour finished half a million votes behind. The Liberal Democrats with fewer candidates received one in four votes. The combined vote

**Table 2: Local elections results by type of authority**

**London Boroughs (N=32)**

	<b>votes</b>	<b>%</b>	<b>wards contested</b>	<b>%</b>	<b>wards won</b>	<b>%</b>	<b>seats contested</b>	<b>%</b>	<b>seats won</b>	<b>%</b>
Con	746,177	35.0	620	99.4	263	42.1	1,811	97.3	785	42.2
Lab	596,570	28.0	620	99.4	231	37	1,828	98.2	685	36.8
LD	443,772	20.8	564	90.4	104	16.7	1,537	82.6	316	17.0
Green	169,160	7.9	357	57.2	5	0.8	567	30.5	12	0.6
Ind	43,266	2.0	105	16.8	0	0.0	163	8.8	2	0.1
Other	130,783	6.1	205	32.9	21	3.4	407	21.9	61	3.3
Total	2,129,728	100			624				1,861	

**Metropolitan Boroughs (N=36)**

	<b>votes</b>	<b>%</b>	<b>wards contested</b>	<b>%</b>	<b>wards won</b>	<b>%</b>	<b>seats contested</b>	<b>%</b>	<b>seats won</b>	<b>%</b>
Con	754,771	26.9	764	93.7	192	23.6	773	93.5	193	23.3
Lab	951,935	34.0	815	100.0	388	47.6	826	99.9	395	47.8
LD	660,701	23.6	698	85.6	186	22.8	707	85.5	189	22.9
Green	99,206	3.5	288	35.3	4	0.5	290	35.1	4	0.5
Ind	66,147	2.4	109	13.4	14	1.7	111	13.4	15	1.8
Other	268,376	9.6	379	46.5	31	3.8	382	46.2	31	3.7
Total	2,801,136	100.0			815				827	

**Table 2: Local elections results by type of authority (contd)**

**Shire Districts (N=88)**

	<b>votes</b>	<b>%</b>	<b>wards contested</b>	<b>%</b>	<b>wards won</b>	<b>%</b>	<b>seats contested</b>	<b>%</b>	<b>seats won</b>	<b>%</b>
Con	946,780	44.6	1,305	97.9	700	52.5	1,335	97.7	714	52.3
Lab	426,133	20.1	1,146	86.0	238	17.9	1,171	85.7	243	17.8
LD	537,766	25.3	1,039	77.9	306	23.0	1,060	77.6	318	23.3
Green	68,103	3.2	325	24.4	10	0.8	331	24.2	12	0.9
Ind	49,066	2.3	123	9.2	34	2.6	124	9.1	34	2.5
Other	97,025	4.6	297	22.3	45	3.4	303	22.2	45	3.3
Total	2,124,873	100.0			1333				1366	

**Unitary Councils (N=20)**

	<b>votes</b>	<b>%</b>	<b>wards contested</b>	<b>%</b>	<b>wards won</b>	<b>%</b>	<b>seats contested</b>	<b>%</b>	<b>seats won</b>	<b>%</b>
Con	283,716	33.5	323	92.0	123	35.0	332	92.2	128	35.6
Lab	241,175	28.5	344	98.0	116	33.0	352	97.8	117	32.5
LD	212,804	25.1	292	83.2	87	24.8	297	82.5	89	24.7
Green	28,318	3.3	102	29.1	1	0.3	102	28.3	1	0.3
Ind	31,694	3.7	72	20.5	14	4.0	73	20.3	14	3.9
Other	49,596	5.9	126	35.9	10	2.8	127	35.3	11	3.1
Total	847,303	100.0			351				360	

share for these three parties is 86%, illustrating the extent to which local voters support parties from outside the political mainstream. A record number of candidates saw the Greens contest more than one in three wards, while within the 'others' category the BNP also contested more seats than previously.

In some parts of the country, notably the London boroughs on this occasion, local council wards choose more than a single councillor at each election. It is more appropriate, therefore, to compare each party's vote share with its overall share of *seats*. Here, both Conservative and Labour parties enjoyed a 'winner's bonus'. The third-placed Liberal Democrats saw overall seat and vote shares often quite close. As expected the Greens and other minor parties suffered but not on a scale found, for example, at the general election where electoral units are much larger.

Overall, the Loosemore-Hanby index of proportionality is 11.0<sup>1</sup>, a more proportional outcome than that for the 2005 general election. However, with the exception of the London boroughs these elections were for only a fraction of each authority's council seats. It is more appropriate, therefore, only to consider index scores for the whole council elections across the 32 London boroughs. The mean score here is 24.8, with standard deviation of 7.2. The most disproportional result is Newham (45.0) where Labour with less than half the votes cast won 90% of seats. Although other Labour-dominated councils have high index scores, including Hackney and Greenwich, some Conservative-run councils also feature. In both Bexley and Wandsworth, for example, Conservatives polled just over half the vote but in each case won over 85% of seats. By contrast, only seven boroughs have an index score of below 20 with Camden the lowest with an index of 13.5.

Table 2 reveals sharp differences in the Conservative party's performance. Across London, for example, the party polled 35% (but still an increase of less than one point) but just over one in four voters supported it throughout the metropolitan boroughs. In thirteen of the 32 London boroughs the Conservatives captured 40% or more of votes, but in only six of the 36 metropolitan boroughs was it as popular (see Appendix A). In exactly a quarter of London and metropolitan boroughs respectively the Conservatives failed to win more than one in five votes cast.

Labour's vote share declined across a range of authorities. Across London, for example, there was a six-point fall in the party vote compared with 2002. There was a double-digit vote collapse in six boroughs, led by Harrow with a decline of around 13-points (Appendix B). Comparing again with 2002, virtually half the metropolitan boroughs show a ten-point decline or more in Labour support, with votes drifting primarily towards the Liberal Democrats and/or a diverse set of overtly anti-Labour local action groups or single-issue parties.

For every London borough where the Liberal Democrat vote rose in another it fell. The most dramatic fall, more than twenty-points, occurred in Barking and Dagenham, but here the party fielded just four candidates compared with 28 that contested in 2002. In Islington lost to no overall control, the party's vote fell by nine points, similar to the drop in Kingston but where control was retained narrowly. In metropolitan boroughs the party's vote fell in a third of authorities, including a double-digit drop in Bolton, but rose by five percentage points or more in ten others, headed by Newcastle, Gateshead and Oldham.

The growth of new party registration with the Electoral Commission continues, and local voters continue to experiment with partisan choices. This year we recorded votes for a total of 104 registered parties, two-thirds of which contested fewer than five seats. In terms of vote share the greatest success came in London where more than one in six votes were cast in favour of candidates standing either as Independents or representing one of the minor parties.

The Greens were prominent, winning almost 5% of the vote overall and presenting candidates in a third of wards. The best showing came in London, with 8% vote share, and most notably in Hackney where one in five voters propelled the party into second place. That support only brought one seat, however, but in Lewisham the party secured six council seats with a similar vote share. Progress also came in Sheffield and Manchester but the party makes a bigger impact still in both Oxford and Norwich.

The BNP doubled its number of council seats, winning 33 in total, with the campaign in Barking and Dagenham attracting considerable media attention. Overall, the party



attracted more than a quarter of million (3%) votes, and contested more than one in every ten wards. Fewer than one in ten BNP votes were cast in London (it only contested 28 of 624 wards) with three-quarters coming in the metropolitan boroughs where it contested almost a third of the wards. By contrast, the United Kingdom Independence Party, UKIP, won less than a third of the votes cast for BNP, despite contesting in just fifty fewer wards.

The Respect party mounted its strongest campaign in Tower Hamlets where the leader has his parliamentary seats. It now forms the main opposition to Labour after eleven of its candidates were successfully elected.

Three-quarters of wards provided electors with a choice from among candidates representing the Conservative, Labour and Liberal Democrat parties (Appendix C). In the cities, party competition was even more pronounced, with 81% and 89% of seats in the metropolitan and London boroughs respectively contested in this manner. In 17% of all cases electors could at least choose between candidates from either Conservative or Labour. There are a negligible number of wards, less than 2%, where electors had a restricted choice of just one candidate from among the main parties.

In three member wards in London the Conservative and Labour parties provided a full slate of candidates in 96% of cases. By contrast, local Liberal Democrat parties mustered three candidates in only 76% of cases and in 9% of wards there was a sole candidate to support. Evidence of less than a full quota of candidates is more pronounced for the Greens. A full quota could be found in less than one in seven wards contested and in almost four in ten cases there was just one candidate.

### **Candidate characteristics: women and incumbents**

More than fifteen thousand candidates (Table 3) contested the elections, an average of 3.5 candidates per seat. In fact, only nineteen seats, most in the shire districts, went uncontested. The highest ratio of candidates to seats (3.9:1) is in the metropolitan boroughs but that is little more than the lowest in the shire districts (3.2:1). Three wards in London, two in Tower Hamlets and a third in Havering, saw sixteen candidates compete. Almost four hundred wards had ten or more candidates challenging for election.

**Table 3: Candidate characteristics**

	<b>London Boroughs</b>	<b>Metropolitan Boroughs</b>	<b>Shire Districts</b>	<b>Unitary Councils</b>	<b>All authorities</b>
Seats	1,861	827	1,366	360	4,414
Candidates	6,389	3,185	4,348	1,308	15,230
Ratio candidates/seats	3.4	3.9	3.2	3.6	3.5
Women candidates	2,116	971	1,428	346	4,861
Women as % of total candidates	33.1	30.5	32.8	26.5	31.9
Women elected	607	250	413	101	1,371
Women as % of all elected in 2006	32.6	30.2	30.2	28.1	31.1
Incumbent candidates	1,280	693	978	286	3,237
Incumbent candidates as % of seats	68.8	83.8	71.6	79.4	73.3
Incumbents elected	1,020	595	810	220	2,645
Incumbents elected as % of all Incumbent candidates	79.7	85.9	82.8	76.9	81.7
Incumbent elected as % of all councillors elected in 2006	54.8	71.9	59.3	61.1	59.9

Women candidates numbered almost five thousand, 29.0% of the total. In the smaller shire districts women comprised 31% of all candidates compared to 26% in the metropolitan boroughs, which traditionally have struggled to recruit women candidates. The Conservatives lag behind in the recruitment of women candidates. Less than 30% of the party's candidates were women, compared with 33% for Labour and 34% for the Liberal Democrats. The most successful party on these terms were the Greens; 41% of whose candidates in 2006 were women.

As might be expected there is considerable variation in women's recruitment among different local authorities. For example, in London six authorities saw women candidates range between 20-30% of the total, but in two, Croydon and Islington, the proportion was nearer half (Appendix D). Three metropolitan boroughs, North Tyneside, St. Helens and Wirral, saw a similar level of recruitment of women candidates and over half the candidates in Stevenage were women. But in half of the metropolitan boroughs women candidates were in a clear minority, 30% or less of the total. Among shire districts, women comprised less than one in five candidates in Crawley, Purbeck and Runnymede, with a similar proportion in three unitary council areas, Blackburn with Darwen, Stoke on Trent and Thurrock.

Almost fourteen hundred women candidates were elected, just over 28% of women candidates and 31% of all councillors elected in 2006. Women fared best in London,

where now a third of councillors are women, a rise of approximately four percentage points since 2002. In the remaining local authority types about three in ten councillors elected this time are women. As with recruitment so also with electoral success – The Conservative party had a smaller proportion of its women candidates elected than the other parties. Whereas 28% of Conservative women candidates were successful, the proportion for Labour and Liberal Democrats was 35% and 31% respectively. Indeed, *ceteris paribus*, Labour's women candidates had a greater chance of success than men. More than half the successful Green candidates were women.

Some 3,237 incumbents sought another four year term, meaning that 73% of all vacancies were fought by an incumbent (see Table 3). It is, perhaps, unsurprising that 84% of contests in the metropolitan boroughs featured an incumbent because these councillors were elected as recently as 2004 at whole council elections following ward boundary changes. However, another way of considering this is that 16% of incumbents, for unknown reasons, chose not to continue despite the short time since last elected. By contrast, in London where seats were last fought four years before, there was a higher rate of retirement. Here, 69% of contests featured an incumbent candidate – or a drop-out rate of about a third.

Local authority-level analysis, however, shows variation in rates of incumbents seeking re-election (Appendix E). The London borough of Islington, for example, saw just twenty incumbents contest for a total of 48 seats but in three boroughs, Greenwich, Kensington and Chelsea and Tower Hamlets, between 80-90% of seats saw incumbents challenge. Among the metropolitan boroughs the lowest rate of incumbents contesting again came in Bradford but there were ten authorities where incumbents contested 90% or more of vacancies. The distribution among the shire districts more closely resembles the position in the metropolitan boroughs rather than in London. Given that in many cases the baseline comparison year is 2002, not 2004, it does suggest a greater propensity for councillors in these smaller, less urban authorities, to try and continue in office.

There was considerable electoral success among incumbents, 2,645 (82%) of whom were re-elected in 2006 (Appendix F). The smallest rate of re-election was in London

where 80% were returned but this is not entirely unexpected given the greater turnover of seats across the capital. Neither is it unexpected that the metropolitan boroughs should show the most success for incumbents, 86% of whom now serve another four-year term. These figures are broadly comparable with the 2005 general election; then 573 incumbents stood for re-election with only fifty defeated, a success rate of 91%.

It is unsurprising to discover that Labour incumbents were the most vulnerable to defeat, with three-quarters losing their seats. In the shire districts Labour incumbents had a one in three chance of being defeated but in the metropolitan boroughs the odds reduced to slightly worse than one in ten. Between 80-85% of Liberal Democrat incumbents were re-elected but even for Conservative incumbents there was a one in ten chance of defeat.

Six in ten councillors elected in 2006 were returning incumbents, ranging from 55% in London to 72% in the metropolitan areas. On balance that suggests there is sufficient scope within the current arrangements to facilitate a wider social mix among council members. But it would be wrong necessarily to apportion blame on party selection meetings. While there may indeed be some local party organisations reluctant to recruit among groups that are poorly represented it may simply be that the absence of these groups is more a function of their reluctance to join parties and stand for election. Unravelling the possible reasons for that is well beyond the scope of this report, however.

### **Electorate and Turnout**

Before discussing aspects of the local electorate and turnout a number of caveats should be noted. First, accurate figures for electorate entitled to vote on polling day were difficult to obtain. In some cases we resort to using electorate figures collected when annual registers first become available; these are obviously not as accurate as election day registers. Second, we found inconsistencies in the calculation and reporting of local electoral turnout. Conventionally, electoral turnout should only include valid ballots, i.e. those legitimately cast for candidates and included in the

final count. Unfortunately, some Returning Officers when calculating turnout include all ballots at the count, valid and invalid. When other information about ballots is unavailable our practice is to use the reported ward turnout figure; we are unable to verify whether or not the local authority has included only valid ballots when calculating turnout. A third problem affects voting in multimember wards. Unless we are informed of the number of valid ballot papers issued, then we either rely upon the percentage ward turnout figure provided or alternatively use an algorithm for calculating turnout. Clearly, the former figure is preferable but that brings a separate though related problem. When a local authority does not provide a figure for its *overall* turnout then we must either average the ward percentages or use an algorithm to calculate an estimated total vote across the authority. None of this is satisfactory, of course, but there is no compulsion on local authorities to report their statistics in a standard manner. What this means is that some of the observations that follow are necessarily compromised by wither the quality of the data that are provided or are adversely affected by data that were simply not provided (Appendix G).

Table 4 shows electorate size for different types of local authority where the overall mean in 2006 is seven thousand electors for each ward. On average the largest electorates are found in the metropolitan boroughs but these range from fewer than five thousand upwards to almost twenty thousand electors. The largest wards are in Birmingham and Leeds while Knowsley has the smallest electorates among the metropolitan boroughs. The mean electorate in London is almost 1,400 fewer and the largest value is just over two thousand above the metropolitan borough mean. Taking into account the number of seats for each type of authority, councillors in the metropolitan boroughs represent an average of 3,300 electors and 2,900 electors in London. Average electorate in the shire districts is somewhat smaller than elsewhere but it should be noted that these authorities include rural authorities like Purbeck, Dorset and South Lakeland, Cumbria.

**Table 4: Electorates in 2006**

<b>Local Authority</b>	Mean	Min	Max	Std. Dev	N=
London boroughs	8,555	3,704	12,226	1,444	624
Metropolitan boroughs	9,934	4,755	19,678	2,916	815
Shire districts	4,331	1,133	9,377	1,343	1,333
Unitary councils	7,156	1,555	12,482	2,108	351
Overall	6,964	1,133	19,678	3,106	3,123

As stated earlier, 21.7 million (58%) electors in England could vote in 2006. Within the London boroughs there are some quite dramatic changes for number of registered electors between 2002-2006 (Appendix H). Overall, the electorate rose by 130,000 over the period but in Barnet the electorate has fallen by more than fifteen thousand (7% of the 2002 register) and in Hounslow there is a similar proportionate fall. Some significant increases in electorate are evident, especially in Newham where the electorate has risen by thirty thousand or 19% and in Tower Hamlets with an 11% rise. For the metropolitan boroughs because the previous elections were only held in 2004, the overall rise is rather small, 21,000 or a quarter of one per cent. But at the local authority level there is evidence of more significant movement. The electorate during the two years has grown by 5% in North Tyneside and by 4% in Bolton, Leeds and Sefton on Merseyside. But in Coventry the electorate is now more than ten thousand fewer, a fall of 5%. We are unable to state how far such changes are evidence of population change or an artefact of modifications in the process of electoral registration among individual local authorities.

The slump in voter turnout now appears to have eased, at least in most types of authority. We estimate a 36% overall turnout in 2006; the highest figure is 40% in London and the lowest, 34%, in the 20 unitary councils<sup>2</sup>. Other things equal, turnout tends to be higher in authorities with whole council elections compared to those that re-elect only a fraction of the council body at any one time. These figures show a general rise on four years before, some six percentage points in London and about a four-point rise elsewhere. But in the metropolitan boroughs turnout declined when compared with the levels in 2004. There are three competing explanations for this decline. First, there is the nature of the two elections; 2004 brought new boundaries and whole council elections whereas 2006 was a partial council election. Second, the local elections for 2004 were postponed from the usual date in May and moved to coincide with the June elections for the European Parliament in a bid to raise turnout; without synchronous elections turnout could fall. Third, in 2004 the government experimented with all-postal elections in four English regions. In common with previous experiments this raised turnout; without all-postal voting in place the decline in turnout is likely to be greatest in these four regions. The initial impression, exploiting the fact that some districts and unitary authorities share the 2004 baseline

with the metropolitan boroughs, is that the move away from all-postal elections produced all, or virtually all, of the turnout decline for authorities that held elections in these two years.

Once again, closer scrutiny of the figures provides evidence of local authority-level variation. Table 5 (see also Appendix I) shows turnout by different types of authority<sup>3</sup>. Within London the lowest turnout is that for Lewisham, 29%, but in three other boroughs less than one in three electors voted. Given the competitive campaign between the Conservatives and Liberal Democrats in Richmond it is unsurprising to discover that more than half the electors voted and the borough also recorded the biggest increase in turnout from 2002. There is a similar story in the metropolitan boroughs with more than four in ten voting in both Bradford and Newcastle. Conversely, in both Knowsley and Liverpool only one in four eligible electors voted. Central ward in Liverpool recorded the lowest turnout in 2006 where just 12% voted, despite five candidates contesting the ward. Further evidence that party competition really does make a difference to local voting is apparent in the shire districts where South Lakeland, Mole Valley, Winchester and St. Albans all feature prominently in the rank order of turnout and all of which changed political control.

**Table 5: Turnout and number of authorities by category of turnout**

	<b>London Boroughs</b>	<b>Metropolitan Boroughs</b>	<b>Shire Districts</b>	<b>Unitary Councils</b>
<b>Number auths with turnout:</b>				
30% or less	1	5	2	4
30 - 35%	6	13	27	8
35 - 40%	10	15	39	7
40% and over	15	3	20	1
Overall turnout	39.5	34.6	36.9	33.7

The lowest average turnouts, 33%, were in wards won by Labour, although Whitefield ward in Pendle again claimed top spot with a turnout of 72% - 17 percentage points ahead of the next highest Labour ward. By contrast meant turnout in Conservative and Liberal Democrat won wards was higher, 38% and 39% respectively. There were 23 wards (0.7%) with turnout less than 20% but 122 wards (3.9%) with over half electors voting.

In 2006, based on data from 161 out of 176 authorities, almost 14% of electors were registered for a postal vote. Local authorities varied considerably in the range (see List 1; for registered in-person voters see List 2), with the lowest, Kingston upon Hull, having issued only 5% of electors with a postal vote but the highest, Newcastle upon Tyne, had 46% registered. In fact, both of these authorities had been included in the 2004 experiment that saw four English regions, North East, North West, Yorkshire and Humberside and East Midlands, conduct all-postal European parliament elections. The 51 local authorities included in our 2006 sample that had been involved in that experiment showed significant variation – a 41-point range - in the current rate of postal voter registration. This confirms that local authority policy plays a major role in determining the take-up of postal voting amongst electors.

The mean local authority-level turnout among postal voters was 63% (N=155) compared with 32% for in-person voters (N=142). The data in 2006 confirm that turnout amongst postal registered voters is generally higher than among those electors that vote in person (Lists 5 & 6). Brentwood showed the highest turnout, 76%, amongst postal voters. In all but four cases for which there are data, turnout amongst postal voters was over half. Postal voter turnout in North East Lincolnshire was the lowest recorded, with just one third of thus registered participating in the election. It is, perhaps, significant that the authority retained a relatively large proportion of postal voters following the 2004 European election.

By contrast, turnout amongst those electors visiting a polling station was somewhat lower, although in Daventry it was still an impressive 58%, only marginally less than turnout for postal voters (List 7). This was the only authority where a majority of in-person voters participated however. The lowest rate of in-person voting was found in Stevenage, which also has 46% of all electors registered for a postal vote. It may be that in-person electors in this borough are rather atypical of those within other authorities but we do not have the data to explore this issue further.

The largest gap in turnout between postal and in-person voters was a 35-point difference in the metropolitan boroughs (means of 63% and 28%) while the smallest was in London (means of 59% and 36% respectively). The biggest gap in turnout among postal and in-person voters was Stevenage closely followed by St. Helens (a



47-point difference) and then Kingston upon Hull (List 8). As stated earlier, the smallest gap was in Daventry, where there was just a three-point difference, followed by North East Lincolnshire and Barking and Dagenham, six and ten point differences respectively.

Comparing the pattern of turnout in 2006 with the 2004 European election is instructive (List 9). All but one of those authorities showing a 10-point or more increase conducted an all-postal election in 2004. This is explained by the fact that by providing all voters with a postal ballot substantially alters the normal composition of postal voters. There are 66 authorities overall which showed an increase in postal voter turnout compared with 2004. Conversely, there are 88 authorities where turnout amongst postal voters decreased between 2004-6. A quarter of these authorities are London boroughs, which also held elections in 2004 for the London Mayor and Assembly.

Echoes of the 2004 all-postal experiment in four English regions can also be found in changes in the proportion of electors registered for a postal vote (List 10). This shows some sizeable declines among local authorities located in these regions – in short if a person received a postal vote in 2004 did not necessarily mean that they remained the holder of a postal vote. Fifty one authorities saw a drop of more than 50% in the proportion of postal voter registrations. However, there were a significant number of authorities where the proportion rose. According to the figures provided, Solihull saw a 31-point increase and there were smaller increases for a number of London boroughs, most notably Sutton and Islington and Richmond.

There is also variation in the proportion of postal ballots received but which were then rejected before the official count (List 11). The largest proportion of rejected postal votes is in Coventry, where one in seven was rejected, followed by Barking and Dagenham where 13% of postal ballots were excluded from the official count. The average for all authorities for which we have data is just 3% rejected. In seven authorities the rejection rate is lower than one percentage point.

Clearly, two of the hazards of postal voting is either that some electors leave it too late to return their vote or that the postal service is at fault. In Islington, for example,

the number of covering envelopes received by the returning officer after the close of poll amounted to one in twenty of all postal ballots issued. In Westminster also 4.8% of all postal ballots issued arrived too late and were excluded from the count.

Eighteen of the top ranked 30 authorities on this list are London boroughs. By contrast, some local authorities appear not to have suffered from this problem at all, with Hartlepool and Kingston upon Hull recording just five and two late postal ballots in total.

Local authorities were asked for details of the total number of ballots rejected from the count (List 13). The rejection rate, once ballots make it to the official count, is rather small as a proportion of all ballots cast. Worthing topped the list but even here just one in fifty ballots were rejected. The overall average for 98 authorities where the calculation can be made is that 0.7% of ballots were rejected at the count. In Birmingham, where more than a quarter of a million ballots were cast the percentage rejected is just 0.3%.

Gosport is the authority with the largest proportion of proxy voters (List 14) reflecting the large number of service personnel located there. It also topped the list at the 2004 European election. But the explanation is more difficult for Pendle's appearance towards the top of the list. It is apparent from this list that either people are reluctant to ask for a proxy to be appointed or that local authorities adopt strict policies regarding people's inclusion in the list. In Newham, for example, from an electorate of almost 190,000 there were just 25 proxies appointed for the 2006 election.

Local authorities were asked to supply the number of polling stations used. However, there may be some ambiguity about this and the related question on the eligible electorate. We noted that some local authorities with elections by thirds incorrectly observed these questions to refer to the entire authority rather than just those wards with an election in 2006. That said, it is clear that there is considerable variation in the ratio of polling stations to electors (List 15). Camden has the fewest polling stations per elector, with each station serving 2,586 electors. Harlow follows closely behind. Among the metropolitan boroughs, Sheffield has the highest figure, an average of over two thousand electors for each polling station. According to our

figures Daventry operates a generous ratio of 500 electors per polling station and rural Craven has just 625 electors per station.

### **Mayoral elections**

In addition to the mayor of London, first elected in 2000, there are a further twelve directly elected mayors across England. All mayors are elected using the Supplementary Vote method. A third of these mayors became due for re-election in 2006<sup>4</sup>, with contests held in three London boroughs (Hackney, Lewisham and Newham) and one shire district, Watford. In all four authorities the incumbent mayor sought and won re-election (Table 6). In Watford Dorothy Thornhill, the only woman mayor, received an absolute majority of first votes and a count of second votes was therefore unnecessary. Of the remaining three elections two (Hackney and Newham) resulted in the winning candidate receiving an absolute majority (first and second votes combined as a proportion of all first votes cast) but in Lewisham the successful candidate's final total remained less than half of all first votes cast.

There were no dramatic changes in the number of candidates contesting the mayoralty elections this time compared with previously: in three cases the number reduced by one while in the remaining case the number increased by one. While independent candidates have in the past been successful, for example, Hartlepool and Middlesbrough, these particular contests were all won by major party candidates although in Newham the second-placed 'runoff' candidate represented the Respect party. Given that voters are casting a ballot simultaneously with the local election it is unsurprising to find little or no deviation in turnout between the two elections.

**Table 6: Mayoral elections**

<b>Authority</b>	<b>No. Candidates</b>	<b>Elected</b>	<b>Party</b>	<b>1st vote</b>	<b>%</b>	<b>valid 2nd vote</b>	<b>1<sup>st</sup> + 2nd vote</b>	<b>Final share</b>	<b>Runoff party</b>	<b>Turnout %</b>
Lewisham	6	Steve Bullock	Lab	22,155	37.7	2,974	25,129	57.1	LD	33.0
Hackney	7	Jules Pipe	Lab	20,830	46.9	3,403	24,233	73.4	Con	32.9
Newham	5	Robin Wales	Lab	28,655	47.9	5,406	34,061	68.2	Respect	34.5
Watford	4	Dorothy Thornhill	LD	11,963	51.2	-	-	-	-	38.1

## Conclusions

The 2006 results further demonstrated that local voters are willing to support a range of other parties and single issue groups. In some parts of the country at least parties such as the Greens, BNP and Respect are both able to mount effective local campaigns and are increasingly capable of winning seats. The age of the Independent in local government may have passed but that does not mean local voters remaining loyal to national parties. There is no shortage of candidates willing to stand and a significant proportion of these, though by no means an equality, are women. It is known that many councillors retire after just one term in office but our figures also show a large number seek re-election, most successfully. Local election turnout slumped at the end of the 1990s but there are recent signs of a modest recovery. This pattern may well transfer to general election turnout. Above all, the results showed interesting variations around the country that suggest some voters continue to make different partisan choices according to the nature of the election before them.

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<sup>1</sup> The Loosemore-Hanby index attempts to measure proportionality of an election outcome. If the election is absolutely proportional then the index score would be 0. Systems that use certain forms of proportional representation voting may have index scores of below 10. It is common for first past the post systems to record a score of 20 and upwards.

<sup>2</sup> For this analysis we employ the algorithm described in Ware et al. 2006, the shorthand term for which is 'weighted sum' aggregate turnout. Interested readers may consult the annual Local Elections Handbook to compare the result of using different procedures for reporting turnout.

<sup>3</sup> The turnouts shown here are aggregate turnout using the algorithm described in Ware et al. 2006. For the results of different methods for calculating turnout readers should consult the Local Elections Handbook.

<sup>4</sup> Although mayors are normally elected for a four-year term the government also determined that a mayoral election should not be held unless an authority-wide local election is held simultaneously. For that reason Middlesbrough's mayor, Ray Mallon and Mansfield's Tony Eggington will not face re-election until 2007, thereby serving a five-year term.