



# Local Elections 2008

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## Introduction

Local elections took place in England and Wales on May 1, 2008. In England, 137 local authorities held elections -36 metropolitan boroughs, 23 unitary authorities, and 78 district councils. The majority of these were for a third of the council. However, four districts had whole council elections following boundary changes -Barrow-in-Furness, Basingstoke and Deane, South Lakeland, and Welwyn Hatfield; half the council was elected in seven districts; and the entire council was chosen in inaugural elections for four new unitary authorities -Cheshire East, Cheshire West and Chester, Durham, and Northumberland. Elections were postponed in two wards. The results of the delayed contests are included in this summary, but not information about their electoral administration. A separate report covers the elections in Wales where all the seats fell vacant in each of the 22 local councils.

## Voting

### Summary results

Including by-elections scheduled for that day, elections were held in 2,540 wards in England with a total of 2,841 seats at stake. Almost half the available seats were won by candidates from the Conservative party, clearly benefiting most from the operation of the voting system (Table 1). Its main rivals, Labour and Liberal Democrats, won 24% and 22.9% of seats respectively.

**Table 1: Vote and Seat share 2008**

	<i>Vote (%)</i>	<i>Seats (%)</i>
Conservative	36.9	45.8
Labour	25.9	24.0
Lib Dem	22.6	22.9
Green	2.8	0.6
BNP	3.8	0.5
UKIP	1.6	0.1
Independent	3.7	3.5
Other	2.5	2.6

The Conservative party obtained 36.9% of votes and gained over 200 additional seats following a near five-point rise in vote share based on its 2004 performance. Labour finished narrowly ahead of the Liberal Democrats in both the popular vote and seats, although the party lost over 200 seats compared with its rival's gain of about 30. Both parties' vote share was about two and a half percentage points down compared with 2004. Minor parties continue to have a presence in local elections, polling about one in seven of all votes cast. The British National Party (BNP) received more votes than the Green party, despite contesting fewer wards, but was less successful than the Greens in converting support into seats.

Labour's continuing relative strength in the larger cities is reflected in results from the metropolitan boroughs (Table 2). However, although the party again came out top in both votes and seats, the margins were much narrower than for many years. It polled only 11,000 more votes than the Conservatives, recording its lowest share (31.4%) since these authorities were created in 1973. Its lead in seats was more comfortable,

but also at a 30 year low. The Conservative vote share was 5 points up on 2004, whereas the Liberal Democrats' was nearly four points down. The Conservatives also finished well ahead of the Liberal Democrats in terms of seats (247 to 208) for the first time since 1992. The BNP vote was slightly down compared with 2007, and they won only three seats.

**Table 2: Vote and Seat share: Metropolitan Boroughs 2008**

	<i>Vote (%)</i>	<i>Seats (%)</i>
Conservative	31.0	29.9
Labour	31.4	38.3
Lib Dem	21.7	25.2
Green	3.3	0.7
BNP	5.7	0.4
UKIP	1.5	0.1
Independent	2.7	2.8
Other	2.8	2.7

Labour tends to be a little stronger in those shire districts with an annual electoral cycle as opposed to those that elect the entire council every four years, but this time the party slipped back badly compared with 2004. It contested a lower proportion of wards, its vote share fell by nearly four percentage points, and it finished a distant third in terms of seats won (Table 3). The Conservatives were the direct beneficiaries of both Labour's plight and a more modest drop in Liberal Democrat support. They registered their best vote and seat share in the districts since facing a similarly embattled Labour government in 1978.

**Table 3: Vote and Seat share: District Councils 2008**

	<i>Vote (%)</i>	<i>Seats (%)</i>
Conservative	46.4	57.4
Labour	18.1	13.1
Lib Dem	23.6	22.6
Green	3.1	0.8
BNP	2.0	0.6
UKIP	1.8	0.2
Independent	2.8	3.0
Other	2.2	2.3

The results of the contests in the unitaries are somewhat skewed by the influence of all-out elections for the four new councils. Indeed, they accounted for more than half of all the seats falling vacant this year. Their presence makes comparisons with previous years impossible, but the overall pattern of results is the same as elsewhere (Table 4). The Conservatives finished well ahead in votes and seats, enjoying a substantial winner's bonus. Labour held off the Liberal Democrats on both measures, with Independents and 'others' polling one in 10 of all votes and winning only a slightly smaller proportion of seats.

**Table 4: Vote and Seat share: Unitary authorities 2008**

	<i>Vote (%)</i>	<i>Seats (%)</i>
Conservative	35.7	42.3
Labour	25.7	27.8
Lib Dem	23.3	20.8
Green	1.5	0.0
BNP	2.4	0.6
UKIP	1.4	0.1
Independent	7.6	5.4
Other	2.5	3.1

### Contestation

Some 10,069 candidates contested 2,841 seats at the May 2008 local elections in England – an overall candidate/seat ratio of 3.5. This figure is higher than in 2007, reflecting the concentration of this year’s elections in councils with established patterns of party competition. The ratio in the metropolitan boroughs was 4.2 –the same as in 2007. Only 15 seats in 14 wards were uncontested, scarcely half of one percent of the total. In 2007, by contrast, more than 5% of seats saw councillors returned unopposed. The difference can again be accounted for by the fact that the vast majority of small wards in rural councils did not have elections this year.

### Electoral Administration

#### Turnout

The local elections in 2008 gave some 17.1 million registered electors the opportunity to vote: about 45% of the total electorate in England. Under the provisions of the Electoral Administration Act 2006, more than 76,000 names (0.5% of the total) were added to the register between 10<sup>th</sup> March (the previous last date for registration to take effect before the election) and 16<sup>th</sup> April (the new closing date). Votes were cast at about 13,000 polling stations as well as by post.

Across the country nearly 6 million valid votes were cast, making the overall aggregate turnout 35.0% -see Table 5<sup>1</sup>. That compares with 37.9% in 2007 and 36.5% in 2006. Taking into account those who tried to vote but had their ballot papers or postal vote returns rejected, the level of participation rises to 35.5%.

**Table 5. Adjusted turnout at local elections in England, 2002-2008 (valid votes as a % of the electorate)\***

<i>2008</i>	<i>2007</i>	<i>2006</i>	<i>2003</i>	<i>2002</i>
35.0	37.9	36.5	35.6	33.3

\* The figures are not strictly comparable because different authorities/wards hold elections in each year. We exclude 2004 because of the all-postal voting pilot in four regions in England and 2005 because the local elections coincided with the general election.

In the rest of this report we use the term ‘adjusted turnout’ to refer to calculations based simply on the number of valid votes cast; ‘minimal unadjusted turnout’ to refer to

calculations taking into account those whose vote was rejected at the count; and ‘maximal unadjusted turnout’ to refer to calculations which take into account votes rejected at the count *and* those rejected at the postal ballot verification stage. The evidence in Table 6 confirms that only a small fraction of voters try to vote but fail to do so successfully. We return to this issue later in the context of the new regulations on postal voting.

**Table 6. Adjusted and unadjusted turnout at English local elections 2006-2008**

<i>2008 max unadjusted</i>	<i>2008 min unadjusted</i>	<i>2008 adjusted</i>
35.5	35.1	35.0
<i>2007 max unadjusted</i>	<i>2007 min unadjusted</i>	<i>2007 adjusted</i>
38.3	38.1	37.9
<i>2006 max unadjusted</i>	<i>2006 min unadjusted</i>	<i>2006 adjusted</i>
37.0	36.7	36.5

Naturally, there are greater variations when turnout is examined at the local authority level. Turnout was above 50% in only one authority (South Lakeland) and below 30% in 10 as -four metropolitan boroughs, four unitary councils, and two districts. The outliers for each type of local authority are set out in Table 7. It is worth pointing out that many of these councils appear in a similar place in the ‘league’ year after year. For example, the impact of all-out elections in Barrow in Furness, in contrast to its usual ‘thirds’ contests, was to move it from the second lowest district council turnout in 2007 to the third lowest this year!

**Table 7. Highest and lowest aggregate % turnouts by local authority 2008**

	<i>2008 adjusted</i>	<i>2008 minimal</i>	<i>2008 maximal</i>
<b>Mets</b>			
Kirklees	40.6	40.6	41.0
South Tyneside	39.5	39.6	40.4
Bradford	39.5	39.7	40.1
Walsall	29.4	29.5	29.8
Manchester	28.3	28.5	29.2
Liverpool	28.4	28.5	28.7
Knowsley	25.8	26.0	26.2
<b>Districts</b>			
South Lakeland	50.5	50.7	50.9
Harrogate	48.0	48.0	48.2
Mole Valley	46.0	46.2	46.4
Winchester	46.0	46.1	46.4
Great Yarmouth	30.0	30.2	30.5
Tamworth	30.0	30.1	30.3
Barrow In Furness	29.7	29.9	30.2
Basildon	28.9	29.0	29.2
Cannock Chase	26.4	26.5	27.3

### Unitaries

Blackburn with Darwen	41.3	42.5	43.6
Northumberland	41.3	41.5	41.9
Southampton	29.9	30.0	30.4
Swindon	29.6	29.7	29.9
Hartlepool	29.3	29.4	29.7
Halton	26.7	26.9	27.2
Kingston Upon Hull	25.5	25.6	25.7

### Rejected ballots

An initial perception of the overall number of ballot papers that were rejected in 2008 may be had from the differences between adjusted and unadjusted turnout in Table 6. This suggests that only a very small fraction of electors who tried to vote had their votes declared invalid. This can happen at one of two stages. Postal voters must first meet the statutory requirements for the documentation they return. Votes which pass this test are then added at the count to those of electors who have voted in person. At this stage votes are checked against a number of other criteria to determine their validity.

**Table 8. Rejected ballots as % of total included at count –England**

2001 general election	0.4
2004 European/local elections	0.8
2005 general election	0.3
2006 local election	0.6
2007 local election	0.4
2008 local election	0.4

Table 8 shows the proportion of ballot papers examined at the count and subsequently rejected at a selection of recent elections in England. At the 2008 local elections just over 23,000 votes were rejected at the count –0.4% of all those counted. The more complex the ballot paper, and the more electors are asked to vote in different ways on different ballot papers, the more likely is it that mistakes are made. In 2004, when many English voters were faced with ballot papers for both European Parliament and local elections, each using a different electoral system, the proportion of rejected papers was higher than at other recent general and local elections. Similarly the rejection rate at the 2008 London Mayor and Assembly elections, when voters could cast four votes on three different ballot papers, was just under 2%. The most common reason for rejection is an unclear ballot paper –‘unmarked or wholly void for uncertainty’ in the technical language. In 2008 these accounted for just under two-thirds of rejections in those cases where we have complete data. In only two cases (Bury 1.2% and Gloucester 2.5%) were in excess of 1% of ballots coming to the count rejected. The Gloucester case is a clear outlier, but we can shed no further light on the circumstances there with the data to hand.

### Postal voting

A sizeable number of electors continue to take advantage of the opportunity to apply for and cast a postal vote. At these elections more than 2.5 million postal votes were issued -14.9% of all those with a contested election in their ward (Table 9). Exact

comparisons with previous years are impossible because of the varying electoral cycle, but it can be noted that 12.9% of local electors in 2007 had a postal vote, 13.6% in 2006 and that 12.8% of electors throughout England had one at the 2005 general election. It would appear that the new rules on providing personal identifiers (together with the need to reapply for a postal vote) have not stemmed the gradual increase in voting by post.

Postal voting was most popular in the metropolitan boroughs (16.5% of electors), but less so among the districts (12.9% of electors). For the second year running Stevenage narrowly beat Newcastle upon Tyne as the authority with the highest proportion of postal electors (Table 10), with both registering a small increase over the past 12 months. At the other end of the scale fewer than 6% of the electorate in Barrow in Furness and Kingston upon-Hull have a postal vote, but there too the figure is slightly up on 2007.

**Table 9. Postal electors and votes in England 2008 –overall and by type of authority\***

Number of postal ballot papers issued	2,531,344	as % of electorate	14.9
Number returned	1,810,555	as % of issued	71.5
Number included ‘in count’	1,746,984	as % of votes at count	29.3
Rejected or otherwise not included in count	64,807	as % of those returned	3.6

\*Data is incomplete for a very small number of authorities.

**Metropolitan boroughs\***

Postal ballot papers as % of electorate:	16.5	(13.1 in 2006)
% ‘Turnout’ among postal voters:	71.4	(65.9 in 2006)
Rejected ballot papers as % of those returned:	3.8	(3.0 in 2006)
Postal ballots as % of those at count:	32.6	(n/a for 2006)

**Unitary authorities\***

Postal ballot papers as % of electorate:	14.3	(13.6 in 2006)
% ‘Turnout’ among postal voters:	71.0	(63.7 in 2006)
Rejected ballot papers as % of those returned:	3.6	(3.2 in 2006)
Postal ballots as % of those at count:	28.5	(n/a for 2006)

**District councils\***

Postal ballot papers as % of electorate:	12.9	(13.1 in 2006)
% ‘Turnout’ among postal voters:	72.0	(65.6 in 2006)
Rejected ballot papers as % of those returned:	3.1	(2.6 in 2006)
Postal ballots as % of those at count:	24.8	(n/a for 2006)

\*The comparison year is 2006 rather than 2007 as the latter is dominated by ‘all out’ elections in both the districts and unitaries.

**Table 10. Biggest and smallest take up of postal votes, 2008**

	<i>% of electorate</i>
<b>Mets</b>	
Newcastle upon Tyne	36.4
South Tyneside	35.2
Sandwell	9.8
Birmingham	7.9

<b>Districts</b>	
Stevenage	36.6
Chorley	30.1
Nuneaton and Bedworth	6.0
Barrow In Furness	5.1
<b>Unitaries</b>	
Blackburn with Darwen	22.9
Durham	21.9
Halton	7.8
Kingston upon Hull	5.5

The proportion of postal voters returning their ballot papers always exceeds the turnout among ‘in person’ voters. To an extent this can be explained by the fact that applying for such a vote in the first place indicates a higher than average level of interest in and engagement with political events. However, especially in the case of second order elections, the convenience and flexibility of postal voting is also likely to boost participation. At the 2008 local elections more than seven in 10 of those with a postal ballot (71.5%) returned it. This is in stark contrast to a turnout of 28.7% - nearly seven percentage points below the overall figure- among those voting at a polling station. In the metropolitan boroughs the turnout of ‘in person’ voters was even lower at just 27.4%. This phenomenon also means that postal votes form a disproportionate number of those at the count. In 2008 nearly three in 10 of all votes counted (29.3%) were cast by post. In the metropolitan boroughs the proportion was 32.6% (Table 9). Indeed some may wish to argue that the success of postal voting acts to disguise a continuing crisis of electoral participation among those who have not taken advantage of this facility.

Some electors who try to vote by post are found to have completed the documentation incorrectly and their ballot papers never reach the count. Although most would have already experienced the requirement for them to provide personal identifiers, in the form of their signature and date of birth, both when applying for a postal vote and when voting at the 2007 local elections, there was a small increase this year in the proportion of postal votes rejected or otherwise not included in the count to 3.6% from 3.2% in 2007. At the last local elections before the new regulations in 2006 the equivalent figure was 3.0% and at the 2005 general election in England it was 2.4%.

Of perhaps greater interest is the considerable variation between local authorities in the proportion so rejected -see Table 11. Examining only those councils where we believe the data returns to be accurate<sup>2</sup>, more than one in ten postal votes were rejected in three councils –Wolverhampton, Cannock Chase, and Slough, but less than 1% in a range of authorities of all types. Such disparities are likely to reflect the judgement and discretion of individual returning officers as much as gross differences in the success of postal electors in completing their forms correctly. On this measure too there is some evidence of a fairly stable ‘league table’ emerging. For example, Salford recorded the smallest proportion of rejected postal ballots in the metropolitan boroughs in both 2007 and 2008, and Barrow in Furness had the second highest proportion of rejections in both years among the districts. It should also be pointed out that each of the four authorities among the unitaries and districts with the lowest

overall proportion of rejected postal votes only subjected about 20% of their returns to formal verification. These issues will be dealt with in more detail in a separate report on postal vote examination processes and rejection rates covering this year's elections in England, Wales and London.

**Table 11. Proportion of returned postal votes rejected before the count 2008**

	<i>% of ballots returned</i>
<b>Mets</b>	
Wolverhampton	11.4
Oldham	8.2
Bolton	0.9
Salford	0.6
<b>Districts</b>	
Cannock Chase	10.6
Barrow in Furness	8.1
West Lindsey	0.5
West Oxfordshire	0.4
<b>Unitaries</b>	
Slough	11.2
Blackburn with Darwen	7.0
Wokingham	1.7
Plymouth	0.7

The new (2006 EAA) postal voting regulations also require returning officers to verify the personal identifiers on a minimum 20% sample of all postal ballot papers returned. In fact, the large majority of returning officers in all types of authority claimed to have verified 100% (or very nearly) of all returns (Table 12). In the metropolitan boroughs only Wolverhampton (70%) and Wigan (50%) verified a significantly smaller proportion. Among the unitaries Plymouth and Wokingham were just over 20% with Kingston upon Hull verifying 50%. Fourteen out of 78 district councils verified between 20-26% of returns, with a further 5 authorities checking fewer than three-quarters. A few councils did not provide sufficient data to enable this calculation. More systematic analysis is also made difficult by apparent inconsistencies in the ways in which the categories 'Number of postal voting statements rejected following verification -not completed' and 'Number of postal voting statements rejected following verification -personal identifier match', were completed by electoral administrators. These issues will be dealt with in more detail in a separate report on postal vote examination processes and rejection rates covering this year's elections in England, Wales and London.

**Table 12. Verification of returned postal votes**

	<i>Mean proportion verified 2008 (2007)</i>	
Mets	97.5	(90.7)
Districts	82.3	(73.8)
Unitaries	81.0	(75.0)

## Proxy votes

The liberalization of postal voting also appears to have had an impact on the number of electors appointing proxies. Scarcely more than 35,000 electors (just 0.09% of the total) appointed a proxy to vote on their behalf, continuing a trend that dates back to the 2001 general election (Table 13). The proportion of proxy voters remains higher in some 'service towns' such as Gosport and Plymouth, but even here it is only about 0.3% of the total electorate. Just 46 emergency proxies were issued across the whole of England.

**Table 13. Proxy voters as percentage of electorate in England 2001-2008**

<i>2008 Locals</i>	<i>2007 Locals</i>	<i>2005 General</i>	<i>2001 General</i>
0.09	0.12	0.22	0.47

## Counting the votes

A total of three authorities failed to provide information about their counts. Of councils for which we have data, 23 metropolitan boroughs counted on Thursday evening and 11 waited until Friday morning. For the unitaries and districts, the figures are 15 and 8, and 54 and 23 respectively.

Of the overnight counters few finished before the small hours of the next morning, whereas all those authorities which counted on Friday finished within the confines of the normal working day. Returning Officers are likely to come under conflicting pressure on this issue. On the one hand, the parties and the media will continue to want an immediate result; on the other, it may be easier to recruit staff for a 'day time' count.

## Conclusions

- Among the main parties the Conservative party performed best, winning the highest share of votes and seats and gaining more than 200 additional council seats. Labour and the Liberal Democrats both lost vote share compared with 2004, although the Liberal Democrats did register a small net gain in seats. The three largest 'small' parties, the Green Party, the BNP and UKIP, together polled over 8% of the votes, although they won just 1.2% of the seats.
- More than 10,000 candidates contested the elections, yielding a candidate/seat ratio of 3.5 overall. Only 15 seats in 14 wards were uncontested.
- The 2008 election saw some 17 million electors with an opportunity to vote – 45% of the total English local electorate. Nearly 6 million valid votes were cast, making the overall turnout 35.0%. This is lower than 2007 when a large number of small rural wards had elections, but not out of line with similar years in the electoral cycle (2006, 2002) in the recent past.
- The proportion of ballots that are rejected at the official count continues to be very small. In 2008 it was about four in every thousand votes cast.

- More than 2.5 million postal votes were issued -14.9% of all those with a contested election in their ward. 71.5% of those with a postal ballot returned it. By way of contrast, fewer than three in 10 of electors required to vote 'in person' did so.
- Despite the additional requirement for electors to provide personal identifiers, the proportion of postal votes rejected or otherwise not included in the count was, at 3.6%, little different to that in 2006 (3.0%) before the new regulations were introduced. Some variation does continue to exist at the local authority level, however, where the proportion of rejected postal votes ranged from more than one in ten to less than one in a hundred. Less than one in a thousand electors nominated a proxy to vote on their behalf.
- The new regulations also imposed a duty on local authorities to sample a minimum of 20% of returned postal ballot papers in order to verify their legality. Most local authorities claimed to have sampled 100% (or very nearly) of all returns and none verified fewer than 20%.

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<sup>1</sup> Councils were sometimes unable to provide a figure for the number of ballot papers issued in those wards where more than one vacancy was being contested. In such cases we have used an algorithm to estimate the number of individual voters who went to the polls, see L. Ware, G. Borisyuk, C. Rallings and M. Thrasher, A New Algorithm for Estimating Turnout, *Electoral Studies*, 25,1 2006. Adjusted (or valid vote) turnout based on an average of the turnout level in all wards with contested elections was 35.8%.

<sup>2</sup> In a small number of cases local authorities filled in their Form K returns incorrectly. For example, by failing to check that the numbers in different cells summed to the total provided.