
The 2005 general election: analysis of the results

Colin Rallings and Michael Thrasher
Local Government Chronicle Elections Centre,
University of Plymouth

The 2005 general election was held on Thursday 5th May. The result was a third successive victory for Labour, the first time the party has achieved this feat. Nevertheless, Labour lost both votes and seats and its parliamentary majority was reduced. The election in one of the 646 parliamentary constituencies, Staffordshire South, was postponed following the death of the Liberal Democrat candidate. This is the first time in over fifty years that a parliamentary election has been postponed in this way. The election for this constituency was eventually held on Thursday June 21st and resulted in victory for the Conservatives. In this report, unless clearly stated, both the commentary and Tables *include* the result for Staffordshire South. Tables summarising the outcome by country and region, together with a wealth of other lists and statistical information, can be found in the accompanying Appendix to the detailed constituency results.

Overall, the number of seats is 13 fewer than were contested at the previous general election. This reduction followed the implementation of the review of constituency boundaries in Scotland, prompted by the creation of a separate Scottish Parliament. Scotland's seats at the Westminster Parliament reduced from 72 to 59. There were no boundary changes for the remaining parts of the UK.

The headline figures are that Labour won 355 seats on a reduced share of vote. Estimates are that Labour would have won 402 seats if the 2005 seats had existed at the time of the 2001 general election, meaning a net loss of 47 seats for the party. The Conservatives captured 198 (a net gain of 33 seats) and the Liberal Democrats 62 seats (net gain 11 seats). Other parties account for the remaining 31 (4.8%) seats.

The strategic situation at the conclusion of the 2005 general election is summarised in Table 1. The first column shows the winning party and each row identifies the party that finished in the runner-up position. Thus, the Conservatives are second to Labour in 221 of its 355 seats while the Liberal Democrats are second in 106. The position in Conservative controlled constituencies is that Labour and the Liberal Democrats are second in 115 and 83 seats respectively. Looking ahead to the next election the Conservatives are second in 269 seats but the Liberal Democrats are now the challengers in 189 constituencies – although this position will alter slightly when new boundaries are implemented.

Table 1: The distribution of first and second places at the 2005 general election

		← 2nd →											
		Con	LD	Lab	SNP	PC	UUP	SF	DUP	Respect	SDLP	Ind	Total
1st	Lab	221	106		18	7				3			355
	Con		83	115									198
	LD	43		18		1							62
	DUP						7	2					9
	SNP	4		2									6
	SF								2		2	1	5
	SDLP							2	1				3
	PC			3									3
	UUP								1				1
	Speaker				1								1
	Respect			1									1
	No label			1									1
	KHH	1											1
	Total	269	189	140	19	8	7	4	4	3	2	1	646

A total of 3,554 candidates contested the election – a rise of 235 candidates compared to the previous election in 2001. Some 1,385 candidates (39%) failed to win five per cent of their constituency vote and forfeited their deposit. A record number of registered parties chose to contest the election. Excluding the Speaker, Independent candidates and candidates who fought without any description on the ballot paper, there were 113 parties represented by at least one candidate.

The battle for votes

In the UK as a whole just over 27 million valid votes were cast from a total eligible electorate of over 44 million. Over three quarters of a million additional votes were cast in 2005 than in 2001. Labour's share of the UK vote was 35.2% and that for the Conservatives was 32.4% - a combined two-party vote of just 67.6%. This is the lowest combined Conservative/Labour share at a UK election since 1923. The Liberal Democrats finished in third place, receiving support from more than one in five voters (22%). The fourth-placed party in the nationwide vote was the United Kingdom Independence Party (UKIP) which received 2.2%.

Because the three main parties generally choose not to contest parliamentary seats in Northern Ireland (just three Conservative candidates, polling a total of less than three thousand votes, contested in 2005), the broad analysis that follows concentrates mainly on the situation in Great Britain.

The case of Northern Ireland is discussed separately alongside country-specific analyses for the other nations of the UK

Across Britain Labour candidates won 36.1% of the popular vote and the party now has an overall parliamentary majority of 66 over all other parties combined¹. The party received over a million fewer votes than in 2001 and its share of the overall vote declined by 5.8 percentage points. The gap between Labour's vote and seat share is 18.9 percentage points. This share of the vote is the lowest ever achieved by a party winning an overall majority at a general election. Labour's vote as a proportion of the UK total electorate is just 21.6%, another record low for a winning party.

The Conservative party finished in second place in votes and seats won. Just over a third of voters (33.2%) in Britain supported the party but its share of the overall vote rose by only half of one percentage point. The Conservative vote share is the third lowest since the war (only 1997 and 2001 were lower). For a third successive election the Conservatives failed to pass the 200 seat mark, eventually falling two short of that figure.

The biggest beneficiaries of the Labour decline were the Liberal Democrats whose vote share rose to 22.6% - the largest third party share since the Liberal/SDP Alliance received 23.1% at the 1987 election. However, there is a sharp contrast to the position then and now in the distribution of seats. In 1987 the Alliance won just 22 seats but the Liberal Democrats on a comparable vote share came first in 62 seats – the highest number for a third party since the Liberals won 158 seats at the 1923 election. Just under one in ten MPs in the new parliament represents the Liberal Democrats.

The nationalist parties in Scotland and Wales, the Scottish National Party (SNP) and Plaid Cymru respectively, each suffered a decline in support. SNP's vote slipped to 17.7% in Scotland, a 2.4-point drop. The party slipped from second to third place in the popular vote behind Labour and the Liberal Democrats. Despite this setback it increased its representation, winning six seats, one more than in 2001 at a time when the number of constituencies was also reduced. Plaid Cymru's share of the vote in Wales also fell (-1.7%) as it went from third to fourth place. The party's representation also declined, from four to three seats. Another symptom of the party's decline is that eight (20%) of its candidates lost their deposits.

The most popular of the remaining parties was the United Kingdom Independence Party (UKIP) which won over six hundred thousand votes or 2.3% of the total cast in Britain. When compared to the previous election UKIP's vote rose by 0.8 percentage points. Almost one in twelve of its candidates successfully saved their deposit but none were elected. The Greens fielded 203 candidates who between them won over a quarter million votes or 1.1% of the total. For the second successive election the Green party's share rose by 0.4%. The British National Party fielded a record number of candidates, 119, a significant fraction of whom managed to retain

¹ This assumes that the Speaker and his three deputies (one Labour and two Conservative MPs) do not vote.

their deposit (34 or 28.6%). Just fewer than two hundred thousand votes were cast in favour of the party's candidates. This is four times as many as in 2001 (when the party had 33 candidates) resulting in a half of one percentage point rise in share.

Although it fielded just 26 candidates, 17 of whom obtained less than 5% of the constituency vote, the Respect party were nevertheless successful in capturing a seat, that of Bethnal Green and Bow from Labour. Two other seats on the British mainland were won by candidates outside the party political mainstream. Dr Richard Taylor was returned for a second term in the Wyre Forest constituency while Peter Law, previously a Labour member of the Welsh Assembly, won Blaenau Gwent without the need of a party label and denied Labour a victory in what had formerly been its sixth safest seat in Britain. Veritas, the party led by the MEP, Robert Kilroy-Silk, and formed after his defection from UKIP, won just 0.2% of votes cast. Apart from the leader all other candidates lost their deposits. Sixty nine parties in all each attracted fewer than a thousand votes.

Country specific analysis

England

A large majority (83.7%) of the UK electorate is registered to vote in England, which has 529 constituencies or 81.9% of the total. Almost 23 million votes were cast from an eligible electorate of just over 37 million. A total of 2,817 candidates contested the English constituencies. This is on average more than five candidates for each constituency. The percentage of candidates losing their deposit (39.5%) is very similar to the situation encountered in other parts of the UK.

However, while Labour won the popular vote in both Scotland and Wales it did not do so in England. Here, the Conservative party finished almost 65,000 votes ahead, taking its vote share to 35.7% compared to Labour's 35.5%. Despite this narrow lead the Conservatives finished some distance behind Labour in seats. Although the party made 29 seats gains across England that still left it some 92 seats behind Labour for a similar vote share. All but four of the Conservatives' MPs represent English constituencies.

All the larger parties benefited from Labour's six-point decline in vote share. The biggest gainers were the Liberal Democrats (+3.5%) but the half a percentage point rise for the Conservatives was smaller than the 0.8% gain for UKIP. UKIP's vote rose by more than two hundred thousand but one of the biggest rises came for the British National Party (BNP) whose 2001 vote of less than fifty thousand swelled to almost two hundred thousand. It should be noted, however, that more than three times as many candidates contested for the BNP in 2005.

Examining the pattern of voting across the English regions it becomes clear that the decline in Labour's vote was relatively uniform. The main exception

was London where there was a more than 8-point decline. In the South West, where Labour's vote is at its lowest, the fall was a relatively modest 3.4 points. The Conservative performance, although overall the party overtook Labour, was patchy. In four regions (East Midlands, North East, North West, Yorkshire and the Humber) the party's vote share actually fell compared to 2001 and remained static in one other (West Midlands). The biggest recovery occurred in the party's heartland seats in the South East and to a lesser extent in the London and Eastern regions. For the Liberal Democrats the most successful region proved to be the North East where its vote share rose by almost seven points taking it into second place behind Labour. There were rises of more than four points for the party in three further regions. The most politically diverse regions are London and West Midlands where the votes for 'other' parties amounted to 7.3% and 7.7% respectively.

Scotland

More than two million votes were cast in Scotland from an eligible electorate of almost four million. A total of 382 candidates challenged in 59 constituencies but almost four in ten (37.2%) lost their deposit.

Labour's dominance was dented still further as its vote fell from 43.3% to 38.9% - a decline of more than four points. Despite winning less than 40% of the vote, however, Labour candidates were successful in 40 out of the 59 constituencies, more than two-thirds of the total. The biggest advance from 2001 was made by the Liberal Democrats who now occupy second place in terms of both votes (22.6%) and seats (11, 18.6%). This is their best result since 1983 when the Liberal and Social Democrat Alliance jointly received 24.5% of the vote in Scotland. The SNP, formerly in second place, saw its vote share fall by 2.4 percentage points and it is now almost five points behind the Liberal Democrats. Despite this decline the SNP increased its representation from four to six seats, and with fewer seats on offer its seat share across Scotland advanced from 6.8% to 10%. The Conservatives, the only party ever to win an absolute majority of votes cast at a general election in Scotland (1955), received only a modest increase in support (+0.2%) taking their vote share to 15.8%. This is just under half of what it was at the 1979 general election. As in 2001 the Scottish party is represented by just a single MP at Westminster. The Scottish Socialist party fielded candidates in all but one constituency but while it won 1.9% of the vote its share declined by more than one percentage point. The remaining seat in Scotland was retained by Michael Martin who contested the election as 'Speaker' and was unchallenged by the three main British parties.

Wales

Although there are only 40 seats available in Wales some 250 candidates contested – a ratio of more than six candidates per seat. As in Scotland, however, a large proportion of those, 39.2%, polled less than one in twenty votes and thereby forfeited their £500 deposit.

Labour's share declined by almost six points (-5.9%) but it remains more than 21 points ahead of its nearest rival, the Conservatives. The electoral system operates very much in Labour's favour, a position exaggerated still further when so many candidates compete and vote share is distributed across more parties. Although Labour secured just 42.7% of the valid votes, it won 29 seats (72.5% of the total). The Conservatives attracted support from more than one in five voters (21.4%) but its share improved only modestly on the 2001 figure. The biggest advance was made by the Liberal Democrats who, courtesy of a 4.6 point rise, are now just three points behind the Conservatives. Interestingly, despite the lower vote share, the Liberal Democrats won four seats compared to the three won by the Conservatives. The Conservatives had won no seats at all in Wales in 2001. As in Scotland the vote for nationalist candidates declined. Plaid Cymru's share was 12.6% (1.7% less than in 2001) and it lost one of its previously four seats. The one remaining seat in Wales, Blaenau Gwent, was captured by the independent Peter Law.

Northern Ireland

The electoral battle in Northern Ireland, although quite different to the rest of the UK, provided considerable interest. The Democratic Unionist Party (DUP) is now the largest, in terms of both votes and seats. It added a further four seats taking its total to nine, half the available seats. The party's vote share, 33.7%, was more than eleven percentage points higher than in 2001 although this time it fielded candidates in every seat. Thus, the Ulster Unionist Party (UUP) was replaced as the most popular party in Northern Ireland. Indeed, its performance saw it move from first to third place in the popular vote, winning 17.8% overall and suffering a nine-point decline from the previous election. From being the largest party with six seats the UUP saw all but one of these lost, including that of its leader, David Trimble. It is now the smallest of the Northern Ireland parties in the UK parliament.

Sinn Fein took advantage of UUP's precipitous decline, moving from third to second place in the popular vote. It attracted support from almost one in four voters (24.3%) and there was a 2.6-point rise in its share. In capturing a further seat the party now represents a third of all constituencies within the province, and its vote has almost doubled since 1983. The Social and Democratic Labour Party (SDLP), by contrast, continues to suffer a decline in support. It finished less than two thousand votes behind UUP with a vote share of just 17.5%, a decline of 3.5 points, and two seats.

Changes in seats and proportionality

Changes in seats take account of the revised boundaries that reduced the number of parliamentary seats by 13 between 2001 and 2005 and of estimates of what the outcome would have been had the 2001 general election been fought on new boundaries. On this basis Labour had a net loss of 47 seats in 2005. These primarily comprised 31 defeats at the hands of

Conservatives and 12 defeats by the Liberal Democrats. Other parties to incur net losses were Plaid Cymru and the Ulster Unionist Party. The Conservatives made a net gain of 33 seats, three times the number made by the Liberal Democrats. The net figure is arrived at by subtracting the party's three losses to the Liberal Democrats from its 36 gains, all but five of which came from Labour. The Liberal Democrats made four times as many gains from Labour than from the Conservatives, twelve and three gains respectively. Its remaining gain was a seat from Plaid Cymru. As noted earlier, despite a lower vote share the SNP gained two extra seats. The Speaker and Dr Richard Taylor were re-elected and these 'others' were joined by Peter Law and George Galloway for Blaenau Gwent and Bethnal Green and Bow respectively.

Table 2: Seat change matrix 2001-5

	<i>Con</i>	<i>Lab</i>	<i>LD</i>	<i>SNP/PC</i>	<i>Other</i>	<i>Total</i>
Con	-	31	5	-	-	36
Lab	-	-	-	-	-	0
LD	3	12	-	1	-	16
SNP/PC	-	2	-	-	-	2
Other	-	2	-	-	6*	8
Total	3	47	5	1	6	
Net gains/losses	+33	-47	+11	+1	+2	

Note: Gains to be read across; losses down. *Seats in Northern Ireland –see below.

	<i>DUP</i>	<i>SDLP</i>	<i>SF</i>	<i>UU</i>	<i>Total</i>
DUP	-	-	-	4	4
SDLP	-	-	-	1	1
SF	-	1	-	-	1
UU	-	-	-	-	0
Total	0	1	0	5	
Net gains/losses	+4	-	+1	-5	

In Northern Ireland the DUP became the largest party, making four gains all from UUP. There is now an additional Sinn Fein member, a gain from the SDLP, which in turn maintained its number of seats by winning one from UUP. A third of the seats in Northern Ireland, therefore, saw a different party win, repeating the extent of change at the 2001 election.

A party benefits from the operation of the electoral system when its seats to votes ratio exceeds one because in those circumstances a party's share of seats is greater than its vote share. Of course, there may be different reasons for this. Larger parties tend to have favourable seat/vote ratios because of electoral system effects under 'first past the post' although this is not necessarily the case. As noted earlier the Conservative and Labour parties were virtually tied in votes across England, but the distribution of seats clearly favoured Labour and discriminated against the Conservatives. Smaller parties may also have a favourable ratio simply because their support is concentrated across a relatively small geographical area, rather than

fragmented across the country. In 2005, for example, both DUP and Sinn Fein won a greater proportion of seats than votes. Naturally, when the seat/vote ratio lies below one then a party has won a lower share of seats than its vote share.

Table 3 shows some seat/vote ratios for the 2005 election. The biggest advantage is Labour's with a ratio of 1.6 but the Conservative ratio of 0.9 shows the party's share of seats was close to its overall vote share (the party needed another 10 seats to achieve a ratio of 1). Among parties actually winning seats, the Liberal Democrats suffer most from the operation of the voting system (it would need to have won another 76 seats to achieve parity), while SNP and Plaid Cymru, whose vote is of course concentrated in a smaller number of constituencies, fare better. UKIP, which captured 2.2% of the nationwide vote, failed to win a single seat and so strictly speaking is the most unfairly treated party of all.

The contrast in the relationship between votes and seats is stark amongst the parties competing in Northern Ireland. While DUP enjoys the same favourable ratio as Labour, neither Sinn Fein nor SDLP are disadvantaged by the translation of votes into seats. The same cannot be said of the Ulster Unionist Party however.

Table 3: Seats/Votes ratio for selected political parties in 2005

<i>Party</i>	<i>Seats/Votes</i>
Labour	1.6
Conservative	0.9
Liberal Democrat	0.4
SNP	0.6
PC	0.7
DUP	1.6
UU	0.3
SF	1.2
SDLP	1.0

One useful method for assessing the electoral outcome in terms of seat/vote relationships and overall proportionality is to employ a measure such as the Loosemore-Hanby index. This index first measures the absolute difference (i.e. ignores negative or positive signs) between each party's share of votes and seats. The differences are then summed and the total divided by two, leaving the index of proportionality as a single summary statistic. An index score of zero would indicate complete equality between each party's seat and vote shares, although even in the most demanding system of proportional representation that would be rare. A benchmark of 10 or below normally indicates a proportional outcome. When applied to the results of the 2005 general election the index measures 20.7. The comparable figure for the previous election was 21.9, suggesting a slightly less disproportional outcome this time.

Candidates

The mean number of candidates fighting each constituency was 5.5 – higher than the average of 5.0 per seat that contested in 2001. To provide greater historical perspective on the continuing growth in competition it is worth noting that in 1966 the average was 2.7 candidates per seat, in 1974 3.5, and in 1987, when the Liberal/SDP Alliance fielded a full slate of candidates, 3.6. However, the 2005 figure is lower than that for 1997, when the Referendum Party helped boost the average to 5.7 candidates per seat.

In 2005 there were just 21 constituencies where only three candidates contested. All of these were in England, and were most abundant in the North East and North West. There were a further 136 seats which featured four candidates. At the opposite extreme there was one constituency (Sedgefield, held by the Prime Minister, Tony Blair) that attracted a total of fifteen candidates. The next comparable constituencies were Brighton Kemptown and Glasgow Central with ten candidates each.

Members of the 2001 parliament wishing to return for a further term accounted for 16.1% of all candidates. Some 88.4% of seats featured at least one incumbent seeking re-election. The most popular area for incumbents was the East Midlands where all but one of the 44 constituencies was contested thus. Perhaps unsurprisingly, 55 of the now reduced 59 seats in Scotland featured at least one incumbent challenging. In Dumfries and Galloway the revision of Scottish parliamentary boundaries meant that two incumbents, Russell Brown and Peter Duncan, were in direct competition. A similar situation occurred in Bethnal Green and Bow where Labour's Oonagh King was challenged by George Galloway who won Glasgow Kelvin for Labour in 2001 but stood for the Respect party in 2005.

From the total of 571 incumbents just fifty (8.8%) failed to win a seat. In percentage terms Northern Ireland is easily the most precarious area for incumbents, three former MPs losing their seats, or 20% of all incumbents. In London (9 or 14.1%) and Eastern (7 or 14%) incumbents also fared relatively badly. By contrast, none of the 26 incumbents challenging again for the total of 30 seats in the North East region were disappointed.

Men comprised more than three-quarters of candidates in 2005 (2,834, 79.7%). This means that there was a one-point rise in the proportion of women candidates (19.2% in 2001; 20.3% in 2005) contesting the general election. The proportions are very similar for the different parts of the UK, although in Wales women comprised 23.2% of all candidates. Within England women candidates could be found in larger numbers in the West Midlands (23.1%) and London (21.4%). In the South West and Eastern, however, the percentages were just 17.0% and 17.8% respectively.

Among the major parties, women candidates were most plentiful for Labour (26.5%) and Liberal Democrats (23.0%) while just less than one in five Conservative candidates was a woman. Of the minor parties that fielded more than 25 candidates in total, there were three (Socialist Labour, Scottish

Socialist Party and Respect) that had significant numbers of women wearing the party colours. In Northern Ireland five of the seven Alliance Party candidates was a woman. By contrast, little more than one in eight of UKIP's candidates was a woman and there were just four women among Plaid Cymru's forty candidates.

A total of 128 women (19.8%) were elected at the 2005 general election and all but three of these stood for one of the three main parties. Once again, Labour has the most women, 98 were elected, 27.6% of the parliamentary party. The Liberal Democrats saw 10 of its women candidates elected and these now comprise 16.1% of the party's Commons' membership. The Conservatives continue to elect fewer women MPs than its rivals, just 17 women compared to 181 men.

Among incumbents seeking re-election women were a smaller percentage (17.7%) than amongst candidates as a whole, but this figure almost exactly replicates their proportion in the Commons elected in 2001 (17.9%). There is nothing, therefore, to suggest that men and women MPs vary in terms of their desire to continue pursuing a parliamentary career. Those women that remained to fight another election fared only slightly worse than their male counterparts. A total of eleven women incumbents were defeated (10.9%) while 39 men (8.3%) suffered the same fate.

Turnout

For the first time at a general election since 1955, fewer electors were registered to vote in 2005 than at the previous contest. Much of the drop can be accounted for by the impact of new procedures for individual registration and voter identification in Northern Ireland, but the electorate was slightly down on 2001 in Scotland and Wales as well. Every part of the United Kingdom except Northern Ireland registered a modest increase in turnout – see Table 4. However, the adjusted (that is, valid vote) turnout of 61.4% was just 2 percentage points higher than in 2001 and was the second lowest figure since universal male suffrage in 1918. Turnout remains a 'problem'.

Table 4: Turnout at the 2005 general election

	<i>Electorate 2005</i>	<i>Valid votes 2005</i>	<i>Adjusted %turnout 2005</i>	<i>%Change 2001-5</i>
UK	44,245,939	27,148,510	61.4	+2.0
GB	43,105,946	26,430,908	61.3	+2.2
England	37,041,396	22,704,302	61.3	+2.2
N. Ireland	1,139,993	717,602	62.9	-5.1
Scotland	3,839,900	2,333,887	60.8	+2.7
Wales	2,224,650	1,392,719	62.6	+1.2
East Midlands	3,215,692	2,015,282	62.7	+1.9
Eastern	4,142,678	2,649,813	64.0	+2.3
London	5,049,694	2,919,130	57.8	+2.5
North East	1,911,820	1,098,176	57.4	+1.0
North West	5,135,150	2,944,990	57.3	+1.5
South East	6,031,692	3,901,148	64.7	+3.1
South West	3,839,841	2,553,315	66.5	+1.6
West Midlands	3,992,780	2,423,216	60.7	+2.1
Yorkshire & The Humber	3,722,049	2,199,232	59.1	+2.3
	<i>Electorate 2001</i>	<i>Change 2001-5</i>	<i>Valid votes 2001</i>	<i>Change 2001-5</i>
Northern Ireland	1,191,009	-51,016	810,374	-92,772

The turnout figures are broadly the same whether the total vote, the mean turnout across each constituency, or the median constituency turnout is considered – see Table 5.

Table 5: Turnout in 2005 using different statistical measures

<i>2005</i>	<i>Aggregate turnout</i>	<i>Mean turnout</i>	<i>Median turnout</i>
UK	61.4	61.2	62.0
GB	61.3	61.1	62.1
England	61.3	61.1	62.1
N. Ireland	62.9	62.8	61.7
Scotland	60.8	60.7	61.3
Wales	62.6	62.6	62.0

Turnout at the constituency level reflected this pattern –see Table 6. A total of 37 constituencies had turnouts in excess of 70% (17 in 2001), and 39 turnouts below 50% (66 in 2001). The large majority of constituencies in Great Britain (527 out of 628) saw increases in turnout and, of the remainder, turnout dropped by greater than 1% in only 35 instances. Once more Northern Ireland was the exception. Leaving aside the postponed election in Staffordshire South, the 12 biggest falls in turnout were in Northern Ireland with all 18 of its constituencies within the bottom 24 ranked constituencies. Individual constituency figures for Scotland need to be treated with caution because turnouts for 2001 are only estimates following boundary changes, but the contrasting fortunes of the two Dunbartonshire seats is worthy of note.

Table 6: Constituency level turnout and turnout change, 2005

<i>Highest turnout 2005</i>		<i>Lowest turnout 2005</i>		
England	Dorset West	76.4	Liverpool Riverside	41.5
Northern Ireland	Fermanagh and South Tyrone	73.5	Strangford	54.0
Scotland	Dunbartonshire East	73.1	Glasgow Central	43.9
Wales	Monmouth	73.4	Swansea East	53.6

<i>Biggest increase in turnout 2001-5</i>		<i>Biggest fall in turnout 2001-5</i>		
England	Maidenhead	+11.3	Hartlepool	-4.3
Northern Ireland	Belfast South	-2.5	Belfast North	-9.0
Scotland	Dunbartonshire East	+11.1	Dunbartonshire West	-2.9
Wales	Pontypridd	+8.3	Merthyr Tydfil and Rhymney	-2.2

There are interesting variations in turnout depending on the political status and marginality of the constituency –see Table 7. As is usual, turnout was sharply lower in safe as opposed to marginal seats. Turnout was also lower in constituencies won by Labour than in those won by either the Conservatives or the Liberal Democrats. Equally, turnout rose by less compared with 2001 in Labour seats. In constituencies gained by either the Conservatives or the Liberal Democrats, the increase in turnout was above average.

Table 7: Turnout by political status of constituency

<i>% majority 2001</i>	<i>Mean turnout 2005</i>	
0 to 5	66.3	
5 to 10	65.3	
10 to 20	64.1	
20+	57.6	

	<i>Mean turnout 2005</i>	<i>Change 2001-5</i>
Con seats	65.4	+2.3
Lab seats	58.1	+1.8
LD seats	65.0	+2.3
Con gains	66.1	+2.4
LD gains	64.0	+3.4

We are also able to examine turnout taking into account those electors who tried to vote but whose postal vote returns and/or ballot papers were rejected –see Table 8. ‘Minimal unadjusted turnout’ includes all electors whose ballot papers were scrutinised at the count. ‘Maximal unadjusted turnout’ adds those whose postal vote returns were deemed invalid and therefore not forwarded to the count. Each adjustment has the effect of fractionally increasing the % of the electorate who participated at the election. The largest proportion of rejected ballots appears to be in Northern Ireland (see later section).

Table 8: 'Adjusted' and 'unadjusted' turnout 2005

	<i>Adjusted %turnout 2005</i>	<i>'Minimal adjusted %turnout 2005'</i>	<i>'Maximal adjusted %turnout 2005'</i>
UK	61.4	61.6*	61.7^
GB	61.3	61.5*	61.7^
England	61.3	61.5	61.7^
N. Ireland	62.9	63.5	63.6
Scotland	60.8	60.9	61.0
Wales	62.6	62.8*	63.2^

*Data for one constituency in Wales missing.

^Data incomplete for 35 constituencies in England and one in Wales.

Postal voting – uptake and turnout

Considerable attention was paid during the election to the number of postal votes issued and the degree to which these had increased since 2001. In the UK as a whole the proportion of electors with postal votes trebled from 4% to 12.1% between 2001 and 2005 –see Table 9. The only exception to this pattern was Northern Ireland where postal voting declined following new regulations. Postal voting in Scotland remained less prevalent than in England and Wales, as was also the case in 2001. All the English regions saw large increases in the number of postal voters, with more than one in eight electors registered to vote in this way in five of the nine cases. Four of these regions were those which had had all postal ballots at the 2004 European Parliament elections, together with the more rural South West. In the North East, where there had also been an all-postal referendum in November 2004, the level of postal voting nearly reached 20%. There was a similar 'spike' among constituencies located within local authorities that had piloted all-postal voting for local elections in 2002 and/or 2003.

Table 9: Postal voting in 2005

<i>2005</i>	<i>Postal ballots issued</i>	<i>%electors with postal ballot</i>	<i>Change 2001-5</i>
UK*	5,362,501	12.1	8.1
GB*	5,334,821	12.4	8.4
England*	4,739,753	12.8	8.7
N. Ireland	27,680	2.4	-0.2
Scotland	312,036	8.1	5.4
Wales*	283,032	12.7	7.8

*Some or all data missing for 35 constituencies in England and one in Wales.

<i>English regions</i>	<i>%electors with postal ballot</i>	<i>Change 2001-5</i>
East Midlands*	13.5	+9.7
Eastern	12.1	+7.3
London	10.9	+7.2
North East*	19.3	+13.6
North West*	12.7	+9.0
South East	12.3	+8.2
South West	13.8	+9.1
West Midlands	10.7	+7.4
Yorkshire & The Humber*	14.2	+10.5

*All-postal voting at the 2004 European parliament elections.

<i>2002/3 all-postal pilots</i>	<i>%electors with postal ballot</i>	<i>Change 2001-5</i>
Pilot	18.3	+13.3
No pilot	11.4	+7.6

The individual constituencies at the top of the postal vote league table similarly reflect the importance of previous all-postal vote pilots in stimulating registration – see Table 10. Those at the bottom confirm that local authorities as well as political parties play a part in encouraging (or not) postal voting – all 3 constituencies in both Hull and Stoke-on-Trent and 6 out of the 7 in Glasgow fall into the bottom 20. Postal electors accounted for 12.4% of the total in the mean constituency in Great Britain, with a standard deviation of 5.23 around the mean.

Table 10: The extent of postal vote take-up in individual constituencies

<i>Top and bottom 20 postal vote take-up 2005 – % of electorate (G.B. only)</i>			
Newcastle upon Tyne North*	45.4	Stoke-on-Trent North	5.4
Stevenage*	45.0	Stoke-on-Trent Central	5.3
Rushcliffe*	39.9	Liverpool Walton*	5.3
Newcastle upon Tyne Central*	36.7	Nuneaton	5.2
Newcastle upon Tyne East & Wallsend*	35.4	Bootle*	5.1
South Shields*	35.2	Airdrie & Shotts	4.9
Jarrow*	33.1	Luton North	4.9
Hackney South & Shoreditch*	30.6	Coatbridge, Chryston & Bellshill	4.9
Tyne Bridge*	30.4	Stoke-on-Trent South	4.7
The Wrekin*	30.4	Brent South	4.5
Hackney North & Stoke Newington*	30.1	Motherwell & Wishaw	4.5
Telford*	29.3	Glasgow South	4.5
Durham North*	26.8	Hull North*	4.3
Norwich South	26.4	Hull West & Hessle*	4.3
Rotherham*	25.2	Glasgow North	4.2
Don Valley*	24.3	Hull East*	4.1
Chorley*	24.0	Glasgow South West	4.1
Blaydon*	23.8	Glasgow Central	4.0
Cheltenham	23.3	Glasgow North East	3.9
Blackpool North & Fleetwood*	23.0	Glasgow East	3.1

*All-postal vote at one or more elections 2002-4 inclusive.

<i>Top 20 change in % of electorate with postal votes 2001-5 (G.B. only)</i>			
Rushcliffe*	36.1	Don Valley*	21.3
South Shields*	32.4	Newcastle upon Tyne East & Wallsend*	21.3
Jarrow*	30.5	Tyne Bridge*	21.2
Hackney South & Shoreditch*	29.6	Blaydon*	20.3
Hackney North & Stoke Newington*	28.7	Rotherham*	20.0
Newcastle upon Tyne North*	28.1	Doncaster North*	19.9
Telford*	26.6	Blyth Valley*	19.7
The Wrekin*	25.5	Blackpool South*	19.4
Newcastle upon Tyne Central*	23.9	Rother Valley*	19.3
Durham North*	21.6	Wentworth*	19.0

*All-postal vote at one or more elections 2002-4 inclusive.

In excess of three-quarters of those issued with postal votes returned them. Perhaps surprisingly, the proportion of postal ballots rejected before being forwarded to the count did not grow in line with the number of votes cast in this way (Northern Ireland is again an exception) –see Table 11. Although many electors had previously experienced pilots where there was no requirement for a witnessed declaration of identity, the vast majority correctly filed their returns complete with witness attestation. We have no ready explanation why twice as many postal votes should be rejected in Wales as in Scotland and England: a situation prevailing at both the previous general election and the 2004 European Parliament contest.

Table 11: Invalid postal vote returns 2005

<i>2005</i>	<i>% Postal ballots returned</i>	<i>Invalid returns</i>	<i>Invalid as % of returned</i>	<i>Change 2001-5</i>
UK*	78.6	102,545	2.5	0.1
GB*	78.6	101,307	2.5	0.3
England*	78.6	86,170	2.4	0.4
N. Ireland	87.4	1,238	5.2	3.6
Scotland	79.4	4,917	2.1	-0.6
Wales*	78.2	10,220	4.6	-0.5

*Some or all data missing for 35 constituencies in England and one in Wales.

The increase in the take up of postal votes had an inevitable impact on the proportion of total votes cast in that way. Across the United Kingdom 15% of all the votes counted were postal ballots –see Table 12. In England and Wales the figure was even higher, balancing the continuing lower popularity of this form of voting in Scotland. In the North East postal votes comprised a quarter of the total, and constituencies in ‘pilot’ local authorities were not far below that level. In two individual constituencies, Newcastle upon Tyne North and Stevenage, a majority of all votes were cast by post. Postal votes accounted for 15.5% of all votes counted in the mean constituency in Great Britain, with a standard deviation of 6.71 around the mean.

Table 12: Postal votes as % of valid vote cast

	<i>postal votes as % of valid votes cast</i>	<i>Change 2001-5</i>
UK	15.0	+9.8
GB	15.4	+10.1
England	16.0	+10.7
Northern Ireland	3.0	-0.2
Scotland	10.2	+6.4
Wales	15.6	+9.3
English regions*		
*2004 pilot regions		
East Midlands*	16.7	
Eastern	14.3	
London	13.7	
North East*	25.1	
North West*	17.3	
South East	14.8	
South West	16.5	
West Midlands	13.3	
Yorkshire & The Humber*	18.6	
2002/3 all-postal pilots		
Pilot	23.8	
No Pilot	14.2	

The sharp rise in postal votes between 2001 and 2005, together with the more modest increase in turnout over the same period, poses interesting questions. Turnout among postal electors was significantly higher than that among in-person voters, with postal electors being almost as likely to use their vote as in 2001 when they were far less numerous –see Table 13. In-person voters were only fractionally more likely to have turned out this time. The extension of postal voting seems to have helped to add about one percentage point to overall participation, but is far from a panacea for the problem of low turnout. The limited impact of postal voting can also be seen from the relationship between the degree to which it increased between 2001 and 2005 and the change in turnout at those two elections. Whereas turnout was on average 1.3 percentage points higher than in 2001 in those constituencies where there had been a 4 point or less increase in postal votes cast, it was only 2.4 points higher where postal voting had increased by 10 percentage points or more.

Table 13: Turnout among postal and in-person electors

	<i>'Minimal unadjusted' turnout (postal electors)</i>		<i>'Minimal unadjusted turnout' (in-person electors)</i>	
	2005	Change 2001-5	2005	Change 2001-5
UK*	76.7	-1.3	59.5	+0.8
GB*	76.6	-1.3	59.4	+1.0
England*	76.7	-0.9	59.3	+0.9
Northern Ireland	83.0	-0.8	63.0	-5.2
Scotland	77.8	-3.1	59.4	+2.0
Wales*	74.6	-3.7	60.7	+0.5

*Some or all data missing for 35 constituencies in England and one in Wales.

<i>% point increase in postal votes cast 2001-5</i>	<i>overall % point change in turnout since 2001</i>
Less than 4	+1.3
4 to 6	+1.8
6 to 8	+2.2
8 to 10	+2.5
10 or more	+2.4

Proxy voting

It was expected that easier access to postal voting would lead to a decrease in the number of electors wishing or having the need to appoint proxies. This was indeed the case with fewer than 100,000 proxy votes compared with nearly 250,000 in 2001 – see Table 14. In only 17 individual constituencies did proxy voting increase rather than decrease, with Islington North (where the number of proxies rose from 145 in 2001 to 1144 in 2005) being a notable outlier. On average, however, little more than a fifth of one per cent of electors now rely on a proxy to cast their vote.

Table 14: Proxy voting 2005

	<i>Proxy votes cast 2005</i>	<i>as % of electorate</i>	<i>Change 2001-5</i>
UK	99,413	0.22	-0.32
GB	92,716	0.22	-0.32
England	81,135	0.22	-0.32
N. Ireland	6,697	0.59	-0.25
Scotland	7,282	0.19	-0.39
Wales*	4,299	0.19	-0.26

*Data missing for one constituency in Wales.

Spoilt ballots

The number of ballot papers rejected at the count continues to be but a small fraction of the total cast, and is hardly changed compared with 2001 –see Table 15. The bulk of these are because the voter has either not marked the ballot paper or made their intention clear. In just under a quarter of cases voters have chosen more than one candidate in a single-member election. Northern Ireland once more provides something of an exception. An overall greater proportion of votes are rejected, two-thirds of them for voting more than once. It is likely that this is caused by confusion among electors who normally vote in Single Transferable Vote elections where they are invited to cast a preference vote for all candidates on the ballot paper.

Table 15: Rejected ballot papers 2005

	<i>Ballot papers rejected at the count</i>	<i>% of ballots at count</i>	<i>Change 2001-5</i>
UK	85,038	0.31	-0.07
GB	78,872	0.30	-0.06
England	70,587	0.31	-0.08
N. Ireland	6,166	0.85	-0.01
Scotland	4,669	0.20	+0.02
Wales*	3,616	0.26	+0.03

*Data for one constituency missing.

	Reasons for rejection*				
	<i>No official mark (%)</i>	<i>Voting more than once (%)</i>	<i>Voter could be identified (%)</i>	<i>Void or uncertain (%)</i>	<i>Rejected in part (%)</i>
UK	2,971 (3.5)	20,595 (24.6)	4,439 (5.3)	54,377 (64.8)	1,478 (1.8)
GB	2,545 (3.3)	16,474 (21.2)	4,312 (5.5)	52,885 (68.1)	1,478 (1.9)
England	2,025 (2.9)	14,376 (20.6)	3,438 (4.9)	48,402 (69.4)	1,478 (2.1)
N. Ireland	426 (6.9)	4,121 (66.8)	127 (2.1)	1,492 (24.2)	-
Scotland	397 (7.5)	1,245 (23.4)	783 (14.7)	2,902 (54.5)	-
Wales	181 (5.4)	1,070 (32.0)	109 (3.3)	1,986 (59.4)	-

*Not all constituencies provided this breakdown.

There is some variation between constituencies in both the number and proportion of ballot papers rejected, and in the reasons for rejection. For example, over 500 electors in Cumbernauld, Kilsyth & Kirkintilloch East (1.6% of the total) were reported to have had their votes discounted because of marks made by which they could be identified. On the other hand, there was no case of this offence recorded in nearly 200 constituencies. Although returning officers are likely to differ in their judgements about the admissibility of ballots, and although electors in some constituencies may be more prone to making errors than those in others, the data on individual seats need to be interpreted with caution.

Correlates of turnout

Turnout at general elections has long been correlated with both the socio-economic character and political marginality of the constituency. 2005 was no exception to this pattern, with results very similar to those for 2001 –see Table 16. A simple regression equation containing six predictor variables (marked ^ in the Table below) is able to explain 79% of the constituency by constituency variance in turnout in Great Britain in 2005, and 77% of that in England and Wales 2001. Housing, car ownership and marginality show especially strong bi-variate correlations with turnout, but *all* the relationships are statistically significant. The basic rule: the more affluent the area and/or the more marginal the seat, the higher the turnout.

Table 16: Correlates of turnout 2005 and 2001

	Correlation with % turnout 2005	Correlation with % turnout 2001
% prof/managerial workers [^]	0.433	0.339
% owner-occupiers	0.715	0.721
% renting	-0.730	-0.727
% aged 18-24 [^]	-0.465	-0.508
% aged 65+ [^]	0.423	0.463
% degree	0.466	0.381
% no religion [^]	0.075	-0.004
% no car [^]	-0.796	-0.805
% non-white	-0.405	-0.416
% majority post-election	-0.508	-0.679
% majority pre-election [^]	-0.718	-0.700*

*excluding Scottish constituencies for which there are no 1997 notional results.

[^] predictor variables used in regression equation

Correlates of postal voting

It is also interesting to search for correlations between the extent of postal voting and constituency socio-economic and political characteristics. The signs on the coefficients suggest that a positive relationship exists between increased postal vote registration and *less* affluent and/or politically *less* marginal areas. This runs contrary to the media emphasis on the importance accorded by political parties at the election to maximising postal votes in marginal seats, but does make sense in terms of the kinds of places where

all-postal pilots have been most prevalent. The importance of these is confirmed in a simple regression equation which shows that previous experience of all-postal ballots was the key, significant component in explaining the percentage point change between 2001 and 2005 in the proportion of the electorate issued with postal ballots in each constituency. By contrast, the majority in the constituency following the 2001 general election has a tiny and non-significant effect.

Table 17: Correlates of the postal electorate 2005 and 2001

	<i>Correlation with % of electorate with postal vote</i>	<i>Correlation with increase in postal vote 2001-5</i>
% prof/managerial workers	0.048	-0.151*
% owner-occupiers	0.010	-0.249*
% renting	-0.006	0.313*
% aged 18-24	0.036	0.106*
% aged 65+	0.031	-0.198*
% degree	0.005	-0.200*
% no religion	-0.059	-0.112*
% no car	-0.009	0.264*
% non-white	-0.064	0.177
% majority 2005/1	-0.072	0.240*
% majority 2001/1997	0.004	0.339*

*significant at 0.001 level.