



Media handbook

UK Parliamentary general election in
Great Britain

Translations and other formats

For information on obtaining this publication in another language or in a large-print or Braille version, please contact the Electoral Commission:

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Email: publications@electoralcommission.org.uk

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Please note: this publication covers England, Scotland and Wales. A separate media handbook on a UK Parliamentary general election in Northern Ireland is available on our website at

www.electoralcommission.org.uk/news-and-media/media-resources

1 Media contacts and resources

Contact information

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Email: press@electoralcommission.org.uk

Websites

www.electoralcommission.org.uk

Our corporate website features a dedicated elections area:

www.electoralcommission.org.uk/elections and a dedicated media centre for journalists www.electoralcommission.org.uk/news-and-media

www.aboutmyvote.co.uk

This website provides information on how to register and vote. It includes a postcode search facility that allows people to find out where elections are taking place and an interactive 'polling station walk-through'.

www.dopolitics.org.uk

The Do Politics Centre is an online resource for democracy practitioners. It provides information and resources to equip people to run interactive workshops and events.

Images

We have a range of election and voting related images, which are available by contacting the Commission press office or by visiting our website at

www.electoralcommission.org.uk/news-and-media/media-resources/press-images

2 UK Parliamentary general election calendar

Event	Date
Start of regulated period for campaign spending by political parties	Thursday 5 February 2009
Start of 'long campaign' regulated period for candidates' expenses	Friday 1 January 2010
Dissolution of Parliament and issue of writ	Monday 12 April 2010
Start of 'short campaign' regulated period for candidates' expenses	Tuesday 13 April 2010
Receipt of writ	Monday 12 or Tuesday 13 April 2010
Last day for publication of notice of election	Wednesday 14 or Thursday 15 April 2010
Deadline for delivery of nomination papers	Tuesday 20 April 2010
Deadline for registering to vote	Tuesday 20 April 2010
Deadline for applying for a postal vote	5pm, Tuesday 20 April 2010
Statements of persons nominated published	By Wednesday 21 April 2010
Last day for withdrawal of nominations	Tuesday 20 April 2010
Deadline for applying for a proxy vote	5pm, Tuesday 27 April 2010
Deadline to issue replacement postal ballots	5pm, Thursday 6 May 2010
Deadline for applying for a proxy vote for medical emergency	5pm, Thursday 6 May 2010
Polling day	7am to 10pm, Thursday 6 May 2010
Verification and counting of ballot paper	Starting as soon as practicable after 10pm, Thursday 6 May 2010
Declaration of result	Thursday 6 May or Friday 7 May 2010, depending on count

UK Parliamentary general election example timetable (continued)

Event	Date
Last date for return of candidates' expenses	Thursday 10 or Friday 11 June 2010, depending on declaration of result
Last date for return of party campaign spending returns (up to and including £250,000)	Thursday 5 August 2010
Last date for return of party campaign spending returns (over £250,000)	Friday 5 November 2010

3 Who's who at the election

The Electoral Commission

The Electoral Commission is an independent body set up by the UK Parliament. We set standards for well-run elections and regulate party and election finance. We:

- make sure people understand how to register to vote and know how to cast their vote
- set the standards for running elections and electoral registration and report on how well this is done
- register political parties
- make sure people understand and follow the rules on party and election finance
- publish details of where parties and candidates get their money from and how they spend it

For the UK Parliamentary general election, we have published guidance for political parties, candidates and their agents, and third parties on how they can comply with their statutory reporting requirements. We have also supplied guidance for polling station staff. These are all available on our website at www.electoralcommission.org.uk/guidance

We are running a public information campaign so people know how to register in time to vote at the UK Parliamentary general election. Details of our campaigns are available on our website at www.electoralcommission.org.uk/news-and-media/public-awareness-campaigns

We are statutorily required to publish a report on the administration of the UK Parliamentary general election. We will also report on the administration of the local elections in England. We will publish all reports in autumn 2010.

Returning Officer and Acting Returning Officer

In England and Wales, the Returning Officer (RO) in a UK Parliamentary general election is a largely ceremonial position. ROs have the right to receive the writ and announce the results of the count.

The Acting Returning Officer (ARO) has responsibility for the organisation and conduct of the election – including nominations, distribution of poll cards and postal ballot papers, the conduct of the poll and the counting of votes – and is normally a senior council official or the Chief Executive of the local authority.

In Scotland the position of RO is not ceremonial, and they hold responsibility for the running of the election. There is no ARO position. The RO is likely to be a senior council official.

In Northern Ireland, the Chief Electoral Officer – supported by the Electoral Office for Northern Ireland – is responsible for running elections.

Electoral Registration Officer

The Electoral Registration Officer (ERO) is responsible for the preparation and maintenance of the electoral register and list of absent voters within their area. Every local authority is required to appoint an ERO.

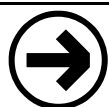
Presiding Officer and poll clerks

(A)ROs appoint Presiding Officers to run polling stations. They must act impartially at all times and ensure that the proper procedure for voting is observed. Duties include organising the layout of the polling station, supervising poll clerks, issuing ballot papers, assisting voters and ensuring that ballot boxes are transported securely to the count venue.

Poll clerks are employed to assist the Presiding Officer with their duties in the polling station.

Electoral observers

Anyone can apply to the Electoral Commission to be an observer at an election. Observers must agree to abide by the Commission's Code of Practice, including respecting the secrecy of the ballot. Representatives of the Electoral Commission may also attend. Observers can ask questions of candidates, agents, electoral staff and electors and observe proceedings at the poll, count and the issue and receipt of postal ballots



To find out more about being an election observer, please visit the Electoral Commission website at www.electoralcommission.org.uk/elections/electoral_observers

Election agents

An election agent is the person responsible in law for the proper management of a candidate's election campaign. By law, certain people cannot be an election agent, e.g. employees of the RO. Candidates who do not appoint an agent take responsibility themselves and are automatically deemed to be their own election agent.

Tellers

'Tellers' or 'checkers' are political party volunteers who stand outside polling stations and record the electoral numbers of those who have voted. They identify likely supporters who have not voted and urge them to vote before the close of poll. While they have an important role in elections, they have no official legal status. The law does not permit tellers to operate inside polling stations.

4 Standing for election

Who can stand as a candidate?

To be a candidate in a UK Parliamentary general election, a person must be:

- at least 18 years of age on the day they are nominated and on polling day
- a British, Irish or qualifying Commonwealth citizen. A qualifying Commonwealth citizen is one that has indefinite leave to remain in the UK or does not require leave to remain

A candidate is not required to live in the Parliamentary constituency in which they wish to stand.



This will be the first UK Parliamentary general election in which candidates as young as 18 years of age will be able to stand. The Electoral Administration Act 2006 reduced the minimum qualifying age from 21 years old to 18 years old.

Is there any reason someone can't stand as a candidate?

There are certain people who cannot stand for election to the UK Parliament. These include:

- someone who is the subject of a bankruptcy restrictions or debt relief order in England and Wales, has been adjudged bankrupt in Northern Ireland, or had their estate sequestered in Scotland and they have not been discharged
- convicted prisoners serving a prison sentence of more than 12 months and who are currently in custody due to that sentence
- people found guilty of certain electoral offences (corrupt or illegal practices)
- certain Crown employees, including civil servants, police officers, members of the armed forces and judges
- anyone who is entitled to sit and vote in the House of Lords

How do you become a UK Parliamentary candidate?

Candidates must secure the support of 10 'subscribers' to assent to their nomination: a 'proposer', a 'seconder' and eight other assenters, who are registered and eligible to vote in the constituency in which they wish to stand.

Candidates or their agent, proposer or seconder must hand deliver a hard copy of their nomination papers, signed by their subscribers, to the (Acting) Returning Officer ((A)RO) by 4pm on Tuesday 20 April.



The Commission produces guidance for candidates and their agents which covers all aspects of standing for elections, including nominations, campaigning and the count. The guidance is available on our website at www.electoralcommission.org.uk/guidance/candidates-agents/candidates-and-agents

Is there a deposit and do candidates get it back?

Candidates are required to pay a £500 deposit at a UK Parliamentary general election. They must pay the deposit before 4pm on Tuesday 20 April.

Candidates who poll less than five per cent of the total votes cast in their constituency forfeit their deposit.

How does a candidate stand for a party?

If a candidate wishes to stand for a political party, and use that party's name or registered description on the ballot paper, they must seek the permission of that party.

The party's Nominating Officer, or someone authorised by the Nominating Officer to do so, would then issue a 'certificate of authorisation'.

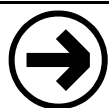
5 Campaigning and expenditure

What is Purdah?

'Purdah' refers to the period between the dissolution of Parliament and polling day. The Cabinet Office issue guidance for Ministers and civil servants on the handling of Government business designed to ensure that no party or candidate uses their position for electoral advantage during this period.

The Department for Communities and Local Government produces a separate set of guidelines for local authorities.

As the devolved legislatures in Scotland and Wales are not being elected, devolved Ministers and civil servants in Scotland and Wales should continue to carry out their devolved functions in the usual way.



For further information on the Purdah period, contact the Cabinet Office press office or see their guidelines on recommended practice at www.cabinetoffice.gov.uk/propriety_and_ethics/civil_service/election_guidance.aspx

Are there rules about what candidates can say about one another?

It is illegal to make a false statement of fact about the personal character or conduct of a candidate in order to affect the return of a candidate at an election. It is a defence to show reasonable grounds for believing that the statement was true.

In addition, rules about defamation or libel could also apply to elections materials.

Do candidates get free delivery of leaflets?

Every candidate at a UK Parliamentary general election is entitled to free postage on an 'electoral communication', usually a leaflet, sent to electors in their constituency. Candidates should contact a universal service provider, such as Royal Mail, to make arrangements. Reasonable terms and conditions apply.

What are imprints?

An 'imprint' is the name and address of the printer and promoter of a candidate or party's election material. The purpose of imprints is so that electors can be clear about the source of campaign information.

All printed election materials (i.e. posters, placards and leaflets distributed for the purpose of promoting the election of a candidate or party) must include an imprint.

What are hustings?

'Hustings' can be organised by anyone, and are events where election candidates debate policies and answer questions from an audience. There is no legal requirement for all candidates standing in an area to be invited.

If someone other than the candidate or candidates meets the costs of the event, this may constitute a donation and count towards the election expenses of the candidate or candidates.

If an event is open to the public and is run in a way that genuinely does not promote the electoral success of particular candidates, we consider that it should not count towards any candidates election expenses.


In addition, it is the Electoral Commission's view that the costs of the event will **not** count against a candidates election expenses if:

- you have invited all the candidates in the constituency to attend
- your hustings is only open to members of your organisation

The simplest way to show that a hustings is genuine is to invite all known candidates in the relevant area. However, this may not always be practical. If an organiser of an event decides not to invite all the known candidates, they should be able to give objective reasons to show that the hustings is non-promotional.

These reasons should not be based on subjective matters, such as your view of the policies or a party or candidate.

Debates broadcast by the BBC, S4C or commercial broadcasters are exempt from candidate expenditure controls.

 The Commission produces guidance for parties, candidates, agents and hustings organisers. For further information, please see the *Topic Overview: Hustings Events* fact sheet on the Commission's website at: www.electoralcommission.org.uk/guidance/resources-for-those-we-regulate

How are Party Election Broadcasts allocated?

The Communications Act 2003 requires certain broadcasters to carry Party Election Broadcasts (PEB) (or Party Political Broadcasts (PPB)) based on allocation rules created by Ofcom. These rules apply to ITV1, Channel 4, Five, talkSPORT, Virgin AM and Classic FM.

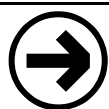
S4C is required to carry broadcasts under the Act but is regulated by the Welsh Authority.

The BBC is required to carry PEBs under its Charter and Agreements but is not regulated by Ofcom.

Sky is not required to carry PEBs but has done so voluntarily in the past.

Parties qualify for a broadcast on the basis of contesting one-sixth or more of the seats up for election. England, Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland are considered separately. Parties may receive additional broadcasts depending on their level of past and/or current electoral support.

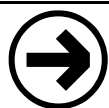
Political parties pay for and produce the content of PEBs, which must observe the law – for example, on copyright, libel, contempt, obscenity, incitement to racial hatred or violence. They must comply with the Ofcom Broadcasting Code or BBC Editorial Guidelines that relate to harm and offence and fairness and privacy.



To find out more from the Broadcasters Liaison Group, a group of Ofcom broadcasters that discusses the allocation of PEBs visit www.broadcastersliaisongroup.org.uk

What are the rules on political impartiality for broadcasters and programme makers?

Political impartiality in broadcasts is covered by the editorial guidelines or code relevant to that particular broadcaster.



The BBC's editorial guidelines on broadcasting during an election can be found at www.bbc.co.uk/guidelines/editorialguidelines/edguide/politics/broadcastingdur.shtml. The Ofcom Broadcasting Code can be found at www.ofcom.org.uk/tv/ifi/codes/bcode/elections/

How much can parties spend nationally?

For a UK Parliamentary general election, political parties are subject to national spending limits based on a formula set out in legislation. The amount a party may spend nationally is £30,000 multiplied by the number of seats they are contesting. A party contesting all 650 seats in the UK Parliament can spend up to £19.5 million. There are separate spending limits for candidates (see 'How much can candidates spend?' later in this chapter).

The regulated period for political parties at this UK Parliamentary general election overlaps with the regulated period for parties at the 2009 European Parliamentary elections. As a result, the spending limits for the UK Parliamentary general election and the European Parliamentary elections are combined. Any under spend by a party in relation to the European Parliamentary elections limit may be added to the UK Parliamentary general election spending limit.¹

¹ For spending by political parties at the 2009 European Parliamentary elections, please see <http://registers.electoralcommission.org.uk/regulatory-issues/gbcampaignex.cfm>

Example

'Party A' contests all seats in Great Britain for both the European Parliamentary elections and the UK Parliamentary general election. If 'Party A' spends £3,000,000 at the European Parliamentary elections (£105,000 under their prescribed limit of £3,105,000), they can then add the amount of that under spend onto their UK Parliamentary general election limit. This would allow 'Party A' to spend £19,065,000 in Great Britain at the UK Parliamentary general election.

When is party spending limited from?

The party spending limit for the UK Parliamentary general election overlaps with that of the 2009 European Parliamentary elections. The combined spending limit applies from 5 February 2009. The maximum combined campaign spending limits for parties are outlined in Table 1 below. The actual limit for each party will depend on how many seats it contests in the UK Parliamentary general election, and how many regions it contested in the European Parliamentary elections.

Table 1: Combined election campaign spending limits for parties

Location	UK Parliamentary spending limit	European Parliamentary spending limit	Combined spending limit
England	£15,990,000	£2,655,000	£18,645,000
Scotland	£1,770,000	£270,000	£2,040,000
Wales	£1,200,000	£180,000	£1,380,000
Great Britain	£18,960,000	£3,105,000	£22,065,000
Northern Ireland	£540,000	£135,000	£675,000
United Kingdom	£19,500,000	£3,240,000	£22,740,000

Who do parties send spending returns to?

Political parties contesting the election must submit a report to the Electoral Commission detailing all the campaign expenditure they have incurred. Parties must submit this within three months of the election if they spent up to £250,000, or within six months of the election if they spent more than £250,000.

We will publish campaign expenditure by parties on our website as soon as is reasonably practicable.

Do parties have to report donations they receive?

Political parties have to report all donations from the same source that total over £7,500 made to central parties and donations over £1,500 made to local accounting units. Parties must report on a quarterly basis. However, during the UK Parliamentary general election period (from the date that the Prime Minister calls the election to the date of the poll), central parties must report donations to the Commission on a weekly basis. The Commission will then publish this information on its website as detailed in Table 2 below.

Table 2: Reporting periods and publication dates for party donations

Reporting period	Deadline for reporting	Publication date
6 – 12 April	19 April	20 April
13-19 April	26 April	27 April
20 – 26 April	3 May	4 May
27 April – 3 May	10 May	11 May
4 – 6 May	13 May	14, May

How much did parties spend at the last two UK Parliamentary general elections?²

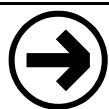
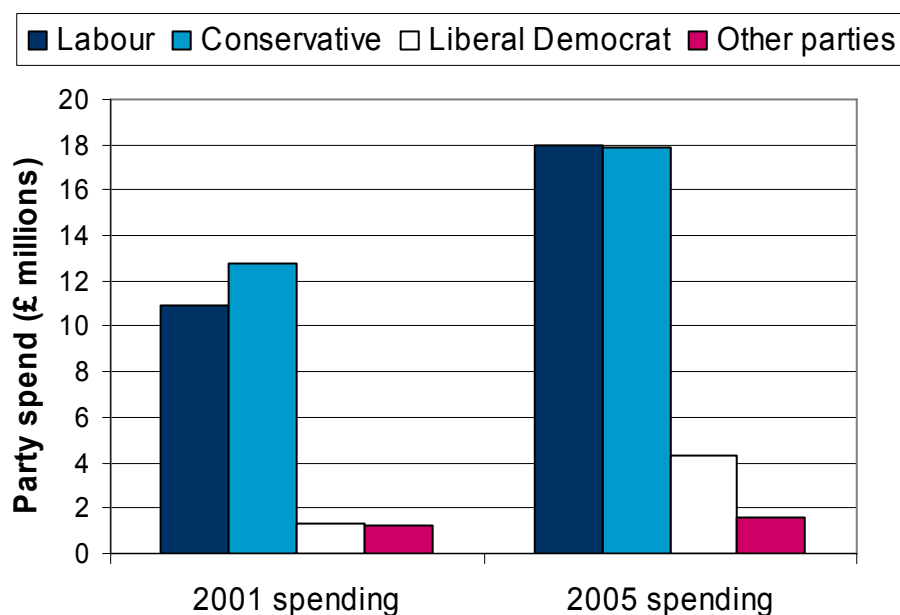
Table 3 and Figure 1 below show party spending in the last two UK Parliamentary general elections held in 2001 and 2005.

Table 3: Party spending at the 2001 and 2005 elections in Great Britain

Party	2001 spending	2005 spending
Labour	£10,945,119	£17,939,617
Conservative Party	£12,751,813	£17,852,240
Liberal Democrats	£1,361,377	£4,324,574
Scottish National Party	£226,203	£193,987
Plaid Cymru	£71,948	£38,879
Other parties	£901,800	£1,380,106
Total	£26,258,260	£41,729,403

² The June 2001 UK Parliamentary general election was the subject of special reduced spending limits (£15,384,000 for a party contesting all UK Parliamentary constituencies).

Figure 1: Party spending at the 2001 and 2005 elections in Great Britain



For information on campaign spending by political parties at previous UK Parliamentary general elections, visit <http://registers.electoralcommission.org.uk/regulatory-issues/gbcampaignex.cfm>

How much can candidates spend?

The regulated period, during which a candidate's spending is limited, is split into the 'long campaign' and 'short campaign'.

The 'short campaign' runs from the dissolution of Parliament to polling day. During this period, candidates may spend **£7,150 plus 5p per elector in a borough (or burgh in Scotland) constituency or plus 7p per elector in a county constituency.**

The 'long campaign' regulates spending in the period before Parliament is dissolved, but applies only if Parliament has been sitting for 55 months.

Between 55 months (the long campaign is from 1 January 2010 at this election) and the dissolution of Parliament, each candidate can spend **£25,000 plus 5p per elector in a borough constituency and 7p per elector in a county constituency.**

The percentage of the new limit that a candidate may spend depends on when the dissolution of Parliament takes place. This is so the overall amount a candidate can spend reflects the overall length of the regulated period, i.e. the combined short and long campaign period. For this election, candidates may spend 100 percent of their 'long campaign' spending limit.

The later Parliament is dissolved, the more a candidate can spend of their long campaign limit.

The candidate spending limits for these periods are distinct and may not be combined.

Do candidates have to report donations they receive?

Candidates must include details of all individual donations of over £50 accepted during the regulated period in their expenditure returns to Returning Officers. In addition, candidates must provide the total of all the donations of under £50 that they receive.

During this period, all donations of over £50 to candidates must be from a permissible source.

Who do candidates report their expenditure to?

Candidates must submit their spending return to the Acting Returning Officer in the constituency in which they stand. These must be submitted within 35 days of the declaration of the result.

Do organisations and individuals that are not parties or candidates have to report spending?

In every election, there will be individuals and organisations that campaign in the election, but are not standing as political parties or candidates. We call these 'third parties'.

Third parties that campaign at a UK general election – and plan to spend more than £10,000 in England or £5,000 in Scotland, Wales or Northern Ireland – must register with the Commission and report their campaign expenditure to the Commission.

The third party spending limit for the UK Parliamentary general election overlaps with that of the 2009 European Parliamentary elections. The combined spending limit applies from 5 February 2009.

Table 4: Third party spending limits for the 2010 UK general election

Area	Spending limit
England	£953,250
Scotland	£126,000
Wales	£71,259
UK total	£1,184,249

Third parties must also report donations of more than £7,500 that they receive during the regulated period and used for controlled expenditure. They must also report a total figure for all donations under £7,500.

6 Electoral fraud and malpractice

What types of electoral offences are there?

There are a number of offences under electoral legislation that can arise during an election period.



Electoral malpractice under the Representation of the People Act 1983 (as amended) is a criminal offence. The appropriate police force would investigate such allegations.

Bribery – A person is guilty of bribery if they directly or indirectly give any money or procure any office to or for any voter, in order to induce any voter to vote, or refrain from voting.

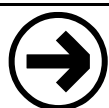
Undue influence – A person is guilty of undue influence if they make use of or threaten to make use of force, violence or restraint, or inflict or threaten to inflict injury, damage, loss or harm in order to induce or compel any voter to vote or refrain from voting.

Secrecy – Everyone involved in the electoral process should be aware of the secrecy of the ballot under Section 66 of the Representation of the People Act 1983.

Personation – This is where any individual votes as someone else (whether that person is living or dead or is a fictitious person), either by post or in person at a polling station as an elector, or as a proxy.

Multiple voting and proxy voting offences – There are various offences regarding multiple voting and proxy voting, including voting by post as an elector or proxy when subject to a legal incapacity to vote, voting more than once in the same election, and applying for a proxy without cancelling a previous proxy appointment.

False registration information – It is an offence to supply false registration information to an Electoral Registration Officer. It is also an offence to supply false information in connection with an application for a postal or proxy vote.



Further details and the penalties for electoral offences in England and Wales and Scotland can be found in our guidance created jointly with the Association of Chief Police Officers and Association of Chief Police Officers (Scotland), available at www.electoralcommission.org.uk/guidance/resources-for-electoral-administrators/integrity-guidance/electoral-events

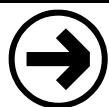
What does the Commission do to prevent electoral fraud?

We work closely with Returning Officers, Electoral Registration Officers, political parties, police and prosecutors to tackle malpractice. This includes producing guidance and a pocket guide to electoral offences for police officers, postal workers and party workers.

We have also agreed a code of conduct with political parties for the handling of postal vote applications and postal ballot packs by political parties, candidates and canvassers.

The code operates on the following two key principles:

- Candidates and supporters should assist in the efficient and secure administration of elections and uphold the secrecy of the ballot.
- No candidate or supporter should place themselves in a situation where their honesty or integrity – or that of the party or candidate – can be questioned.



The *Code of conduct on handling of postal votes* is available on our website at www.electoralcommission.org.uk/document-summary?assetid=71890 (England and Wales) and www.electoralcommission.org.uk/document-summary?assetid=14115 (Scotland).

What offences does the Electoral Commission investigate?

There are also **expenditure related offences** – Various offences including breaches relating to campaign expenses limits, campaign spending reports, party accounting requirements and donations controls (see Section 5). These can apply to political parties, individuals and other organisations involved in election campaigning.



The Commission is responsible for ensuring parties, individuals and other organisations comply with the Political Parties, Elections and Referendums Act 2000 and certain parts of the Representation of the People Act 1983 (as amended). For more information, see the enforcement section of our website: www.electoralcommission.org.uk/party-finance/enforcement, including details of how we handle allegations.

7 Registering to vote

Who can register to vote?

A person can register to vote in the UK Parliamentary general election if they are:

- aged 18 or over on polling day (16 and 17 year olds can register but not vote)
- a British citizen, Irish citizen or qualifying Commonwealth citizen resident in the UK. A qualifying Commonwealth citizen is one that has leave to remain in the UK or does not require such leave

Voters must register by Tuesday 20 April in order to be able vote on Thursday 6 May.

European Union citizens resident in the UK cannot vote in a UK Parliamentary general election, but can also be included on the electoral register and vote in local, Northern Ireland Assembly, Welsh Assembly, Scottish Parliament and European Parliamentary elections.

How do you register to vote?

Anyone wishing to register to vote should contact the Electoral Registration Officer at their local authority (local authority or Valuation Joint Board in Scotland), or go to www.aboutmyvote.co.uk and print off a registration form or call the Commission's helpline on 0800 3 280 280.

Can UK citizens living overseas register to vote?

British citizens living abroad can register as an 'overseas voter' and vote in UK Parliamentary general elections and European Parliamentary elections for 15 years after they were last on the electoral register in the UK. They register in the area where they were last registered to vote in the UK.

If someone was too young to be included on the electoral register when they left the UK, they can register to vote in the area that their parent or guardian was last registered.

Can someone register to vote at different addresses?

A person can register to vote at an address if they are resident at that address. It may be possible to be registered at more than one address, as long as you are resident at both addresses.

An example of this may be full time students, who may be able to register at both their term time address and home address if they are in different local authorities. It is an offence to vote twice in an election to a single body, such as a UK Parliamentary general election. They may vote in both areas for local authority elections, as long as they are voting in different local authority areas.

Can prisoners register to vote?

Remand prisoners can vote if they are on the electoral register. Convicted persons detained because of their sentence cannot join the electoral register or vote.

How do members of the armed forces register to vote?

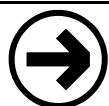
Service personnel and their spouses or civil partners, serving in the UK or overseas, can register either at their UK home address as an ordinary voter or as a 'service voter'. Service voters fill out an armed services declaration, which means they are only required to register once every three years.

How many people are registered to vote in Great Britain?

According to the Office for National Statistics, there were **44,260,051** Parliamentary electors registered to vote in Great Britain as at 1 December 2009. This is a rise of 200,585 (0.5 per cent) on the previous year.

A 2005 Commission report – *Understanding Electoral Registration* – estimated that between 91% and 92% of the eligible electors in England and Wales were registered to vote. Equivalent figures are not currently available for Scotland.

There are a number of groups that are less likely to be registered to vote. People who have recently moved house, young people and students, those living in rented accommodation and people from certain minority ethnic communities are all less likely to be registered to vote.



The Commission's 2005 report, *Understanding Electoral Registration*, is available at www.electoralcommission.org.uk/document-summary?assetid=47252. The most recent registration figures from the Office of National Statistics (broken down by constituency) are available at www.statistics.gov.uk

Who can see the electoral register?

There are two versions of the electoral register – the 'edited' register and the 'full' register.

Voters can choose to opt out of having their details published on the 'edited' version of the register. Anyone can purchase the edited register from the local electoral registration office for any purpose.

All voters are included on the 'full' version of the electoral register. The full version of the register is available to view at each local electoral registration office and anyone can view it under supervision. Copies of the full register cannot be made.

Candidates are entitled to a free copy of the full register for the constituency in which they are standing. Candidates may not pass on the register, disclose

any information in the register or use it for anything other than electoral purposes.

Registered political parties can request a full copy of the register at any time and councillors are entitled to a copy for the ward that they represent.

8 Voting

How do you vote at a polling station?

All polling stations, also known as 'polling places' in Scotland, are open from 7am to 10pm on polling day. Every voter is allocated a specific polling station serving the area in which they live. The (Acting) Returning Officer ((A)RO) will send a poll card to each elector giving the location of the polling station.

It is not necessary for voters to bring their poll card when they vote.³

The relevant local elections office can also provide information on where polling stations are located. Contact details are available from www.aboutmyvote.co.uk or by calling the Commission's helpline on 0800 3 280 280.

In a UK Parliamentary general election, ballot papers should be marked only once with a single 'X' in the box to the right of the candidate a voter wishes to vote for.

How do you vote by post or proxy?

Voters in Great Britain can choose to vote by post or proxy if they cannot, or do not, wish to attend the polling station in person. Voters can apply to their local Electoral Registration Officer for a postal or proxy vote for a single election, for a specified period or indefinitely.

When applying for a postal vote, voters must supply their name, date of birth and signature. These are known as 'absent vote identifiers' and are checked when voters cast their ballot as a security measure.

When applying for a proxy vote, voters must appoint someone to vote on their behalf at the polling station or by postal vote. Proxy voters must tell their proxy which political party or individual candidate they wish to vote for.

Postal and proxy vote application forms are available from electoral registration offices, from www.aboutmyvote.co.uk or by calling our helpline on 0800 3 280 280.

(A)ROs cannot send out postal ballot packs until after 5pm on Tuesday 20 April 2010.

Postal votes must be received by 10pm on polling day and they can be posted back to the council offices, returned by hand to the (A)RO at local council offices or to the polling station.

The deadline for applying for a postal or proxy vote for the UK Parliamentary general election is 5pm on Tuesday 20 April 2010.

³ Voters registered anonymously for reasons of personal safety are required to present their poll card at the polling station.

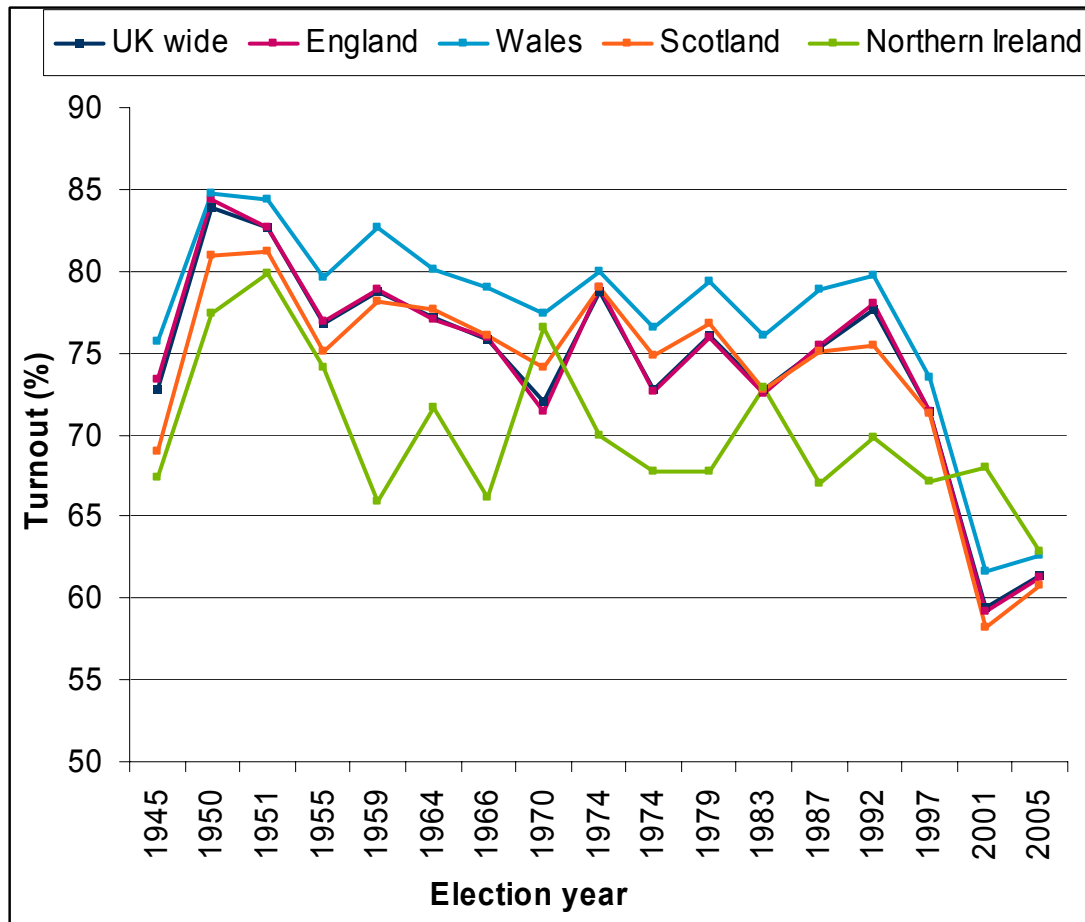
What was turnout like at previous UK Parliamentary general elections?

Turnout at the 2005 UK Parliamentary general election was 61.4% of registered electors, higher than the 2001 turnout of 59.4%, but historically low.

**Table 4: Turnout at UK Parliamentary general elections 1945–2005
(% of registered electors)**

Year	UK wide	England	Wales	Scotland	Northern Ireland
1945	72.8	73.4	75.7	69	67.4
1950	83.9	84.4	84.8	80.9	77.4
1951	82.6	82.7	84.4	81.2	79.9
1955	76.8	76.9	79.6	75.1	74.1
1959	78.7	78.9	82.6	78.1	65.9
1964	77.1	77	80.1	77.6	71.7
1966	75.8	75.9	79	76	66.1
1970	72	71.4	77.4	74.1	76.6
1974 Feb	78.8	79	80	79	69.9
1974 Oct	72.8	72.6	76.6	74.8	67.7
1979	76	75.9	79.4	76.8	67.7
1983	72.7	72.5	76.1	72.7	72.9
1987	75.3	75.4	78.9	75.1	67
1992	77.7	78	79.7	75.5	69.8
1997	71.4	71.4	73.5	71.3	67.1
2001	59.4	59.1	61.4	58.1	68
2005	61.4	61.3	62.6	60.8	62.9

Figure 2: Turnout at UK Parliamentary general elections 1945–2005
 (% of registered electors)



How many votes did each party achieve at the last election?

Table 5: 2005 UK Parliamentary general election results⁴

Party	Votes	% of votes cast	% change on 2001	Seats	Net gain/loss
Labour (including Speaker)	9,567,589	35.3	-5.5	356	-47
Conservative	8,784,915	32.4	+0.7	198	+33
Liberal Democrats	5,985,454	22.0	+3.8	62	+11
Scottish National Party	412,267	1.5	-0.2	6	+2
Democratic Unionist Party	241,856	0.9	+0.2	9	+4
Plaid Cymru	174,838	0.6	-0.1	3	-1
Sinn Fein	174,530	0.6	0.0	5	+1
Ulster Unionist Party	127,414	0.5	-0.4	1	-5
Social and Democratic Labour Party	125,626	0.5	-0.2	3	0
Respect	68,094	0.3	N/A	1	+1
Independent Kidderminster Hospital and Health Concern	18,739	0.1	0.0	1	0
Independent (26 candidates)	99,691	0.4	0.0	1	+1

⁴ The Electoral Commission (April 2006) *Election 2005: The Results*. This report can be found on our website at www.electoralcommission.org.uk/document-summary?assetid=47185

9 Counting the votes

When does the count take place?

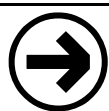
The count may begin as soon as the polls close at 10pm. Each (Acting) Returning Officer ((A)RO) decides when the count in their constituency takes place, taking into account local circumstances. Some areas will conduct the count on Thursday night and some on the Friday.

The Constitutional Reform and Governance Bill (CRAG Bill), currently before the UK Parliament, requires (A)ROs to take reasonable steps to begin counting votes within four hours of the close of poll.

We have issued draft guidance to Returning Officers. We will issue our final guidance as soon after the Bill receives Royal Assent as is possible.

We have asked (A)ROs to notify the Commission of when they intend to commence the counting of votes at the forthcoming UK general election and have published this information on our website. We have also advised (A)ROs that they should be able to explain their decision and they should be prepared to do so in response to enquiries.

Election staff will open returned postal ballot packs up to and on polling day, to check the accompanying personal identifiers (the date of birth and signature of the voter). At these opening sessions, the ballot papers must remain face down and elections staff will not count these votes before the close of poll.



A table of which (Acting) Returning Officers will be counting votes on the night of the election or the next day is available on our website, along with our draft guidance to (A)ROs:

www.electoralcommission.org.uk/elections/upcoming-elections-and-referendums/uk/general-election

What happens at the count?

The first stage of the count involves the verification of all ballot papers. Throughout polling day, polling station staff record the number of ballot papers that they issue to voters. Count centre staff will then compare this with the number of ballot papers in the ballot boxes that election staff deliver to the count centre.

Only after verification has taken place can counting assistants begin counting the votes for each candidate.

Candidates may appoint 'counting agents' to attend the count. Counting agents may observe the process and help to ensure it is carried out in an orderly and accurate manner. For example, counting agents can draw the attention of count staff to doubtful ballot papers or argue for the inclusion of ballot papers that count staff have rejected as spoilt.



The law prohibits counting agents from handling ballot papers. Anyone that attends the count (or any election procedure) must respect the secrecy of the ballot.

Candidates and their agents may request that the (A)RO conduct a recount. There is no limit to the number of recounts that a candidate or their agent can request, but an (A)RO may refuse a request if they believe it to be unreasonable. An (A)RO may instigate a recount.

Can the media attend the count?

Members of the media must apply to the (A)RO if they wish to attend the count. They should abide by any direction the (A)RO gives. The (A)RO's decision is final. They do not have to allow any member of the press into the count (unless they are also a candidate, candidate's agent, counting agent or an accredited observer etc).

10 Challenging an election result

Can someone challenge the result of an election?

Someone can challenge the result of an election by issuing an election petition. An election petition can be presented by:

- someone who voted or had the right to vote at the election
- someone alleging themselves to have been a candidate at the election
- someone claiming to have had the right to be elected at the election

Petitioners must present the petition within 21 days of the return of the writ (usually the day after the election). Where the petition relates to election expenses or corrupt or illegal practices involving the payment of money after the election, further time may be allowed.

Petitioners must sign the petition and return it to the Elections Petition Office at the Supreme Court in England and Wales and the Court of Session in Scotland.

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To contact our offices in Scotland, Wales,
Northern Ireland and the English regions,
see inside back cover for details.

We are an independent body set up by
the UK Parliament. Our aim is integrity and
public confidence in the democratic process.
We regulate party and election finance and
set standards for well-run elections.

Democracy matters