

Local Elections in Wales 2008

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Introduction

Elections for the 22 local councils in Wales took place on May 1st 2008. A total of 3,248 candidates competed for 1,264 seats in 881 divisions. Elections were postponed in four wards. The results of the delayed contests are included in this summary, but not information about their electoral administration. Following the election the Conservative and Labour parties each had political control in two councils, five councils were controlled by Independents or minor parties, and the remaining 13 were 'hung' councils' with no single party in a majority. Labour lost six councils compared with 2004 and Plaid Cymru lost control of its single council, Gwynedd.

This report briefly outlines the results of the elections before giving a detailed account of aspects of electoral administration including turnout, rejected ballot papers, and postal votes. It should be read in association with the detailed data available at (*INSERT web address*).

The results

Table 1 shows the overall result of the election. The Labour party polled the most votes with Independent candidates, supported by more than one in five voters, the next most popular choice. Plaid Cymru received support from one in six voters, followed by the Conservatives (15.6% of the vote) and the Liberal Democrats (12.9%). The array of smaller parties won few votes overall (41,499 or 4.4% of the total). In terms of seats, Labour won 345, 27.3% of the total, enjoying a small 'winner's bonus', customary under the 'first past the post' voting system. A similar bonus went to Independent candidates, 334 of whom were elected. More than one in four councillors elected to the new councils in 2008 stood as an Independent candidate. Some 40 candidates from 'other' parties were successful. Notable among these was the Voice of Gwynedd party, 12 of whose candidates were elected.

Table 1: Summary results 2008

<i>PARTY</i>	<i>Votes</i>	<i>%Shares</i>	<i>Seats</i>	<i>%Seats</i>
Conservative	148,708	15.6	173	13.7
Green	6,568	0.7	0	0
Independent	217,314	22.9	334	26.4
Labour	252,632	26.6	345	27.3
Liberal Democrats	123,037	12.9	165	13.1
Plaid Cymru	161,098	16.9	207	16.4
Other	41,499	4.4	40	3.2
Total	950,856	100	1264	100

Note: In single member divisions the calculation of each party's vote is straightforward but this is not the case in divisions where more than one seat is being decided. To calculate party vote in these cases we use votes cast for the highest placed candidate from each party. Where Independents stand we cluster these candidates into groups according to the number of seats at stake.

Tables 2 and 3 compare the results this time with previous contests in 2004 and 1999. Labour's vote has declined by nearly 8 percentage points during this period, mainly to the benefit of Independent candidates. Between 2004 and 2008, however, there was a 4.3% 'swing' from Labour to the Conservatives. Labour's seat total has slumped from 563 in 1999 to 345 this year, a decline of nearly 40%. By contrast the Conservatives have more than doubled their representation. The Liberal Democrats and Independents have also been on an upward trajectory, although Plaid Cymru's council seats have rather fluctuated

Table 2: Vote shares and change, 1999-2008

	2008	2004-8	2004	1999-2004	1999
	%	%	%	%	%
Conservative	15.6	4.6	11.0	0.9	10.1
Labour	26.6	-3.9	30.5	-4.0	34.5
Liberal Democrat	12.9	-0.9	13.8	0.4	13.4
Plaid Cymru	16.9	0.5	16.4	-1.8	18.2
Independent	22.9	0.2	22.7	3.7	19.0
Green	0.7	-0.5	1.2	0.4	0.8
Other	4.4	0.1	4.3	0.5	3.8

Table 3: Seats won and change, 1999-2008

	2008	2004-8	2004	1999-2004*	1999
Conservative	173	66	107	32	75
Labour	345	-134	479	-84	563
Liberal Democrat	165	19	146	48	98
Plaid Cymru	207	32	175	-30	205
Independent	334	12	322	27	295
Green	0	-	0	-1	1
Other	40	5	35	2	33

*Boundary changes between 1999 and 2004 reduced the total number of seats by 6.

Local elections in Wales have often been criticised for having too many uncontested wards and seats. However, Table 4 shows a sharp reduction in the proportion of councillors returned unopposed this year (8.1%) compared with both 2004 and 1999, and the number of candidates in 2008 was also up on 2004 by more than 100. This is the result of more widespread major party contestation, especially by the Conservatives, and the increasing number of small parties attracted to the elections. Across Wales there was an average of 2.6 candidates contesting each vacancy, with competition tending to be more vigorous in urban than rural areas.

Table 4: Uncontested seats, 1999-2008

	2008		2004		1999	
	N	%	N	%	N	%
	103	8.1	152	12.0	201	15.8

Electoral administration

Turnout

The electorate for the local elections increased by just 2.0% compared with 2004 to a total of 2,263,462. Under the provisions of the Electoral Administration Act 2006, 9,134 names (0.4% of the total) were added to the register between 10th March (the previous last date for registration to take effect before the election) and 16th April (the new closing date). Votes were cast at 2,113 polling stations as well as by post.

Adjusted turnout (that is, excluding any invalid ballot papers), based on the average in all contested wards, at the 2008 local elections in Wales was 44.8% compared with 43.2% in 2004 when the local elections coincided with European Parliament contests –see Table 5. Where the local authority was unable to provide exact figures on ballot papers issued, our data may be less reliable. In such cases they are based on the number of votes cast for each party and cannot take fully into account the number of voters in divisions where more than one vacancy was being contested who either did not use their full quota of votes or supported more than one party .

Table 5. Local election turnout in Wales 1995-2008

1995	48.8
1999^	49.7
2004*	43.2
2008	44.8

*Election coincided with European parliament elections

^ Election coincided with inaugural NAW elections

Table 6 shows both unadjusted and adjusted turnout for Wales and for each local authority, but this time it is an aggregate figure where the calculation is based on dividing the number of votes cast by the eligible electorate multiplied by 100. Turnout appears lower using this method because it dampens the influence of small rural wards with high turnouts on the overall figure. The term ‘adjusted turnout’ refers to calculations based simply on the number of valid votes cast; ‘minimal unadjusted turnout’ takes into account those whose vote was rejected at the count; and ‘maximal unadjusted turnout’ takes account of *both* those whose votes were rejected at the count *and* those rejected at the postal ballot verification stage.

Maximal unadjusted turnout is 43.1%, minimal unadjusted turnout 42.6%, and adjusted turnout 42.4%. In three authorities, Anglesey (Ynys Mon), Ceredigion and Gwynedd, turnout rose above half the eligible electorate. In seven authorities fewer than four in ten electors voted. The general picture changes very little whichever turnout measure is examined.

Table 6. Electoral turnout in 2008

	<i>Max unadjusted %</i>	<i>Min unadjusted %</i>	<i>Adjusted %</i>
Anglesey	52.9	52.5	52.2
Blaenau Gwent	46.4	45.5	45.4
Bridgend	39.9	39.5	39.2
Caerphilly	38.6	38.2	38.0
Cardiff	39.2	38.8	38.6
Carmarthenshire	49.4	48.8	48.4
Ceredigion	52.9	52.5	52.1
Conwy	42.2	41.7	41.4
Denbighshire	43.2	42.6	42.4
Flintshire	41.3	40.9	40.7
Gwynedd	52.5	52.0	51.7
Merthyr Tydfil	39.5	39.2	39.1
Monmouthshire	46.5	46.2	45.9
Neath & Port Talbot	43.7	42.8	42.6
Newport	39.6	39.3	39.2
Pembrokeshire	49.5	49.2	49.0
Powys	48.7	48.4	48.1
Rhondda/Cynon/Taff	39.8	38.9	38.6
Swansea	37.7	37.3	37.1
Torfaen	41.8	41.0	40.8
Vale Of Glamorgan	48.8	48.4	48.1
Wrexham	44.7	44.2	44.0
Overall	43.1	42.6	42.4

Rejected ballots

The overall number of votes rejected at the count was just 5,246 –an average of just 238 per local authority. This amounts to 0.55% of all votes cast and is similar to that for the 2007 National Assembly elections (0.6%) and lower than in 2004 (0.8%) when voters had also to cope with the very different system for electing members of the European Parliament. Of this number nearly two-thirds were rejected as being ‘unmarked’ or ‘wholly void for uncertainty’. The number of vacancies to be filled in a ward makes no statistically significant difference to the proportion of ballot papers rejected. Equally, there is no evidence of whole authorities being particularly more or less likely to reject papers at the count.

Postal voting

Wales, as other areas of Great Britain, has seen a sizeable increase in the number of electors applying for and being granted a postal vote, with the proportion more than doubling between the 2001 and 2005 general elections. At the 2008 local elections one in seven electors (302,757 or 14.4%) in wards with contests had a postal vote compared with 10.6% in 2004. The ‘postal electorate’ has also increased since the last general election which is particularly noteworthy taking into account the new rules on providing personal identifiers at both the application and voting stages (Table 7).

Table 7. Postal voters as percentage of electorate in Wales 2001-2008

2001 general election	5.0
2003 NAW election	6.9
2004 local election	10.6
2005 general election	12.7
2007 NAW election	12.5
2008 local election	14.4

Table 8 shows the figures for 2008 by local authority. The local authority with the highest proportion of postal electors was Torfaen (19.4%), followed by Bridgend and Neath & Port Talbot (both 18.4%). The lowest proportion was in Ceredigion (8.7%), with Merthyr Tydfil (8.9%), Gwynedd (9.0%) and Monmouthshire (9.4%) the only other authorities with fewer than 10% of electors registered for a postal vote. The range between the highest and lowest postal vote authorities is 10.7 percentage points. It is interesting that postal voting appears, on average, to be less common in rural than urban councils. However, the relationship is by no means linear and it is likely that the activities of local electoral administrators and/or political parties are mainly responsible for the varying levels found.

Table 8: Postal votes issued 2008

	<i>Postal votes</i>	<i>Electora te</i>	<i>%</i>
Anglesey	4796	42778	11.2
Blaenau Gwent	8754	52686	16.6
Bridgend	19038	103211	18.4
Caerphilly	17420	129931	13.4
Cardiff	42300	244317	17.3
Carmarthenshire	19317	123211	15.7
Ceredigion	4419	50866	8.7
Conwy	10308	84748	12.2
Denbighshire	12340	73785	16.7
Flintshire	12313	101434	12.1
Gwynedd	5584	62137	9.0
Merthyr Tydfil	3864	43401	8.9
Monmouthshire	5973	63476	9.4
Neath & Port Talbot	18731	101787	18.4
Newport	13507	89169	15.1
Pembrokeshire	7840	71168	11.0
Powys	6595	63629	10.4
Rhondda/Cynon/Taff	29080	166736	17.4
Swansea	23901	182686	13.1
Torfaen	12546	64681	19.4
Vale Of Glamorgan	11085	90929	12.2
Wrexham	13046	98613	13.2
Total	302,757	2,105,379	14.4

Table 9 shows the number of postal votes returned prior to the election. Overall, unadjusted turnout amongst postal voters was 71.4%, six points higher than in 2004. There were five authorities where more than three quarters of those with a postal vote returned it before the deadline. The highest turnout on this measure was in Gwynedd (81.9%); the lowest in Cardiff (66.6%).

Table 9: Postal voter turnout 2008

	<i>Postal issued</i>	<i>Returned before election</i>	<i>%</i>
Anglesey	4796	3811	79.5
Blaenau Gwent	8754	6489	74.1
Bridgend	19038	13066	68.5
Caerphilly	17420	11940	68.5
Cardiff	42300	28157	66.6
Carmarthenshire	19317	14058	72.8
Ceredigion	4419	3229	73.1
Conwy	10308	7915	76.8
Denbighshire	12340	9153	74.2
Flintshire	12313	8789	71.4
Gwynedd	5584	4575	81.9
Merthyr Tydfil	3864	2885	74.7
Monmouthshire	5973	4498	75.3
Neath & Port Talbot	18731	13662	72.9
Newport	13507	9664	71.5
Pembrokeshire	7840	5949	75.7
Powys	6595	4670	70.8
Rhondda/Cynon/Taff	29080	20942	72.0
Swansea	23901	16164	67.6
Torfaen	12546	8603	68.6
Vale Of Glamorgan	11085	8098	73.1
Wrexham	13046	9776	74.9
Total	302,757	216,093	71.4

The proportion of postal voters who return their ballot papers has always exceeded the turnout among ‘in person’ voters –see Table 10. To an extent this can be explained by the fact of applying in the first place indicating a level of interest in and engagement with political events. However, especially in the case of second order elections (that is, all elections other than UK general elections), the convenience and flexibility of postal voting is also likely to boost participation.

It is possible to compare the unadjusted turnout amongst postal voters with that for electors who opted instead to vote at a polling station. Amongst postal voters turnout was 71.4% overall, but for polling station voters it was 40.7%. Put another way, postal voters are 1.7 times more likely to vote than those electors whose vote is cast at a polling station. The pattern is also apparent in all recent elections in Wales. This phenomenon also means that postal votes form a disproportionate number of those at the count. In 2008 more than one in 5 of votes counted (21.5%) were cast by post. In Torfaen postal votes made up 30.7% of the total and nowhere did the proportion fall below 10%.

Table 10. % turnout among postal voters and non-postal voters in Wales 2001-8

2008 locals		2007 NAW		2005 General	
Postal	Non	Postal	Non	Postal	Non
71.4	40.7	78.2	39.3	78.2	60.9
2004 locals		2003 NAW		2001 General	
Postal	Non	Postal	Non	Postal	Non
65.3	39.0	c.63	c.36	82.4	60.5

Rejected postal votes

Some electors who try to vote by post are inevitably found to have completed the documentation incorrectly and their ballot papers never reach the count. It seemed that the proportion of such cases might increase this year compared with 2004 following the requirement for electors to provide personal identifiers in the form of their signature and date of birth both when applying for a postal vote and when voting. However, postal electors in Wales had already had experience of the new system during the 2007 National Assembly contests.

In fact the proportion of postal votes rejected or otherwise not included in the count was, at 4.8%, less than that either last year or in 2004 and on a par with the figures for recent general elections. –see Table 11. Compared with both the NAW elections and the 2004 contests there was a much smaller variation between authorities in the proportion so rejected –see Table 12 and NAW report 2007. Only Blaenau Gwent (7.2%) had a rejection rate of more than plus or minus 2 percentage points of the mean.

It would appear that the electorate has adapted to the new identifier system and that there is more consistency among returning officers in judging the validity of postal ballots. 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. % Ballot papers returned by post but rejected before count 2001-7

2001 general election	4.9
2003 NAW election	5.8
2004 local election	5.0
2005 general election	4.6
2007 NAW election	6.2
2008 local election	4.8

Table 12. Rejected postal votes 2008

	<i>N</i> =	%
Anglesey	174	4.6
Blaenau Gwent	466	7.2
Bridgend	414	3.2
Caerphilly	500	4.2
Cardiff	1,083	3.8
Carmarthenshire	715	5.1
Ceredigion	218	6.8
Conwy	431	5.4
Denbighshire	392	4.3
Flintshire	322	3.7
Gwynedd	276	6.0
Merthyr Tydfil	131	4.5
Monmouthshire	195	4.3
Neath & Port Talbot	886	6.5
Newport	275	2.8
Pembrokeshire	254	4.3
Powys	189	4.0
Rhondda/Cynon/Taff	1,371	6.5
Swansea	793	4.9
Torfaen	493	5.7
Vale Of Glamorgan	421	5.2
Wrexham	461	4.7
Total	10,460	4.8

Postal voting –Verification

The regulations now require returning officers to verify the personal identifiers on an at least 20% sample of all postal ballot papers returned. Nineteen of the 22 local authorities in Wales claimed to have verified 100% (or very nearly) of all returns. Powys checked half its returns; Anglesey returned no data; and Newport returned its postal voting data using an old form and therefore did not provide appropriate information. More systematic analysis is 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 reported by respondents to our data collection exercise. For what it is worth 2,486 postal returns fell into the first category and 6,051 into the second. Similarly, there were inconsistencies in the data provided as additional information concerning whether it was problems with the signature, or date of birth, or both that caused the postal ballot to be rejected. 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.

Proxy votes

The liberalization of postal voting also appears to have had an impact on the number of electors appointing proxies (Table 13). Fewer than 2,500 electors (0.11% of the total) appointed a proxy to vote on their behalf, continuing a trend that dates back to the 2001 general election. Just 121 emergency proxies were issued across the whole of Wales.

Table 13. Proxy voters as percentage of electorate in Wales 2001-8

2001 general election	0.45
2003 NAW election	n/a
2004 local election	0.19
2005 general election	0.18
2007 NAW election	0.12
2008 local election	0.11

Counting the votes

Two authorities failed to provide information about their counts. Of the others, 10 began the process on Thursday evening, 9 waited until Friday morning, and one authority varied its practise between areas. Of the overnight counters none 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

- Although Labour again emerged on top in terms of both vote and seat share, this was not a successful election for the party. Its vote share, 26.6%, and seat share, 27.3%, were the lowest at any local election since our records begin in 1973. Independents slightly increased both vote and seat share compared with 2004 to help register the highest vote for non-party candidates since the early 1970s. The Conservative party, helped by contesting more seats, had its best showing at an 'all Wales' election since 1983, and the Liberal Democrats won their largest ever number of council seats.
- Although the proportion of uncontested seats remains comparatively high, the trend continues downwards. In 2008 the proportion of contested seats was 92% of the total; at the previous election it was 88% and in 1999 it was just 78%. Moreover, there is a concentration of uncontested seats in a handful of local authorities and if the figures are recalculated without these then the pattern of contestation improves dramatically. When seats are contested there does not appear to be a shortage of candidates willing to challenge for office with an average of more than 2.6 candidates per contested seat. .
- Notwithstanding the proportion of uncontested seats it remains true that when local elections are held, then electors in Wales appear considerably more likely to vote than do their counterparts in England. In England the average

adjusted turnout at the 2008 local elections was 35.8%; in Wales it was 44.8%. This is higher than at the comparable contests in 2004, though below that in 1999 when the local elections coincided with the inaugural NAW contests. Only a small fraction of Welsh voters (less than 0.6%) had their ballots rejected at the count.

- More and more electors continue to opt to vote by post. This year one in 7 electors in Wales registered to do so, and nearly three-quarters of them took advantage of the opportunity. In both cases this represented a sizeable increase compared with the 2004 local elections. There remains considerable variation between local authorities in the level of postal votes issued. It is impossible to say whether this reflects local authority policy or is a product of the variable efforts made by party activists to persuade supporters to register by post. However, the rise of postal voting has had a clear impact on the number of proxies appointed –down to little more than a tenth of one percent of the whole electorate.
- The proportion of postal votes rejected or otherwise not included in the count was, at 4.8%, less than that either last year or in 2004 and on a par with the figures for recent general elections. Part of the explanation is that postal electors in Wales had already had experience of the requirement to provide personal identifiers in the form of their signature and date of birth both when applying for a postal vote and when voting during the 2007 NAW contests.
- Of 20 local authorities for which we have complete and reliable data, all except one (Powys) verified all or very nearly all the postal ballots returned.