



Local Elections 2007

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Introduction

Local elections took place in England and Scotland on May 3, 2007. No local elections were scheduled for Wales although voters there re-elected the Assembly for Wales. In England, 312 local authorities held elections, the majority of which were of the whole council. Throughout the metropolitan boroughs and some district and unitary councils only a fraction (normally a third) of seats was up for election. This report does not report on local elections in Scotland where a new voting system (Single Transferable Vote) is now implemented. For England the elections were conducted using first past the post voting in either single or multi-member wards.

VOTING

Summary Results

Elections were scheduled in 6,637 wards with 10,493 seats at stake. Over half of available seats were won by candidates from the Conservative party, clearly benefiting most from the operation of the voting system (Table 1; see also Appendix, Table A1). Its main rivals, Labour and Liberal Democrats, won 18% and 21% of seats respectively. The Green party enjoyed some success, winning over sixty seats. One in ten seats is now held by councillors who stood either as Independents or for one of the smaller parties that now proliferate in many local authorities.

Table 1: Vote and Seat share.

	<i>Vote (%)</i>	<i>Seats (%)</i>
Conservative	38.1	50.7
Labour	22.2	17.9
Lib Dem	23.6	20.7
Green	3.0	0.6
BNP	2.6	0.1
UKIP	1.5	0.0
Independent	6.1	7.0
Other	2.9	3.0

The Conservative party obtained 38% of votes and gained approximately 900 additional seats following a four-point rise in vote share based on its 2003 performance. The Liberal Democrats finished marginally ahead of Labour in the popular vote although the party contested more wards and seats. Both parties made a net loss of seats – Labour’s losses totalled almost 500 and the Liberal Democrats about 300. Labour’s vote fell by five percentage points (based on 2003) and by one point for the Liberal Democrats.

Candidates describing themselves on the ballot paper as ‘Independents’ obtained 7% of votes while the Green party, which fielded a record 1,416 candidates, emerged with 3% of the popular vote having challenged in just under one in five wards. There are around 150 fewer Independent councillors following these elections

but continuing the trend of recent years the number elected for minor parties rose by more than sixty. Contesting 500 fewer wards the British National Party received almost as many votes as did the Green party but it was less successful in converting support into seats. The United Kingdom Independence Party fielded almost a thousand candidates but won 1.5% share of votes.

The Conservative party vote share rose by ten percentage points or more in 27 local authorities although in some cases the rise probably relates to the pattern of competition from Independent candidates. Labour support fell by more than ten points in 25 authorities, most notably in Ashfield following a large swing towards the Liberal Democrats. The latter party had mixed fortunes –producing a double digit rise in nine council elections but a decline of the same scale in sixteen authorities, most notably in Shepway. The Green party advanced most in North Devon and Herefordshire but in 137 other authorities its vote share increased. Generally, Independent councillors reduced in numbers but in terms of change in vote share at the local authority level the outcome is symmetrical; an increased share in 142 authorities and a decline in 146 others. Votes for parties classified as ‘others’ rose in three times as many authorities as it declined. However, we note that the need to register the names of local parties means some crossover in the votes which were formerly cast for candidates standing as Independents but are now standing under a registered party name. Similarly, there are examples that run in the contrary direction.

Results by type of local authority

Labour’s continuing relative strength in the larger cities is reflected in results from the metropolitan boroughs (Table 2, see also Tables A2 and A6). While more than one in three votes went to Labour candidates almost one in two of the seats did so. The Liberal Democrats too experienced a higher share of seats, about one in four, compared to votes received. Despite winning a higher share of votes, some 27%, the Conservative party won a smaller share of seats – 23% overall in the metropolitan borough authorities. In terms of change in vote share the outcome in 2007 is remarkably similar to that of 2006 with only the Liberal Democrats and a fall of two percentage points experiencing any real change in support. BNP candidates achieved their best result in the cities, capturing 6% of the popular vote.

Table 2: Vote and Seat share: Metropolitan Boroughs

	<i>Vote (%)</i>	<i>Seats (%)</i>
Conservative	27.0	22.5
Labour	34.4	48.4
Lib Dem	22.0	24.7
Green	3.5	0.7
BNP	6.2	0.1
UKIP	1.5	0.0
Independent	2.4	1.6
Other	3.1	2.1

A majority of seats at stake, some 6,740, 64%, are in the English shire districts that re-elect the entire council every four years. In these authorities the Conservative party received 44% of votes and 55% of seats, contesting more than nine in ten wards (Table 3, see also Tables A3 and A7). By contrast the Labour party mounted a challenge in less than half the wards and won only one in eight. The Liberal Democrats won one in five seats after polling slightly fewer than one in four votes, and contesting almost two-thirds of the wards. Independent candidates won around one in ten votes and seats in these particular authorities.

Table 3: Vote and Seat share: Shire Districts

	<i>Whole Council</i>		<i>Partial Council</i>	
	<i>Vote (%)</i>	<i>Seats (%)</i>	<i>Vote (%)</i>	<i>Seats (%)</i>
Conservative	43.7	55.1	44.3	53.3
Labour	14.0	11.9	19.6	17.8
Lib Dem	24.8	20.1	23.7	21.9
Green	2.1	0.4	3.2	0.8
BNP	0.8	0.1	1.6	0.1
UKIP	1.4	0.0	1.7	0.2
Independent	10.0	9.0	2.8	2.9
Other	3.1	3.3	3.1	3.1

In the shire districts on an annual electoral cycle the general pattern of voting is similar although Labour tends to be a little stronger, reaching almost 20% of the overall vote and seat shares. Independents do better in the districts with whole council elections (one in ten votes and slightly below that figure in seats) than for ‘thirds’ districts (less than three per cent of votes and seats). Across the two types of shire district, the performance of parties within the category of ‘others’ is similar.

Additionally, there are results from 45 unitary councils, 20 of which have elections by thirds, the remainder for the whole council. In both types the Conservatives finished on top in vote and seats although the ‘winner’s bonus’ is greater in the all-out authorities (Table 4, see also Tables A4 and A8). Labour’s vote is rather higher in authorities with annual elections than the whole council variety while support for the Liberal Democrats is more or less evenly distributed.

Table 4: Vote and Seat share: Unitary councils

	<i>Whole Council</i>		<i>Partial Council</i>	
	<i>Vote (%)</i>	<i>Seats (%)</i>	<i>Vote (%)</i>	<i>Seats (%)</i>
Conservative	37.9	47.4	32.9	36.1
Labour	22.3	26.0	28.7	31.4
Lib Dem	23.0	18.8	23.8	25.3
Green	4.2	1.4	3.5	0.0
BNP	1.7	0.0	2.7	0.8
UKIP	1.5	0.0	1.9	0.0
Independent	7.1	4.7	5.0	4.7
Other	2.3	1.8	1.4	1.7

Analysing change in vote share requires some care since the comparison point is for different years dependent upon each local authority's electoral cycle. In the unitary authorities with election by thirds there is little change in support from the last occasion these wards were fought in 2006. But for unitary councils on a four-yearly cycle the Conservative vote rose by four points, Labour's fell by a similar amount while there was a larger fall of five points for the Liberal Democrats. Share gains were made by candidates from smaller parties who collectively increased vote share by more than three points.

Proportionality of outcome

A party benefits from the operation of the electoral system when its ratio between seats and votes exceeds one- should a party win 60% of seats with 40% of votes then the seat/vote ratio is 60:40 or 1.5. Large parties tend to have favourable seat/vote ratios because of electoral system effects. Some smaller parties may also have a favourable ratio because their support is concentrated across a relatively small geographical area rather than fragmented.

The Conservative party benefited most from the voting system in 2007. Its seat to vote ratio is 1.3. In the final tally the ratio for Independents as a whole is 1.1. Both Labour (0.8) and Liberal Democrats (0.9) have ratios of less than one but the Green party (0.2), BNP (.04), UKIP (.03) and other parties (0.4) are somewhat below these levels.

Another method for describing the distribution of seats and votes is to use the Loosemore-Hanby index of proportionality. This index takes the absolute difference (i.e. ignores negative or positive signs) for each party's share of votes and seats. The differences are summed and the total divided by two, leaving the index of proportionality as a single summary statistic. An index of zero means a perfect equality between each party's seat and vote shares. Systems of voting classified generally as proportional representation (PR) would expect to have an index of about 10 or lower. Across all English local authorities the index of proportionality in 2007 is 13.6 (Table 5). This compares with a lower figure of 7.5 for the outcome of the local elections in Scotland conducted using STV.

Table 5: Distribution of Seats and Votes by Type of Authority

<i>Authority</i>	<i>Index of proportionality</i>
All	13.6
Metropolitan Bors	16.7
Shire districts (whole)	11.6
Shire districts (partial)	9.1
Unitaries (whole)	13.2
Unitaries (partial)	7.7
Scottish unitary councils*	7.5

* Source data for calculation, H. Bochel & D. Denver, Scottish Council elections 2007: Results and Statistics (Lincoln, Policy Studies Research Centre, 2007)

At a lower level of aggregation some differences in proportionality emerge. In the metropolitan boroughs (with only a third of seats electing this time), notable for a large winner's bonus for Labour, the Loosemore Hanby index at 16.7 lies well above the 2007 average. Next, is an index of 13.2 for unitary authorities electing the entire council while shire districts adopting the same method have an overall score of 11.6. The smallest index measures are found in two sets of authorities electing by thirds and using largely single member wards – 9.1 and 7.7 in the shire and unitary district councils respectively. Wider variations than these are to be found amongst individual local authorities.

Candidates and competition

Levels of competition

More than twenty eight thousand candidates contested almost ten and a half thousand seats at the May 2007 local elections in England – an overall candidate/seat ratio of 2.7 and lower than in 2006 (Table A5). This figure is influenced considerably by the relatively large number of seats in the shire districts with whole council elections. More than half of all candidates, 54%, fought an election in this category of authority. In these shire districts the ratio of candidates to seats is 2.3, the lowest for all authority types. By contrast, in two types electing a third of the council members and using single member wards the ratios are higher (4.2 metropolitan boroughs; 3.9 unitary councils).

Over four hundred wards were uncontested, some 6.6% of the total. In terms of seats uncontested the figures are 582 and 5.5% respectively. Just five councillors in the metropolitan boroughs (all in Knowsley) and 15 in the unitary authorities (all except one in Rutland) were returned unopposed – less than 1% of the total seats falling vacant. Just 0.3% of the electorate in both the metropolitan boroughs and unitary councils were effectively deprived of the opportunity to vote because of this. A significant majority of uncontested wards/seats are in the shire districts that use whole council elections. One in ten wards, and a slightly smaller proportion of seats, 8%, were uncontested in these authorities. These cases were overwhelmingly concentrated in small wards in rural councils. Some 5.4% of the total district electorate were affected by uncontested seats. The overall figure is 3.0% of the electorate.

Of the candidates contesting seats some 37% of the total were elected. A quarter of candidates contesting seats in the metropolitan boroughs and unitary councils (thirds) were successful but in the slightly less competitive atmosphere of the shire districts more than four in ten of candidates were elected.

Party competition

The large number of seat vacancies may in part help to explain why the pattern of party competition is more fragmented for this stage of the local electoral cycle (Table 6, see also Table A1). More than three thousand wards featured a contest between candidates from the three main political parties – 45% of the overall total. In a number of cases a local party chose not to contest all the available seats in a ward –

hence the differences between the percentages for wards and seats contested. A separate measure of three-party competition, therefore, is to count the number of three-party contests for each seat; 36% of seats were thus contested.

Table 6: Contestation of Wards and Seats by Party

	<i>Wards (%)</i>	<i>Seats (%)</i>
Conservative	93.9	88.3
Labour	66.0	60.5
Lib Dem	70.4	63.6
Green	18.9	13.5
BNP	11.0	7.1
UKIP	12.8	9.1
Independent	22.2	17.7
Other	11.4	9.4

Variations in the pattern of party competition remain. In urban authorities, considering together the metropolitan boroughs and some of the unitary councils, a large majority of wards continue to feature candidates from the three main parties. In other unitary councils and those shire districts electing by thirds, the level of competition is not as great, with less than two-thirds of ward ballots featuring candidates from each of the main parties. In the remaining shire districts, however, just over one in five seats saw main party candidates challenge. The decision by Labour not to field candidates for these vacancies accounts for a significant part of this, with three in ten seats contested only by Conservative and Liberal Democrat parties.

The pattern of competition in multimember seats shows that many parties are content with fielding fewer candidates than available vacancies. The shire districts using whole council elections provide an example. For two-member wards, whereas the Conservative party had two candidates on the ballot in 78% of cases, the Liberal Democrats contested both seats in 47% and Labour in just 38%. Of course, the remaining cases cover either uncontested wards (for Conservative, Labour and Liberal Democrats, 7%, 43% and 35% respectively) or wards where a solitary party candidate stood (15%, 18% and 17% respectively).

The same phenomenon is observed in three-member wards. While local Conservative parties fielded a full slate of candidates in 70% of such wards they had two candidates in 7% and one candidate in 11%. In almost one in five of the three-member wards Labour fielded just one candidate. Of course, this means that voters here must choose either to cast any remaining votes in favour of candidates from other parties or to use fewer votes than their entitlement. A similar trend is found in unitary councils with whole council elections but the number of three-member vacancies contested there by a single party representative is nearer one in ten for all three main parties.

Women candidates and councillors

Women comprise thirty per cent of candidates, very much in line with recent local elections. There is little difference in the frequency of women candidates across

different types of local authority although the proportion of women standing in ‘thirds’ unitary authorities is as low as 26% (see Table A5).

In 16 authorities the proportion of women candidates is 40% or higher (Table 7). Most of these, 10, are in shire districts that elect by thirds and only three are from the remaining shire districts that use whole council elections. In two authorities, Barrow in Furness and Daventry women candidates are in the majority. At the other end of the spectrum there are 11 authorities where women candidates comprise 20% or fewer of all candidates. Again, the majority of these cases, seven, are located in shire districts using partial council election.

Table 7: Women candidates by Type of Authority

<i>Pct range</i>	<i>Met Bors</i>	<i>Shire (W)</i>	<i>Shire (P)</i>	<i>Units (W)</i>	<i>Units (P)</i>
10 - 20%	1	3	7	0	0
20 - 30%	14	70	26	12	16
30 - 40%	19	75	37	12	4
40 - 50%	2	3	8	1	0
50% and over	0	0	2	0	0
Total	36	151	80	25	20

The proportion of women candidates amongst the three main parties varies little, ranging between 30% for the Conservatives, 31% for Labour and 34% for the Liberal Democrats. The Green party tops the list - 40% of its candidates are women. Just over one in five candidates contesting as Independents or standing for smaller parties is a woman.

The percentage of women elected, 30.4% of the total number elected in 2007, is only slightly lower than the overall percentage of women standing. This suggests that women are not, contrary to some anecdotal evidence, selected for the least winnable seats, but rather, once selected, have as good a chance as men of being elected. This is a general pattern, moreover; the range in the percentage women elected is narrow, with a minimum of 29% in the unitary areas rising to a maximum of 31% in some of the shire districts.

Confirmation of this can be seen in the figures showing elected women as a percentage of all women contesting. For candidates as a whole some 37% were elected and for women only, some 36% were elected. In each set of local authorities these figures are comparable and further demonstrate that whatever the reasons for the under-representation of women in English local government any bias on the part of party selection panels and/or voters is not among them.

The Green party’s advantage in women candidates disappears when councillors elected as assessed. Less than one in three Green party councillors is a woman. The figures for the three main parties are 29%, 31% and 34% for Conservative, Labour and Liberal Democrats respectively.

Incumbents

The figures show that more than seven and a half thousand candidates contesting in 2007 were incumbents seeking re-election (see Table A5). In other words, 72% of vacancies were contested by an incumbent. The highest proportion of would-be returnees is among the metropolitan boroughs. Here, more than eight in ten vacant seats saw an incumbent challenge. This is understandable since this particular cohort was only elected as recently as 2004 when new ward boundaries were introduced. The lowest proportion of incumbents is found in the shire districts with whole council elections where the figure is ten percentage points lower. Once again, the electoral cycle is probably the main explanation for this difference because these former councillors were elected in 2003 and a higher level of retirement is expected.

Overall, slightly more than one in four candidates is an incumbent seeking re-election but differences are apparent among authorities. For example, incumbent candidates in the metropolitan and unitary thirds are less than one in five of all candidates but in the shire districts it is nearer to one in three.

In a total of 14 authorities, five from amongst the metropolitan boroughs and six in thirds districts more than 90% of vacancies were contested by an incumbent (Table 8). In 23 of 36 (64%) metropolitan boroughs incumbent candidates fought 80% or more of vacancies but in only 25 (17%) of the all out shire districts. Again, the likely explanation for the relative difference is the electoral cycle.

Table 8: Incumbents as a percentage of All Candidates by Type of Authority

<i>Incumbent Candidates As (%) of Seats</i>	<i>MB</i>	<i>Shire (W)</i>	<i>Shire (P)</i>	<i>Units (W)</i>	<i>Units (P)</i>
50% or less	0	4	4	0	0
50 - 60%	0	20	13	0	3
60 - 70%	2	47	17	7	3
70 - 80%	11	51	21	12	6
80 - 90%	18	26	19	6	7
90 - 100%	5	3	6	0	1

Having decided to seek another four year term incumbents enjoy a high level of success since 82% proved successful at the poll. The highest rate of re-election came in the metropolitan boroughs where 87% of incumbents were re-elected and the lowest in the Unitary councils that elect a third of councillors but even here 79% of incumbents were successful.

Conservative party incumbents saw the most success with more than nine in ten re-elected, a figure almost matched by the Greens. Around three-quarters of Labour and Liberal Democrat incumbents were successful with a similar number of Independent achieving another success. Former Labour councillors in the shire districts suffered most. Here, just two-thirds of returning incumbents were successful.

ELECTORAL ADMINISTRATION

Turnout

The local elections in 2007 gave the opportunity to vote to some 30.7 million registered electors, over 80% of the total electorate in England. There were no elections in London, but outside the capital only about seven in every 100 electors lived in an area where no contests were scheduled¹. Across the country more than 11 million valid votes were cast, making the overall turnout 37.9% -see Table 9². That compares with 36.5% in 2006 and 35.6% in 2003 –the previous occasion on which most of the seats falling vacant this year were contested. Taking into account those who tried to vote but had their ballot papers or postal vote returns rejected, the level of participation rises to 38.3%.

Table 9. Turnout at Local Elections in England, 2002-2007 (valid votes as a % of the electorate)*

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

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

In the rest of this report we use the term ‘adjusted turnout’ to refer to calculations based simply on the number of valid votes cast; ‘minimal unadjusted turnout’ to refer to calculations taking into account those whose vote was rejected at the count; and ‘maximal unadjusted turnout’ to refer to calculations which take into account votes rejected at the count *and* those rejected at the postal ballot verification stage. The evidence in Table 10 confirms that only a small fraction of voters try to vote but fail to do so successfully. We return to this issue later in the context of the new regulations on postal voting.

Table 10. Adjusted and unadjusted turnout at English local elections 2006 and 2007

<i>2007 maximal</i>	<i>2007 minimal</i>	<i>2007 adjusted</i>	<i>2006 maximal</i>	<i>2006 minimal</i>	<i>2006 adjusted</i>
38.3	38.1	37.9	37.0	36.7	36.5

Regional patterns in turnout are set out in Table 11. The South West registered the highest level of participation; the North West the lowest. The rank order of regions is similar to that at the 2005 general election with the exception of the North East and East of England. It is likely that turnout in the North East at local elections benefits from the high proportion of postal voters in the region (23.3%), whereas general election turnout is comparatively depressed because of the small number of marginal parliamentary seats.

Table 11. Adjusted and unadjusted turnout by region 2007

	<i>2007 maximal</i>	<i>2007 minimal</i>	<i>2007 adjusted</i>	<i>Rank</i>	<i>Rank 2005*</i>
Yorkshire and Humber	37.8	37.4	37.3	6=	6
North West	34.6	34.4	34.2	8	8
North East	39.8	39.3	39.2	2	7
East Midlands	39.1	38.8	38.6	4	4
West Midlands	37.8	37.5	37.4	5	5
South West	42.3	42.1	41.9	1	1
South East	39.4	39.2	39.1	3	2
East of England	37.7	37.5	37.3	6=	3

*excluding London

Table 12. Highest and lowest turnouts by local authority 2007

	<i>2007 adjusted</i>	<i>2007 minimal</i>	<i>2007 maximal</i>
Mets			
Bradford	41.5	41.7	41.9
Kirklees	41.4	41.5	41.8
Newcastle Upon Tyne	39.1	39.2	41.0
North Tyneside	39.9	40.0	40.6
Trafford	39.0	39.1	39.5
Wigan	29.8	29.9	30.0
Salford	29.4	29.5	29.6
Manchester	27.6	27.8	28.4
Liverpool	27.8	27.9	28.1
Knowsley	25.3	25.5	25.6
Districts			
South Shropshire	55.0	55.2	55.5
Bridgnorth	54.0	54.3	54.6
South Lakeland	53.7	54.0	54.1
West Somerset	52.8	53.1	53.2
Alnwick	52.3	52.3	52.3
Broxbourne	31.0	31.1	31.4
Ellesmere Port/Neston	30.3	30.6	30.7
Basildon	30.0	30.1	30.2
Barrow In Furness	28.2	28.4	28.7
Cannock Chase	27.7	27.8	28.4
Unitaries			
Bath & NE Somerset	46.3	46.5	46.6
York	45.3	45.4	45.7
Rutland	44.7	45.0	45.2
Darlington	44.5	44.6	44.6
West Berkshire	44.3	44.5	44.5
Southampton	30.2	30.3	30.6
North East Lincolnshire	30.0	30.1	30.3
Hartlepool	28.9	29.0	29.1
Halton	27.3	27.4	27.4
Kingston Upon Hull	26.5	26.6	26.7

Naturally, there are greater variations when turnout is examined at the local authority level. More than half the electorate attempted to vote in 11 authorities (all district councils) and less than a third did so in 40 cases - 10 metropolitan boroughs, nine unitary councils, and 21 districts. The outliers for each type of local authority are set out in Table 12. It is worth pointing out that all the authorities in the 'top five' among both the unitary councils and districts hold elections once every four years, whereas all those in the 'bottom five' in each case have annual elections for a third of the council.

Postal voting

Uptake and Turnout

A sizeable number of electors continue to take advantage of the opportunity to apply for and cast a postal vote. At these elections more than 3.75 million postal votes were issued - 12.8% of all those with a contested election in their ward (Table 13). Exact comparisons with previous years are impossible, but it can be noted that 13.6% of local electors in 2006 had a postal vote and that 12.8% of electors throughout England had one at the 2005 general election. It would appear that the new rules on providing personal identifiers (together with the need to reapply for a postal vote) have had very little impact on take up. Stevenage narrowly beat Newcastle upon Tyne as the authority with the highest proportion of postal electors (Table 14); only in Alnwick did less than 5% of the electorate register for a postal vote. In each of the five boroughs within the former Tyne and Wear county area, where there have been several all-postal votes at elections and at a referendum, a quarter or more of the electorate were able to vote by post – a figure matched or exceeded by just seven other councils of the 312 with elections this year.

Table 13. Postal electors and votes in England 2007 –overall and by type of authority*

<i>2007 elections</i>			
Number of postal ballot papers issued	3,791,857	as % of electorate	12.8
Number returned	2,839,051	as % of issued	74.9
Number included 'in count'	2,747,906	as % of votes at count	24.4
Rejected or otherwise not included in count	91,145	as % of those returned	3.2

* A small number of authorities were not able to provide one or more of the pieces of information needed to compile this table.

Contd.../

Table 13 - continued

Metropolitan boroughs		
Postal ballot papers as % of electorate:	14.9	(13.1 in 2006)
% 'Turnout' among postal voters:	75.5	(65.9 in 2006)
Rejected ballot papers as % of those returned:	3.4	(3.0 in 2006)
Postal ballots as % of those at count:	31.2	(n/a for 2006)
Unitary authorities		
Postal ballot papers as % of electorate:	12.5	(13.6 in 2006)
% 'Turnout' among postal voters:	75.6	(63.7 in 2006)
Rejected ballot papers as % of those returned:	3.1	(3.2 in 2006)
Postal ballots as % of those at count:	24.0	(n/a for 2006)
District councils		
Postal ballot papers as % of electorate:	11.8	(13.1 in 2006)
% 'Turnout' among postal voters:	74.2	(65.6 in 2006)
Rejected ballot papers as % of those returned:	3.1	(2.6 in 2006)
Postal ballots as % of those at count:	21.6	(n/a for 2006)

Table 14. Take up of postal votes 2007

	<i>% of electorate</i>
Mets	
Newcastle upon Tyne	35.5
South Tyneside	32.9
Walsall	7.9
Birmingham	6.6
Districts	
Stevenage	35.6
Blyth Valley	33.9
Barrow In Furness	5.0
Alnwick	2.9
Unitaries	
Telford and Wrekin	29.5
Blackpool	24.7
Halton	7.0
Kingston upon Hull	5.2

The proportion of postal voters returning their ballot papers always exceeds the turnout among 'in person' voters. To an extent this can be explained by the fact of applying in the first place indicates a higher than average level of interest in and engagement with political events. However, especially in the case of second order elections, the convenience and flexibility of postal voting is also likely to boost participation. At the 2007 local elections almost three-quarters of those with a postal

ballot (74.9%) returned it. This contrasts with a turnout of 32.9% –a full five percentage points lower than the overall figure- among those voting at a polling station. This phenomenon also means that postal votes form a disproportionate number of those at the count. In 2007 nearly one in 4 of all votes counted (24.4%) were cast by post. In the metropolitan boroughs the proportion was 31.2% (Table 13).

Rejected papers

Some electors who try to vote by post are 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 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, the proportion of postal votes rejected or otherwise not included in the count was, at 3.2%, little different to that in 2006 and only fractionally higher than the 2.4% recorded in England at the 2005 general election.

Of perhaps more interest is the considerable variation between local authorities in the proportion so rejected. Examining only those councils where we believe the data returns to be accurate, more than one in ten postal votes were rejected in Congleton but less than 1% in a range of authorities of all types. Such disparities are likely to reflect the judgement and discretion of individual returning officers as much as gross differences in the success of postal electors in completing their forms correctly.

Table 15. Proportion of returned postal votes rejected before the count 2007

	<i>% of ballots returned</i>
Mets	
Sefton	8.7
Newcastle upon Tyne	6.8
Wigan	0.8
Salford	0.5
Districts	
Congleton	10.9
Barrow in Furness	7.9
Hinckley and Bosworth	0.5
West Lindsey	0.4
Unitaries	
Luton	8.0
Derby	7.6
Bath and NE Somerset	1.1
West Berkshire	0.7

Verification

The new regulations require returning officers to verify the personal identifiers on a minimum 20% sample of all postal ballot papers returned. In fact, the majority of returning officers in all types of authority claimed to have verified 100% of all returns, with most of the remainder checking well in excess of 20% (Table 16). About one in 20 councils did not provide data for the relevant columns and a similar proportion completed out-of-date versions of the postal vote return 'Form K'. Ten councils, all but one of which are districts, returned data implying that they had verified less than 20% of returned postal votes. 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 completed by electoral administrators.

Table 16. Verification of returned postal votes

	<i>Mean proportion verified</i>	<i>Proportion of cases where 20% (+/- 1%) verified</i>
Mets	90.7	9.8
Districts	73.8	12.7
Unitaries	75.0	16.9

Proxy votes

The liberalization of postal voting also appears to have had an impact on the number of electors appointing proxies. Fewer than 35,000 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 (Table 17).

Table 17. Proxy voters as percentage of electorate in England 2001-2007

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

Spoilt ballot papers

An initial perception of the overall number of ballot papers that were rejected in 2007 may be had from the differences between adjusted and unadjusted turnout in Table 18. This suggests that a relatively small number of electors who tried to vote had their votes declared invalid. This can happen at one of two stages. Postal voters must first meet the statutory requirements for the documentation they return. Votes which pass this test are then added at the count to those of electors who have voted in person. At

this stage votes are checked against a number of other criteria to determine their validity.

Table 18. Rejected ballots as % of total included at count –England

<i>2007 Locals</i>	<i>2006 Locals</i>	<i>2005 General</i>	<i>2004 Euros/Locals</i>	<i>2001 General</i>
0.4	0.6	0.3	0.8	0.4

Table 18 shows the proportion of ballot papers examined at the count and subsequently rejected at a selection of recent elections in England. At the 2007 local elections more than 48,000 votes were rejected at the count –just 0.4% of all those counted. The more complex the ballot paper, and the more electors are asked to vote in different ways on different ballot papers, the more likely mistakes are made. In 2004, when many English voters were faced with ballot papers for both European Parliament and local elections, each using a different electoral system, the proportion of spoilt papers was higher than at other recent general and local elections. The breakdown of reasons for rejection (where available) is contained in the data Appendices. It is simply worth noting in passing that an unclear ballot paper –‘void for uncertainty’ in the technical language- –is by far the most common reason for rejection. In 2007 this accounted for about two-thirds of rejections in those cases where we have complete data. Only seven councils, all districts, rejected in excess of 1% of ballots coming to the count. The highest proportion, 1.5%, was at Breckland.

Summary

The English local council elections saw more than ten thousand seats at stake in over six thousand wards. Featuring contests for seats in the metropolitan boroughs, shire districts and unitary councils it is the busiest part of the local electoral cycle. Most of the seats were last fought in 2003 but a sizeable proportion related to 2004.

Among the main parties the Conservative party performed best, winning the highest share of votes and seats and gaining approximately 900 additional council seats. Vote and seat losses were incurred by both Labour and the Liberal Democrats. Fielding a record number of local candidates the Green Party, British National Party and the United Kingdom Independence Party together polled around 7% of votes although winning just 0.7% of seats. Despite winning fewer votes than previously Independents received 6% of votes and won 7% of seats. Candidates standing for a range of small parties together captured 3% of seats and votes.

More than twenty eight thousand candidates contested the elections, yielding a candidate/seat ratio of 2.7 overall. More than half the candidates contested seats in the shire districts but here the ratio of candidates to seats is lower, some 2.3 overall. The highest ratio, 4.2, is found in the metropolitan borough areas.

Over four hundred wards were uncontested, some 6.6% (582 and 5.5% of seats) of the total. Just five councillors in the metropolitan boroughs and 15 in the unitary authorities were returned unopposed –less than 1% of the total seats falling

vacant. A significant majority of uncontested wards/seats are in shire districts using whole council elections - one in ten wards, and a slightly smaller proportion of seats, 8%, were uncontested in these authorities.

More than three thousand wards featured a contest between candidates from the three main political parties – 45% of the overall total.

Women comprise thirty per cent of candidates and councillors elected in 2007. There is little variation both in the proportion of candidates and councillors according to the type of local authority, and the political party, although the Green party has more women candidates than all the other significant parties.

Almost three-quarters of all vacancies were contested by a former incumbent seeking re-election. This rises to eight in ten seats in the metropolitan boroughs where these particular seats were those won by the second-placed candidates in the all-out elections in 2004. The largest drop-off rate is found in the shire districts where the seats were last contested in 2003 but even here a large fraction of seats featured incumbents wishing to serve a further four-year term. Between eight and nine in ten incumbents were successful.

The 2007 election saw almost 31 million electors with an opportunity to vote – 80% of the total English local electorate. More than 11 million valid votes were cast, making the overall turnout 37.9%. This is a slight increase on recent years. Voter turnout is highest in the South West and lowest in the North West although the regional pattern may be affected by the relative take up of postal voting.

More than 3.75 million postal votes were issued -12.8% of all those with a contested election in their ward. Almost three-quarters of those with a postal ballot (74.9%) returned it. Fewer than one in three of electors required to vote in person did so.

Despite the additional requirement for electors to provide personal identifiers, the proportion of postal votes rejected or otherwise not included in the count was, at 3.2%, little different to that in 2006. Some variation does continue to exist at the local authority level, however, where the proportion of rejected postal votes ranged from more than one in ten to less than one in a hundred. Just over one in a thousand electors nominated a proxy to vote on their behalf.

The new regulations also imposed a duty on local authorities to sample a minimum of 20% of returned postal ballot papers in order to verify their legality. A majority of local authorities sampled well in excess of the minimum although in some cases the data supplied suggests that verification procedures fell below the required minimum level.

The proportion of ballots that are rejected at the official count continues to be very small. In 2007 this is around 48,000 votes in total or about four in every thousand votes cast.

¹ There were no elections at all in the Isle of Wight, Adur, Cheltenham, Fareham, Gosport, Hastings, Nuneaton and Bedworth, and Oxford. In councils with elections by 'thirds' some individual wards had no scheduled contests this year.

² Councils were often unable to provide a figure for the number of ballot papers issued in those wards where more than one vacancy was being contested. In such cases we have used an algorithm to estimate the number of individual voters who went to the polls, see L. Ware, G. Borisyuk, C. Rallings and M. Thrasher, A New Algorithm for Estimating Turnout, *Electoral Studies*, 25,1 2006.