

Local Elections 2010

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Summary

- Local elections were held for about 4,200 seats in 164 authorities. The whole council was elected in the 32 London boroughs. Elsewhere either a third or a half of council seats fell vacant.
- Nearly 16,000 candidates contested the elections, yielding a candidate/seat ratio of 3.8 overall. In only five seats was a councillor elected unopposed.
- The 2010 local elections gave 21.9 million registered electors the opportunity to vote: a little over 57% of the total electorate in England.
- Over 300,000 electors (1.5% of the total) registered in the weeks leading up to the election -the so-called '11 day rule'. Late registration was particularly common in London where it amounted to 2.5% of the electorate.
- Some 13.6 million valid votes were cast, making the overall turnout 62.2%. The coincidence of the general and local elections makes comparisons with turnout at previous local contests misleading.
- The proportion of ballots that are rejected at the official count continues to be small. In 2010 it was about six in every thousand votes cast –the same as at the comparable local elections in 2006 but twice as high as the 0.3% across England at this year's concurrent general election.
- Almost 3.5 million postal votes were issued -15.9% of all those with a contested election in their ward.
- In five council areas more than 30% of the electorate had a postal vote; in another five fewer than 9% had a postal vote.
- More than four fifths (80.9%) of those with a postal ballot returned it. In contrast 59.7% of electors required to vote 'in person' did so.
- The proportion of postal votes rejected or otherwise not included in the count was 4.0%. However, unlike the case of the 2009 European and local elections, there is no evidence that the rejection rate of postal ballots was higher in those places where there were combined elections as opposed to the general election alone.
- The coincidence of local and general elections appears to have led to an increase in proxy votes compared with recent local elections. About 60,000 electors (a little under 0.3% of the total) appointed proxies to act on their behalf.

Introduction

Local elections took place in 164 local authorities in England on May 6 2010 – the same day as the UK-wide general election. The whole council was elected in all 32 London boroughs. In all 36 metropolitan boroughs, 20 out of 55 unitary authorities and 69 out of 201 district councils a third of the seats fell vacant. In an additional 7 districts there were contests for half the seats on the council. In two districts, Exeter and Norwich, elections for a third of the council were cancelled pending possible local government reorganisation in those areas.

Election results

Elections were scheduled in 2,940 wards with a total of 4,178 seats at stake. The breakdown of vacancies for the different types of authority is given in Table 1. In London voters in every ward except one elected more than one councillor. Elsewhere, with an exception in one ward in Fareham, a single councillor was due to be chosen. In a small number of cases outside London voters were asked to cast more than one ballot where a casual vacancy was being filled in addition to the due election in that ward.

Table 1: Wards/seats falling vacant local elections 2010

| | Wards | Seats | Casual vacancies (seats) |
|--------------|--------------|--------------|--------------------------|
| London | 624 | 1861 | - |
| Mets | 815 | 815 | 8 |
| Unitaries | 351 | 351 | 8 |
| Districts | 1,150 | 1,151 | 29 |
| Total | 2,940 | 4,178 | 45 |

The Conservatives narrowly beat Labour in terms of votes cast, but Labour was more efficient at converting its votes into seats and won a greater proportion of them than did its main rival –see Table 2. As in the general election the Liberal Democrats and minor parties failed to see their vote share reflected in seats won.

Table 2: Vote and Seat share local elections 2010

| | Vote (%) | Seats (%) |
|--------------|----------|-----------|
| Conservative | 32.5 | 38.2 |
| Labour | 31.9 | 42.0 |
| Lib Dem | 23.8 | 17.2 |
| Green | 3.4 | 0.3 |
| BNP | 2.5 | * |
| UKIP | 1.6 | * |
| Independent | 2.0 | 0.9 |
| Other | 2.2 | 1.3 |

*less than 0.1% of seats

In the metropolitan boroughs Labour won nearly two-thirds of the seats with fewer than 40% of the votes cast; in the districts the Conservatives polled 43% of the vote and won more than half the seats. In London Labour beat the

Conservatives by little more than 30,000 votes out of 3.7 million cast, but won 158 more seats. In the unitary authorities the Conservatives topped the popular vote; Labour the number of seats won.

Contestation

A total of 15,908 candidates contested seats at the 2010 local elections –an overall candidate/seat ratio of 3.8. The most competitive elections were in the metropolitan boroughs where 4.4 candidates contested each vacancy; in the districts, by contrast, there were 3.3.candidates for each seat. In only 5 cases (4 in the districts and one in a unitary authority) was a candidate elected unopposed.

Electorate

The local elections in 2010 gave 21.9 million registered electors the opportunity to vote: a little over 57% of the total electorate in England. Under the provisions of the Electoral Administration Act (EAA) 2006, more than 325,000 names (1.5% of the total) were added to the register between 10 March (the previous last date for registration to take effect before the election) and 20 April (the new closing date) –the so-called '11 day rule'. Late registration was particularly common in London where it amounted to 2.5% of the electorate. These figures tally with those separately collected for constituencies at the general election. Local election votes were cast at over 16,000 polling stations as well as by post.

Turnout

Across the country some 13.6 million valid local votes were cast, making the overall aggregate turnout 62.2% - see Table 3¹. Taking into account those who tried to vote but had their ballot papers or postal vote returns rejected, the level of participation rises to 63.1%. The coincidence of the general and local elections makes comparisons with turnout at previous local contests misleading. However it might be noted that the aggregate turnout in 2006, when almost the same wards/seats were contested as this year, was 36.5%. Comparison with previous combined elections is also unhelpful as in 1997, 2001 and 2005 the local elections that coincided with the general election were overwhelmingly concentrated in shire England.

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 3 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 regulations on postal voting.

Table 3. Adjusted and unadjusted turnout at English local elections 2010

| | max unadjusted | min unadjusted | adjusted |
|-----------|----------------|----------------|----------|
| Total | 63.1 | 62.6 | 62.2 |
| London | 62.5 | 62.1 | 61.7 |
| Mets | 61.6 | 61.0 | 60.7 |
| Unitaries | 61.8 | 61.2 | 60.8 |
| Districts | 66.8 | 66.4 | 65.9 |

The higher overall level of turnout in the districts, and variations in participation between authorities of the same type -, reflects the continuing broad relationship between an area's affluence/deprivation and its recorded level of turnout. This is a pattern also noted at the general election. Naturally, there are greater variations when turnout is examined at the local authority or ward level as set out in Table 4. In the case of wards, the highest recorded turnout is more than twice that of the lowest recorded turnout in each type of authority.

Table 4. Highest and lowest aggregate adjusted % turnouts by local authority/ward 2010**Local authority**

| | Highest | | Lowest |
|----------------------|----------------------|------------------------|--------|
| London | | | |
| Richmond upon Thames | 72.9 | Newham | 47.2 |
| Sutton | 69.8 | Kensington and Chelsea | 48.1 |
| Bromley | 69.0 | Westminster | 53.3 |
| Mets | | | |
| Solihull | 67.1 | Manchester | 51.2 |
| Bradford | 66.9 | Sunderland | 54.7 |
| Trafford | 66.2 | Salford | 55.9 |
| Unitaries | | | |
| Wokingham | 69.8 | Kingston upon Hull | 49.5 |
| Warrington | 68.2 | Stoke on Trent | 55.0 |
| Bristol | 65.3 | Hartlepool | 55.7 |
| Districts | | | |
| St Albans | 74.9 | Preston | 58.7 |
| Winchester | 74.9 | Great Yarmouth | 59.0 |
| Mole Valley | 74.2 | Ipswich | 60.0 |
| Ward | | | |
| High turnouts | | | |
| London | Richmond upon Thames | East Sheen | 78.7 |
| Mets | Bradford | Wharfedale | 80.9 |
| Unitaries | Bristol | Henleaze | 83.2 |
| Districts | Stroud | Bisley | 83.3 |

Low turnouts

| | | | |
|-----------|------------------------|------------|------|
| London | Kensington and Chelsea | Courtfield | 37.5 |
| Mets | Liverpool | Central | 32.3 |
| Unitaries | Kingston upon Hull | St Andrews | 36.0 |
| Districts | Great Yarmouth | Nelson | 41.3 |

Rejected ballots

As suggested by the differences between adjusted and unadjusted turnout set out in Table 3, only a small fraction of electors who tried to vote had their ballot papers rejected. This can happen at one of two stages. Postal voters must first meet the statutory requirements for the documentation they return, by supplying personal identifiers in the form of their date of birth and signature. 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 four criteria to determine their validity. The voter's intention should be clear; they should not have voted for more candidates or parties than allowed at that election; they should not mark the ballot paper in such a way that they can be personally identified; and the ballot paper itself should contain the official perforation mark.

Table 5. Rejected ballots as % of total included at count –England

| | |
|-----------------------------------|-----|
| 2001 general election | 0.4 |
| 2004 European/local elections | 0.8 |
| 2005 general election | 0.3 |
| 2006 local election | 0.6 |
| 2007 local election | 0.4 |
| 2008 local election | 0.4 |
| 2009 local election | 0.8 |
| 2009 European Parliament election | 0.7 |
| 2010 general election | 0.3 |
| 2010 local election | 0.6 |

Table 5 shows the proportion of ballot papers examined at the count and subsequently rejected at a selection of recent elections in England. At the 2010 local elections more than 83,000 votes were rejected at the count –that is, 0.6% of all those counted. This is in line with the local elections at the same point of the cycle in 2006, but rather higher than the rejection rate at any of the past 3 general elections in England. It is likely that some electors turning up to vote in the general election are unaware that there is also a local contest and either fail to complete that ballot paper correctly or leave it blank. The most common reason for rejection is an unclear ballot paper –‘unmarked or wholly void for uncertainty’ in the technical language. In 2010 these accounted for almost three-quarters of rejections in those cases where we have complete data. In only one case (Blackburn with Darwen 3.7%) were in excess of 2% of ballots coming to the count rejected. The Blackburn constituency also topped the list of rejected ballot papers in the general election counting. However, we cannot know what proportion of such

rejections is the result of deliberate as opposed to accidental actions by voters.

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 some 3.5 million postal votes were issued -15.9% of all those with a contested election in their ward (Table 6). Exact comparisons with previous years are impossible because of the varying electoral cycle, but it can be noted that 13.6% of local electors had a postal vote in 2006 (the previous occasion when almost all the seats being contested this year last fell vacant) and that 12.8% of electors throughout England had one at the 2005 general election. It would appear that the new rules on providing personal identifiers (together with the need to reapply for a postal vote) have not stemmed the gradual increase in voting by post.

Postal voting remains most common in the metropolitan areas, not least because the 29 out of 36 boroughs located in the North East, North West, and Yorkshire and The Humber regions had substantial experience of all-postal voting between 2000 and 2004. By contrast in London, where only a handful of boroughs were involved in the postal voting pilots, there are somewhat fewer postal voters.

Table 6. Postal electors and local votes 2010 –overall and by type of authority

| | | | |
|---|-----------|------------------------|------|
| Number of postal ballot papers issued | 3,486,704 | as % of electorate | 15.9 |
| Number returned | 2,820,604 | as % of issued | 80.9 |
| Number included 'in count' | 2,708,000 | as % of votes at count | 19.8 |
| Rejected or otherwise not included in count | 112,604 | as % of those returned | 4.0 |

London

| | |
|--|---------------------|
| Postal ballot papers as % of electorate: | 13.6 (11.0 in 2006) |
| % 'Turnout' among postal voters: | 78.0 (61.0 in 2006) |
| Rejected ballot papers as % of those returned: | 4.6 (n/a 2006*) |
| Postal ballots as % of those at count: | 16.3 (n/a 2006*) |

Mets

| | |
|--|---------------------|
| Postal ballot papers as % of electorate: | 18.6 (16.1 in 2006) |
| % 'Turnout' among postal voters: | 80.7 (64.3 in 2006) |
| Rejected ballot papers as % of those returned: | 4.0 (n/a 2006*) |
| Postal ballots as % of those at count: | 23.6 (n/a 2006*) |

Unitaries

| | |
|--|---------------------|
| Postal ballot papers as % of electorate: | 14.5 (13.3 in 2006) |
| % 'Turnout' among postal voters: | 82.4 (62.7 in 2006) |
| Rejected ballot papers as % of those returned: | 4.3 (n/a 2006*) |
| Postal ballots as % of those at count: | 18.7 (n/a 2006*) |

Districts

| | |
|--|---------------------|
| Postal ballot papers as % of electorate: | 15.0 (13.2 in 2006) |
| % 'Turnout' among postal voters: | 83.5 (65.4 in 2006) |
| Rejected ballot papers as % of those returned: | 3.3 (n/a 2006*) |
| Postal ballots as % of those at count: | 18.3 (n/a 2006*) |

*These data were not compiled in 2006.

In five areas more than 30% of the electorate had a postal vote –see Table 7. These councils make a regular appearance on this list (Stevenage heading the table for the fourth year running) and have conducted all postal pilots in the past. At the other extreme, there were five authorities where fewer than 9% had a postal vote. Propping up this end of the table is Kingston upon Hull from the Yorkshire and The Humber region. Its presence demonstrates that council/party activity remains necessary to reinforce a culture of continuing to use postal votes even where there have been all-postal elections in the past. It is also instructive to note that the proportion of electors with postal votes in Birmingham is just 9.1%. This is by some way the lowest figure for a metropolitan borough and may reflect reaction by the local authority and voters alike to the high profile court case relating to postal vote fraud in 2004. There are even sharper variations when ward level data are examined.

Table 7. Biggest and smallest take up of postal votes by authority/ward, 2010

Local authority

Biggest

| | |
|---------------------|------|
| Stevenage | 41.8 |
| South Tyneside | 37.7 |
| Sunderland | 37.7 |
| Newcastle upon Tyne | 34.7 |
| Chorley | 30.8 |

Smallest

| | |
|--------------------|-----|
| Kingston upon Hull | 6.2 |
| Barrow in Furness | 7.0 |
| Oxford | 8.3 |
| Ealing | 8.4 |
| Brent | 8.7 |

Ward

Biggest

| | | | |
|-----------|-----------------------|---------------|------|
| London | Hackney | Cazenove | 29.6 |
| Mets | Newcastle upon Tyne | Westerhope | 48.4 |
| Unitaries | Blackburn with Darwen | Bastwell | 33.1 |
| Districts | Stevenage | Symonds Green | 63.0 |

Smallest

| | | | |
|-----------|--------------------|-----------------|-----|
| London | Ealing | Perivale | 6.2 |
| Mets | Birmingham | Selly Oak | 5.5 |
| Unitaries | Kingston upon Hull | Bransholme East | 3.3 |
| Districts | Oxford | Holywell | 1.0 |

The proportion of postal voters returning their ballot papers always exceeds the turnout among 'in person' voters. To an extent this can be explained by the fact that applying for such a vote in the first place often indicates a higher

than average level of interest in and engagement with political events. With the additional stimulus of a general election it is no surprise that over 80% of those with a postal vote returned their ballots –an increase of about 20 percentage points compared with the local elections at the same point in the cycle in 2006. The turnout of in person voters by contrast was 59.7%; itself a very considerable increase on the approximately 33% recorded among those voting at a polling station in 2006. This phenomenon also means that postal votes form a disproportionate number of those at the count. In 2010 nearly a fifth of all local votes counted (19.8%) were cast by post; in the metropolitan boroughs it was nearly a quarter (23.6%). Indeed some argue that the success of postal voting acts to disguise a continuing problem of electoral participation among those who have not taken advantage of this facility.

Postal vote rejection

As outlined earlier some electors who try to vote by post are found to have completed the documentation incorrectly and their ballot papers never reach the count. The introduction of personal identifiers appears to have led to a small increase in the proportion of postal votes rejected or otherwise not included in the count. At the local elections it was 4.0% overall and at the general election in England this year it was 3.8%. In contrast in 2006, also the last local elections before the new regulations came into force, it was 3.0% and at the 2005 general election in England it was 2.4%. However, unlike the case of the 2009 European and local elections, there is no evidence that the rejection rate of postal ballots was higher in those places where there were combined elections as opposed to the general election alone². Of the total of more than 110,000 postal returns rejected, in about half the cases this was because a signature or date of birth (or both) were mismatched; in another quarter because the elector omitted to enclose either the ballot paper or the postal vote statement (or both).

As in recent years we found considerable variation between local authorities in the proportion of postal ballots rejected and in the reasons for rejection. Such disparities are likely to reflect the judgement and discretion of individual returning officers and the way different software packages work as much as gross differences in the success of postal electors in completing their forms correctly. These issues will be dealt with in more detail in a separate report on postal vote verification processes and rejection rates covering both the general and local elections.

Proxy votes

The introduction of postal voting on demand has recently had an impact on the number of electors appointing proxies –see Table 12. This year however the coincidence of local and general elections appears to have led to an increase in proxy votes, albeit not back to the level seen at the 2001 general election. Some 60,000 local electors appointed a proxy, with just 312 emergency proxies being issued across all councils with local elections.

Table 12. Proxy voters as percentage of electorate in England 2001-2010

| | | | | | | |
|----------|----------|----------|----------|----------|----------|----------|
| 2010 Loc | 2010 Gen | 2009 Loc | 2008 Loc | 2007 Loc | 2005 Gen | 2001 Gen |
| 0.28 | 0.32 | 0.13 | 0.09 | 0.12 | 0.22 | 0.47 |

¹ Councils were sometimes unable to provide a figure for the number of ballot papers issued in those wards where more than one vacancy was being contested. In such cases we have used an algorithm to estimate the number of individual voters who went to the polls, see L. Ware, G. Borisyuk, C. Rallings and M. Thrasher, A New Algorithm for Estimating Turnout, *Electoral Studies*, 25,1 2006. Adjusted (or valid vote) turnout based on an average of the turnout level in all wards with contested elections was 63.6%.

² See Colin Rallings and Michael Thrasher, European Parliament Elections 2009, report to the Electoral Commission and accompanying data tables.