

Local Elections in England and Wales May 2013

(including Mayoral elections and parliamentary
by-election)

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Summary

- Local elections were held for just under 2,400 seats in 34 authorities in England and one in Wales. The whole council was elected in 27 counties and six unitary authorities in England, and on the Isle of Anglesey in Wales. One third of the council was elected in the unitary Bristol City authority.
- Mayoral elections were held in both Doncaster and North Tyneside, and a parliamentary by-election in South Shields.
- Almost 10,000 candidates contested the local elections, yielding a candidate/seat ratio of 4.2 overall. Just 14 councillors were elected unopposed.
- The 2013 local elections gave over 18.4 million registered electors the opportunity to vote. In England more than 45% of the total electorate was in an area with an election.
- More than 80,000 electors (0.5% of the total) registered in the weeks leading up to the election under the so-called '11 day rule'.
- Some 5.71 million local election votes were counted in the ballot box, making the overall turnout 31.0%. This was over eight percentage points below the turnout at the comparable stage in the electoral cycle in 2009.
- The proportion of ballots that are rejected at the official count continues to be small. In 2013 it was about one in every two hundred votes cast.
- Over 2.74 million postal votes were issued -14.9% of all those with a contested election in their division/ward. In three council areas more than 25% of the electorate had a postal vote; in another 12 fewer than 10% did so.
- Two thirds (67.1%) of those with a postal ballot returned it. In contrast turnout among those required to vote 'in person' was just 25.0%.
- The proportion of postal votes rejected or otherwise not included in the count was 3.1%.
- Rejection following a mismatch of signature and/or date of birth was much more common than rejection for incomplete information.
- In about a quarter of these cases voters returned their postal voting envelopes but failed to include either the ballot paper itself or the verification statement or both.
- About two thirds of one percent of electors with a postal vote were granted a waiver to use their date of birth as their sole identifier.
- Some 19,000 local electors (0.10% of the total electorate) appointed proxies to act on their behalf.
- The turnout, proportion of ballot papers rejected at the count, pattern of postal voting and postal vote rejection at the mayoral elections and parliamentary by-election was similar to that in the English local elections.

Introduction

Local elections took place in 34 local authorities in England and on the Isle of Anglesey in Wales on May 2 2013¹. The whole council was elected in 27 counties and six unitary authorities in England, and on Anglesey. One third of the council was elected in unitary Bristol. In nine counties and three unitary authorities boundary changes had been implemented since the previous full council elections. In addition, there were Mayoral elections in both Doncaster and North Tyneside, and a parliamentary by-election in South Shields.

Local elections

Results

Local elections were scheduled in 2,208 divisions/wards with a total of 2,392 seats at stake. Table 1 gives the breakdown of vacancies by type of authority.

Table 1: Divisions/Wards/seats falling vacant local elections 2013

	Divisions/Wards	Seats
County councils	1723	1811
Unitaries –whole council	451	528
Unitary –thirds (Bristol)	23	23
Isle of Anglesey	11	30
Total	2,197	2,392

The Conservatives polled the largest number of votes and won nearly half of all seats -see Table 2. Labour and the Liberal Democrats won seats in rough proportion to their share of votes cast. UKIP, on the other hand, won less than a third of the seats to which it would have been ‘entitled’ under a strict proportional system.

Table 2: Vote and Seat share local elections 2013

	Vote (%)	Seats (%)
Conservative	34.6	46.7
Labour	21.2	22.6
Lib Dem	13.9	14.8
UKIP	20.0	6.1
Green	3.6	0.9
Independent	4.5	7.5
Other	2.2	1.4

Contestation

A total of 9,949 candidates contested seats at the 2013 local elections –an overall candidate/seat ratio of 4.2. The most competitive elections were in the county councils where 4.4 candidates contested each vacancy. In just 14 divisions (mainly in Shropshire and Wiltshire) were candidates elected unopposed.

¹ There were also elections in the Isles of Scilly. They do not form part of this report.

Electorate

The local elections in 2013 gave over 18.4 million registered electors the opportunity to vote. More than 45% of the total electorate in England had an election in their area. More than 80,000 electors (0.5% of the total) took advantage of the so-called '11 day rule' (which was introduced by the 2006 Electoral Administration Act and allows people to register to vote until 11 working days before an election or referendum) and chose to register during the pre-election period. In just one authority (Northumberland) did fewer than 0.2% of the local electorate register under this procedure. At least a further 16,500 people tried to register after the closing date and some 1,000 were recorded as trying to vote on election day itself despite not being registered². Local election votes were cast at some 16,650 polling stations as well as by post.

Turnout

Across the country some 5.71 million local votes were counted at the ballot box, making the overall aggregate turnout 31.0%. Table 3 also breaks this figure down for England and Wales separately. Taking into account those who tried to vote but had their postal vote returns rejected, the level of participation rises to 31.3%. This compares with 39.3% and 39.7% respectively at the same point of the electoral cycle in 2009 when the local contests coincided with European Parliament elections –see Table 4³. In the 27 county councils where a direct comparison with 2009 can be made, 'ballot box' turnout was 30.8% this year against 39.1% four years ago. Indeed, turnout was at its lowest level for nearly 60 years for this tier of local government.

In Table 3 and subsequently we use the term 'valid vote turnout' to refer to calculations based simply on the number of valid votes cast; 'ballot box turnout' to refer to calculations taking into account valid votes plus those which were considered but rejected at the count; and 'total turnout' to refer to calculations which take into account valid votes, those rejected at the count *and* those rejected at the postal ballot verification stage. The evidence in Tables 3 and 4 confirms that only a small fraction of voters try to vote but fail to do so successfully.

Table 3. Turnout at English and Welsh local elections 2013

	Total turnout including rejected postal votes	Votes counted in ballot box	Valid vote turnout
Total	31.3	31.0	30.8
England	31.2	30.9	30.8
Wales	50.9	50.5	50.4
County councils only	31.1	30.8	30.7

² Not all local authorities were able to supply this information.

³ The figures are not directly comparable. Some authorities had elections in 2009 but not in 2013; Durham and Northumberland had elections in 2008 and again this year.

Table 4. Turnout at English local elections 2007-2012*

2012 total turnout 31.5	2012 ballot box turnout 31.0	2012 valid vote turnout 30.8
2011 total turnout 42.7	2011 ballot box turnout 42.0	2011 valid vote turnout 41.6
2009 total turnout 39.7	2009 ballot box turnout 39.3	2009 valid vote turnout 39.1
2008 total turnout 35.5	2008 ballot box turnout 35.1	2008 valid vote turnout 35.0
2007 total turnout 38.3	2007 ballot box turnout 38.1	2007 valid vote turnout 37.9

*Elections in 2010 are excluded because of their clash with the 2010 general election. The local elections in 2011 were held on the same day as a referendum on the parliamentary voting system.

Naturally, there are variations from the mean when turnout is examined at the local authority level as set out in Table 5. The highest turnouts were in Somerset (counties) and the Isle of Wight (unitaries); the lowest in Essex and Bristol (where just a third of the council was being elected) respectively. Among districts within counties, South Lakeland came out on top and Broxbourne brought up the rear. They each occupied a similar place in the league table at the 2012 English district council elections. In the case of divisions/wards, the highest recorded turnout can be up to three times larger than that of the lowest recorded turnout in each type of authority. In just nine cases in England did turnout at this level exceed 50%; in 22 cases it was less than 20%. On the other hand, turnout in Anglesey exceeded 50% in six of the council's' 11 wards.

Table 5. Highest and lowest % 'ballot box' turnouts by local authority 2013

Local authority	Highest	Lowest	
Counties			
Somerset	34.4	Hertfordshire	29.0
Dorset	34.1	Staffordshire	28.0
East Sussex	33.4	Essex	27.8
Unitaries			
Isle of Wight	35.6	Shropshire	33.3
Wiltshire	34.3	Durham	27.8
Northumberland	34.1	Bristol	27.4
Districts within counties			
South Lakeland	39.7	Newcastle under Lyme	23.8
North Norfolk	39.7	Basildon	23.2
Derbyshire Dales	39.4	Broxbourne	23.0

Rejected ballots

As suggested by the modest differences between the turnout measures 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. Under the provisions of the Electoral Administration Act 2006, 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 both when they apply for a postal vote and when they return a ballot paper. Votes submitted by those whose details are deemed to match 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 mark.

Table 6. Rejected ballots as % of total included at count –England 2001-12

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
2011 local election	1.0
2011 AV referendum	0.6
2012 local election	0.6
2013 local election	0.5

Table 6 shows the proportion of ballot papers examined at the count and subsequently rejected at a selection of recent elections in England. At the 2013 local elections more than 26,000 votes were rejected at the count –that is 0.5% of all those counted. This is in line with the long-term average for local elections which do not coincide with other electoral events. Voters in the unitaries were more likely (0.88%) to have their ballots rejected than those in the counties (0.41%). The rejection rate in Anglesey was just 0.23% -60 votes out of more than 25,800 at the count.

The most common reason for rejection is an unclear ballot paper –‘unmarked or wholly void for uncertainty’ in the technical language. In 2013 these accounted for more than two-thirds of rejections in those cases where we have complete data. In only five individual district or unitary authorities were in excess of 1% of ballots coming to the count rejected. Suffolk Coastal topped the list with a rejection rate of 1.6%⁴.

⁴ We understand that this was partly the result of an expected candidate, who was not formally nominated, receiving ‘write-in’ votes in one division within the authority.

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 2.74 million postal votes were issued -14.9% of all those with a contested election in their division/ward (Table 7). 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 2009 (the previous occasion when most of the seats being contested this year last fell vacant) and that 15.9% of electors throughout England had one at the 2010 general election.

Postal voting remains most common in the metropolitan boroughs which did not have local elections this year, not least because 29 out of a total of 36 such boroughs are located in the North East, North West, and Yorkshire and The Humber regions which had substantial experience of all-postal voting between 2000 and 2004. For example, a quarter of electors in Doncaster and North Tyneside (where there were mayoral elections in May) had a postal vote as did more than a third of electors at the South Shields parliamentary by-election.

Table 7. Postal electors and local votes 2013 –overall and by type of authority

Number of postal ballot papers issued	2,741,454	as % of electorate	14.9
Number returned	1,839,669	as % of issued	67.1
Number included 'in count'	1,782,190	as % of votes at count	31.2
Rejected or otherwise not included in count	57479	as % of those returned	3.1

Counties

Postal ballot papers as % of electorate:	14.6 (13.6 in 2009)
% 'Turnout' among postal voters:	67.2 (68.8 in 2009)
Rejected ballot papers as % of those returned:	3.1 (4.7 in 2009)
Postal ballots as % of those at count:	30.9 (22.7 in 2009)

Unitaries

Postal ballot papers as % of electorate:	17.4 (no exact comparison)
% 'Turnout' among postal voters:	66.3 (no exact comparison)
Rejected ballot papers as % of those returned:	3.0 (no exact comparison)
Postal ballots as % of those at count:	35.2 (no exact comparison)

Anglesey

Postal ballot papers as % of electorate:	16.8 (11.2 in 2008)
% 'Turnout' among postal voters:	75.2 (79.5 in 2008)
Rejected ballot papers as % of those returned:	3.0 (4.6 in 2008)
Postal ballots as % of those at count:	24.3 (15.5 in 2008)

In one council area more than 35% of the electorate had a postal vote and in two more over 25% did so –see Table 8. These councils make a regular appearance on this list and each has conducted all postal pilots in the past. At the other extreme, there were 12 authorities (again familiar names) where fewer than 10% of electors had a postal vote. There are, of course, even sharper variations when division/ward level data are examined.

Table 8. Largest and smallest take up of postal votes - % electorate by authority 2013

Local authority

Largest

Stevenage	35.1
Rushcliffe	28.8
Chorley	27.6

Smallest

Barrow in Furness	6.2
Oxford	7.0
Epping Forest	8.2

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 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. More than two in three postal electors used their vote, although this was a little lower than at the comparable county elections in 2009 when 68.8% of postal electors participated. By contrast the turnout among those obliged to visit a polling station was barely a quarter (25.0%) compared with 35.2% in 2009 and 36.7% at the combined elections/referendum in 2011.

This phenomenon also means that postal votes form a disproportionate number of those at the count. In 2013 nearly a third of all local votes counted (31.2%) were cast by post. Indeed some argue that the success of postal voting acts to disguise a continuing problem of low electoral participation among those who choose not to take advantage of this facility. Table 9 contrasts postal and 'in person' participation at recent local elections in England. Turnout at polling stations appears especially to be hit when the local elections are stand-alone events as in 2008, 2012 and 2013.

Table 9. Postal and 'in person' turnout at English local elections 2007-2013*

	Postal voter turnout	'In person' turnout
2013	67.1	25.0
2012	68.0	24.2
2011	72.8	36.7
2009	68.7	35.2
2008	71.5	28.7

*Elections in 2010 are excluded because of their clash with the 2010 general election. The local elections in 2011 were held on the same day as a referendum on the parliamentary voting system.

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 at first to a small increase in the proportion of postal votes rejected or otherwise not

included in the count. For example, in terms of the actual local election returns for England in 2012, the overall proportion of postal votes rejected or otherwise not included in the count was 4.2% compared with 5.2% in 2011, 4.0% in 2010, 4.7% in 2009, 3.6% in 2008, 3.2% in 2007, and 3.0% at the last local elections before the new regulations in 2006.

In 2013 the rate of rejection was rather lower at 3.1% across England and 3.0% in Anglesey. This could be a reflection of the new system bedding down and/or of the lack of combined elections. We have noted in the past evidence that where electoral events are combined, as in many cases in 2009 and 2011, the rejection rate of postal ballots is somewhat higher⁵. Further clarification on this issue may come in 2014 with the combination of European parliament and local elections.

In order to obtain more information on the reasons for postal vote rejection than the statutory forms allow and to try to overcome inconsistencies within and between local authorities in the recording of answers, each returning officer was asked to compile and submit additional data on the outcomes of their verification process. Table 10 makes clear that rejection following a mismatch of signature and/or date of birth was much more common than rejection for incomplete or missing information. The former accounts for at least a half of all rejections in each type of local authority. This is in line with data from previous years.

In other cases, varying from 17% in Anglesey to 27% in the unitary authorities, electors returned their postal voting envelopes but failed to include either the ballot paper itself or the verification statement or both. The proportion doing this was a little higher than in 2012, but lower than in 2011 when it may have been that some voters deliberately decided not to vote at both electoral events –the local elections and the PVS referendum. Having said that, these figures represent percentages of the small number of rejected ballots. For example, only 0.8% of all returned postal votes were rejected for a missing ballot or verification statement. The vast majority of postal voters did correctly file their returns complete with matching signature and date of birth.

Table 10. Reasons for rejection of postal votes at verification by % of total rejected at 2013 local elections

	Counties	Unitaries	Anglesey	Total
PV statement rejected (No signature)	7	5	5	7
PV statement rejected (No DoB)	5	3	13	5
PV statement rejected (Both)	10	5	3	10
Proportion rejected (incomplete information)	22	13	21	21
PV statement mismatched signature	24	27	48	24
PV statement mismatched DoB	21	22	5	21
PV statement mismatched both	9	11	9	10
Proportion rejected (mismatching)	54	60	62	55
Prop rejected (ballot paper or statement missing)	24	27	17	24

⁵ This does not seem to apply, however, when local elections are combined with a general election.

Waivers

A concession granted under the terms of the EAA 2006 was that postal electors who either had a disability, or were illiterate, or were unable to furnish a consistent signature could apply for a waiver to use their date of birth as their sole identifier. Table 10 shows that the proportion of postal electors granted such a waiver varied from 0.58% in Anglesey to 0.83% in the English unitaries. These summary figures represent a slight increase compared with the 2012 and 2011 local elections, the 2010 general election, and the 2009 European Parliament and English local elections. At district level the largest number of waivers was in Arun (3.7%) followed by Newcastle under Lyme (2.6%) which also ranked highly in 2012. It is likely that such differences are at least in part attributable to how far the local authority publicises the availability of such a waiver.

Table 10: Postal electors granted 'waivers' at the 2013 local elections

	As proportion of postal electors	Average per local authority
England	0.68	545
Counties	0.66	583
Unitaries	0.83	398
Anglesey	0.58	59

Proxy votes

The introduction of postal voting on demand has had a downward impact on the number of electors appointing proxies, especially when there is no concurrent general election –see Table 11. This year was no different with some 19,000 local electors in England (0.10% of the total electorate) appointing a proxy and just 67 emergency proxies being issued across all councils with local elections. 132 proxies (and 2 emergency proxies) were issued in Anglesey (0.26% of the electorate).

Table 11. Proxy voters as percentage of electorate in England 2001-2013

2013 Loc	2012 Loc	2011 Loc	2010 Loc	2010 Gen	2009 Loc	2005 Gen	2001 Gen
0.10	0.10	0.15	0.28	0.32	0.13	0.22	0.47

Mayoral Elections

Mayoral elections took place in Doncaster and North Tyneside. In neither case were there coincident local elections. 'Ballot box' turnout was 27.8% and 32.1% respectively with 1.0% and 0.7% of ballots rejected at the count. About a quarter of electors had a postal vote with 61% of them returning it in Doncaster and 70% in North Tyneside. Some 2% of such postal ballots were rejected in Doncaster and 3.4% in North Tyneside.

Parliamentary by-election

The South Shields parliamentary by-election was also a stand-alone contest. Turnout was over 39% with just 0.2% of ballots being rejected at the count. More than a third of electors had a postal vote and 68% of them returned it. 3.4% of postal ballots were rejected; a majority for having a mismatched signature, date of birth or both.

Appendix

There remained inconsistencies and anomalies in the way in which local district authorities recorded the reasons for and total number of postal vote rejections at cells B15-17 and C18-19 on Form K. Although the number of such cases appeared less than in previous years, there is still evidence of a failure always to understand that the figures in B15+B16+B17 should sum to that recorded at C19 and that the figure at C18 (number of PVs included in the count) should be the product of B5 (total number of covering envelopes received) minus C19. It probably does not help that C18 and C19 are set out counter-intuitively on the form with the overall count total preceding the sum of rejections.

The consequence is that it is impossible to conduct a fully accurate audit of PV data involving a breakdown of reasons for rejection. When local authorities are contacted about such anomalies they are often unable to provide revised figures or to throw light on why the data were coded in that way in the first place. In practice we use a calculation of B5 minus C18 as a surrogate for the total number of PVs rejected regardless of whether or not it is the same as recorded in C19.

The different breakdown of reasons for rejection collected on the Additional Data form similarly does not always match this B5 minus C18 calculation. However, the discrepancies do seem less severe and the categories have the advantage of being embedded in software and of having greater 'common sense' meaning. It would seem sensible to consider replacing B15-17 on Form K with three other aggregated categories –rejections for mismatching; rejections for missing identifier information; rejections for absent documentation. As it is B15 is largely redundant anyway given that almost all authorities now verify 100% of PV returns.

We do, though, continue to notice a difference in the way in which software programmes code rejections. As in the past, authorities using the Xpress software record a higher proportion of 'mismatching' than do either of the other main suppliers –Halarose and Strand (see Table A1). It may be necessary for the Commission to try to understand why this is so before finalising any change of categories on Form K.

Table A1. Breakdown of reasons for postal vote rejection by different software suppliers.

	Missing identifier	Mismatching	No documentation
Halarose	27	44	28
Strand	23	45	32
Xpress	19	61	19