

## Postal vote verification and rejections in Great Britain: European and local elections 2009

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## Summary

- The EAA 2006 regulations have not led to a noticeable drop in electors applying for and using a postal vote.
- There was an increase this year in the numbers of postal ballots rejected before the count compared with previous European Parliament (EP) and local elections. It was the first EP contest at which Absent Vote Identifiers were used; a greater proportion of EROs checked 100% of AVIs than at previous local elections; the combination of elections may have led some postal voters to be confused about what was required.
- The large majority of local authorities claim to verify all postal ballot papers returned, most using a fully automatic verification system.
- Postal votes appear to be more often rejected as a result of mismatched date of birth and/or signature rather than for incomplete information. However, the breakdowns supplied by local electoral administrators may not always be reliable.
- There are inter-authority variations in the extent to which the waiver granted to those who may not be able to provide a consistent signature has been taken up. In part at least this is likely to be due to the varying publicity councils have given to this facility. The Electoral Commission may wish to review its guidance on this issue.
- In England, although there are clear and statistically significant relationships between the turnout of postal voters and aspects of the social characteristic of a local authority, only the proportion of its population with no educational qualifications is associated with the level of postal vote rejection.
- Regression models using a range of variables were able to explain less than 1% of the local authority level variance in rejected postal ballots. This is much less than was the case using ward level data at the 2008 and 2007 local elections.
- It is difficult immediately to determine whether local authorities in England which reported either very high or very low rates of postal vote rejection did so as a result of either inaccuracies in how they have recorded data, or the application of different standards of verification or genuine variations in the degree to which electors correctly completed their forms.
- In neither Scotland nor Wales were there identifiable statistical relationships between the character of a counting area and the incidence of rejected postal ballots. Moreover the variance between local authorities was less than at previous elections, perhaps suggesting greater consistency in the application of the regulations by local electoral administrators.

## **Introduction**

Under the provisions of the Electoral Administration Act 2006 all those electors opting to vote by post are required to provide two pieces of personal information both when they apply for a postal ballot and when they return it. This record of their signature and date of birth is then used to verify their ballot paper and so provide additional security against personation or other electoral fraud.

This system was adopted across England in time for the 2007 local elections and in Wales for the 2007 National Assembly election. It was used again for the local elections in England and Wales in 2008 when, because of the electoral cycle, almost all postal electors would have had their second experience of providing identifiers. In London, however, those choosing a postal vote for the 2008 GLA contests were faced with the new rules for the first time. In 2009 the new procedures were extended to Scotland. Northern Ireland, where different rules apply, is not considered in this report.

## **Postal votes**

Data from 2007, 2008 and 2009 suggest that the new security arrangements had little effect on the numbers of people applying for a postal vote.

In 2009 more than 6.25 million postal votes were issued for the European Parliament elections, some 14.2% of the British electorate. This compares with 12.4% across Britain at the 2005 general election and 8.6% in those regions without all postal voting at the previous EP contests in 2004. At the local elections there were nearly 2.4 million postal votes issued, covering 13.6% of all those electors with a contested election in their division/ward. Exact comparisons with previous years are impossible because of variations in the electoral cycle, but it can be noted that 14.9% of local electors in England had a postal vote in 2008, 12.8% in 2007 and 13.6% in 2006. Given that electors were also obliged to reapply for a postal vote under the new rules, these continuing levels are impressive.

A number of electors who try to vote by post are inevitably found to have completed the documentation incorrectly and their ballot papers are rejected before the count. It seemed that the proportion of such cases might increase this year following the requirement for electors to provide personal identifiers together with the added complications involved for those postal voters with combined elections. Across the UK the overall proportion of postal votes rejected or otherwise not included in the count at the European Parliament elections was 4.4%, twice as high as that recorded in 2004 (2.1%) before the introduction of Absent Vote Identifiers. The pattern in Scotland and Wales and across the regions of England was reasonably consistent with the overall average. The rate of rejection in English councils with coincident local elections was, however, 4.9% whereas that in those with only European contests was 4.0%. In terms of the actual local election returns for England, the overall proportion of postal votes rejected or otherwise not included in the count was 4.7% compared with 3.6% in 2008, 3.2% in 2007 and 3.0% at the last local elections before the new regulations in 2006.

Judgements about rejection are made following a verification procedure which aims to match the information provided by electors at the application and voting stages. This paper first provides an overview of local authorities' approaches to verifying postal ballots before subjecting rejected papers to a statistical analysis to see how far the rate of rejection is related to socio-demographic and other characteristics of the population of the electoral unit. The analysis this year is necessarily restricted to the level of a local authority (constituency in Wales). First, this is the level of aggregation at which European Parliament results are released; second, no census data are available for the vast majority of county divisions and unitary wards in which this year's local elections took place.

## Postal vote verification

The new (2006 EAA) postal voting regulations require returning officers to verify the personal identifiers on a minimum 20% sample of all postal ballot papers returned. In fact, more than nine in ten returning officers across Great Britain claimed to have verified 100% (or very nearly) of all returns (Table 1). In many of those cases where the proportion verified was close to but less than 100%, the evidence suggests that covering envelopes returned with no postal votes statements enclosed were simply set aside before the formal verification process. The Commission may wish to ask specific questions about this in the future.

Councils verifying 50% or fewer of returns were concentrated in rural areas and in southern England. Those for which we have such a record are Breckland, North Dorset, Cheltenham, South Hams, Tandridge, Exeter, Runnymede, Havant, Broxbourne, Mole Valley, Medway, Taunton Deane, South Gloucestershire, North Somerset, Bath and NE Somerset and Rutland. Allerdale, one of the small handful of authorities which conducted separate as opposed to combined postal vote exercises for the European and local elections, reported verifying 100% of European postal votes, but only 20% of local ones. Of authorities for which we have clear information, European and local PVs were issued separately in Wycombe, Dacorum, Allerdale, North West Leicestershire, Lichfield, and Copeland. As in 2008 a few councils did not provide sufficient data to enable this calculation (including using old Form Ks or Form Rs to make their returns<sup>1</sup>).

**Table 1. Verification of returned postal votes**

	<i>Mean proportion verified 2009</i>
England	93.6
Wales	99.5
Scotland	99.4

Most councils used a fully automatic system to verify returned postal ballots -see Table 2. Manual and semi-automatic systems tended to be concentrated in smaller, more rural authorities.

**Table 2. Use of ballot verification systems**

	<i>Automatic</i>	<i>Semi-automatic</i>	<i>Manual</i>	<i>Not known</i>
England/326	254	38	7	27

<sup>1</sup> These are the statements as to the issuing and receipt of postal ballot papers which Returning Officers are responsible for completing after an election. A total of 12 councils did not provide useable verification data for either the European and/or local elections.

Scotland/32	23	5	2	2
Wales/40	32	7	-	1

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 to questions B15-17 within Form K (local elections) and B16-18 within Form R (EP elections) – ‘Number of postal voting statements NOT subject to verification rejected -not completed’; ‘Number of postal voting statements rejected following verification -not completed’; and ‘Number of postal voting statements rejected following verification -personal identifier match’, each local authority returning officer was asked to compile and submit additional data on the outcomes of their verification process. This information was collected only at the authority level.

### Reasons for rejection at verification

Tables 3 and 4 make clear that rejection of both European Parliament and local election ballots following a mismatch of signature and/or date of birth was more common than rejection for incomplete information across all types of authority. The variation in ratio was also quite narrow, from 75:25 in Wales to 65:35 in Scotland. These data should, however, be seen as indicative rather than definitive. Not all authorities were able to provide the breakdowns requested, and in some cases the figures given for the various columns look implausible. For example, all of a large number of rejections being listed under a single category. It is difficult therefore to make comparisons between individual councils or to draw statistical inferences between types of rejection and an authority’s demographic make-up.

**Table 3. Reasons for rejection of postal votes at verification by % of total –EP elections**

	England	Scotland	Wales
PV statement rejected (No signature)	11.9	17.2	7.3
PV statement rejected (No DoB)	5.2	5.6	7.1
PV statement rejected (Both)	12.0	11.6	10.4
<b>Proportion rejected (incomplete information)</b>	<b>29.1</b>	<b>35.5</b>	<b>24.8</b>
PV statement mismatched signature	33.9	32.5	32.8
PV statement mismatched DoB	25.9	23.0	32.0
PV statement mismatched both	11.0	10.0	10.4
<b>Proportion rejected (mismatching)</b>	<b>70.8</b>	<b>65.5</b>	<b>75.2</b>

**Table 4. Reasons for rejection of postal votes at verification by % of total – English local elections**

	Counties	Unitaries
PV statement rejected (No signature)	14.8	7.5
PV statement rejected (No DoB)	5.8	9.2
PV statement rejected (Both)	10.3	14.6
<b>Proportion rejected (incomplete information)</b>	<b>30.9</b>	<b>31.3</b>

PV statement mismatched signature	32.9	24.7
PV statement mismatched DoB	25.7	34.7
PV statement mismatched both	10.5	9.2
<b>Proportion rejected (mismatching)</b>	<b>69.1</b>	<b>68.6</b>

However, there is some evidence that different procedures might have been used to record and/or judge date of birth and signature matching. Table 5 shows a selection of councils, among those authorities for which the overall data look reasonably reliable, with apparently unusually high or low rates of ‘mismatching’ rejection<sup>2</sup>. These may merit further investigation by the Commission. It is likely that in some cases covering envelopes which obviously did not contain the appropriate signature/date of birth were set aside *before* the formal verification process (even if this was claimed to cover 100% of all returns) and therefore ‘matching’ was the only check left. Where the level of mismatching was very low, however, it is likely either that electoral administrators were not keeping appropriate records and/or that they were applying varying verification standards. When questioned about the accuracy of these data some EROs told us that their software was unable to distinguish between the categories as requested in the EC’s ‘additional data form’. There are examples of this being claimed across the range of software suppliers.

**Table 5. Proportion of rejected postal votes deemed to be ‘mismatched’**

		‘mismatched’ as % of total rejected
<b>Scotland</b>		
High	North Lanarkshire	97.6
Low	Dundee	13.9
	Fife	13.4
<b>Wales</b>		
High	Cardiff (4 constituencies)	100
	Monmouth	100
<b>England (Euros)</b>		
High	29 cases with 100% of rejection ‘mismatched’	
Low	Broxbourne	5.6
	Tandridge	3.6
	10 cases with 0% of rejection ‘mismatched’	
<b>England (locals)</b>		
High	19 cases with 100% of rejection ‘mismatched’	
Low	Lincoln	0.0
	Surrey Heath	0.0

## 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

<sup>2</sup> The judgement of ‘reliability’ is necessarily a subjective one based on the completeness and general ‘face validity’ of the data supplied by each local authority.

signature could apply for a waiver to use their date of birth as their sole identifier. Table 6 shows that the proportion granted such a waiver varied from 0.98% in Scotland to 0.36% for the EP elections in England. However, these summary figures disguise considerable variations between councils.

**Table 6. Proportion of postal electors granted ‘waivers’**

Scotland	0.98
Wales	0.64
England (Euros)	0.36
England (locals)	0.43

In three councils in Scotland (Orkney Islands, Shetland Islands, and Scottish Borders) and one constituency in Wales (Merthyr Tydfil and Rhymney) waivers exceeded 2% of the postal electorate at the European elections, and in two authorities in England (Arun and Blaby) they did so for both European and local contests. Casual scrutiny of the overall list suggests, perhaps unsurprisingly, that waivers may be more common in areas with a substantial elderly population, but the data do not allow for a conclusive statistical test of that hypothesis. More to the point, it seems that the degree to which local authorities draw attention to this facility itself has an impact on take-up rates. For example, and as in 2008, one of the highest proportions of waivers among postal electors in the metropolitan boroughs was in Bolton (1.22%) where the postal vote application form explicitly asks electors whether they have one of the conditions that may allow them to be excused providing a signature<sup>3</sup>. In neighbouring Bury by contrast, where a form derived from the Electoral Commission standard makes no reference to this facility, just 0.17% of postal electors had a waiver<sup>4</sup>. The Commission may wish to review its guidance to local authorities on this issue.

## Postal vote rejection

We now turn to a statistical analysis of how far the rate of rejection of postal votes appears to be related to socio-demographic and other characteristics of the population as outlined by the 2001 Census. The key figure for comparison is *the total number of postal ballot papers rejected before the count as a proportion of the number returned* in each local counting area. As explained above our analyses are restricted to the local authority level in England and Scotland and the constituency level in Wales. Further, the analysis for England concentrates on the European Parliament elections as the aggregate returns for those authorities with local elections tell a very similar story.

### England

Although only about one in 23 postal votes were disallowed in England as a whole, of perhaps more interest is the considerable variation in the proportion so rejected. According to data received from local authority electoral administrators, in 14 council

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<sup>3</sup> See

[www.bolton.gov.uk/sites/DocumentCentre/Documents/Postal%20Vote%20Application%2009.DOC](http://www.bolton.gov.uk/sites/DocumentCentre/Documents/Postal%20Vote%20Application%2009.DOC).

<sup>4</sup> See [www.bury.gov.uk/NR/rdonlyres/FF1F45BC-9751-4243-968B-9487CBACEADC/0/PostalVoteApplicationForm.pdf](http://www.bury.gov.uk/NR/rdonlyres/FF1F45BC-9751-4243-968B-9487CBACEADC/0/PostalVoteApplicationForm.pdf)

areas 10% or more of postal votes were rejected; in 12 areas 1% or less of postal votes were rejected.

Testing possible explanations for such differences will form the key part of this analysis.

#### Variations in postal vote rejection rates

Hypothesis 1. *The greater the proportion of electors with a postal ballot, the larger the proportion of those returned that will be rejected.* This assumes that the more widespread that postal voting is, the more it will reach into those parts of the electorate less engaged with politics and likely to take less care in the completion of their ballot papers.

At the 2009 European Parliament elections there was no statistical evidence of any such relationship.

Hypothesis 2. *The smaller the proportion of electors with a postal ballot who return it, the larger the proportion of returned postal ballot papers that will be rejected.* This assumes that a low turnout among postal voters may be indicative of a local authority in which the electorate is less engaged with politics and likely to take less care in the completion of their ballot papers.

There is a significant correlation between these two variables, but it is the reverse of the hypothesised direction<sup>5</sup>. A relatively weak relationship (0.23) suggests that a higher turnout of postal voters is associated with a higher level of postal vote rejection. It is possible that this pattern might be associated with those areas with considerable prior experience of all postal voting and where the return of ballot papers has become a habit rather than something to which close attention is paid. However, more detailed ward level data are required to test this properly.

Hypothesis 3. *The more a local authority displays indicators of social deprivation, the larger the proportion of returned postal ballot papers that will be rejected.* This assumes that those with lower levels of education, higher levels of ill health etc will find it more difficult correctly to comply with the instructions for completing their postal ballot paper.

Although there are clear and statistically significant negative relationships between the 'turnout' of postal voters and several such indicators of deprivation, only the proportion of the population with no educational qualifications is significantly associated with the level of postal vote rejection. The relationship is, however, rather modest in size (0.12).

Hypothesis 4. *The more a local authority has a high minority ethnic population, the larger the proportion of returned postal ballot papers that will be rejected.* This assumes that those from a minority ethnic background may, because English may not

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<sup>5</sup> A correlation is a measurement of the relationship between two variables. The closer the correlation is to '1' or '-1', the stronger the relationship in a positive or negative direction. The closer it is to '0', the weaker the relationship. A statistically significant correlation is one where the relationship between variables is unlikely to be a function of pure chance.

be their first language, find it more difficult to understand and therefore comply with the instructions for completing their postal ballot paper.

In this case, although there is a clear and statistically significant negative relationship between the ‘turnout’ of postal voters and the self-designated ‘non-white’ population in a council area, there is *no* such association with the level of postal vote rejection.

A model of postal vote rejection?

Variables drawn from our four hypotheses were subsequently tested using a technique (properly called a linear stepwise regression analysis) to determine the proportion of the variance in the rate of postal ballot rejection for each type of local authority that they could explain. In light of the findings above it is perhaps not surprising that the only variable that made a significant, independent contribution to the model was the proportion with no formal educational qualifications. The model itself explains just 1% of the variance in the rejection of returned postal votes.

The proportion of variance explained is very much less than that obtained using similar models at the ward level for the 2007 and 2008 local elections in England. Local authorities tend to be amalgams of socially very different types of area and aggregating them together loses within council subtleties and nuances that are more apparent within smaller wards/divisions. We cannot therefore say with any certainty that socio-demographic factors were not related to postal vote rejections at the 2009 EP contests; simply that only a tiny statistical relationship was apparent at the level of analysis used.

To investigate further what might be going on, we turn to look at patterns of data between and, to some extent, within individual local authorities.

Patterns between and within local authorities

We are particularly interested in places where recorded postal vote rejections for the EP elections were far above or below the mean of 4.66%. Standard deviation measures how the values of a variable are dispersed about the mean; the more standard deviations away from the mean, the more can a case be seen as taking an ‘outlying’ value. The standard deviation in postal vote rejections in June 2009 was 2.51. The authorities listed in Table 7 had rates of rejection more than either 2 standard deviations above (that is, 9.7% or above) or 1.5 standard deviations below (that is, 0.9% or below) the overall mean *as well as* being judged to have submitted reasonably reliable and consistent data.

**Table 7. Local authorities in ‘outlying’ categories**

Authority	% of postal votes rejected	
	Euros	Locals
<b>High</b>		
Hinckley & Bosworth	16.0	18.8
Basingstoke and Deane	15.9	12.0
Woking	11.2	8.0
Hyndburn	11.2	11.1
Newark & Sherwood	11.0	10.6

Ashfield	10.9	10.3
Hastings	10.6	5.8
Chorley	10.6	6.8
Worthing	10.4	6.7
Adur	10.4	5.5
Mansfield	10.3	9.6
East Hertfordshire	10.0	10.1
Oadby & Wigston	10.0	5.4
Pendle	9.7	8.0
<b>Low</b>		
West Berkshire	0.9	n/a
Mole Valley	0.9	0.9
Wiltshire	0.6	0.6
Wycombe	0.4	0.3
Hertsmere	0.2	1.6
Gosport	0.2	4.6

It is difficult immediately to determine whether local authorities in England which reported either very high or very low rates of postal vote rejection did so as a result of either inaccuracies in recording or the application of different standards of verification or genuine variations in the degree to which electors correctly completed their forms. However, issues worthy of further investigation include:

#### High proportion of rejections

- i) The gap between numbers of covering envelopes set aside for verification and numbers going through to the count and not accounted for in Additional Data Form (Chorley/East Hertfordshire/Basingstoke and Deane/Hinckley and Bosworth). In Chorley, for example, the number of postal votes at the count was more than 1,600 less than the number set aside for verification, yet the number recorded as being rejected either overall or for particular reasons was only about 300. In Hinckley and Bosworth the data returned for the local elections contained considerable ward by ward inconsistencies.
- ii) An unexplained gap between numbers of covering envelopes returned and numbers set aside for verification (Hyndburn/Newark and Sherwood) – perhaps because of returns with obvious omissions simply being set aside rather than recorded on Forms K/R or as part of the Additional Data requested.
- iii) Euro/local differences in the proportion of postal ballot returns rejected – perhaps caused by an absence of EP ballots returned in authorities where a combined postal vote exercise was undertaken (Worthing/Hastings/Adur/Oadby and Wigston)
- iv) Straightforward high numbers of recorded rejections (Pendle/Mansfield/Ashfield/Woking)

#### Low proportion of rejections

- i) Low proportion of postal ballots verified (Mole Valley).
- ii) Unusually low postal voter turnout recorded (Hertsmere -40.7% compared to c.36% for in person voters).
- iii) Euro/local differences in the proportion of postal ballot returns rejected (Gosport).

- iv) Straightforward low numbers of recorded rejections (West Berkshire/Wiltshire/Wycombe)

## **Scotland**

The standard deviation in the proportion of postal ballots rejected in Scotland was, at 1.67, much smaller than recorded in England. Moreover, no local authorities had levels of rejection more than 2 standard deviations below the mean, and in only two, North Lanarkshire and Renfrewshire, was it more than two standard deviations above. It is worth noting that the constituencies within neither the North Lanarkshire nor Renfrewshire council areas featured as having a particularly high rate of postal vote rejection at the 2007 Scottish parliament elections when AVIs were not in use. However, North Lanarkshire does feature in Table 5 above as having an unusually high proportion of postal ballots rejected for being ‘mismatched’.

This relative lack of variance, together with the small number of cases available for analysis (N=32), meant that we were unable to identify any statistical relationships between the character of a local authority and the incidence of rejected postal ballots. It does also suggest relative consistency in the interpretation of ‘valid and ‘invalid’ postal ballots by election officials in Scotland.

## **Wales**

The standard deviation in the proportion of postal ballots rejected in Wales was, at 1.58, smaller than recorded in either England or Scotland. Moreover, no constituencies had levels of rejection more than 2 standard deviations above the mean and in only one, Newport East, was it more than two standard deviations below. This relative lack of variance, together with the small number of cases available for analysis (N=40), meant that we were unable to identify any statistical relationships between the character of a local authority and the incidence of rejected postal ballots.

The local authority of Newport was noted in our 2007 report on the National Assembly of Wales election as recording rejection rates substantially below the mean, but all other such outlying cases from then no longer stand out. As we noted following the Wales local government elections in 2008, ‘the evidence suggests that electoral administrators were implementing a more common standard in interpreting what was and was not an acceptable return’<sup>6</sup>.

## **Discussion**

Evidence from an analysis of postal ballot returns at the 2009 European and local elections suggests a degree of variation between local authorities in the reason why postal ballots were rejected (Table 5); in the granting of waivers (Table 6); and in the overall proportion rejected (Table 7).

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<sup>6</sup> Colin Rallings and Michael Thrasher, Postal vote verification and rejections in England and Wales 2008, report to Electoral Commission, September 2008.

To the extent that such variations reflect genuine differences in the way in which electors complete their returns and make requests of their local authority, there is less of a problem. However, it is likely that some of the variation is the result of local authorities making different judgements, applying different standards of proof, and being more or less proactive in the provision of forms and information.

Factors such as the clarity of instructions sent to postal electors, the role of political parties and local leaders/community groups in guiding supporters in the completion of their forms, the interpretation of returned forms within the council's elections office, and the operation of particular software packages are all likely to have an impact on rejection rates and the way returns are recorded.

Although there are signs in England, Scotland and Wales of progressively greater consistency in the application of the regulations by local electoral administrators, there is still a case for investigating the practices in those authorities flagged in Tables 5 and 7 to see what lessons may be learned and how any guidance provided by the Electoral Commission to local authorities and/or voters may be improved. Moreover, the underlying issue remains. An electoral process which appears to allow similarly completed postal ballot returns to be accepted in one area and rejected in another is failing in one of its important duties to citizens.