

# Postal vote verification and rejections in England and Wales 2008

**Colin Rallings and Michael Thrasher,  
LGC Elections Centre  
University of Plymouth**

## Summary

- The EAA 2006 regulations have led neither to a noticeable drop in electors applying for and using a postal vote, nor to a significant increase in the numbers of postal ballots rejected before the count. This is comparable to the findings from similar research in 2007.
- 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 publicity councils have given to this facility. The Electoral Commission may wish to review its guidance on this issue.
- In both England and Wales, the social characteristics of a ward appear to have a far greater influence on the scale of rejected postal ballots than does the proportion of electors either issued with a postal ballot or who return it.
- In England, there are strong correlations between wards with a large proportion of electors self-described as not 'white' and rejected postal ballots.
- Regression models using a range of variables measuring social 'deprivation' explain a high proportion of the ward-level variance in rejected postal ballots in England (especially in urban areas), but a lesser proportion in Wales. The variance so explained in England is much higher in 2008 than in 2007. There is clearly a case for greater, targeted voter education about using postal ballots and for review of the clarity and accessibility of the instructions and forms involved.
- In both England and Wales many fewer wards than in 2007 had rates of postal vote rejection more than two standard deviations above or below the level predicted by the statistical models. That suggests, some obvious 'outliers' aside, a move towards 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.

Data from both 2007 and 2008 suggest that the more stringent security arrangements had little effect on the numbers of people applying for a postal vote. For the 2008 local elections in England more than 2.5 million postal votes were issued, covering 14.9% of all those electors with a contested election in their ward. Exact comparisons with previous years are impossible because of variations in the electoral cycle, but it can be noted that 12.8% of local electors in England had a postal vote in 2007, 13.6% in 2006, and that 12.8% had one at the 2005 general election. In Wales, 14.4% of 2008 local electors opted for a postal vote compared with 12.5% at the 2007 Assembly contests, 12.7% at the 2005 general election and 10.7% at the local elections in 2004. In London, postal voting reached 11.7% of the electorate compared with 10.9% at the last general election. Given that electors were also obliged to reapply for a postal vote under the new rules, these continuing increases 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 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 England, however, the overall proportion of postal votes rejected or otherwise not included in the count was, at 3.6%, only fractionally higher than in 2007 (3.2%) and 2006 (3.0%). In Wales, the proportion of postal votes rejected or otherwise not included in the count was 4.8%: less than at the equivalent contests in 2004 (5.0%) and only a little higher than the 4.6% at the 2005 general election. The proportion of postal votes rejected at the GLA contests was 4.8%, higher than at the previous election in 2004 (3.9%) but hardly a dramatic increase taking the novelty of the procedure into account.

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.

## 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, the large majority of returning officers in all types of authority claimed to have verified 100% (or very nearly) of all returns (Table 1). In the metropolitan boroughs only Wolverhampton (70%) and Wigan (50%) verified a significantly smaller proportion. Among the unitaries Plymouth and Wokingham were just over 20% with Kingston upon Hull verifying 50%. Fourteen out of 78 district councils verified between 20-26% of returns, with a further 5 authorities checking fewer than three-quarters. In Wales, Powys checked half its returns, and in London, Enfield verified a similar proportion. As in 2007 a few councils did not provide sufficient data to enable this calculation (including using old Form Ks to make their returns<sup>1</sup>).

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

|           | <i>Mean proportion verified 2008 (2007)</i> |        |
|-----------|---|--------|
| Mets      | 97.5  | (90.7) |
| Districts | 82.3  | (73.8) |
| Unitaries | 81.0  | (75.0) |
| Wales     | 97.0  | (86.7) |
| London    | 98.3  | (n/a)  |

Most councils used a fully automatic system to verify returned postal ballots -see Table 2, though it is worth noting that a majority of those few councils which failed to verify all postal ballots received used semi-automatic or manual procedures.

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

|              | <i>Automatic</i> | <i>Semi-automatic</i> | <i>Manual</i> |
|--------------|------------------|-----------------------|---------------|
| Mets/36      | 33               | 2                     | 1             |
| Districts/77 | 50               | 25                    | 2             |
| Unitaries/23 | 16*              | 4                     | 0             |
| Wales/19     | 14               | 5                     | 0             |
| London/32    | 2                | 5                     | 1             |

\*Three of the new unitaries employed a mix of systems in their constituent districts.

In order to try to overcome inconsistencies within and between local authorities in the recording of answers to questions B15-17 within Form K – ‘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

Table 3 makes clear that rejection following a mismatch of signature and/or date of birth was more common than rejection for incomplete information across all types of

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<sup>1</sup> Form K is the statement as to the issuing and receipt of postal ballot papers which Returning Officers are responsible for completing after an election.

authority. The variation in ratio was also quite narrow, from 60:40 in the districts to 72:28 in the GLA contests. Once again, however, these data should 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**

|  | Mets  | Unitaries | Districts |
|--|-------|-----------|-----------|
| PV statement rejected (No signature)         | 13.5  | 13.5      | 19.4      |
| PV statement rejected (No DoB)               | 4.9   | 5.3       | 7.0       |
| PV statement rejected (Both)                 | 15.8  | 9.4       | 13.3      |
| Proportion rejected (incomplete information) | 34.2  | 28.2      | 39.7      |
| PV statement mismatched signature            | 27.9  | 38.5      | 29.4      |
| PV statement mismatched DoB                  | 20.3  | 25.7      | 25.4      |
| PV statement mismatched both                 | 17.6  | 7.7       | 5.6       |
| Proportion rejected (mismatching)            | 65.8  | 71.7      | 60.4      |
|  | Wales | London    |           |
| PV statement rejected (No signature)         | 9.1   | 11.2      |           |
| PV statement rejected (No DoB)               | 6.9   | 6.0       |           |
| PV statement rejected (Both)                 | 15.0  | 10.6      |           |
| Proportion rejected (incomplete information) | 31.0  | 27.8      |           |
| PV statement mismatched signature            | 31.0  | 33.6      |           |
| PV statement mismatched DoB                  | 30.4  | 25.8      |           |
| PV statement mismatched both                 | 7.6   | 12.8      |           |
| Proportion rejected (mismatching)            | 69.0  | 72.2      |           |

However, there is some evidence that different standards might have been used to record and/or judge date of birth and signature matching. Table 4 shows a selection of councils, among those authorities for which the data look reliable, with apparently unusually high or low rates of 'mismatching' rejection. These, and similar, cases may merit further investigation by the Commission.

**Table 4. Proportion of rejected postal votes deemed to be 'mismatched'**

|        |            | 'mismatched' as % of total rejected |
|--------|------------|-------------------------------------|
| London | Harrow     | 97.4                                |
|        | Hounslow   | 93.6                                |
|        | Brent      | 49.6                                |
|        | Hillingdon | 10.8                                |
| Mets   | St Helens  | 90.9                                |
|        | Tameside   | 38.7                                |

|           |               |      |
|-----------|---------------|------|
|           | Wigan         | 15.7 |
| Wales     | Conwy         | 95.5 |
|           | Anglesey      | 32.4 |
|           | Denbighshire  | 18.2 |
| Unitaries | Southampton   | 93.6 |
|           | Plymouth      | 20.0 |
|           | Milton Keynes | 17.6 |
|           | Swindon       | 0.0  |
| Districts | Adur          | 100  |
|           | Gosport       | 100  |
|           | Rossendale    | 5.8  |
|           | Broxbourne    | 1.9  |

### Waivers

A concession granted under the terms of the EAA 2006 was that 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. Just 0.35% of English postal electors were granted such a waiver, with the proportion in Wales and London being 0.76% and 0.29% respectively. These summary figures disguise considerable variations between councils, though only in two cases in Wales (Merthyr Tydfil (5.3%) and Vale of Glamorgan (2.0%)) did waivers exceed 2% of the postal electorate. Casual scrutiny of the overall list suggests, perhaps unsurprisingly, that waivers were 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, the highest proportion of waivers among postal electors in the metropolitan boroughs was in Bolton (1.34%) 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>2</sup>. In neighbouring Bury by contrast, where a form derived from the Electoral Commission standard makes no reference to this facility, just 0.27% of postal electors had a waiver<sup>3</sup>. The Commission may wish to review its guidance to local authorities on this issue,

<sup>2</sup> See [www.bolton.gov.uk/pls/portal92/docs/42165.DOC](http://www.bolton.gov.uk/pls/portal92/docs/42165.DOC)

<sup>3</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)

## 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 ward with a contested election. Census data is only available for wards which either existed or whose new boundaries had been formally agreed by 2002. In all, we have useable electoral *and* census data for all 815 metropolitan borough wards; 322 of 512 unitary authority wards; 923 of 1202 English district wards; and 779 of 881 Welsh council wards. London is excluded from the analysis as postal vote data is not available at ward level. England and Wales are treated as discrete entities throughout the remainder of the report and the section on each country can be read independently.

### England

Although only about one in 28 postal votes were disallowed in England as a whole, of perhaps more interest is the considerable variation in the proportion so rejected. In the metropolitan boroughs, 8% or more of postal votes were rejected in 61 wards, but 0.5% or less in 15. Among the unitary authorities, comparable figures are 22 wards and 13 wards respectively; and in the districts, 42 and 71. Testing four 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.

The findings for different types of local authority are inconsistent. In the metropolitan boroughs there is a small and significant negative correlation<sup>4</sup> (-0.19) implying that a greater number of issued postal votes actually leads to fewer rejections proportionately. In the unitary authorities a similarly significant, but positive correlation (0.16) provides some support for the hypothesis. Among the districts the correlation between the two variables is weak and insignificant.

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 ward 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 in the metropolitan boroughs and districts. In the unitary authorities, the direction of the correlation

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<sup>4</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.

accords with the hypothesis but it is insignificant. The relationship is weak in the mets (-0.11), but a little stronger in the districts (-0.20) where comparatively low turnout among postal voters may have a small substantive role to play in explaining observed differences in the rate of rejection of postal ballots.

Hypothesis 3. *The more a ward 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.

A range of correlations support this relationship in simple terms for each type of local authority. Among metropolitan borough wards, for example, there are significant bi-variate correlations between the proportion of unemployed in a ward (0.44), the proportion that live in overcrowded accommodation (0.46) and the proportion who are 'income deprived' according to the Department of Communities and Local Government's Index of Multiple Deprivation (0.44), and the proportion of rejected postal ballots. This pattern is similar to that found in 2007.

In the unitary authorities the correlations tend to be less strong, albeit significant and in the same direction. For example, one of 0.35 for unemployment and one of 0.31 for income deprivation. Among the districts the correlations are weaker again, perhaps reflecting a greater social heterogeneity within wards. However, there is a significant 0.28 correlation between the proportion of those in a ward with no educational qualifications and the proportion of rejected postal ballots, and one of 0.25 between the proportion who are 'income deprived' and rejected ballots. All the other bi-variate correlations are either equal to or lower than those.

Hypothesis 4. *The more a ward 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 find it more difficult to understand and therefore comply with the instructions for completing their postal ballot paper.

The simple correlations do provide support for this hypothesis, especially in the metropolitan boroughs and unitary authorities. For example, there is a significant, negative correlation of -0.62 between the proportion of self-described 'whites' in a ward and the rate of postal ballot rejections; and a significant positive correlation of 0.47 between the latter variable and the proportion of Asians in a ward. In the unitaries, the correlations between the same variables are -0.62 and 0.56 respectively. In the districts the correlations are smaller, -0.20 and 0.22 respectively, but still significant.

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.

The analysis for the metropolitan boroughs explained a total of 51% of the variance in the rejection of returned postal votes. The proportion long-term unemployed and the ward's score on a scale of income deprivation each made an independent contribution to the model, as did the proportion of the population self-designated as not 'white'. The application of a similar set of variables explained 50% of the variance among wards in the unitary authorities. Two significant variables, the proportion of non-white residents and the proportion of the population with no educational qualifications, squeezed out all the others in the regression equation. For district council wards the model was able to explain just 16% of the variance. The proportion of white residents and the proportion with education up to at least the age of 18 both had a significant negative influence on the rate of rejections, with the level of private sector renting in the ward acting in the reverse manner.

These regression equations, and their associated correlations across a wider range of socio-demographic indicators, provide confirmatory support for the contention that a relationship seems to exist between a ward's social character and the degree to which votes cast by its postal electors are rejected. Moreover, the relationship appears to be stronger than that found by a similar analysis of the 2007 local elections in England. To investigate further what might be going on, we turn to look at patterns of data within individual local authorities.

#### Patterns within and between local authorities

We are particularly interested in places where a significant proportion of wards recorded postal vote rejections far above or below those predicted by the models discussed above. 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 (in this instance a ward) be seen as taking an 'outlying' value. Table 5 shows those local authorities where more than 10% of constituent wards had rates of rejection two or more standard deviations beyond the predicted level.

Among the metropolitan boroughs, Manchester, Oldham, Sheffield and Wolverhampton show a tendency to 'over-reject' postal votes, whereas Birmingham and Bolton both have several wards in which such rejections are well below expectations. In the unitaries, there are wards in Blackburn with Darwen with unusually high rates of rejections and others with unusually low ones. In one district, Cannock Chase, ten out of 13 wards have rates of rejection more than two standard deviations beyond that to be expected statistically and in another, Cherwell, almost half the wards fall into a similar category.

**Table 5. Local authorities with 10% or more of wards in ‘outlying’ categories**

| Authority             | N. of wards | 2 st.dev.+ above prediction | 2 st.dev.- below prediction |
|-----------------------|-------------|-----------------------------|-----------------------------|
| Birmingham            | 40          | -                           | 5                           |
| Bolton                | 20          | -                           | 5                           |
| Manchester            | 32          | 4                           | -                           |
| Oldham                | 20          | 3                           | -                           |
| Sheffield             | 28          | 5                           | -                           |
| Wolverhampton         | 20          | 9                           | -                           |
| Blackburn with Darwen | 22          | 2                           | 3                           |
| Halton                | 20          | 3                           | -                           |
| Slough                | 14          | 3                           | -                           |
| Thurrock              | 17          | 4                           | -                           |
| Barrow In Furness     | 13          | 3                           | -                           |
| Cannock Chase         | 13          | 10                          | -                           |
| Cherwell              | 17          | 7                           | -                           |
| Epping Forest         | 21          | 3                           | -                           |
| Exeter                | 14          | 2                           | -                           |
| Gosport               | 17          | 2                           | -                           |
| Pendle                | 16          | 2                           | -                           |
| Preston               | 19          | 2                           | 1                           |

It is not possible to provide precise explanations for these patterns without the detailed inspection of individual postal vote returns, but they are suggestive. All other things being equal, it would appear that election staff in Wolverhampton were much more likely to reject postal ballots than were their equivalents in Bolton. Although it may be worth investigating the practices in those two authorities, and in the other places flagged in the table, to see whether there are systematic differences in the instructions provided for postal electors, in the role of political parties and leaders/community groups locally in guiding their supporters in how to complete the forms, and in the interpretation of what is and what is not a correctly completed form within each council’s elections office, two comparisons with the findings for 2007 should be made.

First, the authorities which appear in Table 5 only rarely overlap with those that were similarly flagged in 2007. This suggests either that statistically unusual rates of postal vote rejection occur intermittently rather than systematically, or that those authorities identified with high or low rates last year have changed their procedures. Second, the overall instances of ‘outlier’ rejections is much smaller than in 2007, with electoral administrators perhaps implementing a more common standard in interpreting what was and was not an acceptable return.

However, that in itself throws into sharper relief the relationship between ward level social deprivation and postal vote rejections. Having got their own house more in order, it may be time for administrators and indeed the Electoral Commission to address further attention to voter education and to reviewing the clarity and accessibility of both the instructions postal electors are given and the forms they are now obliged to complete.

## Wales

Although only about one in 21 postal votes were disallowed in Wales as a whole, of perhaps more interest is the considerable variation in the proportion so rejected. Eight per cent or more of postal votes were rejected in 86 wards, but 0.5% or less in 16. Testing four 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.

There is no evidence to support this hypothesis for Wales in 2008. In 2007, when National Assembly constituencies rather than wards were the unit of analysis, the correlations also failed to reach the 0.01 level of significance<sup>5</sup>.

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 ward in which the electorate is less engaged with politics and likely to take less care in the completion of their ballot papers.

There is no evidence to support this hypothesis for Wales in 2008.

Hypothesis 3. *The greater the proportion of electors in a ward who speak Welsh, the smaller the proportion of returned postal ballot papers that will be rejected.* This assumes that bilingual instructions are appreciated by Welsh speakers and/or act as a dual reinforcement of the procedures to be followed.

Contrary to the hypothesis there is a small positive correlation between Welsh speakers and rejected ballot papers. However, the correlation is weak (0.08) and the level of significance small. In 2007 the correlation was insignificant.

Hypothesis 4. *The more a ward 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.

A range of correlations support this relationship in simple terms. For example, when all cases are considered, there is a significant 0.24 correlation between the proportion of those in a ward of working age with a limiting long-term illness and the proportion of rejected postal ballots. There is also a significant positive correlation between rejection and the level of unemployment (0.28), and a significant negative correlation

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<sup>5</sup> See footnote 4.

with the proportion of residents in professional or managerial jobs (-0.21). The proportion of the population aged over 65 and the proportion of lone parents with dependent children have no significant relationship with the dependent variable.

A model of postal vote rejection?

Each of the variables mentioned in the 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 that they could explain. In this model the variables 'unemployment', 'long term limiting illness', 'proportion of the population aged 18-24', and 'no knowledge of Welsh' each proved to have an independent and significant impact holding all other variables constant. However together they only accounted for 9% of the ward-level variance in rejections.

## Discussion

There does appear to be some statistical relationship in Wales between the socio-demographic character of a ward and the rate of rejection of returned postal ballot papers. A stronger relationship was obtained in 2007, but the unit of analysis on that occasion was the much smaller number of National Assembly constituencies. In both cases, however, the findings support a call for more attention to be paid to postal voter education, especially in socially deprived areas.

However, although there remain considerable differences which cannot readily be explained by objective measures, there are fewer outliers than was the case in 2007. In only eight wards was the level of rejected votes more than 3 standard deviations above or below that predicted, and in just 32 (out of 779) was it more than two standard deviations adrift<sup>6</sup>. Council areas like Gower and Rhondda/Cynon/Taff which in 2007 displayed atypically high rates of rejection, or Newport, where rejections were very low, no longer stick out.

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, and the interpretation of returned forms within the council's elections office are all likely to have an impact on rejection rates. However, we can be less worried this year about electors in some parts of Wales having their vote recorded whilst those in other parts, despite filling in the forms in exactly the same way, had theirs' rejected. At the least the evidence suggests that electoral administrators were implementing a more common standard in interpreting what was and was not an acceptable return, although (as noted above) they may not always have accurately recorded whether rejected ballots were 'incomplete' or 'mismatched'.

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<sup>6</sup> 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 (in this instance a ward) be seen as taking an 'outlying' value.