

## **Report on Scottish Council Elections 2012**

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## **Introduction**

The 2012 round of elections for the unitary Scottish councils took place on 3 May 2012. That was five years, rather than the usual four, after the previous elections of 2007. The reason for the delay was that in 2007, there were a large number of rejected ballots in the elections to the Scottish Parliament, which were held on the same day as council elections. This stimulated considerable concern and debate, and although there was no very strong evidence that having the two sets of elections simultaneously with different electoral systems (the Additional Member System for the Scottish Parliament and Single Transferable Vote for the councils) actually had a significant influence on the number of improperly completed ballots, it clearly did not make things simpler for voters. The Electoral Commission appointed Ron Gould, former Assistant Chief Electoral Officer of Canada, to carry out a review of the problems, and his report (Electoral Commission, 2007) highlighted the complex institutional, legislative and administrative landscape and recommended, among other things, the decoupling of the Scottish Parliament and local government elections to help prevent voter confusion. The Scottish Government and the Scottish Parliament endorsed that suggestion and under the Scottish Local Government (Elections) Act 2009 the local elections were delayed for one year to allow that decoupling to take place, with a five year term up to 2017 when the elections will revert to four year terms for the future.

One result of the decoupling of elections is that, while there is a price to be paid in terms of lower turnout, the attention of voters and the media may allow greater attention to be paid to local government issues and accountability, rather than these being overshadowed by the Scottish Parliament elections. Indeed, it was noticeable that in 2012 the Scottish media did cover the local elections and the results much more fully than had happened in 1999, 2003 and 2007.

## **The administration of the elections**

Following the 2007 elections these were the second set of Scottish local government elections to be fought using the Single Transferable Vote (STV) electoral system. Ward boundaries were unaltered, with the exception of minor adjustments between North East Ward in Glasgow and Strathkelvin ward in North Lanarkshire (involving 339 electors), between North East ward in Glasgow and Bishopbriggs South ward in East Dunbartonshire (14 electors), and between North East ward in Dundee and Monifieth and Sidlaw ward in Angus (11 electors). For Bathgate ward in West Lothian the number of councillors to be elected was increased from 3 to 4, so that there were now 189 wards electing 3 councillors and 164 wards electing 4 councillors, giving a total of 1,223 councillors across Scotland.

There were 4,693 polling stations located in 2,654 polling places. The total electorate for the 2012 council elections was 3,983,792. Of those, just under one per cent of the electorate (37,152 electors) registered under the 11 day rule, although a further 4,345 people tried to register after the deadline. The use of proxies continues to be relatively rare, with only 5,483 appointed, and only 28 emergency proxies.

The counting of ballots and the announcement of the results on the day following the elections appeared to go smoothly, although there were two small incidents which it is perhaps worth recording. The election in the Dunoon ward of Argyll and Bute was delayed for a week due to the death of one of the candidates. And in Langside ward in Glasgow, a ballot box was recorded as having no votes cast and the result was calculated and announced on that basis before the error was discovered and the votes recounted. In both cases the final figures are included here. The revised result in Langside had the effect of increasing overall turnout in the elections by 0.1 per cent.

A new provision at this election meant that anyone queuing at the close of polling would be entitled to be issued with a ballot paper. There was only one instance of this reported, with three people noted as queuing in South Lanarkshire, although in Edinburgh, Midlothian and South Lanarkshire 1, 2 and 6 people respectively were noted as arriving at a polling station too late to join a queue to vote.

#### *Data from councils*

Councils were overwhelmingly helpful and efficient in providing the data required by the Electoral Commission. Indeed, in many cases much of the information was made available on their web sites immediately following the elections. The data supplied by the councils was generally of good quality, and only a relatively limited amount of activity was required in relation to the quality assurance aspects of data collection for this report. The forms used by the Electoral Commission are appended to this report.

#### *Turnout*

For many, turnout is viewed as the most important measure of the health of a democracy. However, the coincidence of Scottish Parliament and local elections in recent years has made it difficult to judge the interest of the electorate in local elections. It is not at all surprising that the decoupling of the two sets of elections resulted in sharply decreased turnout between 2007 and 2012 (Table 1). However, turnout in 2012 was also five per cent lower than in the first set of elections to these councils in 1995, and indeed was the lowest in Scottish local elections since the wholesale restructuring of local government in 1974.

**Table 1: Turnout (valid vote) in council elections, 1995 -2012**

1995	1999	2003	2007	2012	Change
%	%	%	%	%	2007-12
44.9	58.1	49.1	52.8	39.1	-13.7

Only in the three islands councils was turnout above fifty per cent (the highest being the Shetland Islands at 54.7 per cent). Glasgow had the lowest turnout (32.4 per cent) and the highest turnout on the mainland was in East Renfrewshire (48.8 per cent). While the political context can impact upon turnout, for example in the case of major issues or very tightly fought elections, relative levels of turnout are strongly related to contextual variables, such as the socio-economic composition of the areas concerned, with higher turnout in areas with higher socio-economic composition and vice versa. Since socio-economic factors tend to change slowly, it is not surprising that there is a clear relationship between levels of turnout in the 2007 and 2012 elections (in statistical terms the correlation coefficient measuring the strength of the association between turnout in 2007 and 2012 was +0.749, and if the islands councils are excluded it reaches +0.927, with the nearer the correlation coefficient being to 1 the stronger the association).

At the ward level, in ten wards turnout failed to reach thirty per cent, six in Glasgow, three in Aberdeen and one in Dundee. As with overall turnout, the wards with highest turnouts were in the islands councils, reaching 63.9 per cent in Shetland West and 61.1 per cent in the North Isles (also in Shetland) and in Sgìre an Rubha (in Na h-Eileanan an Iar) but on the mainland Dee in Dumfries and Galloway reached 54.7 per cent. As noted below, turnout among postal voters was higher than for the rest of the electorate.

### *Rejected ballots*

As only the second set of elections to be fought under STV the voting system was likely to have remained unfamiliar to voters. Indeed, part of the reason for the decoupling of local elections from Scottish Parliament elections was to reduce voter confusion, and in 2012 there was indeed a small reduction in the proportion of ballots rejected, and although it remains higher than in the final first-past-the-post elections in 2003 (Table 2) it is clear that the vast majority of voters are able to cope with the demands of the system. This conclusion also fits with the mean number of preferences used by voters, which at 2.95 is not dissimilar from Ireland, where STV has been used for many years, and where voters tend to rank between three and four candidates (Denver et al, 2012).

The largest proportions of rejected ballots were in Glasgow (2.79 per cent) and Dundee (2.43 per cent), while the smallest were in Orkney (0.55 per cent), Shetland (0.89 per cent) and East Dunbartonshire (0.98 per cent). At ward level, although six of the eight wards with the highest proportion of ballots rejected were in Glasgow, the worst of all was Hilton/Stockethill in Aberdeen (7.73 per cent). Other than the fact that there was an unusually large number of candidates (11) in this ward – and there is a positive, although not particularly strong relationship between the number of candidates and the proportion of ballots rejected (the statistical correlation is 0.347, N= 353) – there is no obvious reason for this very sharp deviation from the average, even within Aberdeen, although, as with turnout, it may be associated with socio-economic factors. At the other end of the scale, apart from the very small wards in the islands, the smallest proportions of rejected ballots were 0.35 per cent in Tay Bridgehead (Fife) and 0.38 per cent in Meadows/Morningside (Edinburgh).

**Table 2: Rejected ballots in council elections, 2003-2012**

	2003	2007	2012
Number	14,579	38,351	27,044
%	0.77	1.83	1.74

### *Postal votes*

The proportion of the electorate who request a postal vote appears to be continuing to increase. Across Scotland 605,617 postal ballots were issued to 604,758 voters (in a number of instances there was a need to issue replacement ballots), with the latter figure representing 15.2 per cent of the electorate, higher than the 14.1 per cent who had a postal vote in the 2011 Scottish Parliament election (Electoral Commission, 2011). The proportion of the electorate with postal ballots ranged from 10.7 per cent in Scottish Borders and 10.9 per cent in North Lanarkshire to 19.7 per cent in Inverclyde and Orkney Islands. Total turnout among postal voters was, perhaps unsurprisingly, considerably higher than for the electorate as a whole, at 69.7 per cent. A total of 421,655 covering envelopes were returned before the poll, with 18,698 of those (4.4 per cent) being excluded. As a result, 25.9 per cent of ballots at the count were postal votes.

As a percentage of the total vote the number of postal ballots excluded was very small, ranging from 0.24 per cent in Inverclyde to 1.6 per cent in Glasgow, and averaging 0.8 per cent for Scotland as a whole. Table 3 shows the reasons for rejection of postal votes.

The returns from some councils did include a number of apparent discrepancies in the recording of aspects of postal voting. These are overwhelmingly due to the potential for differences in the numbers of covering envelopes and ballot papers returned, so that, for example, covering envelopes may be sent in without the A envelope or the PVS enclosed, while the missing document may or may

not be sent in a separate covering envelope later, thus differential counting occurs. So, strictly speaking, it would probably be likely that in many instances the number of covering envelopes (A4) would be different from the figure referred to at B(1)1. Similarly, the form notes that 'B(1)1 should equal the sum of the figures entered against B(1)2 and B(1)3', however, a number of councils were very clear that 'the ballot papers do not necessarily match the covering envelopes'. Most councils seem to be aware of this and simply adjust the figures to make them balance. There is, nevertheless, a degree of uncertainty and inconsistency as a result of this. One council, for example, reported that 'We have done this [adjusted the figures] in the past. On this occasion we chose to show the difference in order to highlight what is, in our opinion, a weakness in the reporting system'. Others, in particular those which manually count the postal ballot returns on a daily basis, reported that they were unhappy with the situation.

**Table 3: Reasons for postal vote rejection**

	%
Want of signature	13.9
Want of date of birth	4.8
Want of both	15.2
Mismatched signature	18.7
Mismatched date of birth	15.1
Both mismatched	6.9
Ballot paper not returned	7.4
Statement not returned	17.5
Statement signed using power of attorney	0.6

### Candidates

The number of candidates in 2012 (2,496) was smaller than in 2007 (2,607), with the numbers standing for all of the major parties (and indeed most of the minor parties), other than the SNP, falling, together with the number of Independent candidates (with Independents defined as those who described themselves as such on the nomination, those who offered no description at all, and the three candidates standing for the Cumbernauld Independent Councillors Alliance and the two for East Dunbartonshire Independent Alliance) (Table 4). Although, strictly speaking the two Alliances may be viewed as parties, given that they have to register as such in order to use those descriptions, the names clearly emphasise their independent nature.

The number of SNP candidates rose markedly by 176, so that it had considerable more candidates than any other party. Among the smaller parties the Greens remained the largest despite a small fall in the number of candidates, while UKIP increased to 37 candidates (compared with 10 in 2007). There was a substantial fall in the number of candidates from the Scottish Socialist Party (from 126 to 31) and an even greater drop from Solidarity (83 to 5), although the Scottish Anti-Cuts Coalition put forward 32 candidates.

Both the Conservatives and the SNP had at least one candidate in every ward in mainland Scotland, with Labour contesting 92.4 per cent of mainland wards and the Liberal Democrats 69.5 per cent. There was at least one Independent candidate in 59.2 per cent of these wards, compared with 64.9 per cent in 2007.

**Table 4: Number of candidates in council elections, 2007-12**

	2007	2012	Change 2007-12
Con	379	362	-17
Lab	521	497	-24
Lib Dem	331	247	-84
SNP	437	613	+176
Ind	551	465*	-86
Green	100	86	-14
Others	288	226	-62
<b>Total</b>	<b>2,607</b>	<b>2,496</b>	<b>-111</b>
<b>N of Seats</b>	<b>1,222</b>	<b>1,223</b>	

\*Includes three Cumbernauld Independent Councillors Alliance and two East Dunbartonshire Independent Alliance candidates.

Despite the arguments of some that proportional electoral systems can benefit women candidates, in 2007 there was a clear decline in the number and proportion of women candidates across all of the major parties, to 595. In 2012 the number of women candidates fell slightly to 585, but this represented a slightly larger proportion of all candidates (Table 5). The proportion of women candidates from the Liberal Democrats, however, fell sharply. The proportion of women councillors, who now number 297, is larger than that elected in 2007. Indeed, this is the largest proportion of women councillors since the current councils were established in 1995.

**Table 5: Percentage of women candidates and councillors, 2007-12**

	Candidates		Councillors	
	2007	2012	2007	2012
Con	25.3	26.0	25.9	24.3
Lab	20.3	27.2	17.5	25.9
Lib Dem	31.4	27.5	30.1	36.6
SNP	22.0	23.8	22.3	24.3
Ind	15.1	13.3	16.6	16.9
Green	39.0	41.8	50.0	28.5
Others	20.1	19.5	28.6	0.0
<b>All</b>	<b>22.8</b>	<b>23.4</b>	<b>21.8</b>	<b>24.3</b>

## The results

### *Party support*

Reporting the results of STV elections is not straightforward, particularly in terms of party shares of votes. The convention is to use first preferences votes as an indicator, and to aggregate the first preferences won by all candidates of a party within an electoral district to arrive at a measure of party support, and that is what is used here.

The SNP saw its support increase by 4.4 per cent over its 2007 performance, allowing it to edge out Labour as the largest party in terms of popular support (Table 6). At the same time, Labour recovered somewhat from its poor performance in 2007, so that the two parties clearly dominate in Scotland. For the Conservatives, the slight increase in support in Scotland which had begun in 1999 came to an end, but the collapse in support for the Liberal Democrats meant that the Conservatives remain in third place in terms of share of the vote.

**Table 6: Share of votes in council elections, 2003-2012**

	2003	2007	2012	Change 2007-12
	%	%	%	
Con	15.1	15.6	13.3	-2.3
Lab	32.6	28.1	31.4	+3.3
Lib Dem	14.5	12.7	6.6	-6.1
SNP	24.1	27.9	32.3	+4.4
Ind	10.1	10.9	12.1*	+1.2
Green	0.0	2.2	2.3	+0.1
Others	3.6	2.7	1.9	-0.8

\*Includes votes for three Cumbernauld Independent Councillors Alliance and two East Dunbartonshire Independent Alliance candidates.

#### *Seats won*

Table 7 shows the number of seats won in 2007 and 2012. As would be expected from the changes in share of the vote, the Conservatives lost seats (-28) while Labour (+46) and the SNP (+61) gained. The Liberal Democrats were, however, the most affected, with a drop in the number of councillors from 166 in 2007 to 71 in 2012. Table 8 provides the number of seats won by the parties and by Independents for each council.

**Table 7: Seats won in council elections, 2007-2012**

	2007		2012		Change 2007-12	
	N	%	N	%	N	%
Con	143	11.7	115	9.4	-28	-2.3
Lab	348	28.5	394	32.2	+46	+3.7
Lib Dem	166	13.6	71	5.8	-95	-7.8
SNP	363	29.7	425	34.7	+62	+5.1
Ind	187	15.3	200	16.4*	+13	+1.1
Green	8	0.7	14	1.1	+6	+0.4
Others	7	0.6	4	0.3	-3	-0.3
Total	1,222		1,223			

\*Includes one Cumbernauld Independent Councillors Alliance and two East Dunbartonshire Independent Alliance councillors.

**Table 8: Number of council seats won by party, 2012**

	Con	Lab	LDem	SNP	Ind	Green	Other	Total
Aberdeen	3	17	5	15	3	0	0	43
Aberdeenshire	14	2	12	28	11	1	0	68
Angus	4	1	1	15	8	0	0	29
Argyll & Bute	4	0	4	13	15	0	0	36
Clackmannanshire	1	8	0	8	1	0	0	18
Dumfries & Galloway	14	15	1	10	7	0	0	47
Dundee	1	10	1	16	1	0	0	29
East Ayrshire	2	14	0	15	1	0	0	32
East Dunbartonshire	2	8	3	8	3*	0	0	24
East Lothian	3	10	0	9	1	0	0	23
East Renfrewshire	6	8	0	4	2	0	0	20
Edinburgh	11	20	3	18	0	6	0	58
Falkirk	2	14	0	13	3	0	0	32
Fife	3	35	10	26	4	0	0	78
Glasgow	1	44	1	27	0	5	1	79
Highland	0	8	15	22	35	0	0	80
Inverclyde	1	10	2	6	1	0	0	20
Midlothian	0	8	0	8	1	1	0	18
Moray	3	3	0	10	10	0	0	26
Na h-Eileanan an Iar	0	3	0	7	21	0	0	31
North Ayrshire	1	11	0	12	6	0	0	30
North Lanarkshire	0	41	0	26	3**	0	0	70
Orkney Islands	0	0	0	0	21	0	0	21
Perth & Kinross	10	4	5	18	4	0	0	41
Renfrewshire	1	22	1	15	1	0	0	40
Scottish Borders	10	0	6	9	7	0	2	34
Shetland Islands	0	0	0	0	22	0	0	22
South Ayrshire	10	9	0	9	2	0	0	30
South Lanarkshire	3	33	1	28	2	0	0	67
Stirling	4	8	0	9	0	1	0	22
West Dunbartonshire	0	12	0	6	3	0	1	22
West Lothian	1	16	0	15	1	0	0	33
Scotland total	115	394	71	425	200	14	4	1,223

\*One Cumbernauld Independent Councillors Alliance

\*\*Two East Dunbartonshire Independent Alliance

One of the outcomes of the shift to STV, and the consequent change in the distribution of seats to the position shown in Table 8, was an inevitable increase in the number of councils with no overall control. In 1999 and 2003, excluding the six councils each year that had Independent majorities, individual parties (almost always Labour) had overall majorities in 16 and 15 councils respectively, but in 2007 that fell to two (Labour retained overall control of Glasgow and North Lanarkshire), with the remaining authorities having no overall control. In 2012, however, Labour also took control of Renfrewshire and West Dunbartonshire while the SNP gained overall control of Angus and Dundee.

**Table 9: Control of councils, 2012**

Aberdeen	Lab/Con coalition
Aberdeenshire	Con/LibDem/Ind coalition
Angus	SNP majority
Argyll & Bute	SNP/Ind coalition
Clackmannanshire	SNP minority
Dumfries & Galloway	Con/SNP coalition
Dundee	SNP majority
East Ayrshire	SNP/Con coalition
East Dunbartonshire	Lab/LibDem/Con coalition
East Lothian	Lab/Con coalition
East Renfrewshire	Lab/SNP coalition
Edinburgh	Lab/SNP coalition
Falkirk	Lab/Con/Ind coalition
Fife	Lab minority
Glasgow	Lab majority
Highland	SNP/LibDem/Lab coalition
Inverclyde	Lab minority
Midlothian	SNP+1 Ind
Moray	Con/Ind coalition
Na h-Eileanan an Iar	Ind majority
North Ayrshire	SNP minority
North Lanarkshire	Lab majority
Orkney Islands	Ind majority
Perth & Kinross	SNP minority
Renfrewshire	Lab majority
Scottish Borders	SNP/Ind/LibDem coalition
Shetland Islands	Ind majority
South Ayrshire	Con minority
South Lanarkshire	Lab minority
Stirling	Lab/Con coalition
West Dunbartonshire	Lab majority
West Lothian	Lab minority

Following the inevitable post-election negotiations that accompany the increasing number of councils where no party has an overall majority that is associated with STV elections, the position regarding party control of the remainder of Scotland's councils was varied. While the SNP had just beaten Labour in terms of share of the vote and seats won, they arguably did less well in terms of controlling councils, with the party taking minority control of a further two councils (Clackmannanshire and North Ayrshire) and participating in coalition arrangements in an additional six (Table 9). Labour also took minority control of two councils (Fife and West Lothian), but were in coalition with other parties in a further eight. In two cases Labour and the SNP were in coalition together, and in a third council (Highland) shared control with the Liberal Democrats. The Conservatives formed a minority administration in North Ayrshire and were in coalition in nine councils, while even the biggest losers of the 2012 election, the Liberal Democrats, shared power in four councils. Clearly, in the world of STV for Scottish local elections, almost no type of coalition is ruled out.

**Note:** The views expressed in this report are those of the authors and not the Electoral Commission.

## References

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