

## Rejected Ballots in the 2007 Scottish Parliament Elections

In the immediate aftermath of the Scottish Parliament elections of 2007 there was much adverse comment on two organisational aspects of the elections – the electronic counting of votes and the design of the ballot paper. Newspaper headlines included: ‘The worst poll debacle in the history of British democracy’ (*Scotsman* 5/5/07) and ‘Who is to blame when everyone involved says it’s not their fault?’ (*The Herald* 5/5/07).

When results were announced it emerged that there were very many more rejected ballots than had been the case in the two previous Scottish Parliament elections. Table 1 shows the incidence of rejected ballots in the 2007 elections as compared with the elections in 1999 and 2003. As can be seen, the number and proportion of ballots rejected increased very sharply in 2007. In the regional list voting it rose to 2.88% of all ballots and in the constituency contests to 4.08%. Criticism was sharpened by the fact that there were 16 constituency contests in which the number of rejected ballots was greater than the winning candidate’s majority. Of these, the SNP won 9, Labour 5 and the Liberal Democrats 2. There were only two such cases in 1999 and four in 2003.

**Table 1**

### Rejected Ballots in Scottish Parliament Elections 1999-2007

	1999	2003	2007
Constituency Contests			
Number	9,210	12,810	85,644
% of all ballots	0.39	0.66	4.08
Regional List Voting			
Number	7,268	12,482	60,455
% of all ballots	0.31	0.67	2.88

In the initial confusion commentators wondered whether the electronic reading and counting of ballots might have had something to do with the increase in the number of rejected ballots. On reflection, however, this was ruled out and attention focussed on the new design of the ballot paper.

In the two previous elections, voters were handed two differently coloured ballot papers by polling station staff – one for the constituency contest and one for the regional list voting. The printed instructions on each reminded them that they should vote for one candidate or party list. In 2007, however, there was a single ballot paper with the list contestants printed on the left hand side and constituency candidates on the right. The printed instructions indicated that the elector had two votes and (in most cases) there were arrows to indicate that one vote should be cast in the left-hand column and one in the right hand column. The main motive for the change in ballot paper layout was to dispel the notion that the regional vote is a ‘second’ vote, which is somehow less valuable or important than the ‘first’ (constituency) vote. In Glasgow and Lothians, however, the arrows were omitted from the ballot papers. Each of these electoral regions had 23 contestants on the regional list and the exigencies of electronic counting meant that there was no space to print the arrows intended to guide the voter.

The breakdowns of the reasons why ballots were rejected in 2007 are given in Table 2.

**Table 2**  
**Reasons for Ballots Being Rejected**

	List Voting %	Constituency Contests %
Voting for more than one candidate	30.1	3.0
Writing/mark identifying voter	0.2	0.1
Unmarked or void for uncertainty	69.6	96.8
Want of official mark	0.03	0.02

The rejection of ballots because they lacked the official mark or had writing that identified the voter was extremely rare. In the constituency contests almost all rejected ballots were unmarked or unclear as to the voter’s intention. In the list voting, however, almost a third of rejected ballots contained votes for more than one party/candidate. The proportion of rejected ballots in this category was smallest in the Highlands and Islands (26.7%) and largest in Mid-Scotland and Fife (34.2%). It is not clear, however, why confusion about how many votes should be cast was more evident in the list than in the constituency voting.

### Variation Across Constituencies

There was considerable variation across constituencies in the proportion of rejected ballots. As an indication of this, Table 3 lists the five constituencies with the lowest and highest levels of rejected ballots in the constituency and list elections. Clearly, different sorts of constituencies appear at the top and bottom of the lists with Glasgow constituencies monopolising the bottom places.

**Table 3**  
**Lowest and Highest Level of Rejected Ballots**

List Voting		Constituency Contests	
	%		%
Gordon	1.65	Stirling	1.90
Aberdeenshire W.	1.73	Eastwood	2.29
Banff and Buchan	1.74	Roxburgh and Berwickshire	2.31
Stirling	1.79	Gordon	2.34
Angus	1.95	North East Fife	2.36
Glasgow Maryhill	4.59	Glasgow Springburn	8.81
Glasgow Baillieston	4.63	Glasgow Baillieston	9.67
Glasgow Govan	5.22	Glasgow Pollok	9.79
Glasgow Springburn	5.34	Glasgow Maryhill	10.18
Glasgow Shettleston	5.89	Glasgow Shettleston	12.09

As a first step in examining the distribution of rejected ballots across constituencies, Table 4 shows the mean percentages of ballots rejected in the 73 constituencies given the number of constituency and regional contestants. In constituency contests the number of candidates varied from 4 to 7; regional lists ranged from 15 contestants (in North East Scotland and South of Scotland) to 23 (in Glasgow and Lothians).

**Table 4**  
**Mean Percentage of Ballots Rejected**

N of constituency candidates	List Voting	Constituency Contests
4 (42)	2.88	4.13
5 (23)	3.29	4.70
6 (5)	3.10	3.91
7 (3)	2.40	3.59
N of list contestants		
15 (18)	2.45	3.34
16 (27)	2.88	3.41
18 (9)	2.95	3.49
23 (19)	3.72	6.75

Note: The numbers in brackets indicate the number of constituencies involved in each case.

The number of constituency candidates made no significant difference in either case. On the other hand, the proportions of ballots rejected in both constituency and list contests were significantly higher where there were 23 candidates/parties on the list than in the other cases. The other cases themselves were not significantly different from one another. Before it can be concluded that the very long lists in Glasgow and Lothians were a significant cause of confusion, however, other factors need to be taken into account. In particular, interpretation is complicated by the fact that in these two regions guiding arrows were not printed on the ballots.

First, however, it is possible that the larger proportion of rejected ballots in constituency contests resulted in part from deliberate spoiling of papers. The Scottish Green Party, for example, was on all regional lists but contested only one constituency and the same applies to the Scottish Socialist Party (SSP). Solidarity was on all lists but contested no constituencies. It might be that supporters of these and other parties deliberately spoiled their constituency ballot because they had no candidate to vote for. If this were the case, we would expect the percentage of rejected ballots in the constituency contests to be positively associated with the level of support for these parties in the list voting (more precisely, the difference in their support between constituency and list votes). There was evidence that this occurred with respect to Green Party supporters in 2003 since in that election the correlation between Green

share of the list vote and percentage of ballots rejected at constituency level was significant (0.322).

Table 5 shows the relevant correlation coefficients for groups that contested all lists but, at best, only a few constituencies. The coefficient for the Green Party is positive (0.103) but not significant. For the Senior Citizens Party, the Scottish Christian Party and UKIP the relationships are in the ‘wrong’ direction. On the other hand, there is evidence here that some supporters of the other parties listed may have deliberately spoiled their constituency ballot. The expected relationships are especially strong in the cases of the Socialist Labour Party, Solidarity and Solidarity and the SSP combined.

**Table 5**  
**Correlations: % of Constituency Ballots Rejected and List Support for Minor Parties**

Scottish Green Party	0.103*	Scottish Senior Citizens	-0.012*
Scottish Socialist Party	0.542	Scottish Christian Party	-0.221*
Solidarity	0.760	Christian People’s Alliance	0.313
(SSP plus Solidarity)	0.773	British National Party	0.615
Socialist Labour Party	0.838	UKIP	-0.423

Note: coefficients that are not statistically significant are asterisked.

Despite this *prima facie* evidence of deliberate spoiling of ballots, once again we have to take account of other factors. It may be that list support for these parties was particularly strong in areas which had large numbers of rejected ballots for other reasons. Thus, it would be expected (even from a cursory glance at the lists of constituencies in Table 3) that the proportion of rejected ballots would be related to the social composition of constituencies. This is demonstrated using correlation coefficients in Table 6.

**Table 6**

**Correlations: % of Rejected Ballots and Social Composition of Constituencies**

	List Voting	Constituency Contests	
% Households no car	0.644	0.770	
% Social renters	0.528	0.653	
Persons per hectare	0.391	0.579	
% Ethnic minority	0.394	0.377	
% Owner occupiers	-0.545	-0.629	-
% Professional/Managerial	-0.479	-0.433	-
% employed agriculture	-0.175*	-0.385	-
% with degree	-0.276	-0.276	-

Note: the coefficient that is not statistically significant is asterisked.

The results are in line with expectations. The proportion of rejected ballots (in both list and constituency contests) was higher in more deprived areas (households without a car), where there are more social renters (homes rented from the council or a housing association), in heavily urban areas (persons per hectare) and in areas with more ethnic minority residents. On the other hand, rejected ballots were less frequent in constituencies with larger proportions of owner-occupiers, professional and managerial workers and people with a degree-level qualification, and in rural areas. It should be emphasised that this kind of analysis tells us nothing about the behaviour of the groups identified. Rather it tells us about *constituencies* with the characteristics described.

The fact that there are strong relationships between the social characteristics of constituencies and the proportion of rejected ballots in 2007 is something of a new departure in Scottish elections. In 2003 only two of the above variables were significantly related to rejected ballots in constituency contests – households with no car (0.276) and proportion professional and managerial (-0.350). In the 2003 list voting there were no significant correlations in the expected direction.

In explaining the variation in rejected ballots in the list voting in 2007, then, there are two main possibilities – the length of the list ballot and the social composition of the constituency. For constituency contests we may be able to add deliberate spoiling of ballots by supporters

of minor parties. The next task is to assess the individual and cumulative impact of these different factors.

Fairly obviously, many of the variables that have been considered are themselves heavily inter-correlated with one another. Constituencies with relatively large proportions of professional and managerial workers tend also to have larger proportions of owner occupiers and people with a degree, for example. Using regression analysis we are able to determine which of the variables remain significant predictors of the proportion of rejected ballots when all other included variables are held constant. For list voting, the predictor variables are the social composition measures listed above plus the length of the regional list. The final equation produced is as follows.

$$\% \text{ rejected list} = 2.53 - 0.09 (\text{PM}) + 0.11 (\text{EM}) + 0.11 (\text{Length})$$

In this equation PM is % professional and managerial, EM is % ethnic minority and Length is number of contestants on the regional ballot. Together the three variables explain 59% of the variation across constituencies in the proportion of list ballots rejected.

For the constituency contests, list support for minor parties (list share minus constituency share, if any) was added to the analysis and the final equation produced was as follows.

$$\% \text{ rejected constit} = -1.14 - 0.08 (\text{PM}) + 1.86 (\text{Soclab}) + 0.28 (\text{Solid/SSP}) + 0.27 (\text{Length})$$

Here Soclab refers to list support for the Socialist Labour Party and Solid/SSP to combined list support for Solidarity and the SSP. Together these variables explain an impressive 82% of the variation in the proportion of rejected ballots at constituency level.

It appears, then, that variations in rejected ballots in the list voting are best explained by a combination of the social make-up of constituencies (the two relevant variables being shorthand summaries of this) plus the simple length of the list ballot. In constituency contests we can add an element of deliberate spoiling of ballot by supporters of the parties named. Too much weight should not be placed on the specific social variables included in the equations. These are merely variables which summarise a cluster of attributes such as those

listed in Table 6. To repeat, the analysis should certainly not be interpreted as indicating that ethnic minority voters had more difficulty with the list ballots than others.

### *The Missing Arrows*

The percentage of rejected ballots in Glasgow and Lothians was relatively large. In Glasgow the mean across ten constituencies was 8.1% in constituency contests and 4.3% in the list voting. In Lothians, the relevant figures were 5.2% and 3.1%. In the nature of things it is simply impossible to provide evidence that would offer clues as to whether these above-average figures were due to the fact that the list ballot was extraordinarily long, the fact that the guiding arrows to help voters were not printed on the ballot, or a combination of the two. It may be worth noting, however, that when we omit the Glasgow and Lothians constituencies from the analysis list length is no longer significant in predicting variations in constituency rejected ballots. On the other hand, list length remains a significant predictor of variations in list rejected ballots (although % ethnic minority drops out): % rejected list =  $0.261 - 0.10(\text{PM}) + 0.25 (\text{Length})$ .

### **Summary**

- The level of rejected ballots was much higher in 2007 than in previous Scottish elections.
- The level was distinctly higher in the constituency contests than in the list voting.
- A much larger proportion of ballots were rejected because they contained votes for more than one contestant in the list elections than in the constituency contests.
- A combination of social factors and the length of the list ballot provides the best explanation of variations in the percentage of rejected list ballots across all constituencies.
- In constituency contests there is, in addition, statistical evidence that suggests deliberate spoiling of ballots by supporters of some minor parties.
- It is impossible to determine whether the length of the list ballot or the design of the ballot paper explains the large proportions of rejected ballots in Glasgow and Lothians.
- None of the factors mentioned (other than somehow ensuring that something like guiding arrows are printed on all ballots) is very obviously amenable to intervention by the authorities. Trying to reduce list length by substantially increasing the deposit required to stand, for example, would probably be unacceptable.

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