



The 2015 General Election: aspects of participation and administration

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Summary

- The UK electorate at the 2015 general election was almost 46.4 million –the largest ever. The registers contained three-quarters of a million more names than in 2010 –an increase of 1.7%.
- More than a million people registered to vote in the period between the compilation of the ONS parliamentary electorate statistics based on the registers at 1st December 2014 and the general election in May.
- Nearly 30.7 million valid votes were cast, making the overall turnout across the UK 66.2%. This is one million more votes than in 2010, but only a 1.1 percentage point higher turnout.
- The ‘ballot box’ turnout which includes votes rejected at the count was 30.8 million or 66.4% of the registered electorate.
- Turnout rose in each country, but jumped particularly sharply in Scotland from 63.9% in 2010 to 71.1%.
- The number of ballot papers rejected at the count continues to be but a small fraction of the total cast (0.33%), though was a little greater than in either 2010 or 2005. There is evidence of the rejection rate being somewhat higher where voters are faced with an additional election, especially in cases where it operates under a different electoral system (e.g. in those areas with a coincident mayoral election).
- Almost 7.6 million postal votes were issued -16.4% of the entire electorate. This represented an increase of 1.1 percentage points and more than half a million more voters than in 2010.
- 85.8% of those with a postal ballot returned it. By way of contrast, only 63.2% of those electors required to vote ‘in person’ did so.
- The number of postal votes at the count was one in five of the total. In the North East region of England more than a third of all votes were cast by post.
- The proportion of postal votes rejected or otherwise not included in the count was 3.3%. It was less than in 2010 in every country of the UK.
- In about half the cases postal votes were rejected because a signature or date of birth (or both) were mismatched; in another quarter because the elector omitted to enclose either the ballot paper or the postal vote statement (or both).
- Almost 150,000 electors (0.3% of the total) appointed proxies. This was a small increase compared with 2010, concentrated especially in Scotland and Northern Ireland. The number of emergency proxy votes increased from fewer than 1,000 in 2010 to nearly 9,000 following a relaxation of the rules regarding eligibility.
- About three fifths of one percent of electors with a postal vote were granted a waiver to use their date of birth as their sole identifier. This is in line with levels seen at the 2014 European Parliament contests.

The 2015 general election was held on Thursday 7th May - the first to occur following the passing of the Fixed Term Parliament Act 2011. With no significant boundary changes having taken place, the same 650 constituencies were contested as in 2010 - 533 in England, 59 in Scotland, 40 in Wales, and 18 in Northern Ireland.

In all, some 3,971 candidates competed at the election, a slight reduction on the record 4,150 candidates in 2010. More than 130 registered parties fielded at least one candidate together with 172 Independents. The Conservatives, Labour and the Liberal Democrats contested every seat in Great Britain except that of the Speaker; the Scottish Nationalist Party and Plaid Cymru had candidates in every seat in Scotland and Wales respectively. The Conservatives' sister party in Northern Ireland also fielded 16 candidates. UKIP had a candidate in every seat in England and Wales, but did not fight 18 constituencies in Scotland or 8 in Northern Ireland. The Greens fought 573 seats across the UK compared with 335 in 2010.

The Conservatives won an absolute majority in the House of Commons for the first time since 1992. They won 330 seats compared with 232 for Labour, 56 for the Scottish National Party, 8 each for the Liberal Democrats and Democratic Unionist Party, 4 for Sinn Fein, 3 each for Plaid Cymru and the Social Democratic and Labour Party, 2 for the Ulster Unionist Party, and one each for UKIP, the Green Party, an Independent, and The Speaker.

A total of 1,570 candidates lost their deposit by failing to poll 5 per cent or more of the valid vote in their constituency. This is 40 per cent of the total number of candidates; in 2010, 46 per cent suffered this forfeit. Among the major parties Labour lost just 3 deposits and the Conservatives 18 (including 15 in Northern Ireland); the Liberal Democrats 341 (none were forfeited in 2010); UKIP 79; and the Greens 442.

Electorate

The electorate for the 2015 general election was, at almost 46.4 million, the largest ever. It showed an increase of over three-quarters of a million or 1.7% compared with 2010. The numerical bulk of the rise was in England, but the electorate in Scotland rose by no less than 6.1% compared with five years previously –see Table 1. The Northern Ireland electorate also increased by more than 5 per cent.

It is likely that there are both political and technical issues behind these variations. The 2014 Independence referendum in Scotland prompted an unprecedented number of new applications to register: most will have remained eligible to vote at the general election. In Northern Ireland the decade long bedding in of individual as opposed to household level registration has now raised the parliamentary electorate above 1.2 million for the first time since the 2001 general election.

In Wales and in most of the regions of England the electorate rose much more gradually: in the North East and North West regions it actually fell. Partly this

reflects the move towards individual electoral registration (IER) and the consequent cleansing of registers. Indeed the total general election electorate may well have been less than in 2010 save for a registration campaign conducted in the early months of 2015 highlighting the availability of online registration. Electors also took advantage of the so-called ‘12 day rule’ (introduced by the 2006 Electoral Administration Act) which allowed for registration after the election was formally called.

The ONS parliamentary electorate figures published in April 2015 and based on figures as at 1st December 2014 actually showed a drop of 1.8% compared with a year earlier; a quarter of a million fewer electors than at the time of 2010 general election; and more than a million fewer electors than were eventually registered to vote on May 7th.

In such circumstances it is unsurprising that the electorates in individual constituencies contain evidence of considerable volatility. There was a 10% or more growth in electors between 2010 and 2015 in 21 constituencies – 13 of them in Scotland. The largest individual increase compared with 2010 was 19.3% in Hackney North and Stoke Newington. Only one constituency (Oxford West and Abingdon) reported a reduction of over 10% in its electorate, but 13 others including both Blackpool seats saw their electorate fall by more than 5%.

Table 1: Electorate at the 2015 general election

	<i>Electorate 2015</i>	<i>Electorate 2010</i>	<i>Change 2010-15</i>	<i>%Change 2010-15</i>
UK	46,354,197	45,597,461	+756,736	+1.7
GB	45,117,432	44,428,277	+689,155	+1.6
England	38,736,146	38,300,110	+436,036	+1.1
N. Ireland	1,236,765	1,169,184	+67,581	+5.8
Scotland	4,099,532	3,863,042	+236,490	+6.1
Wales	2,281,754	2,265,125	+16,629	+0.7
East Midlands	3,354,204	3,332,058	+22,146	+0.7
Eastern	4,365,302	4,257,453	+107,849	+2.5
London	5,407,830	5,276,910	+130,290	+2.5
North East	1,923,727	1,948,281	-24,554	-1.3
North West	5,230,395	5,255,192	-24,797	-0.5
South East	6,409,317	6,298,261	+111,056	+1.8
South West	4,080,772	4,020,915	+59,857	+1.5
West Midlands	4,102,205	4,084,007	+18,198	+0.4
Yorkshire & The Humber	3,862,394	3,827,033	+35,361	+0.9

Turnout

There was a small increase in turnout compared with 2010 in England, Northern Ireland and Wales, and a much bigger rise in Scotland – see Table 2. Nevertheless, and despite the growth in the electorate, fewer than 31 million valid votes were cast: a long way short of the record of 33.6 million votes at the 1992 general election. Indeed the overall valid vote turnout of 66.2% was just 1.1 percentage points higher than in 2010 and almost 5 percentage points

lower than at any general election between 1922 and 1997 inclusive. The ‘ballot box’ turnout –see Table 6 below- was similarly 1.1 percentage points higher than in 2010 at 66.4 per cent.

The turnout in Scotland exceeded 71% for the first time since 1997. Although much lower than the 84.6% recorded at the 2014 Independence Referendum, it provides further evidence of the currently greater degree of political engagement north of the border.

Among the English regions, turnout fell slightly in three (East of England and both the East and West Midlands) and increased most in the North West (+2.0%). Once again the highest level of turnout was in the South West (69.5%); the lowest in the North East (61.8%).

Table 2: Turnout at the 2015 general election

	<i>Electorate 2015</i>	<i>Valid votes 2015</i>	<i>Valid vote %turnout 2015</i>	<i>%Change 2010-15</i>
UK	46,354,197	30,697,525	66.2	+1.1
GB	45,117,432	29,979,422	66.4	+1.1
England	38,736,146	25,570,894	66.0	+0.5
N. Ireland	1,236,765	718,103	58.1	+0.4
Scotland	4,099,532	2,910,465	71.0	+7.2
Wales	2,281,754	1,498,063	65.7	+0.9
East Midlands	3,354,204	2,230,402	66.5	-0.3
Eastern	4,365,302	2,948,623	67.5	-0.1
London	5,407,830	3,536,251	65.4	+0.9
North East	1,923,727	1,188,153	61.8	+0.7
North West	5,230,395	3,364,055	64.3	+2.0
South East	6,409,317	4,394,360	68.6	+0.4
South West	4,080,772	2,836,294	69.5	+0.5
West Midlands	4,102,205	2,628,579	64.1	-0.6
Yorkshire & The Humber	3,862,394	2,444,177	63.3	+0.4

The national level turnout figures are broadly the same whichever method is used in their calculation. Table 3 shows the aggregate or total vote valid turnout, the mean (average) turnout across constituencies, and the turnout in the median (or middle) constituency in each geographical unit.

Table 3: Turnout in 2015 using different statistical measures

<i>2015</i>	<i>Aggregate turnout</i>	<i>Mean turnout</i>	<i>Median turnout</i>
UK	66.2	66.1	66.7
GB	66.4	66.4	67.1
England	66.0	65.9	66.6
N. Ireland	58.1	58.0	56.6
Scotland	71.0	71.0	71.6
Wales	65.7	65.6	65.1

A total of 181 constituencies had turnouts in excess of 70% (139 in 2010 and 37 in 2005), and none had a turnout below 50% (6 in 2010 and 39 in 2005). In nearly two-thirds of constituencies turnout rose compared to 2010; in 54 cases it fell by two or more percentage points. Turnout in every constituency in Scotland was higher than in 2010; in eight of the 18 Northern Ireland seats it was lower. Table 4 shows the individual constituencies with the highest and lowest turnouts and turnout change in each country of the UK.

Table 4: Constituency level turnout and turnout change, 2015

<i>Highest turnout 2015</i>		<i>Lowest turnout 2015</i>		
England	Twickenham	77.3	Stoke-on-Trent Central	51.3
Northern Ireland	Fermanagh and South Tyrone	72.6	Londonderry East	51.9
Scotland	Dunbartonshire East	81.9	Glasgow Central	55.4
Wales	Monmouth	76.2	Merthyr Tydfil	53.0

<i>Biggest increase in turnout 2010-15</i>		<i>Biggest fall in turnout 2010-15</i>		
England	Liverpool Riverside*	+10.4	Cambridgeshire North East	-8.7
Northern Ireland	Belfast East	+4.4	Foyle	-4.7
Scotland	Inverclyde	+11.8	Edinburgh South	(+1.1)
Wales	Cardiff Central	+8.2	Merthyr Tydfil	-5.6

*The postponed election in Thirsk and Malton (2010) is excluded.

There are further interesting variations in turnout depending on the political status and marginality of the constituency –see Table 5. As is usual, turnout was lower in safe as opposed to marginal seats, although the gap has narrowed further compared with 2010. Indeed the statistical relationship or ‘correlation’ between marginality at the previous (that is, 2010) election and turnout at the current (2015) one is no longer significant¹. In 2010 there was a significant correlation of 0.48 between marginality and turnout; in 2005 it was 0.72 and in 2001 0.7. Even if Scotland is excluded, the correlation does not reach levels of statistical significance this time.

Table 5: Turnout by political status of constituency

<i>% majority 2010</i>	<i>Mean turnout 2015</i>	<i>Change 2010-15</i>
0 to 5	66.7	+1.2
5 to 10	66.9	+0.7
10 to 20	65.6	+0.8
20+	66.0	+1.5

	<i>Mean turnout 2015</i>	<i>Change 2010-15</i>
Con seats	68.7	+0.4
Lab seats	61.9	+0.7
LD seats	70.1	+1.7
SNP seats	70.9	+7.4
LD losses	70.0	+2.6

¹ 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.

Turnout does remain sharply lower in constituencies won by Labour than in those won by either the Conservatives or the Liberal Democrats. However, the figures for seats won by the SNP and defended by the Liberal Democrats suggest how the ‘politics’ of the election may this time have trumped simply marginality in terms of influencing the propensity of electors to turn out and vote. Throughout Scotland in particular and also in cases where the Liberal Democrats were the incumbent party, both the mean turnout and the change in turnout since 2010 were well above the overall average.

We are also able to examine aggregate turnout taking into account those electors who tried to vote but whose postal vote returns and/or ballot papers were rejected –see Table 6. ‘Ballot box turnout’ includes all electors whose ballot papers were scrutinised at the count. ‘Total vote turnout’ adds those whose postal vote returns were deemed invalid and therefore not forwarded to the count. Each adjustment has the effect of fractionally increasing the % of the electorate who participated at the election, but makes little difference to the overall pattern.

Table 6: ‘Adjusted’ and ‘unadjusted’ turnout 2015

	<i>Valid vote %turnout 2015</i>	<i>Ballot box %turnout 2015</i>	<i>Total vote %turnout 2015</i>
UK	66.2	66.4	66.9
GB	66.4	66.7	67.1
England	66.0	66.2	66.7
N. Ireland	58.1	58.4	58.5
Scotland	71.0	71.1	71.5
Wales	65.7	65.8	66.3

Rejected ballots

The number of ballot papers rejected at the count continues to be but a small fraction of the total cast (0.33%), though is a little greater than in both 2010 and 2005 –see Table 7. The bulk of these are because the voter has either not marked the ballot paper or made their intention clear. In just over a quarter of cases voters have chosen more than one candidate in a single-member election. Northern Ireland once again provides something of an exception. An overall greater proportion of votes are rejected (0.66%), more than four in ten for voting more than once. It is likely that this is caused by confusion among electors who normally vote in Single Transferable Vote elections where they are invited to cast a preference vote for all candidates on the ballot paper. On other hand, fewer votes were rejected in London than in 2010. Five years ago Londoners had co-incident borough council elections which usually took place in multi-member and thus multi-vote wards and some 50% of the 17,500 votes were rejected for ‘voting more than once’. This time the proportion was 33% from a much lower total of 11,500 rejected votes.

Table 7: Rejected ballot papers 2015

	<i>Ballot papers rejected at the count</i>	<i>% of ballots at count</i>	<i>Change 2010-15</i>		
UK	102,639	0.33	0.05		
GB	97,870	0.33	0.06		
England	91,053	0.35	0.07		
N. Ireland	4,769	0.66	0.06		
Scotland	3,733	0.13	-0.05		
Wales	3,084	0.21	0.03		

	Reasons for rejection*				
	<i>No official mark (%)</i>	<i>Voting more than once (%)</i>	<i>Voter could be identified (%)</i>	<i>Void or uncertain (%)</i>	<i>Rejected in part (%)</i>
UK	1,355 (1.4)	26,406 (26.4)	2,453 (2.5)	69,462 (69.6)	175 (0.2)
GB	1,126 (1.2)	24,416 (25.7)	2,203 (2.3)	67,162 (70.6)	175 (0.2)
England	1,029 (1.2)	22,980 (26.1)	2,058 (2.3)	61,703 (70.2)	175 (0.2)
N. Ireland	229 (4.8)	1,990 (41.7)	250 (5.2)	2,300 (48.2)	-
Scotland	97 (2.4)	556 (13.7)	83 (2.0)	3,317 (81.8)	-
Wales	0 (0.0)	880 (28.5)	62 (2.0)	2,142 (69.5)	-

*Not all constituencies provided this breakdown.

There is also some variation between constituencies in both the number and proportion of ballot papers rejected. In Buckingham, where the Speaker stood for re-election with opposition only from UKIP and the Greens, more than 1,250 ballots were disqualified (2.34% of the total at the count); more than 1% were rejected in three other constituencies – Foyle, Leicester East, and Luton South. At the other end of the scale, in 16 constituencies -14 of them in Scotland- fewer than one in a thousand (0.01%) of votes cast were disallowed. It is likely both that returning officers differ in their judgements about the admissibility of ballots, and that electors in some constituencies may be more prone to making errors than those in others. There is no evidence that constituencies with coincident local elections had a higher rate of rejected ballots at the general election, but analysis of local election returns does suggest that a greater proportion of local than general votes were rejected in such cases.

Postal voting – uptake and turnout

The proportion of electors with postal votes nearly quadrupled from 4% to 15.3% between 2001 and 2010. This year it increased again to 16.4% –see Table 8. Some 7.6 million postal votes were issued compared with just under 7 million at the general election five years ago. The jump was especially sharp in Scotland, which had tended to lag behind England and Wales, where the proportion rose by more than four percentage points to 17.6%. Postal voting remains much less common in Northern Ireland (1.4%) where different rules are in force.

Seven of the nine English regions saw further increases in postal electors, although there is evidence of a plateau having been reached in the four regions which had all-postal ballots at the 2004 European Parliament elections. Indeed postal voting actually fell back in the North East –the region where it remains most prevalent.

Table 8: Postal voting in 2015

2015	Postal ballots issued	%electors with postal ballot	Change2010-15
UK	7,592,735	16.4	+1.1
GB	7,575,632	16.8	+1.1
England	6,451,395	16.7	+0.8
N. Ireland	17,103	1.4	-
Scotland	719,955	17.6	+4.4
Wales	404,282	17.7	+1.3

English regions	%electors with postal ballot	Change 2010-15
East Midlands*	16.8	+0.6
Eastern	15.4	+0.9
London	14.8	+1.0
North East*	26.0	-0.7
North West*	18.1	+0.4
South East	16.0	+1.4
South West	17.1	+1.4
West Midlands	13.4	+0.6
Yorkshire & The Humber*	18.0	-

*All-postal voting at the 2004 European parliament elections.

Nonetheless the constituencies at the top of the postal vote league table continue to reflect the importance of prior all-postal vote experience in stimulating postal vote take up – see Table 9. Eight of the ten with the largest fraction of electors entitled to vote by post are in the North East, and all those in the top 20 have had some prior experience of elections where voting by post was the only method available.

Those at the bottom confirm that local authorities as well as political parties play a part in encouraging (or not) postal voting. All three constituencies in Hull are once again in this list despite the city’s previous all-postal voting history; they are joined by half a dozen constituencies in Birmingham which still appears to be experiencing a hangover from a 2005 judgement by the Election Commissioner concerning fraudulent postal voting in some wards. However the range covered by those 20 constituencies with the lowest proportion of postal voters has risen from 5.9%-8.7% in 2010 to 7.4%-9.7% in 2015, reflecting the overall modest upward trend.

Unsurprisingly given our previous observation, constituencies in Scotland dominate the list of those which have seen the biggest increase in the uptake of postal voting during the past five years. Of 19 seats where the proportion of those issued with a postal vote has risen by five percentage points or more, 13 are in Scotland. Over 150 constituencies have a smaller proportion of

postal electors than in 2010, but in only seven cases has there been a fall of over five percentage points.

Table 9: The extent of postal vote take-up in individual constituencies 2015

<i>Top and bottom 20 postal vote take-up 2015 – % of electorate (G.B. only)</i>			
<i>Top</i>		<i>Bottom</i>	
Houghton & Sunderland South*	43.3	Epping Forest	9.7
Sunderland Central*	41.1	Stoke On Trent Central	9.6
Newcastle Upon Tyne North*	41.0	York Central*	9.6
Washington & Sunderland West*	40.4	Edmonton	9.6
Newcastle Upon Tyne Central*	36.1	Hull West & Hessle*	9.4
Blaydon*	35.8	West Bromwich East	9.2
Stevenage*	33.9	Hull East*	9.1
Jarrow*	33.1	Oxford East	8.8
South Shields*	33.1	Birmingham Yardley	8.8
Altrincham & Sale West*	30.8	Weaver Vale*	8.8
Gateshead*	30.7	Wolverhampton South East	8.7
Don Valley*	30.4	Birmingham Selly Oak	8.3
Newcastle Upon Tyne East*	30.1	Hull North*	8.3
Rushcliffe*	29.6	Birmingham Hodge Hill	8.2
Blackpool North & Cleveleys*	29.5	Birmingham Erdington	8.1
Telford*	29.2	Bury St. Edmunds	8.1
Blyth Valley*	29.1	Sherwood*	8.0
The Wrekin*	29.1	Birmingham Ladywood	7.6
Chorley*	28.6	Halton*	7.4
Doncaster Central*	27.5	Birmingham Perry Barr	7.4

*All-postal vote at one or more elections 2002-4 inclusive.

<i>Top 20 percentage point increase in % of electorate with postal votes 2010-15 (G.B. only)</i>			
		Dumfriesshire, Clydesdale &	
Gravesham	9.4	Tweeddale	5.5
Orkney & Shetland	8.6	Lewisham West & Penge	5.3
Na H-Eileanan An Lar (Western Isles)	7.9	Glasgow Central	5.2
Caithness, Sutherland & Easter Ross	6.9	Banff & Buchan	5.1
Inverness, Nairn, Badenoch &			
Strathspey	6.3	Ochil & South Perthshire	5.1
Ross, Skye & Lochaber	6.2	Ceredigion	5.1
Perth & North Perthshire	6.2	Aberdeenshire West & Kincardine	5.1
Glasgow South West	5.8	Edinburgh West	5.1
Crewe & Nantwich*	5.7	Swindon South	5.0
Cambridgeshire North West	5.6	Glasgow East	5.0

*All-postal vote at one or more elections 2002-4 inclusive.

Once again there was remarkable uniformity across Great Britain in the turnout of postal voters with over 85% returning their ballots in each nation – see Table 10. This marked an increase of about two percentage points compared with 2010. In all, some 6.5 million covering envelopes were returned. Compared with 2010 there was a small overall decrease from 3.8% to 3.3% in the proportion of postal ballots rejected before being forwarded to the count. A total of more than 200,000 individual ballots were rejected at the postal vote verification stage.

Although postal voters in Northern Ireland again seemed particularly prone to fall foul of the requirements for having a postal vote forwarded to the count, the rate of rejection was half that in 2010 suggesting greater familiarity with the rather different regulations in place there. The vast majority of voters in every part of the UK correctly filed their returns.

Table 10: Invalid postal vote returns 2015

2015	% Postal ballots returned	Invalid returns	Invalid as % of returned	Change 2010-15
UK	85.8	214,155	3.3	-0.5
GB	85.8	213,299	3.3	-0.5
England	85.7	184,177	3.3	-0.5
N. Ireland	86.0	856	5.8	-5.1
Scotland	86.6	18,179	2.9	-0.7
Wales	86.1	10,493	3.1	-1.1

In order to obtain more information on the reasons for postal vote rejection than the statutory forms allow and to try to overcome inconsistencies in the recording of answers, each returning officer was asked to compile and submit additional data on the outcomes of their verification process. Table 11 makes clear that in about half the cases rejection was because a signature or date of birth (or both) were mismatched; in another quarter because the elector omitted to enclose either the ballot paper or the postal vote statement (or both); and in about a fifth of cases because a signature or date of birth (or both) were missing. These figures are in line with data from recent European Parliament and local elections.

Table 11: Reasons for rejection of postal votes at verification by % of total rejected at 2015 general election

	England	Scotland	Wales	GB
PV statement rejected (No signature)	5	6	8	6
PV statement rejected (No DoB)	4	3	7	4
PV statement rejected (Both)	11	10	4	10
Proportion rejected (incomplete information)	20	20	19	20
PV statement mismatched signature	26	21	22	25
PV statement mismatched DoB	20	17	28	20
PV statement mismatched both	10	14	6	9
Proportion rejected (mismatching)	56	42	58	55
Prop. rejected (ballot paper missing)	10	14	6	10
Prop. rejected (statement missing)	14	24	16	15

The increase in the take up of postal votes continues to be reflected in the proportion of total votes cast in that way. Across the United Kingdom over 20% of all the votes counted were postal ballots –see Table 12. In the North East postal votes comprised more than a third of the total (34.9%). In Newcastle upon Tyne North and in all three constituencies in Sunderland, a

majority of all votes were cast by post. Postal votes accounted for 21.0% of votes counted in the mean constituency in Great Britain, with a standard deviation of 6.25 around the mean.

Table 12: Postal votes as % of votes at count 2015

	<i>postal votes as % of votes at count</i>	<i>Change 2010-15</i>
UK	20.5	+1.7
GB	20.9	+1.7
England	20.8	+1.4
Northern Ireland	1.9	+0.3
Scotland	20.8	+4.1
Wales	22.4	+2.2
English regions		
East Midlands*	21.0	+1.1
Eastern	18.9	+1.5
London	18.1	+2.2
North East*	34.8	-
North West*	22.7	+0.7
South East	19.5	+1.8
South West	20.9	+2.0
West Midlands	17.4	+1.5
Yorkshire & The Humber*	23.5	+0.7

*2004 all-postal pilot regions

Turnout among postal electors was again significantly higher than that among in-person voters –see Table 13. Indeed outside Scotland there was very little difference in turnout at polling stations compared with 2010. The overall rise in turnout can almost wholly be attributed to the generally greater levels of engagement and participation in Scotland together with the further increase in electors with a postal vote. In England, Wales and Northern Ireland, well below two in three of those required physically to attend a polling station did so.

Table 13: Turnout among postal and in-person electors 2015

	<i>'Ballot papers returned'</i> <i>(postal electors)</i>		<i>'Ballot box turnout'</i> <i>(in-person electors)</i>	
	<i>2015</i>	<i>Change 2010-15</i>	<i>2015</i>	<i>Change 2010-15</i>
UK	85.8	+2.6	63.2	+0.6
GB	85.8	+2.6	63.4	+0.6
England	85.7	+2.5	62.9	-0.1
Northern Ireland	86.0	+7.9	58.1	+0.3
Scotland	86.6	+3.0	68.3	+6.9
Wales	86.1	+3.0	62.0	0.0

Proxy voting

It was expected that easier access to postal voting would lead to a decrease in the number of electors wishing or having the need to appoint proxies. This was indeed the case in 2005 when fewer than 100,000 proxy votes were issued compared with nearly 250,000 in 2001. In 2010, however, proxy voting grew to over 140,000 and there was a further numerical increase this year in both Scotland and Northern Ireland –see Table 14. On average about a third of one per cent of electors now rely on a proxy to cast their vote.

More than 500 proxy votes were issued in 25 constituencies (22 in 2010). The table was topped by the two Northern Ireland seats of Fermanagh and South Tyrone (1454 such votes), and Newry and Armagh (870); in Great Britain, Somerton and Frome reported 839 proxy voters.

A relaxation of the rules in Great Britain regarding eligibility for an emergency proxy vote under the Electoral Registration and Administration Act 2013 saw a ten-fold increase in such votes from a mere 835 in 2010 to more than 8,800 this time. The Canterbury and Devizes constituencies each reported issuing more than 100 emergency proxy votes.

Table 14: Proxy voting 2015*

	<i>Proxy votes cast 2015</i>	<i>as % of electorate</i>	<i>Change 2010-15</i>
UK	149,444	0.32	-
GB	144,012	0.32	-
England	120,886	0.31	-0.01
N. Ireland	5,432	0.44	0.26
Scotland	17,360	0.42	0.13
Wales	5,766	0.25	-0.02

*Data missing for 2 Scottish constituencies

Waivers

A concession granted under the terms of the Electoral Administration Act 2006 was that postal electors in Great Britain 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. This is the first time we have reported on this facility in the context of a general election, but at the UK-wide European Parliament elections in 2014 just less than three fifths of one percent of electors with a postal vote were granted a waiver.

In 2015 more than 45,000 people were granted such a waiver – 0.6% of the postal electorate (Table 15). In 15 constituencies – including all seven seats in Glasgow –waivers were granted to more than 2% of such electors. In England and Wales the largest proportion of waivers was at Bognor Regis and Littlehampton (3.1%). On the other hand, in 12 constituencies for which we have information, fewer than 10 individuals were granted waivers.

Table 15: Postal electors granted ‘waivers’ in 2015*

	<i>As proportion of postal electors</i>	<i>Average per constituency</i>
Great Britain	0.60	98
England	0.52	64
Wales	0.79	82
Scotland	1.17	148

*Data missing for 1 Welsh and 2 Scottish constituencies

Miscellaneous

The issue of postal ballot packs

The increase in the take-up of postal votes has heightened interest in when they are issued and returned in as much as this has an impact on the campaign timetable for each party and candidate.

About 620 constituencies provided information on their postal vote timetable. In the case of ballot papers sent to electors abroad, some 30% were despatched 3 weeks or more before polling (16th April) with a total of more than 9 in 10 going out by two weeks before (23rd April). The earliest despatch was on 9th April (constituencies in the Reading and Solihull council areas) and 10th April (seats the responsibility of Wakefield and East Devon councils); the latest reported was 28th April. The most popular single day for despatch was 17th April.

Domestic ballot papers were posted from 13th April onwards –for 14 constituencies by 16th April; for a further 475 by 23rd April; and for 90 more on April 24th alone. The latest reported was 28th April, although several constituencies said that their despatch was staggered over a few days – typically from 21st to 27th April. The most popular single day for despatch was 20th April.

Previous evidence suggests that most postal voters return their ballots fairly shortly after receipt. It is possible, therefore, that 10% or more of all votes had been cast by post a full week before the election, rendering the parties’ final appeals and other events redundant for those electors.

Polling stations

Approximately 41,000 polling stations were used. Not all constituencies provided this figure and some reported the number for the whole local authority area as the response for each constituency within it.

Some 30 constituencies reported people being in the queue at a polling station at 10 p.m.² In only 18 cases was this more than 10 individuals. Bristol

² The UK Parliament implemented an Electoral Commission recommendation and amended the law in 2013 to allow any voter who is in a queue waiting to vote at their polling station at 10pm to be issued with a ballot paper.

West, Milton Keynes North, Milton Keynes South, and Wantage reported 150 or more queuing. All 3 constituencies in Leicester recorded 120 or more queuing. Only 5 constituencies noted people arriving after 10 p.m. and waiting to vote; the largest individual numbers being 10 (Oxford West and Abingdon) and 7 (Wantage).

These data are likely to vary considerably in accuracy. Many constituencies did not record them at all; in others, reliance will have been placed on accurate reporting by each polling station presiding officer. Indicatively, however, they suggest that the new regulations about being in the queue by 10 p.m. ‘solve’ the problem encountered in 2010 when there were reports of people being turned away despite having arrived to try to vote before the close of poll.

Verification and counting of ballot papers

Approximately 620 constituencies provided data on the timing of their verification and counting of ballot papers. All but four (all in Northumberland) reported beginning verification within four hours of the close of poll, but thereafter there are marked differences in rates of progress –see Table 16. Some 350 had completed verification by 2 a.m.; in more than 50 cases it did not finish until after 5 a.m.

Table 16: Times of verification and counting of ballot papers in 2015

	<i>Verification start</i>	<i>Verification finish</i>	<i>Count start</i>	<i>Count finish*</i>
by 10.30 pm	550	-	-	-
by 11 pm	-	-	31	3
by midnight	55	30	26	-
by 1 am	-	-	109	7
by 2 am	3	324	325	20
by 3 am	-	108	-	74
by 4 am	-	86	91	137
by 5 am	-	-	-	135
by 6 am	-	41	-	89
by 7 am	-	-	20	83
by 8 am	-	-	-	36
After 8 am	4	11	9	34

* These times are based on reports from electoral administrators and may differ from declaration times as logged by the media.

Similarly, a clear majority of constituencies began the count proper before 2 a.m., but only 30 had declared by this time. The three Sunderland constituencies alone managed to declare their results before midnight on election day itself. Most results came in between 3 and 6 a.m., with 34 being delayed until after 8 a.m. on May 8th –of these 9 were still outstanding at midday.

Recounts

Ten constituencies reported holding recounts. Three were undertaken in Derby North (Conservative majority 41 votes), and two each in Croydon Central, Gower, and Ynys Mon. Only Newark reported a delay to the count other than pausing to allow other results to be announced.

Combined elections

There were coincident local elections in most areas of England with six local authorities (Bedford, Copeland, Leicester, Mansfield, Middlesbrough, and Torbay) holding mayoral elections in addition to council contests.

In the cases of the mayoral elections, between 2.2% and 4.0% of ballots were rejected at the count (3.4% average) –about three-quarters for uncertainty. This is much higher than at the general election. Rejected postal votes amounted to between 4 and 8% of the total returned (6.4% average). This is also much higher than the general election average for England.

It is clear, as we have noted in past years, that a combined election using a different electoral system does pose problems for a minority of electors.

Voters at first past the post local elections were also more likely to have their ballots rejected at the count. This especially seemed to apply in cases where councils have all out elections every four years rather than annually for a third of the council. Among the unitary authorities, for example, 0.6 per cent of local ballots were rejected at the count in those places with annual elections and single member vacancies; more than 1 per cent where whole council elections took place with multiple vacancies often being filled in each ward. This issue is dealt with at greater length in a report on the 2015 local elections.