Postal voting

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Summary

All voters can apply to cast their vote by post. Turnout has been shown to be higher amongst postal voters than those who vote at polling stations, but postal voting has also been associated with the potential for electoral fraud. Steps have been taken to address this risk: postal voters have been required to provide personal identifiers since 2007.

There has been concern that postal vote packs have not reached overseas voters in time for them to return their papers before the close of the poll. The *Electoral Registration and Administration Act 2013* extended the timetable for Parliamentary elections from 17 to 25 working days (in line with local government elections). Postal votes can now be sent out earlier (on day 6: 19 days before an election).

The 2015 General Election was the first where electoral registers (partially) compiled under the new Individual Electoral Registration (IER) system were used, and the first since the extension of the election timetable. While electoral administrators reported some issues, such as difficulties with getting postal ballot papers printed in time to send them to overseas voters, the Electoral Commission reported that turnout among postal voters was high and postal voters were satisfied with the postal voting arrangements. There were a number of allegations of electoral fraud that are currently under investigation.

Postal voting was first introduced for people serving in the armed forces shortly after World War I. It was extended to certain categories of civilians in 1948. Postal voting was made available under certain conditions in 1985, and on demand in 2000. Measures to verify the identity of postal voters were introduced in 2007. The time available to post postal ballot packs for Parliamentary elections, and receive them back, was fixed in 2011 and extended in 2013. A requirement for Electoral Registration Officers (EROs) to notify postal voters when their vote has been rejected was introduced in 2013.

Several local authorities piloted all-postal voting for local and European elections between 2000 and 2004. The 2004 regional referendum on whether there should be a North East regional Assembly was also an all-postal voting poll. These pilots have shown that postal voting can increase turnout, although there were concerns about postal voting increasing the risk of electoral fraud.

The proportion of voters using postal votes has increased over the last three general elections. Different parts of the UK have different rates of postal voting. The proportion of postal voters also differs among English regions, and among constituencies. Turnout among postal voters has been higher than among persons voting at polling stations.

1. Postal voting

Voters may apply to vote by post by completing an application form and sending it to their local Electoral Registration Officer (ERO). They do not need to give a reason to apply. They must submit personal identifiers set out in legislation: their signature and date of birth. These identifiers can be checked against the postal voting statement when the postal ballot paper is returned; if the identifiers do not match, the vote is rejected.

Since the introduction of Individual Electoral Registration (IER), only voters registered under this system can apply for postal votes. Individual registration involves the identification of voters using their national insurance number or official data (for more information, see Briefing Paper 6764, *Individual Electoral Registration*).

Overseas voters can apply for postal votes (they can also apply to vote by proxy). At previous elections, some voters abroad received their postal vote packs too late to return them in time for the poll. This has raised particular concern where these voters were serving in the armed forces (for more information, see briefing paper 4276, *Armed forces voting*). In 2013, the timetable for Parliamentary elections was extended from 17 working days to 25 working days (in line with local government elections): this meant that postal ballots could be sent out earlier (on day 6: 19 days before the election) at the 2015 General Election.

The Government has announced a 'Votes for Life' Bill that would remove the rule that British citizens living overseas for more than 15 years lose their entitlement to vote in UK Parliamentary elections. This could result in an increase in the number of registered overseas voters, and the number of postal vote applications. The Government also said that it would 'make it easier for overseas electors to cast their votes in time to be counted'.[1]

Advocates of postal voting argue that pilots with all-postal voting (described in Section 3 below) have shown that postal votes can increase turnout.[2]

1.1 Electoral fraud

Postal voting has been associated with the risk of electoral fraud. In the past, it was possible to enter 'ghost' voters onto the electoral register. Postal votes could be applied for and completed in the name of these fictitious voters. An election court recently ruled that postal vote fraud had been committed in the election of Lutfur Rahman as mayor of Tower Hamlets (for more information, see Briefing paper 6255, *Electoral offences since 2010*).

The requirement to provide two personal identifiers (date of birth and signature) for postal voting, introduced in 2007, was meant to reduce the risk of electoral fraud. Since the introduction of IER, only persons that can be identified through their national insurance number or

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[1]   GOV.UK, The Queen's Speech 2015 (May 2015)
[2]   Jess Garland, 'Defending the postal vote', *Electoral Reform Society*, 12 March 2014

official data can be entered onto the electoral register and apply for postal votes. These measures do not reduce the risk of people putting pressure on vulnerable voters to sway their vote, or filling in their ballot papers for them.[3]

The Electoral Commission considered postal voting in its 2014 report on electoral fraud.[4] The Commission said it would monitor the implementation of IER and would consider whether the national insurance numbers used to verify a voter's identity when they register could also be used to verify their identity in the absent voting process. The Commission further said:

> We do not recommend restricting the availability of postal voting in Great Britain. The impact on the overwhelming majority of electors who find postal voting a convenient and secure method of voting would not be proportionate to the potential integrity benefits.
>
> However, there is broad support for maintaining the current, more limited, availability of absent voting in Northern Ireland; for that reason we do not recommend any changes to the framework there.[5]

The Electoral Commission also commented on the risk that vulnerable voters could be pressured into applying for postal votes they do not want, have their postal ballot packs sent to another address (thereby effectively losing their vote), handing over their ballot paper blank or completing it in favour of a candidate who is not their own preference. The Commission recommends that campaigners should not be involved in assisting others to request and complete postal votes, and that EROs and Returning Officers should offer to collect postal ballot packs from people unable to send them in the post. The report also recommends strengthening the Commission's Code of Conduct for Campaigners, which aims to further good practice among party activists.

1.2 Postal voting timetable

The timetable below shows relevant deadlines for the 2015 General Election. These deadlines are the same for all general elections, but the deadline for postal voters to submit evidence to become IER registered will no longer be used after this election (because all voters will already be IER registered at the next general election). Slightly different deadlines apply to local elections and referendums.

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[3]   'Ghost voters and the perils of postal ballots', *BBC News*, 11 March 2014
[4]   Electoral Commission, Electoral fraud in the UK, January 2014
[5]   Ibid, para 5.50-51

2015 General Election timetable

Day 0	Proclamation summoning new Parliament, and issue of writ
Day 1	Receipt of writ
Day 3 (4pm)	Last day for publication of notice of election
Day 6	Last day for delivery of nomination papers/withdrawals of candidature/appointment of election agents (4pm) Statements of persons nominated published at close of time for making objections to nomination papers (5pm on Day 6) or as soon afterwards as any objections are disposed of, but not later than 4pm on Day 7 Dispatch of postal votes (as soon as practicable after 4pm)
Day 13	Last day to apply to register to vote
Day 14 (5pm)	Last day for requests for a new postal vote or to change or cancel an existing postal vote
Day 19 (5pm)	Last day for applications to vote by proxy (except for emergency proxies)
Day 21	First day that voters can apply for a replacement for lost postal votes
Day 25 (7am - 10pm)	Polling day Last time for re-issue of spoilt or lost postal votes (5pm) Last time to alter the register due to clerical error or court appeal (9pm) Last time unconfirmed existing elector with postal vote application already submitted can bring in evidence to become IER registered (10pm)
Within three months after the poll	Deadline for sending postal vote identifier rejection notices

1.3 Postal voting at the 2015 General Election

The 2015 General Election was the first where electoral registers (partially) compiled under the new Individual Electoral Registration system were used, and the first since the extension of the election timetable that enabled postal votes to be sent out earlier.

In its report on the 2015 elections, the Electoral Commission provides some data on the General Election.[6]

Turnout

Total turnout at was 66.4%, but: (emphasis in the original)

> Consistent with previous elections, turnout among postal voters at the UK Parliamentary elections was higher than among those who voted at polling stations: **86.0% of people who were sent a postal ballot pack voted**, compared with **63.5% of those who were entitled to vote at a polling station**.

> Postal votes were issued to around 7.6 million electors and **6.2 million postal votes were included in the count**. Across England, Scotland and Wales, **the proportion of electors who chose to vote by post was 16.9%**. In comparison, 1.4% of the electorate were issued with a postal vote in Northern Ireland, where postal voting is not available on demand.[7]

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6   Electoral Commission, *The May 2015 Elections*, July 2015
7   Electoral Commission, *The May 2015 Elections*, July 2015, p3

Satisfaction

The Electoral Commission further noted that: (emphasis in the original)

> **Nearly all (97%) of those respondents who voted by post, reported that they were satisfied with voting in this way.**
> More than nine in ten (92%) respondents who voted by post said it was easy to complete and return the postal ballot, with 5% saying it was difficult. A similar proportion of respondents (91%) found the written instructions on how to vote and return the ballot useful, although 2% said they were not useful.[8]

Rejection of postal votes

If the personal identifiers (date of birth plus signature) provided on a postal ballot statement do not match those provided on the application for a postal vote, the vote is rejected. Electoral Commission data shows that 4.6% of returned postal ballot papers were rejected (up from 3.8% at the 2010 General Election). Most of these rejections were due to identifiers not matching, or missing identifiers. Voters must be notified about the rejection of their postal vote within three months of the date of the poll.[9]

Issues

The Association for Electoral Administrators (AEA) identified several issues around postal voting in their report on the 2015 General Election.[10] These included:

- In some cases, printing the ballot papers took longer than expected. This meant that postal votes were sent out late
- Royal Mail lost some postal votes and delivered others late
- Some political parties supplied voters with postal vote application forms, and encouraged them to return the forms to the parties rather than to the Electoral Registration Officer directly. The AEA is concerned about parties handling this information
- The Cabinet Office guidance on the latest dates to send out postal ballot packs to different parts of the world was issued too late
- The combination of polls complicated the printing of postal ballot packs. This is particularly the case when polls use different franchises (e.g. European Union citizens can vote in local elections but not in Parliamentary elections)

The AEA also noted certain issues related specifically to the introduction of IER:

- People in care homes sometimes do not have the evidence necessary to register individually (a national insurance number or documentation such as a driver's licence). If they cannot register individually, they cannot apply for a postal vote
- A large number of duplicate online registrations were received and had to be processed. This put pressure on time available for other tasks in preparation for the elections, including postal vote preparations

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8   Electoral Commission, *The May 2015 Elections*, July 2015, p4
9   Ibid, para 2.16-2.22
10   Association for Electoral Administrators, *Elections and Individual Electoral Registration – the challenge of 2015,* July 2015

- When registering online, voters can tick a box to request a form to apply for a postal vote. However, some voters thought that by ticking this box they had already requested a postal vote and failed to return the form
- People who had requested postal votes but not registered individually could provide the evidence to do so until 10pm on polling day. The complex process of verifying this evidence took electoral administrators' time away from other election tasks. Because postal ballot packs could only be sent out after this evidence had been processed, some people received their postal votes late[11]
- Under IER, a higher number of overseas electors registered to vote. However, some of them did not apply for a postal or proxy vote (sometimes because they thought they had already done so by registering online). Some registered too late to receive and return their postal votes in time. A lot of staff time was required to check whether those registered had left the country not more than 15 years ago
- Voters who registered online on the latest possible day were only added to the register after the five day objection period, and their postal votes could only be sent out after this period (6 days before the poll)

The Electoral Commission additionally noted that some postal ballot packs sent out to overseas voters included the prepaid postage envelopes used within the UK. Some voters mistakenly assumed that these envelopes could be used to return their pack to the UK. The Commission recommended that at the next poll, appropriate postage should be provided for overseas voters to return their postal votes.[12]

Postal vote fraud

Lord Lexden asked a Parliamentary Question about the extent of postal vote fraud at the 2015 General Election. Baroness Chisholm of Owlpen responded on 4 June 2015 that the Government were not aware of any allegations of postal vote fraud; that the Electoral Commission would produce a report on the general election including any concerns about postal vote fraud; and that a range of measures is in place to combat electoral fraud in the UK.[13]

The report later published by the Electoral Commission stated:

> 2.44 Between 1 January and 12 June 2015, a total of 391 cases of alleged electoral fraud were recorded by police forces across England, Scotland and Wales. This figure represents a snapshot of the number of cases reported during the first half of 2015, including the May 2015 polls, but further changes to the total number of cases should be expected during the rest of the year. Trends from previous years' data suggest that, following police investigations, a significant proportion of cases of alleged electoral fraud are found to have involved no offence or to have insufficient evidence that a crime had actually taken place. We

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[11] This will not be a problem at future elections: people who have not been matched with official data or registered individually will no longer be on the register after the transition to IER ends in December 2015.

[12] Electoral Commission, *The May 2015 Elections*, July 2015, para 3.51-3.59

[13] HL Deb 4 June 2015 c516

> expect to publish full data for cases of alleged electoral fraud reported during 2015, including outcomes where available, by March 2016. […]
>
> [Out of this number] There were 58 allegations (15% of all allegations) of voting offences – including allegations of impersonation at a polling station or when voting by post or proxy, as well as allegations of bribery, treating or tampering with ballot papers.[14]

A further estimate of the number of allegations of electoral fraud in the postal voting process during the May 2015 elections was included in Gary Streeter's (on behalf of the Speaker's Committee on the Electoral Commission) response to a Parliamentary Question on 6 November 2015:

> At the May 2015 UK Parliamentary general election postal votes were issued to around 7.6 million electors in Great Britain, representing nearly 17% of the total electorate. At present, the Commission is aware of 22 cases of alleged electoral fraud at the May 2015 polls involving postal votes. The Commission continues to monitor data about cases of alleged postal voting fraud, and will keep its assessment of the impact of restricting the availability of postal voting under review in light of any new evidence which becomes available.[15]

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14   Electoral Commission, *The May 2015 Elections*, July 2015, para 2.43-2.48
15   PQ 14593 [on absent voting], 6 November 2015

2. Postal voting: history and legislation

Voting at elections originally took place by way of a public show of hands or by a public ballot. The right to vote by secret ballot was introduced by the *Parliamentary and Municipal Elections Act 1872* (the *Ballot Act*). After this, voting took place at polling stations where voters marked their votes in secret and placed their ballot papers in a closed box.

Absent voting was first introduced in the immediate post-war period by the *Representation of the People Act 1918* for servicemen and others prevented 'by reason of the nature of their occupation…from voting at a poll'. Armed forces still serving overseas at the end of World War I were allowed to vote by post, and permanent arrangements were made for proxy voting by servicemen. The *Representation of the People Act 1945* again made temporary provision for postal voting by service voters. Postal voting was not extended to civilians until 1948 when the *Representation of the People Act 1948* granted postal voting facilities to both service personnel and to certain groups of civilians including those who were physically incapacitated, those unable to vote without making a journey by sea or air or because of the nature of their occupation, and those who were no longer residing at their qualifying address. All had to provide an address in the UK to which ballot papers could be sent. Service personnel could, alternatively, vote by proxy if they were likely to be at sea or abroad on polling day.

2.1 Home Affairs Select Committee report

In 1983, in its review of electoral law, the Home Affairs Select Committee criticised the categories of absent voters who were allowed to vote by post. The Committee made clear that they would not wish absent voting facilities to be made available to everybody on demand but recommended that 'the Home Office should review the existing criteria for eligibility for absent voting facilities, and in particular we suggest that it would be permissible to apply for a postal vote due to absence "by reason of employment", without the necessity to distinguish between one type of employment or another.'[16] The Committee also called for voters absent on holiday to have the right to apply for a postal vote. The Government responded to the Committee's report in January 1984 and expressed some concern at the increased opportunities for electoral abuse offered by absent voting (especially postal voting) and in particular by the standing arrangements made for those allowed an absent vote for an indefinite period.[17] However, the Government's response was summed up as follows:

> First, apart from service voters and electors resident abroad, the right to apply for an absent vote for an indefinite period should in

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[16] *Representation of the People Acts*, Report of the Home Affairs Select Committee, HC 32 1982-83, para 54
[17] Cmnd 9140

general be confined to those who are unable or likely to be unable to vote in person on polling day (or to vote unaided) through blindness or other physical incapacity. (The special arrangements for those unable to reach the polling station from their qualifying address without a sea or air journey would continue unchanged).

Second, the right to apply for an absent vote at a particular Parliamentary, European Parliament or local election in Great Britain should be extended to all those who for whatever reason are unable or likely to be unable to vote in person on polling day. This would benefit holiday makers, people who are away in the course of employment and all other electors who although prevented from voting in person on polling day may not apply under existing provisions.[18]

The *Representation of the People Act 1985* subsequently made provision for these extensions to the right to apply for an absent vote. The proposals did not apply to Northern Ireland where there was already widespread concern, shared by the Government, at the extent and nature of electoral abuse, including the abuse of postal voting. Further amendments were made to the rules governing absent voting in the *Representation of the People Act 1989*.

2.2 Howarth report

By 1999 the system of postal and proxy voting for those unable to vote at polling stations was seen as cumbersome and complex. A Working Party on Electoral Procedures chaired by George Howarth, Minister of State at the Home Office, published its report in October 1999. The working party recommended that

- absent voting should be allowed on demand; and
- the application and voting procedures for absent voting should be simplified.

The *Representation of the People Act 2000* implemented the Howarth report's recommendations. The *Representation of the People (England & Wales) Regulations 2001* introduced the changes to the absent voting arrangements from 16 February 2001.[19] The main change was to allow postal voting on demand. It is now no longer necessary to state a reason for applying for an absent vote, or to obtain attestation of illness etc. from a medical practitioner or employer. Applications may be requested and allowed for an indefinite period, a definite period, or a particular election. The 2000 Act also made provision for postal votes to be sent abroad, enabling overseas and Armed Services voters serving abroad to choose whether to vote by post or by proxy (for more information, see Briefing paper 5923, *Overseas Voters* and Briefing paper 4276, *Armed forces voting*).

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18   Cmnd 9140, paras 3.11-12
19   There are similar regulations for Scotland and Northern Ireland. However the postal voting changes did not take place in Northern Ireland due to continuing concerns about electoral abuse. For more information about elections in Northern Ireland see Library Research Paper 05/15, *The Electoral Registration (Northern Ireland) Bill [HL]*

2.3 Anti-fraud

The *Electoral Administration Act 2006* introduced new anti-fraud measures to prevent electoral abuse. There had been considerable controversy surrounding postal voting at the 2005 General Election and cases of electoral fraud in Birmingham and Blackburn; the new legislation aimed to improve the overall administration of elections and enhance their security. The Act introduced a new offence of falsely applying for a postal vote and section 14 made provision for the collection of personal identifiers from electors intending to vote by post or proxy.

The *Representation of the People (England & Wales) (Amendment) (No 2)* Regulations 2006, made under the 2006 Act, required Returning Officers to check at least 20% of the postal ballot papers they receive to ensure that the personal identifiers on the paper correspond to those provided upon application for a postal vote.

2.4 Parliamentary elections timetable & notice of rejection of postal vote

The *Fixed-terms Parliaments Act 2011* provided that Parliament would be automatically dissolved 17 working days before the date of the poll. This date was fixed as the first Thursday of May every five years, starting with 7 May 2015 (unless an early election is called under the provisions of the Act). The timetable for a general election was extended to 25 working days by the Electoral Registration and Administration Act 2013. This enabled postal vote packs to be sent out earlier: postal ballot papers can be printed 19 days before the poll, and sent out as soon as possible after. The 2013 Act provided a legislative framework for the introduction of IER; the detailed arrangements would be in regulations made under the powers given to the Secretary of State.

The extension of the election timetable addressed concerns that postal vote packs had not reached voters abroad in time for them to return the papers before the poll at previous elections. At the 2010 General Election, the closure of UK airspace due to volcanic ash had further complicated the postal voting process. The Electoral Commission accepted applications for rolling registration and absent votes by fax or scanned into an email, and allowed a change to proxy voting until 5pm on 20 April 2010.[20]

Regulation 28 of the *Representation of the People (England and Wales) (Description of Electoral Registers and Amendment) Regulations 2013 (SI 2013/3198)*, made under the 2013 Act, provided that EROs must notify those whose postal vote has been rejected, and explain why, within three months of the date of the poll.

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[20] 'Receiving registration and absent vote applications and other parts of the electoral process which may be affected by the closure of UK airspace', The Electoral Commission, EC15/2010

3. All-postal voting pilots and evaluation

The *Representation of the People Act 2000* which made provision for postal voting on demand also allowed local authorities to apply for permission to pilot a range of new electoral arrangements for local elections.

Several electoral pilot schemes were held between 2000 and 2007, some of which included all-postal voting polls. In 2007, the Electoral Commission recommended against holding further pilots until the government set out a strategy for modernising the electoral system and made it more secure.[21]

The Government responded by stating it would improve elements of the electoral system, and that it considered that future pilots would continue to be necessary especially in the light of the commitment in the *Governance of Britain* Green Paper to investigate the modernisation of voting methods, in particular the benefits of remote electronic voting.[22]

3.1 All-postal voting pilots, 2000-2003

A total of 32 authorities ran 38 pilot schemes in May 2000. In a review of these pilots the Local Government Association found that all-postal voting was the only new electoral arrangement to have significant potential for increasing local election turnout.[23]

In 2002, 30 pilots were run. The Electoral Commission reported that postal voting had again improved voter turnout, although not in all pilots that used it.[24]

In 2003 there were a further 59 pilots to test alternative voting methods at local elections. The Electoral Commission published an evaluation of these pilots in July 2003. *The Shape of Elections to Come: a strategic evaluation of the 2003 electoral pilot schemes* found that all-postal schemes were effective at boosting participation rates and concluded that all-postal elections were ready to be made available at all local government elections in Great Britain (the form of local elections in Scotland is a devolved matter). Although the Commission recommended that all-postal voting should be made available at all local elections, it also sought measures that would increase the security of postal voting generally:

- There should be a new offence of intending fraudulently to apply for a postal or proxy vote, with a maximum penalty of imprisonment;

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[21]   *Key issues and conclusions, May 2007 electoral pilots schemes*, Electoral Commission, August 2007

[22]   CM 7170, para 150

[23]   *Elections – the 21st Century Model: an evaluation of May 2000 local election pilots.* Local Government Association, 2000

[24]   *Modernising Elections A Strategic Evaluation of the 2002 Pilot Schemes*, Electoral Commission, 1 August 2002

- The law on undue influence should be revised to clarify the nature of the offence;
- Specified secrecy warnings should be included in postal and proxy voting literature;
- Police should be able to arrest a person on suspicion of personation at any location, not just at a polling station, as at present;
- The court should be able to extend the period in which a prosecution must be brought by up to 12 months, where the prosecution has demonstrated all due diligence;
- A random audit process should be used after significant elections, to check for fraud;
- The Commission should develop a Code of Practice in relation to the handling of postal ballots by representatives of political parties, with the option of legislation, should self-regulation be ineffective.

The Commission also considered that an integral component of all-postal elections would be a move to individual, rather than household, registration.

The Labour Government responded to these recommendations in September 2003 and accepted 'as a basis for consultation, the broad thrust of the Commission's recommendations for all-postal voting to be rolled out generally for local elections in England and Wales.'[25] Individual electoral registration was introduced by the Labour Government with the *Political Parties and Elections Act 2009* and brought forward by the Coalition Government with the *Electoral Registration and Administration Act 2013.*

3.2 All-postal voting pilots in 2004

All-postal voting pilots were held at the combined European and local government elections on 10 June 2004 in the North East and the East Midlands regions, as well as the North West and Yorkshire & the Humber regions.

There was concern in the House of Lords about the possibilities of electoral malpractice. The Bill enabling the pilots was amended to make provision for all postal ballot papers to be accompanied by a declaration of identity which had to be signed by a witness.[26] It received Royal Assent on 1 April 2004, only ten weeks before the elections.

Electoral administrators had limited time to prepare for the all-postal pilots. There were allegations of delays in delivering postal ballot papers and of electoral fraud involving postal votes. Turnout in the four all-postal pilot regions in the European Parliamentary elections was more than double that in the previous elections in 1999. In a Written Ministerial Statement Christopher Leslie, then Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Constitutional Affairs, said that 'the all-postal

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[25]   *The Government's response to the Electoral Commission's report: The Shape of Elections to Come – a strategic evaluation of the 2003 Pilot Election Schemes*, Cm 5975
[26]   For more information on this Bill, see Library briefing paper 03-76 *European Parliamentary and Local Elections (Pilots) Bill 2002-03*

pilots have shown, on a significantly larger scale than ever before, that a system in which a postal vote is automatically given to every elector positively encourages participation.'[27]

ODPM Housing, Planning, Local Government and the Regions Committee: report on postal voting, seventh report 2003-04

The Committee's report examined the concern that all-postal voting would lead to increased incidences of fraud, in particular personation, and was published on 20 May 2004.[28] The Committee proposed measures to deal with electoral offences and urged the Government to introduce legislation to provide for individual rather than household registration (following the recommendation from the Electoral Commission in 2003) to ensure an accurate and secure register.

The Government stated in its response to the Committee's report, published in August 2004, that it was intending to consult further about individual registration.[29]

On 16 September 2004 the Committee published a follow–up to its report on postal voting.[30] After the all-postal pilots of 10 June 2004 the Committee had re-opened its inquiry and had written to each of the Regional Returning Officers and Local Returning Officers involved in the pilots and asked them for their observations. The Royal Mail and the Association of Electoral Administrators were also consulted. Despite press reports of increased fraud the Returning Officers reported little difference from the levels of allegations in the pilot all-postal ballots to the levels experienced in a traditional poll.

Electoral Commission report

On 27 August 2004 the Electoral Commission published evaluation reports on the all-postal pilots and a report on the future of postal voting, *Delivering democracy? The future of postal voting*. The Commission had found that there had been an increase in the take up of postal voting outside the pilot regions; in three, London, the West Midlands and the South West, the take up had doubled since the 2001 general election. The Commission said it was not yet able to conclude whether the increased use of postal voting had led to an increase in fraud or malpractice but there was no evidence to date which suggested any widespread abuse of postal voting either within or beyond the pilot regions. However the Commission recommended that all-postal voting should not be used in the future at UK statutory elections. The main reason for the Commission's recommendations was that all-postal voting deprived voters of any choice in voting methods.

The Government rejected this recommendation when it responded to the report on 9 December 2004:

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[27]   HC Deb 21 June 2004 c72WS

[28]   HC 400, 2003-04

[29]   *Government response to and Electoral Commission's observations on the Committee's seventh report, Session 2003-04, postal voting*. ODPM Committee first special report 2003-04, HC 973, 6 August 2005.

[30]   HC 400-IV 2003-04

> The Commission has recommended that all-postal voting should not be pursued for use at UK statutory elections. As we explain in this document, we do not believe the evidence from the evaluation supports this conclusion. In short we are not persuaded of the case for abandoning all-postal voting. Whilst there will be no all-postal voting in the forthcoming General Election, it is important to keep the option open for future local elections, especially after the implementation of some of the recommended safeguards in this report.[31]

3.3 All-postal ballot for the referendum for a North East Regional Assembly, 2004

The regional referendum on whether there should be a North East regional Assembly was held as an all-postal ballot, despite concerns about the risk of electoral fraud. The Electoral Commission recommended this approach because the referendum process was already underway, and because of a number of factors specific to this referendum, including the voters' and electoral administrators' experience of all-postal ballots in the North East; and the lack of evidence of electoral fraud in the all-postal ballots held there in June 2004.[32] The rules governing the all-postal ballot were defined in secondary legislation. Polls closed on 4 November 2004.

The Electoral Commission published an evaluation of the referendum in November 2005.[33] The report stated that turnout was 47.1%. The Chief Counting Officer liaised with the police to develop a protocol on handling potential fraud allegations in advance of the referendum. Unlike in the local elections held in June 2004, voters did not need a witness to verify their vote and the report notes that this resulted in a lower number of rejected ballot papers. This does not seem to have affected the security of the vote, as the report goes on to state:

> 3.43 The lack of any significant concern around security at the referendums is clearly very positive. Nevertheless, the risk of fraud remains a key concern for any future referendums using postal voting (either all-postal ballots or postal voting alongside polling stations). The Commission's report *Securing the vote* (2005) recommends important changes to the electoral system in order to improve the security of postal voting. These include changing from household to individual registration, the introduction of personal identifiers on the register and postal vote applications, and the creation of new offences to prevent fraudulent applications for postal votes.[34]

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[31] *The Government's response to the Electoral commission's report: Delivering Democracy? The future of postal votin*g, Cm 6436, December 2004

[32] Electoral Commission, *The 2004 North East regional assembly and local government referendums*, November 2005, para 2.6

[33] Ibid

[34] Ibid, para 3.43

4. Postal voting statistics

The total number of postal votes issued in Great Britain has risen from 5,334,821 (12.4% of all electors) in 2005, to 6,980,005 (15.7% of all electors) in 2010 and to 7,575,632 (16.8% of all electors) in 2015. These numbers do not provide information on how prevalent postal voting is in different parts of the country.

The figure below shows how many voters used postal votes in different parts of the UK. The use of postal votes has increased over the past 3 general elections in all parts of the UK (except for Northern Ireland, where it is not available on demand). The increase has been largest in Scotland.
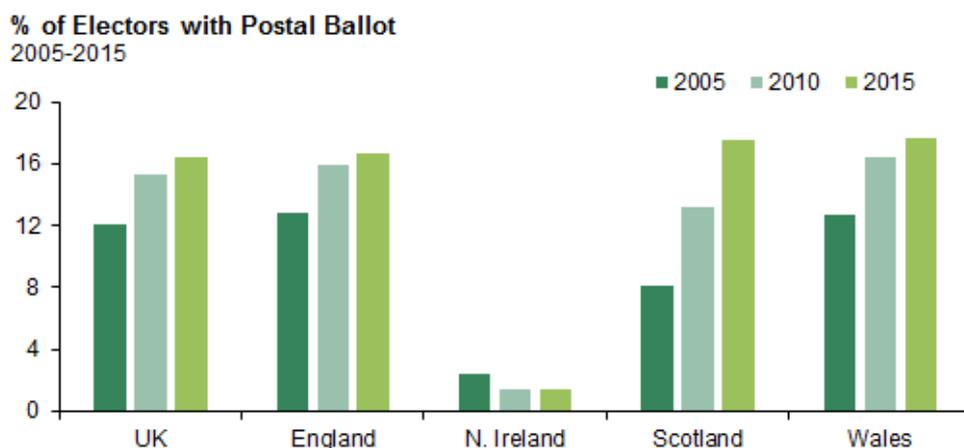
Source: Colin Rallings and Michael Thrasher, The 2005 General Election; The 2010 General Election; The 2015 General Election, published by the Electoral Commission

## 4.1 Proportion of postal voters in English regions

Data is also available for differences in the uptake of postal voting in the English regions. Academic experts Colin Rallings and Michael Thrasher have published reports with the Electoral Commission on the general elections in 2005, 2010 and 2015. In their 2010 report, they note that:

> The four regions which had had all postal ballots at the 2004 European Parliament elections continue to top the league table. In the North East, where there had also been an all-postal referendum in November 2004, more than a quarter now vote by post -an increase of greater than seven percentage points since 2005.[35]

The table below shows the differences in the proportion of postal voters in the English regions.

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[35]   Colin Rallings and Michael Thrasher, *The 2010 general election: aspects of participation and administration*, August 2010, available on the Electoral Commission website, p7

% Electors with Postal Ballots in English Regions 2005-2015
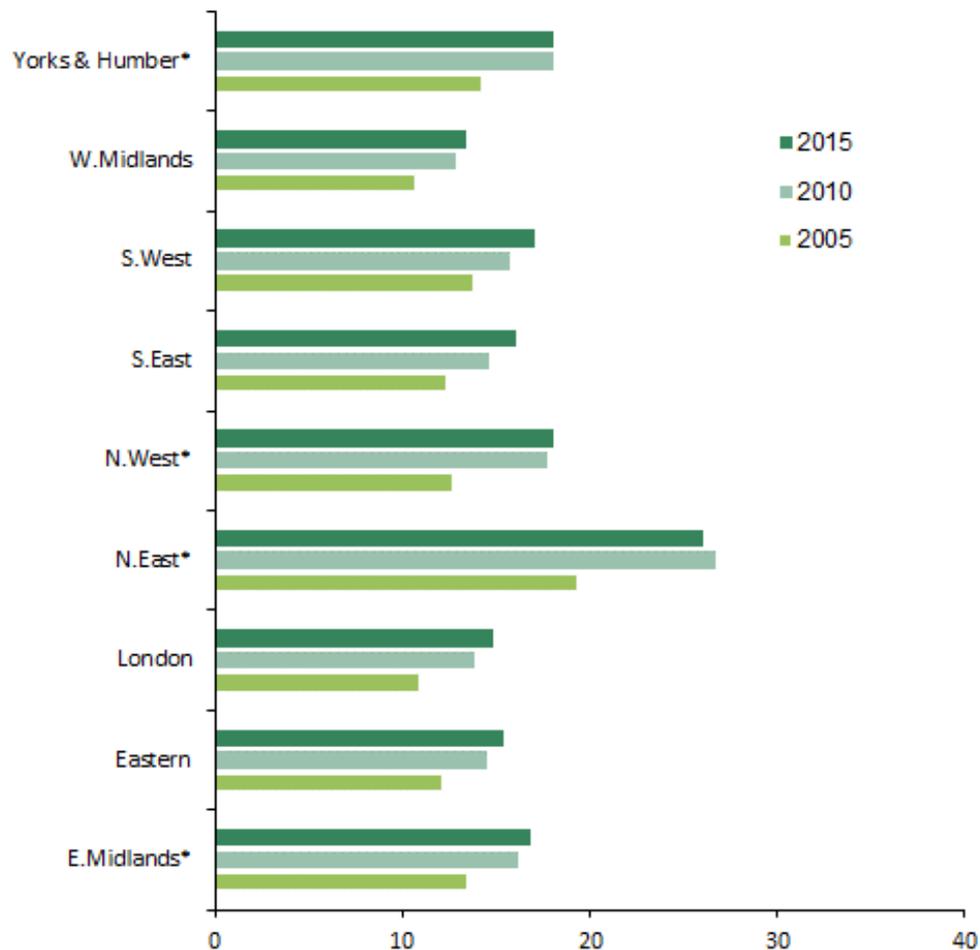
* Used All-postal voting at the 2004 European Parliament elections

Source: Colin Rallings and Michael Thrasher, The 2005 General Election; The 2010 General Election; The 2015 General Election, published by the Electoral Commission

4.2 Differences in constituencies

The tables below show the 20 constituencies with the highest rate of postal voting, and the 20 constituencies with the lowest rate of postal voting at the 2005, 2010 and 2015 general elections. Colin Rallings and Michael Thrasher note in their 2015 report that

> … 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 … 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.[36]

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[36] Colin Rallings and Michael Thrasher, The 2015 general election: aspects of participation and administration, August 2015, available at the Electoral Commission's website

Top and bottom 20 postal vote take-up – % of electorate (G.B. only)

2005

	Top		Bottom
Newcastle upon Tyne North*	45.4	Stoke-on-Trent North	5.4
Stevenage*	45	Stoke-on-Trent Central	5.3
Rushcliffe*	39.9	Liverpool Walton*	5.3
Newcastle upon Tyne Central*	36.7	Nuneaton	5.2
Newcastle upon Tyne East & Wallsend*	35.4	Bootle*	5.1
South Shields*	35.2	Airdrie & Shotts	4.9
Jarrow*	33.1	Luton North	4.9
Hackney South & Shoreditch*	30.6	Coatbridge, Chryston & Bellshill	4.9
Tyne Bridge*	30.4	Stoke-on-Trent South	4.7
The Wrekin*	30.4	Brent South	4.5
Hackney North & Stoke Newington*	30.1	Motherwell & Wishaw	4.5
Telford*	29.3	Glasgow South	4.5
Durham North*	26.8	Hull North*	4.3
Norwich South	26.4	Hull West & Hessle*	4.3
Rotherham*	25.2	Glasgow North	4.2
Don Valley*	24.3	Hull East*	4.1
Chorley*	24	Glasgow South West	4.1
Blaydon*	23.8	Glasgow Central	4
Cheltenham	23.3	Glasgow North East	3.9
Blackpool North & Fleetwood*	23	Glasgow East	3.1

Source: Colin Rallings and Michael Thrashing, The 2005 general election: analysis of the results, published by the Electoral Commission
Notes: *All-postal vote at one or more elections 2002-4 inclusive.

Top and bottom 20 postal vote take-up – % of electorate (G.B. only)

2010

|	Top		Bottom
Newcastle Upon Tyne North*	40.6	Airdrie & Shotts	8.7
Houghton & Sunderland South*	38.9	Glasgow East	8.7
Sunderland Central*	37.4	Barrow & Furness*	8.6
Washington & Sunderland West*	37.2	Glasgow North	8.5
South Shields*	36.2	Halton*	8.4
Jarrow*	35.3	Oxford East	8.3
Blyth Valley*	34.8	Birmingham Selly Oak	8.2
Stevenage*	34.5	Coatbridge, Chryston & Bellshill	8.2
Newcastle Upon Tyne Central*	34.5	Glasgow Central	8.1
Telford*	31.8	Birmingham Ladywood	7.9
Rushcliffe*	31.8	Brent Central	7.7
Wrekin, The*	31.7	Birmingham Erdington	7.7
Blaydon*	31.6	Motherwell & Wishaw	7.5
Don Valley*	31.4	Birmingham Perry Barr	7.4
Chorley*	31	Cambridgeshire North East	7.4
Newcastle Upon Tyne East*	29.8	Ealing North	7.1
Doncaster Central*	29.2	Hull West & Hessle*	7.1
Gateshead*	27.9	Lewisham West & Penge	6.8
Doncaster North*	27.9	Hull East*	6.7
Altrincham & Sale West*	27.9	Hull North*	5.9

Source: Colin Rallings and Michael Thrasher, The 2010 General Election: aspects of participation and administration, published by the Electoral Commission
Notes: *All-postal vote at one or more elections 2002-4 inclusive.

Top and bottom 20 postal vote take-up – % of electorate (G.B. only)

2015

	Top		Bottom
Houghton & Sunderland South*	43.3	Epping Forest	9.7
Sunderland Central*	41.1	Stoke On Trent Central	9.6
Newcastle Upon Tyne North*	41	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
The Wrekin*	29.1	Birmingham Ladywood	7.6
Chorley*	28.6	Halton*	7.4
Doncaster Central*	27.5	Birmingham Perry Barr	7.4

Source: Colin Rallings and Michael Thrasher, The 2015 General Election: aspects of participation and administration, published by the Electoral Commission
Notes: *All-postal vote at one or more elections 2002-4 inclusive.

4.3 Turnout

At the last three general elections, turnout among postal voters has been higher than among persons voting at polling stations, as shown in the chart below. Turnout among both groups was highest in the 2015 general election: 85.8% among postal voters and 63.2% among in-person voters.

UK Postal and In-person Electors in General Elections
2005-2015, (%)
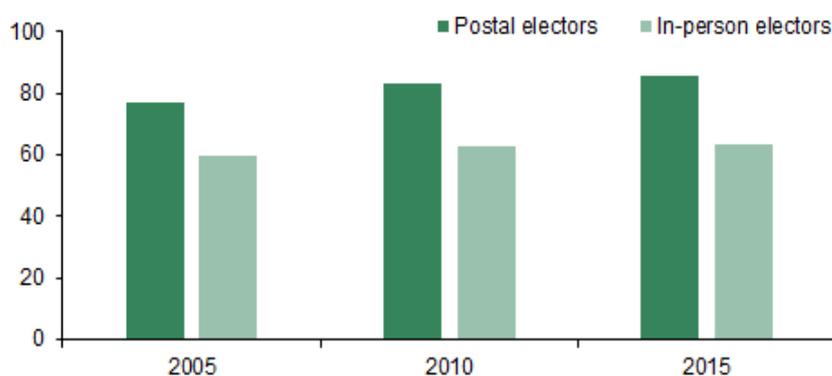
Note: In the 2005 data set some or all data is missing for 35 constituencies in England and one in Wales
Source: Colin Rallings and Michael Thrasher, The 2005 General Election; The 2010 General Election; The 2015 General Election, published by the Electoral Commission