

The UK spends approximately £150 million per year administering elections

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By Democratic Audit UK

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*Democracy costs money, although it isn't always clear how much. As part of the evidence for Democratic Audit's [new report on election information](#), we gathered data from a range of sources to produce a comprehensive estimate of how much UK taxpayers spend administering elections. **Richard Berry** sets out the findings here.*



He spends £5.91 on every vote cast. Is it money well spent? Credit: [HM Treasury](#) (CC BY-NC-ND 2.0)

The costs of running elections has provided several moments of controversy in recent years. In 2011's referendum on the Alternative Vote, the allegedly higher cost of the system compared to First Past the Post became a [theme of the campaign](#). In 2012, in the very first Police and Crime Commissioner elections the Home Office [provoked criticism](#) when it decided not to allow candidates a free election address, on cost grounds.

We wanted to estimate how much elections cost to administer in the UK. To do so we checked official sources to discover the cost of each major election held over the previous five year (2009-2013) period, as well as the running costs of the Electoral Commission and the various boundary commissions. Our estimate includes only public expenditure, not the money spent on campaigns by parties and candidates. Every type of major election and referendum is included; some smaller polls like those for parish councils, NHS Foundation trusts and local planning referendums are not included. Our estimate does not include the costs borne by local authorities in registering voters – the Electoral Commission has [published some information on this](#).

We generated an estimate of **£763.5 million** as the cost of major elections and referendums held in the past five years. Considering the total number of votes cast, this suggests the cost per vote in the past five years has been **£5.91**. Table 1 below lists the elections that have taken place in the past five years, while Table 2 provides the overall costs and the cost per vote calculation. I then consider the finances of each election in more detail.

Table 1: Major elections and referendums held in the UK, 2009-2013

Year	Election	Total votes
2009	European Parliament election	15,724,000
	Local authority elections	6,901,000
2010	General Election	29,991,000
	Local authority elections	14,000,000
2011	Welsh devolution referendum	824,000
	Scottish Parliament election	1,998,000
	Welsh Assembly election	949,000
	Northern Ireland Assembly election	673,000
	Alternative Vote referendum	19,166,000
	Local authority elections	17,170,000
2012	Greater London Authority election	2,249,000
	English mayoral referendums	1,161,000
	Local authority elections	7,277,000
	Police & Crime Commissioner elections	5,491,000
2013	Local authority elections	5,709,000
TOTAL		129,283,000

Table 2: Cost of major elections and referendums held in the UK, 2009-2013

Election	Year	Approximate cost (£millions)	Cost per vote (£)
Police and Crime Commissioner elections	2012	75.0	13.66
Greater London Authority election	2012	20.3	9.03
Welsh Assembly election	2011	8.1	8.54
Welsh devolution referendum	2011	5.9	7.16
Scottish Parliament election	2011	12.6	6.31
European Parliament election	2009	102.2	6.50
Local authority elections	2013	34.2	5.99
Local authority elections	2012	41.1	5.65
Local authority elections	2009	32.6	4.72
Northern Ireland Assembly election	2011	2.9	4.31
Local authority elections	2011	74.6	4.34
Alternative Vote referendum	2011	75.3	3.93
General election	2010	113.3	3.78
Local authority elections	2010	39.5	2.82
English mayoral referendums	2012	2.5	2.15
Electoral Commission running costs	n/a	103.0	n/a
Boundary commissions running costs	n/a	20.4	n/a
TOTAL		763.5	5.91

2009 European Parliament election

The next European Parliament elections will be held in May 2014. The most recent in 2009 cost a total of **£102 million**, based on Government accounts of Returning Officers' expenses for [England and Wales](#), [Scotland](#) and [Northern Ireland](#). This estimate therefore reflects the money spent running elections locally, plus the cost to Royal Mail to deliver candidates' election addresses.



Incidentally, this is significantly higher than the £64 million figure quoted by the Electoral Commission in its report shortly after the election: this was for England and Wales only, and does not appear to include mailout costs. The higher estimate means taxpayers spent almost as much on the European elections as they did on the 2010 General Election, with a little over half the number of votes being cast.

2010 General Election

Electing the UK's first post-war coalition government in May 2010 cost a total of **£113.3 million**. This figure was given in a [parliamentary answer](#) by then Cabinet Office minister Mark Harper MP.

This represented a significant increase on the 2005 election, which is [estimated](#) to have cost £71 million. The higher cost may be a result of increased turnout in 2010 (65%, up from 61%), and/or an increase in the number of parties (133, up from 114) and candidates (4150, up from 3554) standing. See [Electoral Commission research](#) for more information.



2011 Welsh devolution referendum

In 2011 voters in Wales were asked whether they wanted to increase the powers of the Welsh Assembly. A large majority of 64% voted yes, although the referendum turnout was only 40%. [According to the Electoral Commission](#), the total cost of the poll was **£5.9 million**.



2011 Scottish, Welsh and Northern Irish elections

The 2011 elections to the Scottish Parliament, Welsh Assembly and Northern Ireland Assembly cost almost £24 million combined: **£12.6 million** in [Scotland](#), **£8.1 million** in [Wales](#) and **£2.9 million** in [Northern Ireland](#).

The costs in Wales may have been slightly below this estimate. While the Scottish and Northern Irish figures come from the Government accounts of Returning Officers' expenses, the Welsh figure represents the total amount budgeted for Returning Officers and Royal Mail before the election.



2011 Alternative Vote referendum

After the AV referendum in 2011 the [Electoral Commission reported](#) that the total cost of the poll was **£75 million**. This was the first ever estimate of the cost of running a UK-wide referendum, and covers the costs borne by local Counting Officers and the Commission itself: including the employment of 119,500 polling station staff and 80,500 counting staff, and distributing 27 million information booklets.



The turnout at the election was 42% – we might expect higher overall costs if future referendums have higher turnout. In 1975, turnout at the UK-wide referendum on membership of the European Community was **64%**, so if we hold another referendum on this issue as the Government has proposed it seems likely turnout will be closer to this level.

2012 London elections

The election of the Mayor of London and the London Assembly in 2012 cost approximately **£20 million**, according to a comprehensive report [released by the London Assembly](#) post-election. The election had a surprisingly high cost per vote of £9.03, which is only slightly less than the average cost of a pint in the capital.



This election may have given voters a sense of déjà vu as Boris Johnson and Ken Livingstone were again the candidates for the Conservatives and Labour, but it was novel in the use of electronic counting machines to count the votes. There is some disagreement over whether the machines [increased](#) or [decreased](#) total costs; the picture is complicated by the fact a power cut at one counting centre left the machines unable to operate for a significant period. We do know that even with the delay, the count took place much quicker than previously and voters were able to track results as they were being counted in real-time on the [London Elects](#) website.

2012 English mayoral referendums

Eleven towns and cities in England held [referendums](#) in 2012 on whether to introduce directly mayors, with just Bristol and Salford voting in favour. A further two towns voted on whether to keep the elected mayor system, with Doncaster voting yes and Hartlepool voting no. The government provided a figure of **£2.5 million**, in a [parliamentary answer](#), as an estimate of the cost of these referendums. With 1.2 million people voting, this means these referendums as a whole offered the best value for money of any poll conducted in the past five years, at just £2.15 per vote.



2012 Police and Crime Commissioner elections

The inaugural elections of Police and Crime Commissioners (PCCs) in England and Wales in November 2012 cost an estimated **£75 million**. The Home Office met the costs of the elections, and this figure was provided in a [parliamentary answer](#) by the former minister Nick Herbert MP. With turnout at just 15%, this represents a huge cost of £13.66 per vote.



These elections proved controversial in a number of ways. They had been due to take place alongside local elections in May 2012, but the Government [decided to delay them](#) to allow more time to increase public awareness: it is estimated this added £25 million to the cost of the elections.

In a somewhat contradictory decision, the Home Office decided not to provide a free mailout for election candidates, rejecting the [advice of the Electoral Commission](#). The Government claimed the cost of an individual mailout for each candidate would have been **£35 million**. It is not clear what this estimate was based on, given the mailout for the 2010 General Election cost **£29 million**. As noted above 4,150 candidates stood for Parliament in 2010, while just **199 candidates** stood in the PCC elections. Although roughly the same number of letters would have been delivered to each household on both occasions, the mailout for the PCC elections should have been much simpler for Royal Mail to conduct. Further, the elections were only held in England and Wales.

Local elections

Estimating the cost of local elections is very difficult because of the lack of central information sources. The estimate we have produced is that, in total, running local elections cost **£222 million** over the past five years. Our approach was to assume that a local election cost the same amount per elector as a general election, excluding the cost of the free mailout, which is not offered to local election candidates. The electorate sizes for local elections for local elections are generally published by the Electoral Commission; in a few cases where this was not the case, we have produced our own estimate based on the electorates for other elections being held on the same day.



We believe this is the best approach because council and Westminster elections are generally run by the same organisations, using similar electoral systems. There are reasons to think the actual costs might be lower: there are usually fewer votes to count at a local election, and some councils reduce costs by counting votes [the day after the election](#). On the other hand, the fact that council wards are smaller and more numerous than parliamentary constituencies – and multiple councillors are elected per ward – makes the count more complex.

Estimates for how much money saved by holding other elections on the same day as local elections vary considerably. For the 2010 General Election the estimated saving was **£7 million**; for the 2011 referendum it was **£17 million**; for the 2012 PCC elections, as noted above, £25 million might have been saved; for the upcoming European Parliament election the estimate is **£10 million**.

Electoral Commission and boundary commissions

Expenditure by the Electoral Commission and the various boundary commissions has been included, with figures derived from their annual reports. This [spreadsheet](#) compiles all relevant data, showing that the Electoral Commission spent **£103 million** in the past five years. Expenditure by the Electoral Commission on the Alternative Vote and Welsh devolution referendums has been disregarded.



Electoral area boundary reviews are conducted by numerous public bodies in the UK. There are national boundary commissions for England, Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland, and in each country local government boundaries are reviewed by separate agencies. Expenditure by all agencies for the past five years was **£20.3 million**. We were not able to identify expenditure on Northern Ireland local government boundary reviews as this is not carried out by a single, dedicated body, so the actual costs would have been slightly higher than our estimate.

Note: This post represents the views of the author and does not necessarily give the position of Democratic Audit or the LSE. Please read our [comments policy](#) before commenting.

For more detailed information and a full record of sources please see the following documents:

[Electorate sizes and turnouts for UK elections and referendums, 2009-2013](#)

[Costs of UK elections and referendums, 2009-2010](#)

[Expenditure of Electoral Commission and boundary commissions, 2008/09-2012/13](#)

Richard Berry is managing editor and researcher at Democratic Audit. His background is in public policy and political research, particularly in relation to local government. In previous roles Richard has worked for the London Assembly, JMC Partners and Ann Coffey MP. He is the author of the book *Independent: The Rise of the Non-Aligned Politician* (Imprint Academic, 2008). He tweets at [@richard3berry](#).



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