
An Audit of Local Democracy in Britain: The Evidence from Local Elections

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Local government in Britain will undergo considerable change over the next decade. New constitutional arrangements in both Scotland and Wales will have an impact, for good or ill, upon the status of local government in those countries. In England, too, changes are proposed, with the creation of a new London-wide Assembly and elected Mayor simply the most visible facet of that reform. Interestingly, each of these new institutions, the Scottish Parliament, the Welsh Assembly and the London Assembly, will be elected using the Additional Member System. Proportional representation (PR) has been seen as evidence of the new Labour government's radical approach to the constitution. It is significant, therefore, that the government's electoral plans for local government do not embrace PR. Rather, the recently published White Paper has proposed simply to modify existing arrangements while retaining the 'first past the post' electoral system.¹

Two referendums in September 1997, one each in Scotland and Wales, saw voters endorse the government's plans for constitutional change. Elections for these new legislative bodies will now take place in 1999. In London, another referendum to approve proposals for a 25-member assembly and elected mayor, was held on the same day as the 1998 local elections. The May elections, therefore, took place against a background of planned legislative change and were contested by parties whose standing had been transformed by the drama of the previous general election.² For the main parties, these local contests were crucial. A good performance by the Conservative Party would suggest a recovery from arguably its worst election defeat ever. Labour needed to demonstrate that winning the general election would not jeopardise its position as the dominant party of local government, while the Liberal Democrats, so successful in local elections in recent years, had to sustain that momentum in a vastly altered electoral situation.

The 1998 elections might also have signalled a fresh start for local government itself. Following a steady reduction in the functions exercised by local authorities, recent elections had become more relevant as measures of the popularity of the Conservative government than as mechanisms for selecting council members. Indeed, the increasingly tenuous relationship between local voting and local accountability allowed opponents of local self-government to dismiss both its legitimacy and relevance. The aim of this article is to conduct an audit of

the current health of local democracy with specific reference to the electoral process. We use the 1998 elections as the starting point for our inquiry but evidence from past elections will supplement our analysis.

A number of important indicators of how well local democracy is working will provide the framework for our discussion. First, the ease with which voters understand how the local electoral system operates. Second, the level of electoral participation. Third, the scope of political choice and the extent of party competition for control of local authorities. Fourth, the distinctiveness of local elections as mechanisms for the expression of local, as opposed to national, choice. Fifth, the ability of the electoral system to reflect actual voting behaviour. These findings will then inform an appraisal of some of the government's plans to reinvigorate local democracy, principally annual elections, referendums, directly elected mayors and modifications to the conduct of local elections. Before tackling these themes, however, a brief overview of the background to, and outcome of, the 1998 local elections may be helpful.

The local electoral context in 1998

With no local elections taking place in either Scotland or Wales, the focus was on 166 English local authorities where more than 4,000 council seats were at stake. In London there were elections for all 1,917 seats in the 32 boroughs. In metropolitan England, including the cities of Manchester, Birmingham, Liverpool, Leeds and Newcastle, one seat in each of the 827 three-member wards across the 36 boroughs was contested. The remaining elections were in 88 shire districts and 10 unitary councils. Only one of these, the Isle of Wight, had an election for every seat; the remainder, districts and unitaries alike, used an electoral system similar to that in the metropolitan boroughs.

With the exception of the unitary councils, the seats contested in 1998 had last been fought four years previously. Then, the Conservatives had been in power and had suffered from a sizeable 'protest vote'. The party polled an estimated 28% 'national equivalent vote' (by which we mean an estimate of the share of the vote which each party would have obtained if elections had been held throughout Great Britain), only fractionally ahead of the Liberal Democrats on 27%. Labour, with John Smith then leader of the party, had polled approximately 40% of the national vote. Given that at the general election in 1997 both Labour and the Conservatives had polled rather better than in 1994, it seemed that there might be scope for each to make advances in 1998. The party whose councillors were under greatest threat was the Liberal Democrats whose vote share declined by some 10 percentage points between 1994 and the general election.

Alternative and more up-to-date measures of the main parties' popularity in 1998 were also available. In the national opinion polls Labour had enjoyed record levels of public support since the general election,

with pollsters finding that on average more than half of those surveyed said they would vote Labour. According to those same polls, the Conservatives were even less popular than at the general election and Labour's lead had therefore widened. Another method for estimating the current state of electoral opinion was the evidence from local by-election results.³ In the months prior to the May elections, these suggested that Labour was still ahead but that its lead had in fact narrowed since the general election. On this measure Labour had the support of 41% of electors, with the Conservatives on 33% and the Liberal Democrats on 22%. There is certainly increasing evidence that voters in Britain are sensitive to the electoral context and that surveys of parliamentary voting intentions are less reliable in forecasting local electoral outcomes. In 1997, for example, county council elections were held simultaneously with the general election, with some voters able to cast two ballots. An analysis showed that certainly as many as 10% of such voters, and possibly as many as one in five, had engaged in a form of 'split-ticket' voting—voting for different parties in the two types of election.⁴

The Conservative Party needed to perform only as 'well' as it had at the general election to be guaranteed gaining council seats. All the evidence suggested that it would do so. In the case of Labour, the picture was less clear. A performance as good as that achieved at the general election would secure some gains, but if the party was able to match its opinion poll rating at the local elections gains of almost 400 seats were possible. By contrast, the outcome of recent local by-elections pointed to a small number of Labour losses. The Liberal Democrats seemed destined to lose council seats according to all these measures of electoral support. If their support was similar to that at the general election or in current polls, then losses of approximately 450 seats were imminent. If the party's somewhat better showing at local by-elections was replicated, then perhaps 200 Liberal Democrat councillors would be ousted.

Table 1 Transfer of seats at the 1998 local elections

	Con	Lab	Lib Dem	Other	Total gains
Conservative	–	166	158	19	343
Labour	49	–	87	13	149
Lib Dem	26	107	–	6	139
Other	5	27	10	–	42
Total losses	80	300	255	38	
Net gains/losses	+263	-151	-116	+4	

Each party's gains should be read across; losses down

In the event, both Labour and the Liberal Democrats lost ground to the Conservatives. Table 1 shows the transfer of seats between the parties across all types of local authority in 1998. The results marked a

recovery, albeit an extremely modest one, for the Conservative Party. It had a net gain of 263 seats but its national equivalent vote, 33%, was only slightly higher than it had polled at the 1997 general election. Labour suffered a net loss of 151 seats but in some areas, principally within a few London boroughs, it did improve on its 1994 position. The biggest surprise lay in the performance of the Liberal Democrats. Forecasts of heavy losses were misplaced and although the party lost over a hundred councillors, its vote share was substantially better than it had achieved at the general election. A more detailed examination of the figures shows that the Liberal Democrats lost ground to the Conservatives (26 gains/158 losses) but compensated for this by picking up seats from Labour (107 gains/87 losses). Although it is, perhaps, too early in this Parliament to make a judgement about the direction of party competition in local elections, these results do suggest that the Liberal Democrats are well placed to take advantage of any Labour unpopularity, particularly in urban areas.

In terms of council control, however, the pattern in 1998 was one of minimal change. The Conservatives gained control in just three councils (including Tunbridge Wells whose original loss was symptomatic of the scale of past protest directed at the party), but lost power in the London borough of Bromley. Labour, too, lost control of councils, four in its case, but these were counter-balanced by five authorities, mainly in London, where the party took control. Although the Liberal Democrats sustained fewer than anticipated seat losses, the party did lose its overall majority in nine councils. Continuing the pattern of previous years, the number of councils where no single party enjoyed an overall majority crept upwards with a net increase of five authorities.

The political complexion of British local authorities following the 1998 elections is shown in Table 2. By a considerable margin Labour still has the largest number of councillors – more than the Conservative and Liberal Democrat totals combined. Across Scotland, Wales and urban England it enjoys a dominant position, in terms of both council seats and local authority control. It is only in the English shires, at both the district and county level, that Labour is not pre-eminent. The Conservative Party remains in a parlous state, although it did overtake the Liberal Democrats at these elections in terms of council seats, if not councils controlled. The contrast with 1979, when Mrs Thatcher first came to power, is dramatic. Then, Conservative councillors comprised 48% of the total, more than twice the current figure. In 1979 nearly half of all councils in Great Britain were in Conservative hands compared with just 6% in 1998. In both Scotland and Wales the party was unable to win a single council at the last elections in 1995, anticipating the failure to win a single seat in either country at the general election. Four successive general election victories before the disaster of 1997 merely served to disguise its long and steady decline in local government.

However, Labour's overall position can be expected to change following the 1999 local elections. There will be elections for most local authorities in Britain, including all those in Scotland and Wales, and it would represent a break with the trend for the governing party at Westminster not to suffer considerable losses. Barring wholly unexpected circumstances, Labour will be less popular than it was in 1995, when it recorded one of its best ever local election performances and when the seats due to fall vacant in 1999 were last contested. What is less clear is which of the opposition parties will benefit. While the Conservatives remain the official Opposition at Westminster, the same is not true in many local authorities where they have either no representatives or at best a mere token presence. The Liberal Democrats, as well as governing authorities in their own right, are well placed through their occupation of a pivotal position in a large proportion of hung councils. They have also proved superior to the Conservatives in their ability to make the local electoral system work in their favour and thus deliver the council seats that their share of the vote justifies. In both Scotland and Wales the nationalist parties have enjoyed recent local by-election successes against Labour and the coincidence of the local and national legislative elections in 1999 will surely help to bolster their position.

Table 2 State of the Parties in British Local Government, 1998.

COUNCIL SEATS	Con	Lab	Lib Dem	Other	Nat	
London boroughs	538	1050	301	28	-	
Metropolitan boroughs	230	1815	382	54	-	
County councils	884	745	494	80	-	
District councils	2540	4143	2695	1362	-	
Unitary councils	449	1338	551	87	-	
Wales	45	717	81	313	117	
Scotland	84	609	128	236	187	
Total	4770	10417	4632	2160	304	
	21.4%	46.7%	20.8%	9.7%	1.4%	
COUNCIL CONTROL	Con	Lab	Lib Dem	Other	Nat	NOC*
London boroughs	4	18	2	0	-	8
Metropolitan boroughs	0	31	1	0	-	4
Counties	8	8	2	0	-	16
Districts	10	84	32	13	-	99
Unitary councils	2	29	5	0	-	10
Wales	0	14	0	4	1	3
Scotland	0	20	0	6	3	3
Total	24	204	42	23	4	143
	5.7%	46.3%	9.5%	5.2%	0.9%	32.3%

* No Overall Control

Understanding the local electoral system

One important factor in assessing the health of local democracy in Britain is the extent to which ordinary citizens understand the electoral

process. If there is a clear pattern to the nature and frequency of elections, then the sense of local democratic accountability will be strengthened. When, on the other hand, people are confused about the democratic process, then that must serve to undermine the relationship between the electors and the elected. If people are unsure about when and where local elections will take place in the area in which they live, then local government's role in allowing the citizen to relate to the state will be weakened.

We have already seen that only some local authorities held elections in 1998 and this fragmented pattern is a feature of every year. At no time do all local authorities in Britain hold elections simultaneously. One view is that this is not a disadvantage since local elections should be about local issues. It is not important that all local authorities are synchronised in terms of electoral activity. Another view, however, believes that it is important that they become in some sense a national event. At a general election the attention of most people is engaged, even if a substantial fraction choose not to exercise their voting rights. Local elections, where only a proportion of authorities are involved and where there is confusion anyway about what responsibilities they have, find it difficult to attract similar notice. The national press and broadcasting organisations face their own difficulties in understanding the electoral process. It is not surprising that the quality and quantity of election coverage suffers as a consequence.

The existence of different electoral arrangements operating alongside one another is also unhelpful. In 1998 all seats in the London boroughs and in one unitary council fell vacant, but in the 133 remaining authorities there were contests for only a fraction of seats. Again, this is difficult for the media to explain simply to the general public and invariably election coverage is skewed towards those authorities where a change of political control is possible. In 1998 Labour's dominance in the metropolitan boroughs was such that, with only a third of seats up for grabs, it was impossible for the party to be deposed in 26 out of the 32 boroughs under its control even if every Labour ward had been lost. Hardly a recipe for media attention or public interest.

The local electoral cycle, where and when elections are scheduled, has become more complex because of a number of factors. First, there was a piecemeal approach to structural change begun under the last Conservative government. The review in England was conducted by the Local Government Commission, but in Scotland and Wales the Secretaries of State were responsible. They produced blueprints covering local government for the whole of their countries, while the Local Government Commission considered the structure on a county-by-county basis. In Scotland and Wales a system of all-purpose local authorities with a common electoral pattern was proposed and, although there were protests about the autocratic approach to reform, the new structure had the virtue of being easy to understand. In England there was a more

complex outcome following extensive public consultation. In some areas it was proposed to retain the existing county and district structure. Elsewhere, some districts, largely the most urban, were moved out of the county's jurisdiction to become all-purpose authorities. In a few cases administrative counties were abolished and replaced with unitary councils. Previous opinion surveys had shown that the general public remained confused about the structure of local government many years after the initial reorganisation in the 1970s. The manner of this most recent reorganisation will not have improved public understanding.

A second factor, related to the first, has been the difficulty of implementing new electoral arrangements consequent upon structural change. In those counties where some, but not all, district authorities have ceased to be a part of the dual structure, the result has been widespread confusion as our example should demonstrate. The 1997 local elections in Devon saw contests for county council seats in all areas except Plymouth and Torbay, which had each been awarded unitary council status following the recommendations of the Local Government Commission. In Plymouth and Torbay whole-council elections were held. However, the elections for both sets of authority, county and unitary councils, were to determine the composition of what were termed 'shadow' authorities. These would not assume full administrative responsibilities until the following year. Devon county councillors from the areas of Plymouth and Torbay, who had been elected in 1993 for a four-year term, were asked to carry on for a further year to help bridge the gap before the vesting of the new authorities. District councillors in Plymouth and Torbay, who had been elected in 1995 and had believed they would be in office until 1999, found themselves having to fight an election again only two years later. If this proved difficult for the candidates involved, we can only speculate about how it was understood by members of the voting public.

A third factor in serving to undermine public understanding of the local electoral process is, to some extent, unavoidable. As with parliamentary constituencies, the boundaries of local authority wards require periodic review. Population movements mean that electoral units, in this case local wards, display an increasing range in size. The votes of those living in wards with very small electorates have more influence on council composition than do those of electors in wards whose numbers have been swollen by recent development or migration. Such inequalities require correction from time to time. Nevertheless, boundary reviews are potentially disruptive and can harm, rather than help, local democracy. Local government should reflect a community of local interest but that expression could be applied equally to the area covered by the whole authority or electoral wards. Local people may be more concerned that ward boundaries remain untouched and thus identifiable than they are about the relative weight of each person's vote. The Local Government Commission in England is currently reviewing ward

boundaries in the English shire districts and London boroughs. Their activities, necessary as they are to produce electoral equality between wards, will inevitably disrupt the local electoral process still further and do little to aid public understanding of local democracy.

Electoral participation

Overall turnout at the 1998 local elections was just 29%, ranging from a low of 25% in both the metropolitan and unitary authorities to a high of 34% in London. In five authorities, namely Wigan, Sunderland, Knowsley, Salford and Hull, fewer than 20% of the eligible electorate voted. There were no local authorities where more than half of all electors participated. In only six out of 166 authorities was turnout above 40%, with the London borough of Richmond upon Thames registering the highest level of just 45%. The picture was little better at the ward level. In only 42 out of a grand total of 3,115 wards did at least half the electorate vote. At the other end of the scale fewer than one in five electors participated in 343 wards—11% of the total. The lowest ward turnout was Noddle Hill, in the City of Hull, where it reached just 10%.

Even within the context of an almost permanent concern with low turnout at local elections, such figures are disturbing.⁵ Despite the occasion of a referendum in London, the result of which would determine whether the capital would once again have an area-wide authority, turnout was well below the average. Since 1978 turnout in the London boroughs had not fallen below 40%, peaking in 1990 (the so-called poll tax election) at 48%. Similarly, never before in the 25-year history of the metropolitan boroughs had turnout fallen below 30%. Comparisons with the trend in district council elections are difficult to make because of recent structural changes, but it is worth noting that the previous lowest turnout among this group of authorities was some seven percentage points higher than the 1998 figure. One of the principal arguments behind the move towards the establishment of unitary authorities was that such areas represented a distinct and separate community of interest from the surrounding county. Administrative separation and policy independence was intended to give these authorities a fresh start. Judged solely on turnout, just 25% in the new unitary authorities, this has not proved a success.

An important question is whether the low level of turnout in 1998 was an aberration, due to circumstances unlikely to occur again. Was it the case, for example, that the decline in turnout was caused by one party's supporters boycotting the elections? Table 3 considers that question by examining four categories of change in turnout according to which party had won the ward at the previous elections. The categories are ranged from wards where turnout actually rose to those which experienced a fall in turnout of 15% or more. If the supporters of one party had boycotted the elections, then we would expect a large

proportion of that party's own wards to fall into the category showing the largest turnout decline. First and foremost no party saw turnout rise in its own wards to any significant extent, suggesting electoral apathy was a widespread phenomenon. There was some evidence, however, that Conservative wards were less badly affected by falling turnout than wards controlled by Labour and the Liberal Democrats. In 57% of Conservative wards in London, for example, turnout fell by less than 10% but in a clear majority of Labour and Liberal Democrat wards turnout fell by more than that figure. The Conservative performance in wards in the metropolitan areas was less distinctive, but again it was in Labour and Liberal Democrat controlled wards that turnout was most likely to fall steeply. Although some types of wards appeared to suffer from falling turnout more than others, the overriding impression in 1998 was one of public indifference which affected all parties to varying degrees.

Table 3 Pattern of Turnout Change 1994–98 by Party winning ward in 1994

	Increase	Decline 0 to 10%	Decline 10 to 15%	Decline over 15%
London boroughs				
Conservative	0.9	57.1	31.3	10.7
Labour	1.9	25.8	42.0	30.4
Lib Dem	0.8	33.3	44.7	21.2
Metropolitan boroughs				
Conservative	1.3	28.9	52.6	17.1
Labour	0.5	15.2	42.9	41.4
Lib Dem	0.0	13.4	42.5	44.1
District councils				
Conservative	2.5	31.5	46.8	19.2
Labour	1.6	15.3	43.3	39.8
Lib Dem	1.8	28.4	40.1	29.7

Previous research has noted that turnout is often related to the closeness of the expected result.⁶ In marginal wards turnout is often higher, partly because local parties are often campaigning hardest in such wards, and partly because a single vote may influence the outcome and thus electors may take the view that their own participation is crucial. By contrast, in relatively safe wards where no political upset is expected, electors have fewer incentives to vote. In the context of 1998, therefore, with a general decline in turnout, we would expect to find turnout falling least in marginal wards and by most where the result is not in doubt. A simple method for discovering whether any such relationship exists is to examine the correlation between two variables, the decline in turnout and ward marginality in 1994. In the metropolitan authorities the correlation coefficient was 0.08 and for London –0.03. These very low correlations mean that there was effectively no relationship between the variables and suggest that electors had

abstained from voting with no thought about the impact of that action on the election result in their own particular ward.

When we examined the seats gained by the various parties, however, differences in the rate of decline in turnout did become apparent. Comparing seats which either Labour or the Conservatives held with those that were newly captured, we found that there was very little difference in turnout. However this was not the pattern where the Liberal Democrats were involved. In seats already held by the party in London, for example, turnout fell by 11.6%, in line with the overall average, but in seats gained the fall in turnout was just 4.3%. There was a similar, though less pronounced, pattern in the metropolitan boroughs and in the districts. A particularly strong and successful campaign, therefore, did appear to have a small impact on voters who might otherwise have abstained. That pattern confirms what is already known about the effectiveness of local campaigning techniques, particularly those employed by the Liberal Democrats.⁷

Despite this, the general pattern in 1998 was one of widespread uninterest, and explanations for this should be sought. First, there is the possibility of voter fatigue. These elections were the first since the general election and there are precedents for lower turnout in such circumstances. In 1992, for example, local turnout fell sharply when those contests followed a month after the general election. Nevertheless, the absolute level of turnout then was higher than it was in 1998. A second factor contributing to low turnout might have been the campaign activity, or possibly inactivity, by the main parties. All had spent heavily at the last general election and all had a vested interest in ensuring the local elections remained a low key affair. The new Conservative leadership had had little time to consolidate, Labour was embarrassed by the activities of some of its local authorities, while the Liberal Democrats were threatened with heavy losses. Finally, it is worth noting that low turnout is not solely a problem for local government. The turnout at the 1997 general election, just 71%, was the lowest since the war. Local government, therefore, might properly be regarded as merely one of a number of political institutions regarded with indifference by the general public.

Local choice and party competition

A further important indicator of the vitality of local democracy is the number of candidates willing to fight for council seats. In fact, more than 13,000 candidates contested the 1998 local elections. An average of 2.9 candidates contested each vacancy in the district and unitary authorities, 3.0 in London and 3.2 in the metropolitan boroughs. Those figures are broadly in line with previous elections. There was a slight increase in the number of candidates in the metropolitan boroughs, partly because the Conservatives contested more seats than in recent years and partly because of an increase in independent candidates. The

number of unopposed seats was just 36, fewer than 1% of all seats. This level of competition has not always been present, with one in five district councillors returned unopposed in the 1970s. Over the years, however, the rate of contestation has increased to the point that there is no current shortage of candidates prepared to challenge for a council seat.

Apart from the actual numbers contesting a seat, are there other candidate characteristics we should consider relevant to a healthy local democracy? Such characteristics might include candidate gender and, in a multi-cultural society, race. It is difficult to comment extensively on the ethnic background of candidates since the available data are sparse but it is known that areas with large non-white populations, particularly those with sizeable Asian communities, do see those groups reflected in the type of candidates fighting local elections. Nor do there appear to be serious obstacles in the way of pursuing a political career on the local council. Michel Le Lohé found that in the London borough of Tower Hamlets there was a higher proportion of Asian councillors than in the community at large. In other authorities more than a fifth of the council seats were occupied by members of the ethnic minority populations.⁸

The last general election saw the proportion of women MPs double to 20%, due partly to Labour's policy of women-only shortlists (subsequently declared contrary to the terms of the Sex Discrimination Act).⁹ Labour's action in amending its selection process reflected the concern with the underrepresentation of women in the House of Commons. In this regard local government elections provide better opportunities to challenge for political office. Women comprised 30% of the total number of candidates and 27% of elected councillors at the 1998 elections. The proportions in the three main parties were remarkably similar. 29% of Conservative and Labour candidates were women, a figure bettered only slightly by the Liberal Democrats with 33%. The Green party, with 37%, had the largest percentage. At the beginning of the 1970s only 15% of councillors were women but during the next decade that proportion steadily rose. Although the rate of increase has declined in recent years, currently more than one in four councillors in Britain is a woman. Although they appear to have broken through in terms of parliamentary representation, it is still local government that provides greater gender equality.

Another factor in the relationship between electoral choice and local democracy is the extent to which voters are free to choose from candidates ranging across the political spectrum. In 1998 Labour fielded the largest number of candidates, contesting 96% of all available seats, a figure almost matched by the Conservatives. Overall, 74% of contests featured at least one candidate from each of the three main parties, with a further 16% of wards offering voters a straight choice between Conservative and Labour. One of the minor parties, the Greens, fielded almost 500 candidates, fighting more than 10% of all seats. In both

Oxford and Kirklees its candidates contested every seat, while in Bristol, Stroud, Islington, Wigan and Wirral it contested a majority of vacancies. A total of 7 Greens were elected, including one notable victory which saw Labour's leader on Hackney borough council defeated. In addition, there were a thousand candidates fighting under a variety of party labels, ranging from the far-right to the far-left, as well as candidates who spurned any party description. Although Independent councillors have steadily declined in number as local parties have come to dominate, there are still a considerable number of people willing to stand for local election solely in terms of their own beliefs.

Local democracy is strengthened when voters are given a real choice between candidates of different gender, ethnic background and political disposition. The evidence from the 1998 elections points to vigorous competition for council seats. Compared with the picture in the 1970s, and even over the last decade, more social groups are contesting elections and more parties are competing for votes. Although independent candidates are still a feature of local government elections, they have struggled against the more effective campaigns mounted by the political parties. Some might regret this, but political parties are of considerable value in the local electoral process. Analysis of electoral turnout shows that electors are more willing to participate where party competition is greatest. Without parties, local democracy might be confronting an even greater crisis of declining turnout.

National opinion or local issues

It would be a sign of weakness if local election outcomes were solely determined by voters' reaction to national issues. Such a situation would point to electors knowing little and caring less about which politicians ran their local administration. We should not expect, however, that local voters disregard national political events. As we have seen, local elections are frequently contested by local branches of national parties, and voters will be influenced by a range of issues, some of which will be driven by the national political agenda and some by purely local circumstance. The crucial question is the extent to which national factors dominate local issues.

Such an inquiry should first examine whether the pattern of voting was uniform across the different types of local authority with elections. Was there uniform movement in support between this election and the previous one, with parties enjoying the same degree of success or failure regardless of the local authority type? In order to undertake that analysis we need both to control for party competition and also include only those wards with an election in 1994 and 1998. Table 4, therefore, compares changes in vote share in those wards which featured candidates from the three main parties in both election years. By categorising seats according to the winning party in 1994, we can begin to appreciate the different level of support for the three parties across three types of

local authority. The Conservative vote in the party's own seats, for example, rose barely at all in London but by 10% in the districts. Labour's vote fell by more than 4% in the metropolitan authorities at the same time as the party's vote in London was either stable in its own seats or rising slightly in Conservative held wards. Similar variations characterised the changes in the Liberal Democrat vote between 1994 and 1998.

Table 4 Change in vote share 1994–1998 in three-party contests by party winning ward in 1994

Winning party 1994	% change	% change	% change
	Cons	Lab	Lib Dem
London boroughs (N=608)			
Conservative	+1.9	+2.5	-2.7
Labour	-0.5	-0.1	+1.2
Liberal Democrat	+1.1	+4.0	-3.9
Metropolitan boroughs (N=508)			
Conservative	+7.6	-0.5	-7.5
Labour	+2.5	-4.2	+0.1
Liberal Democrat	-0.1	-2.4	+2.4
District councils (N=706)			
Conservative	+10.1	-0.0	-10.0
Labour	+4.3	-1.9	-3.4
Liberal Democrat	+6.1	+2.7	-8.8

The 1998 local elections were marked by considerable variation in results between authorities. Across London, despite the fact that vote shares overall were similar to those in 1994 and despite only a modest net transfer of seats between parties, individual boroughs behaved in sharply contrasting ways. Brent and Lambeth each saw Labour gain an overall majority because of a 7% swing from the Conservatives. In Hillingdon there was a 7% swing also, but this time it was in the opposite direction and sufficient for Labour to lose council control. The Liberal Democrat vote in Harrow fell by 10%, forcing the party into third place, but in Islington the party's share rose by 14%, enabling it to draw level with Labour on what is now a hung council.

Outside London there were other results which suggest that local factors were most influential in shaping voting behaviour. While Labour was doing well in some parts of the country, it suffered serious reverses in Doncaster, Liverpool and Sheffield in particular. Charges of corruption levelled at some members of Labour's ruling group in Doncaster were instrumental in the halving of the party's vote share and the loss of safe seats. In Liverpool, where Labour had run the administration until a by-election defeat in December 1997, and where the band D council tax was the highest in the country, there was a 15% swing against the party. This proved enough for the Liberal Democrats to make the gains needed to take overall control. Sheffield, once a Labour stronghold, saw Labour lose more ground to Liberal Democrats, who took a majority

of votes cast. Elsewhere, however, the Liberal Democrats experienced setbacks of their own. Political control was lost in Colchester, Isle of Wight and Kingston upon Thames—all areas which, in 1997, had contributed to the best Liberal general election performance since 1929.

That all three main parties, after these results became known, were able to highlight their successes whilst avoiding discussion of losses suggests that local factors played a prominent role in shaping voting opinion. The national opinion polls proved not to be an accurate indicator of the local electoral mood. Despite the growing influence of national parties in local politics, it does appear that voters are quite capable of discriminating between candidates on the basis of the particular electoral context. The simultaneous local and general elections in 1997 provided a good illustration of that effect and the 1998 results confirmed it still further. In a healthy local democracy, local issues should strongly influence election results. In this regard, therefore, disparate outcomes are better than a single uniform pattern.

Electoral system effects

The first past the post electoral system has a tendency to overreward the largest party in its share of seats, simultaneously penalising other parties. Each of the main parties could cite examples of gross electoral unfairness in 1998. The Conservatives can point to Tamworth, Labour to Broxbourne and the Liberal Democrats to Tunbridge Wells as instances where a 30% share of the council-wide vote still resulted in the party not winning a single seat. In Tamworth, Labour captured every seat with just 61% of the vote, while in Newham every seat went to Labour on an even lower vote share. The Conservatives benefited in Broxbourne, winning 13 out of 14 seats with a bare majority of votes cast, while in Winchester the Liberal Democrats won all but three wards contested despite receiving scarcely more than half the total vote.

If the electoral system is sometimes capricious, there is growing evidence that some parties have learned to cope better than others, as results from 1998 illustrate. There was a 3% swing from Liberal Democrat to Conservative in Bromley yet the Conservatives lost council control. The explanation for this lay in a handful of key Conservative-held wards which were captured by the Liberal Democrats on a 10% swing. Similarly, in Croydon, where the Conservatives won more votes but fewer seats than Labour in 1994, a further increase in the Conservative borough-wide vote to 46% was insufficient to enable the party to retake control of the council. Labour's campaign was concentrated in the crucial marginal wards and was effective in ensuring their retention. Such results seem to indicate that the Liberal Democrats and Labour currently have a better understanding of the mechanics behind the electoral system, while local Conservatives are more prone to accumulating votes in places where they will have less overall impact.

The Labour government itself has recognised that the number of local

authorities where virtual one-party rule exists may lead to complacency on the part of councillors. In more than a hundred local authorities across Britain the ruling party, overwhelmingly Labour, controls 75% or more of council seats. In such authorities any opposition voice is necessarily muted. It would be churlish to criticise the Labour Party for its current dominance, but local democracy is best served by a competitive party system. When one party receives a much greater share of seats than votes, then activists in and supporters of other parties may become disillusioned with the process. Results do show that a party can adjust its campaign and force the system to work in its favour. But it is a moot point whether democracy exists when the composition of a local authority fails to reflect local expressions of partisan support.

Re-invigorating local democracy

This audit has highlighted a number of concerns that directly affect the health of local democracy. Chief amongst these is the low level of turnout at the 1998 elections. This may be a function of two other features we have examined, namely the difficulties in understanding how the electoral system operates and the tendency of that system to skew the distribution of council seats towards a dominant party. In some other regards, however, local democracy appears to be in good shape. The number of unopposed returns is much lower than it once was, there is strong competition for seats, voters have a range of parties to choose from, and candidates from those parties, to a greater extent than in other types of election, reflect the gender and ethnic balance in society as a whole. We now turn to consider how far the government's proposals to reinvigorate local democracy might impact upon these characteristics.

It is planned to expand the practice of local authorities holding annual elections for a third of their membership, a system currently used in the metropolitan boroughs and in some district and unitary councils. The main authorities affected by this proposal would be the 32 London boroughs which have hitherto held elections for the whole council on a four-yearly cycle. Since the government also believes that wherever possible all electors in an area should vote each year, it will need to instruct the Local Government Commission to create three-member wards across the whole of London. Where a two-tier system of local authorities continues to operate, that is in counties and districts, the proposals are different. Here, the pattern will be one in which both counties and districts elect half their council members in alternate years. This would result in annual elections for these areas but, unless two-member wards are created throughout, it is unlikely that more than half the electorate would be involved each time.

Driving these proposals is the government's desire to improve local accountability. It is assumed that increasing the frequency of elections will make elected members more sensitive to the needs and demands of

local taxpayers. This may or may not be true, but what is the likely effect of this reform upon levels of participation? Analysis of turnout in local elections suggests that voters are more likely to participate in quadrennial than in annual elections.¹⁰ Comparing those district authorities which elect the entire council every fourth year with those where a proportion of councillors are elected annually shows the former to enjoy a consistently higher turnout than the latter. This is also true when we control for the election year. In 1991, for example, the average turnout in wards where an election was taking place for the first time since 1987 was 52%, while the comparable figure for wards which had had an election in the previous year was just 45%. Another approach is to compare turnout in the metropolitan and London boroughs. Periodically, the electoral cycles in these authorities coincide and on such occasions the turnout in London, where the whole council is elected, has been higher. Interestingly, at general elections the reverse is the case, with the metropolitan areas consistently having a higher turnout than London. Universal whole-council elections would do more for participation than a more frequent electoral cycle. Under the former, the electorate have the attraction of being able to change their council lock, stock and barrel if they so wish. With the latter, they will often find that the election outcome is predetermined before a single vote has been cast.

Another consequence of the move towards annual or biennial elections would be the rationalisation of ward boundaries to create, wherever possible, a pattern of two and three-member wards. Given a general reluctance to increase the overall number of councillors, this would involve, in most cases, enlarging existing wards. Although this would promote greater electoral equality, it might also have a dampening effect on turnout. Other things being equal, turnout tends to be higher in wards with smaller electorates.¹¹

Two further changes designed to reinvigorate local democracy, namely elected mayors and the greater use of referendums, are closely related to the annual election proposal. Elected mayors, it is argued, would provide a focus for political leadership and would improve public awareness of the administrative responsibilities undertaken by local authorities. Referendums would be used in the first instance to allow the public to decide on the idea of an elected mayor for their authority and subsequently on important matters of local development or to settle controversial issues. Both would require electors to vote more frequently.

London has already had a referendum and that precedent does not bode well for the rest of local government. Arguably, the low turnout occurred because the Yes vote was perceived as a formality, but on such a major issue the closeness of the result should not have unduly influenced the electorate's willingness to express even a symbolic view. The history of local referendums conducted in the past by individual

authorities is littered with instances of poor turnouts. The potential impact of elected mayors is more complex. Candidates with high public profiles might well stimulate public interest and thus promote greater participation. The attraction of governing one of the world's major cities will encourage such candidates to come forward in London. It is questionable, however, whether similar circumstances will operate in Britain's other cities. Moreover, no one is sure of the effect upon councillor recruitment that elected mayors might bring in their wake. With political leadership focused on a single individual, others, even if members of an appointed cabinet, may feel less inclined to continue in a secondary role. Already the percentage of councillors not standing for re-election is above 40% in some authorities, and that statistic may rise if the power of 'ordinary' councillors is seen to diminish.

Finally, there are a clutch of proposals designed to facilitate voting in local elections. These include a rolling electoral register to replace the current antiquated method of preparing a register in October of one year only for it not to come into force until the following February. It is intended that this reform would solve the problem of electors becoming effectively disfranchised simply by moving house. Other measures, for example improving access to polling stations for the disabled and redesigning the official poll card, would require little effort by local authorities. The government, however, has more ambitious plans for local authorities to experiment in the way elections are conducted. Such experiments may enable them to conduct an entire local election by postal vote or even allow electronic voting, presumably from the comfort of one's armchair. More immediate changes might see the increased use of mobile polling stations, the location of polling booths at supermarkets rather than church halls, voting at weekends and/or over a number of days.

Some local authorities are already trying these methods as far as the law allows. Certainly, the practice of encouraging as many electors as are eligible to vote by post does appear to facilitate participation, with turnout higher amongst this group than amongst those required to visit a polling station.¹² Other councils have tried to make local elections more user friendly through publicity campaigns aimed at particular social groups, for example young voters, whose participation rates are low. Within the constraint that no change in procedures should make electoral fraud easier, these proposals should prove beneficial for the health of local democracy. Local elections should be events which the public perceive as relevant to their everyday lives and where participation is relatively straightforward.

Conclusions

Increasing the frequency of elections may have the desired effect of making councillors more sensitive to public opinion but it is not clear that turnout would necessarily increase. The level of participation seen

at the 1998 elections was considerably below average but in recent years there have been other occasions when large numbers have abstained. Electoral participation, therefore, is extremely fragile and the government's proposals, although well-intentioned, might have the opposite effect to that intended. Making the electoral register more efficient will mean more people being included who might otherwise have been omitted. If those additional registrars do not vote, then measured turnout will decline, not rise. If changes to the electoral timetable and to the means for conducting those elections are inadequately explained, then voters may become more, not less, confused.

Competition for council seats remains healthy, with sufficient candidates and a range of parties on offer. Nevertheless, recruitment and retention of suitable councillors has been identified as a problem for local government.¹³ Legislative changes to improve accountability which exposed the work of local councillors to ever closer public scrutiny could discourage certain people from standing for election. Annual elections would mean local parties behaving in almost permanent campaign mode and that would be regarded by some as detrimental to the development of long-term policies.

Of course, the government's proposals do not address at all the issue of electoral distortion and the preponderance of local authorities that are virtual one-party states. The White Paper talks of the importance of retaining the close link between electors and elected but also refers to the Jenkins Commission on Voting Systems. When that Commission reports, it is noted, the government will consider the implications for local government. Whatever form of proportional representation is proposed for any future election of the Westminster Parliament, the position of local government already appears anomalous. The new legislative bodies in Scotland, Wales and London will all have an element of proportionality through the Additional Member System. In Northern Ireland elections to the new assembly and to local authorities have been by single transferable vote. In June 1999, elections for the European Parliament will be organised on the basis of a regional list system of PR. By contrast, the method used to elect local authorities looks outdated and entirely inappropriate to the needs of a healthy local democracy.

1 *Modern Local Government: In Touch with the People* (Cm 4014, 1998).

2 See P. Norris and N. Gavin (eds), *Britain Votes 1997* (Oxford University Press 1997) first published as a special issue of *Parliamentary Affairs*, 1997/4.

3 C. Rallings and M. Thrasher, 'Forecasting Vote and Seat Share in Local Elections' in D. Farrell *et al.*, *British Elections and Parties Yearbook 1996* (Frank Cass 1996).

4 C. Rallings and M. Thrasher, 'The Local Elections', in Norris and Gavin, *op. cit.*

5 See, C. Rallings and M. Thrasher, *Local Elections in Britain*, (Routledge 1997) ch. 4; C. Rallings, M. Thrasher and J. Downe, *Enhancing Local Electoral Turnout: A guide to current practice and future reform*. (York Publishing Services 1996).

6 C. Rallings and M. Thrasher, *Explaining Election Turnout* (HMSO, 1994).

- 7 C. Rallings and M. Thrasher, The Electoral Record, in D. McIver (ed.), *The Liberal Democrats* (Prentice Hall/Harvester Wheatsheaf, 1996).
- 8 See C. Rallings and M. Thrasher, *Local Elections in Britain*, pp 78–79.
- 9 J. Lovenduski, Gender Politics: A Breakthrough for Women? in Norris and Gavin (eds) op. cit.
- 10 C. Rallings and M. Thrasher, 'The Impact of Local Electoral Systems', *Local Government Studies*, 18 2.
- 11 Rallings and Thrasher, *Explaining Election Turnout*, op. cit.
- 12 Rallings, Thrasher and Downe, op. cit. pp. 17–18.
- 13 C. Game and S. Leach, *Councillor Recruitment and Turnover: An Approaching Precipice?* (Local Government Management Board, 1993).