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Notes and Comments

Coalition Theory and Local Government: Coalition Payoffs in Britain

MICHAEL LAVER, COLIN RALLINGS AND MICHAEL THRASHER*

Formal coalition theory has tended to ignore the existence of local government coalitions. Local government studies have tended to ignore the existence of formal coalition theory. Yet local administrations frequently comprise coalitions of parties. There is clearly a need, therefore, to bring the two areas of study together.

Formal coalition theory has tended to ignore local coalitions in two ways. In the first place, the theories have not been conceptualized in a way that enables them to be brought to bear directly on the problems of local government. In the second place, empirical tests of coalition theories have dealt almost exclusively with coalitions at the national government level. These tests have shown coalition theories to be very successful at predicting both the composition of national coalition cabinets and the distribution of cabinet portfolios between members.¹

If formal coalition theories can be adapted to local government, therefore, they may well have much to offer the local government specialist. This Note involves a consideration of the theoretical issues involved in doing this, together with a preliminary exploration, from the perspective of coalition theory, of the distribution of coalition payoffs in British local government.

THEORETICAL ISSUES

The first, and undoubtedly the most important, difference between local and national government coalitions is that the concept of a 'government' means very different things in

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¹ See, for example, Eric Browne and Mark Franklin, 'Aspects of Coalition Payoffs in European Parliamentary Democracies', *American Political Science Review*, LXVII (1973), 453-69; Abram De Swaan, *Coalition Theories and Cabinet Formations* (Amsterdam: Elsevier, 1973); Eric Browne and F. A. Feste, 'Qualitative Dimensions of Coalition Payoffs: Evidence from European Coalition Governments 1945-70', *American Behavioural Scientist*, xviii (1975), 530-56; Lawrence Dodd, *Coalitions in Parliamentary Government* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1976); Norman Schofield and Michael Laver, 'Bargaining Theory and Portfolio Payoffs in European Coalition Cabinets, 1945-83', *British Journal of Political Science*, xv (1985), 143-64; Michael Taylor and Michael Laver, 'Government Coalitions in Western Europe', *European Journal of Political Research*, 1 (1973), 205-48.

the two contexts. At the national level, there is almost no ambiguity about which parties comprise the government; there is always a cabinet and parties holding cabinet portfolios are in the government. Parties that support the government without holding cabinet portfolios may be treated differently from those that oppose it, but they cannot be treated as part of the administration, however essential they are to its survival.

The situation is rather different in local 'government'. It also tends to vary considerably from system to system. In Britain and Ireland, for example, there is certainly no formal legal entity at local level with a status analogous to that of a national cabinet or government. Rather, the 'executive' is the group of full-time paid council officers while the council meeting is the 'legislature'. There is no formal political executive to be captured as one of the spoils in the legislative game. In the absence of such a 'cabinet', the definition of the local 'government' is ambiguous. None the less, it makes sense to look for something as close as possible to a national government coalition at the local government level. Presumably local councillors, when they fight elections, are fighting to win something. Presumably political parties, when they engage in coalition bargaining, are bargaining to control something. This 'something' needs to be specified carefully for each local coalition system under study, since only then can we define the formal bargaining payoffs.

Theories of national coalition government have been dominated by two types of assumed payoff. The first is a fixed reward of office; the second comprises a variable reward associated with the policy output of the coalition. The second point of difference between coalition bargaining at the local and national levels within the same political system, therefore, is that the balance between these payoffs may shift. Furthermore, new elements may enter each. The scope for patronage, for example, may be greater at a local level, while the range of specific policy issues will certainly differ. Few local governments have foreign policies, while few national politicians concern themselves much with such important matters as land use planning control, which often provide the red meat of local politics.

The third point of variation between local and national coalition bargaining is that the specific policy positions of a local party may differ from those of the national party, and from those of its sister parties in different localities. This may lead different local arenas within the same national party system to generate different local coalitions for the same basic configuration of parties.

The fourth important point of difference is that local coalitions are formed in a national bargaining context. As is always the case in Britain (and sometimes in Ireland) for example, the context might be that of a national one-party government. Or it may involve, as it does for most European systems, the context of a *particular* national coalition government. At the very least, national attitudes to coalition may well influence local coalition politics, while the reverse is less likely to be the case.

The outcome of the process of coalition formation, therefore, may be quite different at local and national level within the same political system. This will be true even if the same bargaining processes are at work and the same theories are appropriate, because the 'inputs' to the coalition formation process vary so widely from level to level and locality to locality. This means that local coalitions should be of particular interest to coalition theorists. One of the clearest general conclusions to emerge from all the empirical tests of theories of national government coalition formation is that the performance of each of the theories is very country-specific. This well-documented phenomenon has tended to undermine general tests of theories of national government coalition bargaining on European data. Country specialists, furthermore, have frequently been at pains to point out

that, whatever the case for *other* European systems, the special features of *their* system make the use of coalition theory inappropriate.²

The systematic analysis of local government coalitions can go quite a long way towards overcoming this problem. Provided that account is taken of the salient differences between local and national coalition bargaining, the analysis of local coalitions within a single country holds constant the two key variables of time and polity. This allows for the testing of theories adapted to the specific situations of particular coalition systems while still retaining sufficient cases to conduct a useful analysis. The factors that do vary between local coalition situations, such as the precise configuration of bargaining weights or the precise policy positions of the parties, can be explored in much greater depth.

The remainder of this Note is devoted to an empirical analysis of the impact of the party distribution of seats in British local councils on the payoffs of office. The fifty or so 'hung' councils in existence after the May 1985 local elections provide a very good opportunity to look at payoff distribution between the same set of parties at the same point in time, given quite a wide range of seat configurations. The emergence of the SDP/Liberal Alliance has recently altered the composition of many British authorities to the point where no single party has an absolute majority. In these authorities it is a simple fact of political life that a party can remain in power only with the support of another party or parties.

LOCAL COALITION PAYOFFS IN BRITAIN: MAY 1985

Problems of Operationalization

The first issue that arises when looking at local coalitions is the need to clarify what is meant by a local 'government'. Office-seeking interpretations of national coalition payoffs have typically concentrated on the distribution of cabinet portfolios. In British local government, however, there is no clear political head of a local authority department. We therefore need to specify a suitable local government equivalent to ministerial office. Since much council business is conducted in committees rather than in the full council, it is appropriate to begin with these in our search for an indicator of membership of a local 'government'.

A considerable proportion of local authorities have traditionally allowed *all-party* membership of committees. The recent findings of the Widdicombe inquiry (henceforward: 'Widdicombe') show that, in local authorities under the control of a majority party, it has been normal for committee membership to incorporate other parties. Even in those authorities where one-party committees did exist, such committees were the exception rather than the rule.³ This indicates that a party's mere presence on a committee is not necessarily an indicator of participation in the controlling administration. What may nevertheless be important is the *proportion* of committee seats allocated to a particular party. If this proportion is greater than the party's proportion of seats on the full council, then this may hint at that party's participation in the administration.

An alternative to analysing the full party composition of the committees is to use the positions of chair and, where applicable, deputy chair as indicators of the payoffs of office. Committee chairmen have long been regarded as key figures in the process of local

² See, for example, Vernon Bogdanor, ed., *Coalition Government in Western Europe* (London: Heinemann Educational Books, 1983).

³ Committee of Inquiry into the Conduct of Local Authority Business, Research Volume 1, *The Political Organisation of Local Authorities*, Cmnd 9798 (London: HMSO, 1986), p. 34.

government decision making, and it is clear from earlier analysis that many councillors perceive their political careers in terms of obtaining first a position on a major committee and ultimately an important chair.⁴ It thus seems justifiable to consider the chairing of a council committee as a payoff of local coalition membership.

A problem that remains is that of determining which of the many committees in a local authority can be used to examine possible coalition payoffs. Widdicombe has confirmed, however, that it is the Policy and Resources Committee or its equivalent that occupies a central position within the organizational structure. Only 6 per cent of Widdicombe's sample of authorities did not have such a committee. In the eighty-one majority-controlled authorities having one-party committees, the Policy Committee was usually the one in question.⁵ While it is tempting to use the Policy Committee as the functional equivalent of a cabinet at local level, this would understate the policy-making role of the major service committees, which can play a significant part in the allocation of resources. To capture as much as possible of the policy and the resource allocating aspects of local government activity, we have looked at membership of the major service committees as well as of the Policy and Resource Committee in the hung local authorities.

Data on the distribution of chairs, deputy chairs and seats in each of the fifty-two hung councils was collected in a survey conducted by Rallings and Thrasher.⁶ Although several of these authorities had been hung for some while, a significant proportion were encountering the phenomenon for the first time. Following the 1985 county council elections, half of the English shires had councils with no single party in the majority. In all cases a questionnaire was sent to the various party leaders as well as the authority's Chief Executive in an attempt to tap many aspects of the coalition environment. In this way very good data were obtained on forty-eight of the fifty-two hung councils.

The Distribution of Committee Chairs and Deputy Chairs in Hung Councils

The most direct analogy in local government with the holding of a national cabinet portfolio is probably the chairing of a council committee. Perhaps the most remarkable finding of the Rallings and Thrasher survey is that committee chairs were shared between more than one party in only ten cases. In the remaining thirty-eight minority situations, a single party controlled all of the chairs. The full results are reported in Table 1. Broadening the analysis to include deputy chairs of committees, parties in twelve of the forty-eight hung councils shared 'cabinet' positions between them. One party took all chairs and deputy chairs on the remaining thirty-six councils.

The infrequency with which committee chairs are shared can be interpreted in one of two ways. The first is that the vast majority of hung councils in Britain do not generate coalitions, but rather minority one-party local 'governments'. This may indicate an unwillingness to depart from past practice under majority government situations in which a single party dominated the committee chairs. The second possibility is that the possession of committee chairs is not in fact the defining criterion of 'government' membership.

⁴ See C. A. Collins, 'Considerations on the Motivation and Social Background of Councillors', *Policy and Politics*, vi (1978), 425-47; Peter Saunders, *Urban Politics* (London: Penguin, 1980), especially Chap. 5.

⁵ Conduct of Local Authority Business, *Political Organisation of Local Authorities*, p. 111.

⁶ Colin Rallings and Michael Thrasher, 'Parties Divided on Hung Councils', *Local Government Chronicle*, 6185 (1986), 12-13.

TABLE I *Seat Distribution and Bargaining Logic When One Party Received All Chairs*

Council	Party					Total seats	Winning threshold	Bargaining logic
	Con.	Lab.	All.	Ind.	Nat./ Other			
Cambridgeshire CC	29	21	*26	1	0	77	39	Three way
Gloucestershire CC	23	14	*23	2	0	62	32	Three way
Maidstone BC	*22	7	22	4	0	55	28	Three way
St Albans BC	25	7	*23	2	0	57	29	Three way
Wiltshire CC	30	16	*26	2	1	75	38	Three way
Somerset CC	24	7	*26	0	0	57	29	Three way
Warwickshire CC	26	*24	10	2	0	62	32	Three way
Great Grimsby BC	*18	17	9	1	0	45	23	Three way
Brent LBC	*31	32	3	0	0	66	34	Three way
Oxfordshire CC	*31	20	18	1	0	70	36	Three way
Hertfordshire CC	*36	27	14	0	0	77	39	Three way
Devon CC	37	10	*36	2	0	85	43	Three way
Lothian SRC	*21	23	3	1	1	49	25	Complex
Northumberland CC	13	*29	21	2	0	65	33	Three way
Cheshire CC	27	*32	11	1	0	71	36	Three way
Eastleigh BC	*20	10	14	0	0	44	23	Three way
Lincolnshire CC	*42	32	11	0	0	85	43	Three way
Cannock Chase CC	5	*19	16	2	0	42	22	Three way
NW Leicestershire DC	*12	19	4	5	0	40	21	Complex
Humberside CC	*35	36	4	0	0	75	38	Three way
Bradford MBC	*43	41	6	0	0	90	46	Three way
Northampton BC	*21	18	4	0	0	43	22	Three way
Cheltenham BC	12	2	*14	1	4	33	17	Complex
Avon CC	31	*37	8	0	0	76	39	Three way
Shropshire CC	24	*25	10	7	0	66	34	Three way
Lancashire CC	42	*48	9	0	0	99	50	Three way
Pendle BC	14	*19	17	0	0	50	26	Three way
Brighton BC	*22	22	4	0	0	48	25	Three way
Stockport MBC	*28	15	15	3	2	63	32	Complex
Exeter BC	16	*14	5	1	0	36	19	Three way
Bristol BC	29	*33	6	0	0	68	35	Three way
York BC	18	*19	8	0	0	45	23	Three way
Peterborough BC	18	*22	8	0	0	48	25	Three way
Calderdale MBC	*16	22	15	5	0	54	28	Three way
Crewe & Nantwich BC	*27	25	5	0	0	57	29	Three way
Waltham Forest LBC	*25	27	7	0	0	59	30	Three way

* Party receiving chairs marked with asterisk.

TABLE 2 *Seat Distribution, Bargaining Logic and Allocation of Committee Chairs When Parties Split Chairs*

Council		Party					Total seats	Winning threshold	Bargaining logic
		Con.	Lab.	All.	Ind.	Nat./ Oth.			
Clwyd CC	Seats	14	25	2	23	2	66	34	Three way
	Chairs	2	0	0	4	0			
	Dep. chairs	2	0	0	4	0			
Hammersmith & Fulham LBC	Seats	23	24	3	0	0	50	26	Three way
	Chairs	5	0	0	0	0			
	Dep. chairs	4	0	1	0	0			
Wyre Forest DC	Seats	18	7	14	3	0	42	22	Complex
	Chairs	0	0	4	0	0			
	Dep. chairs	0	1	3	0	0			
Milton Keynes BC	Seats	17	18	9	2	0	46	24	Three way
	Chairs	2	0	2	0	0			
	Dep. chairs	2	0	2	0	0			
Newark & Sherwood DC	Seats	24	26	2	4	0	56	29	Complex
	Chairs	1	0	0	2	0			
	Dep. chairs	3	0	0	0	0			
South Somerset DC	Seats	21	1	27	11	0	60	32	Three way
	Chairs	1	0	2	1	0			
	Dep. chairs	2	0	1	1	0			
Gloucester BC	Seats	16	11	6	0	0	33	17	Three way
	Chairs	0	3	1	0	0			
	Dep. chairs	0	3	1	0	0			
Cumbria CC	Seats	36	39	5	3	0	83	42	Three way
	Chairs	4	1	0	0	0			
	Dep. chairs	3	1	1	0	0			
Clydesdale SDC	Seats	0	6	0	6	3	15	8	Three way
	Chairs	0	0	0	2	1			
	Dep. chairs	0	0	0	2	1			
Hastings BC	Seats	13	8	10	1	0	32	17	Three way
	Chairs	2	0	1	0	0			
	Dep. chairs	0	0	3	0	0			
Walsall MBC	Seats	19	25	9	7	0	60	31	Complex
	Chairs	4	0	0	2	0			
	Dep. chairs	5	0	0	1	0			
Rochdale MBC	Seats	17	29	14	0	0	60	31	Three way
	Chairs	4	0	2	0	0			
	Dep. chairs	6	0	0	0	0			

To throw some further light on this, compare Tables 1 and 2. Table 1 shows the council seat and committee chair distribution in hung councils with one-party allocations of chairs; Table 2 shows the distribution for hung councils in which the chairs were shared. Each table shows, in addition, the 'winning' threshold of seats needed in each council and an assessment of the 'bargaining logic' of the situation. One of the many indices of bargaining power could easily also be calculated, but the more general statement of the logic of the situation highlights the fact that the formal bargaining structure was identical for nearly all councils. Most comprised three parties, any two of which could combine to form a majority. Independents or others were nearly always 'dummies', pivotal to no majority. All of these are referred to as 'three-way' bargaining situations. When the group of independents is not a dummy, we need more information about them than is available, and the situation has been described as 'complex'. Thus zero-sum bargaining power rarely varies between the three main parties, even though the proportions of seats held by the parties does. In some circumstances the three parties divide the seats more or less equally. In others, a party with a very small number of seats controls the balance of power. Nearly always, however, any two of the three parties could form a majority.

From Table 1 we see that, of the thirty-six 'one-party' systems of committee chairs, there were three systems where the parties tied for first place and one party took all the chairs. Of the remaining thirty-three, the largest party took all the chairs in twenty-one and the second largest party took all in twelve. In most of the latter the second largest party was a close runner-up, and there was no bias in favour of any particular party. The situation in councils where the committee chairs were divided is in sharp contrast. Table 2 shows both their council seat distribution and the share out of committee chairs and deputy chairs. In no case does the largest party on the council get more chairs than any other, and in nine out of twelve cases it gets no chairs at all. Furthermore, the party that loses out is nearly always Labour. Some element of 'bargaining' clearly seems to be present here. This may amount to no more than Labour refusing to participate in the sharing of committee chairs, or it may be that the Conservatives and the Alliance ganged up in these instances to keep Labour out. What we can clearly say, however, is that the sharing of chairs is unusual. The norm is that one party – not necessarily the largest – takes all chairs and deputy chairs.

The Distribution of Ordinary Committee Seats in Hung Councils

The second possibility is that it is ordinary committee seats, not chairs, that are distributed between parties as part of the spoils of 'office' in local government. The evidence on this score is even more striking. We have information on the precise distribution of seats in the policy committees of forty-two of the fifty-two hung councils and on the planning committees of thirty-eight of them. On only one of the forty-two relevant hung councils were seats on the policy committee not given to all three of the main parties. On only two of the thirty-eight relevant councils did all three parties not get seats on the planning committee. The overwhelming norm is for all-party representation on the committees, and this representation even extended to the 'independents' who, as often as not, were 'dummies' with no bargaining power whatever.

In this respect, therefore, the composition of committees in hung authorities is fairly similar to that where a party has an overall majority – although the number of hung councils having one-party committees is considerably lower. The most interesting finding, however, is that not only were all parties represented on the Policy and Resources Committee but that their representation was very close to proportional. The party shares

of seats on planning and policy committees were regressed on the party share of seats in the council chambers. While the results for the Conservatives and the Independents were relatively erratic (almost certainly reflecting the fact that many councillors who describe themselves as Independents are, in fact, allied closely with the Conservatives), those for the Alliance and Labour were close to strict proportionality. The Alliance in particular received a very proportional allocation of committee seats. It is this feature more than any other perhaps, which sets apart hung local authorities from those with majority control. While the norm may be for all-party representation, it is not the case on councils with a one-party majority that this is necessarily strictly proportional to the distribution of party seats in the full council.

The distribution of committee payoffs *between all parties represented in the local councils* is very much like that found by Schofield and Laver at national level for portfolio payoffs *within winning coalitions*.⁷ Overall, indeed, the empirical findings on portfolio payoffs are as striking for local government as they are for national government, though the two sets of results are quite different. At the local level, we are still left in the dark about what, precisely, the prize at issue might be. If we consider committee chairs, then most minority situations in local government give all of the prize to a single party. There are very few coalitions at all. If we take committee seats as the prize, then minority situations virtually always resulted in a proportionate distribution of seats between all parties. Apart from one or two wild cases, deviations from proportionality probably arise from no more than the particular method used to allocate fractional seat entitlements.⁸ On the basis of the committee payoffs minority structures in British local government result either in one-party minority regimes or in grand coalitions. Very little evidence of coalition bargaining over committee allocations is thrown up.

CONCLUSIONS

We might easily arrive at a number of differing conclusions about the behaviour of parties in hung councils on the basis of these findings. From the division of committee chairs, it is clear that most hung councils result in a form of minority 'government', although not necessarily by the largest party, and that *zero sum* coalition theory has little relevance to British local politics. This may be because British local politicians, nurtured on a diet of two-party cut and thrust, do not play coalition games at all or because they play them for different stakes than those contested by national politicians. After all, a major revision of party practice by local councillors might be taken as an acceptance of the Alliance as a permanent feature of the British political scene. It is clear from the responses to the Rallings and Thrasher survey that both Labour and Conservative politicians alike saw the adoption of new conventions on committee membership as a necessary evil, with adverse effects upon the quality of decision-making within local authorities.⁹

It is certainly difficult to believe that *no* bargaining takes place over decision-making in the hung councils. Since it does not appear to occur over committee allocations, the other obvious possibility is that it goes on over *policy*. Policy-seeking motivations are *much* more likely to generate theories that can cope with minority or over-sized governments

⁷ Schofield and Laver, 'Bargaining Theory and Portfolio Payoffs', pp. 156–7.

⁸ See Michael Laver, 'Destruction Testing the Relative Weakness Effect on Fake Data', *Centre for the Study of Irish Elections: Working Papers, Volume 2* (Galway: University College, 1986).

⁹ Rallings and Thrasher, 'Parties Divided on Hung Councils', p. 13.

since policy payoffs reward those that are outside the government as much as those that are in it.¹⁰ Furthermore, theories of coalitional behaviour at national level are clearly moving in this direction. Given the apparent tendency of British local politicians to spurn opportunities to enter coalitions, this general approach may prove fruitful in both theoretical and empirical terms. An analysis of the link between 'coalition' policy and party policy at local level is the obvious next step in the exploration of the coalitional process in British local government.

This current stage in the analysis of British local coalitions has shown that the office-seeking approach that underlies many existing coalition theories does not work at all well in British local politics, at least given the current state of party competition on the ground. Perhaps local politicians are still at a very low point on the learning curve for behaviour in minority situations. Perhaps many of them think that the Alliance will go into a decline, enabling them to return to the old adversarial system. If the phenomenon of the hung council is here to stay, however, there is no doubt that coalition theorists and local government specialists will have much to learn from each other.

¹⁰ Ian Budge and Michael Laver, 'Office-seeking and Policy-pursuit in Coalition Theory', *Legislative Studies Quarterly* (forthcoming).

Changing Pressure-Group Politics: The Case of the Trades Union Congress, 1976–84

NEIL J. MITCHELL*

This Note presents a variety of new evidence on the paths and channels that one pressure group, the Trades Union Congress (TUC), has used to influence or obstruct public policy in Britain over the last decade. Where is pressure applied? At what level? Which departments are most important? What is the role of tripartite organizations? How are policy positions communicated? In addition to these and similar questions the evidence permits a systematic examination of the impact made by a change in the party of government upon the structure of group–government interaction. Two contrasting patterns of interaction, which represent a rapid and sharp change coinciding with the change in government, are revealed. Government decisions themselves appear to be determinants of pressure-group influence and activities – even for a group with such a central position in British politics as the TUC – as well as the other way around; 'Bentley on his head' as Harry Eckstein puts it.¹

The Trades Union Congress, the national centre of the British trade-union movement, has approximately one hundred unions affiliated to it and has met annually since 1868. It

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¹ Harry Eckstein, *Pressure Group Politics: The Case of the British Medical Association* (Stanford, Calif.: Stanford University Press, 1960).