

The Impact of Local Government Electoral Systems: Some Thoughts for the Local Government Commission

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As the Local Government Commission prepares to travel the country in search of solutions to whatever structural problems it finds, it may be interested to know something of the electoral effects of the current variety of practice in English local government. Both the Widdicombe Committee and the recent stimulating paper by John Stewart and Chris Game¹ have addressed some important issues relating to the character of local democracy. In this paper, however, we wish to take such discussion a stage further by examining some of the conditions under which local elections seem best to fulfil their representative and accountable role.

Specifically, we shall analyse five dimensions of local electoral politics:

1. levels of turnout;
2. contestation of vacancies;
3. party competition;
4. the appearance and success of women candidates;
5. councillor turnover;

and their impact on four different categories of local authority. Comparisons will be made between single tier councils and those within a dual tier system; between counties and districts; between councils with an annual electoral cycle and those with a quadrennial one; and between wards where a single councillor is elected at a time and those with multiple concurrent vacancies. Other relevant issues, such as ward size and rurality, will also be taken into account. Finally, we shall suggest what lessons the Commission might learn from this

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TABLE 1
TURNOUT VARIATIONS BY TYPE OF LOCAL AUTHORITY

English counties 1985	41.6%	English districts 1987	47.8%	English counties 1989	39.2%	English districts 1991	48.1%
Welsh counties 1985	45.2%	Welsh districts 1987	51.4%	Welsh counties 1989	44.0%	Welsh districts 1991	53.4%
London boroughs 1983 General Election	67.9%	London boroughs 1986	45.5%	London boroughs 1987 General Election	70.7%	London boroughs 1990	48.2%
Metropolitan boroughs 1983 General Election	71.0%	Metropolitan boroughs 1986	39.3%	Metropolitan boroughs 1987 General Election	74.0%	Metropolitan boroughs 1990	46.3%

information should be the maximisation of electoral participation and choice be one of their major aims.

TURNOUT

There does appear to be some support for the contention that average levels of turnout vary between different types of local authority and under different electoral conditions. Two very general, but initially perhaps rather paradoxical propositions appear to be supported. First, turnout levels are higher in district council elections than county council ones; and, second, more people are willing to cast their vote when elections are held every four years rather than annually.

The disparity between county and district elections is both marked and consistent. As Table 1 shows, between six and nine per cent more voters habitually turn out for the supposedly lower tier elections. Although the counties have more important functions and certainly spend a far greater amount of public money than do the districts, it still seems to be the latter authorities with which people identify more closely and in whose elections they are more willing to participate.

Within the districts, it is further the case that turnouts tend to be higher among those authorities which have quadrennial elections. In 1991, the average turnouts in wards where elections were taking place for the first time since 1987 was 51.5 per cent whereas it was only 44.6 per cent in those wards which had had elections in 1990. Such a pattern can also be discerned in those parts of metropolitan England

with single tier local government. The turnout in London is consistently higher than in the metropolitan boroughs whenever their local elections coincide, even though at both the 1983 and 1987 general elections a smaller proportion of the electorate voted in London than in any metropolitan 'county' area. It may well be that the public finds a greater electoral salience in being able to re-elect or throw out an entire council at periodic intervals, rather than being asked to vote more frequently but with perhaps less impact on political control locally.

The fact that turnout also appears to vary with the size of the ward can be added to the already noted disparities between district and county level elections and between authorities with quadrennial as opposed to annual contests. In 1991 nearly six in ten people voted in wards with an electorate of less than 1,000, but only 44 per cent did so where the electorate was more than 6,000. Although an increase in the number of small wards would lead to a proliferation in the number of councillors, it is also the case that large wards may discourage participation by producing too great a distance between elector and councillor. The optimum balance between size and participation seems to be met by wards with an electorate of between 2,500 and 6,000, where the average turnout in 1991 among those authorities holding whole council elections was over 50 per cent. It may well be argued that the relatively large size of county council electoral divisions – the mean in 1989 was 7,588 electors – is an important factor in depressing turnout in that tier. Equally, it could be the case that if the counties formed the sole tier of local government, then their record for encouraging electoral participation might dramatically improve for that reason alone.

The evidence from the current single tier authorities in London and the metropolitan boroughs is mixed. Although the higher turnout in London may be connected with the fact that the mean electorate in three member wards there is, at 8,041, over 2,000 less than in the metropolitan areas, size of ward is not unambiguously related to levels of turnout within each type of authority.

CONTESTATION

The view that local elections produce a large number of uncontested seats is now almost wholly without foundation, at least in England. In London, the metropolitan boroughs, the counties, and those districts with annual elections fewer than five per cent of current councillors were returned unopposed. Although the figure is much higher for

TABLE 2
PROPORTION OF LOCAL GOVERNMENT WARDS UNCONTESTED

English districts 1991	-annual	3.4%
English districts 1991	-all-out	15.7%
Welsh districts 1991		37.0%
English counties 1989		2.1%
Welsh counties 1989		28.8%
Metropolitan boroughs 1991		4.5%
London boroughs 1990		0.1%

districts with a four-yearly electoral cycle, the uncontested vacancies occur almost wholly in wards with a population of less than 2,500. Seats in small wards in rural areas are, unsurprisingly, those least likely to be contested. However, when more candidates than there are vacancies do present themselves, the electorate in these same areas seem keen to use their vote, not least we suspect from a sense of identity with the geography of the ward and a desire to support an individual candidate as its representative. This phenomenon is especially noticeable in Wales where in large tracts of the country there are either no elections at all or scattered contests attracting higher rates of participation. However, in the districts of Gwent and Glamorgan the English pattern seems now to apply with, in 1991, contests in more than 80 per cent of seats.

PARTY COMPETITION

The issue of contestation is closely related to that of party competition. The structural changes following the 1972 Local Government Act led to a rapid increase in party political activity and a consequent decline in the number of independent councillors. Although more than 2,000 Independents were elected in the 1991 district elections, nearly 95 per cent of this total came from more rural authorities with all-out elections. Few Independents were elected in the English shire counties in 1989 and the trend is now almost extinct in London and the metropolitan boroughs. As the major political parties have come to recognise the importance of maximising their strength in every elected tier of government, the likelihood of their fielding candidates is now tempered almost solely by the factors of rurality and size of ward.

Only in those districts which hold quadrennial elections do the Labour and Conservative parties contest less than 90 per cent and the Liberal Democrats less than 75 per cent of the seats. Even here,

however, the absence of party is only really noticeable in wards with an electorate of less than 2,500, which themselves are heavily concentrated outside the urban areas. Over that level, and in particular in wards with more than 4,000 electors, the degree of party competition reaches that found in other sectors of local government. In all English local elections since 1988 an average of almost 2.9 candidates have contested each vacancy.

GENDER

Many observers believe that a proportional electoral system based on multi-member seats may be one way to encourage more women to compete for local office. Currently, however, the presence or absence of women in local government seems to have more to do with cultural attitudes and party recruitment strategies than with the varieties of electoral system in operation. One variable alone helps to explain why there are fewer women councillors and candidates in Wales than in England and in the metropolitan boroughs than in the shire districts. The explanation has nothing to do with the size of wards, the frequency of elections, the tier of government, or even with single as opposed to multi-member seats. The key to the puzzle is the strength of the Labour Party, with women councillors being comparatively thin on the ground wherever the party dominates local politics. This matter at least cannot be resolved by the Local Government Commission, but rather lies with the parties themselves and their selectorates.

COUNCILLOR TURNOVER

That a significant proportion of councillors do not stand for re-

TABLE 3
WOMEN CANDIDATES AND COUNCILLORS 1991

	English districts	Welsh districts	Metropolitan boroughs
%candidates	28.9	21.8	27.6
%councillors	26.2	18.0	22.7
Women candidates, councillors and party, 1991			
	Conservative	Labour	Liberal Democrat
%candidates	27.4	26.7	33.4
%councillors	27.0	25.9	34.0

TABLE 4
COUNCILLOR TURNOVER IN SELECTED TYPES OF LOCAL
AUTHORITY

		% councillors not standing for re-election
London boroughs	1982-1986	42.0
London boroughs	1986-1990	37.5
Metropolitan boroughs	1982-1986	26.0
Metropolitan boroughs	1983-1987	26.0
Metropolitan boroughs	1984-1988	28.3
English counties	1981-1985	27.7
English counties	1985-1989	26.8

election has been of growing concern in local government for some years. Some survey evidence has been marshalled to provide support for the contention that many councillors have become disillusioned and frustrated by a job which paradoxically provides an increasing workload and a smaller influence on policy. However, because the Widdicombe Committee did not replicate the Maud Committee's study of the attitudes of ex-councillors, we know relatively little about why people voluntarily stand down.

We do have some evidence about the rates of 'voluntary' turnover in different sectors of local government, but it covers only a short time period and in every instance except one deals with a single or 'top' tier authority. The slight drop in turnover in London at the elections following the abolition of the GLC may, however, presage a trend among authorities whose members suddenly find themselves with a more important job to do. In all cases one may contrast the data in Table 4 with the 12 per cent of MPs who retired in 1983 and the 13 per cent (a post-war record) who did so in 1987. It is particularly disappointing that current information on the district councils is not readily available. Tracing the turnover of councillors is something that requires the existence of detailed election results for the entire four-year cycle, and we will be able to do it for the first time only after the May 1992 district elections. This would, however, appear to be a subject worthy of the Local Government Commission's attention if they are concerned to put in place a structure of local government which might encourage councillors to want to stay in post.

CONCLUSION

The overall tenor of our analysis has been to present local elections as events now characterised by vigorous inter-party competition. Only in the more rural parts of England and Wales is it other than rare for electors not to have a choice at the ballot box and only a small minority of councillors are elected unopposed. Party competition is almost universal in local authorities containing significant centres of population and where elections are for the top or only tier of government.

The conditions for encouraging high levels of public participation are more complex. Small wards can produce large turnouts, but equally they attract less party competition and almost one in two of those with an electorate of less than 1,000 were uncontested at the 1991 local elections. Although it is hard to disentangle cause and effect, the best balance between size, turnout, and contestation seems to be achieved with wards of between 2,500 and 6,000 electors, after which participation tends to decline quite noticeably. This applies equally to both single and multi-member wards.

Turnout also seems to be appreciably higher when elections are held every four years rather than annually. Even if the powers and territorial integrity of the metropolitan boroughs are untouched by the proposed review, there may be democratic benefits from creating a larger number of wards with fewer electors and less frequent elections. Similarly, and even more controversially, there can be little doubt that electors have not readily grasped the idea of two-tier local government in the shires. Turnout in the counties, the 'senior' but more remote tier, has been subject to a slight long-term decline, whereas in the less 'important' but more local districts it has been relatively buoyant. In both London and the metropolitan areas turnout has in fact increased by an annual average of 3.5 per cent in the years following abolition of the county tier compared with elections held before 1985.

Currently, therefore, local authorities are at their most vibrant in single or top tier authorities and/or in urban areas. In simple terms, a reform of structure leading to unitary authorities based upon an urban core would guarantee the preservation of such healthy party activity. Regardless of the merits of who should survive, it seems clear that a single, identifiable, and omnipotent local authority would lead to an increase in public accountability and public participation.

The evidence also suggests that the electorate is keener to vote when the party control of the council is at stake rather than if only a proportion of seats are up for grabs and political change is less likely. If the Local Government Commission is concerned to do more than merely change the map of English local government, then it would be desirable for them to take these considerations into account.

NOTES

1. Stewart and C. Game, *Local Democracy - Representation and Elections* (Local Government Management Board, 1991).

Education Reform in Northern Ireland: Towards Harmonisation

MICHAEL STRAIN

Educational arrangements in Northern Ireland should as far as possible match those adopted in Britain.¹ This has been a fundamental and enduring principle of policy here since 1923 and it is evidently as influential as ever today, to judge from the recent legislation.² The new Order is closely modelled on the English and Welsh Act, but also contains some interesting variations of both substance and overall purpose.

The most notable differences between the Northern Ireland proposals and the 1988 Act are as follows:

1. the structure of the National Curriculum;
2. provision of a statutory authority for Catholic maintained schools;
3. promotion of integrated schools;
4. provision for admission and finance in respect of voluntary grammar schools.

In addition, the role of the Education and Library Boards (ELBs) will become more limited and passive, compared with what the 1988 Act proposes for LEAs in England and Wales. But this 'reflect[s] differences in the local administration of the respective education systems', in the rather coy language of the Department's³ explanatory memorandum. The reference is, of course, to embedded political and social divisions which have led to the establishment of nominated Education and Library Boards, only partially and indirectly linked and accountable to a constituency of local electors.⁴

What is probably more significant for the education service here is the common theme discernible in the differences noted above. For if they are examined closely, they will reveal a preoccupation, nowhere espoused or acknowledged, quite different from the emphasis on efficiency, effectiveness, choice and standards, so loudly claimed as the overarching purpose of the English and Welsh reforms.

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Local Government Studies, Vol.18, No.2 (Summer 1992), pp.9-17
PUBLISHED BY FRANK CASS, LONDON