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Exploring Uniformity and Variability in Local Electoral Outcomes: Some Evidence from English Local Elections 1985–1991

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A detailed analysis of English local elections between 1985 and 1991 seems to support the propositions that a proportion of electors hold contradictory local and national voting preferences at one and the same time; and that there is significant variation in party performance both between and within local authorities. The paper concludes that the stimuli to which electors respond in local elections are often those most relevant to the 'context' in which their vote is cast. If partisan dealignment has led to a greater willingness on the part of the electorate to regard voting as a matter of 'horses for courses', there may not only be a further fragmentation in the results of elections of all kinds but the parties may experience different degrees of success depending on the nature of the contest.

The fact that Great Britain is a unitary state crucially influences the ways in which its politics are studied and interpreted. Not least is this the case in the prevailing orthodoxies about the analysis of elections. Every indicator, be it a national opinion poll or a local authority by-election, is closely examined for any message it may carry about the outcome of the next general election. This tendency reaches its apotheosis each first Thursday in May when elections are held for local authorities. Notwithstanding that different communities hold their elections in different years, journalists and political scientists alike see in the results an opportunity to pronounce on the state of the parties nationally and to provide estimates of the implied composition of the next House of Commons.

It is in the nature of such elections, however, that there will be considerable variations in behaviour from place to place. The received wisdom is either to dismiss results running counter to the accepted trend as a 'shambles', or, more soberly, to treat them as irrelevant aberrations.[1] The fact that these are local elections and that the behaviour of electors may reflect local issues and concerns

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is barely acknowledged. Dunleavy (1990) believes that this treatment of sub-national elections in Britain is a product of what he calls 'system bias'. In other words, because power is concentrated in the centre, the dominant concerns of political punditry and psephology are with those parties which are likely to gain that power and with the support they need in order to achieve it.

Similar considerations have also influenced the analysis of parliamentary by-elections and of European assembly elections. In each of these cases the referendum thesis has received powerful support. That is, the idea that electors tend to ignore the specific matters raised by the contest in hand and, instead, cast their ballots principally to express approval or disapproval with the conduct of the parties at Westminster.

Recent evidence about the motivation of electors, and indeed the outcome of various elections in the last few years, must, however, cast some doubt on the orthodox interpretation. Survey data tell us that a substantial proportion of the electorate now changes its party allegiances over quite short periods of time (Miller *et al.*, 1990, c1). Although such individual volatility is often disguised by an overt picture of aggregate stability,[2] its significance as an indicator of dealignment cannot be underestimated. Furthermore, a dealigned electorate will be one willing to tailor its vote in order to achieve the desired electoral outcome.

The results of elections also supply us with evidence of the increasing importance of 'context' to an electoral outcome. In the case of general elections this context is provided by the individual voter's constituency together with the fact that the purpose of the election is to choose a government. Parliamentary by-elections are regarded differently in that while the locus remains the constituency, the purpose has often become one of registering one's support or contempt for the government of the day. The context of elections to both the European assembly and local authorities may be rather more complex. In the case of local government, voters have the specific contexts of the ward in which they are voting and the council which they are choosing, together with those elements of the 'national referendum' which may come to influence their choice. Likewise, elections to the European assembly have the context of constituency, the purpose of choosing a European Parliament as well as providing an opportunity to make a statement about government at Westminster.

In this article we wish to analyse the results of recent non-general elections in Britain to see whether there is any aggregate level evidence that voters do behave differently according to what is at stake when they go to the polling booth.[3] We shall concentrate on a detailed analysis of the results of local elections in England between 1985 and 1991.

Voting and the 'Context' of Elections

The first widespread and systematic evidence that voters in Britain were prepared to engage in 'split-ticket' voting came in 1979 when the general and local elections happened to be held on the same day. Waller (1980, p. 145) subsequently reported, in a study of the share of the vote in the two types of election in 100 constituencies, that whereas in borough (urban) constituencies 'in general electors did not split their local and parliamentary votes', 'in rural areas there can be no doubt that the correlation between...[the] results is much less close'. Such divergences in behaviour, according to Waller, seemed to be a function of the personal popularity of

individual candidates; the existence of salient local issues; and of a greater willingness to cast a vote for other than the Conservative and Labour parties. Steed (1979, p. 106), for example, has calculated that as many as one million more people voted Liberal locally than did so nationally on general election day 1979.

Since 1979 the idea that the 'context' in which the election is being held can affect voters' behaviour has received somewhat wider currency. In a detailed examination of the same set of elections in Liverpool, Cox and Laver (1979) show that voting for the Liberals in the city as a whole was twice as high at the local than at the general election, with two votes being taken from Labour for every one lost by the Conservatives.

Subsequent analysis of electoral change in Liverpool has shown this pattern to persist, at least as far as the relationship between the Liberals (and their successors) and the Conservatives is concerned. As Fig. 1 demonstrates, the Conservative vote has shown a long-term tendency to decline at local elections, only to pick up—albeit to a decreasing level—at general elections. Although party politics in Liverpool over recent years appears to have been a two-party battle between Labour and the Liberal Democrats,[4] the continuing ability of both 'major' parties to command a greater level of support when a national government is being chosen deprived the Alliance in 1987 of victory in two constituencies where the local results just five weeks previously had given them every cause for optimism.

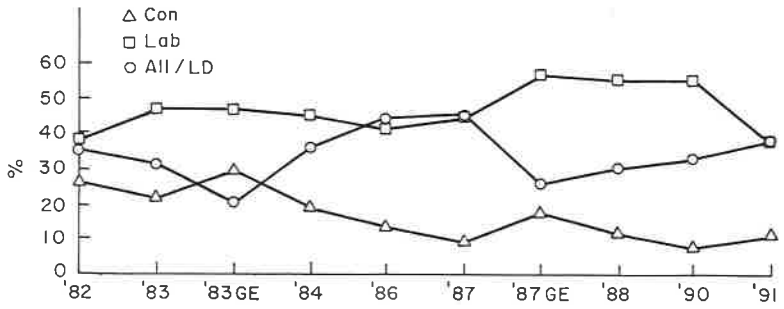

FIG. 1.

Two sets of elections within six weeks of each other in 1989 provide further ammunition for those seeking to argue that the context of the election being contested influences how people cast their vote. As can be seen in Table 1, the Liberal Democrats achieved a nationally equivalent 21 per cent of the vote in the May county council elections. They comfortably outpaced their standing in the polls (a regular occurrence which we shall discuss in more detail in the next section) and claimed, with some justification, that they were the only contender for the role of 'third party' in English politics. Neither the SDP nor the Greens were able to field a fraction of the candidates put up by the Liberal Democrats, and their share of the vote in those seats they fought was substantially inferior.

At the European assembly elections in June, however, the Green party reversed their position in comparison with the Liberal Democrats. Both parties fielded

TABLE 1. Parties, opinion polls and the 1989 county council and European assembly elections

Polls	(Monthly average)		
	April	May	June
Con	41	43	36
Lab	40	42	45
LD/SDP	15	10	9
Green	2	3	6

	Local elections May 1989			*European elections June 1989*	
	% share in English counties	average % share in contested seats	GB equivalent	% share in English shires	GB
Con	42.1	43.3	37.5	41.0	34.7
Lab	31.1	34.3	41.5	35.4	40.1
LD	20.1	25.9	18	7.5	6.1
SDP	1.3	14.7		0.5	0.5
Green	2.1	9.3	2	17.3	14.9
Other	3.3	-		0.4	3.9
		% turnout 39%		% turnout 37%	

candidates for each of the 78 constituencies in Great Britain, and this time it was the Greens who took the major share of the vote of that quarter of the population not prepared to support either Labour or the Conservatives. In the English shires, where electors had had the opportunity to vote in each of these contests, the Liberal Democrat vote slumped from 20.1 per cent to 7.5 per cent, whereas Green support rose from 2.1 per cent to 17.3 per cent.[5] The turnout at each election was just under 40 per cent, and one leading political journalist remarked that it seemed the majority of the Green vote was made up of converts from the former Liberal-SDP Alliance (Kellner, 1989).

How could the fortunes of two parties change so dramatically in two elections separated by such a relatively short space of time? The answer seems to lie with the fact that each type of election was the most fertile ground for one of the parties, but barren for its rival. The Liberal Democrats, as in the Liverpool example above, have had a long history of successful grass-roots campaigning. Their local electoral support, and indeed many of their parliamentary successes, is based on the assiduous cultivation of individual ward electorates by means of personal canvassing; the championing of micro-level causes; and the propagation of their achievements through newsletters and the local media. Council elections, held to elect representatives to wards with a population of just a few thousand, have proved the ideal territory for success.

In contrast, the Green party has fewer resources and a much poorer level of local organization than the Liberal Democrats. They seem to show neither the desire nor ability to mount similar local campaigns. However, the European assembly elections afforded them several advantages. First, they were able to field a candidate for each of the 78 constituencies. Second, the sheer size of the constituencies—around 500,000 electors—meant that most would be perceived as straight fights between Labour and the Conservatives with little opportunity to cast a 'useful' vote for any other party. Third, within that context, it seemed that a 'big idea' rather than local contacts was more likely to woo support. The environment had become a highly

salient issue; Europe, where a number of community countries already had well-established Green parties, seemed an appropriate arena within which to express such concerns; the Greens were afforded significant media coverage. In combination these factors provided them with a rare opportunity. A substantial minority of the electorate, whom the polls suggest would be unlikely to have voted Green in any other type of election, were successfully won over to the cause. The evidence was now too strong to ignore that a proportion of the British electorate might be beginning systematically to vote for different parties at different types of election.[6]

Over recent years parliamentary by-elections and even general elections have been accorded greater attention as 'contextual' events. In a comprehensive survey of post-war contests, Norris (1990, p. 224) shows that 'under conditions of partisan dealignment byelections have become increasingly volatile'. Within the confines of a general desire to 'punish' the government of the day, voters seem to be influenced by certain campaign-specific factors as to how this objective might be achieved. Discussion of the geography of electoral change has tended to shift the focus from Butler and Stokes' (1974, p. 7) concept of a 'uniform national swing'. Curtice and Steed (1988, p. 320) felt able to conclude from their analysis of the 1987 general election that 'the electorate did not deliver a nationwide verdict'. However, whilst different patterns of voting in different regions are compatible with socio-economically based theories of electoral behaviour, interest has also been shown in the rather different phenomenon of 'tactical voting'. The idea that electors are prepared to desert their most preferred party in order most effectively to keep out their least preferred one is relevant here in two ways. First, it suggests that many voters are not sufficiently loyal to any one political party that they will always feel the need to support it regardless of the circumstances of the contest. Second, it supports the contention that an increasingly sophisticated electorate realizes that under the British electoral system it is votes in the ballot box in individual constituences which count, not the overall level of mass support for each party.

The Importance of Context: English Local Elections 1985–91

The period 1985-91 has been chosen for detailed examination for both methodological and substantive reasons. In terms of data catchment it covers those local elections for which complete results are available to us. There is no central official source of such information in Britain, but since 1985 we have taken it upon ourselves to collate and publish local election data for England and Wales.[7] For the purposes of measuring electoral change such a spread of years has the advantage that it allows the analysis of three distinct pairs of elections. Although the cycle of local elections in Britain is quite complex, in reality each electoral unit has the opportunity to vote at least once every four years. Thus, we are able to look at directly comparable elections in 1985 and 1989; 1986 and 1990; and 1987 and 1991.

Over this period too, local elections appear either to have reflected or indeed themselves to have pointed up a number of important electoral phenomena. Put simply, Labour appears to have performed better against the Conservatives in local elections than in the opinion polls, and the Liberal Democrats have maintained their share of the local vote in the wake of the break-up of the Alliance at a level sometimes twice that of their opinion poll rating. In order to search for clues as to why this might be so, we shall now proceed to examine local election results between 1985 and 1991 in three distinct ways.

First, we shall test the conventional wisdom that they are little more than 'referendums' on the performance of the government at Westminster. Such a view would require relatively uniform change and homogeneous behaviour across the country. Second, we shall see whether it is at the local authority level that any variations in electoral behaviour must be sought and explained. In other words, do local electors seem to respond to the policies and record of their councils by turning these contests into 'mini-general elections' within each local authority? Or, finally, is it at the level of the wards themselves that electoral decisions are really made with the micro-level activities of parties and candidates being what counts. At the outset, perhaps, we should recognize that these interpretations are not mutually exclusive nor is any one of them likely to prove a sufficient explanation.

1. Local Elections as National Referendums

That local elections are simply to be seen as referendums or even opinion polls has received quite a wide academic, political and media currency.[8] It is general trends and patterns that are often seized upon, and the apparent absence of them which leads to frustration among some commentators. Yet, there is growing evidence that not every voter behaves the same way in a local as in a general election, and that there can be wide variations in party support even in socially similar or geographically adjacent areas.

For some years now, national opinion polls have tended to ask their respondents in mid and late April not only how they would vote 'if there were a general election tomorrow', but also how they intended to vote in the forthcoming local elections. The answers to these two questions never seem to be quite the same and, albeit with data almost wholly gathered during a period of Conservative government, the Labour party tends to perform better in terms of local as opposed to national support. In 1988, for example, Gallup found an 11 per cent Labour lead in local voting intention as against a mere 1 per cent 'general election' margin. In 1989, the same organization asked respondents whether they were more likely to vote Conservative at a local or at a general election. Of those who said it made a difference, 13 per cent were more likely to support the Tories at a general election and only 5 per cent more likely to do so at a local contest. In 1991 MORI discovered that a 2 per cent Conservative lead in terms of national voting intention was translated into a 2 per cent Labour advantage at local level. Moreover, both parties seemed likely to lose local votes to the Liberal Democrats whose support jumped from 15 per cent at a putative general election to 21 per cent. Such findings are confirmed in opinion polls we have conducted in particular local authorities. In Plymouth in April 1991, for example, whereas Labour led the Conservatives by 1 per cent at a 'general election', the gap was 5 per cent when local voting was the subject of the question.[9]

These variations may not in themselves be dramatic, but they do exist and could reflect greater volatility in choice at the individual as opposed to the aggregate level. Miller (1988 and 1990) has conducted two discrete pieces of survey research which help to throw light on what may be happening. In May 1986 he found that '80% of respondents had local choices for Conservative, Labour or Alliance that were exactly in accord with their party identification—and 83% in accord with their current parliamentary preference'. For our present purposes, though, it is the obverse finding—that as many as one in five electors have different local and

national choices—that is most relevant. Moreover, whilst there was little direct exchange between Conservative and Labour preferences at the two levels, 'the Alliance gains more than it loses in local elections from the willingness of people to desert their national political choice' (Miller, 1988, p. 166 and p. 170).

In a study of the 1987 general election campaign, Miller and his colleagues (1990, p. 28) were able directly to compare how their respondents had voted in the May local elections with their parliamentary vote five weeks later. The degree of correspondence between the parties varies, but once again it depicts a sizeable level of voter fluidity. 87 per cent of 'local' Conservatives stayed with the party at the general election as did 80 per cent of Labour supporters and 63 per cent of those of the Alliance. It appears there were 'substantial shifts from voting Labour in the local elections to voting Alliance in the parliamentary election; and from voting Alliance in the local elections to voting both Labour and Conservative in the parliamentary'.

TABLE 2. Comparison of end of April opinion polls with 'national equivalent results' of the May local elections

		Con	Lab	All/LD	Other
1985	Poll	35	38	26	1
	Local	*32*	*37*	*27*	*4*
1986		32	38	28	2
		34	*38*	*26*	*2*
1987		41	30	26	3
		39	*31*	*28*	*2*
1988		43	41	14	2
		40	*42*	*18*	*2*
1989		41	40	15	4
		37.5	*41.5*	*18*	*2*
1990		31	53	9	7
		32	*43*	*16*	*9*
1991		41	41	14	2
		37	*39*	*21*	*3*

Nor is the evidence of movement in party support confined to opinion poll answers or the traced behaviour of individual electors. We compare in Table 2 the average score received by the parties in all opinion polls conducted and published in the month prior to the local elections with the actual 'nationally equivalent' result of the election.[10] On five out of seven occasions the gap between the Conservatives and Labour changes in the latter's favour at the actual elections compared with the preceding polls; and in six out of seven years the Alliance and its successors have outscored their poll performance at the local ballot box. The most dramatic difference between the polls and the elections was in 1990. Labour's huge opinion poll lead was dented by a sharp increase in support at local level for the Liberal Democrats and also for the Greens and SNP, but the important fact of a divergence in the two measures remains. Local election results and putative general election support are not, it appears, unambiguously the same thing.

Finally, we must ask whether what appears as a modest 'local elections effect' works in a uniform way across the country. This can be investigated in two ways. First, the data allow us to compare the pattern of each party's gains and losses in seats with that which would be expected if all wards behaved similarly. In 1991, for

example, we applied the changes in party share of the vote since 1987 implied by the MORI local elections question to our ward by ward data base of the 1987 election results. This method is the same as that used to 'forecast' the composition of the House of Commons implied by the findings of national opinion polls. This analysis led us to predict in the *Sunday Times* that Labour would gain about 600 seats, whilst the Conservatives would lose approximately 400 and the Liberal Democrats 200.[11] In the event, and despite the parties achieving the same shares of the vote as forecast by the poll, Labour *and* the Liberal Democrats each made about 500 gains and the Conservatives lost nearly 1,000 seats. Clear prima facie evidence that contextual voting had taken place and that the Liberal Democrats in particular had apparently confounded their poll rating. These gains it must be remembered were achieved with that party recording a national equivalent share of the vote of 21 per cent compared with one of 26 per cent the last time the selfsame wards were contested.

If the pattern of seats gained and lost argues against uniform national movement, so does our evidence on changing shares of the vote within the various types of local authority. As is shown in Table 3, there are significant variations between councils in each party's best and worst performances in the three pairs of elections examined.[12] For the purposes of comparison we also show similar statistics for the rather lower level of aggregation of the constituency at the 1987 general election. The a priori expectation that the standard deviation would increase with the number of units of analysis is not met. In fact only the English counties (N=39) show levels of standard deviation in party shares of the vote less than that for the constituencies (N=633). Such differences would seem to be too large to explain solely by reference to changing socio-economic trends in different geographical areas, but their identification leads naturally to the next section.

TABLE 3. Council level comparisons of change in party share of the vote between pairs of elections

	Mean	Max	Min	Std.Dev.
Metropolitan Boroughs 1986-90 N=36				
Con	-0.04	9.4	-6.7	4.3
Lab	6.6	17.1	-1.0	4.6
All/LD	-9.3	1.1	-18.3	4.2
London Boroughs 1986-90 N=32				
Con	2.0	11.2	-6.8	4.2
Lab	1.4	11.8	-6.8	4.8
All/LD	-9.3	0.9	-26.4	5.2
English Counties 1985-89 N=39				
Con	3.9	8.4	-0.5	2.2
Lab	1.0	6.6	-7.3	2.5
All/LD	-7.3	2.9	-18.0	3.7
English shire districts 1987-91 N=297				
Con	-4.3	16.8	-29.5	5.5
Lab	5.3	19.3	-13.5	5.1
All/LD	-4.0	14.9	-27.8	8.0
General Election 1983-87 N=633				
Con	-0.6	10.9	-17.1	3.6
Lab	+3.7	13.9	-9.6	3.9
All/LD	-3.2	17.5	-15.9	4.2

2. Local 'General' Elections

One possible explanation for the variation in party performance among local authorities is that the electorate make a judgement about the record of their own council when deciding how to vote. The extent of accountability, an essential requirement of democratic local government, has been at the forefront of recent investigations particularly relating to the matter of local finance. Although the consensus view among political scientists seems to be that increases in rates (the property tax which existed until 1990) are 'only rarely an important factor in determining local election results', Gibson (1988, p. 197 and p. 205) goes on to present some data claiming that rate increases were related to changes in party vote shares and that 'the effect of rate changes appeared to be large enough to explain why local councillors anticipate detrimental electoral effects from rate increases'. However, whilst councils facing election may moderate their taxation demands in the face of anticipated public hostility, it has been argued that 'it would be totally wrong to equate variations in local government election results with reactions to rates policy or even with reactions to local government policy outputs generally' (Miller, 1988, p. 148).[15]

A belief that this was the case was certainly one factor encouraging the Conservative government in the 1980s to introduce their per capita tax, the community charge or 'poll tax'. It was the government's aim to draw every adult's attention to exactly how much their local services were costing and to encourage them to assess whether they were receiving value for money from their local authority. However, an intensive examination of electoral and fiscal data for the first 'poll tax' election led us to conclude that 'the election results in individual local authorities in 1990 were at most only marginally affected by absolute or relative poll tax levels' (Rallings and Thrasher, 1990). Rather, and ironically, the tax was so generally unpopular that local authorities managed to avoid being called to account because the elections were used as a stick with which to beat the government. This interpretation fits quite neatly with one of Miller's observations from his survey analysis of public opinion at the time of the 1986 local elections. He notes (1988, p. 202) that the local elections made respondents 'more aware of the restrictions placed upon local government; they became more favourable to local autonomy; and they became more favourable towards higher levels of taxes and services—a policy position that was generally supported by local authorities and opposed by central government'. Arguably another instance of the importance of 'context'.

However, whilst this may help us understand why Labour and the Liberal Democrats have done relatively well in local government elections since the advent of Conservative government in 1979, it does not take us very far in explaining inter-council variations. Some clues about this may, however, be gleaned from the London borough elections of 1990. On average Labour did much less well in London than in the rest of the country at those elections. Although in part this reflected problems that the party has suffered in the capital going back to before the 1987 general election, it was also the product of distinct patterns of behaviour in certain boroughs. Within the context of a swing from Labour to the Conservatives of 0.5 per cent in London as a whole since 1986, five boroughs swung to the Conservatives by more than 5 per cent and six swung to Labour by more than 3 per cent.

With the exception of Wandsworth and Westminster where incumbent Conservative councils, aided by very generous block grant settlements, were able to impose a very small poll tax, there is no evidence that it was the level of the tax itself which had an impact on the performance of the parties. Rather Labour was harmed by its image in several boroughs where it controlled the council. Labour administrations which had received adverse publicity about their conduct were noticeably more inclined to register large swings to the Conservatives. Conversely, where Labour councils appeared successfully to have changed public perceptions of their competence and efficiency and where Conservative councils had been unable to levy poll tax in keeping with that in Wandsworth and Westminster, then a swing to Labour more in line with the national trend was common (Rallings and Thrasher, 1990). Gibson and Stewart (1992), in their own study of the 1990 London Borough elections, argue that both Labour and Conservative incumbents were harmed by the issue of local taxation and point to systematic variation in the results between authorities. Such localized patterns of support were also found in the case of the Liberal Democrats. The party easily retained the three London boroughs it effectively controlled prior to the elections despite its overall share of the vote in the capital falling from 24 per cent to 14 per cent. Borough-specific patterns of electoral behaviour are perhaps not surprising in an area like London. On the one hand, large wards and a relatively mobile population make *ad hominem* voting less feasible, whereas the intense national media coverage accorded to local government in what is for most outlets their own home territory means that levels of information and hostility towards some individual councils may be higher than normal. In 1990 the 'goodies' and 'baddies' were clearly and repeatedly identified and the overall tenor of the analysis was never likely to advantage Labour.

London, however, is not the only place where such authority-wide effects have been noted. In 1982 Labour lost control of the Lothian region in Scotland while making advances elsewhere. Variations between authorities in England in the same year led Jones and Stewart (1983, p. 16) to observe that 'the actions of a local authority can affect the election even when a Falklands factor is at work'. In the county council elections of 1989 the change in the combined votes of the Liberal Democrats and the SDP compared with those of the Alliance four years previously varied from an increase of 2.9 per cent in Cornwall to a decrease of 18 per cent in neighbouring Devon. The increase in Cornwall was an artefact of the new party contesting more seats; the decrease in Devon was a direct public response to the perceived inadequacies of the two parties in running the county council following the acrimonious events surrounding the merger of the greater part of each in March 1988.

Yet, just as council-by-council variations spoil the idea of local elections as referendums, so do individual ward results cast doubts that there is homogeneity even within local authorities. Controlling for those wards where there was an identical pattern of party competition in each of our pairs of elections, we show in Table 4 the difference in the ward level performance of political parties in twenty randomly selected councils. At this level of aggregation intra-council differences often exceed inter-council ones, as the standard deviation scores make clear. The party whose performance seems most to vary is the Liberal Democrats, and an explanation for that will be sought in the next section.

TABLE 4. Intra-council variations in party performance in 20 randomly selected local authorities

		Mean	Max	Min	Std.Dev.
Metropolitan Boroughs 1986–90					
Stockport	Con	-3.5	5.5	-10.5	4.0
	Lab	5.8	13.9	-6.3	5.3
	All/LD	-4.9	13.8	-13.5	8.1
N. Tyneside	Con	-4.4	2.2	-11.2	4.6
	Lab	9.1	19.4	-4.7	7.5
	All/LD	-8.7	-0.8	-14.5	5.1
Birmingham	Con	-2.0	4.1	-6.6	3.3
	Lab	9.0	16.6	1.2	4.6
	All/LD	-10.0	-1.6	-17.0	5.5
Kirklees	Con	-4.5	-0.3	-12.5	3.2
	Lab	8.9	20.2	-4.5	5.5
	All/LD	-9.1	-2.0	-15.4	4.1
London Boroughs 1986–90					
Bromley	Con	1.2	11.8	-7.8	4.6
	Lab	4.5	12.4	-9.2	4.7
	All/LD	-9.0	15.6	-27.3	10.1
Kingston	Con	0.6	12.1	-10.0	5.7
	Lab	4.2	17.2	-11.7	7.0
	All/LD	-7.1	16.8	-27.4	11.6
Lambeth	Con	-0.2	8.9	-12.0	5.4
	Lab	0.8	11.3	-5.4	4.3
	All/LD	-8.8	6.1	-30.6	9.1
Waltham	Con	2.7	11.5	-14.6	6.7
Forest	Lab	-4.0	4.9	-24.7	6.1
	All/LD	-2.1	36.7	-15.0	12.1
English Counties 1985–89					
Cheshire	Con	2.9	17.5	-10.3	6.5
	Lab	2.8	16.4	-8.6	6.7
	All/LD	-7.4	15.9	-26.3	9.8
Essex	Con	4.8	16.1	-8.4	5.4
	Lab	0.1	12.8	-12.6	5.0
	All/LD	-6.3	17.3	-20.7	7.8
Cleveland	Con	0.4	18.0	-18.3	8.7
	Lab	4.4	22.8	-18.9	8.8
	All/LD	-4.7	31.8	-26.0	13.6
W. Sussex	Con	3.7	21.2	-8.2	7.2
	Lab	3.1	18.0	-11.1	5.6
	All/LD	-8.1	13.1	-42.5	11.2

3. Variations by Ward—A Truly 'Local' Election

Without doubt one of the ward level trends encouraging a national view of local elections has been the decline, though not yet demise, of the Independent or non-party councillor. The ability of candidates standing as individuals to get elected must self-evidently rest in good part on their 'standing' within the local community and the degree to which they are known among the electorate. Historically these requirements ensured that Independent councillors were more common in rural than in urban areas. However, with the spread of party politics to virtually all parts of the country since local government reorganization in 1974, the number of Independents elected has declined and with that one potential source of results

Table 4 continued

		Mean	Max	Min	Std.Dev.
English districts 1987–91					
Bath	Con	-5.1	4.4	-13.0	4.9
	Lab	3.5	16.1	-19.5	8.4
	All/LD	-1.0	30.5	-19.2	12.9
Chester	Con	-2.1	8.6	-9.8	5.3
	Lab	3.4	12.1	-7.2	5.6
	All/LD	-1.9	9.1	-20.7	8.8
Derby	Con	-1.1	9.4	-6.6	4.7
	Lab	7.7	17.2	-1.2	5.6
	All/LD	-7.8	1.9	-28.2	6.6
Harlow	Con	9.7	24.7	1.5	7.6
	Lab	-4.0	3.7	-19.4	6.4
	All/LD	-5.2	3.2	-12.5	5.9
Hyndburn	Con	0.5	13.2	-10.1	9.6
	Lab	10.2	13.5	8.4	2.3
	All/LD	-10.6	1.7	-21.9	9.8
Waveney	Con	-5.0	-2.1	-9.9	3.2
	Lab	9.2	15.6	-1.9	6.6
	All/LD	-4.9	8.0	-13.5	8.6
Stafford	Con	1.0	15.6	-7.0	8.8
	Lab	10.1	16.6	6.8	3.9
	All/LD	-5.8	-0.5	-14.5	-5.6
Darlington	Con	-4.9	-2.2	-7.2	2.3
	Lab	10.7	15.5	8.4	3.3
	All/LD	-5.9	-1.5	-9.3	3.6

against the trend has been weakened in its effect. By way of illustration, in the local elections of 1979 more than 2,700 non-party candidates in England and Wales were successful whereas by 1991 only 1,784 (representing 14 per cent of all councillors elected) won their ballots.

The marginalization of Independents and the increasing intensity of party competition at ward level does not necessarily imply, though, that each ward acts as a mirror of the national party battle. A substantial proportion of the electorate (39%) at least claims to vote for the candidate, and among this group there is an unsurprising greater inclination to make a different party choice at the local than at the national level (Miller, 1988, p. 170). Candidates, who are not formally Independents and who hope to capitalize on such a vote, must ensure that they are not weighed down by the baggage of their party label. Either, they need to work in harmony with their party and become its personal manifestation in a particular ward, or, they must attempt to transcend their party label by a record of service and commitment to their constituents. At the parliamentary level in Britain, the 'personal vote' for MPs usually refers to the latter case, but in local government there is some research that the campaigning activity of the party in a ward can itself establish the qualities of candidates in the voters' minds (Bruce and Lee, 1982). It has also been argued that it is possible to identify ward level reaction to tax and service issues and that these too can have an impact on individual results (Gibson and Stewart, 1991; Bristow, 1982).

Our data allow us to conduct a limited test of each of these propositions except the last. First, let us see whether incumbent councillors do better than their party

as a whole. Despite the fact that we can only do this for single member wards and that the relevant information is available only for some sets of elections, it does appear that incumbents of all parties do slightly better than their party as a whole in terms of average changes in share of the vote. As Table 5 demonstrates, this applies in five out of six instances and the incumbency effect appears to be especially beneficial to Liberal Democrat councillors.

TABLE 5. Mean percentage change in share of the vote controlling for personal incumbency

	Con	Lab	LD
English shire counties 1985–89			
Incumbent	5.1	5.1	-1.5
Not incumbent	2.9	1.1	-9.0
Metropolitan Boroughs 1986–90			
	Con	Lab	LD
Incumbent	-0.7	5.7	-4.7
Not incumbent	-2.0	7.4	-8.2

Aside from the question of incumbency, one of the few systematic studies of ward level political behaviour has concluded that social class, in terms both of the relationship between an individual's class position and his/her vote and of the overall socio-economic composition of the ward, 'remains the most important predictor of election results' (Warde *et al.*, 1988, p. 339). However, the same research also acknowledges that distinctly local processes—at both ward and town level—are present, and Johnston (1986, p. 52) has argued that parties 'will seek to become part of the local culture, participating in the socialization of individuals...and creating a base that can be mobilised and drawn upon at election time'. In local elections in England such a strategy would seem most appropriate and necessary for those parties which were unable to rely on the certainty of a core of class-derived support. Our contention is that the Liberal party and its various successors and allies, to the statistical explanation of whose share of the vote 'class variables contribute nothing' (Warde *et al.*, 1988, p. 345), have successfully followed just such a path.

Building support from the grass-roots has been the main goal of the long-established organization now known as the Association of Liberal Democrat Councillors. This body is located away from London and has a separate administrative, financial and campaigning structure to that of the national party: neither of the other major parties sustain anything similar. The ALDC has become a sort of clearing house for the techniques and propaganda of 'community politics', and it has made a major contribution to the disproportionate success of the party in local elections noted above. The regular local newsletter, used to identify both issues and personalities to electors, has become something of a totem of this style of campaign and it is a device increasingly adopted by other parties too. That at least must be an expression of a belief that localism does matter. However, can we produce any statistical evidence of the impact of such activity?

Whereas it has been noted that the 'third' party in England has been frustrated in its efforts to 'break the mould' by the existence of a ceiling or plateau in its potential electoral support (Curtice *et al.*, 1983), the Liberal Democrats do appear

to have been relatively successful in retaining in lean years those council seats they won at boom elections for the party. In other words, they have not been subject to quite the peaks and troughs experienced by other parties, especially in those areas where they have maintained a high electoral profile. The data in Table 6, showing the mean change in share of the vote for each party in seats they did and did not hold, are somewhat ambiguous on this point, but all parties do seem to benefit from being the incumbent in the shires at least.

TABLE 6. Mean percentage change in share of the vote controlling for party incumbency

	Con	Lab	LD
English shire counties 1985–89			
Seat held	4.2	4.3	-5.4
Seat not held	3.0	0.8	-8.4
Metropolitan Boroughs 1986–90			
	Con	Lab	LD
Seat held	-0.8	5.7	-8.4
Seat not held	-1.9	8.1	-7.9
English shire districts 1987–91			
	Con	Lab	LD
Seat held	-6.6	4.8	-0.6
Seat not held	-3.7	5.4	-1.4

Two other aspects of the Liberal Democrat performance are worth noting. First, we have clearly shown elsewhere that a strong Liberal Democrat (Alliance) vote is correlated with greater turnout (Rallings and Thrasher, 1990). They would appear, thus, directly to benefit from campaigning strategies which encourage more people to go to the polls *and vote for them*. Second, much of their success at the local just as at the parliamentary level has been in by-elections. These contests, which take place very week throughout the country, were once regarded as rather insignificant political events. However, because of Liberal Democrat attempts to capitalize on their achievements by claiming a connection between their local by-election record and their national electoral standing, the other parties too are now keen to maximize their own contestation and performance. Between the 1983 and 1992 general elections the Liberal Democrats, in their various incarnations, made 340 net gains in local by-elections, compared with 75 net gains for Labour and more than 270 net losses for the Conservatives. Although their average share of the vote in contests over this period (26.7%) leaves them in third place, it is significantly above their average opinion poll rating of 16.3 per cent. Whether Liberal Democrat by-election success is attributed to their ability to catch the protest vote from both sides, or to them investing more effort into the election, the fact remains that the record of the party is a good example of how electors in individual wards can be persuaded to cast their ballots in a way that is specific to both time and circumstance. The results thus confirm Miller's survey findings on the greater likelihood of voting for the (then) Alliance at the local level.

Patterns of contestation are also important in determining ward results. Within a general pattern of increased party competition in local government, both Labour and the Conservatives do concentrate their resources to a limited extent. Labour

either cannot find the candidates or does not bother to field them in many rural authorities, whereas Conservatives are thin on the ground in parts of industrial England. The Liberal Democrats are more likely to concentrate their electoral efforts in carefully targeted seats. In the 1991 local elections they had nearly 2,500 fewer candidates (about 6,000 compared with 8,500) than either of the other major parties; in by-elections since the creation of the new party in 1988 they have had candidates in 71 per cent of contests—about 15 per cent less than either Labour or the Conservatives. The fact that they do not compete in so many seats immediately gives rise to one sort of dispute about how their performance is to be measured. Is it more relevant to look at their share of the total vote, or should their share of the vote in seats contested be the relevant benchmark? Understandably partisanship plays its part in this argument, but the difference between the two indicators can be quite large as Table 7 shows. Their rational, or as some would have it cynical, approach means not only do they not stand where the position is hopeless, but also often give a free run to an incumbent Independent or even other party candidate whom they know has a strong personal vote. The availability of choice is perhaps the prime determinant of the 'context' of any election. Where the choice is restricted, so a party's performance can become distorted.

TABLE 7. Liberal Democrat vote share overall and in seats contested

	1989 English Counties	1990 Met. Bors	1990 London Bors	1991 English districts
Overall	20.1	13.5	14.1	23.1
Seats contested	25.9	18.8	19.6	32.2

Finally, it should be noted that voting in a ward is the local equivalent of voting in a constituency. Candidates, campaign activity, local issues and the choice provided the elector are all important. So too, however, is the concept of tactical voting. One explanation for Labour's seeming ability to do better in local than in general elections in the South of England precisely revolves round this point.[14] Electors who are Labour supporters living in wards where the party has a history of either winning or challenging strongly will express their loyalty in the ballot box. If, however, that ward is in a constituency where Labour is a poor third in general elections, then they may desert their 'natural' party for the one most able to defeat their least preferred alternative. Ironically, therefore, Labour supporters may vote 'nationally' at local level, but tactically in general elections. Here the electoral system may be said to provide the context for the vote.

Partisan Dealignment and the Role of Context

At each level we have examined local elections provide opportunities for movements away from any national pattern or trend. Behaviour and outcomes vary among and within local authorities. Local issues and concerns can influence the vote over either the entire area of a council or in individual wards. Similarly, the campaigns of the parties and the personality of the candidates can have a clear impact on the result.

Everything that has been written about the 'denationalization' of British politics in recent general elections applies, except even more so, to the local electoral arena.[15] The identification of such potential sources of variation is important. For whilst, on the one hand, they do not seem either so crucial or so universal to mean that local elections in Britain cannot be dissected for their underlying message; equally, the possibility that aggregate national trends are at least in part the product of the smoothing out of contradictory local forces must not be neglected.

The thrust of our argument so far is that in an important and evolving way the stimuli to which many electors respond in local elections are those which are relevant to the 'context' in which their vote is cast. However, their influence varies from place to place and from time to time and certainly none of the factors we have considered is an adequate or sufficient explanation on its own. Green (1972), some two decades ago, tried statistically to account for the proportion of variance in local electoral behaviour explained at each of the different levels of analysis we have examined. Basing his study on local elections over a fifteen year period between 1951 and 1966 in Leeds and Sheffield, he attributed 73 per cent of the swing in party support to factors common to both cities (the 'national' explanation); 6 per cent to city-wide, but also city specific factors; and the remaining 21 per cent to ward level influences.

We have exactly replicated his analysis for the period 1983–91. A principal components analysis of the annual ward-by-ward swings in the same two cities shows the first factor extracted, Green's measure of national influence, to explain 42 per cent of the variance. A second factor accounts for a further 32 per cent and the remaining 26 per cent of the variance is captured by two additional factors. The prima facie implication is that the ability of national level influences to explain local electoral outcomes has declined markedly. However, a similar examination of ward level swings in two other metropolitan borough councils, Manchester and Solihull, paints a rather different picture. Principal components analysis suggests that 75 per cent of the variance can be explained by the first factor—that, in other words, results in Manchester and Solihull have more in common with each other. Furthermore, looking simply at results within each of our four boroughs, we discover that the degree of variance explained by borough-wide factors varies from 65 per cent in Leeds to 78 per cent in Manchester. Such findings are entirely consistent with the point we have been making throughout this paper. Some authorities appear to have results in keeping with the national trend; in others there are distinct patterns of behaviour across council territory; in yet others ward level effects, whether of a spatial, political or personal kind are important. Moreover, it is a plausible hypothesis that the relative influence of each of these factors will vary between cycles of elections.

Our evidence from recent elections thus demonstrates both the variability of results between voting districts and also a willingness on the part of the electorate to regard voting more as a matter of 'horses for courses'. This implies that context is a function of constituency/ward circumstances as well as connected with the real and perceived purpose of the election itself. Such factors as the nature of party competition, the conduct of canvassing and campaigning, and the characteristics of the candidates themselves, either real or as portrayed by the local media, would all appear to have a bearing upon voters' perceptions of electoral context.[16]

For the political parties, however, the most profound consequence of the developments we have discussed may well be that a proportion of the electorate have already identified particular parties as suitable or unsuitable for a particular electoral

context. The Liberal Democrats' emphasis on 'pavement politics' could appear appropriate for local government, but their policies and their presence might be deemed irrelevant when voting takes place within a European context. Similarly Labour, regarded as the party more sympathetic to public services and social welfare, does relatively better than the Conservatives in the context of elections to local authorities entrusted with the administration of education, social services and housing. The Conservatives, by contrast, despite suffering considerable local electoral losses and currently presiding over a prolonged economic recession, continue to be trusted more than Labour for their perceived ability to manage the economy. Thus, for them, a general election would appear to provide the best context in which to maximize electoral support.

The elections covered in this survey coincide with an uninterrupted period of Conservative national government. When the task of compiling election results dating from local government reorganization is completed we will be able to analyse the process of partisan dealignment in more detail. Although it is clear that there remains a strong, general association between local and national partisan loyalties, it will be of considerable interest to observe how the context of local elections is affected, if at all, by the passage of time and by the party in power at Westminster.

Notes

1. The word 'shambles' was used by anchorman David Dimbleby on the BBC Local Election results programme 1989. In an article in *The Times* David Butler explained away the same results by simply noting that 'local elections have proved a poor guide to general election results two years later' 6 May 1989, p. 10.
2. Although there seemed little movement in voter preference over the course of the 1987 general election campaign, the MORI panel survey for the *Sunday Times* indicated that nearly 20 per cent of the electorate 'changed their minds either between parties or on whether or not to vote' (Worcester, 1991, p. 103).
3. A similar concern was the focus of Miller (1988), but his data were drawn from a small panel study which was unable effectively to examine the reaction of voters to differing local electoral circumstances—the key question of 'context'.
4. In the parliamentary by-election in the Walton constituency in June 1991, the Conservatives polled just 2.9 per cent of the vote, their lowest vote in any post-war by-election.
5. At the county elections, the Liberal Democrats polled an average of 25.9 per cent of the vote in those seats they contested; the average share for the Greens was 9.3 per cent.
6. A claim made for Northern Ireland in McGarry and O'Leary (1990 Appendix 4).
7. C. Rallings and M. Thrasher, *Local Elections Handbook*, Local Government Chronicle Elections Centre, 1985 and annually. Further details are available from the authors. A local elections database covering the period 1973–87 has recently been compiled with the support of ESRC Research Grant Y304253002. The data will be deposited at the ESRC Data Archive during 1993.
8. See, for example, K. Newton, *Second City Politics*, Oxford University Press, 1976 p. 16; *The Economist*, 16 March 1985, pp. 38–40; M. Schofield, 'The Nationalisation of Local Politics', *New Society*, 28 April 1977.
9. These polls are reported in Gallup Political Index 332 April 1988 and 344 April 1989; *Sunday Times*, 28 April 1991, p. 4; and Polytechnic South West/BBC survey of voting intentions in Plymouth, mimeo, April 1991.
10. This figure attempts to adjust for the fact that electors in not every part of the country are able to vote in each year's round of local elections. For example, in the years when elections are held for the English and Welsh county councils, there are no elections in the more traditionally Labour areas of Scotland and the English metropolitan cities. Since 1986 separate, though usually broadly comparable calculations have been made by the BBC and by ourselves for the *Sunday Times*.

11. *Sunday Times*, 28 April 1991, p. 4. At the general election of 1992 'correct' opinion polls would similarly have wrongly forecast the composition of the House of Commons because constituencies did not behave uniformly.
12. Local authorities in which the pattern of party contestation changed dramatically between 1987 and 1991 have been excluded from the analysis.
13. This argument is likely to continue. In a recent study Gibson and Stewart examine evidence that the electorate is sensitive to 'local tax increases over the full period in authorities subject to election every four years, and Curtice and Steed show that the poor general election results for Labour in 1987 in parts of London could be partly traced to recent high rate increases'. See Gibson and Stewart (1992) and Curtice and Steed (1988, p. 342).
14. A phenomenon examined in Burnham (1990).
15. See Curtice and Steed (1988) and B. Cain *et al.*, (1987).
16. We do not have the data to test such propositions here, but for some interesting research at the constituency level see D. Denver and G. Hands (forthcoming).

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'Enhancing' Factors in At-Large Plurality and Majority Systems: A Reconsideration

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There are important variations in the plurality and majority at-large electoral systems used in cities in the United States. Some of these variations are thought to enhance the ability of a white majority to control electoral outcomes, thereby reducing the likelihood that blacks will be elected to city councils. The presence of these 'enhancing factors', however, is not found to account for variations in the degree of black under-representation on city councils of large cities employing the at-large format. Indeed, under specific conditions, one particular enhancing factor—staggered elections in a plurality context—may have consequences quite contrary to conventional expectations.

Electoral outcomes are reflections of individual voter preferences and the rules which aggregate those preferences into collective decisions. While that proposition is one of the central themes of the burgeoning literature of social choice theory (see, generally, Riker, 1980; 1982; 1984; and, for particulars of electoral rules, Lijphart and Grofman, 1984; Grofman and Lijphart, 1986), a great deal still remains to be learned about the political consequences of electoral rules. Indeed, it has even been asserted, perhaps with modest exaggeration, that 'the study of electoral systems is undoubtably the most underdeveloped subject in political science' (Lijphart, 1985: 3).

The rules by which elections are conducted and their outcomes determined operate to lend structure both to the expression of voter preferences and to the electoral competition. These two effects are themselves interdependent. The voters' strategies for expressing preferences depend on who is competing, and who is competing depends on the strategies the prospective candidates expect the voters to use. This interdependence can often make theoretical generalizations quite knotty and sometimes make empirical generalizations nonobvious, as we shall see

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