

Turnout in English Local Elections—An Aggregate Analysis with Electoral and Contextual Data

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Analysis of survey data by Miller has identified a number of factors influencing voter participation in local government elections in Britain. Nevertheless, variations in turnout remain so great that further investigation is required. This article uses aggregate data derived from the results of county council elections since 1981 and those for the metropolitan districts since 1982. Additional data, of a social, economic and structural nature, are also used to explore variations in electoral turnout. Using multiple regression analysis produces only a modest success in predicting turnout for the more rural county authorities. In the urban metropolitan districts, however, a much higher level of turnout could be predicted from the model.

Explaining variations in the level of turnout in local government elections has attracted the rather intermittent attention of political scientists during the past two decades. Most of the early community studies looked at voting and its correlates through both survey data and the analysis of ward-level election results.¹ Other researchers have concentrated on an aggregate study of electoral data and claimed that the political factors thus highlighted were crucial in influencing the level of participation. Fletcher, for example, argued that 'the three factors which have been identified as having marked associations with high turnout are small wards, the closeness of the party conflict and the presence of Liberal candidates'.² Thus, 'turnout is highest in conditions that are most conducive to party conflict'.³ Newton, however, in a contradictory analysis drawn from his study of Birmingham, dismisses the importance of marginality. Despite a small positive correlation between closeness of contest and turnout, he can find 'no evidence to suggest that marginality is related to turnout or to changes in turnout in any strong or significant manner'.⁴ In general he stresses the importance of national level factors in determining turnout, although he does add that 'it is impossible to understand or explain local elections without carefully considering the relationship between voting and the social characteristics of ward electorates'.⁵

These and other studies are succinctly reviewed in the latest treatment of turnout in local government, that carried out by Miller for the Widdicombe Committee.⁶ Using data collected by NOP for the Committee, Miller is able to provide analysis of the determinants of turnout drawn from the first national survey of public

attitudes to local government since 1965. He puts forward a two-step, two-level model, arguing that political participation can best be understood in terms of personal characteristics *and* the psychological involvement which combines with institutional mobilizing factors to influence actual turnout. Such mobilization can be influenced by national *and/or* local circumstances and the relative strength of each level is important in understanding variations and trends in turnout in local government.

Accepting that respondents are likely to over-report their actual and intended participation in local elections, Miller reviews the relationship between professed 'turnout' and a wide range of variables covering the social characteristics and attitudes of respondents. In general this analysis demonstrates consistently low correlations between individual characteristics and most measures of local involvement and mobilization and turnout. The dominant factor in determining an individual's propensity to vote appears to be the strength of his/her identification with a political party. He then attempts to predict local election turnout and test his original causal model by means of a multiple regression analysis. The results are worth quoting at some length:

- (1) Local election turnout is moderately predictable;
- (2) Psychological involvement in local politics ... does influence local turnout;
- (3) Specially local mobilization factors are not very influential;
- (4) The most important personal factor is age;
- (5) National mobilizing factors—the strength of party identification or more especially turnout in national elections, do influence local turnout, and are more powerful than local mobilizing factors.⁷

Thus, those individuals more inclined to vote in any event are exactly those more likely to turn out for a local election. There is very little specifically about that particular type of contest which prompts them. Miller does point out though, that while only a comparatively aged minority of respondents claim they would certainly vote in a local election, that minority is 'almost perfectly representative of the full electorate in terms of partisanship and issue attitudes'.⁸ There is, in other words, no evidence to suggest that low turnout involves a systematic skewing of results in favour of one political party or even class.

At the level of the individual, Miller's analysis is clearly the most extensive and technically sophisticated yet published. However, variations in turnout at local elections remain so great that they continue to demand exploration from another perspective. Although some of this variation could be accounted for by the different proportions of the 'potential voters' identified above to be found in each ward, it remains plausible that there may be something about the character of the wards themselves (and the political competition within them) which will influence turnout. The NOP sample was not of course large enough to allow for analysis of the reaction of individuals to differences in the electoral, social and partisan contexts in which they found themselves. Such an examination must therefore be undertaken using aggregate data and in the light of a verdict of 'not proven' against previous attempts to correlate turnout and ward character.

Data and Method

The data available for this paper are both extensive and unique, and present the first comprehensive examination of patterns of turnout in post-reorganization local government. They comprise a complete record of the results of the 1981, 1985 and 1989 county council elections in England, together with all metropolitan borough council election results since 1982.⁹ A range of additional information was collected including the gender of candidates, structure of party contest and changes in party

TABLE 1. Availability of electoral and contextual data

	Counties		
	1981	1985	1989
Number of contested wards	2739	2943	2941
Number of wards contested and with same boundaries	1620	2892	
Number of 1981/85 equivalent wards with census data		1216	
Number of 1985/89 equivalent wards with census data		1556	

	Metropolitan Boroughs			
	1982	1983	1984	1986 1987 1988
Number of contested wards	824	821	815	804 814 811
Number of wards with census data 1982/88	511			

TABLE 2. Mean turnout figures

	County Council Elections			
	1981	1985	1989	
All contests	43.1	41.5	39.5	
Standard deviation	6.5	6.9	7.1	
Range	22.1-68.4	20.2-67.9	18.9-64.8	

	Metropolitan Borough Elections			
	1982	1983	1984	1986 1987 1988
All contests	37.6	41.0	38.7	39.2 43.6 38.8
Standard deviation	7.2	6.7	7.0	6.9 7.4 7.0
Range	19.1-63.1	19.8-60.9	16.0-62.4	19.8-58.3 21.8-65.5 21.6-57.5

	Correlation of turnout in equivalent wards			
	1982	1983	1984	1986 1987 1988
All contests	1.0	0.82	0.68	0.71 0.73 0.66
Standard deviation		1.0	0.82	0.73 0.77 0.71
Range			1.0	0.82 0.81 0.75
				0.9 0.9 0.84
				1.0 1.0 0.89

control of seats. These elections cover the whole of England outside London, and are for the functionally and financially most important (or only) tier of local government.

In a significant number of cases for the counties, and in almost every case for the metropolitan authorities, the electoral boundaries remained the same between elections, thus facilitating direct comparisons. In addition, data from the 1981 census have been used wherever possible to provide important contextual information for each ward or division. The number of cases available at each point in the analysis is set out in Table 1.

Turnout varies from year to year in each of the sets of elections for which we have information, though both the standard deviation and range are surprisingly constant—see Table 2. Indeed, there is a high correlation between turnout in a ward at one election with turnout in the same ward at the preceding election. *Prima facie* evidence that it is something about the political or social character of the ward itself that might provide us with an explanation of the wide variations in electoral participation.¹⁰ We begin our discussion from that premise.

Discussion

The first point in our statistical examination, therefore, was to conduct very simple bi-variate analyses of the relationship between turnout and the political and structural character of local government wards. The size of the electorate; the region of the country; the number of candidates; and the presence in a contest of women or incumbent candidates appear to make almost no difference to mean turnout figures. The only exception is that turnout is between 6 per cent and 7 per cent higher than average in wards with less than 3,000 electors. However, whether one inclines to an explanation that it is a sense of community or the ease of campaigning that produces such increased participation, the number of such wards is so small—and constantly declining—as to make them atypical. Small may be beautiful, but it would also imply local councils with up to 400 elected members!

Marginality and Turnout

Next, we correlated turnout with the share of the vote gained by each party at the previous election and with the marginality of the ward. This was defined as the percentage majority of the winning party over the second placed party on the last occasion the seat was contested. We calculated this figure both for each party and for the wards as a whole.¹¹ The correlation coefficients for both county and metropolitan elections are set out in Table 3.

Our data suggest that there is an inverse relationship between the 'safeness' of a ward and the likely level of turnout. This relationship is only modest for county council contests, but moderately strong for some recent metropolitan elections. A large Labour share of the vote and a strong Labour majority both act to depress turnout, but we need also to examine our socio-economic data before drawing clear conclusions from this finding. The greater the Conservative share of the vote, the higher the turnout is likely to be—especially in the metropolitan boroughs; but the safer the Tory ward there is a slight tendency for turnout to decline.

Many commentators have assumed that the Liberal Party (and between 1982 and 1987 the Alliance parties) has reaped considerable benefit in local government

TABLE 3. Turnout correlated with party share of the vote and marginality of seat

	County Council Elections					
	1981	1985	1989			
Turnout with Labour share	-0.27	-0.32	-0.23			
Conservative share	0.02	0.22	0.03			
Liberal (Alliance) share	0.21	0.25	0.23			
Labour majority	-0.37	-0.48	-0.42			
Conservative majority	-0.20	-0.08	-0.27			
Ltd (Alliance) majority	0.08	0.02	-0.17			
Overall majority	-0.29	-0.34	-0.36			
		Metropolitan Borough Elections				
	1982	1983	1984	1986		
1987	1988					
Turnout with Labour share	-0.66	-0.61	-0.52	-0.57	-0.62	-0.6
Conservative share	0.48	0.47	0.33	0.41	0.49	0.4
Alliance share	0.25	0.29	0.37	0.38	0.46	0.39
Labour majority	-0.48	-0.49	-0.52	-0.58	-0.66	-0.53
Conservative majority	0.14	-0.03	-0.32	-0.19	-0.2	-0.25
Alliance majority	0.18	0.01	-0.37	-0.15	0.15	0.01
Overall majority	-0.36	-0.43	-0.55	-0.6	-0.69	-0.55

elections from its concentration on vigorous campaigning and publicity at a community level. Implicit in this analysis is the assumption that the party's success is dependent on persuading an absolutely higher proportion of the electorate to turn out and vote. It does appear that there is a positive relationship between Liberal (Alliance) voting and turnout at each of the elections we have examined, but that the correlation is much less clear cut in seats the party(ies) actually held.

Such bald, statistical analyses do of course ignore the subjective aspect of marginality—that is, the extent to which electors have knowledge of, and are influenced by, the state of party competition within a ward or division. Unfortunately, there are no individual level data available to tap this dimension, with the NOP survey for the Widdicombe Committee merely asking respondents for their perceptions of the marginality of the local COUNCIL.

Socio-economic Composition and Turnout

The second part of our initial analysis is to examine how turnout relates to the socio-economic character of electoral divisions. A simple correlation of turnout with each of a number of demographic variables yields few significant relationships, and the likely high incidence of inter-correlation among such variables renders a multivariate analysis methodology inappropriate. We proceeded therefore to reduce the ecological variables collected for our county and metropolitan borough data sets to a smaller number of structural principal components or factors—see Tables 4 and 5. By inspecting the way in which variables load on each factor we are able to construct multi-item scales to represent a range of otherwise inter-correlated indicators.

Table 4. Factor loadings for census variables—county council data

	I	II	III	IV	V
<i>Low socio-economic status</i>					
1. % manual workers	0.71	0.51	0.17	0.05	-0.10
2. % unemployed	0.63	0.30	0.28	0.15	0.20
3. % overcrowding	0.67	0.28	0.36	-0.28	0.13
4. % council tenants	0.27	0.27	-0.32	-0.14	0.06
5. % no car	0.66	0.29	0.34	0.36	0.40
6. % professional/managerial	0.60	0.59	-0.10	-0.03	-0.25
7. % owner occupiers	-0.92	-0.08	0.12	0.03	0.09
<i>Traditional working class</i>					
8. % skilled workers	0.23	0.86	0.09	0.06	-0.18
9. % working in service industry	-0.14	-0.89	-0.07	0.12	0.13
10. % working in manufacturing industry	0.05	0.70	0.07	-0.40	0.35
11. % students	-0.28	-0.72	0.04	-0.20	0.02
<i>Inner city, multi-occupation</i>					
12. % born in NCWP	0.15	-0.16	0.63	-0.34	0.20
13. % no bath	-0.09	0.21	0.81	0.16	-0.21
14. % no exclusive use of WC	0.10	0.10	0.87	0.23	0.04
<i>OAPs</i>					
15. % pensioners	-0.30	-0.07	0.20	0.89	-0.27
<i>Rural</i>					
16. % working in agriculture	-0.09	-0.01	0.04	0.74	0.96
17. % youth	0.57	-0.23	0.26	-0.41	0.25

Table 5. Factor loadings for census variables—metropolitan borough data

	I	II	III	IV
<i>Traditional working class</i>				
1. % skilled workers	0.91	0.20	0.05	-0.05
2. % manual workers	0.78	0.55	0.21	0.05
3. % working in manufacturing industry	0.92	0.05	-0.04	0.18
4. % professional/managerial	-0.73	-0.58	-0.19	-0.03
5. % working in service industry	-0.74	-0.10	0.06	-0.27
6. % students	-0.81	-0.21	-0.16	0.32
<i>Low socio-economic status</i>				
7. % youth	-0.03	0.80	-0.02	0.32
8. % unemployed	0.23	0.86	0.23	0.19
9. % council tenants	0.49	0.73	-0.20	-0.21
10. % no car	0.36	0.78	0.44	-0.02
11. % overcrowding	0.30	0.69	0.14	0.51
12. % owner-occupier	-0.40	-0.82	-0.01	0.18
13. % self-employed	-0.58	-0.64	0.06	-0.04
<i>Disadvantaged elderly</i>				
14. % pensioners	-0.21	0.01	0.63	-0.49
15. % no bath	0.16	0.05	0.84	0.16
16. % no exclusive WC	0.04	0.18	0.86	0.22
<i>Immigrants</i>				
17. % born in NCWP	-0.01	0.21	0.32	0.77
18. % working in agriculture	0.04	-0.44	-0.07	-0.06

Table 6. Turnout correlated with measures of ward socio-economic character

	County council elections			Metropolitan borough elections					
	1981	1985	1989	1982	1983	1984	1986	1987	1988
Low socio-economic status	-0.26	-0.27	-0.18	-0.59	-0.55	-0.40	-0.54	-0.58	-0.49
'Traditional' working class	-0.15	-0.17	-0.12	-0.56	-0.51	-0.47	-0.59	-0.66	-0.53
Multi-occupancy; inner city	-0.15	-0.10	-0.07	-0.06*	-0.01*	0.10	0.08*	-0.02*	-0.06*
Pensioners	0.06	0.12	0.18	-0.05*	-0.05*	-0.12	-0.14	-0.16	-0.09*
Agricultural workers	0.12	-0.19	-0.12						
Young people	-0.24	0.07	-0.19						

* = correlations not significant at the 0.01 level.

The first two factors in each of our data sets are composed of similar variables and can be interpreted in an identical way. One appears to reflect low socio-economic status; the other—highlighting the presence of skilled, manual workers in manufacturing industry—may be called a measure of the 'traditional' working class. In the counties a third factor identifies areas of multi-occupant accommodation—most probably in inner urban areas, and there are three single variable factors covering pensioners, agricultural workers and youth. In the metropolitan boroughs the third factor appears to pick out the elderly in multi-occupant accommodation, whilst the proportion of the population born in the New Commonwealth or Pakistan appears to be a relevant indicator in its own right. Unsurprisingly, the proportion of agricultural workers has little relevance to the analysis.

Variables to capture each of these multi-item or single high loading components were then constructed by simple addition. They were initially tested by correlation with percentage turnout at each election—see Table 6.

The direction of the relationship accords with intuitive expectations from the literature on political participation. Turnout is negatively correlated with low socio-economic status and with other measures of material well-being. Higher correlations are found in the metropolitan boroughs than in the shire counties, reflecting probably the greater social homogeneity of wards in that tier. What is of interest, however, is that in each case the best predictor variable in the socio-economic category explains about as much of the variation in turnout as the best predictor variable in the party competition category. Our final analysis strategy, therefore, is to examine in tandem the political and social characteristics of wards in order to assess their independent (and comparative) impact on patterns of turnout.

Towards a Model of Local Electoral Turnout

The statistical technique of multiple regression allows us to identify which of a range of variables contribute to our ability to predict turnout and what their relative

Table 7. Predicting turnout from contextual and electoral data (standardized regression weights—betas¹).

	County council elections			
	1981	1985	1989	
<i>Context</i>				
Low status	-0.26	-0.22	-0.16	
Traditional working class	-	-	-	
Multi-occupancy	-0.16	-0.08	-	
OAPs	0.12	0.18	0.19	
Rurality	0.13	-	0.08	
<i>Electoral</i> ^a				
Labour share	-	-	-	
Conservative share	-0.18	-0.12	-0.20	
Liberal share	-	-	-	
Marginality	-0.23	-0.26	-0.26	
Constant	48.4	44.3	43.1	
R ² (%)	14.2	13.7	12.1	

^aMarginality and party shares are at the previous year's election, except for 1981 when that year's results are used.

Table 8. Predicting turnout from contextual and electoral data (standardized regression weights—betas¹)

	Metropolitan borough elections					
	1982	1983	1984	1986	1987	1988
<i>Context</i>						
Low status	-0.27	-0.26	-	-	-	-
Traditional working class	-0.15	-0.13	-0.33	-0.43	-0.38	-0.33
Old	-	0.09	0.08	0.10	-	0.17
Immigrants	0.09	-	-	-	-	-
<i>Electoral</i> ^a						
Labour share	-0.27	-0.19	-	-	-	-0.27
Conservative share	-	-	-	-	-	-
Liberal (Alliance) share	-	-	0.16	0.09	0.13	-
Marginality	-0.13	-0.24	-0.33	-0.38	-0.40	-0.33
Constant	46.6	48.3	43.2	46.2	52.2	46.2
R ² (%)	46.3	43.1	36.5	50.5	57.4	48.8

^aMarginality and party shares are at the previous year's election, except for 1982 when that year's results are used.

importance is in the model. Following from our earlier discussion, we have used five contextual and four electoral indicators for the county elections and four indicators of each type for the metropolitan elections. The full regression results are set out in Tables 7 and 8.

For the counties, our ability to predict turnout from the available information on the composition of electoral divisions is only modest. However, it does appear that

socio-economic and political factors make an almost equal and independent contribution to that proportion of turnout which we can explain. In wards where the result is not in doubt or where 'low' socio-economic status is highlighted, turnout is likely to be below average. In the counties these two circumstances may be working in polar opposite directions to depress the explanatory power of our equation. Citizens in divisions with a large Conservative share of the vote (and majority) may be discouraged from voting because they already 'know' the result, *DESPITE* generally living in an area of high status and thus assumed high predisposition to participate.

In the metropolitan areas the more frequent concurrence of 'safe' seats *AND* areas of 'low' status may help to explain our more impressive ability to 'predict' turnout at this level—see Table 8. Wards at this tier of local government are more homogeneous both socially and politically than those in the counties. The majority of 'safe' seats are held by the Labour party; many of these seats are in traditional working class neighbourhoods. With our regression results once again showing that contextual and electoral factors appear to have an equal impact on levels of turnout, it is scarcely surprising that the mutual reinforcement of these two conditions leads to an increase in our ability to explain variations between wards. Citizens living in low status areas are less likely to participate both because of that fact, and because they are located more frequently in non-competitive wards. Further testing out of the direction of causality must, however, await the availability of individual level data.

It is worth adding that a very limited test of the correlates of turnout in five large shire cities seems to support our analysis. We conducted regression analyses on turnout patterns in those wards in Bristol, Derby, Nottingham, Southampton and Stoke-on-Trent where comparable electoral and contextual data for both 1981 and 1985 were available. The proportion of the variance explained in these cases is 40.6 in 1981 and 28.0 in 1985, with only the political factors of Labour share of the vote and the marginality of the seat loading in the regression equation. As one might expect, these cities appear to exhibit characteristics more in keeping with the metropolitan areas than with the counties of which they are formally a part.

Bucking the Trend

Any regression model, however satisfactorily it acts as a predictor of the dependent variable, is only a 'best fit' among all the cases available. An inspection of a plot of observed against expected values for turnout within our regression equations shows many wards and divisions whose levels of turnout are considerably above or below that predicted. These 'outliers' are worth examining to see if they provide clues to some of the more qualitative characteristics which may determine variations in turnout. For each of our data sets we identified and subjected to close scrutiny those wards where turnout was more than 10 per cent above or below that predicted. Table 9 shows the number of such cases for each set of elections—for both the counties and the metropolitan boroughs about 4 per cent of wards fell into this category.

Only a handful of wards appear as 'residual' cases at every set of elections. There are five county divisions whose turnout in both 1981 and 1985 was more than 10 per cent above prediction, and three whose turnout was 10 per cent below. Between 1985 and 1989 there were six and five such divisions respectively. Over

Table 9. Number of wards/divisions with turnout > 10 per cent above or below prediction

	Above	Below
Counties		
1981	30	22
1985	33	20
1989	36	25
Metropolitan boroughs		
1982	15	6
1983	6	14
1984	11	8
1986	9	11
1987	12	7
1988	14	13

the run of six metropolitan contests, two wards always appear among the residuals where turnout was under-predicted and in one turnout is invariably over-predicted by a large margin. A further ward falls into this latter category on five out of six occasions. What is of interest, though, is that in each year the wards appearing among the residuals tend to come only from a handful of authorities and that often they are adjacent to each other even within the same authority. For example, in 1982 10 and in 1988 11 out of a possible 36 metropolitan boroughs had wards listed in a residual category; and in 1985 all the county divisions with residually high or low turnouts came from 35 of the 296 component districts.

Our analysis suggests it is possible to identify four different types of 'outlier' wards or divisions:

- (1) Wards which are listed as residual only once.
- (2) Wards which are not clustered with others from the same authority, but which are listed on more than one occasion.
- (3) Wards which appear to cluster together, but which are listed only once.
- (4) Wards which appear to cluster together and where a similar cluster occurs on more than one occasion.

We have, in other words, 'habitual' and 'one-off over- and under-achievers. Wards in categories (1) and (3) are likely to be exhibiting a response to currently salient local issues or to a particular set of political circumstances. Where an authority-wide cluster is identified, as in Liverpool in 1984 or in Thanet, (Kent) in 1985, a qualitative examination of the local campaign will usually provide a supportive explanation for the statistical phenomenon. Such instances are not always possible to predict, although informed observers might suggest that turnout in Bradford in 1990 may well exceed past levels by a substantial margin.

Wards in categories (2) and (4) appear time and time again, and it is reasonable to predict that they will stand out at the next diet of elections as well. The scattered, rural Northumbrian division of Plenneller has, for example, been noted for its high turnouts ever since the first elections to the new county authority in 1973.¹² Why some of the individual divisions feature is not readily apparent and certainly

has little to do with patterns of party contestation or the numbers of candidates. One is reluctantly driven almost to a cultural explanation of why turnout in Todmorden should be consistently 15 per cent above the average for Calderdale, or why in Molesey West, Surrey it is consistently 10 per cent less than that in every other division of the Elmbridge district. Similarly, the frequency with which wards in Sandwell are recorded as under-performing while those in nearby, and socially and politically not dissimilar, Walsall are recorded as over-performing requires an explanation which goes beyond the scope of this paper.

Conclusion

Our attempt to predict local election turnout through the aggregate analysis of contextual and electoral data has been modestly successful. The structural context and political complexion of wards and divisions do seem to be related to the propensity of citizens to participate in local authority elections. Electors in 'safe' seats ARE less likely to vote than those in 'marginal' ones—all other things being equal, and electors in 'safe' Labour seats are least likely to vote at all. That finding is interesting, too, in that it suggests that the social character of a ward may contribute to its collective behaviour quite as much as its political character. This is supported by our regression analyses which accord almost equal weight to the two different types of measure in the 'explanation' of patterns of turnout.

In many instances, however, turnout is substantially above or below that predicted by our model. We attempted to highlight such variations in our analysis of residuals. Exceptionally low turnouts are difficult to explain and almost impossible to predict. However, where a contest is unusual, characterized by high partisan competition, features intense campaigning by one or more parties, or occurs in an area where local government has, for whatever reason, been elevated to high prominence, then turnout often exceeds statistical prediction by a wide margin. We can thus confirm for a much larger sample the findings of previous experimental studies of electoral participation.¹³ High turnouts in local government can be achieved, but they must be won by the parties (and the media) successfully conveying to the electorate an impression of the importance of the contest. Apathy can be countered, but it is almost impossible to build the circumstances under which it will be into a quantitative model of local electoral turnout.

Notes and References

1. See, for example, A.H. Birch, *Small Town Politics*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1959), and W. Hampton, *Democracy and Community*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1970).
2. P. Fletcher, 'An Explanation of Variations in Turnout', *Political Studies*, 17, 1969, p.500.
3. *Ibid.*, p.502.
4. K. Newton, 'Turnout and Marginality in Local Elections', *British Journal of Political Science*, 2, 1972, p.255.
5. *Ibid.*, p.255.
6. W.L. Miller, 'Local Electoral Behaviour' in Committee of Inquiry into the Conduct of Local Authority Business, Research Volume III, The Local Government Elector. Cmnd 9800, London: HMSO, 1986.
7. *Ibid.*, p.139.
8. *Ibid.*, p.143.

9. The English county council election results for 1981 and 1985 were collected with the help of ESRC Research Grant E00232117. The metropolitan borough and the 1989 county results were collected by the authors with valuable assistance from their Department at Polytechnic South West and from *Local Government Chronicle*. All the machine-readable data are, or shortly will be, available from the ESRC Archive at the University of Essex. Detailed records of each county council election result in 1985 and 1989 and each metropolitan borough election result in 1986, 1987 and 1988 are published by the Local Government Chronicle Elections Centre at Polytechnic South West. Further information from the authors.
10. We should add the caveat that a small degree of the variation in turnout between different local authorities will be determined by the accuracy of the electoral registration systems they employ. See M. and S. Pinnó-Duschinsky, *Voter Registration: Problems and Solutions* (London: Constitutional Reform Centre, 1987).
11. In 1981 for the counties and in 1982 for the metropolitan boroughs, turnout has had to be correlated with ward electoral data for the same year.
12. See D. Clark, *Battle for the Counties* (Newcastle: Redrose Publications, 1977), p. 10.
13. See, for example, J.M. Bochel and D.T. Denver, 'Canvassing, Turnout and Party Support: an Experiment', *British Journal of Political Science*, 2, 1972, and B. Pimlott, 'Local Party Organization, Turnout and Marginality', *British Journal of Political Science*, 3, 1973.

Vote Probabilities

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The election outcome of the parliamentary elections in the Netherlands in 1986 showed a considerable discrepancy from the expected results. Neither are large differences between poll results and election outcomes exceptional for other countries, as for example in West Germany in 1987. Research in the Netherlands showed that the failure of opinion polls to predict accurately the election outcome in 1986 was due to voters' uncertainty in regard to their political preference.

Within the theory of voting behaviour, one can find a number of different reasons which might give a theoretical explanation for this uncertainty. In this article we will introduce vote probabilities as a way of measuring the degree of voters' uncertainty. We will show that it is possible to use these probabilities to predict an election outcome, taking into account the voters' uncertainty and his possible alternative choices. Empirical research in the future might introduce vote probabilities as intervening variables between the alleged explanatory variables of voting behaviour and the actual vote itself.

In the theory of voting, several approaches to the explanation of the vote have been proposed. The Columbia school of thought, associated with the work of Lazarsfeld *et al.*,¹ depicts long term sociological variables as the main determinants of the voting decision. For the Michigan school, represented in the work of Campbell and his colleagues,² psychological variables, attitudes towards issues and candidates play a decisive role between the sociological background in the determination of the vote. In yet another line of thought, Downs³ depicts voters and parties as rational actors in a market in which political favours are exchanged for votes. Here, the concept of ideology is introduced as a cost saving mechanism. Both voters and parties determine their optimal ideological position, make comparisons and act accordingly.

In a political system in which voters can choose between a relatively large number of parties, one cannot expect either of these theories to always single out *one* party as the most preferred option. As the number of parties in the system under study increases, the models tend to lose explanatory power. In empirical studies, several parties are often identified as possibilities for the vote, due to cross-pressures or equidistant parties in some ideological space, whichever theory is applied.

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