



Patterns of Voting Choice in Multimember Districts: the Case of English Local Elections¹

Colin Rallings, Michael Thrasher* and Christine Gunter

Local Government Chronicle Elections Centre, University of Plymouth, Plymouth, U.K.

Analysis of plurality voting where district magnitude is greater than one offers students of electoral behaviour unique opportunities. In this paper we use aggregate voting data from English local elections to explore a number of issues concerning the relationship between parties, candidates and voters. Our first task is to measure the level of unused votes and consider the impact of party competition and electoral marginality. Multimember districts also provide the potential for intra-party comparisons of candidates. Accordingly, we measure the range of votes between candidates from the same party and consider the impact of incumbency, gender and ballot position on differential rates of electoral support. Although the empirical focus of the paper is on English local government, its findings may well prove relevant to an understanding of the relationship between voters and parties in other electoral systems where a choice about the number of votes to use and the way in which to cast them is available. © 1998 Elsevier Science Ltd. All rights reserved

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Introduction

In their analysis of the effects produced by different electoral systems Taagepera and Shugart (1989) make only passing reference to plurality voting in multimember districts. After noting that proportional representation (PR) systems lead to relative proportionality when district magnitude is high but that under plurality rules large magnitudes help foster disproportionality, the authors comment “we will leave aside the increasingly rare system of plurality in multimember districts” (Taagepera and Shugart, 1989:23) before moving on to issues considered more mainstream. There is no doubt that such electoral systems are rare but that distinction should not, by itself, preclude our studying them. Moreover, given the extent to which this particular method of election is still used in British local government, analysis of that system must, at some point, address the special circumstances surrounding such contests and the sometimes idiosyncratic outcomes which result. Indeed, to make virtue out of necessity, by analysing

*Author for correspondence.

those outcomes we may gain important insights into the complex relationships which exist between voters and parties as well as those between electoral and party systems in many different polities.

Accordingly, this paper will address a number of issues using voting data from multimember districts at four different sets of elections for English local authorities. First, we will measure the extent of unused votes and consider the relationship between that variable and the level of party contestation. A second line of analysis will investigate the extent to which parties experience more or less equality of support for their different candidates. Third, we explore the impact of party incumbency and marginality upon the distribution of votes in multimember districts. A fourth area of interest lies with the possible effect of characteristics associated not with parties but rather with candidates. We shall consider whether voters appear to discriminate in favour or against candidates according to their gender and/or status as incumbents seeking re-election. We also examine the impact of ballot position on the performance of individual candidates.

Before we outline our findings, however, it is important to note how the specific case of plurality voting in multimember districts creates problems for the classification of electoral systems. Much of that discussion has centred on the critical role played by district magnitude. Research has largely contrasted the effects of plurality or majority voting in single member constituencies with that of voting in multimember constituencies under some form of PR. A plurality system using multimember districts does not fit easily within existing frameworks.

Classifying Electoral Systems and Plurality Voting in Multimember Districts

The interaction between electoral and party systems has been a major preoccupation of many political scientists. Some maintain that the electoral system has an important impact upon the way in which party politics is conducted. Thus, Duverger (1954) maintained that plurality systems encouraged the development of two party politics by penalising small parties whose votes were not geographically concentrated. In turn, this encouraged both a stable two party system to develop and also government by a single majority party. PR systems, however, by extending political choice effectively allowed parties to proliferate and made coalition government almost inevitable. Duverger (1984) argues that plurality and majority systems are to be preferred to PR systems since the latter leads to "political sclerosis" while the former help facilitate election victories by the likes of Margaret Thatcher and François Mitterrand both of whom, "have greatly stirred their two nations" (Duverger, 1984: 38). Criticising this stance Sartori maintains, "the methodological and substantive feebleness of the laws of Duverger are patent and easily demonstrated" (Sartori, 1986: 45). Such criticism does not, however, stand in the way of Sartori's own basic argument that voting behaviour is influenced by the electoral system. Systems that operate with low district magnitudes produce a "strong" pressure upon voters to support major parties while those with PR and higher district magnitudes are considered more "feeble" in their effect. At one end of the "strong-feeble" scale, therefore, are systems which use plurality voting in single member districts while at the other are PR systems where the entire country votes as a single constituency. But the effect produced by district magnitude is, according to Sartori, a constituency effect. In order to understand how we might move from local to national bipartyism in plurality systems, for example, we need also to understand how party systems operate and how they too might be categorised as "strong" or "feeble". Later, after reviewing the evidence, we shall consider how plurality voting in multimember districts might fit within Sartori's scheme.

Another view of the relationship between electoral and party systems emphasises the historical background to a country's adoption of a particular electoral method. Thus, Rokkan, 1970 noted how the existence and potential threat posed by intense minorities often prompted the adoption of PR. In the specific case of plurality voting in multimember districts there are indeed historical reasons why the method was adopted and has survived to the present day in British local government (Rallings and Thrasher, 1997). Nohlen (1984) believes that countries rarely move from one form of electoral system to another because the system is itself an expression of a fundamental view about the nature of politics and the principles of representation which ought to operate. Two basic principles exist: one emphasising functional/political representation, the other striving for social/proportional representation. For this reason Nohlen thinks Sartori's classification is mistaken because it operates as though only one principle of representation, that of social/proportional, is at work. Sartori's response is to quote his earlier work (Sartori, 1968) stating that two patterns of representational system can be detected, one functional and largely concerned with creating efficient government the other reflective of society as a whole. We believe that Taagepera and Shugart (1989: 53) are right to conclude that both sides to this argument have something important to say and that, "Politics and electoral systems can operate in a complex, two-directional way".

Although discussions about the fundamental principles of electoral systems are important they tell us little about the mechanics of those systems and the way in which they impact upon electoral outcomes. The classic study in this regard is Rae's (1967) classification of electoral laws. First, there is "electoral formula", which defines the process whereby votes are translated into seats. At one end of the continuum seats are allocated on a "first past the post" or "winner takes all" basis while at the other deliberate efforts are made to award seats proportionately to votes. Second, systems differ in the type of choice available to voters. Categorical ballots require voters to choose one party and no others while ordinal ballots permit a more complex set of preferences amongst parties and candidates to take place. Rae's third dimension, "district magnitude", is acknowledged as the most crucial determinant of a system's perceived "fairness". Where district magnitude is one there is often an imbalance between votes and seats but as district magnitude rises this imbalance begins to disappear. Katz (1980) has added to Rae's classification by identifying the importance of intraparty electoral choice. Some systems with magnitudes greater than one do not allow voters to discriminate amongst candidates from the same party, making party campaigns essentially a co-operative exercise. In other systems, for example, those using a limited vote, candidates from the same party can be seen as effectively competing against one another for votes.

Using these four dimensions how might we describe plurality voting in multimember districts? Theoretically, such electoral units have an enhanced capacity to reward winners: the more seats at stake, the more exaggerated the winner's bonus and the less proportional the outcome. In this sense they could justifiably be placed at one extreme end of Rae's continuum. Alternatively, multimember districts could produce an outcome which ameliorates the usual effects produced by "first past the post" systems. Voters might opt to spread their support evenly across parties if they felt each had something important to offer. If sufficient voters engaged in "split-ticket" voting then a more proportional outcome could, theoretically, be obtained. What of Rae's second dimension, ballot structure? In multimember districts using simple plurality voters are not asked to rank candidates on an ordinal scale but neither are they obliged to express a purely categorical choice. Clearly, voters can, *de facto*, cast a categorical ballot but the ballot structure, strictly speaking, does not force the voter down this particular path. By choosing candidates from different parties a voter can choose to divide his

or her mandate. Voters in multimember districts, therefore, do not necessarily fall easily within one or other of these "ideal types". Rae's third dimension, district magnitude, poses a problem when the number of seats allocated to each district within a legislature varies as it does in the case of British local authorities. We will not dwell upon this issue here but we should note that in such cases Taagepera and Shugart (1989, Ch. 12) believe that a more accurate measure is that of "effective magnitude". Finally, there remains the issue of intraparty electoral choice. Superficially, party candidates in multimember districts should fight co-operative campaigns if they believe voters are essentially partisan. But what if past elections have demonstrated that voters are not partisan and instead choose between candidates on grounds other than party? In such cases candidates might feel that to enhance their own chances of election some distancing from their fellow party candidates might be prudent. The number of multimember districts in Britain which see candidates of different parties elected means that some individuals must face a dilemma in choosing between a co-operative or competitive campaign strategy.

Plurality voting in multimember districts provide special circumstances that present difficulties in classifying such electoral systems. Although the system superficially appears "strong" in Sartori's terms, that condition will operate only if voters remain loyal to one particular party and do not exploit the potential for freedom of choice. If, on the other hand, sufficient voters do opt for "split-ticket" voting then a more proportional outcome is theoretically possible and the system could then be classed as "feeble". Clearly, the more we can learn about the reality of plurality voting in multimember districts the more we advance our capacity for classifying electoral systems.

Multimember Districts in Britain

Plurality voting in multimember districts is now sufficiently rare that Britain, the United States (Niemi *et al.*, 1985, 1991) and New Zealand (Bush, 1992) provide virtually the only remaining examples. In nineteenth century Britain various forms of local administration, including parish councils, school boards and boards of guardians, elected officials using multimember districts. When local government was consolidated in the latter part of the century these electoral arrangements were readily appropriated as the basis for the new authorities. Further local government reorganisation in the early 1970s saw some entire former local authorities used as the basis for new voting districts giving rise to some large district magnitudes with voters able to elect up to twelve councillors at a time. One election for a ten member district in 1973 attracted a total of 31 candidates. Of the successful candidates in this particular contest only two were not from among the ten candidates fielded by the Conservative party and they happened to be the first two names listed on the ballot paper. Multimember districts are still used extensively in local authority elections in both England and Wales but successive boundary reviews have reduced district magnitudes. Two and three member districts are most common but there are still a handful of four and five member districts.

In this paper we will analyse the two types of local authority in England which still use multimember districts and which elect the entire council at a single election. In the 32 London boroughs, which following abolition of the Greater London Council in 1986 constitute the sole tier of local government in the capital city, our data cover the two consecutive sets of elections held in 1990 and 1994. In 1994 across the London authorities there were 15 single member, 330 two-member and 414 three-member districts. The second type of authority are English shire councils (confusingly known as district councils), approximately 180 in number, which employ multimember districts. These authorities follow a different electoral cycle to the Lon-

don boroughs and data for elections in 1991 and 1995 will be examined. A total of 1,239 two member and 873 three-member districts were used in the most recent elections held in 1995. Although experiencing a similar electoral system, in other ways London boroughs and shire districts are worlds apart. The London boroughs are high profile authorities with normally fierce party political competition and high migration rates. Candidates standing on a non-party platform are few and largely unsuccessful. In the English shires, however, parties often fail to field a full slate of candidates and minor or non-party candidates are both more numerous and successful. Furthermore, shire elections can take place in relatively small authorities with a stable population where the scope for candidates to nurture a “personal” vote might be considered better than in the de-personalised atmosphere of a major city. Such contrasts provide considerable scope for examining the ways in which votes are distributed between parties and candidates in multimember districts. The Welsh district councils were not considered suitable for analysis given the high proportion of uncontested wards—almost 40% in 1991.

Unused Votes in Multimember Districts

We calculate unused votes in a multimember district election by first taking the number of electors who voted and multiplying that figure by district magnitude. Next, we sum the votes for each candidate in the district to arrive at total actual votes. The difference between the total possible votes and the sum of the votes for each candidate is then expressed as a percentage of the total possible votes. In their analysis of voting at the 1973 local elections Denver and Hands (1975) found that the mean percentage of unused votes in multimember districts was 11.3%. That particular study covered 193 cases from shire councils located in a relatively small area of the country. In Table 1 we show average percentage unused votes for more than two thousand multimember districts throughout the English shires and for a further seven hundred in the London boroughs. In the shires the average percentage of unused votes was greater than that found by Denver and Hands, but in the London boroughs it was much lower. The figures also show that the higher the district magnitude the greater the percentage of unused votes. One possible explanation for the differences between the more recent data and those taken from the 1973 elections is that party competition was then largely between just Conservative and Labour candidates while for the later period more contests feature candidates from the third party, the Liberal Democrats. If voters are partisan then we might anticipate that the more parties there are and the more those parties fail to field a full slate of candidates then “their” voters will not use all available votes. In London the main parties fielded a full slate of candidates in three quarters of cases. In the shires, however, less than a third of contests attracted a full slate of candidates for each of the parties. The considerable difference in unused votes between the London boroughs and the English shire councils might, therefore, simply be a result of the different patterns of party competition.

Table 1. % unused votes in multimember districts

		All	N =	M = 2	N =	M = 3	N =
English shires	1991	12.9	2116	11.5	1238	14.8	873
English shires	1995	12.2	2116	11.1	1238	13.8	873
London Bors.	1990	7.7	739	7.0	324	8.1	414
London Bors.	1994	7.6	739	6.9	326	8.2	413

Table 2. % unused votes in three member districts controlling for party competition

	Shires 1991		London 1990	
	%	N =	%	N =
Full major party slates + others	5.3	407	6.3	381
Full major party slates/no others	5.2	261	6.1	168
Lab/LD full slate + others – Con less	11.1	17	10.8	5
Lab/LD full slate no others – Con less	12.8	5	11.3	2
Con/LD full slate + others – Lab less	9.3	29	–	–
Con/LD full slate no others – Lab less	8.0	19	–	–
Con/Lab full slate + others – LD less	10.5	21	8.1	35
Con/Lab full slate no others – LD less	10.1	11	8.2	10
	Shires 1995		London 1994	
	%	N =	%	N =
Full major party slates + others	5.9	483	6.7	553
Full major party slates/no others	5.8	344	6.5	331
Lab/LD full slate + others – Con less	13.1	23	12.2	5
Lab/LD full slate no others – Con less	12.4	17	–	–
Con/LD full slate + others – Lab less	10.0	30	–	–
Con/LD full slate no others – Lab less	9.9	21	–	–
Con/Lab full slate + others – LD less	8.8	23	8.8	16
Con/Lab full slate no others – LD less	8.5	19	8.8	10

Table 2 shows quite clearly that once we control for the pattern of party competition electors in the shires show little difference to those in London in terms of their propensity to “waste” votes. Further evidence of the role played by party competition in determining the level of unused votes can be found in Table 3. In the shires it is fairly common for one of the main parties to field a solitary candidate in a multimember district. The very high percentage of unused votes in such districts suggests that those party loyalists that do turn out to vote are less likely to transfer spare votes to candidates from other parties.

Party Vote Dispersion in Multimember Districts

The distribution of support among candidates of the same party might tell us something about the strength of party loyalty among voters. Those parties which command a strong sense of

Table 3. % Unused votes in three member districts in English shires with single party candidates

	1991	N =	1995	N =
Single Con	19.4	330	17.8	475
Single Lab	19.0	379	18.0	369
Single LDem	18.6	459	15.1	399

party identity should reveal a relatively small gap between their best and worst placed candidates in any multimember district. Where the gap in votes is great, however, we might surmise that voter support for that party is less robust. In their article *Denver and Hands* (1975) develop an “index of vote dispersion” which they calculate by expressing the standard deviation of the votes for a party’s candidates as a percentage of the mean number of votes for that party. This is, in fact, more widely known as the “coefficient of variation” but in this case “index of dispersion” carries more meaning and we propose to use their terminology. In their study they found that the index of dispersion for a full slate of Labour candidates was an average of 5.9% while for Conservative candidates it was 7.0%.

In Table 4 we show the rate of dispersion for the three main parties at four sets of elections. There appears to be a marked difference between the level of dispersion amongst Conservative and Labour candidates on the one hand and Liberal Democrats on the other. We know from British Election Study data (reported in *Denver*, 1989) that Liberal Democrat voters are much less likely to express a strong party identification than Labour or Conservative supporters. We should not be surprised, therefore, that vote dispersion is greater for Liberal Democrat candidates than for the other two parties. A second feature of Table 4 worthy of comment is the different levels of vote dispersion in the English shires and London boroughs. Other research (Waller, 1980; Miller, 1988) suggests that voters in the shires are less inclined towards the national parties and more likely to vote on local issues. Our findings seem to support this view but it may be that party campaigns are more visible and better resourced in London and that also contributes to more consistent support for party slates.

Strategic Situation and Voting in Multimember Districts

There are three ways in which we might assess the impact on voting of the strategic situation surrounding each electoral district. Since, as we have shown, the structure of party competition is so critical we examine only those districts where each party had a full slate of candidates. First, is it the case that parties suffer less vote dispersion in the seats they hold rather than in those where they are challenging? It could be that one of the advantages of incumbency, both for the party itself and often too for its sitting councillors, is the ability to get voters into the habit of voting the straight ticket. Second, we can divide districts into marginal (defined in

Table 4. Index of Dispersion for main parties

	Con	N =	Lab	N =	LDem	N =
English shires 1991						
All	7.2	1556	8.7	1405	10.2	939
Full party slates	7.1	1447	8.6	1314	10.1	850
English shires 1995						
All	8.5	1286	7.8	1551	10.9	1174
Full party slates	8.1	1186	7.6	1465	10.8	1081
London 1990						
All	4.5	710	5.4	737	7.8	436
Full party slates	4.4	703	5.4	735	7.5	400
London 1994						
All	5.7	709	5.0	739	7.2	600
Full party slates	5.7	701	5.0	739	7.2	581

terms of the winning party having a majority of 20% or less at the previous election) and non-marginal and then analyse the extent of vote dispersion. The assumption underlying this approach is that parties campaign more fiercely in those seats viewed as most vulnerable and that voters respond to such a campaign by sticking with the party ticket. In safer seats the party struggle is often less intense and, with the overall result in little doubt, there is more scope for ticket-splitting. A third approach is to examine the index of vote dispersion in those districts where there was a change in political control compared to the previous election. Although there is some overlap between these categories previous analyses of local election data in Britain have shown that large variations exist both in the size and direction of swing between parties and that it is not always in the marginal districts that political change takes place (Rallings and Thrasher, 1996). We might anticipate that one factor in allowing a party to “gain” a district is its ability to minimise the level of its vote dispersion compared with that of its opponents.

Table 5 shows the index of dispersion for each of the parties in its own and its rivals’ marginal and non-marginal districts. In all but one case parties do suffer less dispersion in their own seats, but there is no clear relationship between the index of vote dispersion and marginality. In the English shires each party’s score is higher in the marginals than in those districts where there was less prospect of defeat. In London, by contrast, the dispersion rate for Labour and the Liberal Democrats is lower in their marginal rather than safe seats whereas Conservative-held seats conform to the pattern found in the shires. Perhaps by moving our focus away from marginal districts towards those where political control did actually alter we might learn more about any possible effect on voting produced by the perceived closeness of the outcome.

Defining change in political control is not as straightforward in the case of multimember districts as it is for single member constituencies. It is not unusual to encounter districts where candidates from different parties have been successful at the same election. In the 1994 London borough elections, for example, more than 6% of two member districts saw councillors from different parties elected while in the following year’s shire elections no fewer than 22% of two member districts had a similar outcome, a pattern not dissimilar from the U.S. experience

Table 5. Marginality and index of dispersion in multimember wards with full party slates

	Con	Lab	LDem	N =
English shires 1995				
Con marginals	7.0	7.3	9.0	143
Con non-marginals	5.0	6.7	10.7	96
Lab marginals	11.3	5.6	11.2	43
Lab non-marginals	10.8	4.9	10.8	36
LDem marginals	9.3	7.3	7.8	86
LDem non-marginals	7.0	7.4	5.7	52
London Boroughs 1994				
Con marginals	3.4	4.6	7.6	88
Con non-marginals	2.9	5.4	5.9	144
Lab marginals	5.9	4.0	8.4	86
Lab non-marginals	8.0	4.7	8.8	102
LDem marginals	6.6	5.0	3.7	51
LDem non-marginals	8.9	5.6	5.3	26

(Niemi *et al.*, 1985, 1991). For this reason we have defined a change in political control as when the party which topped the poll at the first election is different to the one which did so at the second election. Overall, however, the figures in Table 6 are not consistent with the proposition that changes in political control, any more than marginality itself, are correlated with differences in party vote dispersion. Trial regression analyses to determine the relative impact of party competition, electoral marginality, and district magnitude on the levels of unused votes and on vote dispersion yielded insignificant results.

Candidate Characteristics and Voting in Multimember Districts

To explore the relationship, if any, between individual candidate characteristics and voting patterns in multimember districts we will examine incumbency, gender and position on the ballot paper.

Incumbency

There is considerable evidence from national studies that political incumbents seeking re-election have an advantage over their rivals. In the United States, for example, their success rate is frequently above 90 per cent for the House of Representatives and only slightly lower for the Senate (Mann, 1977; Cover, 1977; Parker, 1980; Jacobson, 1992). This research has also been conducted for state level elections (Breux, 1990). Such factors as higher media profiles, opportunities to initiate and identify with successful policy programmes and the ability to attract support simply because some people like to “back a winner” all tend to favour incumbents. Occasionally, of course, and especially when a government is embroiled in scandal, political incumbency can prove a handicap (Reed, 1994), but on balance once in office certain advantages accrue to legislators when seeking a fresh electoral mandate. Interestingly, the use

Table 6. Index of dispersion and change of political control

	Con	Lab	LDem
Shire Councils 1995			
No change in control	8.3	7.5	10.4
Change in political control	8.5	7.9	11.2
Con to Lab	9.1	8.5	10.3
Con to LDem	9.1	9.0	11.8
Lab to Con	7.6	7.7	10.2
Lab to LDem	7.6	7.1	11.0
LDem to Con	8.3	7.7	11.7
LDem to Lab	8.6	7.7	11.2
London Boroughs 1994			
No change in control	5.8	4.9	7.1
Change in political control	5.6	5.1	7.3
Con to Lab	5.3	5.2	7.8
Con to LDem	5.9	4.7	5.8
Lab to Con	4.9	5.0	9.3
Lab to LDem	6.6	5.6	6.2
LDem to Con	4.5	4.1	3.6
LDem to Lab	6.8	5.0	6.4

of multimember districts in some state legislative elections has stimulated U.S. research into the effect of incumbency under such ballot rules. Cox and Morgenstern (1995) found that while there was an incumbency advantage the average rate of increase in that advantage was lower for multimember than single member districts while Niemi *et al.* (1991) made particular note of the extent to which multimember districts elected candidates from different parties. Little of this research, however, has focused specifically on the relationship between incumbency advantage and ballot structure. Faced with a ballot paper containing candidates from the same party do voters favour incumbents over non-incumbents and, if so, how large is that advantage?

At the 1991 English shire council elections incumbents were more than twice as likely to finish in first place in a three member district as were non-incumbents. When we controlled for party, however, differences emerged. The largest gap between incumbents and non-incumbents was amongst Conservative candidates where the value of incumbency was almost four times greater than non-incumbency in terms of finishing top of that party's slate of candidates. Incumbency was of less value to Labour candidates, although sitting councillors were still more than twice as likely to finish at the top of the party's list. Liberal Democrat candidates enjoyed the least advantage of incumbency, although even then councillors seeking re-election did perform better than the party's other candidates. We repeated this analysis for the following cycle of elections in 1995. On this occasion 41% of re-elected incumbents finished in first place in three member districts compared with 25% who finished in third place. The mean share of the electorate for re-elected incumbents was 21.7% while for newly elected candidates it was two per cent lower. Closer inspection of the data controlling for party shows incumbents consistently doing better than non-incumbents, albeit with some variation in the margin between parties—see Table 7. Among Conservatives, whose losses were considerable in this particular set of elections, incumbents averaged just under 2 per cent more than non-incumbents. The gap was even smaller for Liberal Democrat candidates, though Labour incumbents did enjoy a slightly larger lead of some 3.2 per cent over non-incumbents. Among Independents, where *a priori* we might expect evidence of a greater personal vote, the difference in mean share of the electorate between incumbents and non-incumbents was little different to that experienced by candidates sporting a party label.

To what extent were incumbents in the English shires enjoying a level of “personal vote” denied to councillors seeking re-election in the more urban authorities? In multimember districts in the London boroughs the advantages of incumbency did appear to be smaller, although some relationship between finishing position and incumbency was still observable. Overall, incumbents standing for re-election to the London boroughs were one and half times more likely to finish ahead of non-incumbents in those districts won by the same party. The relationship was stronger for Conservatives, whose incumbents were almost twice as successful in

Table 7. % mean share of the electorate for incumbents and non-incumbents elected in three member districts at the 1995 English shire elections

Party	Incumbents %	Non-incumbents %	Difference
Conservative	19.4	17.5	+ 1.9
Labour	24.0	20.8	+ 3.2
Liberal Democrat	18.2	17.0	+ 1.2
Independent	20.3	18.4	+ 1.9

coming at the top of the party's slate, than for Labour where incumbency hardly appeared to matter. Although not as numerous in London Liberal Democrat incumbents also reaped an electoral benefit when standing for re-election. The data from multimember districts, therefore, suggests the electoral prospects for incumbents are better than non-incumbents although the overall level of that personal vote is not large. Voters in the shires appeared either more able or more willing to recognise a former councillor than those voting in London authorities. This suggests that individuals from smaller districts in rural areas have a better chance of becoming known as councillors and thereby establishing a "personal vote" than do their counterparts on more urban councils.

Incumbents, therefore, appear to enjoy a distinct advantage over non-incumbents. We can take this analysis further by asking whether those advantages operate collectively as well as specifically for the individual. For each of our four sets of elections we divided districts with full party slates into one of four categories. First, those districts where no incumbents from any of the main parties stood as candidates. Second, districts where three incumbent Conservative candidates stood for re-election. Third, districts with Labour incumbents and, fourth, those with Liberal Democrat incumbents. Our hypothesis was that in those districts where one party's supporters could identify all three candidates as incumbent councillors seeking re-election the party's index of dispersion would be lower than where no incumbents were challenging because of a collective incumbency effect.

Table 8 shows a mixed pattern of results with, on balance, a party enjoying a somewhat lower index of dispersion where it fields a full slate of incumbent candidates than where it fields none. The Liberal Democrats in particular appear to benefit from persuading their supporters that they should vote a straight ticket where there are incumbents seeking re-election. This finding will not be surprising to those who have studied the Liberal Democrat style of local politics which emphasises the importance of community issues, public accessibility to elected representatives and the circulation of newsletters extolling the virtues of their councillors (McIver, 1996). However, it is important to note that the level of vote dispersion experienced by the Liberal Democrats still tends to be greater than that for the other two parties even controlling for incumbency.

Table 8. Incumbency and the index of dispersion in 3 member districts with full party slates

	Con	Lab	LDem
London boroughs 1990			
no incumbents	4.7	5.7	7.6
full incumbency	2.6	3.6	4.0
London boroughs 1994			
no incumbents	6.8	5.0	7.1
full incumbency	4.2	5.3	3.9
English shires 1991			
no incumbents	5.1	6.0	9.2
full incumbency	7.0	8.6	7.1
English shires 1995			
no incumbents	8.7	7.0	10.3
Full incumbency	5.9	6.5	8.8

Gender

Research has shown that more women are elected under PR systems with large district magnitude than in those which employ single member systems (Norris, 1985; Rule, 1987). In the British context Lakeman (1970) has argued that women's chances of election are increased when local councils use multimember rather than single member districts. Studlar and Welch, however, have extensively studied the position of women in British local government and found that in general the electorate do not appear to discriminate, for or against, women when voting (Studlar and Welch, 1987; Welch and Studlar, 1988, 1990; Studlar and Welch, 1991). In their analysis of the 1986 London borough elections they concluded, "These findings lend support to previous research showing a lack of a clear linear relationship between increased magnitude and increased women's electability" (Studlar and Welch, 1991, 464). We have found nothing in our data that would refute that conclusion.

Indeed, we can take this analysis a stage further. Another method for examining whether voters discriminate for or against women is to examine the finishing order for male and female candidates in the 1991 and 1995 English shire elections. If voters do discriminate we should expect that the distributions of men and women candidates in the finishing order will be different. As Table 9 shows this does not appear to be the case. Although a quarter of female candidates finished in first place in 1991 this was lower than the 28.9 per cent of male candidates who finished in the same position. Below first place, however, the percentages become virtually indistinguishable. In the 1995 elections the proportion of women candidates finishing in first place was just 2 per cent less than the equivalent figure for male candidates but once again there appears to be little or no discrimination towards women lower down the ballot. That still leaves the fact that men are more likely to finish at the top of the ballot. We strongly suspect, however, that the explanation for that lies not with the influence of gender but rather of political incumbency—local government in Britain reveals a strong, though declining, bias against the recruitment of women candidates and councillors (Gyford *et al.*, 1989; Barron *et al.*, 1991; Rallings and Thrasher, 1997).

Table 9. Finishing order of female and male candidates in English shires

Poll order	1991 elections				1995 elections			
	Female		Male		Female		Male	
	N =	%	N =	%	N =	%	N =	%
1	1870	25.3	5441	28.9	1777	24.3	4519	26.3
2	1740	23.5	4673	24.8	1691	23.1	4193	24.4
3	1400	18.9	3353	17.8	1410	19.2	3161	18.4
4	865	11.7	2063	10.9	843	11.5	1846	10.8
5	568	7.7	1293	6.9	605	8.3	1246	7.3
6	415	5.6	901	4.8	400	5.5	988	5.8
7	258	3.5	505	2.7	270	3.7	531	3.1
8	138	1.9	300	1.6	169	2.3	321	1.9
9	91	1.2	208	1.1	98	1.3	237	1.4
10	42	0.6	70	0.4	41	0.6	70	0.4
11	8	0.1	31	0.2	4	0.1	33	0.2
12 +	8	0.1	17	0.1	18	0.1	12	0.1

Ballot Paper Position

Previous research has shown that ballot position can have a marked effect on election outcomes. Candidates placed near to the top of the ballot paper appear at an advantage (Bain and Hecock, 1957; Upton and Brook, 1975; Kelly and McAllister, 1984; Darcy and McAllister, 1990; Darcy and Marsh, 1994) and where long lists are involved the candidate whose name appears at the bottom also appears to have an advantage (Bain and Hecock, 1957). Following their extensive survey of the literature on ballot position effects Darcy and McAllister observe, "A large body of research appears to show that there are unequivocal and significant advantages to be gained from placement at or near the top of the ballot. Conversely, an almost equally large body of research has shown that these effects are either non-existent, limited, or are apparent only under special conditions." (1990, 5) One important feature of local elections in Britain which utilise the multimember method is invariably that with many parties competing the ballot structure can become quite complex. In their study of elections to the Spanish Senate where a limited vote operates Lijphart and Pintor (1988) found some evidence of alphabetic voting within party slates offering by way of explanation the possibility that some voters might not vote the party ticket or simply not use their full quota of votes. Such possibilities also exist within multimember voting districts in Britain.

We began our own analysis of ballot position effects by constructing a two-way contingency table of finishing position in the election by overall alphabetic position on the ballot paper. A chi-squared test of independence then led us to reject the null hypothesis of no relationship between the two variables. Repeating these tests but controlling separately for political party, gender and incumbency gave very similar results with calculated chi-squared statistics very much above the appropriate tabulated critical values. In each case, the difference between the observed value and the expected value was greatest when the candidate finished first or second and the name was at the top of the ballot paper. From this there would appear to be some advantage to be gained from being at the top of the ballot paper.

In order more rigorously to control for different patterns of party competition we decided to select only those three member districts which had candidates from all three main parties and no others. This selection process produced 528 London borough and 414 English shire district wards, each with nine candidates listed in alphabetical order on the ballot paper and with party affiliation printed alongside each name. Should there be any alphabetic voting we would hypothesise that voters who engaged in either split-ticket voting or who, for one reason or another, did not use the full quota of votes would tend to favour candidates at the top of the party slate. Each party's candidate was labelled A, B, or C according to where he or she fell in alphabetic order. If there was no alphabetic bias we would expect the six different possible outcomes of those three letters to occur with almost equal probability: in other words the finishing order CBA would occur as frequently as the order ABC. However, if there is alphabetic bias amongst voters then the order ABC should be more frequent than other combinations.

The results of this analysis for both the London and shire district elections can be found in Table 10. For both sets of elections the chi-squared statistics were above the tabulated 5% critical value and accordingly the null hypothesis that there was no alphabetic voting was rejected. There does indeed appear to be alphabetic voting although the strength of that relationship does vary slightly. In the London borough elections, for example, almost half the Labour slates finished in strict alphabetical order compared with less than a third of Liberal Democrat party slates. Taken as a whole alphabetic voting did not appear as prominent in the English

Table 10. Alphabetic Voting in English Local Elections

London Boroughs 1994						
	Conservative		Labour		Liberal Democrat	
	N	%	N	%	N	%
ABC	74	42.0	85	48.3	52	29.6
ACB	30	17.0	27	15.3	49	27.8
BAC	33	18.8	34	19.3	37	21.0
CAB	14	8.0	9	5.1	11	6.3
BCA	12	6.8	11	6.3	9	5.1
CBA	13	7.4	10	5.7	18	10.2
Total	176	100.0	176	100.0	176	100.0
$\chi^2(5)$	98.5		114.88		62.4	

English shire districts 1995						
	Conservative		Labour		Liberal Democrat	
	N	%	N	%	N	%
ABC	43	31.2	47	34.1	41	29.7
ACB	23	16.7	25	18.1	29	21.0
BAC	36	26.1	35	25.4	23	16.7
CAB	17	12.3	10	7.2	20	14.5
BCA	13	9.4	10	7.2	15	10.9
CBA	6	4.3	11	8.0	10	7.2
Total	138	100.0	138	100.0	138	100.0
$\chi^2(5)$	43.22		52.44		26.17	

shire district elections as was the case for the London boroughs. Both sets of electoral contests, however, clearly indicated that a smaller proportion of ballots were cast for candidates found in the middle or at the bottom of the alphabetical order. The analysis does show that when voters do not cast all available votes for one party's candidates there is a marked bias towards those listed higher in the alphabetical order. In future research it would be interesting to conduct some simulations to estimate how many councillors would not have been elected save for the fact that they topped their party's list thanks to having a surname near the beginning of the alphabet. Our findings also confirm earlier research which showed that in contests featuring only candidates from the three main parties the best method for estimating total votes cast was to take the vote of each party's best placed candidate (Gunter *et al.*, forthcoming). That implies, of course, that voters are less inclined towards split-ticket voting and that the explanation for differential support amongst candidates from the same party lies with the proportion of unused votes.

A simple regression analysis of finishing position in the election in terms of incumbency, gender, alphabetic position on the ballot paper and alphabetic position within party slate confirms the advantage of incumbents over non-incumbents and the role of alphabetical bias in explaining voting patterns. Four regressions were calculated for both types of authorities for

three-member wards with full major party slates and no other parties in the contest. The first regression was estimated in terms of all the candidates. In the other three regressions the data were split by party and a separate regression was estimated for each of the three of them. The results are presented in Table 11 below.

Considering the simplicity of the models the regressions explain candidate finishing position in the local elections reasonably well. There is an average R^2 score of 0.28% for the London boroughs and a slightly lower figure of 0.22% for the English shire districts. *A priori* expectation of the significance and sign of the incumbency and alphabetical bias variables was upheld. Incumbency was highly significant and negative in both sets of regressions confirming that incumbents tend to finish in a higher position than non-incumbents. Alphabetical bias, in some form, was also important in the aggregate regressions but not in all of the separate political party regressions. In the London boroughs, it is within party alphabetical position on the ballot paper that appears to be most significant. The political party candidate whose name appears before the other candidates of that party on the ballot paper is more likely to finish higher overall. In the English shire districts the picture is somewhat different. Although alphabetical position is still important, here it is the overall alphabetical position on the ballot paper that is now significant and not within party position. Gender was included in both sets of regressions, but was insignificant. A similar set of regressions with the candidate share of the vote as the dependent variable and with the same independent variables found a significant gender effect in the case of London borough Labour candidates. There was no gender effect in any of the English district regressions. We also repeated our regressions for the case of 2-member wards in both London and the shire districts. The results of these were so similar to the 3-member case that they are not reported separately.

Table 11. Candidate effects on finishing position in English Local Elections

London Boroughs 1994				
	All	Con	Lab	LD
Incumbency	-3.31*	-2.78*	-3.02*	-4.45*
Alphabetical position within party	0.48*	0.43*	0.93*	–
Constant	4.68	4.47	4.02	6.27
R^2	0.28	0.32	0.25	0.26
N = 1584 candidates				
English Shire Districts 1995				
	All	Con	Lab	LD
Incumbency	-2.69*	-1.78*	-3.51*	-3.69*
Alphabetical position on ballot	0.14*	0.15*	–	–
Constant	4.94	4.93	5.42	5.87
R^2	0.23	0.20	0.19	0.31
N = 1242 candidates				

* t-test statistic significant at 5% or less

Conclusions

This paper has sought to identify factors which might influence voter behaviour in multimember districts in English local elections. Our examination thus far of the relationship between unused votes and the structure of party competition has indicated that voters are reluctant to step outside the normal rules of the categorical ballot. Where the voter's chosen party has failed to field a full slate of candidates that voter will probably not use the full allocation rather than cast them for another party. In single member districts voters have no choice but to plump for one party and to reject all others. In multimember districts that imperative is missing but the effect is much the same. In another sense, however, the analysis of each of the main parties' index of dispersion appears to show that voters do not slavishly vote the party ticket. The crucial question here, of course, is whether they choose not to do so, perhaps because of candidate characteristics, or whether the dispersion is a function simply of voter fatigue or a misunderstanding of the ballot rules. Unfortunately, with the data at hand we cannot answer such a question satisfactorily, merely point out that incumbents do have an advantage over non-incumbents and that there does appear to be alphabetic bias in the way votes are cast between candidates.

To what extent does the English experience of voting in multimember districts suggest the effect of the electoral system upon voters is, to use Sartori's terms, "strong" or "feeble"? At the outset we speculated that, in theory at least, voters were free to exercise a limited amount of discretion. They could, if they so desired, divide their mandate amongst candidates from different parties. The data, however, suggest that voters are principally guided by the competitive party system and that individual candidate characteristics count for less. The combination of party and electoral system, therefore, help impose a "strong" effect upon voters, although not as strong as that produced by plurality voting in single member districts.

The data show that no party exercises total control over its supporters but that some parties are more successful than others in this regard. Voting data do echo survey findings which show that supporters of the third party, the Liberal Democrats, are less committed to their chosen party. For any party the fact that its index of dispersion is relatively high is a cause for concern; for the Liberal Democrats in particular, whose position as the third party in a plurality system is precarious, it is of even greater concern. Moreover, in crucial situations, where parties might ideally expect a united and co-ordinated response from their followers, that response appears to be missing. Marginal districts, for example, do not see consistently lower levels of vote dispersion amongst parties. Similarly, in those districts where one party has wrestled control from another, that success does not appear to have stemmed from a party's above average ability to persuade electors to support its entire ticket.

Nonetheless, the dynamics of the electoral contest in multimember districts do present parties and candidates with a potentially interesting set of dilemmas. When contesting a marginal district should a party seek to maximise its support or concentrate on winning a fraction of the seats at stake? If candidates are not uniformly electable is it better for a party organisation to acknowledge that and focus its campaign around the individual(s) deemed to have the best chance of achieving a limited amount of success? What of the candidates? Although linked by party, they are separate on the ballot paper. Candidates who feel they have an edge over their party colleagues, whether through incumbency or because of a "friends and neighbours" effect, might be better advised to pursue a campaign strategy which emphasises the qualities of the individual before those of the party.

Such remarks show that multimember districts using plurality voting present us with unique

opportunities to discover more about the relationships between voters, candidates and parties. Moreover, in an era in which Britain is poised to introduce a variety of new voting systems, they help to highlight some of the ways in which voters may react to new experiences. To what extent might elections based on the Alternative Vote fail to achieve their desired impact because of electors' unwillingness to vote for other than one, chosen party? And would such a reaction help or harm some parties more than others? Should not the evidence on ballot paper position effects be taken into account when considering the fairness of systems that allow for an intra-party choice between candidates? To what extent may failure to understand the ballot rules lead to an outcome contrary to the true wishes of electors? Far from ignoring multimember plurality systems because of their rarity, we should perhaps be conducting further research into their complexity and the lessons they can teach us.

Notes

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