



The English local government elections of May 2006

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Local government is often said to be closer to the people than national government. Yet public interest, at least if voter turnout is a gauge, is frequently limited and bureaucratic practices have often create barriers to public participation, especially when restructuring has been undertaken. Numerous and often confusing changes have taken place in local government in the United Kingdom since 1974: the two major governing parties—Conservative and Labour—have played around with boundaries and powers.

The local government franchise in the United Kingdom is at least more compatible with democratic principles than that in Australia, where in all States except Queensland there are still property votes and, in some cases, plural votes where property is held in more than one ward. In the United Kingdom, by contrast, only residents and *not* non-residential property owners can vote in local government elections.¹ The franchise is generous, extending far beyond British citizens. Citizens of 75 countries can vote in local government elections providing they are residents and are on the roll. This includes citizens of both Commonwealth and European Union countries—there are some overlaps between the 53 Commonwealth and 25 European countries. There is no minimum residency requirement.

Local government elections for half of the councils in England took place on 4 May 2006,² with some electing one-third and others (including London boroughs) electing the whole council. The results, although almost invariably along party lines, do not necessarily indicate the relative strengths of the parties in a general election. Because voting is voluntary, less than half the electorate normally turns out for local government elections. Attempts to increase turnout through increased use of postal voting have led to a number of prosecutions for fraud, as discussed below. The three Australian States that have voluntary voting for local government, Western Australia, South Australia and Tasmania, have also attempted to boost turnout through postal elections, although in Western Australia the choice of postal or in-person election is left to the Council concerned.

¹ With the exception of the City of London.

Powers and functions

British local government was reformed between 1834 and 1894 and then again in 1974. In rural areas this created four layers of elected government—central, county, district and parish, with descending powers and budgets. The 1974 reforms changed many boundaries, reduced the number and increased the size of the districts. Further changes recreated unitary (all-purpose) authorities in the major towns and cities, gave a degree of self-government to London, abolished two of the recently created counties and changed many boundaries. Some councils now have popularly elected mayors, as does London. The overall effect has been to increase the resource base and managerial power of local authorities but often to remove them further from direct contact with their constituencies.

The powers and functions of local councils vary according to their status and may be shared with county councils, regional authorities or private agencies. They are bound by national legislation and, in recent years, have been subjected to budgetary controls as well as auditing by central government. Many earlier functions, such as public transport, gas, electricity and water, have been taken away by national agencies which were subsequently privatised. Public housing remains important, as does public school education. Local authorities are also represented on many boards dealing, for example, with planning, police and health. The normal local services such as garbage collection, street lighting and urban roads are also at district level. In general, the English councils now have more extensive functions and much larger budgets and membership than their Australian equivalents. They are thus engaged in policy and administrative areas which divide the national parties and are highly politicised. The major cities have been contested by political parties for over a century. In the absence of intermediate State governments they provide an opportunity to pass judgement on the national government in between general parliamentary elections.

Despite this, voter turnout and interest has normally been confined to about one-third of electors. The Blair government, elected in 1997, aimed at reforming the electoral registration system and making it easier to vote. It also tried to bring local government

² Devolved Scotland and Wales do not vote at the same time as England.

closer to the electors by setting up ward committees within the larger cities and extending public consultation. It went further in devolving functions to Scotland and Wales, and London government was restored, having been abolished by the Thatcher Government., but when voters in the North East of England overwhelmingly voted against devolution in a consultative referendum, the prospect of English regional devolution ended.

One of the most contentious reforms was the introduction of generalised postal voting to replace much more restrictive provisions based on invalidity or work requirements. This system was difficult to manage and led to considerable fraud, most notably in Birmingham where Labour councillors were sent to prison. Registration by households and supervision by local authorities had long been traditional. But very large enrolments from single addresses caused much concern and led to the Birmingham prosecutions. Similar concerns were raised in the London Borough of Tower Hamlets before the 4 May elections. For all these efforts the turnout rarely rose above 50 per cent. It was rather higher than in recent years, probably because of the desire to express unhappiness with the national government.

The results

The councils which were elected in May were mainly in urban and metropolitan areas, including London, Manchester, Birmingham, Liverpool, Newcastle, Leeds and Bristol. They should, therefore, have been dominated by Labour victories, as all of these are overwhelmingly represented by Labour at Westminster. The half of the English councils which did not vote is mainly rural, provincial and outer suburban and so more Conservative-supporting, though does include cities such as Nottingham, Leicester, and some former coalfields where Labour is strong. As Scotland and Wales did not vote, their domination by Labour was not tested. Overall the result was very unpromising for Labour despite it winning the 2005 general election with a very large majority, consolidating its hold on the national government since 1997. The overall voting results were: Conservative 40 per cent, Liberal Democrats 27 per cent, Labour 26 per cent and others 7 per cent. The Conservatives with 1830 councillors control 68 councils, an increase of eleven; Labour with 1439 councillors control 29 councils, a decrease of 18; the Liberal Democrats with 909 councillors control 13 councils, an increase of only one. But the

most interesting political situations often occur on the 66 councils with no overall party control. These see alliances between Labour and Liberals or Liberals and Conservatives, or balance holding by smaller parties and groups. This pattern also occurs in those councils which were not holding elections, although one party rule is more common, usually favouring the Conservatives in rural areas and the South.

The worst results for Labour were generally in and around London and in the more prosperous parts of Southern England. These were the areas which 'New Labour' had been winning from the Conservatives since 1997 in its highly successful forays into 'middle England. In the less prosperous and often declining North, Labour held on to many of its traditional working class strongholds. But not everywhere. The Liberals control Newcastle, Stockport, Pendle and Liverpool, though the Conservatives had little outright success in the North. But the list of councils lost by Labour, leaving no party in the majority, must be very sobering for a party based for a century on industrial workers and trade unions. They include Hull, Bolton, Bradford, Burnley, Coventry, Derby, Leeds, Preston, Rochdale, St Helens and Warrington - all highly industrialised and some controlled by Labour for a generation.

Southern England and the Midlands have always been unreliable testing grounds between the two major parties. Here the story was even worse than in industrial England. In London, Labour lost Camden, Croydon, Bexley, Brent, Ealing, Hounslow, Lewisham, and Merton, and failed to win back Southwark—the heart of south London Cockney culture. Their only consolation was to win back Lambeth with a big swing against the Liberals. In the outer suburbs, the Conservatives were usually triumphant. But they faced a strong Liberal Democrat challenge and failed to control or regain Richmond, Sutton, Watford, Three Rivers, St Albans and Kingston. The Liberals lost Islington, once a Labour stronghold and home of Tony Blair.

The breakup of the old party system?

For many years those who should have known better have been predicting the breakup of the British two-party system. The Social Democrat Party (SDP) breakaway from Labour in 1981 was predicated on this, having the support of experienced politicians like Roy

Jenkins and academic political scientists like Anthony King. It did not happen and the SDP disappeared into the Liberals, adding the name 'Democrat' to that ancient party. Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland have lent credence to this prediction. They now have multiparty systems and coalition politics. But England has been more conventional. In local government, independent and 'ratepayer' groups have almost disappeared, except in a few rural areas. Party politics has become almost universal as the mainstay of local organisation. But because the electoral units are quite small, and because local organisation has declined markedly in both the Labour and Conservative parties, it has proved easier to 'break the mould' of two-party dominance than at the national level. The mass media is less influential and doorknocking and the local press still important. Above the level of rural parish councils personal knowledge of the candidates is difficult, as councils range in size from 90 000 people to one million. But local wards can be targeted by candidates and smaller parties. There is much evidence from elections over the past few years that this is happening to the disadvantage of the two major parties.

The Liberals have been the main beneficiaries of discontent with the two main parties. Adopting the strategy of 'drains and footpaths', they concentrated on local grievances which are particularly relevant to the powers of local government. Their victories in major cities like Liverpool and Newcastle dispelled the notion that they were confined to the rural Celtic fringe or some affluent suburbs. Though only winning 13 councils on 4 May, they were also strongly represented over a wider range, allowing them to play coalition politics in many cases, as in Birmingham, the largest local council with over one million inhabitants and 33 Liberal councillors out of 120. Liberal Democrats hold the balance in major industrial cities such as Bradford, Bolton, Burnley, Derby, Hull, Leeds, Rochdale and Warrington; in major provincial centres such as Bristol, Cheltenham, Chester, Exeter, Oxford, Portsmouth and Southampton; and in the London boroughs of Brent, Islington and Southwark.

More controversial than the strong position of the Liberals, has been the rise of parties concerned with race and nationalism. The two most important at present are the British National Party and Respect, at opposite poles of the 'race debate'. The BNP emerged from the more openly fascist National Front in the early 1980s. Its main appeal rests on

hostility to immigration and to non-Europeans in general. They have quite cleverly concentrated on areas where there has been racial tension—east London, the industrial Midlands and Lancashire and Yorkshire. While winning only 45 council seats, this represented a doubling of their previous support. Their greatest success was in outer east London working class areas where they won 11 seats in Barking/Dagenham, six in Epping Forest and one in Redbridge, mostly on public housing estates. In the Midlands they won five seats in Stoke-on-Trent, four in Sandwell, one in Redditch and one in leafy suburban Solihull. In the North they won seven seats in Burnley, three in Kirklees, two each in Bradford and Calderdale and one each in Leeds and Pendle. These were all areas in which they had been campaigning since before the 2005 general election. However they also ran candidates in every ward in Birmingham, where they notched up almost 30 000 votes.

At the other extreme was Respect, a strange alliance of mainly Bangladeshi Muslims and young Trotskyists from the Socialist Workers Party. They had triumphed in the general election by winning Bethnal Green and Bow in the London East End, a seat held by Labour for a century barring a brief interlude when a Communist was elected.

Respect, like the BNP, concentrated on areas where it had strength, predominantly in east London. It won twelve seats in Tower Hamlets (the old East End) and three in neighbouring Newham, forming the only significant opposition to Labour in both. Its only other victories were in Preston (Lancashire) and the Sparkbrook ward of Birmingham, where it had done well in the general election. All 12 of their Tower Hamlet councillors were South Asian Muslims. But Respect was not the only party to return Muslim candidates. In Birmingham 17.5 per cent of councillors are Asians, nearly all of them Muslims and most of them Labour or Liberals. Local elections give far more scope to ethnic minorities than does the parliamentary contest. The party system may not be breaking up yet but it is certainly more volatile.