



24 July 2009

all politics is local

Revitalising Local Democracy

Ideas for improving turnout and participation

INTRODUCTION

Tom Shakespeare, Research and Policy, Localis



Voter turnout at local and national elections is consistently low, and falls far behind most other Western countries. But why is this?

This edition of Policy Platform aims to explore this question and to understand what may be

required to re-engage people in a political process in which increasingly large numbers of people distrust or do not care about.

In the first article Harry Phibbs suggests that Councils should be doing more to communicate with residents, and not waste 'vast sums' of money on bogus consultation exercises, and that the key is making sure when voters want something done, the Council should do something about it.

The second article by Ken Richie from the Electoral Reform Society suggests that the whole electoral system needs to change to overcome the 'forgone conclusion' mentality which pervades the current system.

The final article by Peter Facey from Unlock Democracy, suggests that local government needs far more sweeping powers and autonomy to make local government more locally accountable.

Reading through the articles there are four key themes which emerge. Firstly, in all three articles there is recognition that communication and genuine citizen involvement in the political process is important to bolster representative democracy. Secondly, the electoral system needs to be revisited to ensure that people are not disillusioned about the value of their vote. Thirdly, the voting process can be made more appealing. Finally, central government needs to think about radical decentralisation

HARRY PHIBBS

Local Government editor, ConservativeHome



Just as who people vote for is a matter of choice so is their decision of whether to vote at all. Those who abstain in an election are making an entirely legitimate decision and should not be insulted as a result. In their recent elections Nottinghamshire County Council

ran a campaign to encourage voting with the slogan Notts Bothered. But residents, whether in Nottinghamshire of elsewhere, who don't wish to vote should have their decision respected without having to put up with a lot of nannying advertising paid for out of their Council Tax.

It could be they are apathetic. It could be after agonised deliberations they feel unable to support any of the candidates available. Either way it's their business.

So the role of Council officers would be limited. They should stick to the basics. Making sure the electoral register is up to date. Making sure the Polling Station are well chosen. Despite the controversies I think there is also a case for doing more to make people more aware of their entitlement to Postal Votes.

"Councils waste vast sums on bogus consultation exercises"

Some have a sentimental attraction to going along to their local church, school or community hall to cast their vote with "that stubby little pencil tied to that straggly bit of string" as John Major called it. But for busy people or for those who have difficulty moving about Postal Voting is a great help.

Councils should be the servants not the masters of their residents. Facilitating the process as best they can - but not telling people off for not joining in.



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In terms of providing the motivation to vote this is much more a matter for councillors and council candidates. Certainly it is about campaigning with zeal and over a sustained period of years and months.

“Communication is important. A good Council website is a basic requirement for residents to know what a Council is doing”

But for those who are elected it is also about making a difference. If councillors passively leave the council officers to run the show, meekly complying with Whitehall guidelines, then they can scarcely object when residents feel there is no point bothering to vote.

Involving residents in policy the rest of the time is a much broader challenge. Councils waste vast sums on bogus consultation exercises. Why does the paper have to be so thick and glossy?

But the more basic point is the cynicism of the whole process can lead to. As Mayor of London, Ken Livingstone would hold consultation exercises on such matters as the Congestion Charge and the proposed West London Tram and then ignore the results. Boris Johnson has startled everyone by actually giving the process some teeth. He made clear that the consultation on scrapping the Congestion Charge extension would be genuine. The result would be adhered to.

Local parks are an example of where it can work well. Those sufficiently interested in responding to plans to redevelop parks can then be invited to start a Friends group. Both to keep in contact with the Council in future but also to provide voluntary help - perhaps in running a cafe, of putting on events or gardening. They say that when the state owns - everybody owns, and when everybody owns nobody owns and when nobody owns nobody cares. At best the Friends groups take on a sense of ownership.

But on some of the broad policy areas the elected councillors should get on with it knowing they face being voted out if they get it wrong.

Councillors who across their district have obtained tens of thousands of votes should not feel obliged to abandon a manifesto pledge because a consultation exercise with a hundred people taking part comes out against it. But then why have the consultation exercise at all?

Communication is important. A good Council website is a basic requirement for residents to know what a Council is doing. Windsor and Maidenhead have included a list on their website of all payments to suppliers of over £500.

Some Councils include webcams of Council meetings on their websites. For example Croydon does so. There is a significant cost, in the case of Croydon nearly £50,000 but I think this is probably justified. The number of hits averages 300-400 a meeting for planning committee meetings and full council meetings.

It increases accountability. What councillors say can be written down and quoted in leaflets by their opponents. But then if misquoted councillors are in a stronger position to challenge it.

Jargon must be banished from council documents. Also councillors should talk to the press themselves rather than employing press officers at the expense of the Council Taxpayer. Councils running their own newspapers can offer better value for money than Council's advertising in low circulation independent newspapers. But this should be funded by real private sector advertising.

“More people will vote and participate in local government if there is a connection between doing so and anything happening as a result”

Community activists are a tremendous asset. They do a lot of the sort of work without pay that councillors undertake with remuneration. But councillors should not assume the views of activists running residents associations or tenants groups are representative. There is no substitute for going out and knocking on doors to find out what people think.



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Meetings need to be genuinely local to be effective. A five minute walk to a local church - not a half hour bus ride to the Town Hall. In my council of Hammersmith and Fulham the Council leader has been holding a Leader Listen's meeting in each ward. They have been well attended and productive. A Council represents not one community but several. People in my borough don't say: "I live in Hammersmith and Fulham." They say: "I live in Shepherd's Bush/Parsons Green/Barons Court/Brook Green/etc..."

"Only connect" said EM Forster. Ultimately more people will vote and participate in local government if there is a connection between doing so and anything happening as a result. Of course central Government passing down more decision making to a local level would help. But Councils also need to show residents that they are making effective use of the powers they have.

KEN RICHIE

Chief Executive, Electoral Reform Society



To engage voters we need better elections. In spite of the opportunity to vote in two elections – for local government and the European Parliament – offered to many English voters on 4 June, the offer was not good enough to tempt a majority to the polls. In the Euro elections, only in Northern Ireland, which uses a different electoral system, did the turnout pass the 40% mark. The Chartists, the suffragettes and all those who languished in penal colonies because they demanded the right to vote must have been turning in their graves, but the turnout was just what might have been expected from past experience.

In Britain we are taught to be proud of our democracy. There was a time when Britain led the world in its democratic system, but that was centuries ago. Nowadays our democratic arrangements are out-of-date and ineffective, or the Government's jargon, not fit for purpose.

Should we be concerned that election turnout is so abysmal? Some argue that it does not, or that low turnout signifies a generally satisfied electorate. That, however, is a dangerous argument – the fewer who vote, the greater the risk that political space is created for extremists who, thankfully, only represent a small minority of electors. As a result, we get the political representation we did not vote for, and this year the chickens came home to roost with the election of BNP MEPs as well as more BNP local councillors.

Politicians are of course concerned, but they have failed to respond to the challenge. The Government has tried to boost turnouts by making voting easier – postal votes are now available on demand, and there has been experimentation with internet and text message voting. But that misses the point. Turnouts are not low because voting is difficult, but because people simply don't think their votes matter. Last November some Americans queued for hours to vote because they felt an Obama victory would bring about changes, but in Britain few think their votes will make a difference.

There is no single or easy measure that will overcome the problems of voter apathy, but I would like to suggest three areas in which action is needed.

Our voting system

Our antiquated 'first-past-the-post' voting system does not help. In far too many elections the outcome is a foregone conclusion – in wards which always return a Tory or a Labour candidate, there is little incentive for parties to seriously campaign and little incentive for people to vote. If all seats were marginals, we would see more hotly contested campaigns with parties doing more to get people to the polling stations.

This can be easily achieved. With the single transferable vote system (STV), used in Northern Ireland and introduced for Scottish local elections in 2007, several councillors are elected in multi-seat areas. Those voting Labour, say, may find they have a choice between Labour candidates: that Labour may win a seat might be predictable, but whether they win one, or two, or more, and which candidates will be successful is not. Elections then become more



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interesting.

STV also has the advantage of making most votes count. With FPTP most votes are cast for losers, but STV uses preference voting, in which voters mark the candidates in order of preference, resulting in few votes being wasted because if a first preference candidate does not need a vote (because they have enough votes already or because they have no chance of being elected) the vote is transferred to the voter's next preference.

“There is little incentive for parties to seriously campaign and little incentive for people to vote”

In the Scottish local elections in 2007 using STV, 73% of voters found that their first choices were elected, and it is safe to assume that well over 90% found that someone they voted for was successful. People are much more likely to be motivated to vote if they feel it will lead to them being represented by a councillor of their choice.

Preference voting also lessens the chance of extremists being elected. In a ward in Coalville in Leicestershire, a BNP councillor was elected with only 27% of the votes – if the votes for other parties had been transferable, this would not have happened (and, indeed, if we had used STV for European elections, as they do in Northern Ireland, rather than the abominable closed list system, then it is unlikely that we would have BNP MEPs).

As a proportional system, STV also leads to more representative councils, rather than councils controlled by parties which have far short of a majority of the votes, or have majorities which cannot be justified by their electoral support. In Scotland in 2007, the elections led to only two councils out of 32 under single party control – votes for smaller parties became important in providing effective minority voices in council chambers.

Local government with teeth

Under any voting system, however, people will not be inclined to vote if they think the result does not matter. While local government is only about when bins are emptied and the local management of central government policy, it is hardly surprising the interest in local elections is low. On 4 June, Labour did not lose 291 councillors because they were doing a bad job, but because people used their votes to express dissatisfaction in a Labour Government which appeared to have lost its way. If local government had real powers, we might see people voting on local issues and the extent to which local councillors had been serving the needs of their communities.

The marbled halls of many city council chambers show the esteem in which local government was held in earlier times. Give local government the power to make a difference locally and we may generate more interest in who controls it, and may attract more people of calibre interested in serving as councillors.

Promote and celebrate democracy

Elections can come and go without many people even being aware they are being held. But elections are important – they are our opportunity to have a say on the type of society we want – they should therefore be celebrations of democracy.

“Polling cards are more like funeral notices than wedding invitations. No commercial venture would market services in such a way”

Yet our official polling cards are more like funeral notices than wedding invitations, and polling stations are often in the dreariest of halls. No commercial venture would market its services in such a way, so why not full-colour, council-funded brochures on the importance of voting and polling stations serving teas and coffees with armchairs and leaflets for those voters who want to study their options? Now that parties find it more difficult to display posters and generate any polling day razzmatazz, why not get



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local councils to put up the bunting and get the local brass band on the streets? Rather than talk of changing election days to weekends, why not offer statutory time-off work for voting, or even have an election day holiday?

Recent legislative changes have given councils the task of not just running elections but also of promoting participation. Now they have the chance to up their game. They need to be given a financial incentive to be innovative and imaginative. Yes, it means more costs, but we cannot expect decent democracy on the cheap – although it's a lot cheaper than buying banks.

A better electoral system, more power for local councils and more up-beat promotion of elections might not solve all problems, but they seem good starting points.

Following the MPs' expenses scandal more people

PETER FACEY

Director, Unlock Democracy



than ever before believe that our political system is rotten and that many of the people involved are at best self-serving and at worst corrupt. Even though this scandal had nothing to do with local government, this perception affects those involved in local as well as national politics.

But even without this problem, local authorities are already dealing with the long-term consequences of a lack of power, meagre revenue-raising ability and an unresponsive electoral system that in many areas has led to one party states and electoral deserts. In some locations, local politics is so uncompetitive that candidates are returned unopposed.

To really revitalise local democracy Whitehall needs to initiate radical reform - devolving genuine power, removing capping, and giving councils greater abilities to raise their own money. Following Scotland and Northern Ireland, it should introduce the single

transferable vote for local elections in England or at the very least give local authorities the power to use a different electoral system.

But local politicians can't simply raise their hands in despair, and wait for Whitehall to stop being overly controlling and spontaneously devolve genuine power.

"To really revitalise local democracy Whitehall needs to remove capping and give Councils greater abilities to raise their own money"

So here are three practical things local authorities in England can do engage people in policy-making without any change in the law. They are not new and many local authorities are already doing some or all of them, but their merit is that they can be done now.

Decentralise

In the same way that national government needs to devolve power to our counties, cities and districts, local councils need to push power, services and budgets down to communities. Many of our unitary authorities have populations of over a hundred thousand people, and are far too large to be responsive to their communities. I am not calling for a single uniform approach, but one that starts from the position of saying that we will decentralise unless there is a good reason not to. It may be that in an urban area you decentralise to neighbourhoods / town centres based on groups of local wards, or that in rural areas you empower parish and town councils.

However a local authority does it there are two tests you can apply to see if it is genuine. One, are the people who take the decisions in the devolved area democratically elected by the people they serve? Two, can the devolved area take decisions that are different from, or even contrary to, the policy of the ruling group on the Council? Decentralisation is genuine if a neighbourhood has the freedom not only to do things that the Council wants them to do, but



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also the freedom to do things they don't. Many councils of all political persuasions are doing this but not enough, and in some cases they have the rhetoric but not the reality.

Let the people in

I am a believer in representative democracy, but in many local councils we have low electoral turnout and small and shrinking party membership. We need to give people a way of directly having a say and shaping decisions in their community. Many local authorities already have experimented with participatory decision-making. A handful of councils in the late 1990s and early 2000s, such as the London Borough of Croydon, held referendums on the level of council tax. But these referendums were initiated by the councils themselves - in effect they were the councils asking their residents a question.

“Every Council should establish a petition committee”

Instead, councils should have responsive systems to allow voters to ask them questions, and ultimately to tell local authorities what they want them to do. At a minimum every council should establish a petition committee, and rule that if (for example) 2% of local residents support a proposal then it be considered and a report on the issue sent to the full council for debate.

But I hope some local authorities will go further and give their voters the right to put questions on the ballot to be voted on at the next local election. I believe this would not only increase turnout, but would also help revitalise local politics.

Sustainable Communities Act

In October 2007 the Sustainable Communities Act came into force in England after five years of campaigning by a coalition of 90 organisations. The idea behind it is simple. Local people know the most about their own problems and are the best people to decide how to address them. The Act establishes a process where councils and communities can drive the actions and assistance that central government gives to promote sustainability locally. Sustainability

includes things that will promote the economic, social, democratic or environmental well-being of an area.

The deadline for submitting ideas to the secretary of state is the end of July and so far 120 local authorities have confirmed that they will take part in the process. But if we are to succeed in empowering communities, we need to press government to commit to making this a rolling programme.

To enable local authorities to ask for activities and functions (and the money that goes with them) to be transferred from the centre to local people, we need a clear picture of what is spent by government in every local authority area. Though the Act set created Local Spending Reports, so far government has refused to publish the data for key agencies such as Learning and Skills Council, Job Centre Plus, the Homes and Communities Agency and the Highways Agency. But already 224 MPs of all parties have endorsed the campaign to force quangos and government agencies to open their books. Collectively local government can be a powerful lobby when it comes to influencing MPs and Government it just needs to be more willing to use that power.

People participate in politics when they think it matters, and will have an effect. If we want more people to be involved in local politics and to vote in local elections then we have to show them that their participation will really change things.

If we are to get the democratic renaissance that our country desperately needs then change cannot simply come from the top, but has to be driven from below and elected local councils must play a vital role in shaping that change.

FOR MORE INFORMATION

Localis is an independent think-tank dedicated to issues related to local government and localism more generally. We carry out innovative research, hold a calendar of events and facilitate an ever growing network of members to stimulate and challenge the current orthodoxy of the governance of the UK .

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