

Electoral Commission findings and factors affecting electoral cycles

The electorate's understanding of local government elections

A1. The Electoral Commission concluded that the current pattern of local electoral cycles in England is unclear and inconsistent, both within and between local authorities and it is unnecessarily complicated and confusing in that many electors do not know when or why local elections are held in their area. More worryingly, it allows electors to be unclear about which body they are voting for on a given day. The Commission is concerned that whilst the current complexity of English local government elections is not an issue in itself, the complexity might not encourage understanding of the democratic opportunities across England, which is a significant matter.

A2. The Commission also noted the variation in the proportion of the local government electorate that has been eligible to vote over the years. For example, in 1999 and 2003 80 per cent of the total local government electorate in England were eligible but in 1996 and 2000 less than half were eligible to vote. This pattern of elections, mitigates against continuing interest and encouraging higher participation in elections.

A3. A study by MORI on behalf of the Commission in 2003 showed that one-in-six people in areas where elections were due to be held were unaware of it. The year before, MORI had found this to be a quarter of the electorate. Younger people and respondents from black and minority ethnic groups were three times more likely to be uninformed. Disturbingly, one-in-five respondents did not know which authority they would be voting for in 2003. To outline this, MORI found that in unitary authority areas 21 per cent of respondents thought they would be voting in a county council election.

A4. The Commission has concerns that the varied pattern of electoral cycles across England may have a particular effect on the levels of awareness and understanding of the electorate. 30 per cent of respondents conceded that they did not know how often elections were held in their area and only 16 per cent were actually able to correctly identify the actual cycle of local elections. A higher proportion of respondents where elections were held once every four years were most likely to correctly identify the cycle of local elections in their area, around one-third of correct responses. Only 5 per cent of respondents facing elections in three or two out of four years could correctly identify the cycle. These respondents were much more likely to think that local elections took place every year, which is not the case.

A5. Respondents to the Commission's consultation paper on electoral cycles were divided on the merits and desirability for change to a more uniform pattern of elections. Many accepted the benefits of increased voter awareness; others resented interference from the centre in what they saw as a matter for local choice.

(Interestingly, whilst respondents felt that electors did understand the cycle of local elections the Commission's research suggests otherwise.)

A6. The majority of respondents accepted that a more uniform pattern of local elections would be beneficial: a clearer more predictable pattern would help electors to understand when elections take place. Some noted the importance of consistency both within and across local authorities, ensuring all electors have the same rights and opportunities. Others noted that consistency across England may develop a 'national voting habit' which could promote local democratic renewal and civic responsibility.

A7. There is some opposition among local government stakeholders on the idea of imposition of change. Some consider that what works well for some authorities will not work for others. They argue that local choice is important and that local elected representatives are best placed to determine which pattern is most suitable for their area, responding to local need and circumstances but only shire district/borough and unitary authorities have local choice under our current arrangements.

A8. On balance, the Commission felt that locally determined arrangements would merely suit those with established interests. Well-informed electors are better placed to hold their local representatives to account. Removing confusion on the cycle of elections was an important step forward and outweighs the potential costs of change.

Equity between electors

A9. The Electoral Commission is clear that opportunities for access to the local democratic process should be equitable. In its view it is unfair and unacceptable that within an individual local authority some local electors may have fewer opportunities to vote and influence the political composition of the *same local authority* than their neighbours in a different ward. (Many authorities that elect by thirds, outside metropolitan borough areas, do not have a uniform pattern of three-member wards. In these areas, some electors may have three opportunities to vote for their local authority in a four-year period while others can only vote once in the same period.) In areas with partial elections but no uniform pattern of members per wards, electors may become disaffected if control of the council changed as the result of an election in which they were not able to participate.

A10. A strong theme that came from respondents to the Commission's consultation paper was the importance of ensuring the equity and fairness in electoral arrangements, in line with the Widdicombe Committee's thinking. Respondents felt that all electors within each individual local authority should have the same opportunities to influence the outcome of local elections and the policies of the authority. This is clearly not the case at present.

A11. An alternative way of achieving equity for electors in each individual local authority would be to require a uniform number of members per ward within the authority. However, the Boundary Committee for England has noted that the requirement to recommend a uniform pattern of three-member wards in all 36 metropolitan borough areas caused specific difficulties when attempting to reflect community identities in some authorities. They note that the flexibility to recommend single, two or three-member wards enables the Committee to more easily reflect

local communities' identity while continuing to provide good levels of electoral equality.

A12. A pattern of whole council elections would not require authorities to be restricted to any particular size of ward, yet there would be equity for electors in that the whole electorate would be eligible to vote together once every four years. It is worth reiterating at this point, over half of all principal authorities in England already operate on this basis.

Leadership stability within councils

A13. Local government stakeholders value the role of stability and leadership in enabling the effective management of authorities. However, there is no clear evidence directly linking the electoral cycle of an authority with its CPA score.

A14. Stability means different things to different people:

- For some supporting elections by thirds, stability means less potential for abrupt changes of political control and switches of policy. They would also tend to suggest that important but controversial decisions may be postponed for political reasons until after an election, giving electors no opportunity for democratic protest for four years where whole elections are held;
- On the other hand, those favouring whole elections point to importance of consistency of policies and representatives through a defined period of office, without the interruption and diversion of intervening elections. Whole elections provide a degree of inherent stability with a clear mandate to representatives for a programme of policies during a four-year period, allowing time for the administration to carry its policies through before being held to account by the whole electorate on its record, its success or its failures.

A15. Equally, some commentators will note that where the balance of power within an authority is on a knife-edge, political control could change frequently where the authority elects by thirds, with significant instability as a result. Others note that where authorities elect by thirds and have strong single-party control where the will of the electorate means that the ruling party loses all seats in a given year, overall political control may not change because too few seats are contested at that election and therefore has the desired outcome of leading to greater stability. In short, elections by thirds can lead to greater stability to those areas where one party tends to dominate, but to reduce stability where support for the parties is more evenly balanced.

A16. We would tend to the view that whole elections do provide a degree of inherent stability, providing an administration with a clear four-year mandate to implement its policies on which it can clearly be judged. Indeed, this is one aspect of the mayoral model, which makes Directly Elected Mayors attractive.

Participation and turnout

A17. Another area of conflicting views relates to participation and turnout. Annual or biennial elections hold the potential for more frequent opportunities for participation

by electors. Equally, more frequent elections may tend to dilute public interest in elections and electors may, in practice, tire of passing judgement on their representatives annually.

A18. Good levels of turnout are important to ensure the continued relevance and legitimacy of local government. Continued low turnout may undermine the authority of local government to speak and act on behalf of the communities it represents. Turnout could clearly be affected by the electors' weak understanding of electoral matters, driven in part by confusion over electoral cycles. Equally, electors may perceive a disincentive to vote where they feel they cannot change a council because too few seats are up for grabs at a given election. However, the Commission have drawn upon some research by the LGC Elections Centre at the University of Plymouth.

A19. The Centre's research gives some weight to the notion that more frequent elections may dilute public interest and reduce turnout. They found that over the last 30 years, the four-yearly elected London boroughs generally have had a higher electoral turnout than the metropolitan boroughs, which elect by thirds. Furthermore, turnout in London has been between two and ten percentage points higher than in metropolitan boroughs in all years, except 2002, when both types of authority held elections. Similar differences were present for shire districts. The centre's findings also show that turnout would fall if authorities who normally had whole elections moved to elections by thirds and a rise in turnout could be achieved by moving to whole elections for those operating on thirds or halves.