



Electoral Reform Society Report: **Local Authority Elections in Scotland**

The Scottish Local elections in 2007 were the first major use of the Single Transferable Vote (STV) for public election in Great Britain.

Though STV has been used in the Republic of Ireland, and now Northern Ireland, the very different political contexts in those countries mean that the transfer of STV to the mainland would be a very different proposition.

Headline conclusions

- STV has produced much more representative councils than would have been elected under the former First-Past-The-Post (FPTP) system;
- Most votes mattered, in the sense that they contributed to the election of a councillor.
- Parties appear to have adapted well to the new system, although we expect that parties will develop their techniques as they gain experience of STV campaigning;
- The new system has not disadvantaged women, although the opportunities it presents were far from fully grasped by the parties.
- Voter understanding of the system appears to have been generally good, with a relatively low level of spoilt ballot papers and the majority of voters using their preferences effectively.

Representative councils and the end of single party states

“STV produces results that are an accurate reflection of the way people have voted”.
(Page 28)

STV has produced much more representative councils than would have been elected under the former First-Past-The-Post system. There are no longer councils with safe majorities for one party, and there are no longer parties unduly denied representation. Labour continues to control North Lanarkshire and Glasgow but no other councils are in single party control.

Had the same election taken place under FPTP in 2007, there would still have been a marked swing in support from Labour to the SNP, but the introduction of STV also had a pronounced effect. Parties lost seats which they had held through the distortions of the FPTP system and also gained seats that the unfairness of FPTP had denied them.

The norm (27 out of 32 councils) is now no overall control (NOC) and a varied pattern of coalitions has emerged. While this represents losses for some parties, particularly Labour, areas once closed to parties have opened up such as Ravenscraig for the Conservatives and Newton Mearns for Labour.

Most Votes Mattered – choice and power for the voter

“A great majority could look at the election and feel they had contributed to electing a winning candidate.” (Page 68)

Choice

Scottish voters in 2007 also had a much wider choice of candidates under the STV local elections. The average number of candidates per ward rose from 3.4 in 2003 to 7.4 in 2007.

There were also no uncontested seats in 2007, whereas in 2003, 61 councillors were ‘elected’ unopposed.

Power

In 2003 about half of all voters voted for losing candidates, but in 2007 nearly three-quarters found the candidate to whom they had given their first preference had been successful. This also does not count all those who contributed to a successful election through their second preferences.

This can only strengthen the link between councillors and their constituents. Having voted for someone creates a more direct link between constituent and representative, and a greater sense of accountability and ownership, than being represented by someone whether one likes it or not.

Campaigning under STV

“One of the consequences of STV is that each party is taken out of its previous comfort zones in searching out support.” (Page 32)

In 2007 the SNP made strong national net gains, very much at Labour’s expense. The Conservatives also advanced a little, and Independents and the Liberal Democrats slipped back.

Parties appear to have adapted well to the new system. Labour made the best use of putting forward multiple slates of candidates, while the Liberal Democrats fared well in terms of attracting second-preference votes.

There were fears that putting up too many candidates would harm the performance of parties, as the vote would be split, or because preferences would “leak” to other candidates. However, the results showed that concerns about the risks of over-nomination had been grossly overrated.

Scottish Labour

The major trend in Scottish local government has been for Labour to fall back from the high point reached in the 1995 elections, and for the number of councils under no overall control (NOC) to increase. STV just allowed this trend to be accurately reflected.

However, the Labour Party was reasonably effective at campaigning under STV:

Fears that STV would split the party vote were unfounded, as those who voted Labour in their first preference, tended to vote Labour for their further preferences.

Also Labour’s strategy of nominating two or more candidates in over half the wards was successful – especially in comparison to the SNP who probably could have gained more seats had they put up more candidates.

Scottish Conservatives

The Conservatives were the party that saw the biggest expansion in its reach in 2007 – they used the opportunity presented by the new system to put up nearly a full slate of candidates in mainland Scotland, including candidates in many areas where they had not previously contested elections.

However, the Conservatives did not pick up many second preferences and so lost out when votes were transferred. In total 26 Conservatives who looked to be leading after first preferences were overtaken by other candidates due to transfers. The Conservative party needs to get a lot closer to winning a whole quota than other parties in order to get elected under STV.

The Scottish Liberal Democrats

The Liberal Democrats did well by attracting second preferences from people who had voted for other candidates. There were 31 cases where a Liberal Democrat candidate was not in a winning position at the first stage of the count but came through to win on transfers. This is a considerable strength for the party, and enabled it to win seats where it was well short of a full quota of first preferences.

However, this strength is a potential source of future weakness, in that the party depends on the second preference support of people who are not strongly committed to it for many of its seats.

The Scottish National Party

The SNP polled reasonably well everywhere and are represented on more local authorities than any other party.

However, the SNP did not take full advantage of the opportunities provided by STV. They tended to under nominate candidates and did not do as well as they could have done as a result. One example was the Canal ward in the City of Glasgow, where a single SNP candidate polled 1.49 quotas – a second SNP candidate would have almost certainly benefited from that surplus.

Diversity

“The new system has not disadvantaged women, although the opportunities it presents were far from fully grasped by the parties.” (Page 61)

There was unfortunately a drop in the number of female candidates in 2007 compared to 2003. However, while in 2003 many women may have fought in unwinnable seats, in 2007, with a system that makes the concept of ‘safe’ seats less valid, the electoral success rate of women was comparable to that of men. As a result, the number of women councillors remained more or less the same – an outcome that should provide some optimism for progress in subsequent STV elections.

More young people were elected in 2007, and in particular there were three who benefited from the legislative change reducing the minimum age for candidates to 18.

The number of black, minority and ethnic (BME) councillors remained unchanged.

In general, the results were disappointing. Why?

- The small number of councillors being elected for each ward reduced the positive effects of multi-member wards
- Labour, as the party running more multiple slates of candidates, did not succeed in increasing diversity as it had previously been over-represented, meaning there were lots of white male incumbents taking first choice of seats.

Evidence shows that where multiple candidates were put forward for multi-member wards, diversity was helped. Where Labour stood more than one candidate women and men had an equal chance of getting elected. Where single candidates stood, it was still the case that more male candidates got elected.

Voter understanding

“The average voter was less willing to accept party as a limitation on choice than might have been expected on the first outing of STV.” (Page 70)

Sophistication

For many voters this would have been their first choice of preferential voting. Bearing that in mind the sophistication demonstrated by the voters was remarkable.

The median voter cast three preferences. As there were very few cases in which a party nominated three candidates, this demonstrates that most voters gave support to candidates of at least two parties.

Four-member wards seem to be associated with a greater use of multiple preferences by voters.

Spoilage

Across Scotland the rate of spoilt papers in the local government elections was very much lower than for the parliamentary election – 1.85 per cent compared to 4 per cent.

One feature of STV in these elections was that voters could misunderstand how it worked and how they were supposed to vote, but still manage to record a valid vote.

There were 177,817 more valid votes cast in the STV elections in 2007 than there were in the FPTP elections in 2003. This is a 9.5 per cent increase over the previous election.

Administration

Alphabetical ordering of the ballot paper did favour those at the top; alternatives should be looked at and thoroughly tested

There would only be very slight advantages in terms of proportionality if wards were made larger. 4 member wards worked particularly well in terms of presenting the voter with choice as there was more chance of major parties presenting more than one candidate.

The future

STV elections should continue to work well: If, as appears likely, the local government elections are decoupled from those for the Scottish Parliament, voter information can be more focused on the use of transferable voting and election campaigns more focused on local issues.

Of more importance is the effect STV will have on the democratic culture of Local Government in Scotland – whether over time it can make councils more representative and improve the quality of their relations with the electorate.