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Time to streamline Local Elections Day

Chris Game

Local authorities in this country are far more accountable to their residents and voters than central government. Meetings are more open, information more accessible, you are told far more about how your money's spent, and there are elections every single year.

That frequency of elections, though, is a mixed blessing. Knowing there are local elections on the first Thursday in May is not the same as knowing whether you have a vote in your area for your local councillors. Our present arrangements are confusing and arguably discriminatory – which is why in the pre-election version of this blog I argued for having just one Local Elections Day (LED), or at most two, in each four-year cycle.

In Birmingham we have it quite easy. All 36 metropolitan boroughs elect their councils by thirds. So most years, even if we choose not to use our vote, we at least know we've got one not to use. This is the year we don't have one.

Instead, it's the year the 27 county councils are elected – the upper-tier councils in the remaining two-tier parts of England – but in this case in 'whole-council' or all-out elections. In the West Midlands this meant Warwickshire, Worcestershire and Staffordshire – plus Shropshire, now a 'whole-county' unitary authority but which still holds elections in the 'county year'.

Even in that last sentence we're beginning to see the potential confusion. The 201 lower-tier districts in the shire counties (and also the 56 unitary authorities) can choose their electoral cycle: whether to elect by thirds, like the metropolitan boroughs, or in all-out elections like the counties. Naturally, they choose differently, and in doing so confuse all voters and, I'd suggest, discriminate against many.

One example, from Worcestershire: if you live in Bromsgrove, Wychavon or Malvern Hills, you elect your district councillors in all-out elections every four years. But in neighbouring Redditch, Wyre Forest and Worcester they elect theirs by thirds, and their voters get to vote maybe three times as frequently. They might see it as an opportunity, a duty, or a chore, but it fits uneasily with the idea of democracy being about equal voting rights.

My proposal is that voters' lives would be easier, their turnout at least slightly higher, and local accountability strengthened, if the four-year cycle of local elections was uniform across the whole of England, was based on all-out elections for all councils, with all elections held on the same 'Local Elections Day'. My fall-back offer would be one every other year: LED1 being for voters to elect their 'most immediate' councils – districts, unitaries, London and metropolitan boroughs – and LED2 for those in two-tier areas to elect their county councils and the London Assembly. Neither LED could coincide and be forced to share the stage with a General or European Parliament election – the fate of each of the past four sets of county council elections.

There would be several benefits. First, all voters would have the same number of opportunities to elect their councillors, and would know when they could do so. There seems to me something seriously unbalanced about a system of local democracy in which ministers think uniform frequency should apply to bin collection but not to voting opportunity.

Secondly – and there is no better time to make this point than now, on Friday afternoon as I listen to the results being declared and discussed on the national media – the election campaign, both by the political parties and in the media, would surely have to give at least a little more acknowledgement that these are real local government elections, for councils and councillors spending billions of our pounds on services and activities affecting our daily lives, and not just a glorified opinion poll laid on to enable them to speculate about a parliamentary election in two years' time.

It so happens that, in two of those three West Midlands councils mentioned above there were really significant results. Warwickshire was one of an unexpectedly large number of counties where the Conservatives lost their majority control and possibly any involvement at all in the council's administration. Staffordshire, however, though run uninterruptedly by Labour from 1981 to 2005, bucked the national trend and stayed Conservative. In the two councils combined there are now just 2 UKIP councillors, fewer than there were before.

But, knowing apparently very little about the politics of either county, the national politicians and pundits preferred to carry on gossiping about UKIP, immigration, the EU, UKIP, gay marriage, the 2015 General Election, and UKIP. I'm not daft. I know a single Local Elections Day wouldn't fundamentally change this, any more than it would dramatically increase the public's awareness of their local government and their inclination to vote. But might it not help just a little?

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