Blog: The Ultimate Pivotal Voters of Ramsbottom

Posted on Tuesday 7th June 2011

By: Chris Game

Some of my social science colleagues, being both concerned citizens and mathematically inclined, spend sizable portions of their academic lives investigating why some of us bother to vote and others don't. Mainly economists, their maths is, to me anyway, achingly complicated, but their political world is an almost childishly simple one, in which people vote either out of self-interest or from some sense of civic duty. Their notion of self-interest is also very basic, often expressed in so-called **pivotal voter models**. Citizens are assumed to calculate the probability of their individual vote being pivotal in determining the result of the election, and will be motivated to vote if the expected 'instrumental benefit' outweighs the cost of trotting along to the polling station.

As a political scientist, I'm personally keener on actually asking people why they vote – or, better still, why they voted – rather than theorising about it. **My instinct, therefore, would be to drive straight up the M6 to Ramsbottom in Bury and track down as many of last Thursday's 3,644 Labour and Conservative voters as I could – and ask them whether they were appropriately excited at being, at least in the world of English local government, as close as we get to Ultimate Pivotal Voters (UPVs).**

Hey, don't go away – this may not be quite what you think. Yes, local elections, with their relatively small wards and often paltry turnouts, regularly produce dead heats, which are then resolved by tossing coins, cutting cards, or whatever. There was one this year in Selby, North Yorkshire, involving the Conservative and Labour candidates – but Selby was and remains a very solidly Conservative-run council, and, for the *Yorkshire Post* reporter, the combination of the recounts and lot-drawing represented about 'the only excitement that this year's election provided'. Bury, honestly, is different.

First, it's a metropolitan borough, and recently a politically highly marginal one. For the past year the 23 Conservatives ran a minority administration with the help of an informal voting (or abstention) arrangement with the 8 Liberal Democrats, while the 20 Labour members formed an opposition increasingly looking to regain an overall majority.

Second, the Council Leader, Bob Bibby, chose to compensate for his party's numerical weakness by taking to heart the last Government's enthusiasm for strong individual local leadership – most notably in devising one of the most radical and ideological responses in the country to the council's loss of grant and threatened services.

The policy document, *Transforming Bury*, was very much the Leader's personal initiative, based on the default assumption that 'the council will not directly deliver services'. The plan, as described by *Independent* journalist, Paul Vallely, was for every council service to be 'examined against a Transforming Toolkit which will begin by considering whether the council should cease the service, in whole or part. Where the council has a statutory responsibility it will try to hive it off to a public-private partnership, a private company or a voluntary group or even a stock market flotation – the changes to be in place by 2012/13'.

Inevitably, the Transformation Strategy was labelled by political opponents a 'privatise everything' programme. Moreover, in a manner that might have been designed to remind electors of what they most disliked about the National Coalition, it was passed by the Council – like the budgetary cuts to youth and adult services, library services to the housebound, lollipop ladies, etc. – thanks to Lib Dem councillors metaphorically sitting on their hands.

The expectation was that both parties would suffer in the local elections, and they did. Labour took the two most marginal Conservative seats with swings averaging around 8%, and the three most marginal Lib Dem seats with swings of nearer 20%. With just one result outstanding, from Conservative-held Ramsbottom, the figures were tantalisingly poised: Labour 25, Conservatives 21, Lib Dems 5. Hold Ramsbottom, and the Conservatives could still retain minority or coalition control of the Council and press ahead *Transforming Bury*. Lose it to Labour, the only serious challengers, and Labour gain majority control of the Council, and the Transformation Strategy, at least in its proposed form, was toast.

After repeated recounts the two candidates' totals were inseparable at 1,822 each, and a random means of determining the winner had to be agreed. Straws and coins possibly being considered too commonplace for so democratically momentous a function, it was decided that the candidates would draw different length cable ties inserted in a 'legal tome' provided by the Returning Officer.

It was an unusual procedure, and one that a purist might question as, in the circumstances, falling short of complete randomness. Presented with two cable ties side by side, there must surely be some likelihood of the Labour candidate picking the one on the left, and the Conservative the one on the right. As it happened, and as can now be seen by all on YouTube, this is precisely what the Labour candidate, Joanne Columbine, did – and in doing so delivered control of the Council to an ecstatic Labour Group leader, Councillor Mike Connolly – **www.burytimes.co.uk/news/ (http://www.burytimes.co.uk/news/9012994.Labour_take_control_of_Bury_Council_leadership_by_drawing_lots/)** .

The Conservatives' reflex action was to attack Labour's 'mandate deficiency' – hoping presumably that no one would notice that, across the borough as a whole, Labour had not only outpolled them by 52% to 32%, but had achieved what they never had: an overall majority of the vote. Connolly, meanwhile, pronounced the Transformation Strategy 'dead in the water', and, while it must be possible that parts of the Conservatives' programme prove as unavoidable or beneficial as they claimed and reappear in some other guise, there can be no doubt that the town's immediate future will be significantly different, thanks to that famous cable tie.

As for Ramsbottom's 3,644 ultimate pivotal voters, did at least some of them calculate or even wonder about the chances of their being about to play such a decisive role in local history? Even with an electorate of nearly 9,000, it wouldn't have been such a fanciful idea.

If Labour were to gain majority control, they needed to hold all their seats and win six from the Conservatives and Lib Dems. The Lib Dems were only defending three from 2007, none requiring a swing to Labour of more than 16%. All were likely to be lost in the current political climate – and all were. The Conservatives were defending seven seats, of which Ramsbottom was the third most marginal. If the first two wards were lost, statistically it would be the pivotal one, with Labour requiring a perfectly feasible swing of only 12%. Few events are predictable in political science, but this one was a lot less unpredictable than most. I'd love to know how many of the Ramsbottom UPVs realised.

Read more of INLOGOVs blog posts at http://inlogov.com (http://inlogov.com)

© University of Birmingham 2015