STV in Scotland: Local Government Elections 2007

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Abstract

A form of the Single Transferable Vote (STV) will be introduced for Scottish local government elections in May, bringing the total number of electoral systems used in Scotland to four. The paper outlines the key characteristics of the new system, and considers the implications of these changes. The introduction of STV will undoubtedly produce a more proportional distribution of seats amongst the main parties, and there will be a reduction in the number of Labour councillors. However, the reforms are unlikely to lead to an electoral transformation in that minor parties will struggle to make an impact. Nor will the party responsible of these changes – the Liberal Democrats – benefit to any great extent.

Introduction

On May 3rd 2007, the same day as the Scottish Parliament election, the Single Transferable Vote (STV) will be introduced for Scottish local government elections. This system allows voters to rank candidates in order of preference, and involves the creation of large electoral wards (consisting of three or four councillors). The new system will lead to a more proportional distribution of seats amongst the parties, moving away from majority administrations. Supporters of the new system argue that local democracy in Scotland will be enhanced by these changes (see Arbuthnott 2006). Coalitions, minority administrations, and increased levels of opposition in councils are seen positively, a way of changing the jaded culture and working patterns of councillors. However, some (mainly Labour) figures have voiced concerns about the reforms, interpreting them as an attack on the local political culture and on long-serving Labour councillors. Moreover, concerns have been expressed about how Scottish voters will react to yet another new electoral system. The introduction of STV for local government brings the total number of electoral systems employed in Scotland to four. The Additional Member System (AMS) is used for elections to the Scottish Parliament, list PR for the European Parliament, and First Past the Post for Westminster elections.

STV for the 2007 Scottish local government elections is the direct result of coalition negotiations between Labour and the Liberal Democrats. Following the 2003 Scottish Parliament elections, the parties published a partnership agreement committing the Scottish Executive to STV for the next round of local elections (Scottish Executive 2003: 46). The legislative outcome of these commitments − The Local Governance (Scotland) Act 2004 − is commonly interpreted as the price Labour

had to pay for Liberal Democrat support in 2003, as was reform of student tuition fees in 1999.

This paper considers how STV will work in the context of the forthcoming 2007 Scottish local elections. It then assesses available evidence on voter behaviour, and the impact on party support and party control of local councils. To what extent will the reforms challenge Labour dominance of local councils? Finally, the paper considers broader implications of the new system for parties, campaigns and voters.

The New STV System

In local government contests Scottish voters will be able to indicate their order of preference for the candidates on the ballot paper, ranking as many as they wish. The ballot paper will have three columns: The first column will present the name of the political party (or the candidate's independent status); the second column will contain the candidate's name, as well as the emblem of the political party; and the third column will contain the boxes for voters to rank candidates. It is also worth noting that the ballot paper will present candidates in alphabetical order, by their surname. Studies of other STV systems reveal that the design of the ballot can influence voters, and that 'position effects' may result from the order in which candidates are presented. Generally speaking, if candidates are grouped by party, voters are more likely to vote for all of a party's candidates. From the point of view of the party, this minimises 'leakage'. If, however, candidates are ordered alphabetically by name, or randomly, this increases the chances of candidate-centred voting. Whilst these 'position effects' are widely debated (see Darcy and McAllister 1990), we can tentatively conclude that the design of the ballot paper for the local government elections in Scotland will encourage voters to focus on individual candidates.

This system is, of course, very different from the first past the post voting experience, when electors indicate support for one candidate only. It also varies significantly from the Scottish Parliament version of AMS, where voters work with two votes, one for a constituency Member of the Scottish Parliament (MSP) (now the second vote), and one for a (closed) party list MSP (now the first vote). It also differs from European elections where voters are simply asked to opt for a closed party list.

As in other STV systems, candidates will be successful when they achieve an electoral quota: ((number of valid votes cast)/(number of seats to be filled+1)) + 1. Therefore, if there are four seats to be filled, the quota is a fifth of the vote plus one. If fewer than necessary candidates achieve the quota, there will then be a transferral of votes. In the first place, surplus votes from a winning candidate will be transferred, according to the second and subsequent preferences of voters. If necessary, the bottom placed candidate will be eliminated, and her/his votes redistributed. This process continues until the required numbers of candidates achieve the quota.

Another implication of STV is the introduction of multi-member constituencies. There will be three or four councillors per ward, a relatively small number in comparison with the other countries using STV, and this will limit the proportionality of election outcomes.[1] There will be no change to the total number of Scottish councils (32), nor the total number of councillors elected (1, 222). Existing wards will be combined, although some completely new wards will be created. To illustrate, in Aberdeenshire, there will be 19 electoral wards, 11 wards returning four members, eight wards (more rural areas with smaller populations) returning three, with the overall number of councillors remaining at 68 (www.lgbc-scotland.gov.uk).[2]

A key change for councillors will be the working of multi-member wards. There has been much discussion of how responsibilities will be allocated or shared between the three or four councillors, and, a related point, how the councillor/ward link will be maintained. There is, for example, potential for duplication of work To avoid duplication of councillor efforts, the STV Working Group (2004: 15), set up by the Scottish Executive, recommended that 'broad principles should be drawn up in a protocol which councils could adapt for their own use'. The evidence on how multi-member wards work elsewhere (under STV in Northern Ireland and the Republic of Ireland, as well as First Past the Post in England and Wales) does not point to the use of formal agreements or protocols between councillors. Councillors reach informal agreements on their work duties, divided up on either a subject basis or by geographical area.   However, misgivings over this issue are particularly understandable in the Scottish context, given the early tension between constituency and list Members of the Scottish Parliament (MSPs) in performing work roles (Bradbury and Mitchell 2006).

The other main innovation of these elections is the introduction of electronic counting. E-counting will be used for both Scottish Parliament and local government elections, but the change was prompted by the introduction of STV, which would have inevitably produced a lengthy and complex manual count.

Impact on Party Support and Party Control of Councils

It is a well documented fact that the Labour party in Scotland has benefited greatly from the disproportional single member plurality of First Past the Post (FPTP). Indeed, Labour has enjoyed these benefits for generations, leading to powerful perceptions of cronyism and a culture of 'jobs for the boys'. Table 1 displays the results of the 1995, 1999 and 2003 local elections in Scotland, illustrating the strength of Labour under the FPTP system.[3] The table reveals the extent to which Labour's lead over the other parties is exaggerated by FPTP. To illustrate, Labour won 44% of council seats in 2003 on the back of 32.9% of the vote. No other party enjoyed such an advantage, although Independents did relatively well. The proportion of council seats won by the Liberal Democrats was a fair reflection of their overall vote. The Conservatives lost out, but not nearly as much as the SNP.   The SNP were disadvantaged to roughly the same extent as Labour gained under single member plurality. For example, in 2003 the SNP attracted nearly a quarter of all votes, but this brought them only 15.5% of council seats.

Local illustrations, perhaps, are more effective. The often quoted example is Glasgow where in 2003 Labour won 47.6% of votes but 90% of seats (71 out of 79). In Mid Lothian, the party won 83.3% of seats (15 of 18) with 43.3% of votes, and in West Dunbartonshire 81% of seats but only 46.8% of votes. The SNP, conversely, could attract more than a fifth of the vote in Glasgow, but were rewarded with only three seats (3.8%). And in Labour controlled Renfrewshire the SNP attracted a higher share of the vote than Labour (39.3% as opposed to 36.8%) but won 15 seats compared to Labour's 21. It should be noted that the SNP *benefits* from FPTP in Angus, the one council where it has overall control; in 2003 the party attracted 40.4% of votes, but won 58.6% of seats (17 out of 29). Consequently, the move to STV is likely to damage the party's standing here.

Table 1: Local Government Elections in Scotland, 1995, 1999 and 2003

	1995			1999			2003		
	N seats	% seats	% votes	N seats	% seats	% votes	N seats	% seats	% votes
Con	82	7.1	11.3	108	9.4	13.7	123	10.7	15.2
Lab	614	52.9	43.8	545	47.5	36.6	505	44.0	32.9
Lib Dem	121	10.4	9.7	148	12.9	12.7	170	14.8	14.6
SNP	181	15.6	26.2	201	17.5	28.9	178	15.5	24.3
SSP	0	0.0	0.6	1	0.1	0.9	2	0.2	3.4
Ind	154	13.3	7.6	135	11.8	6.5	169	14.7	9.5
Others	7	0.6	0.9	10	0.9	0.8	1	0.1	0.2
Total	1161			1148			1148		

Source: Denver and Bochel 2004: 85, 92

As for which parties control Scotland's councils, following the elections of 2003, 15 of the 32 councils emerged with a single party in overall control. Labour had outright control in 13 councils, the SNP maintained majority control of Angus, and the Liberal Democrats took Inverclyde from Labour. Note that this represented the Liberal Democrats' first ever outright victory in a unitary council, while the Conservatives have yet to achieve such a victory. Independents emerged with control of six councils, and in 11 councils no party or group had overall control, producing a mix of 'hung' councils. In other words, elections under FPTP produced a significant number of councils run by Independents and minority administrations. However, of all the main parties only Labour enjoyed single party government to any significant degree. In the big cities of Glasgow and Edinburgh, in the central belt and Ayrshire, Labour maintained a strong-hold at the local level. However, to what extent is this is about to change?

There is a great deal of uncertainty concerning how voters will react to STV, partly because it is a completely unfamiliar system, and partly because of the scheduling of local government and Scottish Parliament elections at the same time. Nevertheless, the use of STV in 2007 is expected to produce a significantly more proportional distribution of seats in relation to votes, certainly among the main parties. The introduction of the new system has been described as 'an act of remarkable political selflessness' on the part of the Labour party, because it is likely to lead to a diminution of Labour control (Bochel and Denver 2004: 97). There is some evidence to suggest that Labour support was already in decline in 2003 – the local elections of that year marked the party's worst performance since 1977 – but STV is expected to lead to the further disintegration of Labour councils and the rise of coalition and minority administrations.

Curtice and Herbert (2005) have attempted to apply STV calculations to the results of the 2003 local council elections. This is based on actual votes in 2003 and responses to a question in the Scottish Social Attitudes Survey of 2003 which asked about the distribution of voters' second preferences.[4] As Curtice and Herbert (2005: 3) state, this analysis does nothing more than apply STV rules for allocating seats to a set of election results conducted under very different rules, and we must assume that both voters and parties will behave differently on the real election day. Nevertheless, this provides us with some indication of how the parties may perform under the new system.

Curtice and Herbert (2005: 8) calculate that, under STV, the number of Labour councillors in 2003 would have been reduced by 104. The party would have lost seats in more than 20 councils, but more than half of total Labour losses would have been in the four councils of Glasgow, South Lanarkshire, Edinburgh and North Lanarkshire (Labour would have gained in only four council areas – Angus, Dundee, East Renfrewshire and Inverclyde). SNP councillors would have increased by 127, making gains in 26 of the 32 councils, generally in councils where Labour lost most seats, and losing only four seats (three seats in Angus, and one in Highland).

There would have been relatively little change in the number of Liberal Democrat (-13), Conservative (+6) and Independent councillors (-22).[5] In fact these projections suggest that the Conservatives would have gained a small number of seats in only a dozen councils, would have lost seats in six, and would have remained the same in 14. The Liberal Democrats would have increased seats in only eight council areas (losing seats in nine, and maintaining status quo in 15), and Independents would have increased seats in three councils (losing in 17, remaining the same in 12). Some parties who chose not to stand in the 2003 local elections – the Scottish Greens and others – are not included in this analysis, although Curtice and Herbert (2005) suggest the SSP would have won nine seats.

So, we expect significant change to result from these reforms, with Labour experiencing the biggest losses. Many long-standing local government representatives will undoubtedly lose their seats, making critical reaction to reform within the Labour party understandable. Labour would certainly have lost seats across nearly all 32 councils in 2003. However, the extent and significance of these losses should not be exaggerated. According to Curtice and Herbert (2005), only in four authorities (Edinburgh, Glasgow, North Lanarkshire, and South Lanarkshire) would Labour losses have reached double figures.

As for the smaller parties, the implications of STV are not entirely straightforward. The Greens and SSP were fully supportive of the new system, but these parties will find it difficult to surpass the threshold of votes necessary to claim seats. In the three member wards, a candidate has to win around 25% of the votes to be sure of election; in four member wards the threshold is a little lower, at 20%. This threshold is, to say the least, challenging for the minor parties. The Scottish Greens, for example, attracted 6.9% of the overall regional vote in the 2003 Scottish Parliament elections, their best regional result being 12.1% in Lothian (Bennie 2004: 38). The smaller parties may, of course, be successful as the result of inter-party transfers.[6] Nevertheless, the effective threshold will disadvantage these parties.

The other significant way in which STV will impact is on party control of councils, substantially reducing the chances of parties achieving the majority of seats in a council. As previously stated, in 2003 a single party enjoyed overall control in 15 of Scotland's 32 councils. According to Curtice and Herbert (2005: 6-9), Labour would have lost a number of councils to No Overall Control (NOC) in 2003; Clackmannanshire, East Lothian, Edinburgh, Midlothian, Renfrewshire, Stirling, and West Lothian. However, these calculations point to Labour being in control in six of the 13 councils they won in 2003. Moreover, the party would have retained control of these councils despite a fairly dramatic decrease in numbers of seats in these areas.

Table 2: Control of Scotland's Councils 2003

	Actual (FPTP) Result	If STV

Labour	13	6
SNP	1	0
Liberal Democrat	1	0
Independent	5	5
NOC	12	21

The Curtice and Herbert (2005) analysis suggests that neither the Liberal Democrats nor the SNP would have maintained overall control of the councils they secured in 2003, but Independents would have maintained their position. Thus, while the SNP is likely to gain in terms of overall numbers of councillors, this will not necessarily translate into overall control of many of Scotland's councils. According to this evidence, in 2003 only Labour would have been in a position to run any of Scotland's councils on the basis of an outright majority, although the total number of such councils would have been reduced by about a half, with Independents controlling nearly as many councils as Labour. Thus, around two thirds of the 32 councils would have been NOC, with Labour and Independents in control of the remaining third.

We should, therefore, expect the new local councils to be made up of a fairer distribution of seats *amongst the main parties*. It is worth emphasising that the system of STV to be used in May 2007 is based on a relatively small number of seats in each ward i.e. a district magnitude of three or four. Under these circumstances, small parties will not benefit greatly, and the larger parties will still be over-represented. In practice this can mean that a party attracting only 45 per cent of the vote, or perhaps less, could be rewarded with a majority.[7] Looked at from this perspective, Labour may yet come to terms with the new system. Certainly, the Labour party will lose seats, but it will very likely remain the largest party. The SNP will clearly benefit from the reforms, but is unlikely to control many more councils.

Party Support Since 2003

To assess the overall standing of the parties in the run up to May's elections, we can look to more recent evidence. For instance, there have been 45 local government by-elections held in Scotland since 2003. While these contests tend to be heavily influenced by local factors, they nevertheless provide hard evidence of how voters are behaving, as opposed to what they say in public opinion polls (see Rallings and Thrasher 1999). In Scottish local government by-elections since 2003, there has been a significant decline in support for Labour; the party has experienced a drop of nearly ten percentage points in overall share of the vote (Table 3). Half of all the contests resulted in a change of party. However, Labour gained only one seat, from an Independent in Dumfries and Galloway in October 2005. Overall, the party lost nine seats. Crucially, the Labour party lost overall control of Stirling council in March 2006, when it lost a seat to the SNP.

Since the 2003 elections, the SNP has gained 11 seats. In June 2006, the SNP took Dumbarton West from Labour, with a swing of over 20%. Overall, support for the SNP in these contests since 2003 has risen by 2.7%. Meanwhile, the Liberal Democrats have gained three seats, and the Conservatives four seats. Independents have experienced a net loss in seats but maintain their position in terms of share of the vote.

Table 3: Local Government By-Elections Since May 2003

Party	% votes	% change	Councillors elected	Seats gained	Seats lost	Candidates
Cons	21.7	+ 2.8	12	4	0	43
Lab	23.1	- 9.9	9	1	9	39
Lib Dem	14.6	+ 4.7	5	3	0	32
SNP	24.7	+ 2.7	14	11	3	43
Ind	12.6	- 0.3	5	3	9	40
SSP	2.4	- 0.8	0	0	0	25
SGP	0.7	+ 0.7	0	0	0	8

Note: The % change column refers to change since May 2003

In the two Scottish Parliament by-elections held since 2003, Labour support declined, by 1.5% in Glasgow Cathcart, and 9.3% in Moray. In the Westminster Election of 2005, Labour's share of the vote fell below 40%, which represented a decline of 4.4% since 2001 (6.7% since 1997), although the party still won 40 (68%) of the 59 seats. In the two Westminster by-elections since 2005 (Livingston, and Dunfermline and West Fife) the Labour vote fell by 9.3% and 16.8% respectively, the latter of these contests producing a resounding Liberal Democrat victory over the incumbent Labour candidate.

Some of these Labour losses can be put down to mid-term difficulties, but their scale and number suggest a genuine decline in support for the party. With less than a month to the May elections, recent polls suggest that the SNP are now challenging Labour's status as the largest party.[8] Since the beginning of 2007, around ten different polls put the SNP ahead of Labour in voting intentions for the Scottish Parliament elections, some by as much as 10% (e.g. a Populus poll for *The Times*, 28 March 2007). On average, the SNP is polling 5% more than Labour in both the constituencies and regions. The polls also suggest that the Greens are gradually increasing in support, polling around 6%, and benefiting from the implosion of the SSP. If the Greens attract this level of support across the country on May 3rd, they will successfully return MSPs to Holyrood, but it remains far less likely that the party will make an impact on the local councils, due to the more challenging threshold of support they must surpass.

Polls on voting intentions for the Scottish parliament tell us very little about how voters will behave in the STV election of local councillors. Very few of the polling companies have asked about voting intentions for the local councils. (A YouGov poll in January 2007 did ask this question, and reported that Labour and the SNP were on 31% and 30% respectively, with Lib Dems and Cons both attracting 15% of support, and Independents and others on 9%.). Moreover, national opinion polls tell us nothing about how votes will distribute across regions and local areas. However, as STV approaches, the polls do tell us that there appears to be a general decline in support for Labour. If we consider that Labour's 2003 local council result was the worst since 1977 – with less than a third of the overall vote – it seems that the party is on a downward trajectory (i.e. before the introduction of STV). When we come to analyse the results, a general decline in support for Labour is likely to exacerbate the effects of STV for the party, although it will be difficult to disentangle such effects, not to mention the impact of combining the Scottish Parliament and local government elections.

Thus, it is clear that the new electoral system will produce a more even distribution of council seats amongst the main parties in Scotland, with Labour's share of seats considerably reduced. However, minor parties are unlikely to be helped to any great extent. Nor do the protagonists behind the change – the Liberal Democrats – stand to gain under the new election rules, although the party argues that STV will involve the creation of a new, more democratic, style of local government, and the promotion of a 'fair' voting system throughout the UK.

The Parties, Campaigns and Voters

Along with the Liberal Democrats, the SNP, Greens and Scottish Socialist Party were all in favour of introducing STV for local council elections, and the Local Governance (Scotland) Act 2004 received an easy passage through the Scottish Parliament. So, the reforms enjoyed a great deal of support amongst Scotland's political parties. However, Scotland's parties face a number of challenges in the light of the STV reforms. These relate to party organisation and the selection of candidates, campaigns, and a potential change in the nature of inter-party relationships. In these three key areas, the parties face pressure to adapt.

Bochel and Denver (2004: 81) noted a decline in Labour and SNP candidates between 1999 and 2003, and interpreted this as evidence of a strain on party resources caused by campaigning for local government and the Scottish Parliament at the same time. Similarly, Clark (2005:43) notes that the parties had difficulty attracting local government candidates in 2003. With a brand new electoral system to contend with, and simultaneous elections once again, the parties' organisations have again been put under pressure.

With the introduction of STV, the parties face decisions on how many candidates to put forward in a ward. Important considerations here include the number of strong supporters of the party. How many people are likely to allocate their first preferences to the party? Will these supporters vote for all the party's candidates, or are voters attached to individual personalities? Are supporters of other parties and candidates prepared to 'transfer' votes? In an ideal world, parties would be able to conduct extensive research to guide them through this process. In reality, parties have limited information, not least due to the strain on resources caused by contesting two elections on the same day. Nevertheless, the parties will have been guided by some broad principles as they selected their candidates. Certainly, decisions on the numbers of candidates per ward will have depended on levels of community support. Too many candidates could mean distributing party support too thinly, but too few candidates could mean a party fails to exploit widespread support. Another consideration is that the more candidates there are on the ballot paper, the more work voters have to do to identify individual or party candidates and the more 'leakage' is likely to occur i.e. when voters transfer votes to other parties' candidates.

There is clearly potential for internal party conflict. Incumbents may view other candidates from the same party as direct competitors. Indeed, in the Republic of Ireland there are many examples of incumbents losing their seats to candidate from their own party (ERS 2005:8). With these considerations in mind, party managers may have been inclined to select fewer candidates. The Labour party, of course, is faced with large numbers of incumbents so is likely to field more candidates rather than less. However, the parties have other considerations when choosing their candidates, including gender balance and the representation of ethnic groups. This

implies a degree of centralisation in party organisation. STV in Ireland, and indeed the operation of party lists in other elections in Scotland, points to a centralisation of party selection procedures, as well as central influence on party campaign literature (see Galligan 2003: 43). Recent reports on the Labour party's selection of candidates for 2007 confirm this tension, with attempts to implement rules on gender and ethnic balance for local government elections being resisted by constituency parties (Fraser 2006).

When it comes to campaigning, the central difference under STV is that more parties have incentives to campaign in more seats. Previously, parties were able to identify areas of strength and to focus resources on marginal seats. With the introduction of STV, the parties may have difficulty targeting resources; to an extent safe seats and marginal seats become redundant concepts. So, parties have good reasons to campaign actively in more seats. In essence, while old party loyalties will not be eradicated by STV, challengers have a chance of success if they can attract transfers.

It will be in the interests of parties to get voters to support all of their candidates. In this respect, parties' communications to the electorate under STV are more straightforward than for AMS.[9] However, parties and candidates must decide whether to campaign as part of a team, or as individual candidates. In Ireland, strong personal campaigns are common but parties have attempted to promote a 'team identity' in their election material (Collins 2003). In Australian states using STV, the parties put more emphasis on the team of candidates, urging voters to rank all the party's candidates, suggesting a precise order of candidates. In this way, the parties can offer clear guidance to the electorate on how to vote. So far, the signs are that the Scottish parties are following the 'team' model, recommending that voters support all the party's candidates, without offering precise guidance on ranking candidates. However, incumbent councillors who have built up loyal constituency support will inevitably emphasise their personal experience and run more individualistic campaigns.

One of the most interesting aspects of STV will be its impact on inter-party relations. A key feature of STV is that parties become acutely interested in the supporters of other parties, in that campaigns involve parties attempting to persuade other parties' supporter to transfer their lower preferences. For example, it will be in the interest of the SNP to persuade traditional Labour supporters to consider ranking an SNP candidate behind the Labour candidate. These inter-party transfers have major implications for election campaigns in that parties now have an incentive to highlight areas of policy agreement.

In the long term, parties may be more reluctant to make enemies during election campaigns as there will undoubtedly be a greater need for parties to work together in the council chambers. Certainly, the STV experience elsewhere reveals that alliances between parties may form, with voters being encouraged by one party to vote for traditional opponents. This would arise if parties had a clear idea of the other parties they could work with in the council chambers. However, this 'consensus model' does not apply in Scotland. The Scottish parties have grown accustomed to a confrontational form of campaigning, and the experience of AMS has done little to change these dynamics. There is very little indication, for instance, that the campaigns of Labour and the Liberal Democrats have been made any more consensual by the parties' formal coalition at Holyrood. It will be interesting to see if, in time, the necessity of attracting transfers under STV modifies the campaigns of Scotland's parties at the local level. The parties may perceive head-on confrontation

with others to have more immediate consequences. However, at this early stage, there is very little evidence that STV will lead to conciliation amongst Scotland's parties. As we approach the May elections, the party campaigns are distinctly confrontational in character, and focused very much on Holyrood. If future local elections are decoupled from the Scottish Parliament election, and as parties become more familiar with the workings of the new system, cooperation between the parties during campaigns may develop. At present there is very little evidence of such a dynamic.

Overall, STV will undoubtedly produce a more proportional relationship between votes cast and seats allocated. Parties will now argue that a vote for them is no longer a wasted vote. However, broader, more long-term, implications include its influence on internal party politics, the conduct of campaigns, and the nature of inter-party relations. With STV comes the decline of one-party control, the rise of coalition administrations, and a ratcheting up in the pressure on parties to work together. The regional list aspect of AMS provided Scotland's parties with a flavour of proportionality, and resulted in formal coalition politics at Holyrood. STV will extend these principles of cooperation still further.

As for the voters, the introduction of STV has pretty much failed to register on the public consciousness. The decision to combine Parliament and local government elections will undoubtedly result in a higher turnout than would be the case for a stand-alone local election. However, there are obvious potential difficulties associated with voters who are only now becoming accustomed to AMS being asked to grapple with yet another electoral system. The Scottish Executive's attempts to educate the public have involved the creation of a *VoteScotland* website, set up with the assistance of the Electoral Commission. The website offers detailed information on all electoral systems used in Scotland, a virtual tour of a May 3rd voting both, and interactive games involving images of famous personalities, designed to illustrate how the different electoral systems will work. There is a particular emphasis on the youth vote with, for example, the creation of a dot mobile website where voters can access information in their mobile phones. As the elections approach, these modern methods of informing the public will be combined with more traditional methods, including television ads, billboards and a leaflet delivered to every household. However, attempts to educate voters about the new electoral system have so far been very low profile indeed. These problems will be compounded by a change to the ballot paper(s) for the Scottish Parliament. Voters will now be presented with one ballot paper, with the regional vote now being presented as the 'first' vote i.e. the left hand side of the ballot will contain the list of parties and individuals standing for election as regional MSPs (printed in a brown colour), while the right hand side will list candidates standing as constituency MSPs (in lilac). (The council ballot paper will be white.) This change came about because of perceptions that the 2nd, regional, vote was less important. So, the reform is an attempt to present the two votes as having equal status. The most gloomy scenario is that the introduction of STV, combined with changes in the ballot paper for the Parliamentary election, may lead to wide-scale voter confusion and discourage voters from visiting the polling booths at all.

Conclusion

Supporters of STV argue that the use of the new system in local elections will enhance Scottish democracy. The underlying theme is that the more proportional the electoral system, the more competitive the election, the more votes 'count', and the

more likely citizens will be engaged (see Stoker 2006: 171). The central advantage of STV – unlike AMS and list PR – is that it gives voters, or citizens, rather than party elites, the power to choose candidates. In addition, it maintains the link between elected representatives and local constituencies.

However, STV is traditionally associated with a number of problems. These include the complexity of translating votes into seats, the difficulties associated with representing large constituencies, and the potential for unstable or ineffectual government (see Farrell 1997, Ch.6). Many such doubts have been raised about the introduction of STV for local government elections in Scotland. For example, concerns have been expressed that multi-member wards will lead to confusion on the part of constituents. Which councillor should constituents approach with an issue or concern? Formally speaking, voters are entitled to contact any one, or indeed all, of the councillors who represent their ward. The legislation as it stands leaves it to councillors to organise their roles – they may agree to divide responsibilities according to issues or geography. However, such arrangements may lead to difficulties between councillors from different parties.

Most criticisms, however, have been directed at the decision to hold the local government elections on the same day as those for the Scottish Parliament. This simultaneous polling has been criticised by the councils and many other observers, partly due to the burden of administering two elections, including two vote counts, and partly due to the potential for voter confusion. The Arbuthnott Commission (2006) highlighted low (and declining) levels of voter understanding about the system used to elect the Scottish Parliament, and argued that simultaneous elections would increase voter confusion further.[10]

Another consequence of combining the two elections is that local issues become submerged in a Holyrood campaign. As we approach the May elections, media attention is squarely focused on the Scottish Parliament and national level issues. As the evidence of previous elections suggests, local issues are subsumed by the Parliament campaign when elections occur simultaneously (Rosie et al. 2003). Of central interest here is the extent to which the Scottish Parliament vote will influence voting in the local government elections i.e. a coat-tail effect. However, we simply don't know how Scottish voters will react to STV. To what extent will normally loyal party supporters vote for all of the party's candidates? Will voters be guided by party or candidates? Will voters be attracted by the individual characteristics of candidates e.g. their gender or ethnic group? Furthermore, what will be the effect of holding the STV local elections on the same day as voters elect their MSPs? The results will be studied in detail, examining the extent of 'leakage', the direction of transfers, and the consequences of combining elections, but for now we must 'wait and see'.

NOTES

[1] STV is used in the Republic of Ireland (parliament, local government and European parliament), Northern Ireland (Assembly, local government, and European) Malta, Australia (Senate), and New Zealand (local authorities).

[2] Although the Local Governance (Scotland) Act 2004 retains the 32 local authority structure, it has recently been reported that the Scottish Executive is considering reducing the number of authorities after the 2007 elections (MacMahon 2006).

[3] The 32 unitary Scottish local councils were created in 1995. Before this (1974-1995) Scotland had a two-tier structure of local government, with districts and regions. However, three unitary Island councils – Orkney, Shetland, and the Western Isles – were already in existence in 1995, meaning there

were no elections in these areas in 1995. The table, therefore, includes data on the 29 unitary councils established in 1995, to allow comparisons across the three elections.

[4] Respondents to the Scottish Social Attitudes Survey of 2003 were asked to think of the Scottish Parliament elections in 2003, and to indicate their first preference party, as well as their second choice party. The Liberal Democrats attract a relatively high proportion of second preferences across all party supporters (except SSP), while Labour does well amongst Lib Dem, SNP and, to a lesser extent, SSP supporters. The SNP does best amongst Labour supporters, while the Conservatives do not attract a great deal of second preferences at all. Now this analysis can only provide some rough impressions of how voters may rank parties. For example, as these questions are based on Scottish Parliament elections, they underestimate the place of Independents in Scottish local government elections. Nevertheless, the data suggests that the Liberal Democrats are well placed to pick up second preference votes, that large numbers of Labour and SNP voters are inclined to support both parties (i.e. the parties are not regarded as mutually exclusive in the minds of many voters), and, finally, that the Conservatives will continue to struggle to attract support.

[5] Curtice and Herbert (2005: 8) note that their projection of 22 Independent losses is based on a likely underestimate of how many voters would give their second-preference vote to an Independent candidate in a local government election. Even so, they estimate that there would be at least 200 Independent councillors in total. Thus, there appears no reason why the Scottish tradition of Independent candidates doing well in local elections should not continue under STV. Independents did particularly well in 2003, with 10% of the vote, an increase of 38 seats, or a 19.9% increase (Clark 2005: 46).

[6] The Greens in the Republic of Ireland certainly benefit from preference transfers. In 2002, six Green TDs were elected, with a large number of transfers from Sinn Fein and Independents (Gallagher 2003: 99).

[7] For instance, Curtice and Herbert (2005: 10) suggest that Labour would have emerged with a majority based on less than 45 per cent of the vote in North Ayrshire.

[8] Note that there have not been regular polls in Scotland since The Herald's System Three polls were discontinued in December 2003.

[9] The simultaneous nature of local government and Scottish Parliament elections again complicates matters, however; communicating information to the electorate about STV and AMS *at the same time* may prove very difficult indeed.

[10] The Arbuthnott Commission (2006) was set up in 2004 by the Secretary of State for Scotland to examine the effects of having different constituency boundaries for Scottish Parliament and Westminster elections, as well as the impact of having four different voting systems. The Arbuthnott Commission (2006: 51) recommended that STV should be introduced for European Elections, reducing the number of electoral systems in use in Scotland to three. While the Commission suggested that Scottish Parliament elections should continue with AMS, it emphasised the need for reform, including the introduction of open lists for the election of regional MSPs. Furthermore, it suggested that STV should be considered as a possible long term option for Scottish Parliament elections, if reform of AMS was ineffective.

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