Introduction

This short paper discusses turnout in Scottish local council elections. First, it explores levels of turnout in a historical context, suggesting that the 2012 result was disappointing but far from abnormal. Second, it summarises factors affecting turnout. Thirdly, it explores measures that might encourage voting in future local council elections.

1. Turnout in context

Historically, local government election turnout in the UK has consistently been below 50%. This has also been the case in Scotland, apart from those years when local elections took place on the same day as parliamentary elections. Table 1 documents average local election turnout by decade since the 1940s in Scotland, England and Wales. The 40% turnout in 2012 was the lowest since the 1970s, but when compared with trends over time, and with elections elsewhere in the UK, the figure looks to be within the range of ‘normal’. Note that turnout in the 2012 local elections in England was only 31%.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Scotland</th>
<th>England</th>
<th>Wales</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1940s</td>
<td>50.7</td>
<td>44.7</td>
<td>58.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1950s</td>
<td>42.2</td>
<td>43.0</td>
<td>51.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1960s</td>
<td>42.7</td>
<td>39.5</td>
<td>47.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1970s</td>
<td>43.7</td>
<td>38.5</td>
<td>48.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1980s</td>
<td>45.1</td>
<td>41.4</td>
<td>45.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1990s</td>
<td>47.3</td>
<td>37.9</td>
<td>44.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2000s</td>
<td>51.4</td>
<td>35.8</td>
<td>42.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2012</td>
<td>39.8</td>
<td>30.9</td>
<td>38.4</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: Rallings and Thrasher 2012: 223

These events have taken place against a backdrop of declining turnout in modern liberal democracies (Dalton 2014; LeDuc et al. 2014). Often, this is interpreted as a sign of declining engagement with politics, even antipathy towards politics and politicians. A more benign interpretation is that societies have changed, that modern citizens engage more intermittently with politics, voting in elections irregularly, when it is seen to matter - to the individual voter and/or to the election outcome. For sure, fewer voters cast their vote out of blind loyalty to a party (which may be no bad thing). The result is that voters may require an incentive, or to be persuaded, to vote. Therefore, it is important to reflect on measures that might improve turnout.

2. Factors influencing turnout
Turnout in elections has been linked to a number of factors, including the following:

**Perceptions of governmental institutions:** We know that when institutions are viewed as important and powerful, electoral engagement is encouraged. In the UK context, turnout is closely related to perceptions of power/responsibilities of the governmental body concerned. Academics frequently make the distinction between first and second order elections, a way of categorising the importance of institutions (Reif and Schmitt 1997). Until now, elections to Westminster have been viewed as the most clearly first order (followed by Scottish Parliament elections) and elections to local government and the European Parliament distinctly second order. Turnout reflects the degree of competence of each set of institutions (Table 2).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>EU ref 2016</th>
<th>SP 2016</th>
<th>GE 2015</th>
<th>Ind ref 2014</th>
<th>EU 2014</th>
<th>Local 2012</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>%</td>
<td>67</td>
<td>56</td>
<td>71</td>
<td>85</td>
<td>34</td>
<td>40</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The location of power in UK politics is a live topic. The implications of recent events – the further devolving of powers to the Scottish Parliament and Brexit – are far from clear. However, with power and responsibility comes voter interest and engagement. If power were to be devolved to local government, voters would be likely to take more of an interest. If, on the other hand, the powers of local government are seen to be eroded it should come as no surprise if voters become less inclined to vote in local elections.

**Election campaigns**

Local party election campaigns matter, both in terms of which candidates are successful, and in electoral turnout terms (Clark 2012; Denver and Hands 2004). Campaigns can boost turnout or, at the very least, prevent turnout declining further. Current restrictions on displaying campaign literature (posters) fly in the face of this evidence. Conversely, increasing membership in some parties since 2014 suggests that parties will have more volunteers to engage in the types of activities associated with encouraging turnout, such as doorstep and telephone canvassing and election stalls (Bennie et al. 2016).

**Electoral systems**

Citizens are more likely to vote when they perceive their vote as important, and when election competitions look close, as evidenced in recent referendums. Thus, electoral systems can be important. Some have suggested that the use of STV in local elections is too complicated and has the potential to suppress turnout. Indeed, Scottish voters must contend with four different types of electoral system in the various elections. However, research suggests that voters cope well with STV, even when different elections take place on the same day (employing different electoral systems) (Denver et al. 2009; Bennie and Clark 2008; Clark and Bennie 2008; Clark 2013). There is little evidence that voters are repelled by this system of voting. Rather, the phenomenon of ‘wasted votes’ that takes place under the majoritarian
first past the post electoral system is more likely to lead voters to conclude that
voting is a waste of their time (but in Westminster elections, this is counterbalanced
by views on importance of governmental institutions). In sum, electoral system
effects on turnout require more investigation but there is little to suggest that STV
dis-incentivises voting in local elections.

**Electoral groups/ dynamics**

Some groups are considerably less likely to vote. Those living in areas of urban
depression and young people present particular challenges. The academic evidence
on turnout amongst these groups is well documented (Denver and Hands 2004;
Fieldhouse et al. 2007; Denver and Bochel 2007). Not only are these groups less
likely to vote, they are less likely to register to vote. Thus, the extension of the
franchise to 16-17 year olds is not, in and of itself, likely to boost turnout (see Cowley
and Denver 2005). A related group of special interest is that of students. In the 2012
election, two of the Aberdeen wards with the lowest turnouts contained large
numbers of students (Clark 2013).

**3. Possible reforms**

**Continue to develop public information campaigns**

These could place more emphasis on the *importance* of local government, and the
precise competences involved. The Electoral Commission’s public information
campaign in 2012 focused on voter registration and how to vote using STV, but this
communication could do more to advertise the democratic role of local councils –
what they actually do.

**Targeted voter registration campaigns**

Including targeting of young people e.g. students. For example, could voter
registration be more prominent on student campuses, during student induction? The
mechanisms used in public information campaigns must also keep up with
generational and technological changes in the electorate e.g. more online
advertising.

**Encourage more postal/advance voting**

25.5% of all votes cast in 2012 were postal votes (Electoral Commission 2012: 2). In
modern societies, postal voting is important and should be encouraged. Note, also,
that some US elections allow early voting at polling booths. A related point is the
availability of emergency proxy voting. An extension of emergency proxy voting was
recommended by the Electoral Commission in 2012. These are details of electoral
administration but represent appropriate, flexible ways of dealing with mobile, busy
populations.

**Electronic voting/ digital democracy**

Electronic procedures can take place at various stages in the electoral process, from
distribution of ballots to voting (at a polling station or from home) and counting of
votes. Electoral Reform Services (ERS) administer a range of ballots in the UK, and electronic voting takes place in other countries, notably Estonia. There is presently no consensus on electronic voting in UK elections, largely due to concerns about electoral integrity and equality of access (Birch and Watt 2004; Birch et al. 2014). However, it is recognised that electronic voting might encourage young people to take part.

**Consider lifting poster ban**

Most councils now ban the posting of election materials on lampposts and other council property. Given the importance of election campaigns, as outlined above, this practice does not encourage voters to engage.

**Local government reform**

The structure of local councils is ripe for review and reform. Whilst, on the surface, neither voters nor politicians have an appetite for reshaping the structures of local government again, there is a strong case to be made for reinvigorating democracy at the local level with genuine democratic input from local communities (see campaigns of the Electoral Reform Society). Any review should include an examination of the role played by community councils.

**Conclusion**

There is no obvious short term solution to improving electoral turnout in local council elections. Wider democratic trends suggest that turnout is unlikely to increase dramatically any time soon. Moreover, the participation of four in every ten eligible voters may be a reasonable outcome for elections to a level of government that is seen as relatively unimportant. However, there are measures that encourage participation in elections, including vigorous party campaigns and matters of electoral administration. Ultimately, enhancing the role and status of local democracy may be the key to increasing voter engagement.

Lynn Bennie
Politics and International Relations
University of Aberdeen
References


The Electoral Reform Society, Scotland (http://www.electoral-reform.org.uk/scotland)