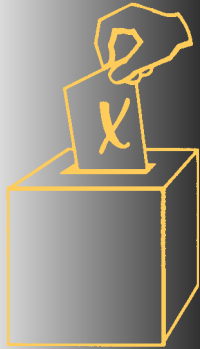




Service Quality



Participation



Finance



Management



Structure

LOCAL AND REGIONAL
GOVERNMENT RESEARCH
PROGRAMME



Research Summary

1998 British Social Attitudes Survey: Secondary Data Analysis of the Local Government Module

BY NATALIA I CHIVITE-MATTHEWS AND JASON TEAL

Key recommendations

The evidence found in this paper sends three very clear messages for policy:

- The need to improve people's knowledge and interest in local government, its politics, services and performance.
- The need to encourage more people to vote in local elections, particularly the young.
- The need to invest in finding ways in which to regain the confidence of the public in local government and particularly in elected councillors.

Introduction

In the summer of 1998 the White Paper *Modern Local Government: in touch with the people* was published by the Government. It sets out a strategy for the reform of local government. Central to and underpinning each of the initiatives proposed in the 1998 White Paper is the renewal of local democracy. It is proposed that this could be achieved not only by securing better service delivery outcomes in terms of quality and value for money, but also by raising the profile of local authorities, developing clear and defined leadership, responsibilities and accountabilities, providing for more participative involvement in every aspect of local government and improving access and opportunities to vote. To these ends the White Paper explored the possibilities for councils to adopt a range of initiatives to promote democracy at the localised level

involving the installation of mayors or council cabinets, utilising citizens' juries, panels or referendums, providing polling booths in supermarkets and holding elections at weekends.

Many of the initiatives proposed in the 1998 White Paper have now been introduced:

- A duty to achieve Best Value in local government service delivery (Local Government Act 1999) has replaced Compulsory Competitive Tendering (CCT).
- Several changes have been introduced to encourage local government democratic renewal including, new political-executive arrangements, a new ethical framework and a variety of innovations to make voting more accessible (Local Government Act 2000).

- Local authorities have been given new powers to promote economic, social and environmental well-being in their areas (Local Government Act 2000).

In relation to the Government's White Paper, the 1998 British Social Attitudes (BSA) survey included a module on local democracy, to investigate public attitudes to the suggested initiatives. It tests the assumptions made in the paper and some of the proposals it makes against popular opinion. Overall findings of the survey were published in the 16th British Social Attitudes Report by Rao and Young (1999), this paper develops the original publication further by examining sub-group differences in public attitudes towards local government. In total, the module on local democracy targets a sample of 4,000 households in the UK. Of these, 2,071 interviews were carried out (59.1%), lasting for approximately 1¼ hours each.

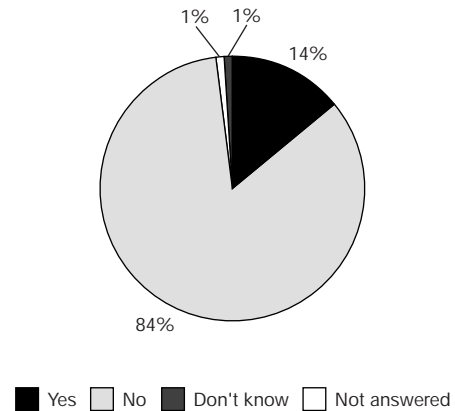
The White Paper was based on an assumption that the general public is insufficiently interested in local government, is ill-informed and knows little about how local councils are run. It is this lack of interest which results in one of the lowest average turnout rates for local elections in Europe.

Most people (90%) are simply not interested in local politics (Rao et al. 1999:47). It is well documented that on average, only about 40% of people typically turn out to vote in a local election – compared to 70% in a general election – although it is recognised that both these figures have been falling in recent years (Rallings et al. 1999).

Knowledge of local government

This apparent indifference to local government is reflected in the very limited level of awareness amongst the general public. The 1998 BSA survey revealed that there was a large proportion (81%) of people who knew the name of their council although other questions indicate that there are low levels of awareness as to which party holds power in the respondents' local councils; and what the authorities' main responsibilities are. Similarly, only 14% said they knew the name of the leader of the largest group/party in their authority only 36% of those (5% of the total number of respondents) could name the leader accurately.

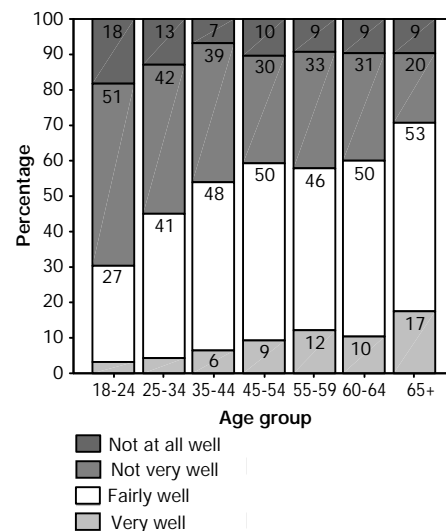
Do you know who the leader of the largest party is?



Local authority information provision

In terms of being kept abreast of local authority activities, consistently – both on average and throughout almost all sub-groups – around a half or so of respondents thought their council kept them fairly/very well informed about the services it provides – although typically, awareness of and satisfaction with councils' provision of information rises with age, socio-economic group and level of education.

How well your council keeps you informed about services?



Local council control and setting standards

Over half of the respondents (55%) thought that a good balance of power between central and local government had been struck – although it was the older generations and the more educated that tended

to favour more local autonomy. There was general agreement that the setting of standards for strategic services such as education should be centralised and similarly that the council should be free to decide how to run more localised services such as refuse collection.

Council tax and local authority efficiency

In relation to control over local government finance, two-thirds of people (64%) thought that local government should be able to determine its own level of council tax. 69% of the respondents, however, felt that an authority should hold a referendum if it wanted to raise council tax above the level of inflation.

There was no clear consensus over whether councils offered good value for money – roughly a third thought that they did, a third thought not, with the remainder thinking that they offered neither good nor bad value for money. Demographically, young people, the less educated and the lower socio-economic groups tended to be less satisfied with the extent of value for money provided by their council. It is worthy of note that four out of every ten people thought that councils were not inherently inefficient and could run services as efficiently as private companies.

Reported voting behaviour

EXPLAINING WHY PEOPLE VOTE

The literature clearly shows that there is a complex set of structural and individual level factors which interact on determining whether a person will vote or not.

Factors evident at the *individual level*¹:

- Socio-economic characteristics such as age, social-class, income, educational qualifications and employment have been consistently found as correlated with voting or not voting.
- Behavioural characteristics such as having an interest in the local political process and supporting a political party.

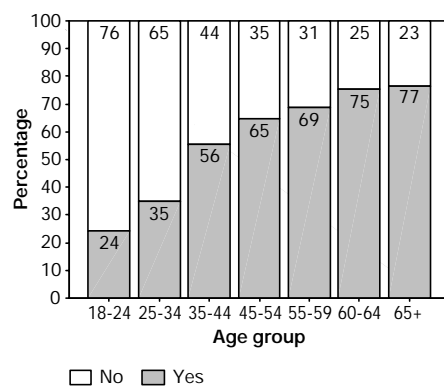
- Attitudinal characteristics towards the political and administrative regime, towards politicians and voting. Others include feeling of belonging, attachment and involvement with the local area.

Factors evident at the *structural level*² include: legal requirements for voting, type of electoral system, the size of the authority, money spent on the election, innovative electoral measures, the closeness of the elections, the locality, the perceived power of the council, the extent to which the council is seen to engage with and involve the public in its decision-making processes, the representativeness of councillors, the cultivation of interest and awareness of local government and its duties, and the economy of the area.

SOCIO-ECONOMIC CHARACTERISTICS

The 1998 BSA study mostly looks at individual level characteristics. It was found that age has by far the strongest influence on voting behaviour whereby the older the person is the more likely it is that they will vote. According to the findings in the report other characteristics that would make a person more likely to vote in local elections are: to be employed or retired; to be from Wales or Scotland; and, to be in the higher social-classes.

Voted in the last local election



INNOVATIVE ELECTORAL MEASURES

The Local Government White Paper (1998) highlights the importance of making voting opportunities more accessible and convenient – by for example, weekend elections, postal voting, alternative locations of polling stations (in a shop or

1 See Dalton 1988, Marsh 1990, Uhlener 1991, Lynn 1992, Flickinger et al 1992, Bynner et al 1994 and 1996, Chivite-Matthews 1999 – see also – Rose et al 1990, Conley 1994, Farrell et al 1996, Pattie et al 1997, Harrop et al 1987.

2 See Rallings et al 1994, 1994a, 1996 and 1999, Blais and Carthy 1990, Brown 1998, MORI 1998.

Post Office), electronic voting. These structural changes to increasing voter turnout were tested in the survey. However, there appears to be a large amount of indifference to the introduction of any of these initiatives. Around three quarters of all respondents did not think that having more outlets or greater opportunity to vote would necessarily mean that they would be more inclined to do so. However, it is important to note that it is precisely those groups that are currently least likely to vote – the young, those in the lower socio-economic groups and those in full-time education – that are the most responsive to measures designed to make voting more convenient.

REASONS STATED FOR NOT VOTING

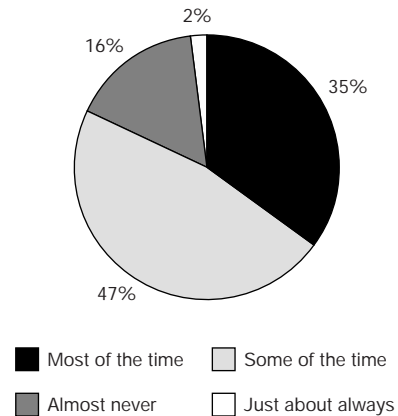
Among the reasons mentioned by those who had not voted in the last election, a quarter said that they were simply not interested enough in the local election to vote and one in five reported that they were 'too busy' to vote in a local election (compared to one in ten in a general election).

Attitudes towards councillors

At the individual level (see above) attitudes towards voting, politics and politicians are thought to be key determinants of whether a person will vote or not. This report finds that people are not very cynical about the actual voting process per se in local elections. However, there does appear to be a widespread cynicism towards elected councillors: 63% said that they would trust councillors only some of the time/almost never to make important decisions; 56% agreed with the statement that 'generally speaking, those we elect as councillors lose touch with people pretty quickly'; and, a small majority agreed with the statement that councillors don't care much what people think.

It appears that a lot of people believe that their councillors are not in tune with their community. 88% thought that councils could make better decisions if they consulted with the local population more. Indeed, respondents tended to have greater faith in more participative and deliberative measures. This is borne out by the lack of confidence in councils making good decisions on important issues, where more people would trust a jury of twelve citizens (57%) than their locally elected councillors (34%). Electors would also rather have a direct say over local council tax rates in a referendum than trust their local councillors to this decision.

Trust councillors to make important decisions



Attitudes towards directly elected Mayors

With regard to changing the democratic structure of local government to develop community leadership, a mayoral figure was primarily seen as being an identifiable community leader – someone who would speak up for the area and be the focus of accountability and responsibility. The position was not necessarily seen as taking influence away from councillors, although concern was expressed as to the amount of power held in one office. Interestingly, the views of the younger and older generations seem to coincide more on this issue.

Further Information

The full report "1998 British Social Attitudes Survey: Secondary data analysis of the Local Government module" by Natalia I Chivite-Matthews and Jason Teal (Local and Regional Government Research Unit) is available from: <http://www.local.detr.gov.uk/research/research.htm> For further information on the research contact:

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