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*Electoral Conflict
and
Democracy
in Cities*

JOHN J. KIRLIN

AS A LITMUS PAPER TEST, electoral conflict should play an important role in discussions of the extent to which the politics of American cities are democratic. Although the process by which representatives are elected has long been considered important in national and state level political analyses, attention to city electoral processes has been erratic. Electoral conflict played a part, although not often a central role, in the generation of community power studies, and city referenda have occasionally been analyzed;¹ studies of local elections most often focused upon nonpartisanship.² Recently, the

¹ Electoral conflict played a part in the "community" analyses of: Robert Agger et al., *The Rulers and the Ruled* (New York: John Wiley and Sons, 1964); Gladys M. Kammerer et al., *The Urban Political Community* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Co., 1963); and Aaron Wildavsky, *Leadership in a Small Town* (Totowa, N. J.: Bedminster Press, 1964). As examples of local referenda studies, see Harlan Hahn, "Correlates of Public Sentiments About the War: Local Referenda on the Vietnam War," *American Political Science Review*, 64 (December 1970), 1,186-1,198; and Howard D. Hamilton, "Direct Legislation: Some Implications of Open Housing Referenda," *American Political Science Review*, 64 (March 1970), 124-137.

² Charles Adrian, "Some General Characteristics of Nonpartisan Elections," *American Political Science Review*, 46 (September 1952), 766-776; Adrian, "A Typology of Nonpartisan Elections," *Western Political Quarterly*, 12 (June

comparative city council analyses undertaken in the San Francisco Bay Area have made local electoral processes a central focus.³

If analysis of city council elections is to prove fruitful, defining the role of electoral conflict in democratic city politics and finding a satisfactory measure of electoral conflict are necessary first steps because considerable confusion and contradiction exist in these areas. This paper presents a revised interpretation of such conflict by contrasting an analysis of electoral conflict in Los Angeles suburbs with the work of Prewitt and Eulau on San Francisco Bay Area cities. While Prewitt and Eulau used the average rate of incumbent defeat as their principal measure of electoral conflict, the fate of groups of incumbents is analyzed here. This measure is conceptually more attractive and its use results in conclusions differing from those suggested by the average rate of incumbent defeat.⁴

A REFINED MEASURE OF LOCAL ELECTORAL CONFLICT: THE MULTIPLE DEFEAT OF INCUMBENTS

The nexus between the concept of electoral conflict and the measure using election statistics is critical. If defeat of city council incumbents is averaged over time, each incumbent candidate is viewed as being re-elected or defeated as an individual, implying that the election results are independent events. Another possibility

1959), 449-458; Adrian and Oliver Williams, "The Insulation of Local Politics Under the Nonpartisan Ballot," *American Political Science Review*, 53 (December 1959), 1,052-1,063; and Eugene Lee, *The Politics of Nonpartisanship: A Study of California City Elections* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1960). For an analysis including nonpartisan political systems, see Charles Gilbert and Christopher Clague, "Electoral Competition and Electoral Systems in Large Cities," *Journal of Politics*, 24 (May 1962), 323-349.

³ Kenneth Prewitt and Heinz Eulau, "Political Matrix and Political Representation: Prolegomenon to a New Departure from an Old Problem," *American Political Science Review*, 63 (June 1969), 427-442; Prewitt, "Political Ambitions, Volunteerism, and Electoral Accountability," *American Political Science Review*, 64 (March 1970), 5-17; and Prewitt, *The Recruitment of Political Leaders: A Study of Citizen-Politicians* (Indianapolis: Bobbs-Merrill Company, 1970).

⁴ Analysts have typically found a high average percentage of incumbents winning re-election. For example, 80 percent by Prewitt, "Political Ambition"; 84 percent by Gilbert and Clague, "Electoral Competition"; and 71 percent by Lee, *Politics of Nonpartisanship*.

exists in many local elections. In elections in which more than one incumbent is standing for re-election, each incumbent may stand not individually but rather as part of a group—a group of two or more incumbent candidates whose futures are linked. Two explanations of the manner in which this may occur illustrate the argument.

First, coalitional behavior and tendencies to make unanimous decisions would link city council members one to another in behavior on the council; citizens would then be “correct” in perceiving sameness among the council members and in re-election bids treating jointly those incumbent candidates who had behaved similarly on the council. The tendencies to unanimity in decision-making in small groups are well documented, and when unanimity breaks down, coalitional behavior is often seen, with two or more councilmen persistently joining in positions on issues brought before the group. For example, Eulau classified 82 city councils on a conflict dimension and found: 20 councils with stable coalitions in opposition to one another (bi-polar split); 29 councils with no stable divisions (nonpolar splits); and 33 councils in which votes were only very rarely split (unipolar).⁵

Second, electorate linking of two or more incumbent candidates' re-election bids may rest not on the behavior of the councilmen/candidates, but upon the behavior of the electorate itself. Accurate perception of the previous positions (and the campaign positions) taken by council members demands much of the electorate. Examples of misperception and lack of information are legion; a main thrust of national-level electoral analysis has been to show how citizens shortcut the cognitive task of distinguishing between candidates, especially by using party labels. Thus, regardless of their actual differences in behavior as incumbents, two or more candidates may be perceived by the electorate as indistinguishable. Similarly, voters may vote against the system, or for the system, using the immediate context of an electoral decision to vent general feelings concerning their state in life or the operation of the political system.

In addition to these two explanations for not treating the defeat of incumbents as independent events, there exists yet another argument which emphasizes the joint defeat of incumbents. If the defeats of incumbents are treated as independent events, an artifact

⁵ “The Informal Organization of Decisional Structures in Small Legislative Bodies,” *Midwest Journal of Political Science*, 13 (August 1969), 341-366.

of method arises which most analysts would probably reject as theoretically unjustifiable. The difficulty concerns expectations or the frequency and pattern in which electoral conflict will appear in cities. A well-respected hypothesis—perhaps most commonly identified with James S. Coleman—is that political conflict in cities will be episodic, that is, periods of relative political calm will occasionally be broken by bursts of more intense political conflict, after which evidence of political conflict subsides.⁶ Treatment of defeat of incumbents as an independent event, however, results in the presumption that political/electoral conflict is randomly observed and conceals evidence of the sort of episodic, or regime-threatening, conflict discussed by Coleman and Agger. Analyses focusing upon the fates of individual incumbents may be appropriate in some instances, but inclusion of a measure of joint outcomes promises to add new dimension to analyses of city council elections. Application of such a measure to elections of Los Angeles suburbs provides the context for discussion of the role of electoral conflict in the political processes of those cities.

ELECTORAL CONFLICT IN LOS ANGELES SUBURBS

The cities included in this analysis are general law suburbs within the Los Angeles-Long Beach Standard Metropolitan Statistical Area (SMSA), with an average population of 30,000 (ranging from 134,584 to 200). These cities encompass 30 percent of the total SMSA population, and, because this pattern is common to other metropolitan areas, the politics of such suburbs are the local politics of a vast number of American citizens. General law cities are incorporated under state statute and have largely identical structures. Each has a council-manager form of government and a five-man city council to which councilmen are elected to staggered four-year terms in nonpartisan, biennial May elections. Thus, two seats are filled in one election, and three in the subsequent election two years later. A maximum of 66 cities (out of 78 in Los Angeles county), is included in the analysis. Election return data for the six biennial elections from 1960 through 1970 were obtained from the *Los Angeles Times*. The nongeneral law ("charter") cities ex-

⁶ Coleman, *Community Conflict* (Glencoe, Ill.: The Free Press, 1957). See, also, Kammerer et al., *Urban Political Community*; and Agger et al., *Rulers*, 92, 471, 582.

cluded from this analysis are the larger, older cities of the county; the smaller cities included here provide a reasonable test of the role of electoral conflict in the politics of small cities. Indeed, the conclusions of the analysis may not hold for larger cities, especially for those with partisan, district elections to city council.

During the period under analysis, incumbent city council candidates in Los Angeles suburbs were re-elected with a frequency of 73 percent. Although this is slightly less than the 80 percent observed in the Bay Area studies, a majority of incumbent candidates is returned to office by the electorate of Los Angeles suburbs. Further analysis of these data shows, however, that a greater degree of electoral conflict and electoral accountability exists in these cities than is suggested by the over-all success of incumbent candidates.

With what frequency do incumbents stand for re-election? Table I reveals that in these Los Angeles suburbs, it is the rare election in

TABLE I
FREQUENCY OF INCUMBENT RE-ELECTION BIDS IN LOS ANGELES
SUBURBS, 1960-70

Number of Incumbents per Election	Number of Elections	Percentage of Elections	Percentage of Incumbents Re-elected
0	19	5.3	—
1	79	22.1	79
2	164	45.8	73
3	96	26.8	72
	358	100.0	

which at least one incumbent does not run and that the usual pattern is two or three incumbents seeking re-election. In 164 of the elections under analysis, two incumbents were simultaneously candidates for re-election, and in an additional 96 instances, three incumbents simultaneously ran for re-election. These occasions offered the electorate opportunity to reject a sizable minority or majority of the five-member city councils and are the objects of this analysis.⁷

Considering each city as a separate political system, 35 of the 66

⁷ For larger councils, more incumbents would presumably run simultaneously for re-election and analysis would focus on larger groups of incumbents.

suburbs included in the analysis experienced at least one election in which two or three incumbent candidates were simultaneously defeated in re-election bids, as shown in Table 2. While this defeat occurred in only 43 of 358 elections, the systems implications are better understood by attention to the fact of council overturn in over one-half of the cities. This overturn of councils is more frequent than suggested by an average incumbent re-election rate of 73 percent.

TABLE 2
SIMULTANEOUS DEFEAT OF TWO OR THREE INCUMBENT CANDIDATES IN SIX
BIENNIAL LOS ANGELES SUBURBAN COUNCIL ELECTIONS, 1960-70

Frequency of Council Overturn	Number of Cities
Twice	8
Once	27
Never	31

Statistical support for the hypothesis that electorates view multiple incumbent candidates jointly rather than individually and for the hypothesis that political conflict is episodic rather than random is obtained by returning to the election level of analysis and further inspection of instances in which two or three incumbents stood for re-election. In such cases, the *expected* frequencies of various combinations of wins and losses can be calculated if the defeat or victory of each incumbent candidate is *assumed to be an independent event* (the null hypothesis). Table 3 presents the expected and observed frequencies of wins and losses of various combinations for the two and three incumbent cases.⁸

⁸ The expected probabilities and frequencies are computed by use of the formula for determining the probabilities of joint occurrence of independent events; working out the probabilities for the two-incumbent case illustrates the procedure. Remembering that the probability of any incumbent being re-elected for the entire population of ten years' election returns for Los Angeles suburbs is .73 and that the probability of an incumbent's defeat is then, of necessity, equal to .27, the various probabilities are:

$$p(W,W) = p(W) \times p(W) = .73 \times .73 = .53$$

$$p(W,L) = p(W) \times p(L) = .73 \times .27 = .20$$

$$p(L,W) = p(L) \times p(W) = .27 \times .73 = .20$$

$$p(L,L) = p(L) \times p(L) = .27 \times .27 = .07$$

As the two intermediate cases of (W,L) and (L,W) are statistically equivalent, the probabilities of their occurrences may be added, such that $p[(W,L) \text{ or } (L,W)] = .40$.

TABLE 3
 FREQUENCIES OF ELECTION RESULTS IN CASES WITH TWO OR
 THREE INCUMBENT CANDIDATES

	Combination of Election Results	Expected p of Combination ^a	Expected Frequency of Combination ^a	Observed Frequency of Combination
For Two Incumbents (N = 164)	W,W	.53	87	96
	W,L:L,W	.40	66	48
	L,L	.07	12	20
For Three Incumbents (N = 96)	W,W,W	.39	37	42
	W,W,L:W,L,W;	.42	40	31
	L,W,W			
	W,L,L:L,W,L;			
	L,L,W	.15	14	15
	L,L,L	.02	2	8

^a Expected probabilities and expected frequencies are slightly erroneous because of rounding errors.

From the evidence in Table 3, it is clear that the most frequent outcome of elections in which two or three incumbents are candidates is continuation of all in office; that cases of mixed results of wins and losses are numerous but not as numerous as one would expect if wins and losses were randomly determined; and that instances in which both or all three incumbent candidates are defeated are relatively rare but more frequent than expected if randomly determined. Thus, the cells in which all incumbents either win [(W,W) or (W,W,W)] or lose [(L,L) or (L,L,L)] are observed to occur more frequently than expected while the observed frequencies in the intermediate cases in which incumbent candidates both win and lose are consistently less than their expected frequencies. Since the expected frequencies were derived from a model in which the re-election or defeat of any incumbent candidate was an independent event—a model consistent with the assumptions

Considering Table 3 as a multinomial experiment, a chi-square test shows the observed frequency of incumbent defeats to differ significantly from the expected. Over-all, $X^2 = 31.94$ (d.f. = 5), significant at the .001 level. If the two and three incumbent cases are considered separately, the respective results are: $X^2 = 11.17$, d.f. = 2, $p \leq .01$, and $X^2 = 20.77$, d.f. = 3, $p \leq .001$. In both cases, the greatest contribution to X^2 occurs in the difference between observed and expected cases in which all incumbents are defeated.

that individual incumbents are viewed singly by the electorate, and that electoral conflict is distributed randomly over a time period—the validity of those hypotheses is doubtful. In contrast, the hypothesis that the electorate treats multiple incumbent candidates jointly and the hypothesis that conflict will be episodic in intensity are both supported by this evidence.

CONCLUSIONS

Even in a city like Los Angeles, popularly viewed as having a highly mobile population, political memories of council members should extend ten years; incumbents do get thrown out of office with enough frequency to suggest a plausible threat to city councilmen in at least half of these cities. Additionally, of course, communication nets extend beyond the boundaries of any one city, and news of elections that change or threaten councils should spread to other council members. Such a conclusion, however, is speculative; interview data would be needed to test its validity and it should be remembered that interviews of city councilmen in the Bay Area studies found them ostensibly unconcerned with the threat of electoral defeat.⁹ If similar evidence were found in the attitudes of councilmen of Los Angeles suburbs, the research question would become the basis of these attitudes, given the reality of some probability of council-threatening behavior by the electorate.

There is evidence here that the electorate did constrain elected officials by denying continuation in office; that this phenomenon occurs on a group rather than on an individual basis; and that reliance upon simple averages of incumbent defeats is misleading. Use of a measure of joint outcomes in analyses of city councils offers promise of enriched understanding of the role of electoral conflict in city political systems.

⁹ Prewitt, "Political Ambition," 7.