

Abstract

There is a wide variety of electoral systems used for local governments around Australia.

While many of these elections are non-partisan, most elections in urban New South Wales are contested by political parties, grouped on the ballot in a similar style to Senate elections. These elections are proportional, with most councils using wards electing three councillors or more.

While the main national political parties such as Labor, Liberal and the Greens do contest these elections, there are also other parties that only contest one or a handful of local councils. In most areas there are two clearly identifiable “major parties” but in many cases one of those major parties differs from the national major parties.

The use of different electoral systems for local government, along with the different boundaries of the polity, appear to contribute to the creation of small localised party systems that differ from the national party system, or how people in that area vote in state or federal elections.

This paper uses tools from comparative electoral systems research to look at the relationship between the electoral systems and party systems in these local councils.

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Ben is a prominent media commentator on election results. He has been a regular analyst on The Guardian’s election night liveblogs and was also ABC Radio’s election night analyst for the 2023 NSW state election and the 2023 Voice referendum.

Party systems in local government

Ben Raue

Local government is only lightly covered in Australian political science. In particular, there is little analysis of local councils as political organisations, formed through elections and contested by different groups representing different interests in a community.

There is extensive international research¹ examining the relationship between party systems and electoral systems, in particular how features of a state’s electoral system (such as the district magnitude and the size of the parliamentary assembly) impact on the party system – such as the effective number of parties winning votes and winning seats.

Most of this research is focused on national-level elections, and generally Australia’s complex preferential voting systems are treated as special cases (compared to first-past-the-post or list PR systems which tend to be more common).

¹ Shugart, Matthew and Rein Taagepera. 2017. *Votes From Seats*. Cambridge. Cambridge University Press. <https://www.cambridge.org/core/books/votes-from-seats/890D24F8D0DB2FF9CCEA1C77CE4E463F>

There's a great deal of potential to examine some of these questions at a local level by examining partisan council elections in Australia, particularly in New South Wales. These elections can give us insights into how different electoral systems, and different boundaries of a polity, shape the local party system in ways that don't simply replicate voting patterns in that area at a state and federal level.

Council elections in urban parts of New South Wales tend to be contested by political parties. These councils tend to be substantial in size (many of them with over 100,000 residents) and have proportional voting systems, but with a wide variety of district magnitude, ranging from 2 to 15.

For the 2021 New South Wales local government elections, I chose to focus my analysis on the twenty-five most populous councils². These are the 25 councils with a population of 100,000 or more, and are mostly in urban New South Wales, in the area ranging from Newcastle to Wollongong, as well as Shoalhaven council on the NSW south coast. One of these councils (Central Coast) was suspended and did not hold an election in 2021, leaving 24 others which held elections that year. These councils make up almost two thirds of the population of New South Wales.

Of these 25 councils, all but one are dominated by political parties, with the exception being Ku-ring-gai where all candidates are independents. This has not always been the case. A number of these councils have shifted from mostly electing independents to mostly electing party members since 2004.³ There are also a number of other smaller councils, usually on the urban fringe, which are also dominated by political parties or quasi-parties.

This is relatively unusual in local government elections across Australia. Some party members contest elections for suburban councils in Melbourne, but there is no official recognition of parties on ballot papers. Brisbane City Council is also dominated by political parties, using a single-member electorate system similar to state and federal elections. Outside of those areas, official party candidates are rare.

These councils all use a proportional voting system which resembles the Senate or NSW Legislative Council system with a variety of magnitudes ranging from 3 to 15, although most of them have a magnitude of three. The size of these councils also vary from nine to fifteen.

These local councils have a wide variety of local party systems, which often differ from the party systems at a state and federal level.⁴ In many of these local councils, a dynamic emerges of two major parties along with other forces, and in many of these councils those major parties are not Labor and Liberal. The Greens take on that role in one council, and in a

² Raue, Ben. 2021. 'Launching the NSW council election guide'. *The Tally Room*, 10 May. <https://www.tallyroom.com.au/41890>

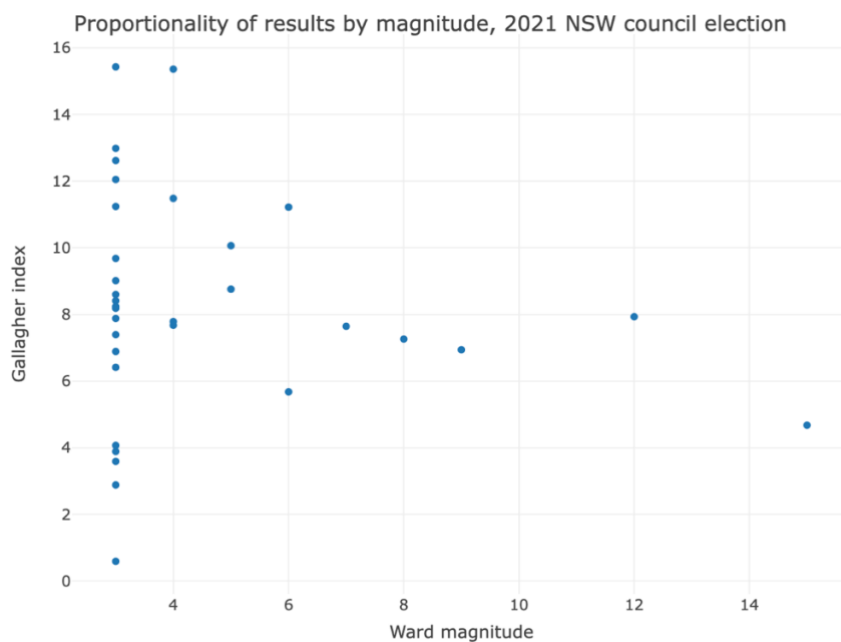
³ Raue, Ben. 2021. 'Party politics spreads across Sydney councils'. *The Tally Room*, 22 October. <https://www.tallyroom.com.au/44098>

⁴ Raue, Ben. 2021. 'The many party systems of NSW councils'. *The Tally Room*, 29 October. <https://www.tallyroom.com.au/44180>

number of others a local party that only runs in one or a handful of councils has taken on that role.

The variety of council size and ward magnitude also creates potential for analysing how these elements of electoral systems influence the shape of a party system, although the predominance of a particular electoral system (5 wards of 3 councillors each) does limit the range of systems available for analysis.

I had previously analysed the relationship between the ward magnitude of a council and the amount of disproportionality based on the Gallagher Index.⁵



I found that there was a general decline in disproportionality as magnitude increased, although the large number of magnitude-3 councils have a variety of disproportionality, with some achieving a very low level.

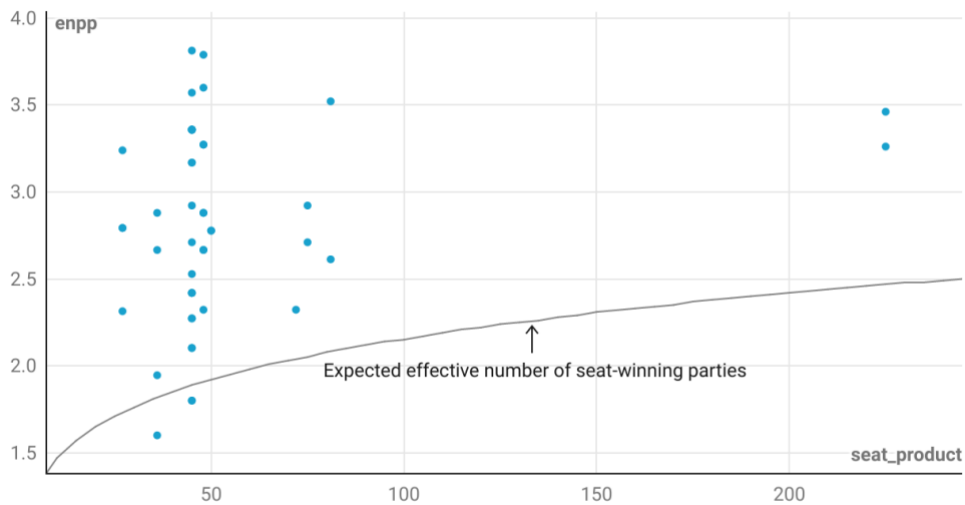
I have also analysed these election results using the “seat product model” introduced in the book *Votes from Seats* by Matthew Shugart and Rene Taagepera. This model takes two inputs – the average district magnitude and the total assembly size – and multiplies them. This “seat product” has a predictive relationship with party systems around the democratic world.

When preparing this paper I also took election results for these 24 councils at the 2016, 2017 and 2021 council elections, and compared the seat product (multiplying the ward magnitude by the council size) to the effective number of seat-winning parties on each council.

⁵ Raue, Ben. 2022. ‘Proportionality and magnitude at the NSW council election’. *The Tally Room*, 6 January. <https://www.tallyroom.com.au/44565>

Effective number of parties in big NSW councils, 2016-2021

For the 24 most populous councils in NSW with partisan elections (excluding Ku-ring-gai), at NSW council elections in 2016, 2017 and 2021, how did the effective number of seat-winning parties (ENPP) compare to the seat product.



The seat product is produced by multiplying the assembly size by the average magnitude. The seat product model in Votes From Seats expects the effective number of seat-winning parties (ENPP) to be produced by taking the seat product model to the power of (1/6)

Chart: Ben Raue • Created with Datawrapper

Shugart and Taagepera found that most national party systems generally fit a model where the effective number of seat-winning parties was close to the seat product to the power of (1/6).

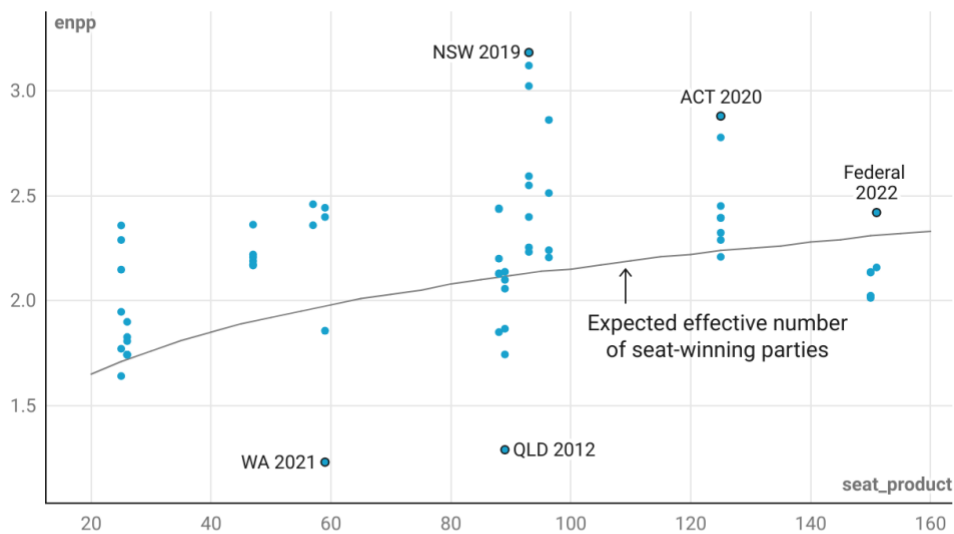
I found that an increasing seat product did produce an increasing effective number of seat-winning parties, but the number of parties tended to outpace what would have been predicted for that given seat product.

I have also found some evidence in analysing similar data higher-level elections that the effective number of seat-winning parties tends to be consistently higher than would be expected from Shugart and Taagepera's model.

The next chart shows results from elections for the lower house or only house for the Commonwealth, the six states, the two mainland territories and the City of Brisbane. Generally the effective number of parliamentary parties exceeds the number predicted by the seat product, but there are exceptions. The elections with a low ENP tend to be massive landslides (Queensland 2012, Western Australia 2017 and 2021), but it is also the case that federal elections prior to 2022 tended to produce a smaller effective number of parties than the seat product would predict.

Effective number of parties in Australian elections, 2000-2023

How did the effective number of seat-winning parties (ENPP) compare to the seat product?



The seat product is produced by multiplying the assembly size by the average magnitude. The seat product model in *Votes From Seats* expects the effective number of seat-winning parties (ENPP) to be produced by taking the seat product model to the power of $(1/6)$

Chart: Ben Raue · Created with Datawrapper

There's potential room for further analysis here to see how these sorts of party systems relate to the electoral system, and how that deviates from global trends.

The most obvious differences between these examples and those used in previous analysis is that they are sub-national analysis (and thus would presumably be influenced by state and federal party systems), but also the use of preferential voting systems. The electoral systems used in *Votes From Seats* are simpler systems – either first-past-the-post for single-member districts or list PR for multi-member districts.

There may be some basis to think that, for a given assembly size and district magnitude, a preferential system tends to produce a greater amount of political diversity. All the same, an increased seat product does seem to still produce a greater number of parties.

There is much more that can be done on the many small electoral systems of Australian politics. Proportional voting systems are used for councils in South Australia, Tasmania, the Northern Territory and some councils in Victoria and (from later this year) Western Australia. There is a great deal of variety in levels of proportionality. Tasmanian councils are the most proportional, with each council elected at large at the same election, while South Australian and Northern Territory councils tend to have lower magnitudes.

Even where formal parties do not contest local government elections, I expect that local factions and political divides would exist, but they would require more in-depth analysis to uncover.

I would also like to more deeply examine the history of how these proportional voting systems came into place, replacing previous plurality voting systems around the country. There is some information on the record about when changes were made in legislation, but there is often great variety in how each council within a state elects its members, and there would be value in tracking how proportionality may have changed over time.⁶

⁶ In 2020, I wrote a blog post which tracked changes in local government electoral structures in Victoria from 2004 until 2020: Raue, Ben 2020. 'Victorian council wards – how they have changed. *The Tally Room*, 9 March. <https://www.tallyroom.com.au/39347>