

Political Statistics, Devolution and Electoral Systems

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My interest is in obtaining a better understanding of Scottish devolution and how this might impact on the political integrity of the United Kingdom. In examining the political statistics, I give pride of place to those issued by the Electoral Commission followed by selected political opinion polls and attitude surveys.

Devolution was set in train in 1999 when the UK Government delegated certain matters and powers to the constituent countries and transformed the way in which Scotland is governed.

'No longer is policy such as key domestic matters as health, education and law and order formally made by the UK Government. Instead it is settled by a Scottish Executive and a Scottish Parliament located in Edinburgh. For its advocates, this new arrangement has two key advantages. First it recognises and expresses the distinctive sense of nationhood felt by most Scots. The second key advantage (claimed for devolution) is that it makes government more accountable.'

The extract cited here is from the book 'Has Devolution Delivered?' published by the Edinburgh University Press (1). It helps set the scene for what follows in this paper.

Attention is now given to the prime political statistics which are the declared rationale for what follows. It begins with the voting turnout and votes cast for the major political parties in England and Scotland in the 2005 UK General Election. Comments on these statistics follow and then reference is made to the compilation of electoral rolls by local authorities on behalf of the Electoral Commission. This is followed by findings from two political opinion polls which show support for each of the four main parties in 2006 and 2007. The last of these two polls took place four months before the May 2007 Scottish Parliament Elections. The results and implications of this latter election are then commented on at some length.

The 2005 UK General Election

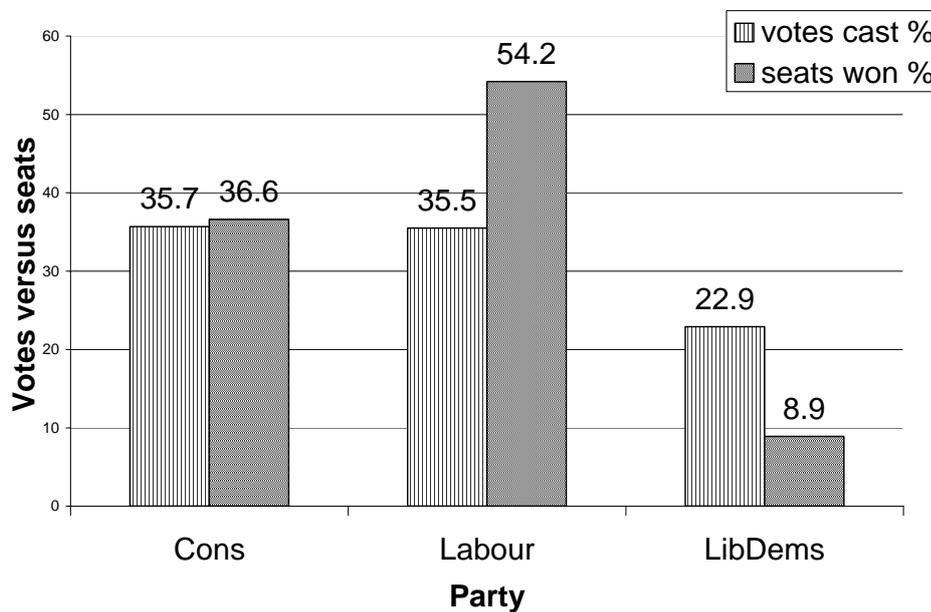
The turnout in the May 2005 UK General Election was 61.3%. In England it was 61.2% (22,679,444 votes), whilst in Scotland the turnout at 60.6% was marginally lower (2,333,887 votes). England is some ten times as populous as Scotland.

Political Parties Share of the Votes and MPs' Seats Won in England and Scotland

England

In England with its 528 Parliamentary constituencies Labour got 35.5% of the votes and 54% of the seats, the Conservatives got 35.7% of the votes (more than Labour) and 36.6% of the seats. The broad correspondence for the Conservatives between their share of the votes cast and their share of the seats in the UK Parliament is to be noted. In England the Liberal Democrats obtained 22.9% of the votes cast and a mere 8.9% of the seats at Westminster. The dramatic difference between these two percentages attests to the gross unfairness of the present 'first past the post' ('the devil take the hindmost') UK electoral system. These percentages are grist to the mills of both the Labour and Conservative political parties and their MPs in Parliament. They confirm the view that successive UK Parliaments and governments are unrepresentative

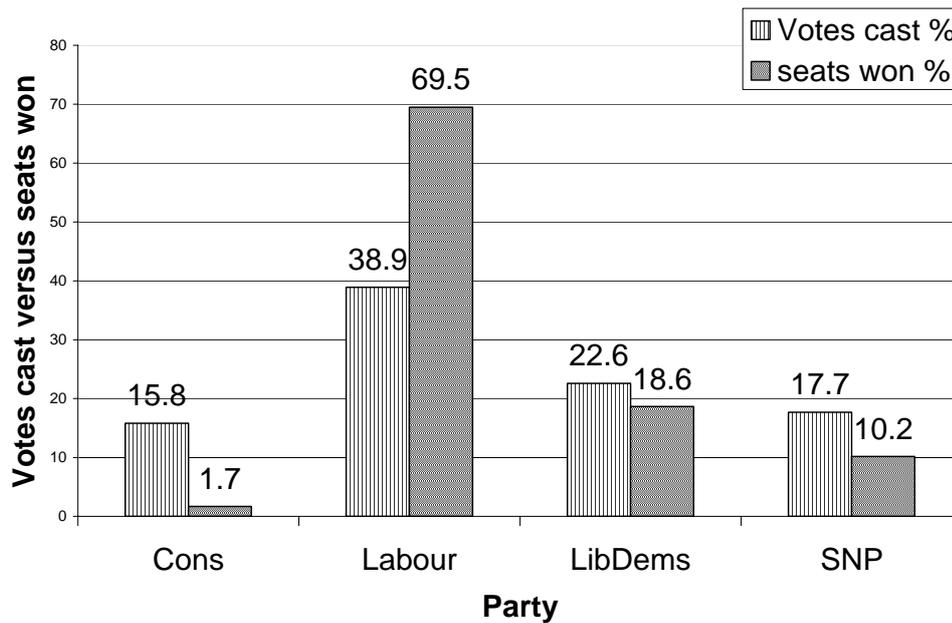
Results in England UK General Election 2005



Scotland

In Scotland in the 2005 UK General Election Labour got 38.9% of the vote and took 69.5% of the seats, whilst the Conservatives obtained 15.8% of the votes cast and only one of the 59 seats in Parliament. The Liberal Democrats got 22.6% of the vote and 11 of the 59 seats (19%), whilst the SNP (Scottish National Party) got 17.7% of the votes and only 6 of the seats (10%). These figures also attest to the gross unfairness of the present Westminster system. They also support the views of those who urged the further devolution of powers to the Scottish Government at Holyrood.

Scottish Results in UK General Election 2005



Eligibility to vote

Sound and comprehensive electoral rolls are also a basic requirement of good government and warrant some consideration here. The backcloth is of unprecedented high immigration into Scotland as well as England. Those entitled to vote are eligible if they are 18 or over and citizens of the UK, Republic of Ireland or Commonwealth, or citizens of the European Union living in the UK, or a citizen of the Channel Islands, the Isle of Man or a British Overseas Territory living in the UK. Responsibility for the compilation of electoral rolls is vested in the Electoral Commission which each year charges each UK local authority with appointing a Returning Officer who then has responsibility for compiling a register of those residents in his area aged 18 and over who are eligible to vote. These electoral registers are

required to be as correct and comprehensive as possible and are then returned to the Electoral Commission. The Commission has, quite recently, conducted a pilot study into how 'comprehensive' (complete and accurate) the voting registers were in six London boroughs and is also responsible for investigating electoral malpractice and fraud though this aspect is not pursued here (2).

Before attention is given to the results of the May 2007 Scottish Parliament Election it seems sensible to ascertain whether public opinion polls over the intervening period provide evidence of changes in support for the main political parties and in attitudes towards them.

The best, ie most authoritative, survey of Scottish people's views on attitudes towards independence derive from the annual Scottish Social Attitudes surveys (SSAS)(3). These reveal that whilst the 2005 SSAS showed that one in three (34%) of those questioned considered that 'Scotland should become independent, separate from the UK and the European Union', in 2007 this proportion had fallen to about one in four (23%). Over this period there had been an increase from 37% in 2005 to 55% in 2007 in those who believed that Scotland should remain part of the UK, with its own elected parliament which has some taxation powers.

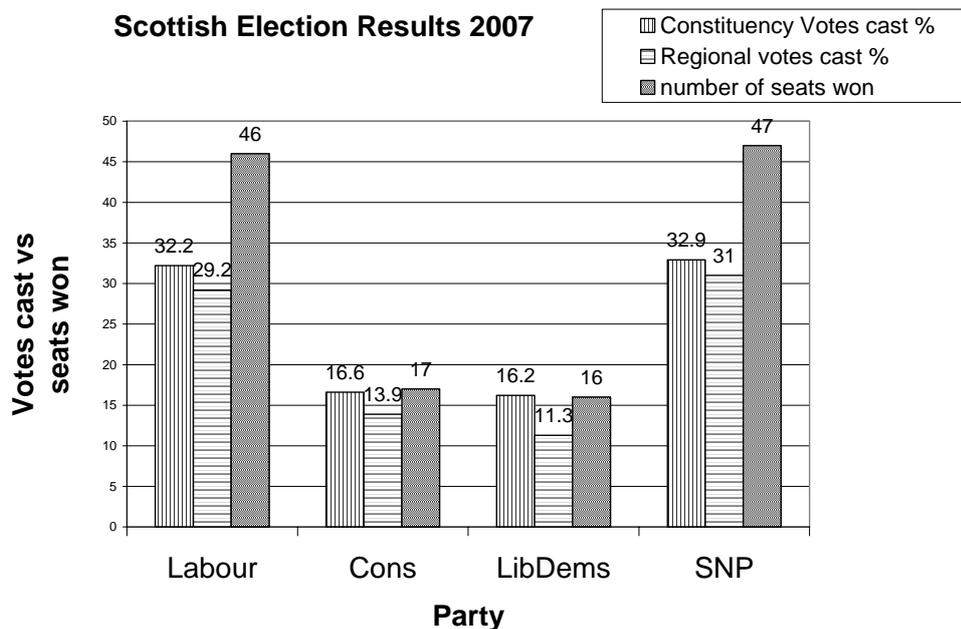
For voting intentions Scottish data (ie which political party was supported) over this two year period reference was made with the help of Ipsos/MORI to Anthony Wells' UK polling report compilation of all companies 'Scottish voting intention polls' (4). Two of these are relevant. The first, a YouGov/SNP poll in April 2006 gave Labour with 30% a slight lead over the SNP with 26%. A second YouGov/Sunday Times poll in January 2007 gave the SNP with 35% a slightly larger lead of 6% over Labour (29%). The two other parties, namely the Liberal Democrats and Conservatives both seemingly lost a little support (the Lib Dems down from 20% to 18% and the Conservatives down from 14% to 13%).

The May 2007 Scottish Parliament Election

This election coincided with local elections across England and Wales and Northern Ireland as well as Scotland. The outcome in terms of votes cast together with what can be learnt from the methods employed should make for better government in the years to come. There are implications too for England as well as the UK, though again it is to be remembered that England has almost ten times as many electors and just short of ten times as many Members of Parliament as

Scotland. Also, before commenting on the votes cast for each of the main political parties in the May 2007 Scottish Parliament Election, it seems sensible to refer briefly to the voting system now used. Whereas in the UK elections First Past the Post (FPTP) continues to be favoured, in the Scottish 2007 Election the Additional Member System (AMS) was used. This system is said to be better known internationally as Mixed Member Proportional (MMP). In this electors have two votes – one to choose a constituency member and the other for a party. Constituency members are elected using FPTP and regional seats are then awarded in a way that makes the overall result in each region as near as proportional as possible to the parties' shares of the regional votes.

Using this system, the Additional Member System, the Scottish 2007 Election produced a Parliament that broadly represents the views of Scottish voters. In the constituency vote the Scottish National Party (SNP) obtained 32.9% of the votes, compared with 32.2% for Labour, whilst in the regional vote the SNP secured 31%, compared with 29.2% for Labour. The Conservatives obtained 16.6% of the constituency vote and 13.9% of the regional vote. The outcome was a close run thing. In terms of seats the SNP with 47 became the largest single party with one more seat than Labour with 46. The Conservatives won 17 seats and the Liberal Democrats 16.



For the first time the election resulted in the Scottish National Party, led by Alec Salmon, forming the Scottish Executive. This party

advocates breaking away from the United Kingdom and becoming an independent nation-state in the European Union. In passing it should be noted that currently Wales, Northern Ireland, London and the Republic of Ireland, as well as Scotland, all use the Additional Member System. England, in contrast, lags behind and is poorly represented by its elected assembly.

Of interest too was the relatively poor turnout. In the 2007 Scottish Parliament Election just under 52% of the electorate voted. This compares with 61% in Scotland in the 2005 UK Parliament Election. The 2007 Scottish Parliament Election turnout was then disappointingly low and it has been conjectured that this may have been due to the facts that Scottish regional elections took place on the same day, and to the ill-designed and confusing ballot paper.

This poor design resulted in a relatively large number of rejected ballot papers (3.5% of the total), designed it is said by a Scottish election official. It said 'vote for two' when it should have said 'vote once in each of the two columns' and more than 100,000 Scots, largely in consequence of this, spoiled their ballot papers. This in turn diminished the proportion of electors casting valid votes.

Before turning attention to the major Scottish Election Study conducted by the Scottish Centre for Social Research as part of the 2007 Scottish Social Attitudes Survey brief reference is made to a January 2008 YouGov/Daily Express Holyrood Voting Intention Survey. This showed a clear majority opposed to a fully independent Scotland, with twice as many voting against (57%) as voted for (27%). The same survey, however, showed stronger support for the SNP (38%) than for Labour (29%). The Conservatives and Liberal Democrats trailed, each with 14%.

The Scottish Centre for Social Research 2007 Scottish Election Study

This study, conducted in the months following the May 2007 Scottish Parliament Election showed that 55% now favour having a devolved parliament with taxation powers, the highest proportion yet recorded. Instead of winning on a rising tide of support for independence, the SNP advanced because it was far more successful than it was in 2003 in winning the votes of those who do back independence. No less than three-quarters (76%) of those who favour independence voted for the SNP (on the regional list vote) in May. In contrast in 2003 only half (51%) of those who supported independence backed the SNP. One key

reason for the SNP's success was found to be the personal popularity of Alec Salmon. Asked to give him a mark out of ten to show how good a First Minister they expected him to be, no less than 44% gave Mr Salmon a mark of seven or more. A second reason for the SNP's success was that it successfully sold the message that it was more effectively 'Scotland's party'. Some 24% thought that the SNP looks after the interests of people in Scotland 'very closely', with just 7% saying the same about Labour. Also, most voters understood and were able to use the new Single Transferable Voting system for local government (3).

John Curtice, one of the co-directors of the study, said 'The SNP's victory in May was a success for the party rather than the cause of independence that it espouses. It had a popular leader and tapped a feeling that Holyrood should put Scotland, rather than partnership with London, first. This enabled the party to win the votes of those who already backed independence rather than win new converts to the independence cause'.

Concluding remarks

In this the final part of the paper attention is focussed on the implications of the successful devolution of powers in Scotland for the political integrity of the UK and England in particular. In Scotland devolution has yielded the Scottish Parliament powers in respect of domestic matters such as health, education and law and order. Scotland has yet to press its claims for a 'say' in matters such as defence and foreign affairs and North Sea oil, though Alec Salmon, the SNP leader, has given notice of his intention to do this. Meanwhile Scotland has introduced policies such as free personal care and travel for the elderly, abolished tuition fees and prescription charges, and Alec Salmon is on record as opposing the retention of Trident and the UK's nuclear 'defence' capabilities based on the Clyde. These are all issues on which the UK and other national governments hold strong and often opposing views. The running however is being made by the Scottish SNP and Westminster is right to be concerned.

Also, very importantly, the success of the Additional Member System used in the 2007 Scottish Parliament election means that Scotland now has a much more representative and accountable government than the UK. At Westminster neither of the two 'first past the post' Labour and Conservative Parties support electoral reform. Both parties are short of money and Labour MPs fear for their livelihood. The electorate remains generally disinterested and accepting of the present electoral system, and it is just possible that a 'put England first' party

committed to more immediate electoral reform at Westminster will come into being. Meanwhile, we warmly welcome the fact that the 2007 Scottish elections resulted in the proportions of elected representatives now correspond much more closely with the votes cast for each party. We also acknowledge the continuing major contributions towards more representative government for Scotland being made by the Scottish Centre for Social Research and Edinburgh University.

Change for the better in achieving a more representative parliament at both Westminster and for England is long overdue though, sadly, neither of the two major parties in the UK Parliament is ready to press for this necessary reform.

Acknowledgements

1. 'Has Devolution Delivered' edited by Catherine Bemley, John Curtice, David McCrone and Alison Park – Edinburgh University Press.
2. William Reburn, Electoral Commission.
3. Scottish Social Attitudes Surveys (SSAS) – Scottish Centre for Social Research (SCSR).
4. Ipsos/MORI and the Anthony Wells UK polling report compilation of all companies 'Scottish voting intention polls'.
5. Susan Johnson, Librarian, National Centre for Social Research.
6. Scotland Devolution Monitoring Report – January 2008, Institute of Governance, University of Edinburgh on behalf of the Constitution Unit.
7. Ben Page and Roger Mortimore, Ipsos/MORI.
8. Paul Wilder, Librarian, Electoral Reform Society.

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Biographical Notes on the author

Dr John Martyn is a graduate of the London School of Economics where he obtained a BSc (Sociology) and a PhD for a thesis on electricity supply in London, Hamburg and New York. For many years he was a member of the Statistics User Group. He may be best remembered for his monthly Monitoring of Press Comment on Official Statistics. His on-going major interest is in electoral reform.

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