

CHAPTER 1

A WATERSHED ELECTION?

Two battles were being fought when Scotland went to the polls on 1 May 2007. The first contest was for the 129 seats in the devolved Scottish Parliament, the third such election to be held since the parliament was established in 1999. The second tussle was for 1,222 seats on all of the country's 32 local councils.

Both events appeared to represent a watershed, or even a revolutionary change in the nature of Scottish politics. In the parliamentary election the Scottish National Party (SNP), whose principal objective is that Scotland should leave the United Kingdom and become an independent state, emerged with most votes and most seats. It was the first time that the party, formed as long ago as 1934, had succeeded in coming ahead of all of its rivals in a nationwide contest. Apparently the warnings of those who argued that devolution would put Scotland on a 'slippery slope' to independence were proving all too prescient (Dalyell, 1977).

The local elections, meanwhile, were fought using a new more proportional electoral system. Instead of using the single member plurality (or first-past-the-post) system that had been in place ever since the reorganisation of Scottish local government in the 1970s, councillors were elected using the single transferable vote in three or four member wards. This new system allowed voters both to express support for more than one party and to choose between candidates of the same party. As a result it supposedly shifted the emphasis of the elections away from being contests between parties and towards being races between individual candidates. At the same time the more proportional outcomes produced by the system would end the days of single party - primarily Labour - rule on most councils.

This book examines whether these two developments do indeed represent a revolution in Scottish politics. Did the success of the SNP indicate a growing wish amongst people in Scotland to terminate their country's membership of the United Kingdom? And did the introduction of the new electoral system in local government ensure that

considerations of personality rather than party were now at the forefront of voters' minds when deciding how to vote? Or should we, perhaps, adopt a less apocalyptic view of the significance of the 2007 elections? Perhaps voters backed the SNP because they were unhappy with the performance of the previous Labour/Liberal Democrat coalition, and used the devolved election to replace one seemingly ineffective regime with another that might do a better job? And perhaps despite whatever incentives the new electoral system might have given voters to vote on the basis of personality rather than party, perhaps party still mattered to them more? If it is these alternative perspectives that seem in practice to be closer to the mark, then perhaps the 2007 elections should be regarded as no more than a further stage in the evolution of Scottish politics rather than marking some revolutionary break with the past.

THE NATIONALIST BREAKTHROUGH

For many of its advocates, devolution was designed to strengthen Scotland's position within the Union (Aughey, 2001; Bogdanor, 1999; Paterson, 1998; Mackintosh, 1998). In creating the Scottish Parliament the United Kingdom would demonstrate it could give recognition to the distinctive sense of national identity felt by many people in Scotland and meet the demand that the already wide ranging powers of the Scottish Office (the UK government department responsible for much of what happened in Scotland) should be brought under more effective democratic control. As a result, it was argued, people in Scotland would come to accept that their country did not need to become independent in order to secure a sufficient degree of autonomy. Indeed according to the former Labour Shadow Scottish Secretary, George Robertson, the creation of the Scottish Parliament would kill nationalism 'stone dead'.

Table 1.1 Scottish Parliament Election Results, 1999–2007

	% Constituency vote (no. of seats)		
	1999	2003	2007
SNP	28.7 (7)	23.8 (9)	32.9 (21)
Labour	38.8 (53)	34.6 (46)	32.2 (37)
Conservatives	15.6 (0)	16.5 (3)	16.6 (4)
Liberal Democrats	14.2 (12)	15.4 (13)	16.2 (11)
Greens	-	-	0.1 (0)
Scottish Socialists	1.0 (0)	6.2 (0)	0.0 (0)
Others	1.7 (1)	3.5 (2)	2.0 (0)
	% Regional List vote (no. of seats)		
	1999	2003	2007
SNP	27.3 (28)	20.9 (18)	31.0 (26)
Labour	33.6 (3)	29.3 (4)	29.2 (9)
Conservatives	15.4 (18)	15.5 (15)	13.9 (13)
Liberal Democrats	12.4 (5)	11.8 (4)	11.3 (5)
Greens	3.6 (1)	6.9 (7)	4.0 (2)
Scottish Socialists	2.0 (1)	6.7 (6)	0.6 (0)
Others	5.7 (0)	8.9 (2)	10.0 (1)

Note: Greens did not fight any constituencies in 1999 or 2003.

Sources: Hassan and Fraser (2004); Electoral Commission (2007).

Table 1.1 shows how the SNP, together with the other parties, have fared in elections to the new devolved parliament since it was created in 1999. Elections to the Scottish Parliament are held using a two ballot additional member system rather than the single member plurality system that is used in elections to the UK House of Commons (for further details see Curtice, 2006). One vote is cast in a single member plurality election for a local Member of the Scottish Parliament (MSP), of whom there are 73. A second vote is cast for a regional party list; this determines the allocation of 56 ‘additional’ seats (seven in each of eight separate regions) that are distributed so that the total number of seats (constituency and list) won by each party is as proportional as possible to its share of the regional list vote. As there is no obligation on voters to give both their votes to the same party (or indeed any requirement for parties to nominate both constituency and regional list candidates), the table shows separately the

distribution of the vote (and associated number of seats) on the two ballots.

We can see that from the very outset of the devolution project there was good reason to doubt the validity of George Robertson's prediction. The SNP might have trailed Labour by some considerable margin in the 1999 election, but, nevertheless, its share of the constituency vote was greater than it had been at any previous election to the House of Commons apart from October 1974 (when it won 30.4%). Moreover the greater proportionality afforded by the 'top-up' or 'additional' element of the electoral system meant that the party's performance was better rewarded than under single member plurality where the even geographical distribution of the nationalist vote puts the party at a disadvantage. The nationalists' meagre reward in 1999 of seven constituency seats was 'topped up' with a further 26 list seats. The resulting tally of 33 seats meant that the SNP now not only had a substantial parliamentary presence for the first time ever (it had never had more than eleven seats in the over 600 seat UK House of Commons), but also actually enjoyed the status of being the principal opposition party in the chamber (to a coalition between Labour and the Liberal Democrats). Such an outcome looked more like a boost to the SNP's fortunes than the first leg in its demise.

Moreover, opinion polls conducted in the run up to the 1999 election campaign revealed an intriguing phenomenon; people were more willing to vote for the SNP in Scottish Parliament elections than they were in elections to the House of Commons. For example, the first detailed poll of Scottish Parliament vote intentions, conducted exactly a year before the May 1999 polling date by ICM for the *Scotland on Sunday* newspaper, found that whereas only 27% said that they would vote for the SNP in any immediate House of Commons election, no less than 36% would do so on the constituency vote for the Scottish Parliament - and as many as 39% on the regional list vote. Such a pattern continued to persist in every reading of public opinion thereafter. Whatever the ups and downs of SNP popularity, it became apparent that the party was always more likely to prosper in Scottish Parliament elections than in House of Commons contests. So as well as using an electoral system that treated SNP support more favourably, devolved elections apparently also provided a forum in which the SNP found it easier to win votes in the first place.

Given the apparently propitious environment created by the advent of devolved elections, the nationalist performance in 2003 was undoubtedly

a disappointment. Alex Salmond, the party's charismatic leader since 1990, had surprisingly stood down in 2000 and opted soon after to leave the Scottish Parliament, focusing his energies instead on being an MP (and the party's parliamentary leader) at Westminster. His replacement, John Swinney, struggled to make an impact on the general public. Compared with 1999, the party's share of the vote dropped by five points on the constituency vote and by six on the list. Not that Labour thrived either. Rather the election was graced by a dramatic rise in support for smaller parties, most notably the Greens and the far left Scottish Socialist Party (SSP). The success of these two parties, neither of which has ever been represented in the House of Commons, in winning between them 13 seats meant that the resulting body was soon dubbed a 'rainbow parliament'. The SNP took comfort from the fact that, because both the Greens and the SSP also support independence, the proportion of the regional list vote cast for parties that backed independence had in fact risen by just over two points. Perhaps more importantly, the SNP had still performed rather better than the 20.1% it had won in 2001 UK general election, while it retained its position as the principal opposition party, and thus as the main alternative to the Labour-Liberal Democrat coalition that was returned to power.

By 2007 circumstances had changed. After another disappointing result in the 2004 European election, John Swinney stood down as party leader. Then to great surprise Alex Salmond successfully put himself forward as leader once more and committed himself to fighting the 2007 Scottish Parliament election as his party's candidate to be First Minister. Meanwhile by now the gloss had finally come off the UK Labour government at Westminster, which trailed the Conservatives in Britain wide polls. In the summer of 2006 a poll conducted by Ipsos-MORI put the SNP two points ahead in voting intentions for the next Scottish Parliament election, and this was followed in the autumn by a flurry of polls that between them suggested the SNP was at least neck and neck with Labour in the race to come first. Both the press and politicians began to realise that the SNP might well pose a real threat to Labour's dominance of Scottish politics.

Labour's reaction to the apparent threat was to repeat the campaign tactics it had used with seeming success in the first devolved election in 1999 - to suggest that independence, as championed by the SNP, would pose a threat to Scotland's prosperity and stability. This time around it

claimed, for example, that independence would cost every family in Scotland an extra tax bill of £5,000 a year. The alleged threat posed by the SNP was regularly invoked by the UK Prime Minister, Tony Blair, and Chancellor, Gordon Brown, whose extensive involvement in the election campaign tended to leave the Scottish First Minister, Jack McConnell, in the shade. By such tactics it was hoped that sufficient voters would be persuaded to draw back from voting for the SNP.

In contrast, the SNP said relatively little about independence and focused instead on emphasising its ability to provide Scotland with effective (devolved) government. Under the slogan, 'It's time', it set out a detailed prospectus for what it would do in government over the next four years (Scottish National Party, 2007). True, that included holding a referendum on independence, but not until the SNP had been in power for three years and demonstrated its ability to govern effectively. Meanwhile the party set out a detailed new departmental structure for government in Scotland and a programme that would focus on five instrumental objectives ranging from making Scotland healthier to making it smarter.

In the event the nationalists did just enough to win. Although they won their highest ever share of the Scotland wide vote, they only led Labour by less than two points on the regional list vote and by less than one percentage point in the constituency contests. Because the 'top-up' element of the electoral system did not fully reverse Labour's advantage in winning constituency seats - despite trailing in the nationwide vote Labour still won 37 such seats to the SNP's 21 - these margins were only sufficient to give the party one seat more than Labour. Indeed with just 47 seats the party was a long way indeed from having an overall majority, and could conceivably be denied office should Labour and the Liberal Democrats strike another coalition deal that also secured the acquiescence of the Conservatives. However, an attempt by the Liberal Democrats' UK party leader, Sir Menzies Campbell, to instigate such negotiations came to naught (Campbell, 2008), while the party's Scottish leadership soon signalled that they were also unwilling to enter a coalition with the SNP. The only possible government seemed to be a minority SNP administration. So with the Conservatives and Liberal Democrats abstaining and the Greens backing him, on 16 May 2007 Alex Salmond was elected First Minister, and the SNP secured its first ever taste of power.

It is then little wonder that we might be uncertain as to the significance of the nationalist breakthrough in 2007. On the one hand not only did the SNP secure its highest share of the vote ever in the face of a strong attack on independence by its opponents, but the result was also another piece of evidence that the introduction of devolved elections has created an environment in which the SNP persistently find it easier to prosper. On this reading devolution does seem to have instigated greater popular support for the independence cause. On the other hand, even though the incumbent UK Labour government was unpopular the SNP still only secured less than a third of the vote and only did so after fighting an election campaign as an alternative government rather than as a movement for independence. Not only does this suggest a continuing lack of enthusiasm for the nationalist cause, but perhaps indicates that voters were doing no more than using the SNP to protest against the perceived inadequacies of the UK Labour government and/or the incumbent Labour/Liberal Democrat Scottish administration. Evidently there is a need to dig deeper if we are to assess adequately the significance of the 2007 parliamentary contest.

A NEW WAY OF VOTING?

How Scotland's local councils should be elected was the subject of dispute and debate from the very early days of devolution. Two events started the ball rolling. First, in 1999 a commission established by the Scottish Office on the proper relationship between the new Scottish Parliament and local government argued that a new more proportional electoral system should be used to elect the country's 32 local councils (McIntosh, 1999). Second, the Liberal Democrats, who have long been in favour of proportional representation, succeeded in their coalition talks with Labour after the 1999 election in securing a commitment to making 'significant progress' on local government electoral reform. As a result the new administration appointed a second commission that was charged with the task of recommending what particular form of proportional representation should be used in Scottish local elections. It reported in favour of the single transferable vote (STV) in multi-member wards (Kerley, 2001). This in fact was the system favoured by both the Liberal Democrats and

the Electoral Reform Society, the principal organisation campaigning in favour of electoral reform in the UK.

Progress thereafter, however, was relatively slow, not least because of reluctance within much of the Labour party to embrace a reform from which it would undoubtedly suffer (Curtice and Herbert, 2005; Curtice and Ritchie, 1999). By the time of the 2003 election, the Scottish Executive (as the devolved government was then known) had undertaken a consultation on the proposal and published a draft bill, but was still not committed to changing the system. However, after making reform one of their key demands, the Liberal Democrats did secure such a commitment from Labour in the 2003 coalition negotiations. The single transferable vote was to be introduced in three and four member wards and be in place for the 2007 local elections. The relevant legislation, part of the Local Government (Scotland) Act, received the Royal Assent on 28 July 2004. Subsequently the Local Government Boundary Commission for Scotland formulated the necessary new ward boundaries which were all in place before the end of 2006.

This switch to STV was not merely of interest within Scotland. As we have already noted STV has long been the preferred system of the Liberal Democrats and the Electoral Reform Society. It had also enjoyed some previous use in elections in the UK. In particular, from 1918 until their abolition in 1950 it was used to elect the handful of MPs that represented university seats, including the three seats elected by graduates of the ancient Scottish universities. It was also used to elect the separate Scottish local education authorities that existed between 1919 and 1929. However, more recently the system has only been used in Northern Ireland, where since the 1970s it has been deployed in all elections other than to the UK House of Commons. It has been the Additional Member System (AMS) rather than STV whose merits have in recent years been most successfully argued in debates about electoral systems in Great Britain. Not only is AMS used in elections to the Scottish Parliament but also in those to the National Assembly of Wales and the Greater London Assembly. However, if the introduction of STV in Scotland were to be judged a success the tide of the electoral reform debate might be turned back in favour of STV.

STV is very different from either the two-ballot AMS system used in Scottish Parliament elections or the single member plurality system previously used in Scottish local elections (Lakeman, 1970). Instead of

being asked just to place an 'X' against the name of an individual candidate or party, voters are invited to place the individual candidates standing in their ward in rank order. Those candidates may be standing in the name of particular parties, but this need not necessarily constrain the choice that voters make. They can express a preference for candidates from different parties, perhaps, for example, marking a '1' against a Conservative candidate, '2' against a Labour one, etc. Note too that as there is more than one seat at stake in each ward, more than one candidate may be standing for the same party. Nevertheless, a voter is free to express support for one such candidate but not another. And even if a voter does want to support more than one candidate from the same party, they are obliged to place them in a preferred order.

In short, STV encourages voters to consider the merits of individual candidates rather than just the parties for which they are standing. Moreover, any switch from party to personality based voting could have important implications for the way in which councillors fulfil their role. No longer could a councillor simply rely on the popularity of their party locally in order to secure election. Rather, they would have to ensure they were personally popular too. Of course, such popularity might be secured in a variety of ways. But if, for example, voters valued someone who spoke up for the interests of their area and was assiduous in dealing with individual voters' complaints about the local council, then councillors would find themselves under pressure to perform such tasks. Indeed they might even compete with each other in terms of the quality of the local service they provide.

This possibility in fact addresses one of the key aspects in the debate about electoral reform in the UK. Advocates of single member plurality argue that it provides a strong incentive for elected representatives to look after the interests of their constituency and constituents and that this feature would be lost under any multi-member system of proportional representation (Curtice and Shively, 2009; Farrell and McAllister, 2006). Proponents of STV, on the other hand, argue that STV provides an even stronger incentive for elected representatives to provide their constituents with a good local service (Carey and Shugart, 1995). So it matters whether the argument that STV encourages personality politics is correct or not.

In practice, international experience suggests that while STV can encourage voters to focus on candidates rather than parties, there is no

guarantee that this will happen. On the one hand, in the Republic of Ireland, where STV has been used ever since the founding of the State in 1922, voters do often appear to vote on the basis of what they think of individual candidates rather than (or as well as) their parties and in so doing do take into account the quality of the constituency service they provide (Marsh, 2000; Sinnott, 1995). On the other hand, the position in both Malta and Australia is very different. In Malta very few voters are willing to give any kind of preference to a candidate from another party (Hirczy de Miño and Lane, 2000). In Australia (outside Tasmania at least) voters have long followed advice issued by parties on how to order their ballots (Reilly and Maley, 2000; Wright 1986); indeed since 1983 the order in which parties would like voters to place the candidates has been indicated on the ballot paper together with an easy means of endorsing that order.

So it seems that we cannot presume that the introduction of STV in local elections in Scotland will necessarily have persuaded voters to vote on the basis of personality rather than party - with possible implications for the role of councillors. If voters care only about party, then STV allows them to behave accordingly. They can just vote for the candidates of their preferred party and no other, and they are able to place those candidates in the order recommended by that party. Changing the electoral system can change the opportunities available to voters, but voters will only exploit those opportunities if they are motivated to do so.

Table 1.2 Summary of Local Election Results, 2003 and 2007

	2003		2007	
	% vote	Seats	% vote	Seats
SNP	24.3	181	27.9	363
Labour	32.9	509	28.1	348
Conservatives	15.2	123	15.6	143
Liberal Democrats	14.6	175	12.7	166
Independents	9.5	231	10.7	187
Greens	0.0	0	2.2	8
Scottish Socialists	3.4	2	0.9	1
Others	0.2	1	1.8	6

Source: Bochel and Denver (2007).

As expected, Labour did indeed lose out from the introduction of STV, though its losses were exacerbated by the fact that its share of the vote fell as compared with 2003 (see Table 1.2). Not only did the party win 161 fewer seats, but it was left in overall majority control of just two councils rather than 13 as in 2003. But radical though the partisan consequences of the new system might have been, they tell us nothing about the more subtle but potentially more profound possibility that its introduction might have encouraged voters to vote on the basis of personality rather than party.¹ To assess that possibility we need to examine how voters used the STV ballot paper, and how their use relates to their views about the parties and candidates standing in their area. Here too we evidently need to dig more deeply.

OUR EVIDENCE

Our evidence on what underlay the nationalist success and how voters used the local election ballot paper comes from survey research. In the weeks and months immediately after the 2007 election, professional interviewers from the Scottish Centre for Social Research (ScotCen) interviewed face to face, a representative sample of adults aged 18 and over as part of the Scottish Social Attitudes survey (for further details see the technical appendix). The survey covered a wide range of topics of interest to us here, including how people voted in the two elections, their views about policies, the parties and their leaders, and their attitudes towards devolution and independence. This means we can link how people behaved in the elections with a wide range of views and attitudes that might account for why they voted as they did.

But, of course, if we wish, for example, to investigate whether support for independence has risen or fallen, we require to know more than people's attitudes towards Scotland's constitutional future in 2007. Rather, we need to know how their attitudes in 2007 compare with what they were in earlier years. Fortunately, the Scottish Social Attitudes survey was not only conducted after the 2007 election, but every year from 1999 onwards. This means we can chart how attitudes in Scotland have developed since the advent of devolution. In addition, we can compare our findings about the reasons as to why people voted as they did in 2007 with similar evidence for the devolved elections in 1999 and 2003

- and indeed on occasion the UK House of Commons elections held in 2001 and 2005 too. Moreover, some of the questions included on Scottish Social Attitudes were previously asked in surveys conducted in Scotland after the 1992 and 1997 UK general elections (Bennie et al., 1997; Brown et al., 1999) and the referendum on whether the devolved Scottish Parliament should be created that was held in September 1997 (Taylor and Thomson, 1999), thereby enabling us to compare the position now with that immediately prior to the advent of devolution.

Our analysis of these data falls into three parts. First of all, in Chapters 2 to 4 we look at how people in Scotland have reacted to the experience of eight years of devolved government. In so doing our primary goal is to establish whether devolution has strengthened or weakened the basis of public support in Scotland for the Union with the rest of the United Kingdom. In Chapter 2 we consider some of the underlying forces that could have helped undermine support for the Union. Perhaps, for example, the creation of the Scottish Parliament has influenced people's sense of national identity? Perhaps they are now less likely to feel British, and thus an emotional affinity with the rest of the United Kingdom, and more likely to feel distinctively Scottish? Perhaps too, devolution has resulted in debates about policy in Scotland being conducted entirely separately from the equivalent debates in England, with the result that people in Scotland increasingly have different policy preferences from their counterparts south of the border?

Then in Chapter 3 we consider how people in Scotland have reacted to the experience of devolution. Do they feel that devolution has improved the way in which their country is governed? And has their experience changed their views about the way in which the Union operates? As we have seen, the advocates of devolution argued that people would come to feel that devolution has improved the way Scotland is governed, and that as a result they would be persuaded to hold a more benign view towards the Union. Our analysis puts that argument to the test. Thereafter in Chapter 4 we look directly at trends in attitudes towards how Scotland should be governed. Did the SNP's success in the 2007 election really signify a growing demand for independence? And even if people in Scotland still have doubts about the merits of independence, does this necessarily mean that they are content with the degree of autonomy afforded their country by the current arrangements?

But even if it were the case that people in Scotland want more autonomy and that support for independence has increased, it does not necessarily follow that this is why the SNP achieved its breakthrough in 2007. After all, we should not assume that people who favour independence necessarily support the SNP - or vice-versa (Bond and Rosie, 2002; Bond and Rosie, 2003). As we have already noted, there were other reasons why voters might have opted for the SNP, such as dissatisfaction with the performance of the UK Labour government, unhappiness with the Labour/Liberal Democrat coalition in Scotland, or perhaps support for policies put forward by the SNP other than independence. So in the second part of the book we look more specifically at why people voted as they did in the parliamentary election. In Chapter 5 we examine the role that evaluations of the performance of government and voters' attitudes towards some of the key policy debates that surfaced during the campaign played in determining how people voted. Then in Chapter 6 we focus specifically on how we can best account for the success of the SNP in 2007.

In the third part of the book we shift our focus towards the local elections. One important implication that appears to flow from the international experience of STV is how voters behave depends on how important parties are to them in the first place. If they feel a strong attachment to a party, and are inclined to support it through thick and thin, then perhaps there is little reason why the introduction of STV should persuade people to pay attention to the merits of individual candidates. But if they do not feel such an attachment then perhaps the change of electoral system might serve to weaken further the already loose ties between parties and voters yet further. So in Chapter 7 we consider recent trends in the strength of people's attachments to parties in Scotland. In part this is achieved by looking at how strongly attached to a party people say they feel. But we can also garner valuable evidence by looking at how people behave under the two vote AMS system used in Scottish Parliament elections. For voters who feel strongly attached to a party would seem unlikely to indulge in the practice of voting for different parties on the two ballots.

Thereafter in Chapter 8 we examine how voters behaved in the local elections themselves. Did many people avail themselves of the opportunity to express support for more than one party? Or did most voters support all of the candidates of their preferred party and no others?

In addressing these questions we are able to compare our findings directly with the evidence for Ireland, whose 2002 National Election Study asked many of the relevant questions included in our 2007 survey. As a result we can directly assess how closely Scotland conforms to the Irish model of STV personality politics.

In the final concluding chapter we return to the original question posed at the beginning of this chapter. In the light of our analysis, does the 2007 election indeed mark a revolutionary break in Scotland's links with the rest of the United Kingdom and in the importance of personality in local elections? Or does it simply mark an evolution in the country's politics? Our quest for answers now begins with a look at the nation's sense of identity.

NOTES

1. For analyses of the partisan impact brought about by the change of system see Baston, 2008; Bennie and Clark, 2008; Curtice 2007; Denver and Bochel 2007; Electoral Reform Society, 2008.

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