

LABOUR PREDOMINANCE REASSERTED: THE REGIONAL ELECTIONS OF 1986

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There can be little doubt that the most significant development in Scottish Regional elections since the formation of the Regional Council in 1984 has been the steady incursion of political parties into local electoral competition. By 1982 all four major parties (Conservative, Labour, Alliance and SNP) were heavily involved in Regional elections. In the 'partisan' Regions (Grampian, Tayside, Fife, Lothian, Central Scotland and Strathclyde) containing about 90.0 percent of the electorate, party competition was overwhelmingly the norm. In Scotland as a whole too, the proportion of Independent candidates had more than halved. These developments, along with the formation of the Liberal/SDP Alliance and its strong intervention in local elections, led us to give our report on the 1982 elections the title: Towards a Four Party System?

The results of the general election of 1983 suggested that this question was a fair one since Scotland returned MPs from all four parties to Westminster, and in some respects the 1986 Regional elections suggest the question is still pertinent. Table 1 shows the number of candidates of each party put forward in 1986 compared with 1982. In the partisan Regions increases in the number of Labour (3), Alliance (14) and SNP candidates (62) more than offset the small decline (-16) in the number of Conservative candidates. In these Regions the SNP contested 92.0 percent of divisions, Labour 89.0 percent, the Conservatives 73.0 percent and the Alliance 69.0 percent.

While the Alliance and the Conservatives have room for advancement, Labour and the SNP are close to saturation point in terms of candidates in the partisan Regions. The record number of candidates in 1983 was partly the product of the presence of a large number of Green Party representatives (69) but it is difficult to know whether this represents the first appearance of a new political force or merely a temporary flurry of ecological interest which will not be repeated. The higher level of party participation has important consequences for the nature of the choices facing electors. Table 2 shows the incidence of various forms of electoral competition in 1982

1986, again distinguishing partisan and non-partisan Regions.

TABLE 1

Party of Candidates 1982-86

	Partisan Regions		Non-Partisan Regions		Total	
	1982	1986	1982	1986	1982	1986
Con	259	243	24	16	283	259
Lab	294	297	28	20	322	317
Alliance	217	231	13	14	230	245
SNP	245	307	21	23	266	330
Ind	29	23	111	118	140	141
Others	53	97	—	1	53	98
Total	1097	1198	197	192	1294	1390
Divisions	331	335	110	110	441	445

TABLE 2

Forms of Electoral Competition 1982-86

	Partisan Regions		Non-Partisan Regions		Total	
	1982 %	1986 %	1982 %	1986 %	1982 %	1986 %
Major Party Contest	92	96	18	13	74	75
Major Party Unopposed	6	2	12	11	7	4
Major party v Ind/Other	2	2	27	28	9	9
Ind/Other Contest	—	*	15	18	4	5
Ind Unopposed	—	—	28	30	7	7

Note: * = less than one percent. The numbers of divisions are as in Table 1.

In partisan Regions, the proportion of divisions that witnessed a contest between at least two major party candidates rose from 92.0 to 96.0 percent between 1982 and 1986. Put another way, only 14 of 335 divisions in

these Regions did not have such a contest in 1986. In contrast, in non-partisan Regions the percentage of major party contests declined and a pattern of unopposed returns of Independents remained common.

TABLE 3

Percentages of Divisions Uncontested 1974-86

	1974 %	1978 %	1982 %	1986 %
Partisan Regions	7.3	10.7	5.7	1.5
Non-partisan Regions	17.1	52.4	40.0	41.0
Total	9.7	20.9	14.3	11.2

The trend in unopposed returns since 1974 is shown in Table 3. It is clear that as party competition has increased in the partisan Regions, the incidence of unopposed returns has steadily diminished. In contrast, following the first flurry of activity in 1974, unopposed returns in non-partisan Regions seem to have stabilised at around two-fifths of divisions. Those who deplore 'politics' in local government should recognise that at least 'politics' promotes electoral competition. A somewhat similar point can be made with reference to turnout in contested divisions. Table 4 shows the trend in this case.

TABLE 4

Percentage Turnout in Contested Divisions 1974-86

	1974 %	1978 %	1982 %	1986 %
Partisan Regions	50.7	44.8	43.0	45.9
Non-partisan Regions	49.6	43.3	40.2	40.1
Total	50.4	44.7	42.9	45.6

In every round of Regional elections the turnout of voters has been greater in the partisan Regions and the gap between these and the non-partisan Regions has been widening. In 1986 areas with party competition had a turnout almost five points higher than the others despite the fact that Grampian, a partisan Region, had the lowest turnout of any individual Region (as it has had in all four sets of elections).

A small proportion of uncontested seats and higher turnouts are by-products of party competition. Our final piece of evidence about the changing nature of party competition in Scotland is given in Table 5. Thus far we have referred only to 'party contests' defining these as any contest involving two or more candidates of the major parties. Such contests can take many forms however and the table shows how these have changed since 1974.

TABLE 5

Forms of Party Contest (Partisan Regions)

	1974 %	1978 %	1982 %	1986 %
Four-way Contests				
Con v Lab v Lib/All v SNP	5	6	45	51
Three-way Contests				
Con v Lab v SNP	21	52	16	12
Con v Lab v Lib/All	12	3	9	3
Other Three-way	1	0	10	15

All Three-way	34	55	35	30

Two-way Contests				
Con v Lab	42	18	5	0
Lab v SNP	14	11	8	15
Other Two-way	5	9	7	5

All Two-way	61	38	20	20

Total Party Contests	254	279	304	321

In 1974 straight fights between Labour and the Conservatives were the commonest form of party contest, accounting for two-fifths of such contests, while other straight fights accounted for another fifth. Only five percent of party contests involved all four parties. Four years later the situation changed markedly. The number of SNP candidates rose sharply and as a result there were many more triangular contests. More than half of these were of the Conservative v Labour v SNP variety. Four-way contests remained rare, however. In 1982, following the formation of the SDP and its alliance with the Liberals there was another sea change. Four-way

contests were now the commonest (45.0 percent of contests) and there were corresponding declines in three-way and two-way battles. This trend continued in 1986. More than half of the contests involved all four parties. The only form of straight fight to have occurred in significant numbers was Labour v SNP and these contests were concentrated in just two Regions (Central and Fife). Not a single division in the partisan Regions had a straight fight between Labour and Conservative – a clear indication of the change in the form of party competition at Regional elections since 1974. If, then, party systems could be adequately characterised on the basis of candidatures there would be good grounds for arguing that the 1986 Regional elections saw a continuation of the trend towards competitive four-party politics in Scotland. But of course candidatures tell only one side of the story and when we consider the outcome of the elections a rather different picture emerges.

Patterns of Party Support

The most significant influence on the results of the 1982 Regional elections was the intervention of the Alliance for the first time on a large scale. In addition the Labour Party nationally was in disarray and was tumbling in the polls as the Conservatives benefitted from the government's handling of the Falklands war. Despite these portents, Labour held its own in the 1982 elections and it was the Conservatives and the SNP who suffered losses, though the Conservative losses may have been dampened by the Falklands and the 'Lothian' affair.

In the run up to the 1986 elections things looked different. Labour under its new 'realistic' leadership seemed to be back on the rails and the party was benefitting in the polls from the more centrist image being projected. The Conservatives, in contrast, were in the doldrums. The government had committed a series of gaffes – beginning with the Westland affair – and in Scotland in particular there was much discontent – within as well as outside the Conservative Party – over the government's handling of the teachers' dispute, rating revaluation, the closure of the Gartcosh steel plant and the question of heating allowances during severe weather. In all of these cases the Conservatives appeared indifferent to Scottish interests.

Both the SNP and Alliance, on the other hand, had some cause for optimism. The SNP had been slowly creeping up in Scottish opinion polls and had gained a number of council seats in local by-elections. The Alliance had also performed well in local by-elections in England and were in a strong position in national opinion polls. Its strength in Scotland, however, remained more problematical.

The distribution of votes at the 1982 and 1986 elections is shown in Table 6.

TABLE 6

Party Share of Votes in Regional Elections 1982-86

	Partisan Regions		Non-Partisan Regions		Total	
	1982 %	1986 %	1982 %	1986 %	1982 %	1986 %
Con	25.8	17.3	13.1	9.6	25.1	16.9
Lab	39.2	45.6	9.6	12.1	37.6	43.9
All	18.4	15.5	13.4	7.1	18.1	15.1
SNP	13.7	18.6	9.5	11.5	13.4	18.2
Ind	2.3	2.0	54.4	59.2	5.1	4.8
Other	0.6	1.1	-	0.5	0.6	1.1

Clearly the Conservatives suffered a major setback. In partisan Regions their vote fell to 17.3 percent, by far their worst performance at local level in Scotland since reorganisation. They were outpolled by the SNP whose slight recovery in popular support was confirmed as they increased their vote share to 18.6 percent. The SNP also overtook the Alliance whose vote declined to 15.5 percent, although the Alliance's disappointment could be tempered by the fact that this was a slight improvement upon their performance in the 1984 District elections. It is Labour's showing which catches the eye, however. From an already predominant position Labour's vote increased sharply. They obtained their largest level of support to date at Regional elections, far outstripping their competitors.

Due to the small numbers of votes involved, changes in patterns of support in non-partisan Regions are not very significant although it is worth noting how Independents maintained their dominance while falling further back over the country as a whole.

As we have cautioned in previous analyses of local election results, the figures in Table 6 are 'raw', taking no account of variations in candidatures and unopposed returns. The SNP as we have seen, for example, sharply increased its number of candidates between 1982 and 1986 and that might

partly explain its apparent recovery. But its average vote per candidate did increase.

A check on the trends identified in Table 6 is made in Table 7 which shows the four parties' shares of the votes in divisions which all four contested in both 1982 and 1986, of which there were 108.

TABLE 7

Change in Party Support in 108 Four-Party Divisions 1982-86

	1982	1986	Change
	%	%	%
Con	28.7	19.9	-8.8
Lab	37.5	47.0	+9.5
All	23.2	18.6	-4.6
SNP	10.7	14.4	+3.7

While the precise percentages are, of course, slightly different from those given in Table 6, trends are similar although these data suggest an even stronger Labour advance than the 'raw' figures and (not unexpectedly given their increased number of candidates) a rather more modest SNP gain.

Noting trends from one local election to the next is, of course, largely of interest to local government specialists or local politicians. Most political commentators and national politicians are more concerned about trends in relation to general elections. Table 8 gives an indication of these trends by comparing the 1983 General Election results in Scotland with the distribution of votes in all wards (166) having a four-party contest in the 1984 District elections and all divisions (165) having a four-party contest in the 1986 Regional elections.

Clearly the Conservatives are in steep decline in Scotland while Labour has recovered from its relatively poor performance in the 1983 general election. The SNP seems to be staging something of a comeback while the Alliance, though suffering a drop in support are hanging on to a respectable share of the Scottish vote. It would be unwise, however, to extrapolate from these figures to make predictions about the outcome of the next general election, although the MORI poll published in *The Scotsman* on May 5th 1986 closely reflects the figures in the third column of Table 8. The electorate is highly volatile and the next election may be still

two years away. In addition, voters will be confronted with a different set of tactical situations in a general election and this is likely to affect their behaviour. It does seem clear, however that if the Conservatives do not do something to improve their electoral fortunes in Scotland they face the prospect of losing a significant number of the 21 parliamentary seats they now hold. The Conservatives do not now control a single Regional council, they have a majority on only 4 of the 53 District councils (with only 5.0 percent of the Scottish electorate) and in only one of the non-partisan Regions (Dumfries and Galloway) can they boast a Member of Parliament.

TABLE 8

Trends in Party Support in Scotland 1983-86

	General Election	District Election	Regional Election	MORI Poll
	1983	(4 way Contest) 1984	(4 way Contest) 1986	5 May 1986
	%	%	%	%
Con	28.5	25.8	20.8	21.0
Lab	35.2	45.9	45.8	45.0
All	24.6	17.5	18.5	19.0
SNP	11.8	10.8	14.9	14.0

The impression conveyed by the voting figures of overwhelming Labour predominance in the 1986 Regional elections is emphasised when the distribution of seats won is considered. These data are shown in Table 9.

TABLE 9

Regional Council Seats Won

	Partisan Regions		Non-partisan Regions		Total	
	1982	1986	1982	1986	1982	1986
Con	106	57	13	8	119	65
Lab	177	209	9	14	186	223
All	18	31	7	9	25	40
SNP	18	27	5	9	23	36
Ind	11	10	76	69	87	79
Others	1	1	-	1	1	2
Total	331	335	110	110	441	445

In partisan Regions, the number of seats won by the Conservatives was almost halved. Labour, on the other hand, advanced to over 60.0 percent of the seats at stake. Advances were also made by the Alliance and the SNP, but both still have a relatively minor presence in regional councils. Once again the number of Independent councillors declined. Labour now has an absolute majority of seats in four Regions (Fife, Lothian, Central and Strathclyde) which together contain some 74.0 percent of the Scottish electorate and they are the largest party in two others (Grampian and Tayside). The remaining three Regions (Highland, Borders and Dumfries and Galloway) are 'controlled' by Independents. The trend towards four-party politics as indicated by contests and candidatures is, then, rather superficial. As at District level, Regional politics is best characterised as a system of one-party predominance with three 'also-rans'.

It remains to be seen whether the other parties become disheartened by Labour's apparent impregnability or whether they will continue to plug away in the hope that something will turn up which may undermine Labour's position.

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