

THE REGIONAL ELECTIONS OF 1990

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Political parties now take local government elections very seriously, but in some respects different levels in the parties have differing interests and priorities. At national level parties focus on overall shares of the votes, on the total number of seats won or lost and, when the results are favourable to the party, on the number of councils under the party's control. At local level parties are primarily interested in seats won on their particular councils and in controlling these councils. They also, usually under exhortation from party headquarters, have an eye on overall share of the vote, and this accounts, at least in part, for a good number of contests in seats where a party has no chance of success. In an analysis of local government election results it is necessary to take account of both of these perspectives.

For the Conservatives the 1990 Regional elections were, to some degree, a test of their ability to stage a recovery in Scottish politics. It is worth recalling that whereas in the general election of 1955 they won a majority of the parliamentary seats in Scotland with over 50 per cent of the vote, in 1987 they were reduced to 10 seats and a mere 24 per cent of the vote. Worse was to follow, for in 1989 they were to lose their two remaining European parliamentary seats with a miserable 20.9 per cent of the vote. At local government level the Tories began the 1980s with a total of 365 Regional and District seats (out of 1,555) and ended the decade with just 228 (out of 1,600).

In contrast, Labour's task was simply to maintain their long term primacy in Scottish electoral politics. Realistically they could only hope to make marginal advances in their own heartland such was their dominance there; otherwise they could work away at increasing support elsewhere. Complacency seemed to be the major danger. On the other hand, the SNP had to try to consolidate its position as second party in share of the vote which it had achieved in the regional elections of 1986 and again in the European elections of 1989; and to make progress throughout the country and particularly in Labour territory. The most that the SLD could hope for was to improve on their dismal 4.3 per cent share of the vote in the European elections (when they came fifth behind the Greens) and to maintain their strength in areas where they already had a reasonable base, especially in those constituencies in which they had MPs.

In these elections the Conservatives had the daunting task of trying to regain the three Regions that they formerly controlled namely, Grampian, Tayside and Lothian and to make at least some inroads into Labour territory.

majorities in Strathclyde and Central. Labour could look forward with confidence to retaining control of Fife, Lothian, Strathclyde and Central and could, without undue optimism, hope to make sufficient gains to entitle them to lead minority administrations in Grampian and Tayside after the elections. The SNP could not hope to gain control of any Region, but were justifiably hopeful of increasing significantly the number of seats they held and of improving their share of the vote in most regions. In particular they aspired to become the largest party in Tayside and to improve their position in Grampian to the extent that they could have an important influence on the administration there. Like the SNP the SLD could not hope to win control of a Region and the prospect of their wielding much power in any 'hung' council was confined to Grampian.

In the run up to the elections things did not look good for the Conservatives. The reorganisation at Scottish Central Office which followed the 1987 general election had produced no significant positive results at the 1988 District elections or at the 1989 European elections. In late 1989 Mrs Thatcher had appointed one of her apostles, Michael Forsyth, as chairman of the Conservative Party in Scotland. The changes that followed his installation were of an organisational and propaganda nature. The former were hardly bloodless and, in the short term at least, morale probably suffered. The latter could be viewed as perverse in the context of Scottish politics. Whereas Malcolm Rifkind tended to soften the Conservative message to make it more congruent with Scottish attitudes and values, Forsyth's propaganda offensive was a form of shrill and undiluted Thatcherism that had clearly been rejected by the mass of Scottish voters over a number of elections. In addition, Forsyth's offensive had a petty side to it. His 'monitoring unit' at Central Office recorded and publicised the iniquities of Labour controlled local authorities, not on large policy issues, but on such details as the number of foreign visits made by councillors in the pursuit of the councils' business.

In the period immediately preceding the May 1990 elections the Conservatives still languished in the Scottish opinion polls. The poll tax was no more popular with the electorate than it had been in 1988 and the Budget speech fiasco undermined their morale and standing still further. In this speech the Chancellor, John Major, announced concessions to poll tax payers in England and Wales, but made no mention of Scotland. In the subsequent furore Conservative spokespersons in Scotland attempted to justify the omission, but the opposition so successfully exploited the issue that Malcolm Rifkind, the Secretary of State, sought to persuade the Cabinet (with a resignation letter as it were in his pocket) to extend the concession to Scotland. He succeeded, but not before the damaging allegation that he had been remiss in not looking after Scotland's interests had taken its toll. The concession was seen moreover, as a half hearted one, as it emerged that in the case of Scotland, it was not as in England and Wales to be funded out of 'new' money, but from the existing Scottish Office budget. These factors and others made the Conservatives' task of engineering a revival of their fortunes in Scotland

very difficult. One chance to seize the initiative did occur when Labour in Scotland, somewhat prematurely, unveiled their alternative to the poll tax. This proposal for a largely property based tax was poorly presented and its implications for individuals only partly worked out. The 'roof tax' as it was quickly christened by Labour's opponents came like a gift to the beleaguered Tories who attempted to capitalise on it through advertising and media appearances. Huge posters teased Donald Dewar, the Shadow Secretary of State, with the question, 'Donald where's yer figures?'. Malcolm Rifkind claimed that they had Labour 'on the rack' and Forsyth predicted that the Tories would increase their share of the vote and number of seats in the forthcoming Regional elections. They, at least, thought that they had the initiative for once.

Despite this apparent gaffe Labour were entitled to feel confident about the outcome of the elections. In the first three months of 1990 the System Three poll, published regularly in the *Glasgow Herald*, gave Labour leads of 29, 27 and 31 points over their nearest rivals. In addition, Labour's popularity was buoyant throughout Britain. National opinion polls showed consistent Labour leads over the Conservatives, and it looked as if there was a more than even chance that they could win the next general election. This worked to the disadvantage of their main rivals the SNP, part of whose case was that there was no point in voting Labour in Scotland because they would never form a government in Westminster. Nor did the SNP's attacks on Labour's 'timid tactics' on the poll tax seem to have much impact. The loss of Labour's formerly safe seat of Govan to the SNP at a 1988 by-election did result in a temporary decline in Labour support in the opinion polls, but the medium to long term effects were slight.

The Govan result was a great victory and a morale booster for the SNP and the 'afterglow' effect on the polls was impressive though comparatively short lived. The big issue for the SNP in the Regional elections was the poll tax. There is little evidence however that its campaign or policy of civil disobedience in the form of non-payment of the tax brought significant dividends in support. Nevertheless the SNP were clearly on an upward curve in the run-up to the elections. As ever, a major test for the SNP was the extent to which they could make progress in city seats and the Central Belt, in order to become a real threat to Labour. That they would make progress generally was not in doubt.

The SLD was still suffering from the failure of the party to make an impact at a UK level. Poor opinion poll results in Britain as a whole suggested an even poorer performance in Scotland. The search for a role in Scottish politics which was distinctive and would impress the electorate had to continue. In the meantime they could take comfort from the recent record of their old incarnation, the Liberal Party, which had shown that they could, by and large hold on to former gains and make further progress when things turned their way again.

Candidates and Party Competition

The 1990 Regional elections were more competitive than ever before with a record 1,515 candidates contesting the 445 divisions. Table 1 gives a comparison with 1986.

Table 1: Party of Candidates 1986-90

	Partisan Regions		Non-Partisan Regions		Scotland	
	1986	1990	1986	1990	1986	1990
Con	243	294	16	28	259	322
Lab	297	311	20	31	317	342
SNP	307	313	23	35	330	348
All/SLD	231	190	14	22	245	212
Green	69	109	-	9	69	118
Ind	23	27	118	105	141	132
Other	28	38	1	3	29	41
Total	1198	1282	192	233	1390	1515

All parties except the SLD had an increased number of candidates.

In partisan Regions the Conservatives had a major increase (51) bringing them close to Labour and the SNP who had more modest increases (14 and 6 respectively). Labour and the SNP contested more than 92 per cent of the divisions in partisan areas and the Conservatives were not far behind at 87 per cent. The Greens, obviously encouraged by their performance in the European elections, fielded 40 more candidates in partisan Regions than in 1986.

The major parties all increased their intervention in non-partisan Regions and the Conservatives made a particularly strong assault in Borders where they contested 19 of the 23 seats. The number of Independent candidates in non-partisan Regions again fell by 13. In 1974 almost 70 per cent of the candidates in these Regions were Independents, but by 1990 this had fallen to 45 per cent. It seems to be only a matter of time, therefore, before the non-partisan Regions witness full-scale party politics in local as well as in Parliamentary elections.

The increased intervention of the parties has implications for the nature of party competition as is shown in Table 2. In partisan Regions almost all divisions are now contested by at least two of the four main parties. All other forms of contest are virtually non-existent. There is still room for change in non-partisan Regions however. In 1978 only about 7 per cent of divisions in these Regions witnessed major party contests and this rose to over one-third in 1990. This trend is likely to continue.

Table 2: Forms of Electoral Competition, 1974-1990

Partisan Regions	1974	1978	1982	1986	1990
	%	%	%	%	%
Major Party Contest	78	86	92	96	97
Major Party Unopposed	7	9	6	2	*
Major Party v Ind/Other	14	4	2	2	3
Ind/Other Contest	1	-	-	-	-
Ind Unopposed	-	2	-	-	-
Non-Partisan Regions	1974	1978	1982	1986	1990
	%	%	%	%	%
Major Party Contest	13	7	18	13	35
Major Party Unopposed	1	15	12	11	9
Major Party v Ind/Other	42	18	27	28	17
Ind/Other Contest	28	23	15	18	15
Ind Unopposed	16	37	28	30	25

Another feature of increased competitiveness is the large increase in the incidence of four-party contests in partisan Regions. These rose from just 5 per cent of divisions with four party contests in 1974 to 51 per cent in 1986. The fielding of fewer SLD candidates reduced this slightly to 48 per cent in 1990, but the decline in the number of straight fights (ie only two parties contesting a seat) continued and as can be seen in Table 3 accounted for only 11 per cent of party contests.

Table 3: Forms of Party Contest in Partisan Regions, 1974-1990

	1974	1978	1982	1986	1990
	%	%	%	%	%
Four-way Contests					
Con v Lab v All/SLD v SNP	5	6	45	51	48
Three-way Contests					
Con v Lab v SNP	21	52	16	12	33
Con v Lab v All/SLD	12	3	9	3	3
Other Three-way	1	-	10	15	5
All Three-way	34	55	35	30	41
Two-way Contest					
Con v Lab	42	18	5	-	1
Lab v SNP	14	11	8	15	6
Other Two-way	5	9	7	5	4
All Two-way	61	38	20	20	11
Total Party Contests	254	279	304	321	325

We have in the past suggested that party activity rather than issues has been responsible for the higher turnout in partisan than in non-partisan Regions. Increased party activity in the latter may, therefore, help to explain increased turnout in 1990 from 40.1% to 43.2%. There was no change in partisan Regions and overall turnout remained virtually unchanged (Table 4).

Table 4: Percentage Turnout in Contested Divisions

	1974	1978	1982	1986	1990
	%	%	%	%	%
Partisan Regions	50.7	44.8	43.0	45.9	45.9
Non-partisan Regions	49.6	43.3	40.2	40.1	43.2
Total	50.4	44.7	42.9	45.6	45.9

A corollary of increased competition is a decline in the number of uncontested elections (Table 5). These are now very rare in partisan regions; there was, indeed, only one such case (in Fife) in 1990. For a time it looked as if unopposed returns in non-partisan Regions had reached a plateau of about 40 per cent, but the intervention of the parties reduced this to about one third in the latest elections.

Table 5: Percentages of Contested Divisions 1974-1990

	1974	1978	1982	1986	1990
	%	%	%	%	%
Partisan Regions	92.7	89.3	94.3	98.5	99.7
Non-Partisan Regions	82.9	47.6	60.0	59.0	66.4
Scotland	90.3	79.1	85.7	88.8	91.5

Patterns of Party Support

These elections produced, on a superficial view, something for all the parties to crow about and they duly did so. Despite a net loss of seats the Conservatives seized on a very small increase in their share of the votes to proclaim that they were on their way back in Scotland. Labour pointed to yet another increase in the number of seats won and played down the (admittedly small) decline in vote share. The SNP could boast that they had, of all the parties, by far the largest percentage increase in share of the vote and also increased their tally of seats. Even the SLD who had suffered a severe loss in support could point out that they had not incurred a net loss in seats.

Clearly all could not be winners, and the results require closer examination. Table 6 shows the distribution of votes in 1986 and 1990. In partisan Regions the Conservatives did indeed increase their share of the vote and, as Forsyth had predicted, over Scotland as a whole. Whilst Labour's share declined slightly, they still won almost twice as many votes as their nearest

Table 6: Party Shares of Votes in Regional Elections 1986-1990

	Partisan Regions		Non-Partisan Regions		Total	
	1986	1990	1986	1990	1986	1990
	%	%	%	%	%	%
Con	17.3	20.0	9.6	12.5	16.9	19.6
Lab	45.6	44.6	12.1	12.3	43.9	42.7
SNP	18.6	22.2	11.5	16.2	18.2	21.8
All/SLD	15.5	8.4	7.1	11.6	15.6	8.7
Green	0.5	2.0	-	3.4	0.5	2.1
Ind	2.0	2.0	59.2	43.2	4.8	4.5
Other	0.6	0.9	0.5	0.8	0.6	0.9

rivals, the SNP. The latter very clearly improved on their 1986 performance and again came second in popular support. The SLD won only about half of the vote attracted by the Alliance in 1986.

In non-partisan Regions all of the parties improved their share of the vote. The most notable feature here was the slump of 16 percentage points in support for Independent candidates. This resulted in the Independents winning less than 50 per cent of the vote for the first time.

The Conservatives advanced in all Regions except Grampian (-4.0 per cent). Their 'best' result was in Central, which contains Michael Forsyth's constituency (+7.3 per cent), but here they had more than doubled their number of candidates (from 11 to 26), whilst the other parties had the same number as in 1986. Labour's share was down in four of the six partisan Regions, but with the exception of Central (-2.7 per cent) this decline was marginal. Fife was the only partisan Region in which the SLD held on to its share of the vote (-0.4 per cent), but this relatively good result was partly attributable to an increased number of candidates (+7); in Lothian and Strathclyde a significant drop in the number of SLD candidates (-8 and -42 respectively) was reflected in a large drop in the share of the vote. The SNP advanced in four partisan Regions and by an impressive 10.5 percentage points in Grampian, but this result owed quite a lot to an increased number of candidates, just as their apparent loss of support in Fife and Central coincided with changes in the number of candidates put forward.

The raw figures in Table 6 could be misleading because they do not take account of variations in candidatures. A more accurate measure of trends in party support can be obtained if we compare cases in which all four parties fought the same seats in 1986 and 1990. This controls for changes in the number of candidates. There were 108 divisions which were contested by the four parties in both years and Table 7 shows how they performed in these. The Conservatives did indeed increase their share of the total votes in all of these divisions taken together (+2.6 points), but so also did Labour (+1.3 points) and any Conservative advance **relative to Labour** is very small indeed.

Table 7: Party Support in Four-Party Divisions, 1986-1990

	Con %	Lab %	SNP %	All/SLD %
<u>All Divs (108)</u>				
1986	23.7	41.4	12.9	22.0
1990	26.3	42.7	17.8	13.2
<u>Lab held (65)</u>				
1986	15.6	53.2	14.2	17.0
1990	16.9	54.6	20.3	8.2
<u>Con held (29)</u>				
1986	43.3	21.0	10.5	25.1
1990	48.3	25.0	14.0	12.6
<u>Alliance held (13)</u>				
1986	24.8	20.6	9.8	44.7
1990	24.4	21.2	12.1	42.3

Expressed as a swing the figures suggest a movement of only 0.7 points from Labour to Conservative, that is virtually no change.

Table 7 does show, however, that the SNP did rather well, if not sensationally so, in these seats (+4.9 points), suggesting that overall, the SNP advance was not accounted for by an increase in the number of candidates. By the same token the Table indicates that the decline in the SLD vote was not simply a function of the number of candidates put forward, but represented real fall in support.

A further analysis of these seats shows that the Conservatives did best in seats that they already held (+5.0 per cent), but that this was almost matched by an increased Labour share in the same seats (+4.0 per cent). Labour also improved its share in its own territory (+1.4 per cent) and this was slightly larger than the Conservatives' increase in the same seats (+1.3 per cent). There were not enough SNP cases to allow a similar analysis for them, but it is obvious that they made most progress in Labour seats (+6.1 per cent), although they advanced in seats held by the other parties too. The SLD lost most ground in Conservative held seats (-12.5 per cent), but also suffered a substantial setback in Labour held divisions. They did less badly, however, in seats that they already held (-2.4). What seems to be indicated here is an apparent consolidation of strength in the parties' own territories. It is unclear on the available evidence whether it is incumbency that gives an advantage or whether the parties successfully targeted their efforts to exploit existing support.

Council Seats Won

Much is made by parties themselves and by the media of the shares of

votes obtained in local elections because of the implications for parliamentary elections. This is unfortunate because it tends to demote the importance of local government. It should not be forgotten that even though local authorities are much circumscribed by central government in the functions that they perform and the money they spend, the results of these elections have considerable direct effects on the population of each local authority area. It is necessary, therefore to give some attention to the manner in which trends in party choice are translated into Regional council seats and thus party control of councils. Table 8 shows the seats won by the parties in partisan and non-partisan Regions in 1986 and 1990. Overall the Conservatives were the only party to lose seats (-13) reducing them to their lowest level ever. Such a result sits oddly with Conservative claims immediately after the election that they had begun an electoral comeback in Scotland.

Table 8: Regional Council Seats Won 1986-1990

	Partisan Regions		Non-Partisan Regions		Total	
	1986	1990	1986	1990	1986	1990
Con	57	48	8	4	65	52
Lab	209	213	14	20	223	233
SNP	27	34	9	8	36	42
All/SLD	31	29	9	11	40	40
Green	-	-	-	1	-	1
Ind	10	9	69	64	79	73
Other	1	2	1	2	2	4
Scotland	335	335	110	110	445	445

In partisan Regions Labour recorded yet another increase, taking their tally of seats to 213, four and a half times as many as the next party, the Conservatives. The latter had a net loss of 9 seats in these Regions. The Conservatives' worst result came in Grampian (a Region that they controlled until 1986) where they lost six seats and came fourth in terms of the number of councillors. Although the SNP came a clear second in share of the vote in partisan Regions, their count of seats did not reflect this achievement; a net gain of six seats, most of them in Grampian, seems a poor reward. In contrast, the SLD which lost quite heavily in share of the votes ended up with a net loss of only two seats in the partisan Regions and with no change over Scotland as a whole.

In non-partisan Regions the number of Independent councillors fell yet again and Labour was most successful in making advances, particularly in Highland (+3) and Dumfries and Galloway (+3). The Greens, who obtained 3.4 per cent of the vote in these Regions were rewarded with a symbolically important first seat, in the Highland Region.

In sum, the various gains and losses did not result in any changes in single

party control of Regional councils. Labour remains the majority party in Fife, Lothian, Central and Strathclyde, and is again the largest party (although without a majority) in Grampian and Tayside where they lead minority administrations. Thus Labour either controls or administers on an understanding with other parties all six of the partisan Regions in Scotland. Independents are still the largest group in each of the non-partisan Regions, but they effectively lost control of Dumfries and Galloway as a result of arrangements amongst parties there.

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