

THE 1989 EUROPEAN ELECTIONS IN SCOTLAND

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The European Parliament is a remote institution. Few voters (or political scientists for that matter) know very much about its powers, functions or composition. Unsurprisingly, the most striking feature of British elections to the Parliament so far has been the low turnout of voters – lower even than in local council elections. Nonetheless, the 1989 European elections provided an opportunity for voters to indicate their current attitudes towards the parties and a chance for commentators to assess the state of political opinion among the volatile Scottish electorate. In this brief account of the elections we first present a short description and analysis of the results in the eight Scottish Euro-constituencies and then go on to review the progress and prospects of the various parties in Scotland.

The Results

(i) Turnout

Turnout in Scotland increased sharply as compared with the last Euro-elections in 1984, from just over 33% to 41%. Even so, this still leaves participation by the electorate at a lower level than that normally achieved in local elections, but turnout in Scotland was significantly higher than the 37% for the UK as a whole.

Without detailed survey evidence it is difficult to say why turnout improved. It may have been the product of a slightly greater interest in the EEC as an institution but probably more important were the facts that there were more candidates standing in 1989 than previously, that Labour sought to make the election into a vote of no confidence in an unpopular government and that the SNP were experiencing a period of increased popularity in opinion polls, thus raising the political temperature in Scotland.

Turnout increased in every constituency, the sharpest rise being in Glasgow (10.3 percentage points) and the smallest in the Highlands and Islands (2.5). Variations in turnout across constituencies were small, however. The highest (42.6%) was in Strathclyde West and the lowest (38.4%) in North East Scotland, which contains Grampian Region – an area of notoriously low turnouts in every type of election.

(ii) Party Support

As Table 1 shows, Labour support in the election was close to that obtained in the 1987 general election, reaffirming the party's predominance in Scottish electoral politics. Labour gained the two seats previously held by the Conservatives and, in the words of a Scottish Labour MP, succeeded in making Scotland a 'Tory-Free Zone' in terms of European representation. The SNP sharply increased its share of the popular vote as compared with 1987. At 25.6%, the SNP's vote share was the party's best performance in a Scottish-wide election since the October 1974 general election and was a significant advance on their 1988 District election result. They retained their one seat (Highlands and Islands) with a much increased majority and came very close to gaining North East Scotland. The Conservatives experienced yet another electoral disaster in Scotland, coming third in the popular vote and losing their two seats. An even worse disaster befell the SLD which plummeted from 19.4% (for the Alliance) in 1987 to a miserable 4.3% in these elections. The Greens appeared from nowhere, as it were, and overtook the SLD with 7.2% of the vote. This was a remarkable performance, but only half as good as that achieved by the Green party in England and Wales.

Table 1: Distribution of Party Support

	Euro-election	General election	Euro-election	
	1984	1987	1989	
	%	%	%	(seats)
Conservative	25.7	24.0	20.9	(-)
Labour	40.7	42.4	41.9	(7)
Alliance/SLD	15.6	19.4	4.3	(-)
SNP	17.8	14.0	25.6	(1)
Green	-	-	7.2	(-)

Individual constituency results reflect the national picture. Table 2 shows the distribution of votes in the eight Euro-constituencies. It is striking to note that the Conservatives failed to obtain even a third of the vote in any constituency. They gained only three second places and were relegated to third place in the other five seats. Labour, by contrast, obtained well over half of the votes in two seats and performed poorly only in the Highlands and Islands. In the latter seat, the SNP result was spectacular and, no doubt, reflects the personal popularity of Mrs Ewing. Otherwise, SNP support was relatively uniform across the country with the exception of South of Scotland, where they appear to have been 'squeezed' somewhat in what was widely regarded as a Conservative-Labour marginal. There were no bright spots for the SLD, but the heavily populated Strathclyde Region was a particularly black spot where SLD support was

derisory. The Greens' best performance, with more than 10% of the vote, was in Lothians.

Table 2: Distribution of Party Support in Euro-constituencies 1989

	Con %	Lab %	SLD %	SNP %	Green %
Glasgow	10.7	55.4	2.0	25.0	6.3
Highlands & Islands	16.8	13.9	8.3	51.6	9.5
Lothians	23.7	41.4	4.2	20.5	10.2
Mid-Scotland and Fife	21.0	46.1	4.0	22.6	6.4
North East Scotland	26.7	30.7	6.0	29.4	7.3
South of Scotland	32.2	39.8	5.1	17.2	5.7
Strathclyde East	11.4	56.2	2.2	25.1	5.0
Strathclyde West	21.8	42.7	3.9	23.8	7.8

Table 3 shows the changes in support for the major parties between the 1987 general election and the Euro-elections. The Conservatives declined everywhere (from an already low base) except in the South of Scotland. Labour's performance was more up and down than the overall figures might suggest. While they advanced in four seats, they also lost ground in four, most notably in Glasgow where the SNP appears to have made inroads into Labour's (admittedly massive) support. The decline in the SLD vote was in double figures everywhere, although the massive drop in Highlands and Islands is explained by the personality factor already referred to. The swing to the SNP was not a localised phenomenon, however – the SNP vote rose significantly in every constituency.

Table 3: Change in Shares of Vote in Euro-constituencies 1987-89

	Con	Lab	SLD	SNP
Glasgow	-2.3	-7.1	-11.7	+14.6
Highlands & Islands	-8.0	-5.1	-26.5	+32.2
Lothians	-3.5	+0.7	-16.9	+10.0
Mid-Scotland and Fife	-4.1	+3.3	-13.5	+ 8.1
North East Scotland	-3.8	+3.9	-13.9	+ 6.7
South of Scotland	+1.2	+3.5	-15.2	+ 5.1
Strathclyde East	-2.9	-1.4	-12.2	+11.4
Strathclyde West	-3.9	-3.3	-14.1	+13.4

None of the constituency results seems, on the face of it, to put any of Labour's Westminster constituencies at risk, but the swing to Labour from the Conservatives in the South of Scotland, although small, is bad news for whoever succeeds George Younger at Ayr, where the Tories hold the seat with a tiny majority. Likewise, the position of Michael Forsyth in Stirling must be in doubt given the swing to Labour in Mid Scotland and Fife.

Despite their improved share of the vote, it is difficult to see the SNP making gains in a Westminster election without a further surge in support. Their overwhelming majority in the Highlands and Islands is unlikely to be translated into general election victories. The SNP has won all three Euro-elections in this constituency, but in 1987 they lost the only Westminster component of it that they held (Western Isles).

The party which has perhaps most to worry about is the SLD. Despite what we have said about the peculiarities of the Highlands and Islands, the collapse of the SLD vote there does not augur well for the retention of the five Westminster seats that it now holds in that area; the decline in Mid-Scotland and Fife brings into question its hold on North East Fife. Even in SLD bastions in the Borders, the party looks fragile on the basis of the South of Scotland Euro-result. Nonetheless, the SLD can take comfort from the personal appeal of their Westminster MP's and their record of retaining seats against the odds.

Review of Party Performances

(i) The Conservatives

The European elections came at the end of a dismal decade for the Conservatives. While their party nationally was celebrating ten years in government, Scottish Conservatives were forlornly defending the two European seats that they still held and hoping to stem the tide that had steadily eroded their position in Scotland. Table 4 charts the performance of the Conservatives in Scotland over the past ten years in local, Westminster and European elections.

Table 4: Conservative Share of Votes in Scottish Elections 1979-89

	Regional/District Elections		General Elections		European Elections	
	%		%		%	
1980	24.1		1979	31.4	1979	33.7
1982	25.1					
1984	21.4		1983	28.4	1984	25.7
1986	16.9					
1988	19.5		1987	24.0	1989	20.9

In 1979 they had made something of a recovery to around one third of the popular vote in both the general and European election, but since then it has been largely downhill all the way for the Scottish Conservatives. The nadir (so far) was 16.9% of the votes in the 1986 Regional elections.

In the aftermath of the disastrous results in the 1987 general election,

when they were reduced to holding only ten of the 72 Scottish seats, the Conservatives undertook a drastic reorganisation of their Central Office in Edinburgh. This included an attempt to revive and revitalise moribund local associations. At the same time, they attempted to go on the offensive in the propagation of policy – claiming that Thatcherism was good for Scotland, that its results were enjoyed by Scots as much as by others and that, indeed, Scottish intellectual and moral traditions were very much in tune with Thatcherism; it was even suggested that they, in part, inspired it. Adam Smith and Presbyterianism were invoked in confirmation of this. Mrs Thatcher herself paid regular missionary visits to the Scottish Conservative conference and continued to be acclaimed with undiluted enthusiasm and deference. She also visited the 1988 General Assembly of the Church of Scotland where she delivered her provocative and controversial ‘Sermon on the Mound’.

The combination of organisational reform and propaganda offensive had no apparent beneficial effects on the results of the 1988 District elections, but time was probably too short for that to be expected. The European elections were held two full years after the general election, however, and some positive result might have been anticipated – even if only a stemming of the anti-Conservative tide.

Several factors militated against even this modest ambition, however. British-wide opinion polls showed that the Conservative government was losing popularity at a greater rate than for some years and that at the same time the Labour party (having completed its policy review and launched it with some success) was again accepted by the electorate as a credible party of government. Mrs Thatcher was seen by an increasing proportion of voters as fallible and her style, which had always been unpopular with a majority in Scotland, seemed to be a diminishing asset nationwide. Some government policies, such as the privatisation of water (although this did not affect Scotland) were apparently seen as unnecessary, undesirable and the product of extremist ideology. The government’s plans for the reorganisation of the National Health Service which were regarded as retrograde in England and Wales were even more unpopular in Scotland. The highly unpopular poll tax/community charge came into operation in Scotland just before the European elections and must have been a negative contribution to electors’ view of the Conservative party. Devolution, which had been kept as a live issue by the Campaign for a Scottish Assembly, was another policy area in which the Conservatives were out of tune with Scottish opinion. In order to justify their refusal to participate in the Constitutional Convention their anti-devolution rhetoric became even more strident.

To compound these difficulties, in the run up to the elections the Conservatives found themselves pushed into third place in popular support in Scotland. They came a poor third at the 1988 District elections and on the

eve of the European vote a MORI poll in the *Scotsman* showed no improvement in their position. The SNP, having gained a very safe Labour seat at a by-election in Glasgow Govan, soared ahead of the Conservatives in the opinion polls and acquired the status of the major ‘opposition’ party (to Labour) in Scotland. Add to this, the unusual spectacle of the Conservative party divided on its approach to Europe and a wholly negative election campaign, and we find the ingredients for defeat.

(ii) Labour

In sharp contrast to the Conservatives, the Labour party was in the electoral doldrums in England and Wales throughout the 1980s and yet established itself, not without some minor setbacks, as the dominant party at all levels of elections in Scotland (see Table 5). In areas where local politics is conducted on a partisan basis Labour holds around 60% of all District and Regional Council seats; they won 50 of the 72 seats in the 1987 general election; they now hold seven of the eight Euro-seats.

Table 5: Labour Share of Votes in Scottish Elections 1979-89

Regional/District Elections		General Elections		European Elections	
%		%		%	
1980	45.4	1979	41.5	1979	33.0
1982	37.6				
1984	45.7	1983	35.1	1984	40.7
1986	43.9				
1988	42.6	1987	42.4	1989	41.9

Complacency is always a potential pitfall for the successful, but it must be said that Labour showed few signs of this as they threw themselves into successive elections with a determination to do even better. Whether it was complacency, tiredness or miscalculation that led to a slip up at the Glasgow Govan by-election in November 1988, when the SNP gained the seat in spectacular fashion, is unclear. But the loss of this seat was certainly a shock to Labour and the necessary lessons were quickly learned and acted upon. If some of the SNP propaganda after Govan was designed to panic Labour, it failed to do so. Post-Govan opinion polls which showed some loss of support and a surge for the Nationalists were calmly assessed and judged to be an inevitable, but relatively ephemeral, reaction to what was indeed a spectacular defeat.

The sea change in Scottish politics, which some claimed to identify, has not so far occurred. Labour went about its business more or less as normal. This included participation in the Constitutional Convention and a renewal and strengthening of its commitment to devolution. The improved position

of the party in British-wide opinion polls must have boosted the morale of its Scottish activists after the Govan defeat. At last there were signs that the frustrations of a majority without power could be ended. It is true that a few voices were raised after Govan calling for more militant actions and more radical policies to defend and advance Scotland's interests, but the party was pretty well united on its Scottish strategy and policies. One dark cloud threatened Labour's calm. It had to face the prospect of a by-election in another Glasgow constituency, Glasgow Central, which was adjacent to Govan and was in many ways eerily similar. But Labour was clawing its way back up the opinion polls again and polls taken specifically in Central seemed to assure it of success there. The decision to hold the by-election on the same day as the European elections was clearly designed to dilute the resources that the SNP could pour into Central and to ensure that in the unlikely event of a setback there, any adverse effect on the European campaign would be avoided. In the event, Labour held the Glasgow Central seat comfortably.

As it did throughout Britain, Labour fought the European campaign as a referendum on the general record of the Thatcher government. From an electoral point of view this was clearly the right strategy, for a MORI poll published in the *Scotsman* in early June showed that the Community charge/poll tax, unemployment/industry and the Health service were the major issues that Scottish electors said they would take into account when deciding how to vote in the European elections. Individual candidates did pay some attention to the European dimension, but clearly the record of the government, and some of its more controversial policy proposals were exploited. As we have seen, the election results suggest that this approach paid off.

(iii) The SNP

The early years of the 1980s was a period of decline for the SNP but in the latter half of the decade they picked up considerable momentum (see Table 6). In the 1988 District elections the party overtook the Conservatives in share of votes and their triumph in the Govan by-election immediately and significantly boosted their position in the polls. The Glasgow Central by-election gave the SNP an early chance to raise their profile yet again. But things did not go all their way. It soon became obvious that Central was not to be another Govan. The refusal of the SNP to participate in the Constitutional convention resulted in a bad press and saw the emergence of internal divisions on the issue; and a late controversy over the fact that the SNP group on Tayside Regional Council voted with the Conservatives to privatise some council services (with a consequent loss of jobs) was exploited with some success by Labour, and was subsequently blamed by some SNP spokesmen for defeat in Central and the absence of gains in the European elections. It is difficult for the SNP to justify claims to be the heirs of the Red Clydesiders in Glasgow and at the same time present

a mildly left of centre or even mildly conservative image in those areas North of the Tay where it has the best chance of winning seats.

In the late 1980s the SNP made much of Labour's apparent inability to obtain a majority in the House of Commons and of the pointlessness of Scotland electing 'feeble fifty' Labour MPs. By implication, this argument conceded that Labour had a natural majority in Scotland and when British-wide opinion polls indicated a significant Labour revival the argument was somewhat undermined.

Table 6: SNP Share of Vote in Scottish Elections 1979-89

Regional/District Elections		General Elections		European Elections	
%		%		%	
1980	15.5	1979	17.3	1979	19.4
1982	13.4				
1984	11.7	1983	11.7	1984	17.8
1986	18.2				
1988	21.3	1987	14.0	1989	25.6

These sorts of reasons explain why the SNP did not do as well as it might have hoped – certainly in the immediate aftermath of Govan. But if not gaining North East Scotland was a disappointment, the fact remains that these elections saw the best electoral performance of the decade for the SNP and they appear firmly in place as the second party in Scotland.

(iv) The SLD

The performance of the 'third' force in Scottish elections during the 1980s shows clear signs of surge and decline (see Table 7).

Table 7: Liberal/Alliance/SLD Share of Vote in Scottish Elections 1979-89

Regional/District Elections		General Elections		European Elections	
%		%		%	
1980	6.2	1979	9.0	1979	14.0
1982	18.1				
1984	12.8	1983	24.5	1984	15.6
1986	15.1				
1988	8.4	1987	19.4	1989	4.3

Despite the complications of a four-party system the Alliance did well in Scotland at the height of its popularity, holding nine Westminster seats

after the 1987 general election. It might even be said that the SLD did relatively well in the 1988 District elections, given the trauma of its birth. But the failure of the party to consolidate its position and establish an identity in British-wide terms were reflected in Scotland. A very poor result in the Govan by-election was a bad blow to morale and another disaster was expected (and resulted) in Glasgow Central. There is little that is specifically 'Scottish' about the slump in SLD support although the availability of the SNP as an alternative for voters disaffected from the major parties makes the SLD's task that much harder. Following the European elections, the SLD was at a lower electoral ebb than the 'third' force had been at any time during the previous ten years.

(v) The Green Party

The Green party entered the European elections in force for the first time and were virtually ignored by commentators (including the present authors). Its predecessor, the Ecology party, fought only one seat (Lothians) in the 1984 European elections and obtained only 1.4% of the votes. In the 1987 general election ten Green candidates amassed a total of only 4,034 votes. In the 1988 District elections the Greens had thirty seven candidates who averaged 136 votes each. In these circumstances the relative success of the Greens in the Euro-elections is a major puzzle. A MORI poll in the *Scotsman* during the Euro-campaign showed that 9% of voters said that they would take 'the environment' into account when deciding how to vote. At this stage, however, we would go along with those who have interpreted the Green vote as essentially indicating disaffection from the other parties – in other words, a 'protest' vote. As such, we remain to be convinced that Green politics are, in any significant sense, here to stay.

Prospects

In a volatile, unpredictable, ever-changing political landscape it is foolhardy to make firm predictions from one election to another which could be as much as three years away. It is not, however, giving any hostages to fortune to say that the Conservatives have a mountain to climb if they are to regain a position of authority in Scottish politics. They are in decline at all levels and there is no sign that their slide is at an end. The Conservatives' problem is probably not that they are out of touch with Scottish opinion – they know only too well what it is – but that they insist on telling Scots that they are wrong and that the current brand of conservatism, so clearly a product of a South-East of England party, is what is required and really wanted in Scotland. The Scottish political culture, a combination of egalitarianism, collectivism and concern for the underprivileged tinged with a mild form of nationalism, is not inconsistent with other cultural values like individualism and enterprise, but it does imply compromise and a broad consensus. Political cultures do change, albeit

slowly, and political parties can play a part in engendering this change but it is a long haul. There is more to changing a political culture than 'getting our message across'. The message may get across only too well and be rejected. No amount of party reorganisation, changes in personnel or social engineering (sale of council houses, privatisation, opted-out schools, changes in school curricula, social security changes and so on) can be effective if the general trend is clearly out of tune with the political culture.

At present it is clearly the Labour party in Scotland, conservative though it may be in some ways (perhaps deliberately so), that is best in tune with Scottish attitudes and aspirations. So long as it maintains this position it is likely to remain the major political force.

It might be argued that the SNP, paradoxically, are in one respect going against the Scottish grain. Scots have certainly strong feelings of national identity and even some nationalistic streaks, but this falls short of what is conventionally accepted as the form of nationalism that is required to underpin demands for political independence (even 'within Europe'). The SNP have altered some of their policies and may now be considered a left-of-centre, social democratic style party but the nature of their dilemma – the need to make electoral progress in both Labour heartlands and Conservative-held seats – tends to lead to a certain obfuscation of their position. While many of the SNP's policies are perfectly acceptable to large sections of the Scottish electorate, their major one – indeed, their *raison d'être* – of independence, is not. The political culture cannot, as yet, accommodate it. It is conceivable that the Conservatives may adjust their policies for electoral reasons, but the Nationalists have no alternative but to attempt to change the culture in this important respect. This is a perfectly legitimate aspiration but again it must be seen as a long and arduous task.

It is difficult to articulate a role for the SLD in Scotland. The establishment of a Scottish Assembly elected on the basis of some form of proportional representation could result in their finding a secure and distinctive place in Scottish politics, but otherwise the prospects are not promising. The future of the Green party is equally problematic. Much will depend on how other parties react to their advance in 1989. If the major parties adopt and act upon 'greenish' policies then it seems likely that the Greens themselves will continue to inhabit the political fringe.

Only one thing can be said with certainty. The volatility and unpredictability of the electorate referred to above promises to make the next decade as interesting, and even exciting, for students of Scottish politics as the last one has been.

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