

TOWARDS A FOUR PARTY SYSTEM?  
THE REGIONAL ELECTIONS OF MAY 1982

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In 'normal' circumstances (though it is now difficult to remember when Scottish electoral politics were last 'normal') there would have been few doubts about the likely outcome of the Regional elections which took place on May 6th 1982. A Conservative government had been in office for three years. During this time unemployment had more than doubled to three million, and, as usual, the percentage unemployed in Scotland was above the British average, inflation was still higher than it had been when the Conservatives took over and there was little light on the economic horizon. For most of 1981 the Conservatives had languished in public opinion polls especially in Scotland where their highest level of support reported by System Three was 18.0% compared with a maximum figure for Labour of 55.0% and a low of 40.0%. Labour should have been expected to reap rich electoral benefits, confirming and even extending its electoral dominance in Scotland.

But in May 1982 things were far from normal. A number of factors complicated the political situation and made predictions of the outcome of these elections a chancy business.<sup>1</sup> Firstly, there was the state of the Labour party. Labour, nationally, had been in disarray for many months suffering a loss in morale and public support as a result of bruising internal constitutional and policy battles. Factional infighting showed no signs of abating and the image of extremism and terminal decline was hard to avoid. Added to all this, the Labour leader, Michael Foot, was shown by opinion polls to be the least popular leader of the Opposition since the war. It is true that things were not as bleak-looking in Scotland, but the signs were ominous. In

January 1981, according to System Three, Labour had the support of 55.0% of the Scottish Electorate; by March 1982, this had fallen to 39.0%

The second important factor making this an unusual election was the emergence of the SDP/Liberal Alliance as a potential electoral force. From the foundation of the SDP a year earlier, the Alliance had made a major impact, winning a string of local by-elections and having two stunning victories in parliamentary by-elections in England as well as running strongly in national opinion polls. Some commentators doubted whether the Alliance would fare as well in Scotland where commitment to Labour continued to be strong and there was already an 'anti-system' party in the form of the SNP. For the first three months of 1982 Alliance support in System Three polls was slightly ahead of that for the Conservatives and it had overtaken the SNP, although, at 25.0% in January, it was well behind Labour. But only a month or so before the Regional elections, on March 25th, the Alliance in the person of Roy Jenkins won a parliamentary by-election in Glasgow Hillhead, taking the seat from the Conservatives, with Labour in third place. They therefore entered the Regional elections with high hopes. The question was whether they could successfully make inroads on a broad front in the first Scotland-wide challenge to the existing party system.

The prospects for the Regional elections were also made more problematical by the potential electoral effect of the Falkland Islands crisis. The Conservative government had been doing badly in public opinion polls, but the Falklands dispute seemed to bring about an upsurge in support. In Britain as a whole, Gallup gave the Conservatives 31.0% of vote intentions in April, but this increased to 41.0% in May. The crisis had, of course, nothing to do with local government, but since local electoral behaviour is largely a response to national events, issues and personalities, it was conceivable that the Falklands effect, coming quite out of the blue, could rescue the Conservatives from a rout such as they had never before experienced in Scotland.

In at least one region, Lothian, it looked as if a real test of the effect of local issues on an election could at last be seen. Lothian Regional Council, controlled by a left-wing Labour group found itself in direct confrontation with the Conservative government. The Council refused to make expenditure cuts demanded by the Secretary of

State for Scotland and consequently had part of its central government grant withheld. Amid much publicity and acrimony Lothian Region seemed to verge on bankruptcy and during the election the Labour group explicitly appealed to the electorate to give them a mandate to continue their policy of defying the government. The situation seemed to have been tailor-made for the Alliance, and especially for the SDP. An 'extremist' Labour council and an interfering Conservative government, backed by the Lothian Region Conservative group, could be said to be playing politics at the expense of the interests of the people of the Region. A prominent member of the Labour group, an ex-convenor of the Region, despairing of the 'extremism' of his colleagues, had defected to the SDP and led what seemed to be a strong electoral challenge. Would there, then, be a 'Lothian effect' in the Regional elections?

One thing was reasonably sure, the SNP was destined to do relatively badly. Like the Labour Party, it suffered trauma from the setbacks it received at the 1979 General Election. It too became involved in wrangles over leadership positions and policy and its best showing in the System Three Poll was 21.0% in October 1981 slightly below the SDP, this fell to 14.0% in January 1982. The SNP also came a rather poor fourth in the Hillhead by-election.

Finally, and perhaps somewhat esoterically, these elections were complicated by the fact that they were fought on new electoral division boundaries. This made predictions of the outcomes in individual divisions difficult (and it also inhibits analysis of the results). Of more general importance, however, the new electoral divisions were used by the Scottish Parliamentary Boundary Commission to construct revised parliamentary constituencies. The Regional elections therefore offered the parties and commentators an opportunity to assess the likely distribution of votes in the new constituencies.

We shall return to these issues in due course. As in previous reports on Scottish local elections, however, we begin here by considering levels of participation by parties and electors.

#### (1) Participation: Parties

Table 1 shows the number of candidates from each party or group standing in the three sets of Regional elections held to date.

TABLE 1 : CANDIDATES

	<u>1974</u>	<u>1978</u>	<u>1982</u>	<u>Change 1978 - 1982</u>
Con.	254	292	283	-9
Lab.	303	284	322	+38
Lib./SDP	83	37	230	+193
SNP	126	225	266	+41
Ind.	297	151	140	-11
Others	85	58	53	-5
<b>TOTAL</b>	<b>1148</b>	<b>1047</b>	<b>1294</b>	<b>+247</b>

In 1982 there was a record number of Regional Council candidates, an increase of 247 over the 1978 figure. The bulk of this increase was due to the Alliance which mushroomed from a pitiful 37 Liberal candidates in 1978 to near parity with the three other major parties. The general increase in party activity was not confined to areas where elections were already dominated by parties. There is some evidence of a slow movement by parties into previously solidly Independent regions. In Highland, Borders and Dumfries and Galloway the four major parties in 1974 accounted for 29% of all candidates. In 1978 this proportion inched upwards to 30% but in 1982 it was 45%. The day may not be far distant, then, when local elections throughout Scotland, at least at Regional level, will be party-dominated.

One consequence of increased party activity in 1982 was a rise in the proportion of divisions that were actually contested. This rose to 85.7% compared with 79.1% in 1978. No Region had fewer than 50% of seats contested (the lowest being Highland with 50%) and five had contests in more than 90% of seats (Lothian 100%, Strathclyde 98.0%, Tayside 95.7%, Fife 95.6% and Central 91.2%). Only 63 seats in all (out of 441 at stake) were taken without a contest and as is usual at this level, Independents benefitted most in this way, taking 31 seats to 16 for the Conservatives, 14 for Labour and 1 each for the SNP and the Alliance.

In the contested elections there were, of course, a variety of configurations of candidates. If, however, we consider only contests in which two or more of the major parties opposed one another then the developing pattern of party competition can be charted. This is done in Table 2. The first point of interest in this table is the steady

increase in the number of divisions in which two or more of the major parties faced one another. This reflects the increasing participation in the elections by the parties which we noted above. Even more striking, however, is the extent to which patterns of party competition have changed. Britain used to be thought the epitome of a two-party class-based system and indeed in 1974, Conservative v. Labour contests were the commonest form of party conflict, though even then accounting for only 40% of divisions in which party candidates opposed one another. But those days have long gone. In the 1978 elections over half of the

TABLE 2 PARTY CONTESTS

	<u>1974</u>	<u>1978</u>	<u>1982</u>
	%	%	%
Con. v Lab. v Lib/SDP v SNP	4.5	6.7	42.0
Con. v Lab. v Lib/SDP	11.9	3.5	8.3
Con. v Lab. v SNP	20.1	50.4	14.8
Con. v Lib/SDP v SNP	0.4	0	3.4
Lab. v Lib/SDP v SNP	1.5	0	7.4
Con. v Lab.	39.9	18.7	5.6
Con. v Lib.	3.4	1.1	4.3
Con. v SNP	1.9	7.7	2.5
Lab. v Lib/SDP	1.9	0	2.8
Lab. v SNP	14.6	12.0	9.0
Lib/SDP v SNP	0	0	0
Number of divisions	(268)	(284)	(324)

contests were three-way fights between the Conservatives, Labour and the SNP. By 1982 the commonest form of contest was a four-way battle, only 5% of contests were straight fights between the two former major parties. Electors, then, could have few complaints about the choice of candidates presented to them - their scope for choice has steadily increased. If abstentions due to lack of choice were a significant factor affecting turnout we might expect that the 1982 elections would result in an increased turnout of electors - a topic we now consider.

## (2) Participation: electors

Table 3 shows the turnout in contested elections in each Region at each set of Regional elections. On the face of it the implicit hypotheses in the last sentence of the previous section is not support-

ed by the data. Overall, turnout in the 1982 elections declined to 42.9%. This decline was not uniform, however. Tayside and Lothian recorded significant increases in turnout. It would be premature to see this as necessarily part of a 'Lothian effect' since these two Regions

TABLE 3 TURNOUT IN CONTESTED DIVISIONS

	<u>1974</u>	<u>1978</u>	<u>1982</u>	<u>Change 1978-1982</u>
	%	%	%	%
Highland	52.5	44.2	41.0	-3.2
Grampian	43.0	33.9	34.3	+0.4
Tayside	47.4	41.4	45.3	+3.9
Fife	49.9	46.4	43.2	-3.2
Lothian	51.0	43.9	47.6	+3.7
Central	57.7	50.7	44.7	-6.0
Borders	48.2	41.8	41.1	-0.7
Strathclyde	51.7	47.2	42.4	-3.8
Dumfries & Galloway	46.9	43.3	39.0	-4.3
SCOTLAND	50.6	44.7	42.9	-1.8

also recorded the greatest proportionate increase in the number of candidates standing. In contrast, Central Region, which had the steepest turnout decline, was the only Region in which the number of candidates decreased.

If, however, we examine the data more closely it is clear that there is no systematic relationship between changes in the number of major party candidates and changes in turnout. The increased activity of the parties in the peripheral Regions did not lead to an increased turnout. And Lothian had only an average increase in major party candidatures. It could be, therefore, that the increased turnout in Tayside was a consequence of increased major party candidatures (from 83 to 145) while the increased turnout in Lothian (139 major party candidates in 1978, 185 in 1982) was due to the local political situation.

Due to the changed boundaries of electoral divisions, which we noted above, we are unable to pursue the question of changes in turnout at the level of individual divisions. This would enable a more exact analysis of the effects of increased party competition upon turnout. It is clear, however, that turnout in Regional elections is now about the level of local election turnout in Scotland before local gov-

ernment reorganisation, despite greatly increased commitment by the political parties.

(3) Party Support: Votes

Table 4 shows the distribution of votes over the whole country in the Regional elections held so far. These are, of course, 'raw' figures

TABLE 4 PARTY SUPPORT

	<u>1974</u>	<u>1978</u>	<u>1982</u>	<u>Change 1978-82</u>
	%	%	%	%
Con.	28.6	30.3	25.1	-5.2
Lab.	38.5	39.6	37.6	-2.0
Lib/SDP	5.1	2.3	18.1	+15.8
SNP	12.6	20.9	13.4	-7.5
Ind.	12.4	4.9	5.1	+0.2
Others	2.9	1.9	0.6	-1.3

taking no account of variations in candidatures and unopposed returns. Nonetheless the general trend in votes in 1982 is clear enough. Labour maintained its hold on Scottish voters, its share of votes declining by only two percentage points despite its problems and the intervention of a large number of Alliance candidates. More significant losses of support were sustained by the Conservatives and the SNP. The latter dropped to fourth in popularity, being overtaken in one bound by the Alliance. The latter's showing in its first serious nationwide challenge was, of course, due in some part simply to the greatly increased number of candidates available to receive votes, but nonetheless 18% of the votes represents a substantial level of support. Changes in party support between 1978 and 1982 within Regions are shown in Table 5. As can be seen there were considerable variations across Regions both in the strength and direction of change: thus, the Conservatives declined by 13 points in Fife but increased by 17 in Borders. But these variations are due to a great extent to variations in candidature.

TABLE 5 REGIONAL CHANGES IN PARTY SUPPORT 1978-1982

	<u>Con.</u>	<u>Lab.</u>	<u>Lib/SDP</u>	<u>SNP</u>
Highland	-2.6	+9.4	+2.3	+3.4
Grampian	-2.7	-1.2	+11.9	-3.0
Tayside	-6.2	-9.1	+10.3	+4.3
Fife	-13.1	-3.6	+21.0	-5.6
Lothian	-2.8	-9.6	+21.7	-8.7

TABLE 5 Cont'd

	<u>Con.</u>	<u>Lab.</u>	<u>Lib/SDP</u>	<u>SNP</u>
Central	-0.9	+1.3	+11.9	-7.4
Borders	+17.6	-0.5	+8.0	-2.9
Strathclyde	-7.5	+2.8	+15.2	-10.1
Dumfries & Galloway	-2.8	-7.2	+15.6	+11.6
SCOTLAND	-5.2	-2.0	+15.9	-7.5

To demonstrate this we calculated for each Region the change in each party's share of major party candidatures and its changed share of the vote. Correlating these 2 variables produces the following coefficients - Conservatives .80, Labour .94, Alliance .95 and SNP .89. Although we have only 9 units of analysis these coefficients are large and show that much of the Regional variation in changes in party support is accounted for simply by variations in the number of candidates put forward.

Taking account of changes in candidatures, however, it is clear that the Conservatives did relatively well and Labour badly in Lothian. By contrast Labour actually increased its share of the vote in Strathclyde, despite much keener competition, while the Conservatives slipped back.

Most people are not tremendously interested in changing patterns of party support between one Regional election and the next. What concerns them is change since the last General Election. The local elections are seen by many as a sort of super-opinion poll involving many thousands of electors and based on real votes rather than hypothetical vote intention.

As before, however, variations in candidatures inhibit accurate measurement from General to Regional election figures. Nonetheless it is worth attempting some analysis of this. In order to control for candidate variations we have analysed separately those divisions and parliamentary constituencies in which voters were offered a choice between candidates of all four parties. Figures for Lothian, Strathclyde and the four other partisan regions are shown separately in Table 6. The numbers in brackets indicate the number of constituencies (1979) and divisions (1982) involved. In a sense what we have here are 3 samples of constituencies and 3 of electoral divisions. Even if some inaccuracy arises from sampling, the trends in the different Regions

TABLE 6  
GENERAL AND REGIONAL ELECTION VOTES IN FOUR-WAY CONTESTS

	<u>Lothian</u>		<u>Strathclyde</u>		<u>Grampian, Tayside, Fife, Central</u>	
	<u>1979(8)</u>	<u>1982(40)</u>	<u>1979(17)</u>	<u>1982(63)</u>	<u>1979(11)</u>	<u>1982(33)</u>
	%	%	%	%	%	%
Con.	36.5	33.9	31.9	22.6	35.0	35.7
Lab.	39.9	28.9	43.7	44.6	28.6	25.4
Lib/Alliance	12.7	26.9	11.7	20.9	13.2	23.6
SNP	10.9	10.3	12.7	11.9	23.1	15.3

are moderately clear. The Conservatives lost heavily in Strathclyde but more or less held their ground in other Regions. Labour lost heavily in Lothian and slightly in other Regions but increased their support in Strathclyde. The Alliance roughly doubled the Liberals' share of the vote everywhere and the SNP dropped slightly in Lothian and Strathclyde but rather more heavily elsewhere where their support was strongest.

In terms of 'swing' between the two leading parties, the figures show a 'swing' of 5.1% to Labour in Strathclyde, 3.7% to the Conservatives in Lothian and 2% to the Conservatives in other Regions since the General Election. In a way this demonstrates the solidity of Labour support in Strathclyde. But we would suggest that the Strathclyde result is what might have been expected in normal circumstances, and that the other Regions' results are to be explained in terms of a combination of a 'Falklands' and a local effect.

#### From Votes to Seats

In Table 7 we show the number of seats gained by the various parties and groups in Regional elections.

	<u>SEATS WON</u>		
	<u>1974</u>	<u>1978</u>	<u>1982</u>
Con.	112	136	119
Lab.	172	177	186
Lib/SDP	11	6	25
SNP	18	18	23
Ind.	114	89	87
Others	5	6	1
<b>TOTAL</b>	<b>432</b>	<b>432</b>	<b>441</b>

Due to boundary changes the overall number of seats to be filled increased but even so the Conservatives lost seats compared with 1978.

Labour maintained its dominance while the Alliance received poor reward for its reasonable showing in terms of votes. Somewhat surprisingly the SNP slightly increased the numbers of seats it won despite a smaller vote share.

All of this demonstrates the effect of the electoral system. The 'simple plurality' system in Britain has been much criticised of late for the disproportionate way in which it translates voting support into seats. Under this system the geographical distribution of support is almost as important as the amount of support gained. Thus, Independents gained only 5% of the Scottish vote but 14% of the contested seats because their support is concentrated in the peripheral Regions. In a similar way, though not to the same extent, the SNP benefitted from localised strength.

The greatest sufferer from the operation of the electoral system was the Liberal/SDP Alliance, who are also its fiercest critics. The Alliance took 18% of the vote but only 6% of seats. The problems posed for the Alliance by the electoral system are perhaps most clearly illustrated in Lothian Region. In terms of votes they came only slightly behind the two main parties taking 26% compared to 31% for Labour and 30% for the Conservatives. But the two latter parties each won 22 seats while the Alliance won only 3. The problem, from the Alliance's point of view, was that they were quite popular throughout the Region but very popular in only a few seats. They achieved 25 second-places in three-way or four-way contests (10 to Labour and 15 to the Conservatives) which certainly indicates wide support. But the electoral system does not reward wide support; concentrations of support are needed to win seats.

The various losses and gains of seats had effects on the political control of Regional authorities in only one case. Labour lost control of the Lothian Region and subsequently the Conservatives were able to form an administration with the support of the Alliance. In other Regions it was 'as you were' with Labour controlling Fife, Central and Strathclyde, the Conservatives holding on to Grampian and Tayside and Independents dominating Border, Highland and Dumfries and Galloway.

#### Conclusion

At the outset we suggested that there were four features of particular interest in the 1982 Regional elections - the Alliance, the

'Falklands effect', the 'Lothian effect' and the implications for revised parliamentary constituencies.

After the election much comment concerned the lack of success of the Alliance certainly compared with its aspirations. In some ways this could be said to be a bit overdrawn. The Alliance, as we have seen, gained 18% of the total vote in Scotland, relegating the SNP to fourth place. Alliance candidates got more votes than the SNP in 84% of the divisions in which they were in direct competition. In some areas too the Alliance outpolled the major parties - beating Labour in Edinburgh, for instance, and the Conservatives in Fife.

Where the Alliance failed was in not being able to translate this electoral support into seats. More than a hundred second places were obtained, but second places count for nothing given the electoral system. This highlights the problems the Alliance will face in the next general election and there is not very much they can do about it. They can hardly make electoral pacts with Labour in some seats and the Conservatives in others, nor can they expect their supporters to move into a number of selected constituencies. All they can do is wait and hope that their support in Scotland increases to the point where they benefit from the quirks of the electoral system, leaving their opponents to complain about its unfairness.

Boundary changes prevent any extended analysis of the effects of Alliance intervention. It does seem, however, that the Alliance tended to take votes from the challenging party, i.e. from Labour in Conservative seats and vice versa. This interpretation is suggested by the data in Table 8 which shows the division of the vote among the four main parties in constituencies which they all contested in 1979 and divisions in which there were four-way contests in 1982, considering separately those won by Labour and those won by the Conservatives. (This analysis is confined to the partisan regions).

TABLE 8

	<u>Labour Wins</u>		<u>Conservative Wins</u>	
	<u>1979(19)</u>	<u>1982(81)</u>	<u>1979(16)</u>	<u>1982(45)</u>
	%	%	%	%
Con.	27.8	18.8	42.9	45.9
Lab.	48.7	48.3	24.6	20.0
Lib/SDP	10.8	20.0	15.0	24.4
SNP	12.7	12.9	17.5	9.7

In Labour-held areas the Alliance's advance seems to have been almost wholly at the expense of the Conservatives who dropped to third place while the Labour vote was steady. In Conservative-held areas, on the other hand, the Conservative vote share increased while Labour lost significantly and dropped to third place. The SNP also dropped significantly here perhaps indicating that tactical voting for the SNP against the Conservatives was replaced in the Regional elections by tactical voting for the Alliance.

We noted in the introduction that the Conservatives might have been expected, if electoral politics had been 'normal' to have been routed in these elections. Their support in Scottish opinion polls was very low in the months preceding the elections (although it had risen quite dramatically from 17% in February to 25% in May) and they lost the once impregnable Hillhead seat in a parliamentary by-election. In the event, though the Conservative vote declined and they lost some seats, the results were by no means a rout. They remained the second party in Scotland in terms of votes and seats and, in addition to dislodging Labour in Lothian through an arrangement with the Alliance, they retained control of those regions they already held. It is, of course, impossible to know what precisely explains the general Conservative performance. It may be that they are now down to hard rock support that cannot decline much further. It would be surprising, however, if there were no 'Falklands effect'. This seems the most likely reason for the increase in support for them during the month of April. But clearly this 'effect' was far less important in Scotland than in England as is evidenced by opinion polls and the contrasting results in parliamentary by-elections in Beaconsfield and Coatbridge and Airdrie which followed the Regional elections.

There is rather firmer evidence of a 'Lothian effect'. As we have seen, Lothian was one of only 3 regions in which turnout increased. This region also produced one of the smallest declines in the Conservative's share of the vote and the largest decline in Labour's share so that there was a crude net 'saving' from Labour to the Conservatives of 3.4% between 1978 and 1982. It was in Lothian too, that the Alliance recorded its highest share of the vote apparently disproportionately at Labour's expense. A comparison of the general election figures with the regional elections in Lothian showed a similar pattern with Labour

doing worse and the Conservatives better than elsewhere. It would appear, then, that all the publicity surrounding the Labour administration in Lothian did have an electoral effect and that, unusually, local issues affected the result to Labour's disadvantage.

Labour's internal problems seem not to have had a very serious effect on their support in these elections, and certainly not as much as it had in England. If the Conservatives have now declined to a bed-rock of support it also seems likely that Labour has, on any conventional calculation, almost reached a maximum level, at least in the short-term. Any further increase is likely to be marginal. The degree of Labour strength in Scotland, and its solidity asserted at the last general election and more or less confirmed at the Regional elections, in contrast to that in England, has important implications for the future of British politics.

Finally, what about the parties' prospects in the proposed new parliamentary constituencies? The Parliamentary Boundary Commission has produced revised recommendations for 4 of the partisan Regions (Strathclyde, Lothian, Central and Tayside). If the Regional election results in these Regions are aggregated to the new constituencies the effect would be that Labour would win 39 seats and the Conservatives 13. In the same area in the 1979 General Election the result was Labour 39, Conservatives 12, SNP 1. Given that the Conservatives did not do particularly well in these elections it would seem that boundary revisions will operate slightly in their favour.

On these results the SNP would lose Dundee East, their only seat on mainland Scotland, to Labour and would gain none. The Alliance also would win no seats, though they would gain 8 second places. Best bet for the Alliance look to be Hillhead (Lab. 31%, Con. 30%, Alliance 30%), Renfrew West and Inverclyde (Lab. 35%, Alliance 34%) and Edinburgh South (Con. 38%, Alliance 31%).

Some of the other seats we have assigned to the Conservatives or Labour also look decidedly marginal. On the Labour side these are Cunninghame North (Lab. 38% Con. 36%) and Linlithgow (Lab. 38% SNP 36%) while the Conservatives would only just win Cathcart (Con. 38% Lab. 37%), Edinburgh East (Con. 36% Lab 35%) and Stirling (where it is impossible to give figures due to variations in candidancies).

Though the Regional elections will be the last set of local elections in Scotland before the next general election it would be fool-

ish to make predictions based on them. The regional results themselves indicate the continuing changes in electoral behaviour in Scotland. Much depends on whether the Government's popularity over the Falklands issue proves to be temporary and whether the SDP/Liberal Alliance can recover the momentum that it had throughout 1981 in England and Wales and transfers this to Scotland. If it does, Scotland, which already has an established three-party system, will continue to be idiosyncratic by having a four-party system.