

**THE DISTRICT ELECTIONS OF 1983:
A 1 + 3 PARTY SYSTEM**

JOHN BOCHEL
DEPARTMENT OF POLITICAL SCIENCE
UNIVERSITY OF DUNDEE

DAVID DENVER
DEPARTMENT OF POLITICS
UNIVERSITY OF LANCASTER

Introduction

On the face of it, the main interest in local elections should focus on the results in each authority for these have local consequences such as party control of the administration, policy orientations, patterns of expenditure and so on. But for good or ill perhaps most attention today is devoted to the overall performances of parties. This may be inevitable. Local elections are widely interpreted as important and reliable between-general-election indicators of trends in the popularity of major parties. Underlying this is the assumption that local electoral behaviour is largely 'nationalised' in that it reflects voters' concern with national issues, personalities and governmental performance. There is considerable evidence that this assumption is, on the whole, valid.

Both of these focuses are justified in an era in which many local authorities and their associations are in conflict with central government. The political complexion of individual local authorities has assumed more than its usual importance and, unlike public opinion polls, local elections are real tests of opinion and may be held to reflect, to some extent, concern about what is happening to local government.

The District elections of 1984 were the first electoral test for the parties in Scotland since the 1983 General election. That election had seen a dramatic fractionalisation of the party system in respect of voting. Labour,

long the dominant party, slumped from 41.6 per cent of the popular vote in 1979 to 35.1 per cent, its poorest performance since the war, the SNP also fell back to only 11.7 per cent, a far cry from the heady days of October 1974 when it came second with over 30 per cent. Although the Conservatives won the election with an increased majority their share of the vote in Scotland was, at 28.4 per cent, their second lowest since 1945. Only the SDP/Liberal Alliance could be said to have advanced, with 24.5 per cent of the Scottish vote compared with only 9 per cent for the Liberals in 1979. The fractionalisation was, however, mainly of votes. Labour still held 41 (-3) of the Scottish seats, the Conservatives 21 (-1) whilst the SNP retained their 2. But the Alliance did advance on previous Liberal performances with 8 seats (+5).

The second half of 1983 saw a modest improvement in the national position of Labour as reflected in opinion polls. The accession to the leadership and deputy leadership of Neil Kinnock and Roy Hattersley proved to be a mild tonic. Labour's progress at this stage was at the expense of both the Conservatives and the Alliance. The former's support drifted slightly downward and the latter's fell back to hover at around the 20 per cent level. In Scotland the SNP continued in the doldrums. The District elections would show whether these trends would appear in actual voting behaviour.

It was not only the fortunes of parties relative to the 1983 General election that was of interest. Comparison with the District elections of 1980 was also important. These were held at a time of Conservative and SNP unpopularity and had resulted in a massive Labour dominance of local government in Scotland where they had outright control of twenty-four Districts and minority control of one other. In contrast the Conservatives controlled only five Districts with a majority and formed a minority administration in two others. (The remaining Districts were controlled by Independents). Would the 1984 District elections result in the other parties making a dent in Labour's near hegemonic position in Scottish local government, or would they strengthen Labour's hold further and legitimise the challenge of some authorities to central government policies?

Important and interesting though relatively short-term trends in party support are, there are other, more fundamental movements in Scottish local elections that demand and deserve examination, for example, changing patterns of party competition, increasing partisanship, and the decline of Independents, turnout and so on. We propose to analyse these first.

Candidates and Contests

Before the emergence of the Alliance local elections in Scotland were already more complex than in England and Wales. We had, in effect, in local as in national elections, at least a three-, and perhaps a four-party system. The rise of the Alliance certainly added to the complexity and, so far as candidates went, instituted a four-party system.

TABLE 1
Candidates at District Elections 1974-1984

	1974	1977	1980	1984
Conservative	539	543	547	571
Labour	753	719	765	830
Liberal/Alliance	148	136	153	417
SNP	269	465	439	493
Others	207	187	122	120
Independent	644	521	426	402
Total	2559	2571	2452	2833

Table 1 shows that all of the major parties increased their numbers of candidates, but it is obvious that the major change compared with previous elections was the extensive challenge mounted by the Alliance parties. A mere 153 Liberal candidates in 1980 increased to 400 Alliance candidates in 1984.

The rise in the number of major party candidates reflects, in a small way, the fact that boundary changes increased the number of District wards from 1,124 in 1980 to 1,151 in 1984. More important is the slow, but steady incursion of party candidates into areas that have hitherto been characterised by non-Partisan local politics. After the 1980 elections we classified 32 Districts as 'Partisan' (those dominated by parties), 14 as 'non-Partisan' (those dominated by Independents) and 7 as 'Intermediate' (those in which there is significant but not dominant intervention by parties) in their form of local politics. (See J.M. Bochel and D.T. Denver, *The Scottish District Elections of 1980*, Election Studies, University of Dundee, Dundee 1980). Although the same Districts remain in the three categories it can be seen from Table 2 that the proportion of Independent candidates declined in each category between 1980 and 1984. The decline was especially marked in Intermediate Districts, but even the formerly

solidly Non-Partisan Districts had a significant number of party candidates in 1984. Overall, only 14.2 per cent of all District candidates in 1984 were Independents compared with 17.4 per cent in 1980, 20.3 per cent in 1977 and 25.2 per cent in 1974. This is a massive change in a ten year period.

TABLE 2

Percentage of Candidates Independent 1980-1984

	1980 %	1984 %
Partisan Districts (32)	4.0	3.3
Intermediate Districts (7)	54.4	41.3
Non-Partisan Districts (14)	87.8	80.4

These changes in candidatures have, of course, consequential effects on patterns of party competition at ward level and these are illustrated in Table 3 and 4. Table 3 shows firstly the proportion of wards in which only Independent or 'Other' candidates (e.g. Ecology, Communist, Independent Labour, etc.) were seeking election. This proportion remained steady from 1974 until 1984 when there was a significant fall to 17 per cent. The second feature of the Table is the decline, over the decade, in the proportion of wards in which a candidate of a major party (that is, Labour, Conservative, SNP, Liberal/SDP) faced competition from at least one Independent or 'Other' candidate, this has fallen from 13 per cent to 9 per cent. Together these two items indicate an increase in the level of party competition in Scottish local government. The third item in the Table further illustrates this increase in party competition; the proportion of wards in which at least two major party candidates opposed one another has

TABLE 3

Patterns of Competition in District Wards, 1974-1984

	1974 %	1977 %	1980 %	1984 %
Ind/Others Only	22	22	21	17
Major Party v Ind/Others	13	11	9	9
Major Party Contest	56	59	61	65
Major Party Uncontested	9	8	9	9

(N = 1110) (N = 1117) (N = 1124) (N = 1148)

increased steadily since 1974. The proportion of seats in which a major party held or gained seats unopposed has remained steady at around 9 per cent over the ten year period.

This phenomenon of increasing party activity in Scottish local elections seems likely to continue. It is largely a consequence of the 1974 reorganisation of local government which swept away small burghs and rural authorities with a tradition of Non-Partisan local politics and replaced them with larger Districts with both an urban and rural content. These are less well suited to the more intimate, personal characteristics of non-partisan politics. In addition the Conservative party has changed its attitude to participation in local government. Before 1974 the task of opposing Labour was, for the most part, left to an assortment of ratepayers, moderates, progressives, etc. as well as Independents. Since 1974 the Tories have increasingly taken up the challenge themselves. As their base in urban areas contracts it seems likely that they will seek to retain a substantial foothold in local government by replacing Independents in Non-Partisan Districts. Certainly, since 1974 the number of Conservative candidates has consistently increased. Similarly, the SNP and the Alliance parties have, for much the same reasons, increased the numbers of their candidates. Labour, which already dominates the larger Districts, is in the comfortable position of seeking new worlds to conquer.

It is now only in small (in population) authorities on the periphery of Scotland – the Highlands, Borders and Dumfries and Galloway – that Non-Partisan politics predominates; but even here there was, in 1984, a significant decline in the number of Independent, and an increase in the number of party, candidates.

It is not only the increasing partisanship in District elections that is a feature of 1984. Table 4 demonstrates a major change in the nature of major party contests. Not many years ago the British party system was considered to be an archetypal two-party system. It is true that in the first (1974) District elections two-party, Conservative v Labour contests were the most common, but even then they accounted for less than two-fifths of party contests. By 1977 three-party, Conservative v Labour v SNP contests were the commonest and there were almost as many Labour v SNP contests as there were Conservative v Labour. This, broadly speaking remained the position in 1980.

In 1984 however, with the Liberal/SDP Alliance mounting a major challenge, the situation changed. For the first time fewer than half of party contests were straight fights (40 per cent) and only 12 per cent were single Conservative v Labour contests. The proportion of three-way contests

TABLE 4

Party Contests in District Wards 1974-1984

	1974	1977	1980	1984
	%	%	%	%
Two-Way Contests				
Conservative v Labour	39	24	26	12
Labour v SNP	20	22	23	16
Others	9	10	9	12
All Two-Way	<u>68</u>	<u>56</u>	<u>58</u>	<u>40</u>
Three-Way Contests	%	%	%	%
Conservative v Labour v SNP	17	30	26	17
Conservative v Labour v Lib/All	13	5	8	15
Others	1	2	2	7
All Three-Way	<u>31</u>	<u>37</u>	<u>36</u>	<u>39</u>
Four-Way Contests	%	%	%	%
Con v Lab v Lib/All v SNP	3	6	6	21

increased to 39 per cent mainly because of a sharp rise in the number of Conservative v Labour v Alliance confrontations. Even more striking is the increase in the proportion of four-way contests. This was 3 per cent in 1974, and 6 per cent in 1977 and 1980. In 1984 more than 20 per cent of party contests involved all four parties. At least insofar as candidates are concerned the 1984 elections confirmed the increasing complexity of the Scottish party system demonstrated by the results of the 1983 General election.

The increased level of party competition in 1984 resulted in an increase in the proportion of wards contested from 74 per cent to 78 per cent despite the fact that, following boundary changes, the number of wards had increased and thus more candidates had to be found. Table 5 shows the percentage of wards contested at each set of District elections since 1974 with separate figures for the Partisan, Non-Partisan and Intermediate Districts referred to earlier.

In Partisan Districts the proportion of wards contested has remained consistently high since reorganisation and is increasing – to a record 92 per

TABLE 5

Percentage of District Wards Contested 1974-1984

	1974	1977	1980	1984
	%	%	%	%
Scotland	80	78	74	78
Partisan Districts (32)	88	88	90	92
Intermediate Districts (7)	53	61	49	59
Non-Partisan Districts (14)	61	47	27	36

cent in 1984. The figures for Intermediate and Non-Partisan Districts are distinctly more variable. After an initial surge of enthusiasm in 1974, the latter have never had more than half of their wards contested and despite an improvement in 1984 only 36 per cent of wards were contested. If the incursion of parties into these Districts continues, however, fewer wards are likely to remain uncontested.

As in previous elections, Independents were the major beneficiaries of unopposed returns in 1984 (Table 6). Labour consistently wins more seats unopposed than the other parties.

TABLE 6

Winning Party in Uncontested Wards 1974-1984

	1974	1977	1980	1984
Conservative	23	41	29	22
Labour	73	42	61	64
Liberal/Alliance	1	3	7	7
SNP	4	7	6	8
Independent	122	154	184	145
Others	–	–	3	1
Total	223	247	290	247

Turnout

Levels of turnout at local elections are notoriously low. Table 7 shows that the trend of declining turnout that we have noted in previous years continued in 1984, albeit at a slower pace. The smallest decline since reorganisation may owe something to increased party competition, but

TABLE 7

Turnout at District Elections 1974-1984

1974	1977	1980	1984
%	%	%	%
51.4	47.8	45.7	44.4

the position is far from healthy. As usual, there are considerable variations in turnout between and within Regions. Again Grampian Region as a whole had the lowest turnout at 35 per cent, not one of its five Districts polled as much as 40 per cent of the electorate. Only two other Districts, Roxburgh and Wigtown, fell below 40 per cent. The Central Region continued to top the turnout league with 48.4 per cent and within it, Stirling polled 54 per cent – by far the highest for any District in which all seats were contested.

There is no ready explanation for consistently low or relatively high turnout in some areas. Patterns and styles of party activity are fairly uniform throughout the country and some wider social-cultural explanations have to be sought.

The Performance of the Parties

Table 8 shows the share of the votes obtained by each party at each set of District elections since 1974. As we have cautioned in previous analyses

TABLE 8

Party Shares of the Votes 1974-1984

	1974	1977	1980	1984	Change 1980-84
	%	%	%	%	
Con	26.8	27.2	24.1	21.4	-2.7
Labour	38.4	31.6	45.4	45.7	+0.3
Lib/All	5.0	4.0	6.2	12.8	+6.6
SNP	12.4	24.2	15.5	11.7	-3.8
Ind	14.1	9.8	6.7	6.8	+0.1

of local election results, these are 'raw' figures which take no account of variations in the number of candidates of each party or unopposed returns. Nonetheless the message of the figures is clear. In 1984 the Conservatives, despite a record number of candidates, fell back to their lowest level of

support at local level since the reorganisation of local government in 1974. This was, indeed, the poorest Conservative performance at any nationwide election in Scotland for many years (certainly since 1974, probably since 1945). In contrast, Labour polled marginally better, despite greatly increased competition, and from an already high base, than they did in 1980. This was their best local election performance since reorganisation and their highest nationwide share of the vote since the 1966 General election. Despite an increase of 6.7 percentage points in their share of the vote the Alliance performance must have been a disappointment to them. They put forward 264 more candidates than in 1980, but although their share of the vote doubled the return was relatively poor. The figures seem to confirm the electoral decline of the SNP who, like the Conservatives, recorded their poorest performance since 1974.

As might be expected the decline in Independent and Other candidatures noted earlier is accompanied by a shrinking in their share of the vote from 17.5 per cent ten years ago to 8.4 per cent in 1984.

A more precise indication of trends in major party support in Scotland is given in Table 9 which shows the distribution of votes among the four parties in wards which had four-party contests, compared with the result of

TABLE 9

Trends in Major Party Support in Scotland

	Regional Election 1982 %	General Election 1983 %	District Election 1984 %
Conservative	27.8	28.5	25.8
Labour	38.9	35.2	45.9
Liberal/Alliance	23.3	24.6	17.5
SNP	10.0	11.8	10.8

the General election of 1983 and four-party contests in the Regional elections of 1982. On the basis of these figures the broad trends apparent in Table 7 are confirmed. There has clearly been a very substantial Labour recovery in Scotland accompanied by a decline in the fortunes of the Conservatives and a significant diminution in the attraction of the Alliance.

It is very obvious that the impression of intense party competition conveyed by an analysis of candidatures is not reflected in party support.

What we seem to have is a four-party system in which one party (Labour) is predominant, one (Conservative) is a moderate challenger and two (Alliance and SNP) are really minor challengers.

Support for this interpretation is found in a consideration of the number of seats won by parties in the 1984 District elections, details of which are given in Table 10. We have noted in the past that the first-past-the-post system produces distortions in the relationship between votes

TABLE 10

District Council Seats Won 1974-1984

	1974	1977	1980	1984	Change 1980-84
Conservative	241	277	229	189	-40
Labour	428	299	494	545	+51
Liberal/Alliance	17	31	40	78	+38
SNP	62	170	54	59	+5
Independent	345	318	289	267	-22
Others	17	22	18	11	-7
Total	1110	1117	1124	1149*	

* There were no candidates in three wards.

and seats. Parties doing well in terms of the popular vote gain a bonus in seats. Labour, as the predominant party in Scotland, tends to obtain more seats in Parliamentary and local elections than its share of the votes suggests it should. But in 1984 the bias in the electoral system did not distort Labour's share of the seats by much, especially when we remember that they took 64 seats unopposed for which no votes are counted. They advanced to 545 seats (47.3 per cent of the total from 45.7 per cent of the vote). By contrast the Conservatives gathered only 189 seats (16 per cent of the total from 21.4 per cent of the vote), by far their worst performance under the new system. Both the Alliance and the SNP made advances in the number of seats won, but they were even more severely punished by the electoral system. With 13 and 12 per cent of the votes respectively they won only 7 and 6 per cent of the seats.

With 267 seats won, Independents also had their worst election since reorganisation, but because of the number of seats won without a contest (mostly wards with small electorates) the decline in the proportion of seats they won (to 23 per cent) is less marked than their decline in votes (to 6.8

per cent).

The consequences of these changes in seats won was to increase further Labour's hold on power at local level in Scotland. Party control of the 53 seats is now as follows:

1. Majority Labour Control (25)

Aberdeen	Clackmannan	Monklands
Dundee	Stirling	Motherwell
Kirkcaldy	Falkirk	Hamilton
Dunfermline	Dumbarton	East Kilbride
West Lothian	Glasgow	Renfrew

2. Majority Conservative Control (4)

Berwickshire	Kyle and Carrick
Bearsden and Milngavie	Eastwood

3. Majority Alliance Control (1)

North East Fife

4. Majority SNP Control (1)

Angus

5. Majority Independent Control (16)

Caithness	Ettrick and Lauderdale	Tweeddale
Sutherland	Argyll and Bute	Badenoch and Strathspey
Ross and Cromarty	Nairn	Wigtown
Skye and Lochalsh	Moray	Stewartry
Lochaber	Kincardine and Deeside	Annandale and Eskdale
		Inverness

6. No Overall Control (largest party in brackets) (6)

Banff and Buchan (Ind.)	Clydesdale (Lab.)
Nithsdale (Con.-SNP-Ind.)	Roxburgh (Ind.)
Perth and Kinross (Con.)	Gordon (Ind.)

A comparison of the pattern of control of the 53 Districts in 1980 and 1984 is given in Table 11.

Labour lost control of Kyle and Carrick to the Conservatives but

gained Edinburgh and Stirling (where in 1980 they formed the largest party). The result is that Labour now controls authorities containing 74 per cent of the Scottish electorate. The Conservatives are now in charge of only four small authorities containing 5 per cent of the Scottish electorate. It is worth noting too that the number of authorities where Independents hold a majority of seats has slipped from 20 to 16 and these contain only 10 per cent of the electorate.

TABLE 11

Party Control of Districts

	1980	1984
Majority Labour Control	24	25
Majority Conservative Control	5	4
Majority Lib/Alliance Control	0	1
Majority SNP Control	0	1
Majority Independent Control	20	16
No Overall Control	4	6

Conclusion

Five major points can be made in conclusion to this analysis of the 1984 District elections in Scotland.

1. There continues to be an advance on the part of political parties at local level in Scotland. There were fewer Independent candidates than ever before; they gained a smaller share of the votes and fewer seats.
2. The Labour party has made a substantial recovery since the General election. They gained more votes and more seats and control more authorities than ever.
3. The Conservative party is in a weaker position in Scotland than it has been in living memory.
4. The SNP are at a lower ebb than they have been since their dramatic arrival on the Scottish electoral scene in the 1960s.
5. The Alliance failed to make a major impact upon the Scottish electorate in 1984. Despite their increase in votes and seats the Alliance do not look like shaking the party system in Scotland.

When commenting upon the results of the Scottish Regional elections in 1982 we asked in our title whether Scotland was heading 'towards a four-

party system'. The results of the 1984 District elections suggest that there is indeed a four-party system but not one of four equals. Rather, as we indicated earlier, it is now a system in which a dominant party is challenged to some extent by one other and to a small extent by two others.