

**THE SCOTTISH DISTRICT ELECTIONS OF 1988**

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The Scottish District Elections held on 5th May 1988 were the first electoral test for the parties in Scotland since the 1987 general election. In that election voting behaviour in Scotland deviated even more sharply from that in the rest of the country than hitherto. Whilst the Conservatives more or less held their own and Labour failed to make headway elsewhere, in Scotland Conservative support slumped to only 24 percent of the vote and they won only ten of the seventy-two seats – their worst performance ever. From an already strong position Labour advanced to 42.4 percent of the vote and won fifty seats; the SNP made a modest recovery (14 percent of the vote and three seats), and the Alliance slipped back to 19.2 percent of the vote while increasing its tally of seats to nine.

After their 1987 debacle the Conservatives sought to go on the offensive in Scotland. A review of party organisation was undertaken and radical changes were implemented. Scottish ministers and Mrs Thatcher herself began to preach aggressively the relevance of Thatcherism for Scotland. Few, if any policy changes seemed to be contemplated. The party remained firmly anti-devolutionist and the obviously unpopular poll-tax or community charge was to go ahead first in Scotland. The latter became the central issue in the 1988 local election campaign. One year was too short a time to see any significant results from the reform of party organisation or attempts to change political attitudes in Scotland. So the local elections became, to a large extent, a chance for Scots to pronounce a verdict on the proposed tax.

For the former Alliance parties the elections were also an important test. The formation of the Social and Liberal Democrats from the former Liberal party and a section of the SDP was a long and rather messy business, and inevitably support in the opinion polls for the new party fell compared with that for the former Alliance. Time was short for the new party to expect to make headway in the local elections. For the SLD, then, a holding operation must have been the most optimistic aspiration.

Having made some progress in the 1987 general election, the SNP was subsequently encouraged by good figures in Scottish opinion polls and some successes in local by-elections. It was vigorously opposed to the poll-tax and, unlike Labour, it was relatively united in its policy of non-payment as a means of resistance. The SNP had grounds for expecting to consolidate

and advance upon its 1987 performance.

As ever, the Labour party could only hope to maintain its position in these elections. Since the reorganisation of Scottish local government in 1974, Labour had established a position of overwhelming predominance in the Regions and Districts. After the 1984 district elections Labour-controlled authorities contained three-quarters of the Scottish electorate, and in the 1987 general election it won almost 70 per cent of the constituencies. Clearly something extra-ordinary needs to happen to threaten Labour domination of Scottish politics.

Local elections are not, however, simply gigantic opinion polls recording voters' current preferences amongst the parties, although this is a legitimate view of them. These elections do decide who runs local affairs and, in these days of seemingly perpetual conflict between central and local government, and despite the limits placed on the discretion of local authorities, that is important. Local elections are also of intrinsic interest to those concerned with the developing patterns of party competition, electoral participation and trends in party support in Scotland. It is these themes that we wish to pursue in what follows.

**Forms of Local Politics**

We have in the past distinguished Scottish districts by the level of party competition in them. We identified three categories viz. (a) Partisan districts, in which party competition is the norm and councils are run on party lines, (b) Non-partisan districts, in which Independents predominate and (c) Mixed or Intermediate districts which fall between the first two categories. Table 1 presents our categorisation of the fifty-three districts for the five sets of elections since 1974.

**TABLE 1**  
**Forms of Local Politics in Scottish Districts 1974-88**

	1974	1977	1980	1984	1988
Partisan Districts	27	26	32	34	34
Mixed Districts	9	14	7	6	9
Non-Partisan Districts	17	13	14	13	10

Reorganisation resulted in much greater party interest and involvement in local elections than before and the level of partisanship has grown steadily since 1974. The number of purely non-partisan districts has fallen to only ten, and these are very small (in terms of population) and on the geographical periphery.

Candidates

Table 2 presents the number of candidates put forward by the different parties and groups at each set of district elections. 1988 showed the continuation of an upward trend which produced over 3,000 for the first time. The increase is entirely attributable to the growing involvement of the parties and indicates that, in this respect at least, local democracy is in good health.

**TABLE 2**  
**Number of Candidates 1974-1988**

	1974	1977	1980	1984	1988
Conservatives	539	543	547	571	626
Labour	753	719	765	830	870
Lib/Alliance/SLD	148	136	153	417	333
SNP	269	465	439	493	769
Independent	644	521	426	402	373
Others	207	187	122	122	159
<b>Total</b>	<b>2560</b>	<b>2571</b>	<b>2452</b>	<b>2835</b>	<b>3130</b>

One of the weaknesses of Conservative organisation at local level in Scotland was the relatively low number of candidates they put forward at district and regional elections. This had a knock-on effect at Parliamentary elections because the local electoral machines were at best rusty and sometimes non-existent. Efforts were obviously made to remedy this and as a consequence they fielded a record number of candidates in 1988. The hope was not only to revive local organisation, but also to have as many candidates as possible to spread the Conservative message. Although Labour could hardly expect to improve upon the number of district councils it controlled, encouraged by some good results in unlikely places at the general election, it sought to improve its performance in some hitherto hostile territory. As a consequence it also fielded a record number of candidates. The SNP clearly perceived that its fortunes were on an upturn, morale had improved and so it was easier to attract candidates. These factors led to a spectacular increase in the number of candidates (+276) and for the first time the SNP had more than the Conservatives. The break-up of the Alliance and the recent fraught birth of the SLD resulted in the new party putting forward fewer candidates (333) than the combined Alliance total in 1984 (417). It was still a creditable effort when we note that about half of the decline reflects our decision to treat the SDP (Continuing) candidates in 1988 as 'others'.

Overall, big increases in the number of candidates were recorded in Grampian (+85) and in Fife (+57) where all four major parties advanced

upon their 1984 figures. Strathclyde had more candidates too (+67) largely because of a major increase in SNP intervention (+90). The total number of candidates rose in every region except Tayside which was the only one where the number of Conservative aspirants fell.

The Conservatives seem to have a major problem in attracting candidates in Central region where the SLD is also very weak as it is in Tayside and Strathclyde.

The decline in the number of Independent candidates continues unabated, as it has since 1974. Table 3 shows that they now constitute a tiny minority in partisan districts. In non-partisan districts Independent candidates were formerly in a near-monopolistic position, but in the last two sets of elections the major parties have made quite large incursions. In mixed districts the intervention of parties in 1988 was very substantial and Independents declined to less than half of all candidates. It seems likely that in these districts there will be a slow but steady move towards partisan local politics.

**TABLE 3**  
**Independents as a proportion of All Candidates 1974-1988**

	1974	1977	1980	1984	1988
Partisan Districts (34)	10.7	7.1	5.1	3.3	3.0
Mixed Districts (9)	73.7	72.7	64.8	62.1	44.3
Non-Partisan Districts (10)	92.0	92.1	97.0	86.5	72.0
All Districts	25.2	20.3	17.4	14.2	11.9

**Uncontested Elections and Party Competition**

Uncontested returns have long been unheard of in parliamentary elections, and indeed, with the exception of Ulster, it is normal for the major parties to nominate candidates in all constituencies. But uncontested elections still persist at local level. Two major factors may account for this. Firstly there is the sheer number of wards – well over a thousand in Scottish districts – for which candidates must be found. Finding a candidate and mounting a campaign presupposes, or should, a ward party organisation and some resources of manpower and finance. It is very doubtful whether any of our parties has a viable organisation in every ward in Scotland, and so gaps arise in party slates. Secondly, the rewards of local government are few and the costs, in time, career prospects and disruption to family life are not inconsiderable. Of course many people do wish to serve as local councillors, and some even claim to enjoy campaigning in elections. But very often calls upon party loyalty and the promised support of the party machine are required to persuade party members to stand as candidates. There are, however, no such pressures for Independents and self-motivation

is becoming increasingly rare. Parties do, however, have incentives to contest seats even where they have no prospects of winning. Headquarters are likely to argue that the electoral machine requires exercise, that party supporters should have a candidate to vote for, that the maximisation of the vote on a national scale is now important as a measure of party strength and so on. If electoral competition is good, then partisan politics contributes to a healthy political system.

Table 4 demonstrates that electoral competition is thriving. Overall the proportion of wards contested in 1988 was the largest since reorganisation but competition is uneven. Partisan districts have had a large and growing proportion of contests, but after an initial increase in competition in 1974 non-partisan districts have never had more than forty percent of wards contested; mixed districts have had an inconsistent level of competition, but 1988 saw a sharp increase to almost three-quarters of the wards contested.

**TABLE 4**  
Percentage of Wards Contested 1974-1988

	1974	1977	1980	1984	1988
	%	%	%	%	%
All Districts	79.5	77.9	74.0	78.3	86.1
Partisan	86.3	88.0	88.3	91.3	95.9
Mixed	64.3	51.9	43.6	52.2	73.3
Non-Partisan	53.8	36.6	20.7	27.5	40.0

The form that these contests have taken is shown in Table 5. The most significant long-term change has been the steady increase in major party contests and this accelerated sharply in 1988. Almost three-quarters of all district wards had contested elections involving two or more of the major parties compared with just over half in 1974. Wards in which the major parties were entirely absent declined to twelve percent of the total. In 1988 too, there was a marked decline in the number of wards in which a major party candidate was returned unopposed.

**TABLE 5**  
Patterns of Competition in District Wards 1974-88

	1974	1977	1980	1984	1988
	%	%	%	%	%
Ind/Others only	22	22	21	17	12
Major Party v Ind/Others	13	11	9	9	9
Major Party Contested	56	59	61	65	74
Major Party Uncontested	9	8	9	9	5

Another aspect of competition patterns is shown in Table 6. More than

ninety percent of all the wards in partisan districts had major party contests. The spread of party activity is illustrated by the fact that even in non-partisan districts thirty percent of wards had at least one major party candidate.

**TABLE 6**  
Patterns of Competition in Partisan, Mixed and Non-Partisan Districts 1988

	All Districts	Partisan	Mixed	Non-Partisan
	%	%	%	%
Ind/Others only	12	*	27	70
Major Party v Ind/Others	9	4	33	14
Major Party Contested	74	92	31	9
Major Party Uncontested	5	4	9	7

\* = less than 1%

The changing nature of party contests is illustrated in Table 7. Two-way contests, which were far and away the most common in 1974, have declined pretty steadily and significantly. In particular, straight fights between Labour and the Conservatives, which were again the most common, are now relatively rare. The increase in Conservative v. Labour v. SNP contests is a direct function of the larger number of SNP candidates. This also explains why, despite the fall in the number of SLD candidates, the proportion of four-way contests reached a high point of twenty-three per cent of contests in 1988.

**TABLE 7**  
Selected Types of Party Contests in District Wards 1974-1988

	1974	1977	1980	1984	1988
	%	%	%	%	%
<b>Two-way Contests</b>					
Con. v Lab.	39	24	26	12	6
Lab. v SNP	20	22	23	16	23
Others	9	10	9	12	8
All Two-way	68	56	58	40	37
<b>Three-way Contests</b>					
Con. v Lab. v SNP	17	30	26	17	26
Con. v Lab. v Lib/All/SLD	13	5	8	15	5
Others	1	2	2	7	5
All Three-way	31	37	36	39	36
<b>Four-way Contests</b>					
Con. v Lab. v Lib/All/SLD v SNP	3	6	6	21	23

In 1988 the steady, and now very significant, trend towards a complex and competitive four party system continued in relation to candidacies. The nomination of candidates is but one aspect of elections however: harvesting of votes and their conversion into seats is quite another as we demonstrate below.

**Trends in Party Support**

Table 8 shows the distribution of votes at all district elections between 1974 and 1988. These are 'raw' figures which do not take account of the number of candidates put forward by the different parties or groups.

**TABLE 8**  
**Party Share of Votes in Scottish Districts 1974-1988**

	1974	1977	1980	1984	1988
	%	%	%	%	%
Conservative	26.8	27.2	24.1	21.4	19.4
Labour	38.4	31.6	45.4	45.7	42.6
Lib/All/SDL	5.0	4.0	6.2	12.8	8.4
SNP	12.4	24.2	15.5	11.7	21.3
Independent	14.1	9.8	6.7	6.8	6.4
Others	3.4	3.3	2.2	1.6	2.0

On these data the Conservatives dropped to their lowest level of support ever in district elections and the same can be said of their results in 1980 and 1984. On this occasion too, the Conservatives were pushed into third place by the SNP which improved its share of the vote by almost ten percentage points compared with 1984. The SLD emerged in a position half-way between the Alliance performance in 1984 and the Liberals' in 1980. Although there was a small decline in Labour's share of the vote its dominance was hardly dented. In three successive sets of district elections it has had around twice the number of votes obtained by the next placed party.

An analysis of the distribution of party support in the three categories of districts (Table 9) reveals, not surprisingly, that the results in partisan districts closely reflect the overall figures, with a nine point rise in SNP support, a five point fall for the SLD and small decreases for Labour and the Conservatives. There is distinctly more variation in mixed and non-partisan districts, but in both the Independents suffered sharp declines and the SNP made its largest gains, benefitting as it did from its increased number of candidates in these districts.

As we have cautioned before, the varying patterns of candidatures and the number of uncontested divisions can significantly affect the levels of party support. More precise and probably more reliable estimates of the

**TABLE 9**  
**Party Share of Votes in Three Categories of Scottish Districts 1984-1988**

	Partisan Districts			Mixed Districts			Non-Partisan Districts		
	1984	1988	change	1984	1988	change	1984	1988	change
Conservative	22.2	20.7	-1.5	11.6	8.6	-3.0	-	4.1	+4.1
Labour	48.0	46.1	-1.9	9.3	9.9	+0.6	9.3	7.5	-1.8
Lib/All/SLD	13.2	8.2	-5.0	8.8	12.6	+3.8	0.9	2.5	+1.6
SNP	12.0	21.2	+9.2	8.2	25.1	+16.9	2.6	15.1	+12.5
Independent	3.0	2.2	-0.8	60.9	42.7	-18.2	87.2	68.9	-18.3
Others	1.7	1.6	-0.1	1.1	1.2	+0.1	-	1.9	+1.9

ebb and flow of support can be obtained by examining those wards in which the pattern of candidatures was identical in two successive elections.

In Table 10 we report the results in three types of contest, those in which the four main parties all nominated candidates, contests in which there were Conservative, Labour and SNP candidates and those in which there were straight fights between Labour and the SNP. The results in the four-way contests confirm that there was a genuine increase in support for the SNP. The overall figures are not simply an artifact of increased SNP candidacies. By the same token there was 'real' decline in SLD support. An

**TABLE 10**  
**Changes in Party Share of Votes in Selected Types of Contests 1984-1988**

Four-way Contests (82)	1984	1988	Change
	%	%	
Conservatives	29.1	27.6	-1.5
Labour	41.3	41.3	-
All/SLD	21.6	14.2	-7.3
SNP	8.0	16.8	+8.8
Two-way Contests (66)	1984	1988	Change
	%	%	
Conservatives	24.4	19.7	-4.7
Labour	57.5	51.9	-5.6
SNP	18.1	28.5	+10.4
Two-way Contests (69)	1984	1988	Change
	%	%	
Labour	64.0	59.7	-4.3
SNP	36.0	40.3	+4.3

analysis of the three way contests leads to the same conclusion, with the SNP advancing, apparently at the expense of Labour and the Conservatives. A study of two-way contests shows that Labour lost ground to the SNP. Together these data which, it should be remembered, control for the number of candidates, enable us to say with confidence that the 1988 district elections saw a marked revival in support for the SNP and a decline for the SLD. Conservative support fell a little from an already pitifully small base, and Labour at best stood still, but suffered a slight decline overall. The comfort for Labour was that the small loss it suffered was in relation to a record performance in 1984 and that its remarkable dominance of local government in Scotland was not in any immediate danger of erosion.

**Council Seats Won**

Labour's dominance in terms of votes has also brought a rich harvest of seats won. It advanced to (yet another) new record with almost twice as many seats as the next largest grouping, the Independents, and more than three times the number of the Conservatives. The Conservatives now hold fewer seats than at any time since reorganisation in 1974. The SNP, in line with the improvement in its share of the vote, nearly doubled its tally of seats, although this is still a long way from its 1977 performance. More surprisingly, despite a reduced share of the vote, the SLD came out of the election with an increased number of seats, but this was entirely due to their success in two small districts, Gordon (+8) and Annandale and Eskdale (+4). The decline in Independent representation continued and they now have one third fewer seats than they had fourteen years ago. (Table 11).

**TABLE 11**  
**District Council Seats Won 1974-1988**

	1974	1977	1980	1984	1988
Conservatives	241	277	229	189	162
Labour	428	299	494	545	553
Lib/All/SLD	17	31	40	78	84
SNP	62	170	54	59	113
Independent	345	318	289	267	231
Others	17	22	18	11	11
<b>Total</b>	<b>1110</b>	<b>1117</b>	<b>1124</b>	<b>1149*</b>	<b>1154**</b>

\* no nomination in three wards  
\*\* no nomination in three wards

The effects that changes in seats won between 1984 and 1988 had on party control in individual districts are shown in Table 12. Labour gained majority control in two districts (Clydesdale and Kyle and Carrick) but lost

their majority in three others (Stirling, Dumbarton and Cumbernauld and Kilsyth). The Conservatives lost one of the four districts they controlled, (Kyle and Carrick) to Labour. The SLD added control of Gordon to North East Fife while the SNP gained Angus. Independents lost their majority in four districts (Moray, Kincardine and Deeside, Annandale and Eskdale and Inverness), but regained a majority in two others (Banff and Buchan and Roxburgh).

**TABLE 12**  
**Party Control in Districts 1984-1988**

	1984	1988
<b>Majority Control</b>		
Labour	25	24
Conservative	4	3
All/SLD	1	2
SNP	1	1
Independent	16	14
<b>No Overall Control</b>	<b>6</b>	<b>9</b>
<b>Total</b>	<b>53</b>	<b>53</b>

Party control of the 53 districts is now as follows:

**Party Control of the 53 Scottish Districts 1988**

**Majority Labour Control (24)**

Aberdeen	Midlothian	Strath	Renfrew
Dundee	East Lothian	Monklands	Inverclyde
Kirkcaldy	Clackmannan	Motherwell	Cunninghame
Dunfermline	Falkirk	Hamilton	Kilmarnock & Loudoun
West Lothian	Glasgow	East Kilbride	Kyle & Carrick
Edinburgh	Clydebank	Clydesdale	Cumnock & Doon Valley

**Majority Conservative Control (3)**

Berwickshire	Bearsden & Milngavie	Eastwood
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**Majority SLD Control (2)**

North East Fife	Gordon
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**Majority SNP Control (1)**

Angus
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**Majority Independent Control (14)**

Caithness	Badenoch & Strathspey	Roxburgh
Sutherland	Ettrick & Lauderdale	Argyll & Bute
Ross & Cromarty	Banff & Buchan	Wigtown
Skye & Lochalsh	Tweeddale	Lochaber
Stewartry	Nairn	

**No Overall Control (largest party in brackets) (9)**

Inverness (Ind)	Perth & Kinross (Con)	Cumbernauld (Lab/SNP)
Moray (SNP/Ind)	Stirling (Con/Lab)	Nithsdale (Lab)
Kincardine/Deeside (Ind)	Dunbarton (Lab)	Annandale/Eskdale (SLD)

**Conclusion**

Local government throughout Britain is very much on the defensive just now. Councils see their powers diminishing, the range of services they administer contracting, their discretion over financial and other matters limited and, in Scotland at least, a question mark put over the entire structure.

In the circumstances it is surprising and encouraging to be able to observe that, in some important respects, the system of local government in Scotland is healthy and buoyant. A record number of candidates was willing to be nominated in 1988; the proportion of wards contested was at its highest since reorganisation in 1974 and so more electors than ever before had a choice of candidates; not only did more electors have a choice, their range of choice was also greater with major parties contesting almost three quarters of the seats. In addition, although we have not the space to go into detail, the number of women candidates and councillors continued to increase and turnout showed a modest but welcome rise. The inexorable advance of partisan politics is a more controversial 'gain', but its beneficial side effects are obvious. It has increased electoral competition in many areas and has, as a consequence, increased responsibility and accountability in a number of districts because, when electors have to give a verdict on a council's stewardship over the previous four years they can reward or punish the party that has administered the affairs of the district.

For good or ill local election results are scrutinised for what they might reveal about the electoral standing of the parties. The overall figures show that, despite the Conservative reorganisation of their machinery, their largest ever number of candidates and a formidable rhetorical counter-attack attempting to explain the advantages of Thatcherism for Scotland, their support continued to decline and they fell into third place in the popular vote. Labour, which has dominance in Parliamentary and local politics in Scotland did not lapse into complacency, it fought and won a

record number of seats and its share of the vote remained at the high point attained in the 1987 general election. The SNP, which fielded its largest ever number of candidates, made more progress than any other of the main parties; its share of the vote (which put it ahead of the Conservatives), and the number of seats won was the highest since 1977, although these still fell some way short of the figures obtained then. It still controls only one District council, but of most potential significance perhaps, was the relatively good, but patchy performance of the SNP in Labour's heartland, the central belt. It has been there before, of course, and has not sustained its gains, and there is nothing about the current political climate which suggest that long-term change beneficial to the SNP is in prospect. Given the handicaps it faced the new SLD fought a commendable number of seats; its share of the vote (compared with the Alliance share in 1984) fell quite sharply, but it ended up with the largest number of seats won by the Liberals or the Alliance since reorganisation and added Gordon to North East Fife as districts that it controlled.

It is always difficult for an observer to determine with any confidence what the main issues are in any election or to divine what the electors are 'trying to say' when they vote. There is little agreement amongst the parties during a campaign about what they regard as the main issues, and their interpretations of the electors' verdict are perhaps even more varied. If, as we suggested earlier, these elections were some kind of judgement on the poll tax, then this innovation was overwhelmingly rejected. Equally, if they were an opportunity to show approval of Thatcherism as promoted by a newly aggressive Conservative party in Scotland, then the approval was clearly not given. The poll tax was indubitably an issue and an appropriate one, but local elections are, above all and properly, an opportunity for electors to pass judgement on the way in which their districts have been run over the previous four years. If this is indeed the case, then the results of the 1987 District elections can be read as a generous endorsement of the performance of the great majority of Labour councils. Labour's vote held, it won more seats than ever before and controls twenty-four of the thirty-four partisan districts in Scotland.

Probably no single interpretation of the results is correct, but it is probably not unfair to assess them as a muted, but pretty emphatic vote of confidence in our system of local government and in the people who run it.

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