OPINION POLLS IN SCOTLAND

August 1988 to July 1989

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Voting Intentions

The remarkable calm in the fortunes of the Parties during 1987-88 was disrupted by political events during 1988-89, above all by the ructions of the Govan by-election in November 1988, and by the continuing slide in support for the Scottish Liberal Democrats.

The MORI polls (figure 1), which are less frequent than those of System 3, but cover more issues in depth, chart the rise of the SNP to second place behind Labour. This rise is especially noticeable in the last few months of 1988, coinciding with Jim Sillar's remarkable victory at Govan, and in the MORI poll this support is maintained into the first quarter of 1989. The System 3 polls (figure 2), which appear monthly, on the other hand, show just how volatile Scottish political opinion is. By the turn of the year, the SNP was challenging Labour, whose support had fallen accordingly, but by mid 1989 (and, of course, following Labour's victory in Glasgow Central) Scottish opinion had reverted to the status quo of the previous August. Labour support in both polls remained in the mid 40% range, while the promised Conservative fight-back failed to materialise in spite of the problems of the SLD and the SDP in Scotland. Compared with the General Election of 1987, the Conservatives were down 2-3 percentage points, Labour up by the same amount, the SNP had risen by a dramatic 8 to 11 percentage points, and the Centre parties had fallen from 19% to a mere 8%. The good showing of the Greens in the European elections had given them 4% in the polls.

Using the MORI cross-tabulations of voting intention by social variables such as gender, social class, age and housing tenure, reveals the underlying characteristics of Scottish political opinion. The 'gender gap' continues to diminish to the extent that in-built support for the Conservatives among women has all but disappeared. In fact, Labour attracts more support from women than men, while the SNP does better among men. The SNP continues to do well among young people, though not as well as Labour, while Conservative support among the 18-24 age group stands at a mere 10% (April 1989). Among social class AB (professionals, managers and administrators), the Conservatives command 43% while Labour and the SNP take about the same support between them. The SNP continues to perform well across the social class spectrum, as does Labour although the strength of the latter's support continues to lie among manual workers. As regards housing tenure, the Conservatives have a diminishing advantage among owner-occupiers over Labour (34% to 31%), while Labour's hold over council tenants remains firm (59%).

The Government continues to have a poor reputation among the Scottish

FIGURE 1: VOTING INTENTION (MORI POLLS)

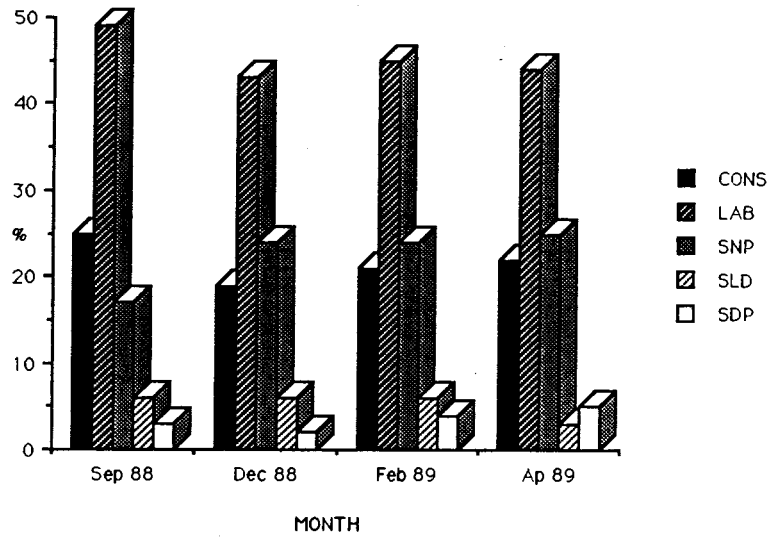
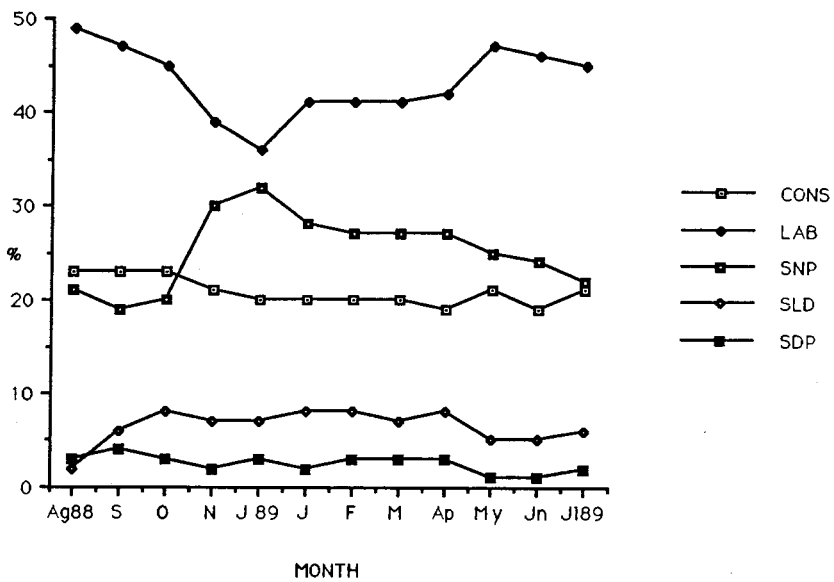


FIGURE 2: VOTING INTENTION (SYSTEM 3)



electorate, a substantial 77% of whom were dissatisfied with its performance. Mrs Thatcher's own performance was not held in high regard. 64% thought she was out of touch with ordinary people; 57% that she talked down to people; 9% that she was trustworthy; and a mere 6% that she understood Scotland's problems. 32% thought her a capable leader, and 28% that she was good in a crisis. Neil Kinnock's performance was not rated highly either, at least in comparison with Donald Dewar and even Malcom Rifkind. The tendency to give native sons (and daughters, presumably) the benefit of the doubt can be seen in the low regard Paddy Ashdown is held in contrast to David Steel when he led the Liberals.

Constitutional Options

Since its December 1988 poll, MORI have revised their constitutional options in a more meaningful way (Figure 3). Four categories were offered as follows (data refers to Feb 1989 poll):

'an independent Scotland which is separate from both England and Wales and the European Community';

'an independent Scotland which is separate from England and Wales but part of the European Community';

'Scotland remaining part of the UK but with its own devolved Assembly with some taxation and spending powers';

'no change from the present system'.

FIGURE 3: PREFERRED GOVERNMENT FOR SCOTLAND (MORI)

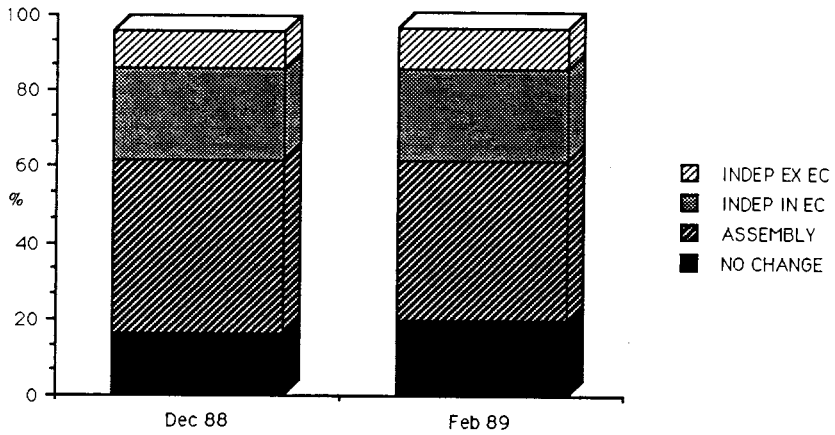


Table 1: Preferred Constitutional Option by Voting Intention

	Cons. %	Lab. %	SLD/SDP %	SNP %	All voters %
Indep ex EC	4	11	5	18	11
Indep in EC	9	25	16	42	24
Assembly	38	46	55	36	42
No Change	48	14	20	3	20
Don't Know	1	3	3	1	3
Number	206	427	91	228	1095

What these data show is a lack of close correspondence between voting intention and preferred constitutional option. Only a majority of SLD/SDP supporters plumped for the option publicly associated with the Centre parties. A minority – albeit the largest number – of supporters of all the other parties preferred their party's option. Hence, there is a significant number of Nationalists who preferred an Assembly, of Labour voters who wanted Independence, and of Tories who opted for an Assembly. Parties cannot assume that their supporters think like they do on these matters.

Nevertheless, support for some measure of Home Rule was to be found across all social classes, including class AB where an above average 27% wanted Independence within Europe (29% wanted 'no change from the present system').

The SNP was adjudged by 40% of those questioned to be the party which is best at representing Scottish interests, although, as we might expect, such an opinion varies considerably by voting intention.

The poll in April 1989 attests to considerable dissatisfaction with the present system of government in Scotland. A mere 11% of respondents thought Westminster Parliament acted in Scotland's interests, 13% that UK Ministers did so, and 21% believed the economic ties with the rest of the UK were inimical to Scotland. Only the Scottish Office and the Monarchy had more supporters than detractors on this issue.

Strong preference was given to devolved government. Only 25% chose as their ideal 'a country where most power is exercised by a strong government accountable to a UK parliament at Westminster', compared with 66% who preferred 'a country where most power is exercised through regional administrations throughout the UK accountable to directly elected bodies such as a Scottish Assembly'. Only Conservatives (at least, 59% of supporters) approved of the first option, though a substantial minority (36%) preferred the devolved one.

A majority of those questioned in April 1989 seemed to prefer a corporatist or social democratic system over a 'free market' one. Thus, only 21% saw as their ideal 'a country in which private interests and a free market economy are more important', contrasted with 71% who preferred 'a country in which public interests and a more managed economy are more important'. Support for the latter option was to be found among social class AB (59%), home owners (66%), and even a substantial

proportion of Conservatives (48%). Similar support was manifest for a collectivist over an individualistic system. 60% opted for 'a country which emphasises social and collective provision of welfare', compared with 33% who preferred 'a country where the individual is encouraged to look after him/herself'. Conservatives were more persuaded of the latter (57%) than the former (39%), but a majority of social class AB (52%) and home owners (56%) preferred the more liberal option.

The poll conducted by MORI in February 1989 sought public opinion of the recently announced Scottish Constitutional Convention. Public awareness was low, and less than half (46%) of those asked claimed to have heard of it. Knowledge of the Convention was more likely among social class AB rather than DE (63% as opposed to 39%), among men rather than women (54%, 37%), and, ironically, among Conservatives rather than Labour voters (61%, 36%). Respondents were sceptical as to whether representatives of political parties, churches, business and trade unions could actually agree a new Scottish constitution (only 30% thought it at all likely), although the Convention seemed to have the good will of the public – 53% thought that 'new arrangements' for governing Scotland would be an improvement. Only Conservative supporters thought it might make matters worse (36%) rather than better (31%). Unsurprisingly, only a majority of SNP voters (54%) thought it correct that their party had withdrawn from the Convention, although 31% thought it a mistake.

Poll Tax/Community Charge

More than three-quarters of Scots questioned in April 1989 by MORI (77%) disapproved of the Poll Tax, an increase of 7 percentage points since September 1988. A majority of home owners (63%) and of social class AB (52%) disapproved of the tax, and only a majority of Conservatives approved (63%: 33% disapproved). Despite these views, a minority (37%) supported a campaign of non-payment, although among social class DE supporters and dissenters were evenly matched at 44%. 48% of Labour voters and 49% of SNP voters supported such a campaign, a modest majority in each case. On a personal basis, few (19%) intended not paying the Poll Tax, a small decrease over the September poll, and not even Labour (21%) or SNP voters (27%) had much enthusiasm for personal non-payment.

Education

Other aspects of government policy continued to be unpopular in Scotland. Proposals to allow parents to opt their school out of local education authority control were supported by a third of those questioned. Of those questioned in the December 1988 poll, just under half (49%) opposed the plan. There did not seem to be much enthusiasm among Government supporters either, 51% supporting it. Replacing student grants with loans was even more unpopular – opposed by 65% and supported by 23%. Home owners and social class AB were opposed to the plans too (only 26% support in each case), and only 46% of Conservatives gave the plan their support.

National Health Service

The unpopularity of government plans in Scotland was also reflected in those for the National Health Service (Feb 1989). 65% thought the proposals would make the service worse, and only 11% that they would improve it (18% claimed it would make no difference). These negative views were shared by social class AB (61%), and by those over 55 (57%). Government supporters too seem unconvinced, and 33% – the

largest number of Conservatives – thought it would lead the service to deteriorate.

In broad terms, however, most people (59%) thought that the current standard of care was good (28% that it was poor). Nevertheless, the assessment of the current quality seems to have been bound up with political views, as Conservative voters gave the most favourable assessments of the NHS. Similarly, of those who thought that the government's proposals would improve the service, three-quarters rated the current standard of care good or very good.

Conclusion

There seems little in Scottish public opinion which gives much comfort to the present government. Far from the problem lying in getting its message across, its problem seems to be that its policies do not have extensive support north of the border. Although Conservative supporters do give most backing to government plans and ideologies, there is a reluctance, or a lack of enthusiasm, conveyed in their responses. Among higher social classes, home owners and other social groups who one might expect to be sympathetic to Conservative thinking, there is little evidence that this is so. Whether we are referring to specific government proposals or to the broad sweep of Conservative ideology, Scotland remains infertile soil for the current enthusiasms of the party.

Acknowledgements and Technical Details

We are indebted to *MORI* and their sponsors, *The Scotsman*, and to *System 3* and *The Glasgow Herald*, for permission to use their polls.

MORI carried out representative quota samples as follows: December 1988: 1049 adults aged 18 and over in 52 constituency sampling points throughout Scotland;
February 1989: 1095 adults aged 18 and over in 52 constituency sampling points throughout Scotland;
April 1989: 1046 adults aged 18 and over in 52 constituency sampling points throughout Scotland.

System 3 carry out monthly quota samples of around 1000 adults in 40 constituency sampling points in Scotland.