

The Scottish Parliament Elections of 2011

Report to the Electoral Commission

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Summary

- The elections were fought on the basis of revised constituency and electoral region boundaries. As a consequence, constituency electorates were more equal in size than previously.
- The number of constituency candidates declined to 321 – the smallest number in a Scottish Parliament election to date.
- Twenty-one parties or groups were represented in the regional lists together with 11 individuals.
- The SNP won 53 of the 73 constituency seats with 45.4 per cent of the votes. Labour was second (15 seats, 31.7 per cent of votes) followed by the Conservatives (3 seats and 13.9 per cent of votes) and the Liberal Democrats (2 seats and 7.9 per cent of votes).
- When the list seats were added, the SNP had an overall majority of 69 out of 129 seats. Labour had 37, the Conservatives 15, Liberal Democrats 5, Green Party 2 and an Independent 1.
- Turnout at 50.6 per cent was slightly down on the 2007 figure (53.9 per cent).
- In the 2007 election a single ballot sheet was used for both constituency and list elections and large numbers of votes were consequently rejected. In 2011, two separate ballot papers were re-introduced and rejected votes returned to minuscule proportions - 0.42 per cent of constituency ballots and 0.34 per cent of list ballots.
- Across Scotland, 558,202 postal ballots were issued amounting to 14.1 per cent of the electorate. This is the largest proportion to date.
- Almost 77 per cent of postal ballots issued were returned. Of these, 5.8 per cent were excluded from the counts because of failures relating to personal identifiers or non-inclusion of either a ballot or statement in the envelope.

Context

The 2011 Scottish Parliament elections were fought on the basis of revised constituency and electoral region boundaries prescribed by the Boundary Commission for Scotland. The old constituencies had originally been defined in the mid-1990s for Westminster elections and by 2007 they were well out of date. The electoral wards on which they were based had long disappeared and constituency boundaries bore little relation to the current - much larger - multi-member wards which had been used introduced for local elections conducted using the Single Transferable Vote system. In 2007 constituency electorates ranged from around 42,000 to almost 72,000. In the redistribution the number of constituencies remained the same but only four seats were unchanged. In terms of a commonly-used index of change (number of electors entering a constituency plus electors leaving divided by the electorate of the base constituency), five constituencies had minimal change and nine were subject to minor change. Of the remainder 13 were significantly changed, 25 had a major change and 17 could only be described as new constituencies.¹ Excluding the islands, 2011 electorates ranged from 48,000 to 65,000. The BBC and the Press Association commissioned me to provide estimates of 'notional' 2007 votes in the new constituencies and regions. These were published in advance of the election and were extensively used by the media during the campaign and in their reporting of the election results. The full report can be viewed at:

http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/shared/bsp/hi/pdfs/08_09_10_boundaryreport.pdf

A total of 321 candidates (including 291 from the four major parties and 14 independents) were nominated for the constituency contests. This compares with 334 in 2007 and is the smallest number in a Scottish Parliament (SP) election to date. In the regional list voting, 11 parties contested all eight regions and a further 10 parties or groups were represented in at least one region, together with 11 individuals as independents.

At the start of the campaign there was little indication that a remarkable result was in prospect. According to opinion polls the two major contenders, Labour and the SNP, were running neck and neck in voting intentions. Over the campaign, however, SNP support increased steadily while that for Labour declined. The Conservatives and Liberal Democrats, meanwhile, lagged well behind with the latter, in particular, looking set to do badly.

¹ Index < 1 is defined as minimal change, index 1-9.9 as minor change, index 10-24.9 as significant change, index 25-49.9 as major change and index 50+ as a new constituency.

Summary results: votes and seats

Table 1 shows the overall results of the election while Table 2 has details of changes from the previous election in 2007. In the constituency contests the main story, of course, is that the SNP won 53 of the 73 constituency seats with 45.4 per cent of the votes – a stunning victory by any standard. There was only a small decline in Labour’s vote share (-0.5) but an impressive advance (+12.5) by the SNP, producing a net swing of 6.5 per cent between the two parties. As foreshadowed in the polls, the electoral travails of the Liberal Democrats since joining the Conservatives in the coalition government at Westminster were clearly reflected in these results. Their share of the vote slumped to just 7.9 per cent (-8.3) and they ended up winning only the two remote constituencies of Orkney and Shetland (which are also very small in terms of electorate size). The Conservatives fell back a bit (-2.7) to 13.9 per cent in the constituency contests but won three seats (Ayr; Ettrick, Roxburgh & Berwickshire; Galloway & West Dumfries).

Table 1

The Distribution of Votes and Seats in Scotland 2011

	Constituencies		Regional Lists		Total Seats
	Share of Votes %	Seats Won	Share of Votes %	Seats Won	
Conservative	13.9	3	12.4	12	15
Labour	31.7	15	26.3	22	37
Lib Dem	7.9	2	5.2	3	5
SNP	45.4	53	44.0	16	69
Green	-	-	4.4	2	2
Independents	0.6	0	1.2	1	1
Others	0.5	0	6.5	0	0

Table 2

Changes in the Distribution of Votes and Seats 2007-11

	Constituencies		Regional Lists		Total Seats
	Share of Votes %	Seats Won	Share of Votes	Seats Won	
Conservative	-2.7	-3	-1.5	-1	-4
Labour	-0.5	-20	-2.9	+12	-8
Lib Dem	-8.3	-9	-6.1	-3	-12
SNP	+12.5	+32	+13.0	-9	+23
Green	-	-	+0.4	+1	+1
Independents	-0.6	0	+0.2	0	0
Others	-0.4	0	-3.0	0	0

Note: Seat changes from 2007 are in relation to the ‘notional’ winners in the new constituencies and regions created by the Boundary Commission for Scotland.

In the list voting, the SNP contrived to hold on to almost all of its big vote in the constituency contests and won most votes in every region. As a consequence, the party added 16 list seats to the 53 constituencies already won. Even in the North East region, where the SNP won all ten constituencies, an additional seat was won on the basis of list voting. In contrast, Labour’s list vote was significantly poorer than its performance in the constituency contests. Nonetheless, the party’s failure to win many constituencies meant that it picked up more list seats than usual. The Conservative decline in the list voting was smaller than in the constituencies and they took 12 seats. As in the constituencies, the biggest losers in the list voting were the Liberal Democrats who won only three list seats. The Green Party’s share of list votes increased slightly as compared with 2007 and they won two seats (one in Glasgow and one in Lothian). Margo MacDonald, standing again as an Independent in Lothian, was the only other non-major party candidate to win a list seat.

Minor parties and others

In the constituency contests the most successful of the ‘others’ was UKIP (3 candidates) with 2,508 votes, followed by the Pensioners’ Party (2 candidates 1,618 votes), the Scottish National Front (5 candidates 1,515 votes), Angus Independents Representatives (1 candidate, 1,321 votes) and the Scottish Christian Party (2 candidates 1,193 votes). The three remaining other candidates – Liberal, Land Party and Communist – received 436, 276 and 256 votes respectively.

Entering the list contests is much easier for small parties and groups than finding, nominating and campaigning for candidates in a large number of constituencies. The list voting also offers the ‘others’ a better prospect of attracting support and winning a seat (as demonstrated by the Green Party which does not contest constituencies) The votes received by the ‘others’ not detailed in Table 1 were as follows (number of regions contested in brackets);

Pensioners Party (8)	33,253	Ban Bankers’ Bonuses (2)	2,968
UKIP (8)	18,138	Solidarity (7)	2,837
Socialist Labour Party (8)	16,847	Liberal Party (2)	2,393
Scottish Christian Party (8)	16,466	Pirate Party (2)	1,431

British National Party (8)	15,580	Christian People's Alliance (2)	1,191
Scottish Socialist Party (8)	8,272	Scottish National Front (1)	640
Respect (1)	6,972	Homeland Party (2)	616
Scottish Unionist (2)	3,002	Angus Independent Reps (1)	471

The four major parties have increasingly dominated the list voting since 2003. In that year, together they took 77.2 per cent of the votes but this rose to 85.4 per cent in 2007 and was 87.9 per cent in 2011.

Electorate and electoral registration

The eligible Scottish electorate rose from 3,919,310 in (July) 2007 to 3,950,626 in 2011, an increase of 0.8 per cent. The number of electors declined in 29 constituencies with the largest falls being in Edinburgh Central (-5.0 per cent), Banffshire and Buchan Coast (-4.4 per cent), Edinburgh East (-3.5 per cent), Cumbernauld and Kilsyth (-2.8 per cent) and Hamilton, Larkhall and Stonehouse (-2.1 per cent). Electorates declined in five of the six Edinburgh seats.

At the other extreme the largest increases in electorate were recorded in three Glasgow seats: Provan (+7.6 per cent), Shettleston (+7.3 per cent) and Kelvin (+6.1 per cent). All eight Glasgow constituencies had larger electorates than in 2007.

There is no obvious reason for these patterns. For example, it seems unlikely that there was significant population movement into the Glasgow seats and out of Edinburgh. It may be, however, that there had been more intensive efforts to improve electoral registration in Glasgow. It should be noted, however, that the 2007 electorate figures are taken from the report of the Boundary Commission for Scotland on the new constituencies and it may be that the estimates made were subject to error.

Late registration

The number of electors added to the register under the '11-day rule' totalled 25,480 – a mean of 349 per constituency. There were huge variations across constituencies, however. At one extreme six constituencies had fewer than 20 – Eastwood (8), Renfrewshire South (14), Cunninghame South (15), Paisley (16), Renfrewshire North & West (17) and Greenock & Inverclyde (19). At the other, three had more than 700 – Edinburgh Northern and Leith

(720), Edinburgh Central (792) and Glasgow Kelvin (891). It is unclear why there should be such variation in these numbers.

Turnout

Turnout, as conventionally defined by electoral analysts (valid votes cast plus ballots rejected at the count as a percentage of the electorate) was 50.57 per cent in the both the constituency contests and the list voting. Figures for all Scottish Parliament elections to date are shown in Table 3.

Table 3
Turnout in Scottish Parliament Elections 1999-2011

1999	2003	2007	2011
%	%	%	%
58.8	49.7	53.9	50.6

Note: the figures refer to turnout in the constituency voting. List turnout was either identical (2007) or very close to these figures.

After the excitement of the first elections which produced a turnout of almost 59 per cent in 1999, participation by the electorate fell below 50 per cent in 2003. The closely fought 2007 election saw something of a revival of interest but in 2011 turnout fell back to just over 50 per cent. As usual there was considerable variation across constituencies, the range running from 35.0 per cent in Glasgow Provan to 63.4 per cent in Eastwood (the area which also recorded the highest turnout in Britain at the 2010 UK general election). Three other Glasgow constituencies fell below 40 per cent (Maryhill and Springburn, Shettleston and Pollok) but only one other seat exceeded 60 per cent (Edinburgh Southern). Across sub-regions of Scotland, indeed, turnout was highest in Edinburgh (56.9 per cent) and lowest in Glasgow (40.2 per cent). Although census data for the new constituencies are not available, it is clear that – as always – there were lower turnouts in relatively deprived urban areas with much social housing while more middle-class, suburban and rural areas had higher turnouts.

If the definition of turnout is extended to include postal votes which were returned but were not included in the count due to problems with personal identifiers and the like (see below) then the figures for Scotland as a whole are 51.21 per cent for the constituency contests and 51.20 per cent for the list voting.

Valid votes

The number of valid votes cast as a percentage of the electorate is shown separately for the constituency and list contests in Table 4 together with the change in these figures since the last election. The percentages are virtually identical (the difference to two decimal places being just 0.05). In neither case is the decline from 2007 as sharp as the decline in turnout. This is because rejected ballots formed a much larger proportion of the total votes cast in 2007 than they did in 2011.

Table 4
Valid Votes as % of Electorate 2011 and Change 2007-11

	Constituency Contests %	List Voting %
	50.35	50.40
Change 07-11	-1.3	-2.0

Ballots rejected at the count

Table 5
Rejected Ballots 2007 and 2011

	Constituencies		Regional Lists	
	Number	% of all	Number	% of all
2011	8,416	0.42	6,811	0.34
2007	85,644	4.08	60,455	2.88

In 2007, for the first time, a single ballot sheet was used for the Scottish elections, showing the list contestants printed on the left hand side and constituency candidates on the right, with printed instructions indicating that the elector had two votes. This new ballot paper confused a significant minority of voters and large numbers of papers - amounting to 4.1 per cent of constituency ballots and 2.9 per cent of list ballots - were rejected during the counting process as being improperly completed. This provoked much unfavourable comment in the media and among commentators (as well as comparisons with electoral maladministration elsewhere). Following various reports which concluded that the design of the ballot paper

had confused some voters, the relevant authorities - unsurprisingly - decided to revert to the original system of using separate ballot papers for the 2011 election. Unsurprisingly, the incidence of rejected ballots returned to minuscule proportions (0.42 per cent of constituency ballots and 0.34 per cent of list ballots) and the subject of ballot design to relative obscurity. The relevant figures for 2007 and 2011 are shown in Table 5.

In Table 6 the reasons for rejection of ballots in 2007 and 2011 are detailed. As in previous elections a paper being unmarked or uncertainty as to the voters' intentions is by far the commonest reason for rejection, followed by the elector voting for too many candidates.

Table 6
Reasons for Ballots Being Rejected

	2007		2011	
	Constituency %	List %	Constituency %	List %
Unmarked or void for uncertainty	96.8	69.6	85.8	62.2
Voting for more than one candidate	3.0	30.1	13.7	36.3
Writing/mark identifying voter	0.1	0.2	0.5	1.4
Want of official mark	0.02	0.03	0.01	0.1

Postal Voting

Across Scotland, 558,202 postal ballots were issued amounting to 14.1 per cent of the electorate. This compared with 11.2 per cent in 2007 and 3.6 per cent in 2003 so that the uptake of the option of voting by post has continued to increase (albeit more slowly than in the past). Across constituencies, the proportion of electors having postal votes ranged from 7.9 per cent in Glasgow Kelvin to 20.1 per cent in Aberdeen South and North Kincardine. Across local authorities the smallest percentages were in Glasgow (9.4 per cent) and North Lanarkshire (9.8 per cent) and the largest in Aberdeen (18.8 per cent), East Renfrewshire (18.6 per cent), South Ayrshire (18.5 per cent) and Edinburgh (18.4 per cent). These differences reflect, no doubt, the nature of the population in different areas as well as the efforts of the authorities in promoting postal voting.

Ballots returned in the constituency elections totalled 429,595 (77.0 per cent of those issued). In the list elections the figures were almost identical at 429,432 and 76.9 per cent. For comparison, the 2007 figure was 73.5 per cent. Clearly, these figures indicate that postal voters were much more likely to vote than 'in person' electors. It should not be inferred,

however, that because the turnout of postal voters is higher than more extensive postal voting would increase overall turnout. It is now well established that the sorts of people more likely to apply for and use postal votes are the sorts of people who would vote in any event, even if that involved physically going to the polls.

All postal votes were subject to verification by all returning officers in Scotland. Comparing postal ballots received with the numbers included in the count indicates that 25,334 postal votes were rejected and not included in the counts in constituency contests and 25,058 in list elections (5.9 and 5.8 per cent of ballots received respectively). This is a higher rate of rejection than for 'in person' voting and reflects the relatively strict rules (introduced to counter fraud) that now apply to postal voting, especially relating to the need to supply personal identifiers. These make postal voting a relatively complex process especially when, as in this case, the voter had to complete and return two ballots for the election and one for the contemporaneous referendum on the electoral system. The breakdown of reasons for not allowing postal ballots to be entered into the count is as follows:

	%
Want of signature	14.0
Want of date of birth	3.0
Want of both signature and d.o.b.	11.6
Mismatched signature	15.4
Mismatched date of birth	11.8
Both signature and d.o.b. mismatched	3.9
Statement or ballot paper not returned	40.2

The most common reason for rejection was that either the statement or (probably less likely) the ballot paper was not returned. Otherwise, one or both of the personal identifiers was missing (28.6 per cent) or did not match those given on the postal vote application (31.1).

Postal votes accounted for 20.2 per cent of all ballots included in the counts in both constituency and list elections as compared with 14.7 per cent in 2007.

A total of 2,363 covering envelopes were received after the close of poll and were, therefore, excluded from further consideration. That is an average of 34 per constituency – but there were 78 in Paisley and only 4 in Orkney and also in Shetland and 5 in each of Eastwood, Inverness & Nairn, and Skye, Lochaber & Badenoch.

Under certain circumstances electors are able to apply for a waiver with respect to the use of their signature as a personal identifier so that their date of birth only is required. Across Scotland 5,896 such waivers were granted, representing 1.06 per cent of those registered for a postal vote. The figure was less than one per cent in 49 constituencies and lowest of all in Aberdeen Central (0.24 per cent). On the other hand, it was greater than four per cent in all eight Glasgow seats (peaking at 5.86 per cent in Kelvin). Presumably, the Glasgow figures reflect a local policy on this matter.

Proxy Voters

Proxies were appointed in 6,890 cases (0.2 per cent of the electorate) of which 97 were 'emergency proxies'. The number of proxies averaged 94 but ranged from 17 in Glasgow Provan to 194 in Inverness and Nairn. The total in 2007 was 8,099.

Miscellaneous

Counting of Votes

Overnight counting of votes was undertaken in 64 constituencies. The exceptions were Argyll & Bute, Na h-Eileanan Siar, Clackmannanshire & Dunblane, Stirling and the five Fife seats (Cowdenbeath, Dunfermline, Kirkcaldy, Mid Fife & Glenrothes, North East Fife). There were recounts in only two constituencies: Glasgow Anniesland and Edinburgh Central.