

REPORT ON THE 2007 SCOTTISH PARLIAMENT AND COUNCIL ELECTIONS

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As in 1999 and 2003, the Scottish Parliament and Council elections were held on the same day in 2007. On this occasion, the Parliament elections generated an unusual level of controversy. This centred, firstly, on the newly-introduced electronic counting of votes which, in some cases at least, led to lengthy delays in the announcing of results and, secondly, on the unusually large numbers of rejected ballots in the Parliament elections. These matters are not considered here, however. The focus, rather, is on more traditional concerns - turnout, postal voting and the outcome of the Parliament election – but I also discuss the impact of the introduction of the Single Transferable Vote (STV) system for Council elections. The rejected ballots controversy is the subject of a separate report.

Turnout

Table 1 shows the turnout in the 2007 Scottish elections compared with turnout in the previous elections in 2003.

Table 1
Turnout in Scottish Elections

Scottish Parliament			Council Elections		
2003	2007	Change	2003	2007	Change
%	%		%	%	
49.7	53.9	+4.2	49.6	53.8	+4.2

Note: all turnout figures are for 'total' turnout (i.e. the number of ballots cast, including rejected ballots, as a percentage of the electorate).

In both 2003 and 2007 turnout was almost identical in both sets of elections. The common assumption - and the main argument for holding the elections simultaneously - is that people are keener to vote in the Scottish Parliament elections than in the locals but, having turned up (or filled in a postal ballot) for the former, almost all are happy to vote for their local council as well. This assumption seems to take a somewhat patronising view of local government and of voters. It is worth noting that in the last council elections to be held separately, in 1995, the turnout of 45% was not that far short of the turnout in the 2003 Scottish Parliament election. The 'decoupling' of the elections was recommended by the Arbuthnott Commission (Commission on Boundary Differences and Voting Systems, 2006, pp. 48-51) and it is likely that this issue will continue to be debated in the Scottish Parliament.

Turnout increased by a healthy 4.2 points in 2007. This was probably due to the fact that the Scottish Parliament election was widely expected to be a close-run thing (as, indeed, proved to be the case). In the Parliament election every constituency recorded an increase – the greatest being in the keenly-fought Edinburgh Central (+9.1) and in Gordon (+7.6), where the SNP leader and putative First Minister, Alex Salmond, was a candidate.

Although it increased in every constituency there was, of course, considerable variation in the level of turnout across constituencies. It ranged from 38.0% in Glasgow Shettleston (which took the wooden spoon for the third consecutive election) to 64.8% in Eastwood. There were 16 constituencies in which the figure was below 50% (nine of them in Glasgow) and eight in which turnout was greater than 60%. The pattern of turnout variation is a familiar one, very similar to that found in previous elections. Table 2 shows the correlation coefficients measuring the strength of the association between constituency turnouts at each of the last three elections. The relationships are very strong and the degree of continuity is impressive. Put simply, there are constituencies where turnout is regularly relatively low and others where it is regularly relatively high, even if the absolute turnout level changes.

Table 2
Correlations: Constituency Turnouts 1999-2007

	Turnout 1999	Turnout 2003
Turnout 2003	0.921	
Turnout 2007	0.912	0.945

Note: the number of cases is 73 for each calculation. All coefficients are statistically significant.

Two main factors underlie variations in constituency turnout – the varying social composition of constituencies and the marginality or safeness of the seats. More marginal seats tend to have higher turnouts because it is in these that parties normally target their campaigning, making greater efforts to mobilise supporters. Table 3 shows the correlations between turnout in 2007 and various indicators of social composition as well as constituency marginality (measured on the basis of the 2003 election results). It is important to note that these correlation coefficients do not tell us anything about the turnout of the groups mentioned but about the *constituencies*. Thus, turnout was greater in constituencies where there were more professionals and managers, more people working in agriculture, more owner occupiers, and more people with a degree. Conversely, turnout was lower in constituencies where there are more households without a car (generally taken as an indicator of the level of poverty and deprivation), in more urban areas (persons per hectare), where there are more people who rent their homes from the council or a housing association, more ethnic minority residents and more young people. There was also a strong positive correlation between constituency marginality and turnout – the smaller the gap between the two leading parties in 2003, the bigger the turnout in 2007.

The social composition variables listed are themselves highly inter-correlated, of course. Constituencies with large proportions of social renters also have large proportions without a car, for example. We can take account of this by undertaking regression analysis, which identifies the variables which remain significant in ‘predicting’ a dependent variable (turnout in this case) when all others are held constant and also measures their cumulative impact. A stepwise regression analysis of constituency turnout produced a final equation in which marginality and all but three of the social variables are significant. The three to drop out were % in agriculture, % with no car and % aged 18-24. The remaining variables account for

an impressive 80.9% of the variation in turnout across constituencies.¹ Very similar results have been reported for previous Scottish Parliament elections (see Denver and Hands, 2004).

Table 3
Correlates of Constituency Turnout 2007

% prof. & managerial	0.560	% no car	-0.705
% in agriculture	0.293	persons per hectare	-0.527
% owner occupiers	0.795	% social renters	-0.756
% with degree	0.402	% ethnic minority	-0.347
% aged 65+	0.226*	% aged 18-24	-0.348
constituency marginality	0.514		

Note: all coefficients are statistically significant except the one asterisked. N = 73.

Turnout in the local elections varied across councils in similar sorts of ways ranging from 44.3% in Glasgow (the only council below 50%) to 64.7% in East Renfrewshire (which coincides with the Eastwood constituency). The figure exceeded 60% in three other councils (Na h-Eileanan an Iar, East Dunbartonshire and Stirling). At ward level, the highest turnout (69.7%) was recorded in Netherlee, Stamperland and Williamwood in East Renfrewshire but it was 65% or more in 19 wards. At the other extreme, turnout was below 40% in 9 wards, 7 of them in Glasgow, including Anderston/City which had the lowest turnout of all at 34.4%.

The continuity of the turnout pattern at council level is illustrated in Table 4 which shows the top and bottom five mainland councils in terms of turnout in 2003 and 2007. Islands councils are excluded because they had many uncontested wards in 2003. The extent of the overlap between the two lists is obvious.

Table 4
Best and Worst Turnouts in Mainland Councils 2003 and 2007

2003	%	2007	%
Clackmannanshire	58.5	East Renfrewshire	64.7
East Renfrewshire	58.2	East Dunbartonshire	63.3
Argyll and Bute	57.6	Stirling	61.2
Stirling	56.5	Argyll and Bute	59.9
East Dunbartonshire	56.0	Perth and Kinross	59.2
Aberdeen	47.4	Dundee	51.2
Moray	46.4	Aberdeen	51.1
Fife	46.2	Fife	50.9

North Lanarkshire	46.1	North Lanarkshire	50.5
Glasgow	40.8	Glasgow	44.3

Postal Voting

The choice of voting by post is now open to any elector on demand. This relaxation of the former rules was introduced as a potential antidote to declining turnout levels in UK elections. Across Scotland in 2007 11.2% of the electorate received a postal ballot. This represents a sharp increase from 3.6% in 2003. The proportion increased in every constituency with the increase ranging from 4.3 points in Ochil to 12.1 points in Paisley North. The largest proportions of postal voters were found in Paisley South (17.5%), Ayr (17.0%), Aberdeen Central (15.9%), Aberdeen South (15.7%) and Edinburgh South (15.3%). In eight constituencies the proportion was smaller than 7% and six of these were in Glasgow – Springburn, Pollok and Maryhill (all 6.7%), Shettleston (6.6%), Kelvin (6.5%) and Baillieston (6.4%). The two others are Hamilton North and Bellshill (6.7%) and Motherwell and Wishaw (6.6%).

At council level, the proportion of postal voters exceeded 14% of the electorate in eight councils, the largest proportions being found in South Ayrshire (16.0%), Aberdeen (15.0%), Renfrewshire (14.9%), East Renfrewshire (14.9%) and Dundee (14.7%). In ten councils the proportion was less than 10% and was smallest in North Lanarkshire (7.0%), Glasgow (7.4%), South Lanarkshire (8.5%), Shetland (8.8%), Argyll and Bute (8.9%) and Orkney (9.0%).

There is some evidence that the increase in the proportion of electors registered to vote by post contributed to the increase in turnout since across constituencies there was a significant, if mild, positive correlation between the two (coefficient 0.271). There is also evidence that increased registration for postal voting may be due in part to the activities of the political parties as the increase between 2003 and 2007 correlates significantly with the marginality of constituencies (coefficient 0.335).

There is no doubt that electors who receive a postal ballot use their vote to a greater extent than those who have to go to a polling station. This has been true of all cases that have been examined and is no less true in this case. The ‘turnout’ of postal voters in the Scottish Parliament elections (ballots received in time by the Returning Officer as a proportion of those issued) was 73.5% which means that the turnout of those voting in person was 51.4%. Ballots cast by post comprised 14.7% of all ballots included in the counting of votes.

This appears strong evidence that the easier availability of postal voting increases turnout. It is necessary to enter a caveat, however, and it is that perhaps the people who vote by post would actually vote in any event – even if postal voting were not easily available. Table 5 provides food for thought in this regard. It shows the relationships between three aspects of postal voting and the variables used in Table 3 to analyse turnout patterns.

Table 5
Patterns in Postal Voting 2007

% electorate issued	% postal ballots	% pbs rejected
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	postal ballot	returned	pre-count
% prof. & managerial	0.418	0.236	-0.427
% in agriculture	0.095*	0.234	-0.327
% owner occupiers	0.379	0.302	-0.641
% with degree	0.379	0.236	-0.267
% aged 65+	0.227*	0.243	-0.009*
constituency marginality	0.446	0.396	-
% no car	-0.292	-0.313	0.753
persons per hectare	-0.071*	-0.277	0.533
% social renters	-0.480	-0.334	0.617
% ethnic minority	-0.085*	-0.032*	0.217*
% aged 18-24	0.045	-0.171*	0.433

Note: all coefficients are statistically significant ($p < 0.05$) except those asterisked. $N = 73$.

The first column focuses on the proportion of the electorate registered for postal voting. The pattern of associations is strikingly similar to that for turnout levels (Table 3). A larger proportion of people register for postal votes in more middle-class and prosperous constituencies and fewer in more deprived constituencies. In addition, electors in marginal seats are much more likely to register for a postal vote than those in safe/hopeless seats. The same patterns are repeated in the second column which concerns the turnout of postal voters. Even among those with postal votes, turnout is lower in more deprived urban areas and higher in more affluent and rural areas as well as in more marginal seats. It is important to note that the third column does not refer to ballots rejected at the count for one reason or another but those rejected and excluded from the count because the details required for a postal vote (such as a signed declaration of identity) were incorrectly or not completed. In total 3% of returned postal ballots were excluded in this way (and more than 13% in two Glasgow constituencies). The correlation coefficients once again very clearly display a familiar pattern (although the signs are, of course, reversed). The sorts of constituencies where turnout tends to be low tend also to have the largest proportions of postal ballots rejected on what might be described as technical grounds.

In their 2003 report for the Electoral Commission, Curtice and Fisher (2003, p. 10) surmised that, rather than producing a general increase in turnout, it could be the case that easy access to postal voting 'might be contributing to and helping to widen the differences in the level of valid turnout between different kinds of constituency'. The data in Table 5 support this line of argument and the implication is that, rather than being the panacea that proponents suggest, postal voting may widen differences in turnout between different social groups.

The Outcome of the Scottish Parliament Election

Table 6 shows the overall results of the election while Table 7 shows changes from the last election. In the constituency contests, the main story is that the SNP just overtook Labour to

become the largest party in terms of votes for the first time ever in a national election. In fact, there was only a modest decline in Labour's vote share (-2.4) but the SNP (+9.0) appears to have profited most from the slump in support for 'others'. The latter was mostly due to the withdrawal of the Scottish Socialist Party (SSP) from the constituency contests. The Liberal Democrats increased their vote share by a small amount while Conservative support was unchanged from 2003.

Despite coming second in votes, Labour took most of the constituency seats (37) although the party lost ten that it had won in 2003 (nine to the SNP and one to the Liberal Democrats). The Conservatives comfortably retained the three seats that they held and added another (Roxburgh and Berwickshire). As well as losing Roxburgh and Berwickshire to the Conservatives, the Liberal Democrats lost Argyll and Bute and Gordon to the SNP (Alex Salmond being the victor in Gordon). The seat changes were completed by the retirement of Independent Dennis Canavan in Falkirk West (gained by the SNP) and the defeat of health campaigner Jean Turner in Strathkelvin and Bearsden (the sole Labour gain).

In the list voting, the SNP made a very strong advance even though support for the other major parties was little changed compared with 2003. They were rewarded with 26 list seats, including five of the seven available in both Central Scotland and South of Scotland. As in the constituencies, the big losers were the minor parties. The Green Party's share of votes fell back and they lost five of their seven seats, retaining one in Glasgow and one in Lothians. Margo MacDonald, standing again as an Independent in Lothians, was the only other non-major party candidate to win a list seat. Among the minor parties, the Scottish Senior Citizens Unity Party managed 1.0 per cent and the BNP 1.2 per cent across Scotland. Solidarity, formed and led by Tommy Sheridan after his falling out with the SSP, easily outpolled the latter with 1.5 per cent to 0.6 per cent of the votes but even adding their votes together they would have struggled to win a seat. The Scottish Christian Party took 1.3 per cent of the vote and the Christian People's Alliance 0.7 per cent.

The final tally of seats meant that the SNP were (just) the largest party in the Parliament but no two parties (other than the improbable combination of Labour and the SNP) could achieve an overall majority of seats. In the event, the leader of the SNP, Alex Salmond, became First Minister heading a minority administration with support from the two Green MSPs.

Table 6

The Distribution of Votes and Seats in Scotland 2007

	Constituencies		Regional Lists		Total Seats
	Share of Votes %	Seats Won	Share of Votes	Seats Won	
Conservative	16.6	4	13.9	13	17
Labour	32.2	37	29.2	9	46
Lib Dem	16.2	11	11.3	5	16
SNP	32.9	21	31.0	26	47
Green	0.1	0	4.0	2	2
Others	2.0	0	10.6	1	1

Table 7

Changes in the Distribution of Votes and Seats 2003-07

	Constituencies		Regional Lists		Total Seats
	Share of Votes %	Seats Won	Share of Votes	Seats Won	
Conservative	0.0	+1	-1.6	-2	-1
Labour	-2.4	-9	-0.1	+5	-4
Lib Dem	+0.8	-2	-0.5	+1	-1
SNP	+9.0	+12	+10.1	+8	+20
Green	+0.1	0	-2.9	-5	-5
Others	-7.5	-2	-5.1	-7	-9

The Impact of STV on the Council Elections

The Single Transferable Vote electoral system for council elections was introduced by the Local Governance (Scotland) Act passed by the Scottish Parliament in 2004. These were the first public elections on the British mainland to use the system so that it is worth considering the effects that it had. Three preliminary comments should be made, however.

First, implementing the new system required a complete redrawing of ward boundaries to create new wards that would elect either three or four councillors. (Previously all Scottish wards elected one councillor.) This was undertaken by the Scottish Local Government Boundary Commission and the final outcome was a reduction from 1,222 single-member wards to 353 multi-member wards, 190 electing three councillors and 163 electing four with the total number of councillors remaining at 1,222. (For details of the work of the Boundary Commission see <http://www.lgbc-scotland.gov>).

Second, it was the introduction of STV that was the main impetus behind the decision to make vote counting electronic, since counting votes and determining results under this system can be a lengthy and arduous process. Despite the controversy mentioned at the outset, electronic counting went fairly smoothly in respect of the council elections and initial results were announced reasonably quickly after counting began.

Third, the electorate did not appear to experience undue difficulty in using the new system. Only 1.83% of council ballots were rejected. Given the unfamiliarity of STV for most people, this seems not an unreasonable figure. The vast majority of voters were clearly able to handle preferential voting. For comparison, STV has been used in Ireland since the 1920s and in the 2007 Irish general election a mean of 0.99% of ballots were rejected in eleven Dublin constituencies.

Contests

For the first time ever in local elections, not a single ward in Scotland was uncontested in 2007. The proportion had been declining previously but in 2003 5% of wards were uncontested. There is little doubt that this was due to STV. In areas of weakness a party could force a ward contest with just one candidate whereas previously they would have had to find three or four. Before the change 1,222 candidates were required to contest every ward; under the new system 353 sufficed.

Candidates

Partly for the reason described in the previous paragraph, but mainly because the parties did not put forward full slates of candidates, there was a sharp decline in the total number of council candidates. The parties appear to have calculated that their chances of winning seats would be improved if they nominated only as many candidates in a ward as they thought could win seats. As a consequence, despite an increase in the number of Independents (+63) the total number of candidates declined from 4,195 in 2003 to 2,606 in 2007. The decline in candidates was evident in all four major parties but greatest in the case of the SNP (-533 compared with -419 for the Conservatives, -399 for Labour and -345 for the Liberal Democrats).

In the competition for a reduced number of candidacies women in particular appear to have lost out. In the four main parties they constituted 29.5% of candidates in 2003 but 24.1% in 2007.

'Alphabetic' Voting

In the aftermath of the elections there were complaints made (frequently by defeated councillors) that the STV system had favoured candidates placed near the top of the ballot paper (i.e. those with surnames starting with a letter towards the beginning of the alphabet). It appears that voters wanting to vote for the candidates of a particular party tended to give their first preference to the candidate coming first on the ballot and subsequent preferences to those lower down. There is no doubt that this was the case. Where the major parties had two candidates in a ward (N=327) the higher-placed candidate received more first preferences in 85% of the cases. Where a party had three candidates (N= 49) the highest placed candidate got most votes in 67% of cases. Since a random distribution would have yielded a figure close to 50% in the former case and 33% in the latter, it is clear that being placed towards the top of the ballot paper was a significant advantage in terms of gaining first preference votes and hence in being elected.

Proportionality: Seats and Votes

Unsurprisingly, the distribution of council seats under STV was more proportional to votes than previously. Table 8 shows the distribution of first preference votes and seats in 2007 as compared with votes and seats in 2003. Independents remain somewhat over-represented due to their strength in the islands councils (which have small electorates) but the disproportionality between seats and votes (especially in relation to Labour and the SNP) was substantially reduced by the operation of STV.

Table 8

Council Elections: Votes and Seats 2003 and 2007

	2003		2007	
	Votes %	Seats %	Votes %	Seats %
Conservative	15.2	10.1	15.6	11.7
Labour	32.9	41.7	28.1	28.5
Liberal Democrat	14.6	14.3	12.7	13.6
SNP	24.3	14.8	27.9	29.7
Independent	9.5	18.9	10.9	15.3
Others	3.6	0.3	4.9	1.3

Control of Councils

Following the 2003 council elections 21 of Scotland's 32 councils were controlled by a single party or group. The 2007 results mean that this is now true of only five councils. Labour has an overall majority of seats in Glasgow and North Lanarkshire while Independents dominate the three islands councils. In all other councils there is no overall majority. The introduction of STV has effectively removed Labour's dominance of Scottish local government and will have a significant impact on how councils operate in future.

References

- Commission on Boundary Differences and Voting Systems (2006) *Putting Citizens First: Boundaries, Voting and Representation in Scotland*, Edinburgh, Stationery Office.
- Curtice, J. and Fisher, S. (2003) 'Scottish Parliament Election 2003: Analysis of Turnout for the Electoral Commission', Electoral Commission.
- Denver, D. and Hands, G. (2004) 'Exploring Variations in Turnout: Constituencies and Wards in the Scottish Parliament elections of 1999 and 2003', *British Journal of Politics and International Relations*, Vol.6 No. 4, pp. 527-42.

Notes

1. The relevant regression equation is:

$$\text{Turnout} = -39.1 + 0.126 (\text{MARG}) - 0.679 (\text{PM}) - 0.133 (\text{PPH}) + 0.836 (\text{OO}) + 0.666 (\text{SR}) + 1.05 (\text{DEG}) + 0.428 (\text{AGE65}) - 0.400 (\text{EM})$$

Where MARG = Marginality; PM = % Professional and Managerial; PPH = Persons Per Hectare; OO = % Owner Occupiers; SR = % Social Renters; DEG = % with degree; AGE65 = % Aged 65+; EM = % Ethnic minority.