

The Scottish Parliament Elections of 2016

Report to the Electoral Commission

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Summary

- The number of constituency candidates declined to 313 – the smallest number in a Scottish Parliament election to date. The four major parties – Conservative, Labour, Liberal Democrats and SNP contested all 73 constituencies and there were just 21 other candidates. Of these eight were Independents, six represented the Trade Union and Socialist Coalition (TUSC), and three the Green party, leaving four others.
- Eight parties contested all eight regional list elections – the four major parties plus the Greens, UKIP, RISE (Respect, Independence, Internationalism and Environmentalism) and Solidarity.
- The SNP won 59 of the 73 constituency seats with 46.5% of the votes. The Conservatives won seven (22.0% of votes), Liberal Democrats four (7.9%) and Labour three (22.6%).
- In the list voting, the SNP had 41.7% of votes, the Conservatives 22.9%, Labour 19.1%, Greens 6.6% and Liberal Democrats 5.2%. UKIP led the ‘others’ with 1.9%. This earned the Conservatives 24 list seats, Labour 21, Greens six, SNP four and Liberal Democrats one.
- Overall, the SNP fell short of a majority in the Parliament winning 63 of the 129 seats – a decline of six compared with 2011. The Conservatives with 31 seats became the second largest party – up from 15 in 2011.
- Turnout at 55.8% for the constituency contests and 55.9% for the list voting was significantly higher than in 2011 (50.5% and 50.4% respectively).
- As in 2011, rejected ballots constituted a minuscule proportion of votes cast. The figure was 0.41% in constituency contests and 0.17% in the list elections. The comparable figures in 2011 were 0.42% and 0.34%.
- Across Scotland, 726,555 postal ballots were issued amounting to 17.7% of the electorate. This is the largest proportion to date.
- Almost 77 per cent of postal ballots issued were returned. Of these, just over 3 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 return envelope.
- In the 63 constituencies for which data are available, new electors added to the register between December and March amounted to 3.8% of the electorate while those added between March and April constituted 2.2%. The total varied from less than 2% in two constituencies to more than 10% in four.
- Across 58 constituencies, electors aged 16-17 accounted for 2% of the electorate, the figures ranging narrowly from 1.1% to 2.7%.

Context

Scottish electoral politics changed dramatically after the referendum on independence held in September 2014. Although independence was clearly rejected by the electorate, the SNP experienced a major upsurge in popularity. This carried through to the 2015 general election when the SNP won 50 per cent of the votes and all but three of the Westminster seats in Scotland. Opinion polls throughout 2015 and the first months of 2016 suggested that the SNP's dominance would be further reflected in the Scottish Parliament elections of May 5th. The party maintained a large lead over its rivals and commentators generally agreed that most interest centred on which party would come second, as the Conservatives continued to come close to the unusually low levels of support for Labour.

A total of 313 candidates (including 292 from the four major parties and eight independents) were nominated for the constituency contests. As Table 1 shows, this is the smallest number in a Scottish Parliament (SP) election to date. In part, this is explained by the virtual demise of some smaller parties (such as the Scottish Socialist Party) and also the preference of smaller parties to devote scarce resources to the regional list contests. In the latter, the small parties do not have to find so many candidates and could have a better chance of picking up votes from people voting for the major parties in the constituency contests. A large majority of the latter (55) featured four candidates while 11 had five and five had six candidates.

Table 1
Number of constituency candidates in Scottish Parliament elections

		Ave. per Constit.
1999	338	4.6
2003	406	5.6
2007	334	4.6
2011	321	4.4
2016	313	4.3

In the regional list elections, eight parties contested all eight regions (compared with 11 in 2011) - the four major parties plus the Greens, UKIP, RISE (Respect, Independence, Internationalism and Environmentalism) and Solidarity. In addition, the Scottish Christian Party contested 5, the Libertarian Party 3 and Women's Equality Party 2. The Scottish Unionist Party, Scottish National Front, Communist Party, Animal Welfare Party and

‘Clydesdale and South of Scotland Independent’ were each represented in one region. together with three independent individuals.

Results: votes and seats

Table 2 shows the overall results of the election while Table 3 has details of changes from the previous election in 2011. In the constituency contests the headline story, of course, is that the SNP won 59 of the 73 constituency seats with 46.5 per cent of the votes. Although this was a slightly smaller share than predicted by opinion polls it represents, nonetheless, a stunning victory. In contrast, Labour’s share declined by nine percentage points and the party only just held on to second place in these contests. Given the general trend it was, indeed, something of a surprise that Labour managed to hold off the SNP to retain the constituencies of Dumbarton, East Lothian and Edinburgh Southern. The Conservatives made a strong recovery from recent dismal performances in Scotland and their improved vote share was rewarded with seven constituency seats – four more than were taken in 2011. These included Edinburgh Central which was won by the party’s Scottish leader, Ruth Davidson, from the SNP. Overall, support for the Liberal Democrats barely changed as compared with 2011 but the party managed to add Edinburgh Western and North East Fife to Orkney and Shetland. The two gains were in constituencies with a previous history of Liberal Democrat strength.

Table 2

The Distribution of Votes and Seats in Scotland 2016

	Constituencies		Regional Lists		Total Seats
	Share of Votes %	Seats Won	Share of Votes %	Seats Won	
Conservative	22.0	7	22.9	24	31
Labour	22.6	3	19.1	21	24
Lib Dem	7.8	4	5.2	1	5
SNP	46.5	59	41.7	4	63
Green	0.6	0	6.6	6	6
Others	0.5	0	4.5	0	0

Table 3

Changes in the Distribution of Votes and Seats 2011-16

	Constituencies		Regional Lists		Total Seats
	Share of Votes %	Seats Won	Share of Votes	Seats Won	
Conservative	+8.1	+4	+10.5	+12	+16
Labour	-9.1	-12	-7.2	-1	-13
Lib Dem	-0.1	+2	0.0	-2	0

SNP	+1.1	+6	-2.3	-12	-6
Green	+0.6	0	+2.2	+4	+4
Others	-0.6	0	-3.2	-1	-1

In the list voting, the SNP again emerged as the leading party although it was less successful in retaining constituency votes than in 2011. Nonetheless, the party won most list votes in every region and, as a consequence, added 4 list seats to the 59 constituencies already won. The Conservatives came second in the list voting and were rewarded with 24 additional members, making them the second-largest party in the Parliament with 31 MSPs. Although Labour's list performance was less than impressive the fact that the party won only three constituencies meant that it was awarded 21 list seats. The vote share of the Liberal Democrats changed little between 2011 and 2016 and their representation in the Parliament also remained stable at 6 seats (with two gains in the constituency contests and two losses from the lists). The Green Party is the only other party represented in the Scottish Parliament and its numbers rose from two to six as its share of list votes rose to 6.6%. The party now holds list seats in Glasgow, Highland, Lothians (2) Mid Scotland and Fife and West Scotland.

Minor parties and others

In the constituency contests the most successful of the 'others' was the Green party (3 candidates) with 13,172 votes, followed by the TUSC (8 candidates 3,540 votes) and the Scottish Christian Party (1 candidate 1,162 votes). Eight Independents between them gathered 5,467 votes and the picture is completed by a 'Clydesdale Independent', a 'Stronger Community' and a Libertarian candidate who mustered 909, 544 and 119 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 contested no constituencies in 2011 and three in 2016). The votes received by the 'others' not detailed in Table 1 are shown in Table 4 (with number of regions contested in brackets);

Table 4
Votes for 'Others' in List voting 2016 and Seats 2011-16

UKIP (8)	46,426	Scottish Unionist (1)	3,002
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Solidarity (8)	14,333	Animal Welfare Party (1)	1,819
Scottish Christian Party (5)	11,686	Scottish Libertarian Party (3)	1,686
RISE (8)	10,911	Clydesdale Independent (1)	1,485
Women's Equality Party (2)	5,968	Scottish National Front (1)	617
		Communist Party (1)	510

UKIP was much the largest of these political minnows winning 2.0% of the total list vote. The trend towards domination of list voting by the four major parties continued in 2016. In 2003 they took 77.2% of the votes but this rose to 85.4% in 2007 and 87.9% in 2011. In this election –despite the success of the Greens - there was a further increase to 88.9%.

Turnout

Turnout, as conventionally defined by electoral analysts (valid votes cast plus ballots rejected at the count as a percentage of the electorate) was 55.84% in the constituency contests and 55.86% in the list voting. Table 5 shows turnout levels in all Scottish Parliament elections to date.

Table 5
Turnout in Scottish Parliament Elections 1999-2011

1999	2003	2007	2011	2016
%	%	%	%	%
58.8	49.7	53.9	50.6	55.8

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

The figure for 2016 is the highest since the inaugural elections which unsurprisingly generated some excitement. Given the large lead held by the SNP in opinion polls this might appear unexpected but, of course, the proportional electoral system meant that the possibility of the SNP retaining its overall majority of MSPs was always in doubt. In addition, the question of who would come second appears to have generated some interest.

As usual, there was considerable turnout variation across constituencies, the range running from 43.2% in Glasgow Provan to 68.5% in Eastwood. These same two constituencies were also worst and best in 2011. In all, turnout was under 50% in nine constituencies – six in

Glasgow plus Aberdeen Central, Banffshire and Buchan and Airdrie and Shotts. At the other extreme, turnout exceeded 60% in 21 constituencies.

The general continuity in turnout variation across constituencies in successive elections is illustrated by the fact that the correlation coefficient measuring the association between turnouts in 2011 and 2016 is 0.92, which indicates a very strong relationship. Analysis of census data (not shown here) reveals that 2016 followed a well-established pattern in this respect. As always, turnout was lower in relatively deprived urban areas with much social housing while more middle-class, suburban and rural areas had higher turnouts.

Electorate and electoral registration

The Scottish electorate increased from 3,950,626 in 2011 to 4,098,462 in 2016 an increase of 3.7%. More than half of the increase was due to 16- and 17-year olds being allowed to vote in these elections. Nonetheless, the number of electors declined in 17 constituencies including four in Ayrshire, three in Fife and two in Glasgow. Among the 15 constituencies with the largest increases nine are in Edinburgh and the Lothians while six are in rural North East Scotland. It is possible that these geographical patterns reflect differences in the activities of the relevant authorities in promoting electoral registration.

For those constituencies for which the information is available (N = 58) those aged 16-17 constituted 1.99 % of the electorate. The proportion ranged from 1.1% in Edinburgh Central to 2.7% in Almond Valley.

Across 63 constituencies, 3.8% of the electorate were added to the electoral register between December 2015 and March 13th 2016 while a further 2.2% were included between March 14th and April 18th. The total for both periods was under 2% in two constituencies (Greenock and Inverclyde and Eastwood) while it exceeded 10% in four (Glasgow Kelvin, Moray, Edinburgh Central and Aberdeen Central). In the last case the figure was a remarkable 16.3%.

Ballots rejected at the count

The figures for rejected ballots in 2011 and 2016 are shown in Table 6. Although the proportions in both cases are very small the pattern suggests that a few voters opting for one

of the small parties available on the list may have declined to vote for any of the more restricted options in the constituency contests.

Table 6
Rejected Ballots 2011 and 2016

	Constituencies		Regional Lists	
	Number	% of all	Number	% of all
2016	9,277	0.41	3,923	0.17
2011	8,416	0.42	6,811	0.34

In Table 7 the reasons for rejection of ballots in 2011 and 2016 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. (The increase in the proportion lacking the official mark is almost entirely due to one polling station in West Dunbartonshire with inexperienced staff which accounted for 8 of the 23 relevant cases in the constituency contests and 25 of the 30 in the list voting.)

Table 7
Reasons for Ballots Being Rejected at Count

	2011		2016	
	Constituency	List	Constituency	List
	%	%	%	%
Unmarked or void for uncertainty	85.8	62.2	88.2	76.3
Voting for more than one candidate	13.7	36.3	11.2	22.1
Writing/mark identifying voter	0.5	1.4	0.29	0.61
Want of official mark	0.02	0.03	0.25	0.76

Postal Voting

Across Scotland, 726,555 postal ballots were issued amounting to 17.7% of the electorate. This compared with 14.1% in 2011, 11.2% in 2007 and 3.6% in 2003. In individual constituencies, the proportion of electors having postal votes ranged from 12.2% in Glasgow Kelvin (which also had the smallest proportion in 2011) to 25.0% in the Orkney Islands.

Postal ballots returned in the constituency elections totalled 556,829 (76.6% of those issued). In the list elections the numbers were almost identical as was the percentage figure in 2011

(76.8%). These data indicate that postal voters were much more likely to vote than ‘in person’ electors but 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. For constituency contexts 18,682 (3.3%) were rejected due to either the ballot paper or identity statement being missing or because of a problem with the personal identifiers. For the list elections the number rejected was smaller at 17,699 (3.1%) since the list ballot paper was missing in fewer cases. Table 8 shows the distribution of reasons for the rejection of postal ballots. As has been established in previous elections mismatched signatures or dates of birth are much commoner than cases where these are missing.

Table 8
Reasons for Rejection of Postal Ballots

	Constituency %	List %
Ballot paper missing	22.6	18.3
Postal voting statement missing	17.8	19.0
Signature/Date of Birth missing	17.5	18.3
Signature/Date of Birth mismatched	42.3	44.6

Postal votes accounted for 23.7% of all ballots included in the counts in constituency contests and 23.8% in the list elections. This compares with 20.2% for both in 2011.

In the seven days after the close of polling a total of 1,538 postal ballots were received which gives an average of just 21 per constituency.

Miscellaneous

Waivers

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 9,093 such waivers were granted, representing 1.3 per cent of those registered for a

postal vote. The figure was lowest of all in Cowdenbeath (0.4 per cent) but exceeded 3% in Edinburgh Eastern (3.0%), Glasgow Pollok (3.1% and Edinburgh Southern (3.5%).

Proxies

Proxies (which apply to both constituency and list elections) were appointed in 9,887 cases of which 366 were 'emergency proxies. The total in 2011 was 6,890. The number of proxies averaged 135 across constituencies but was 30 or fewer in all eight Glasgow constituencies compared with 307 in Moray.

Polling places

A total of 2,689 separate polling places were used in these elections. The constituencies having most polling places are far-flung – Argyll and Bute (117), Skye, Lochaber and Badenoch (95) and Caithness, Sutherland and Ross (79). However, it may be surprising to note that the constituency with fewest is the Orkney Islands. This was made possible by getting all electors on some small islands to vote by post.