

OPINION POLLS IN SCOTLAND JULY 1996-JUNE 1997

David McCrone

This was the year when the opinion polls got the election result more or less correct (figure 1: compare this with the results reported by David Denver in his article elsewhere in this issue of **Scottish Affairs**). ICM in particular were within one percentage point of the Scottish result in their poll two days before the election, and System Three's poll the day before was only a couple of percentage points out. ICM's polls throughout the election campaign had put Labour's vote in Scotland at under 50%, and had adopted the technique of re-allocating 'don't knows' or 'won't says' according to how respondents had voted in 1992, thereby boosting the Conservative share of the vote. However, all three polling companies, ICM for **The Scotsman**, System Three for **The Herald**, and NOP for **The Sunday Times Scotland** can take comfort for the accuracy of their predictions.

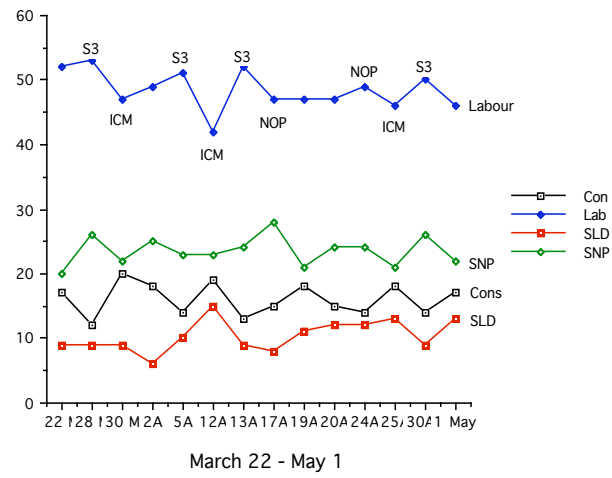
Taking the final ICM poll as the most accurate predictor of the result, we find that there was virtually no gender gap (apart from the Liberal Democrats who split 11% among men and 16% among women). The SNP drew support more or less equally from women and men. Labour was by far the most popular party among all ages, and all social classes. The middle classes (ABC) were more than twice as likely to vote Labour as Conservative (43/20). The best the Tories could do was 24% (among those age 65 or over). Labour did twice as well among the young (48%) as the SNP (23%).

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THE CONSTITUTIONAL QUESTION

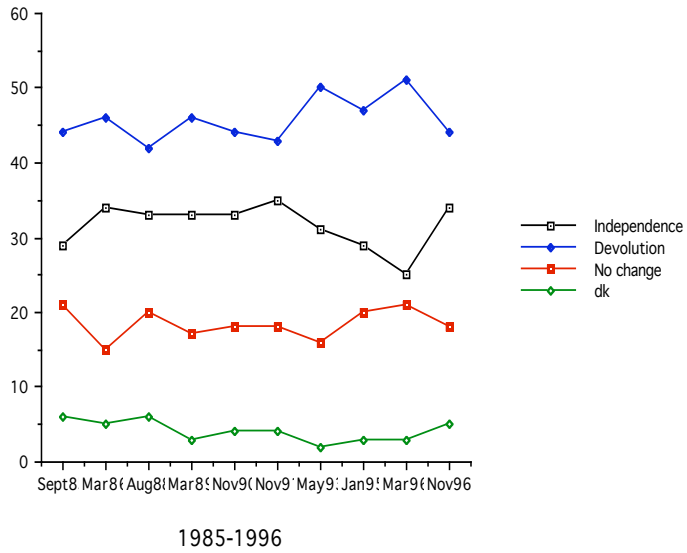
System Three has been measuring support for the main constitutional options in Scotland since the mid 1980s, and these data are reproduced in figure 2.

FIGURE 1: SCOTTISH OPINION POLLS AND ELECTION RESULT



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FIGURE 2: CONSTITUTIONAL OPTIONS (System Three)



Opinion Polls in Scotland: June 1996-June 1997

The data in figure 2 show a fairly consistent pattern of support for devolution at around 40% plus, for Independence at around 30%, and for the status quo on or just below 20%.

During the election campaign, ICM's polls suggested a firming up of the status quo option from 28% to 31%, putting it ahead of Independence (27%), and somewhat at odds with the System Three polls in figure 2. Commentators observed that only a minority of those favouring the status quo were Conservatives (43%), and that a substantial minority (36%) were Labour voters. In large part, this is a result of Labour's dominance in Scotland. We perhaps need to remind ourselves that just under half of Labour voters favour devolution (48%), and that they represent in turn well over half of the pro-devolution vote, but that over a quarter favour Independence (26%). Indeed, the pro-Independence support is made up of broadly equal numbers of Labour and SNP voters (45% and 46%) respectively. NOP's two April polls also showed stronger-than-expected support for the constitutional status quo (on 24% and 29%).

While pollsters have been asking the tripartite constitutional question for some years, we are also seeing the rising importance of attitudes to Labour's plans for constitutional reform. ICM's polls in early 1997 asked about a Scottish parliament within the UK, and attitudes to tax-varying powers. The first question shows support running at 2 to 1 in favour of an Edinburgh parliament, and the second on tax-varying powers has 'yes' votes at over 50% and 'no' on 34% (figures 3a and 3b).

Support for a Scottish parliament is disproportionately strong among the young, among working class people, and among Labour and SNP voters. Support for tax-varying powers does best among males, the young, and Labour and SNP voters.

System Three's 1996 polls had shown similarly strong support for both a Scottish parliament and for one with tax-varying powers. Its July 1996 poll had 60% in favour of a parliament, and 27% against (14% don't know), while its November poll showed 73% for and 20% against a parliament, with 7% don't know. As regards tax-varying powers, the earlier poll had yes/no on 51/31 (17% don't know), and the later poll put the percentages at 59/29/12. NOP's poll of early April showed similar figures of 63/23/14. In the System Three and the ICM polls, Labour and SNP supporters are most strongly committed to both a parliament and one with tax-varying powers.

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Labour support in these polls runs at between 3 to 1 and 6 to 1 on the issue of a Scottish parliament, and over 2 to 1 on the tax-varying question.

Opinion Polls in Scotland: June 1996-June 1997

FIGURE 3a: 'Do you want a Scottish parliament within the UK?'

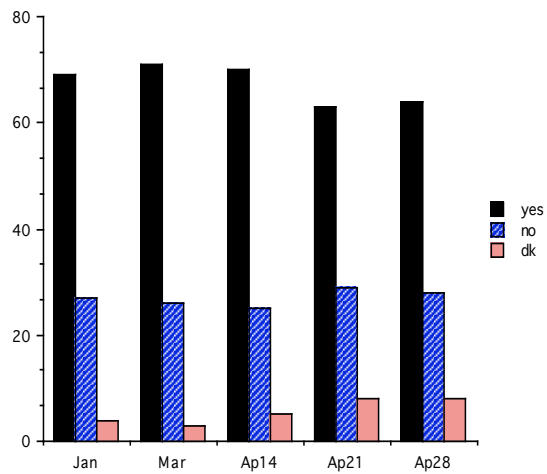
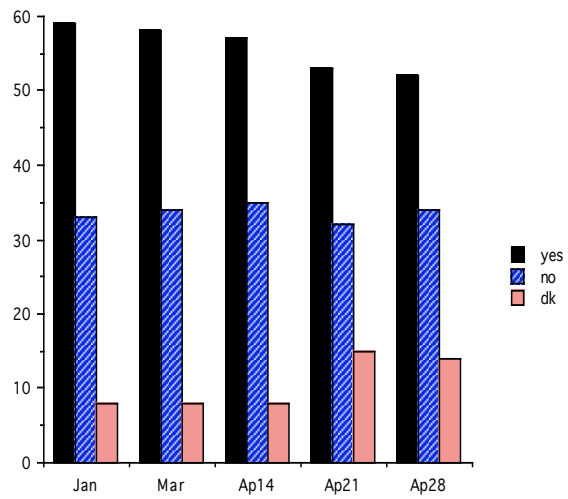


FIGURE 3b: 'Should a Scottish parliament have tax-varying powers?'



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After the election, System Three's poll for **The Herald** in early June 1997 showed support for a Scottish parliament running strongly at 3 to 1 (64% yes, 21% no, with 15% don't knows). On the tax-varying power question, 53% were in favour, 28% against and 19% were undecided. In this poll, Conservative support had fallen to 9%, a historic low, with Labour on 57%, SNP 23% and Liberal Democrats 10% (**The Herald**, 4 June 1997).

The ICM March 1997 poll also asked: 'If a Scottish parliament were established, in your view how likely is it that it will lead eventually to Scottish Independence?' Fifty four percent thought it likely (splitting 24% very likely and 30% fairly likely), and 38% unlikely (25% not very likely and 13% not at all likely). In a February poll for the UK as a whole, 38% thought devolution was likely to lead to Scottish Independence, and 21% that it was unlikely (with the rest not having an opinion). Most UK respondents in that poll would prefer no change (38%) as regards Scotland's constitutional position, with 33% in favour of devolution, and 15% Independence. There was a small majority of UK respondents who thought that Scottish independence would lead to unnecessary conflict with England (38% to 35%).

NOP's late April poll asked what respondents thought was likely to happen by the year 2020. Eighteen percent thought that Scotland would be independent, 33% that there would be a Home Rule parliament, and the largest number, 39%, that there would be no constitutional change. Those predicting no change were disproportionately women, young people, Conservatives and Liberal Democrats.

During the election campaign, ICM asked: 'If Scotland were to be an independent country within the European Union, do you think it would be economically better off, worse off, or would it be much the same as now?'. Thirty four percent opted for 'better off', 29% worse off, and 28% that it would make no difference. Those who thought Scotland would be better off disproportionately included young people, Labour and SNP voters; the middle class, Conservatives and Liberal Democrats were more likely to think it would be worse off.

As regards the election itself, the result corresponded with what voters expected to happen. The late April ICM poll indicated that 51% expected an overall Labour majority at Westminster, with even many Tories (27%) thinking that this would happen. Would the election make a difference to respondents and their families? Optimists outnumbered pessimists (52% to

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42%), with young people, the middle classes, and Conservatives among the optimists, and women, over 65s, the working class and SNP voters among the pessimists. In early April, voters were also asked: 'When you vote, will you vote mainly on the basis of UK national issues or on issues as they affect Scotland?'. Numbers were evenly balanced, with 43% indicating that Scottish issues were uppermost (especially women, young people, working classes and SNP voters). Forty two percent opted for UK issues, especially older people, the middle classes, and Conservatives.

VOTING IN A SCOTTISH PARLIAMENT

In their mid-April poll, NOP asked respondents which party they were likely to vote for in a Scottish parliament. Although, in this same poll, Labour were well ahead of the SNP in the 1997 election race for Westminster (47% to 28%), the predicted vote in a Scottish parliament was virtually neck-and-neck (39% to 38%). Most of the rise in the SNP vote came from Labour switchers (18% of 1997 Labour voters claimed that they would vote SNP in elections for an Edinburgh parliament), and from the Liberal Democrats (with 27% of LibDems opting for the SNP). The Conservatives and the SNP had the highest share of vote retention (73% and 71% respectively), with Labour somewhat lower (67%), and the Liberal Democrats lower still (51%).

NATIONAL IDENTITY

ICM's March poll asked the by-now familiar question: 'Thinking about your national identity, which of the following best describes the way you feel about your national identity?' The modal response was 'equally British and Scottish' (37%), with 26% 'more Scottish than British', and 22% 'Scottish not British'. Only 3% thought themselves 'more British than Scottish', and 8% 'British not Scottish'. A further 4% said they were 'not Scottish'. Young people, Labour and SNP voters were most likely to forefront their Scottishness. This question has been asked for over a decade in opinion polls, and reflects the strength of Scottish identity, as well as the tendency for some degree of British identification to rise during UK general elections.

THE MONARCHY

In January 1997, a phone-in telephone poll for a televised debate on the future of the monarchy suggested that, contrary to the British response as a

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whole, Scots did not want a monarchy in the UK. ICM followed this up in a more systematic way later in the month. Their poll showed that 55% wanted a monarchy, and 37% did not, with 7% don't know. Those in favour of the monarchy included women, and those over 65, while opponents included men, young people, Labour and SNP voters. What was somewhat unexpected was that the middle classes were more hostile than the working classes to the monarchy, with 39% of the middle class and 31% of the working class rejecting it.

THE CONSERVATIVE PARTY

From the vantage point of February 1997, asking about the name of the party in Scotland seemed a fairly innocuous question. In the post-electoral wipe-out for the party in Scotland, the result of that previous poll took on added significance, if the various protagonists had cared to look back a few months. Those advocating a name-change to the 'Scottish Unionist Party' would have found little benefit, for 74% of respondents said that it would make little difference to the way they voted. Only 11% thought the name would be more attractive, but only 14% of Conservative supporters thought it would do so. The name seemed to be less significant than the perception of the party as 'an English party with little relevance to Scotland'. Seventy three percent agreed with this statement (including 28% of Tories), and only 26% disagreed (71% of Tories).

EUROPE

Given the salience of the European question in the general election campaign (including most obviously the Referendum Party), ICM's poll of late April asked: 'Do you think there should be a referendum on whether the UK as a whole should adopt a single European currency?'. Sixty nine percent thought there should be, and 23% that there should not. If there were to be such a referendum, 66% said they would 'vote to retain the pound', while 20% preferred a single European currency (especially men, the middle classes, Labour and SNP voters).

APPENDIX

(a) System Three carried out the following polls for **The Herald**:

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Poll on a Scottish Parliament: 1029 adults at 40 sampling points throughout Scotland between 25-30 July 1996.

Poll on Scottish Government: 1063 adults at 40 sampling points throughout Scotland between 21-26 November 1996.

(b) ICM carried out the following polls for **The Scotsman**:

Devolution in Scotland: 1512 adults at 105 sampling points throughout the UK between 10-12 January 1997.

Scottish poll: 1000 adults between 11-14 February 1997 (sampling points not given).

Scottish poll: 1017 adults (details not given).

Scottish poll: 1000 adults between 29-31 March 1997.

Scottish poll: 1000 adults (details not given).

Scottish poll: 1000 adults between 18-20 April 1997.

Scottish poll: 1000 adults between 25-27 April 1997.

(c) NOP carried out three opinion polls for **The Sunday Times Scotland** on

2 April with 844 respondents;

17 April with 950 respondents;

24 April with 1000 respondents.

The **Scottish Affairs** editors are grateful to the polling organisations System Three, ICM, and NOP and their respective sponsors, **The Herald**, **The Scotsman**, **The Sunday Times Scotland**, for permission to use these polls.

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