

OPINION POLLS IN SCOTLAND JULY 1998 - JUNE 1999

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Opinion polls are not precision instruments, although they are frequently taken by newspapers and their readers to be such. Polls are, however, fairly crude devices for charting the general trends in public opinion as it forms and shifts around the major issues of the day. In recent years, polls have made the news as much as reflected it, as newspapers and political parties have tried to measure, and thus influence, public opinion. There has been no shortage of polls this year, in the run-up to the first Scottish parliamentary election. System Three has continued to carry out its monthly polling for **The Herald**, supplemented by two in April just ahead of the May election. Its blockbuster poll of mid-April (with a sample size of 3255, three times the normal) - headlined by **The Herald** as 'SNP in freefall' - appeared to have an independent effect on party endeavours, and seemingly brought about a change in SNP strategy in the final three weeks of the campaign. **The Scotsman's** pollsters, ICM, carried out fourteen polls between July 1998 and May 1999 for **The Scotsman** and its sister paper, **Scotland on Sunday**. Polls for **The Herald's** new sister paper, **The Sunday Herald**, were carried out by MORI.

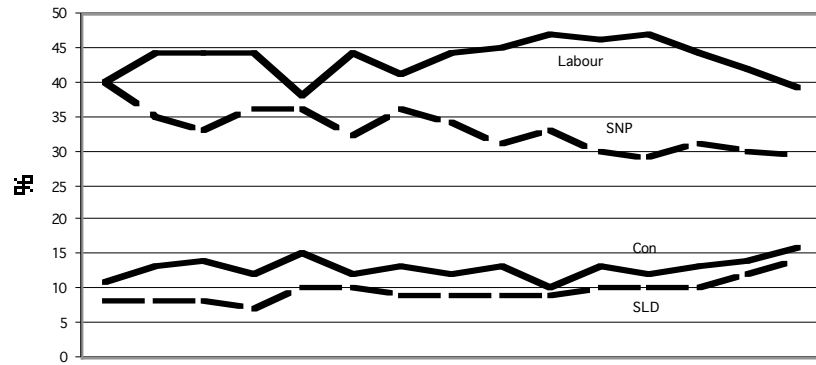
How well did the polls predict the outcome? In general, they did pretty well, especially ICM which polled up to 3 days before the election, and managed to get things fairly accurate (see figures 1 and 2).

The Herald's polls appeared to be less accurate, but they carried out fieldwork for their last poll 10-14 days before the election (figures 3 and 4). In general, all the polls over-estimated Labour's lead, especially on the 'list' vote, for no-one predicted that they would barely get a third of the vote. Similarly, in general terms the polls under-estimated support for the

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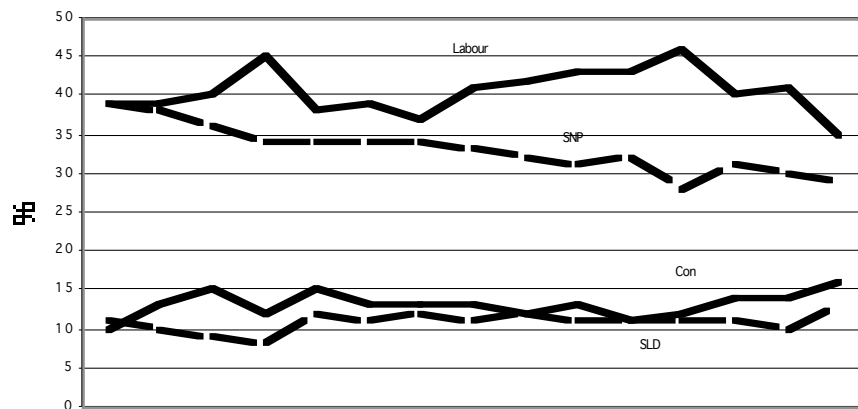
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Figure 1
Scottish parliament constituency vote (ICM)



July 1998- May 1999 (inc. results)

Figure 2
Scottish parliament list vote (ICM)

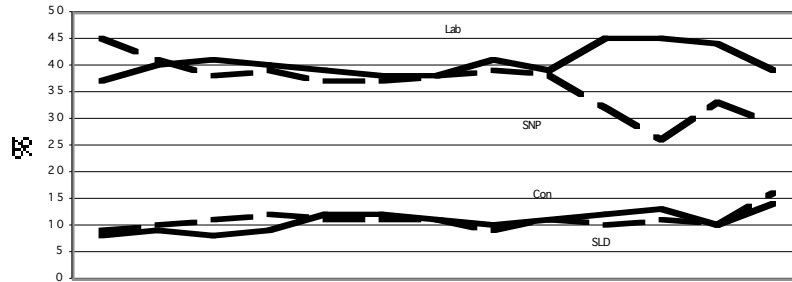


July 1998- May 1999 (inc. results)

(The final points on these graphs represent the election results.)

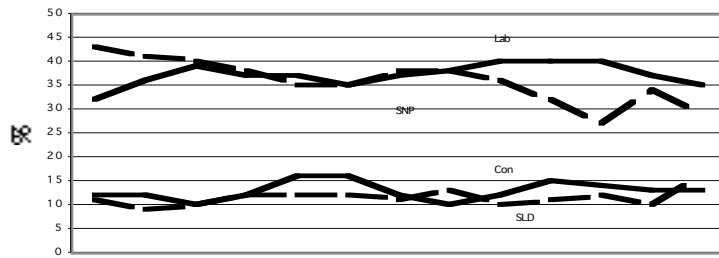
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Figure 3
Scottish parliament constituency vote
(System Three)



June 98-May 99 (inc. result)

Figure 4
Scottish parliament list vote
(System Three)



June 98 - May 99 (inc. results)

(The final points on these graphs represent the election results.)

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Figure 5
Westminster elections
(System Three)

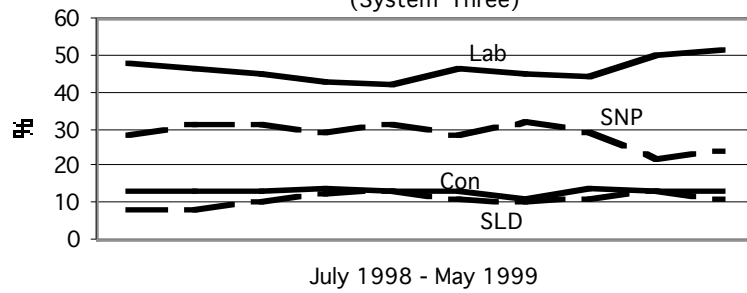
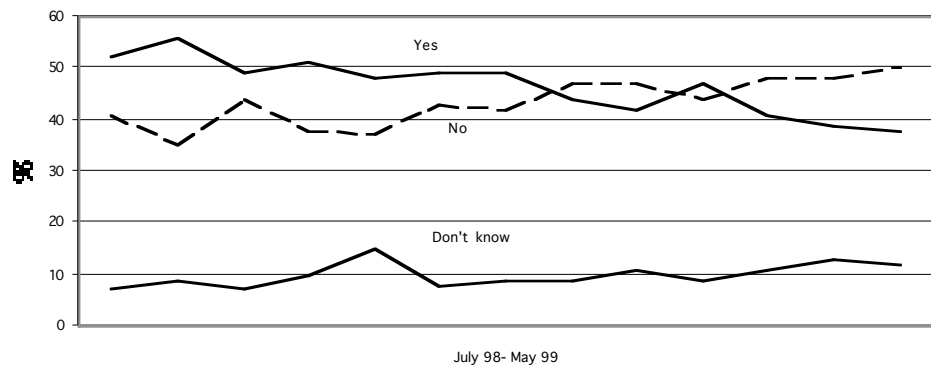


Figure 6
'How would you vote in a referendum on Independence?' (ICM)



(The final points on these graphs represent the election results.)

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Conservatives and the Liberal Democrats, while picking up on regional concentrations for the Greens, the Scottish Socialist Party and Dennis Canavan was always going to be much more difficult.

In broad terms, both System Three and ICM caught how the SNP lost its lead over Labour in mid-1998, although the contest was a much closer run thing between these two parties according to System Three. Apart from a narrowing late in 1998, ICM polls showed a fairly consistent gap between Labour and SNP of around 10 to 15 points throughout 1999. System Three suggested that this only happened from March onwards. On the other hand, both sets of polls showed a sizeable gap in putative elections for Westminster of the order of 20-25 percentage points (figure 5).

ELECTION ISSUES

Party leaders

The year 1999 began with Alex Salmond showing strongly as a potential First Minister, but this diminished as his party's fortunes declined in the polls. By April/May, his ratings were virtually half those of Donald Dewar as to who would make the best First Minister. In an ICM February poll, Salmond was ahead of Dewar when it came to 'standing up for Scotland' (84 to 73), being 'in touch with people like me' (55 to 48), 'personality' (57 to 34) and 'arrogance' (42 to 34). Dewar came out ahead on 'experience' (88 to 74), 'honesty' (49 to 45), and being the best person to negotiate with the UK and EU (46 to 39).

Attitudes to Independence

Support for Independence in a referendum also went the way of general opinion poll trends, with a strong showing up to January 1999, and thereafter a preference for the status quo (see figure 6).

Support for Independence consistently came from young people (18-34), and from Catholics, while support from semi- and unskilled workers shifted away as the Labour party made it more of an issue in the campaign ('Divorce is expensive'). A poll in early April suggested that voters were beginning to judge as negative the economic effects of Independence, with 18% saying they and their families would be better off, 36% that it would make no difference, and 33% that they would be worse off. In the blockbuster poll for **The Herald** in mid-April, System Three found that 50% thought Independence would never happen, while 26% thought that it would occur

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within 10 years. An ICM poll for **The Guardian**, however, carried out in mid-April 1999, indicated that support for Scottish Independence had risen across Britain in general from 39% in 1997 to 53% in 1999. Well over 60% also thought that Scotland would become independent within 10 years.

Coalition government

From the outset, the polls were indicating that no party was likely to have an overall majority, though Labour came fairly close in some of them a few weeks before the election. Voters did not seem fazed by the prospect, and, indeed, preferred it to a Labour minority administration. The one which came to pass, between Labour and the Liberal Democrats, was marginally preferred to one between the SNP and the Liberal Democrats, but only by a matter of a few percentage points.

A penny for Scotland

At the outset of the election campaign, the SNP opted to gamble on a policy of adding the penny which chancellor Gordon Brown had indicated he would cut from income tax in the UK budget. The first poll taken after the SNP decision by ICM suggested that for most people (65%) it would make no difference either way to how they intended to vote. Seventeen percent said it would make them less likely to vote SNP, and 12% that it would make them more likely to. Thirty nine percent, however, thought that the SNP should have opted for Brown's tax cut. Undecided voters were broadly in line with those who claimed they had already made up their mind, suggesting that the political effect of the ploy was broadly neutral. An April poll for System Three indicated that more people were inclined to support the SNP policy on income tax than the Labour policy (52% to 37%), with a particular appeal to young people and strong resistance from those over 65.

The Kosovo effect

Not content with gambling on the electoral effects of tax changes, Alex Salmond's TV broadcast in March on the impact of bombing in the former Yugoslavia became a major campaign issue in its own right. Despite what government ministers tried to claim, the electoral effect was broadly neutral. In an early April poll, ICM found little evidence that the government's attack on the SNP had made a difference. Only 36% agreed with Salmond that the bombing would not help Kosovo, and 47% that the bombing would work (support was disproportionately strong among men and Labour voters). In general, however, there was uncertainty about the effects of bombing, especially among women. Electors divided in their judgement about the

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effects of the bombing broadly along party lines, with SNP supporters splitting 48% to 40% that it would not help the people of Kosovo, and Labour supporters 59% to 29% that it would. A poll later in April found that the war made little difference to whether people felt British or not (57% said it made none). People were split as to whether the bombing would help the people of Kosovo (44% to 37%), and 50% agreed with sending British troops as part of a NATO force (37% disagreed). As to the political effects of Salmond's intervention, almost two-thirds claimed that it had made no difference on how they would vote, and of the rest, 20% said it made them less likely, and 9% more likely to vote SNP. On the other hand, a MORI poll for **The Sunday Herald** in April 1999 found only 11% agreeing with Salmond's stance on the war, and 45% who backed Labour's position. The problem for the SNP was that their poll ratings and those of the leader were declining in March/April, regardless of the effect of the war in Kosovo.

GENERAL THEMES

Religion

Commendably, ICM have included a question on religion in their polls from July 1998, which they have subsequently used as a classification variable. In general, the polls confirm that Catholics are more likely to vote Labour, and that their continuing antipathy to the Tories is marked by as much as a ten point differential compared with Protestants or those of other religions or none. They confirm that it is not hostility to the SNP which explains Catholic attachment to Labour, but anti-Conservative feeling. Indeed, support for the SNP is broadly in line with national trends generally. They are also more likely to support Independence than other Labour voters, and voters in general. This is a consistent feature of the polls over the last twelve months, even when semi- and unskilled manual workers who started out as supporters of Independence came back into line with Labour thinking.

Education

Given the salience of education as a political issue in the last year, the responses to the late September 1998 ICM poll are revealing. Despite the fairly pessimistic assessments made by government ministers and by sections of the media, it is interesting that the Scottish education system gets a fairly clean bill of health from the Scottish public. Hence, only 22% thought that the system was deteriorating, compared with 24% who thought it was improving, and 43% that not much had changed. More people thought it had actually improved since their own school-days, especially older people and

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semi- and unskilled manual workers. The system was deemed to be better than in England by almost half of respondents, especially by older people and Conservatives. As regards who should be responsible for education, almost two-thirds were happy that it should be the Scottish parliament, rather than local authorities (25%), or Westminster (5%). Two-thirds indicated support for using the parliament's tax-varying powers to increase spending on education in particular. Teachers too were highly thought of. Seventy eight percent thought they were hard-working; about the same proportion denied they were overpaid; and seven out of ten respondents believed them to be in touch with children, and to be generally undervalued by society. Roughly the same proportion thought that there was insufficient discipline in schools, and marginally more thought that qualifications were easier to get nowadays than 5 or 10 years ago.

Broadly supportive attitudes towards the education system were shared across the country, and there were no significant differences by social class, age, gender, or political support. The only deviation was with regard to the abolition of the assisted places scheme by Labour, which was supported by two-thirds of respondents, but only 42% of Tories. There was little support for private education even if people could afford it, by a margin of 60% to 35%, although there was broad balance between those who supported the principle of private education and those who did not. The general picture is one of support for education in Scotland, something which politicians do not always seem to grasp.

MORI also included a question on separate Catholic schooling in their March 1999 poll for **The Sunday Herald**. This showed that 56% disapproved of the system, with 25% supporting it. Catholics themselves supported separate schooling by 62% to 28%, while Protestants disapproved by 62% to 16%.

National identity

The progress to a Scottish parliament generated press speculation that it was generating anti-English attitudes, and a more exclusive sense of Scottishness. In November 1998, ICM found that there was little support for such views. Fully two-thirds agreed with the statement that they liked the English a little or a lot, with only one in ten expressing dislike. SNP supporters were just as likely as those of other parties to hold such views. A mere 16% thought that people's views of the English had become more negative in the last five years, and most (62%) that they had not actually changed much. In the same November poll, ICM tried out a 'Scottish passport' question which has the potential to be a useful addition to the battery of questions on national

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identity in the last few years. For that reason, it is reproduced in full here: Respondents were asked: 'Which of the following types of people should be entitled to a Scottish passport? (Percentage agreeing is indicated alongside).

- people born in Scotland and who currently live in Scotland: 94%
- people born in Scotland but who live out of Scotland: 81%
- people not born in Scotland but currently living in Scotland: 55%
- people not born in Scotland, not currently living in Scotland, but who have at least one parent born in Scotland: 50%
- people not born in Scotland, not currently living in Scotland, but who have at least one grandparent born in Scotland: 26%
- everyone in the UK: 31%

As regards social variation, the most noticeable aspect is that Catholics are more 'liberal' in their definitions as to who should be allowed a Scottish passport, while SNP supporters are little different from the rest of the population in these matters. That almost one-third of the whole sample thought that everyone in the UK should be entitled to a Scottish passport is difficult to interpret, and slightly odd, but is possibly a reflection of a desire to be as inclusive as possible of national identity.

In late April 1999, ICM asked the more conventional 'Moreno' question about national identity, the results of which were broadly in line with previous surveys although slightly more claimed a 'British not Scottish' identity:

		disproportionate claims
Scottish not British	25%	SNP 40%; RC 29%
More Scottish than British	32%	C2 37%; SNP 40%; young 35%
equally Scottish and British	26%	over-65 35%; Cons 34%
more British than Scottish	3%	-
British not Scottish	11%	Cons 21%; over-65 15%; ABC1 14%

Press and media

The November 1998 ICM poll surveyed newspaper readership in Scotland, which confirmed marked regional variations. In general terms, the **Daily Record**, read by one-third of Scots, remains well ahead of **The Sun** with

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19%. The two Scottish broadsheets, **The Herald** (12%), and **The Scotsman** (9%) have more readers than the 'English' broadsheets (**The Times**, **Guardian**, **Independent**, **Telegraph**, and **Financial Times**, in that order) put together (13%). In terms of social class readership, Scotland's middle classes (ABC1) read **The Herald** (25%), **The Scotsman** (23%), and the **Daily Record** (18%), while manual workers (DE) read the **Record** (40%), and **The Sun** (28%). Glasgow readers prefer **The Herald** (19%) to **The Scotsman** (9%), while their Edinburgh counterparts reverse the order with 34% reading **The Scotsman**, and only 4% **The Herald**. The **Daily Record** however is read by almost 50% of Glaswegians, but only 21% in the Lothians, and 13% in the North East, where it is outsold by **The Sun** (19%). The **Press and Journal**, however, outsells them all in the North East with 23%. The general picture, then, is of significant regional variation in newspaper readership in Scotland.

The media also made the news in November 1998 when the governors of the BBC rejected proposals for a Scottish opt-out for the early evening six o'clock news bulletin. The poll carried out by ICM in mid-November showed Scottish opinion evenly balanced, with support for a 'Scottish Six' coming disproportionately from working class people, Glaswegians, and SNP supporters. Polls in other newspapers a couple of weeks later - after the debate had had a thorough public airing showed strong support than this for the Scottish Six. A poll in the **Sunday Mail** in late November showed 61% in favour and just 23% against, and the monthly System Three poll for **The Herald** in late November showed 69% in favour and 20% against.

Europe

The introduction the Euro in January 1999, which the government chose to sit out, was the subject of an ICM poll for **The Scotsman**. It indicated that Scottish opinion was evenly balanced between those who supported/opposed the UK joining the new currency. Only one-fifth took the view that the UK should never join (including almost 30% of SNP supporters), and just under half agreed that Britain should join 'when the conditions were right'. Nevertheless, nine out of ten expected this to happen at some time in the future, on average within five years. Seventy one percent took the view that joining the Euro would make no difference to a vote on Scottish Independence.

THE ELECTION AFTERMATH

Both ICM and System Three carried out polls in early June in the first few weeks of the Scottish parliament. These suggested that, contrary to press speculation, the Liberal Democrats had not suffered unduly from coalition politics. The System Three poll put Labour on 44% on a putative constituency vote, and 36% on the list, with the SNP on 28% and 30% respectively, the Liberal Democrats on 13% and 17%, the Conservatives 10% and 10%, and 'others' holding up at 5% and 8%. The ICM poll suggested that there was broad support for the coalition (45%), but 42% took the view that Labour should have gone it alone. 'Having our parliament' was deemed to be good by 45%, and bad by 15%, but a significant 40% said they did not know. On the other hand, fully 62% said that the Scottish parliament mattered most, compared with only 26% for its Westminster counterpart, and a mere 7% for the European parliament. This was in some contrast with responses to a MORI poll for **The Sunday Herald** which was also carried out in June 1999, where 44% thought that the Westminster parliament 'makes the most difference to your life', compared with 38% for the Scottish parliament, and 11% for the European parliament.

CONCLUSION

The year 1998-9 has been one of the most significant in Scottish history, and the opinion polls and their sponsors have played their part in monitoring changing attitudes in Scotland over that period. As the parliament beds down, it will continue to be important to gauge public opinion, and we are particularly fortunate in Scotland to have such high quality and significant tests of public opinion to rely on.

APPENDIX

(a) System Three carried out monthly polls of around 1000 adults for **The Herald**, including one of 3255 respondents in all 73 constituencies in mid-April 1999:

(b) ICM carried out the following polls for **The Scotsman** and **Scotland on Sunday**:

June 1999: N=1002

May 1999: N=1000; N=1005

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April 1999: N=1013; N=1006; N=11 16

Mar. 1999: N=1005; N=1009

Feb. 1999: N=1009; N=1014

Jan. 1999: N=1012

Nov. 1998: N=1010

Sept. 1998: N=1220; N=1209;

July 1998: N=1209

June 1998: N=1002;

(c) MORI carried out polls for **The Sunday Herald** of 1000 respondents in March-June 1999.

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

June 1999