

## **THE 1999 EUROPEAN PARLIAMENT ELECTION IN SCOTLAND**

*David Denver and Iain MacAllister*

On 10 June 1999 Scottish electors were called upon to go to the polls in a nationwide election for the second time in just over a month. Having elected the Scottish Parliament and local councillors on the same day in May, they now had to elect eight members of the European Parliament. Moreover, in the space of five weeks three different electoral systems were used to convert votes into seats in the bodies being elected. Local councillors were elected by the familiar first-past-the-post method while Members of the Scottish Parliament were elected by a combination of first-past-the-post in constituencies and regional party lists (for further details see Denver and MacAllister 1999). For the European Parliament election, the 'closed party list' system was used. The whole of Scotland was treated as one constituency and electors could only vote for a party's list of candidates as a whole - not for individuals. The method of allocating seats will be described below. Before considering the distribution of party support, however, we focus on the aspect of these elections that attracted most media comment - the very low turnout.

### **TURNOUT**

Proponents of proportional representation frequently argue that one of its major advantages is that, as compared to first-past-the-post, it provides a stronger incentive for electors to turn out and vote. Most wards and constituencies used for first-past-the-post elections in Britain are safe for one party or another and hopeless prospects for the other parties. The votes of those who don't support the dominant party are effectively wasted (as they do not help to elect anyone) and even supporters of the dominant party have little incentive to vote as they know that their party is going to win in any

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*David Denver is Professor of Politics and Iain MacAllister a Research Assistant at Lancaster University.*

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case. In line with this argument, it is well established that more marginal wards and constituencies regularly have higher turnouts than those considered safe (see Denver and Hands 1997; Rallings and Thrasher 1997, ch. 4).

Under PR, however, the number of wasted votes is minimised. With Scotland being treated as one constituency for the European Parliament, it did not matter where votes were cast. The votes of party supporters in an area where it has been weak would be added to the national total and could help to elect a representative. Similarly, parties had every incentive to pile up as many votes as possible in their strongest areas. At least as far as the major parties were concerned, every vote counted.

This reasoning appears to have been lost on Scottish voters, however, as turnout in the Euro-election slumped to what must be an all-time low for a nationwide election. Table 1 compares the turnout with other Scotland-wide polls in recent years. European elections attract much the lowest turnout of all - lower even than local elections - and the new electoral system introduced in 1999 made no difference to this. At 24.7%, turnout was 46.7 points lower than in the general election, 34.1 points lower than in the Scottish Parliament election and 13.2 points lower than in the previous European election. Scotland was not alone in having an exceptionally low turnout in these elections, of course. In seven of the nine English regions turnout was lower than in Scotland and the Scottish figure was slightly better than turnout in Britain as a whole (23.1%).

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**Table 1**  
**Turnout in Scottish Elections 1994-99**

Euro-Election 1994	Council Elections 1995	General Election 1997	Devolution Referendum 1997	Parliament Election 1999	Euro Election 1999
%	%	%	%	%	%
37.9	44.9	71.4	60.4	58.8	24.7

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Variations in turnout across Scottish constituencies reflected the normal pattern in elections. The highest turnout was recorded in Galloway and Upper Nithsdale (32.3%) and the lowest (as in the Scottish Parliament election) in Glasgow Shettleston (15.6%). More generally, turnout tended to be higher in

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more affluent areas characterised by higher rates of owner occupation and also in rural areas; lower turnouts are found in poorer, working-class, urban areas with high proportions of council tenants. Given these associations with the nature of constituencies, it is not surprising to find that turnout was lower in seats won by Labour at the 1997 general election (23.8%, N = 56) than in those won by the Liberal Democrats (26.9%, N = 10) or the SNP (28.1%, N= 6). Indeed, as Table 2 shows, in Labour-held seats the size of the turnout was clearly related to Labour's strength in 1997, ranging from an average of 20.7% in their safest seats to 27.2% in more marginal seats. To repeat, these turnout patterns are not unusual. Correlating constituency turnouts in the European elections with turnout in the 1997 general election gives a coefficient of 0.707 while the same measure comparing the Scottish Parliament election with the European election gives a coefficient of 0.818. In all three elections, then, the same constituencies tended to have higher turnouts and the same constituencies lower turnouts.

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**Table 2**  
**Turnout in Labour seats in the European Elections 1999**

	Least safe	Comfortable	Safest
	%	%	%
	27.2	23.6	20.7
(Constituencies)	(14)	(28)	(14)

*Notes: 'least safe' refers to constituencies in which Labour's 1997 majority was less than 26%, 'safest' to those in which it was more than 37.5% and 'comfortable' to those in between. The figures shown are means.*

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What was different about turnout in the Euro-elections in 1999, however, was its extremely low absolute level. As compared with the general election there was a decline of more than 50% in 18 constituencies, the largest being in Falkirk East (-52.9%). Only one constituency (Glasgow Kelvin) fell by less than 40% (-36.4% from an already very low base). The decline was slightly greater in Labour-held seats (-47.1%) than in Liberal Democrat (-45.4%) or SNP seats (-44.7%). If we take turnout and seats held in the Scottish Parliament as the bases of comparison, however, then there was no significant difference between Labour (-34.2%) and Liberal Democrat (-34.3%) seats although the decline in SNP seats (-32.0%) was again a little smaller. In both comparisons turnout tended to fall most where it had been

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relatively high and least (as with Glasgow Kelvin) where it was already relatively low.

Two related questions arise from this discussion. Why is turnout so much lower in European elections than in other elections? And why was turnout in the 1999 Euro-elections particularly poor, especially in stronger Labour areas? Answers to the general question must surely begin with the fact that voters know little and care less about the European Parliament. It is not a particularly powerful body within the EU (even after recent changes); its activities are rarely mentioned in the national media. If most voters think about the Parliament at all they see it, fairly or unfairly, as an institution whose members receive large salaries, lavish expenses and a place on the 'grave train' for doing nothing very much other than imposing irritating regulations. In addition, unlike local, Scottish Parliament and general elections, the European elections are not accompanied by any serious campaigning at national or local level. National campaigns are very low-key and are confined to the inside pages of broadsheet newspapers. At 'local' level the sheer size of the former Euro-constituencies made campaigning difficult - the organisations of the parties are designed for campaigning in wards and Parliamentary constituencies - and this problem was compounded in 1999 when the whole of Scotland was, in effect, one constituency. As compared with other elections, canvassing, leafletting, posters and efforts to mobilise the electorate on polling day are notable by their absence in European elections. In these circumstances low turnout is unsurprising. Indeed, non-voting in European elections is increasing across the member states. Of the thirteen in which voting is not compulsory, turnout in 1999 declined as compared with the previous Euro-election in ten, and also in ten it failed to exceed 50%.

It might be suggested that the particularly poor turnout in 1999 was a consequence of 'election fatigue'. In the space of two years Scottish (and Welsh) voters had voted in a general election, a referendum, Scottish Parliament or Welsh Assembly elections, local council elections and now European Parliament elections. While there is no doubt that this must have put a strain on party workers and that local campaigning probably suffered as a result, the fact that turnout was even lower in England, where there have been fewer elections, than in either Scotland or Wales casts doubt on the 'election fatigue' explanation. An alternative suggestion put forward by Paul Whiteley (**Guardian** 22 June 1999) is that working-class Labour supporters are more hostile to Europe than is the party leadership or its middle-class supporters and expressed this by more or less boycotting the election. The Conservatives succeeded in making the European single currency the major

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issue of the campaign and were more sceptical than the Government, which is committed to joining the currency when conditions are right. At the time of the 1997 general election, however, the Scottish Election Study survey found that a clear majority of Scottish Labour voters (56%) wanted to keep the pound sterling and have nothing to do with the euro (18% wanted to replace the pound, 21% wanted both the pound and the euro and 5% had no opinion). Among middle-class Labour supporters 49% wanted to keep the pound only while among working-class supporters 62% did so. Given that Labour is the dominant party in Scotland such a disjunction between the views of party supporters and the policy of the Labour government could well help to account for the marked lack of interest in the election, especially in strongly Labour areas.

### **THE OVERALL OUTCOME**

Table 3 shows the votes cast across Scotland for the various lists (and one individual advocating lower taxation) which contested the election. The procedure for allocating seats was similar to that used to elect regional 'top up' members in the Scottish Parliament election. Labour had the largest number of votes and so the first Labour candidate was elected. Labour's vote was now divided by two (1 + number of seats already won) to give 141,745. The SNP was now highest and had a candidate elected, with their votes then being reduced to 134,264. That left the Conservatives to have their first candidate elected and votes reduced to 97,648. These three parties were still ahead of the next best-placed party (the Liberal Democrats) and so each then had another candidate elected with their votes consequently being reduced respectively to 94,496, 89,509 and 65,099. That left the Liberal Democrats with almost 97,000 votes, just ahead of Labour, and so they picked up the seventh seat and Labour the eighth. Scotland's representatives in the European Parliament comprise, therefore, three Labour, two Conservatives, two SNP and one Liberal Democrat.

There is no doubt that this result represented a major disappointment for Labour. We have to go back more than 70 years (to 1923) to find the last case of the party getting less than 30% of the vote in a nationwide election in Scotland. Labour's performance also contrasted starkly with their standing in opinion polls. At the end of May and beginning of June, in terms of general election voting intentions across the UK, Labour was on 46% according to ICM and 52% according to MORI, having a large lead over the Conservatives in both cases. Within Scotland a MORI poll undertaken at the start of June suggested that Labour would get 48% of the votes in the Euro-

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elections compared with 30% for the SNP, 10% for the Conservatives and 8% for the Liberal Democrats.

In Table 4 we compare the Euro-election result with the results of the 1997 general election and the Scottish Parliament election in May 1999 (showing separate figures for constituency and list voting in the latter). By any standard the Conservative recovery was very modest - up by only 2.3% from their general election disaster and by just over 4% from an even worse showing in the Scottish Parliament elections. Labour, on the other hand, declined sharply from their performance in the general election, to the apparent benefit of the SNP and 'others'. There was also a marked decline in Labour support when compared with constituency voting in the Scottish Parliament election. If the Liberal Democrats hoped that the institution of a more proportional electoral system would enable them to increase their vote - on the grounds that it seriously weakens the 'wasted vote' argument - then they have been disappointed. Their share of the vote in the Euro-elections fell as compared with the previous first-past-the post elections. Overall, the data in Table 4 suggest that the introduction of list voting produces larger votes for small parties and that Labour loses out most from defections, especially to the Green party and the small socialist parties.

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**Table 3**  
**Votes Cast in the European Elections 1999**

		%
Labour	283,490	28.7
SNP	268,528	27.2
Conservative	195,296	19.8
Liberal Democrat	96,971	9.8
Green	57,142	5.8
Scottish Socialist Party	39,720	4.0
Pro European Conservative	17,781	1.8
UK Independence Party	12,549	1.3
Socialist Labour Party	9,385	1.0
British National Party	3,729	0.4
Natural Law Party	2,087	0.2
Lower Tax	1,632	0.2

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Some evidence in support of this interpretation is given by the figures comparing list voting for the Scottish Parliament and voting in the Euro-elections. In both cases electors were faced with party lists and asked to indicate their preferred party, and the changes here are rather smaller than the comparisons with first-past-the-post elections. Between the two list votes there was a swing of 5.2% from Labour to the Conservatives, support for the Liberal Democrats and SNP declined a little and that for others increased somewhat.

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**Table 4**  
**Changes in Party Shares of Vote**

	Con	Lab	Lib Dem	SNP	Others
From:	%	%	%	%	%
General Election	+2.3	-16.9	-3.2	+5.1	+12.3
Scot. Parl. Election (Constit.)	+4.3	-10.1	-4.4	-1.5	+11.5
Scot. Parl. Election (List)	+4.4	-6.0	-2.6	-0.1	+3.3

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### CONSTITUENCY RESULTS

The overall result of the European election was computed by aggregating the votes cast in individual parliamentary constituencies, and the fact that constituency figures are available makes it possible to carry our analysis further<sup>1</sup>. It is worth noting first that, had the election been fought under first-past-the-post using the eight Euro-constituencies into which Scotland had

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<sup>1</sup> It should be noted that the figures for constituency voting reported in the Scottish press are incomplete and unreliable. The data used here were obtained from returning officers.

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been divided in preparation for the 1999 elections<sup>1</sup>, then Labour would have won four seats (Central Scotland, Glasgow, Lothians and West of Scotland), the SNP would have won three (Highlands and Islands, Mid Scotland and Fife and North East Scotland) and the Conservatives one (South of Scotland). On the (perhaps unwise) assumption that people would have voted in broadly the same ways under first-past-the-post, the effect of PR was to reduce Labour and SNP representation in the European Parliament by one seat, give the Conservatives an extra seat and allow the Liberal Democrats to have a Scottish MEP for the first time.

On the same assumption, figures for the 72 UK parliamentary constituencies show that the Conservatives would have won 12 and the SNP 15. Although the latter included Aberdeen North and South and Dundee East and West, the SNP would not have won any seats in Labour's West of Scotland heartlands, even with Labour doing very badly. This illustrates the size of the mountain that the SNP have to climb in order to dislodge Labour if first-past-the post elections continue to be used for the House of Commons and for more than half of the seats in the Scottish Parliament. The Liberal Democrats would have held just one seat (Orkney and Shetland) which perhaps indicates the extent to which their general election successes owe much to the personalities of incumbent MPs. Astonishingly, with just 28.7% of the national vote Labour would have won 44 constituencies (61%) - a statistic which speaks volumes about the effect of the first-past-the-post system in distorting representation.

Table 5 shows the changes in the parties' shares of list votes at the Scottish Parliament election and the European Parliament election in the eight regions used in the former case. The Conservatives increased their vote share in every region, doing best, at opposite ends of the country, in the Highlands and Islands (+5.5%) and South of Scotland (+5.7%). The slight increase in Labour's share of the vote in Central Scotland reflects the popularity of Dennis Canavan, the incumbent MP, who stood as an Independent Labour list candidate in this area in the Scottish Parliament election (as well as in the Falkirk West constituency, which he won). Otherwise, Labour declined everywhere as did the Liberal Democrats, the latter declining most in areas of previous strength. Changes in SNP support are a mixture of small increases

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<sup>1</sup> *These are not the same as the Euro-constituencies in 1994 since in the interim there had been significant changes to the boundaries of parliamentary constituencies which are the building blocks of the Euro-constituencies.*

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and small decreases but it is interesting that the party failed to make any headway in the central belt of Glasgow, West of Scotland and Lothians.

We can compare voting in the European election with list voting in the Scottish Parliament election in more detail at constituency level. The Conservatives increased their vote share in every constituency, the improvement ranging from 0.9% in Glasgow Maryhill to 8.8% in Cunninghame North. Labour's share decreased in all but five constituencies. There was a major advance in Falkirk West (+11.5%) due to the 'Canavan factor' mentioned above, and this probably also explains the improvement in three of the other four seats in which Labour's vote share increased (Falkirk East, Motherwell and Wishaw and Airdrie and Shotts). The exception was Midlothian (+4.4%). The Liberal Democrats also improved their position in just five seats (again including Falkirk East and West) but their five worst performances, ranging from -13.2% to -7.3%, were all in seats that they represent in both the Westminster and the Scottish Parliament - Orkney and Shetland, Roxburgh and Berwickshire, Gordon, North East Fife, and Ross, Skye and Inverness West. The SNP share of the vote hardly changed overall but it was slightly up in 24 constituencies and slightly down in 48. The biggest increases were in Falkirk West (+6.5%) and Banff and Buchan (+5.4%) while the steepest decline was in Glasgow Maryhill (-5.7%).

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**Table 5**  
**Changes in Party Shares of List Vote in Regions**  
**(Scottish Parliament and European Elections)**

	Con	Lab	Lib Dem	SNP	Others
	%	%	%	%	%
Central Scotland	+3.4	+0.3	-1.0	+0.4	-3.2
Glasgow	+2.9	-5.8	-0.6	-1.6	+5.1
Highlands & Islands	+5.5	-7.3	-5.7	+3.1	+4.5
Lothians	+3.8	-1.2	-3.0	-1.9	+2.3
Mid Scotland & Fife	+4.4	-7.6	-2.7	-0.3	+6.2
North East Scotland	+3.4	-4.8	-6.0	+2.6	+4.8
South of Scotland	+5.7	-4.4	-2.5	-1.9	+3.2

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West of Scotland      +4.7      -8.0      -1.7      -0.1      +5.2

*Note: these figures are derived by aggregating to regional level the votes cast within constituencies at both elections.*

To explore how the parties' vote shares changed relative to one another and also how these changes were related to the steep change in turnout we show the relevant correlation coefficients in Table 6. Due to the unusual situation in Falkirk West constituency we have excluded it from these calculations. The decline in turnout was not significantly related to changes in the level of support for Labour, the Liberal Democrats or the SNP. On the other hand, the more turnout fell the better the Conservatives did and the smaller the increase recorded by 'others'. The relationships between changes in support for the different parties are much as would be expected. Change in the Conservative vote varied inversely with changes in the shares obtained by Labour and the Liberal Democrats; Labour changes also varied inversely with changes in SNP and (especially) 'other' support. Changes in Liberal Democrat and SNP vote shares were negatively related to one another and both were also associated with change in support for others. We can attempt to put an interpretative gloss on these statistical relationships. The Conservatives appear to have improved their position because supporters of the other main parties were more likely to stay away from the polls and also because of some defections from the Liberal Democrats. Labour and, to a lesser extent, the Liberal Democrats also lost out more heavily to fringe parties.

**Table 6**  
**Correlations between Changes in Party Shares of List Vote and Change in Turnout (Scottish Parliament and European Elections)**

	Change in %:				
	Con	Lab	Lib Dem	SNP	Others
Change in %:					
Lab	<b>-0.246</b>	-			
Lib Dem	<b>-0.299</b>	0.070	-		
SNP	0.028	<b>-0.339</b>	<b>-0.432</b>	-	
Others	-0.077	<b>-0.622</b>	<b>-0.281</b>	-0.046	
Turnout	<b>-0.286</b>	-0.150	-0.051	-0.118	<b>0.464</b>

*Note: Significant coefficients are printed in bold. Falkirk West is excluded from these calculations; N = 71.*

## **CONCLUSION**

Labour's poor showing in the European elections is open to at least three main interpretations. The first suggests that core Labour voters are becoming disillusioned with the government. The strategy of seeking the votes of 'middle England' and the policies pursued - the introduction of university tuition fees, the 'modernisation' of welfare, the failure to do anything about rail privatisation or 'fat cats' - have dissipated any credit that was gained by creating the Scottish Parliament. The effect is a slump in support similar to that experienced by previous governments in the mid-term between general elections. The problem with this view is that all opinion polls suggest that the government and the Prime Minister remain unusually popular. A second view suggests that most voters are entirely happy with the way in which things are going. They are content with the government's performance and have no strong incentive to use their votes to indicate a protest against it, as is common when governments are unpopular. Labour voters felt no particular need to come out and support their government which was, in any case, not under threat. The third view has already been mentioned and it is that Labour's problems in these elections were related to the European issue itself. Its Scottish supporters are hostile to the single currency and wary of the EU itself. When asked in the 1997 Scottish Election Study survey about the future development of the EU, 47% of Labour voters in Scotland either wanted the UK to leave or the Union to have reduced powers. Less than a quarter (24%) wanted increased powers for the EU while the remainder (29%) wanted things to stay as they were or had no opinion. The Conservatives were not able to cash in on this scepticism as much as they might have but it did result in Labour supporters being unwilling to go to the polls to elect members of an institution about which many of them were unenthusiastic, to say the least. The implication of the second and third interpretation (and possibly also the first) is that Labour does not really have to worry too much about its poor performance in the Euro-elections. Although there may be difficulties in respect of European policy - in particular getting electors to agree to joining the single currency in a referendum - these interpretations suggest that most Labour supporters will return to the fold when the next general election comes along.

It might also be suggested, however, that Labour's poor performance is a reflection of the willingness of erstwhile Labour supporters to vote for other parties when they have an opportunity to do so under a proportional electoral

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system. In both the Scottish Parliament and European elections, list voting resulted in a sharp drop in Labour support as compared with the general election and a rise in support for fringe parties. This may have had something to do with tactical or strategic voting in the Scottish Parliament case, but the European election figures might be interpreted as showing that, when unconstrained by the first-past-the post system, the Scottish electorate is less strongly Labour-inclined than might have been anticipated. There will be no change in the electoral system in place for the next general election but if a change is later made to the system for electing representatives to the House of Commons and also to local councils (which is certainly on the political agenda) then the image of Scotland as a country in which Labour dominates at all levels may quickly become a thing of the past.

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