

OPINION POLLS IN SCOTLAND: JUNE 2000-JUNE 2001

David McCrone

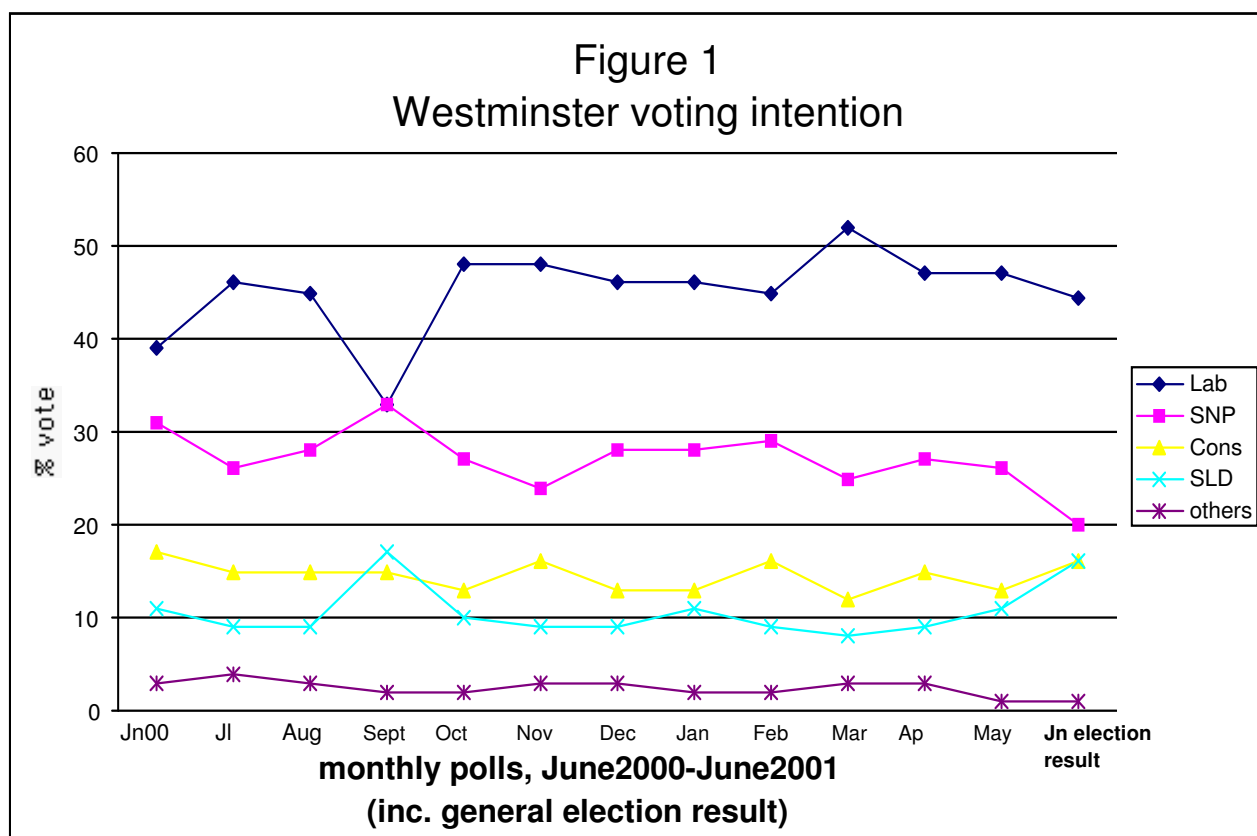
The twelve month period from June 2000 culminated in the British general election on 7th June 2001. Whereas in the UK as a whole the opinion polls were tolerably accurate in predicting the result, notably the final ICM poll for **The Guardian** which achieved an average error of merely 0.5%, a similar poll for **The Scotsman** was well adrift. In particular, the Scottish ICM poll overestimated the SNP share of the vote by 5 percentage points, and underestimated the Liberal-Democrat share by 3. ICM was not unusual in this respect, for System Three's boosted poll (with 3019 respondents, three times the usual) also overestimated the SNP by a similar amount, as well as putting Labour's share at 50%. The fieldwork for this poll, however, was carried out in the third week of May, while ICM's was done a couple of days before the election itself. No newspaper in Scotland has sought to query the accuracy of polling in Scotland this time round, possibly because south of the border it was not an issue this time. The only organisation to do so, and during the campaign itself, was the Scottish Conservative party who complained to System Three that its predicted share of the vote at 12% grossly underestimated its 'real' vote. In the event, the Tories managed 15.6%, almost 2 percentage points lower than its share in 1997, and no more was heard thereafter about polls being unfair to the party.

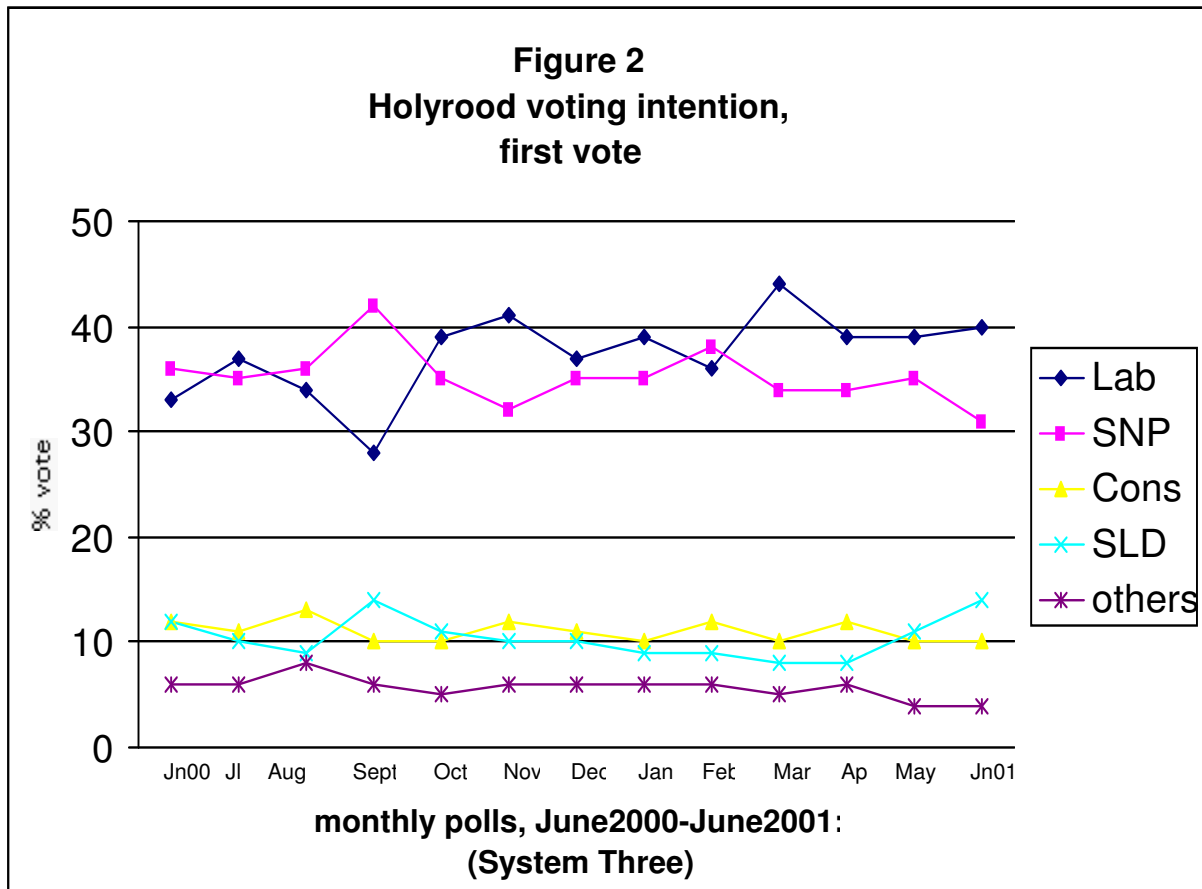
The System Three monthly polls for **The Herald** were as in Figure 1. The polls were fairly consistent, showing Labour well ahead of the SNP apart from the fuel crisis blip in September/October 2000, when both parties were level. By November, the status quo ante had been restored. The untimely death of Donald Dewar, and the resignation of Alex Salmond as leader of the SNP, both occurring in the later months of 2000, seemed to have little impact on the relative fortunes of their parties. Neither the SQA fiasco of August

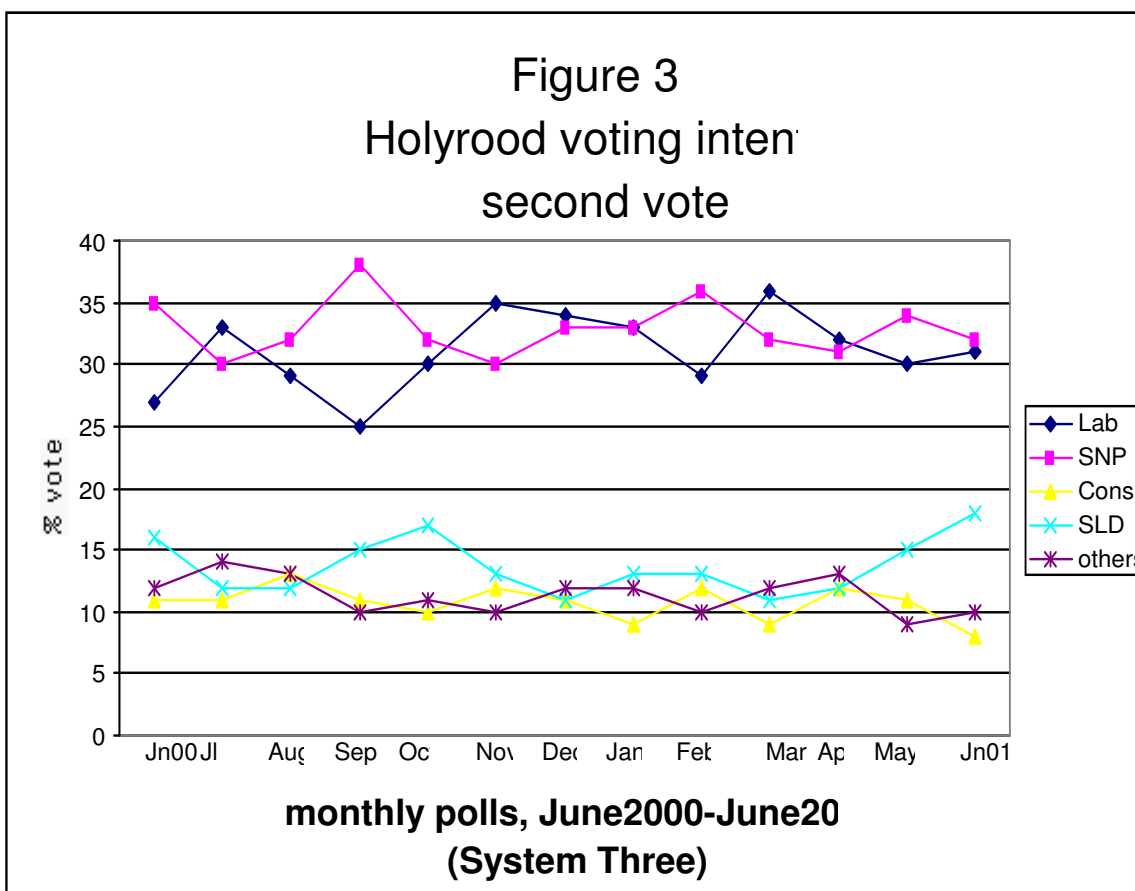
David McCrone is Professor of Sociology and co-Director of the Institute of Governance at the University of Edinburgh.

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2000, nor the final throws of the Section 2a/28 saga, had much impact on party fortunes, though the SNP showed up well in the July 2000 poll.







THE BRITISH ELECTION

One of the notable features of the 2001 election both north and south of the border was the low turnout: in Scotland, a mere 58.1%. Did the polls predict this? It is hard to say that they did, for System Three poll found that 67% said they were 'certain' to vote, and ICM's June poll put the figure at 66%. In these and other polls, there was a clear age differential, with only 37% of 18-24 year olds saying they were certain to vote, compared with 84% of people over 65 (ICM June 2001). Whatever the actual abstention figure, the polls showed little evidence of party advantage on the issue, for supporters of Labour and the SNP were just as likely to vote as Tories and Liberal Democrats. That the Scottish Socialist Party was unlikely to meet its target of 5% of the popular vote was reflected in opinion poll ratings of around 3%, the level they eventually achieved.

The SNP continues to have a gender differential, with women less likely to support them than men (18% to 26% respectively in the System Three poll in May 2001). The Nationalists continue to poll much better among young people than among the old, but the party is no doubt hit by high abstention rates among the young. Labour dominates all social classes, and while there is a differential (51% of working class people, compared with 37% of the middle class), it remains the first choice among all classes (System Three, May 2001).

In terms of electoral issues, health and education dominated, as they did in the rest of Britain. Thus, health was mentioned by as many as 71% as among the key issues, compared with 54% who mentioned education, 40% unemployment and jobs, 40% law and order, 28% the economy, and 27% taxation. European issues were mentioned by only 8% (System Three, May 2001). Health seems to have been a more important issue for women, and for people over 65, and less so for men, and for young people who had greater concerns about jobs as well as education. In terms of political preferences, there was broadly little difference among voters, though Labour supporters were marginally more concerned about health, unemployment and jobs, SNP voters about matters of unemployment and jobs, Liberal Democrats about education, and transport, and Tory voters about taxation. European issues, which appear to have dominated the Tory agenda, were mentioned by only 15% of Conservatives.

VOTING FOR HOLYROOD

While the focus of most polls, particularly preceding June 2001, was on the British election, the polls kept a watch on voting intentions for Holyrood. The System Three polls for first and second vote for the Scottish parliament are as in Figure 2.

We can see that Labour and the SNP fight it out for first place. The SNP do better in the autumn of 2000, while Labour make a quick recovery after the fuel tax debacle, and maintain a lead over the SNP until the June elections, apart from a slight dip in February and March of 2001. The ICM June 2001 poll put the two parties neck and neck, with Labour a point or two ahead. In terms of vote switching between Westminster and Holyrood elections, voters indicated a high degree of consistency, ranging from 93% of SNP voters who said they would be voting SNP at both, to 83% for Labour (12% said they intended to switch to the SNP at Holyrood elections). As regards voting switching between first and second Holyrood votes, 75% of Tories said they would stay loyal, compared with 71% of Nationalists (20% would switch to Labour), 66% of Labour voters (21% switching to the SNP on the second ballot), and the Liberal Democrats retaining only 41% on both ballots (23% to Labour, and 20% to the SNP). These figures come from the ICM June 2001 poll.

This poll also asked people which level of government should raise and collect taxes, and found that 37% said this should be done by the Scottish Executive, 17% by the UK government (as at present), and 38% that it should be a shared responsibility. Those favouring the Scottish option included disproportionately young people, skilled manual workers, and SNP voters, while 43% of Tories wanted London to collect all taxes. A previous ICM poll in February 2001 found that 67% thought that the Scottish Executive should be responsible for setting and collecting taxes in Scotland, with 27% in favour of the UK government.

In the ICM May 2001 poll for **The Scotsman**, 32% said that the Scottish parliament is most relevant in dealing with issues affecting them, compared with 21% who said it was Westminster. Forty two percent said both equally. On the other hand, the UK government was deemed to have most influence over the quality of the NHS and schools in Scotland (38%), compared with 27% who thought it was the Executive.

The ICM polls continued to run questions on preferred constitutional options post-devolution: Table 1.

Scottish Affairs

Table 1

Constitutional Options

percentage	September 2000	February 2001	May 2001
Independence in EU	24	27	25
Devolved parliament	55	53	56
No devolution	18	16	17
base	1000	1003	1000

ICM polls

Support for Independence came disproportionately from young people (35%), and SNP voters (50%), while opposition to the whole idea of devolution was more likely to come from older people (23% of over 65s). If a referendum were to be held on Independence, 45% said they would vote favour, and 49% against (ICM, March 2001).

There was during the year a significant increase in the ratings for the Scottish parliament: Table 2.

Table 2

'From what you have seen or heard, do you think that the Scottish parliament has achieved a lot, a little, or nothing at all?'

percentage	September 2000	February 2001
A lot	11	25
A little	56	56
Nothing at all	29	14
base	1000	1003

ICM polls

System Three's poll for the **Sunday Herald** in February/March 2001 indicated that 57% wanted the Scottish parliament to have more powers than

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at present, marginally down from 62% in April 2000. Policy areas favoured to come under the responsibility of Holyrood included taxation (58%), social security (54%), railways (38%), and broadcasting (30%). Young people were more likely than older people to want the Scottish parliament to have more powers (67% and 48% respectively). While, unsurprisingly, SNP voters were in favour of more powers (88%), a majority of Labour voters (57%) also favoured such a proposal.

EUROPE

In a putative referendum vote on whether or not the UK should join the single European currency, there were broadly twice as many opposing the policy as supporting it. In the ICM June 2001 poll, for example, 28% said they would vote 'yes', and 56% 'no', with 16% 'don't knows'. Those disproportionately supporting a yes vote included: men (33%), young people (32%), the middle class (35%), and Labour and Liberal Democrats (38% each). Nevertheless, Europe remains a political issue of relatively low significance in Scottish, as in British, politics, with only 18% saying that it is a crucial issue determining how they would vote in a general election (ICM, June 2001).

The next twelve months should see a strengthening of the Scottish political agenda, given that the British general election has taken place, and a Scottish election is scheduled for May 2003. While no elections will take place until then, Scottish politics are likely to continue to be vibrant and contested, and we are indebted to both System Three and ICM, and to their sponsors, **The Herald** and **The Scotsman**, for providing continuing investment in this important aspect of Scottish life.

APPENDIX

System Three carried out monthly polls for **The Herald**, and **The Sunday Herald**, with sample sizes at or around 1000 cases, with the exception of its June 2001 poll which had a boosted sample of 3019.

ICM carried out the following polls, with sample sizes at or around 1000:

September 2000, for **The Scotsman**; February 2001 for **Scotland on Sunday**; March 2001 for **The News of the World**; May 2001 for **The Scotsman**; June 2001 for **The Scotsman**; and June 2000 for Media House.

September 2001