

THE 1994 EUROPEAN ELECTIONS IN SCOTLAND

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It is not clear how European elections should be analysed and interpreted. On the one hand there are similarities with general elections. The country is divided into constituencies; there are 'sitting' MEPs who defend the seats that they hold; there is a recognisable national campaign which is reported to some extent on television and in the quality press. This implies that analysis should follow the conventions established in general elections - taking the previous Euro-election as the point of comparison and focusing on topics such as gains and losses of seats, constituency swings and so on. In this perspective it is presumed that European elections are significant events in themselves, that who gets elected is a matter of some importance and possibly even that the party balance in the European Parliament is a consideration that should be borne in mind by commentators.

On the other hand, it can be argued that it is only general elections that really matter and that European elections are merely 'mid-term' events, affording the electorate an opportunity to express their opinion about the current performance of the parties in the UK context. In this respect they have a status which is roughly similar to that of local elections and can even be conceived of as a sort of opinion poll on a grand scale. The eight Scottish Euro-constituencies (averaging almost half a million voters) are so large as to be meaningless; the electorate have little knowledge about or interest in the activities of MEPs and the European Parliament, and base their vote purely on internal British concerns; there appears to be very little local activity by the parties - certainly as compared with general elections - so that voters are frequently not aware of the names of the candidates or the range of parties contesting the seat until they turn up at the polls. In this view it does not matter much who wins seats and the main point of analysis is to use the election results as an indicator of the current standing of the parties as compared with the last general election.

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The latest round of European elections took place in June 1994 and in this brief account of the results in Scotland I take account of both of these analytical strategies. As will become clear, however, the results themselves suggest that the second approach is the more realistic.

TURNOUT

There is little doubt that the British electorate have little interest in European elections. Turnout in Scotland in 1994 was 37.9% as compared with 40.7% in 1989. In table 1 these figures are compared with the turnout in intervening nationwide elections. Clearly, the evidence suggests that general elections are regarded by the voters as 'first-order' elections of major importance while the others are very much 'second-order' elections. Indeed, European elections attract the lowest turnout of all and, given this, it seems unconvincing to argue that they are treated by the electorate as significant events. In part this is a consequence of the fact that the parties themselves - or at least voluntary party workers - do not treat European elections very seriously. As compared with other elections, there appears to be very little local party activity - canvassing, leafletting, posters and strenuous efforts to mobilise the electorate on polling day are notable by their absence. This in turn reflects the fact that the parties have simply not come to terms with the problem of organising effective, or even simply visible, local campaigns in the massive Euro-constituencies.

Table 1

Turnout in Scottish Elections 1989-1994 (%)

Euro-election	Regional elections	General election	District elections	Regional elections	Euro-election
1989	1990	1992	1992	1994	1994
40.7	45.9	75.4	41.4	45.6	37.9

Table 2
Turnout and Change in Turnout in Euro-constituencies

	Turnout 1994 %	Change in Turnout 1989-94
Glasgow	34.5	-5.4
Highlands & Islands	39.1	-1.8
Lothians	38.7	-3.3
Mid Scotland & Fife	38.3	-3.1
North East Scotland	37.7	-0.7
South of Scotland	40.1	-1.4
Strathclyde East	37.3	-2.0
Strathclyde West	40.1	-2.5

Election turnout is not simply a function of the parties' efforts to mobilise the voters, however. Table 2 shows the variations in turnout and in turnout change from the last Euro-elections across the eight Scottish constituencies. Apart from Glasgow, turnout varied within a relatively narrow range across the constituencies, exceeding 40% (just) in only South of Scotland and Strathclyde West. However, these two areas also had the highest turnouts in the 1992 general election and Glasgow also had the lowest, so that there appears to be little distinctive about the European elections to explain the broad geographical patterns of turnout. Rather, the figures reflect enduring social and cultural factors which influence electoral participation. In one respect, however, this conclusion requires modification. The decline in turnout in the North East Scotland seat was somewhat smaller than elsewhere. This is an area of notoriously low turnouts in all kinds of elections and turnout remained below average in 1994. In advance of the election, however, it was widely expected that this seat would be a close run thing between the Labour incumbent and the SNP challenger, with a distinct possibility that the seat would be gained by the latter. It seems possible that

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this prompted greater than average campaign effort by Labour and the SNP (or extra publicity in the media) and the message appears to have got through to at least some of the electorate. To a slight extent, therefore, a factor specifically related to the European election - the presumed marginality of North East Scotland - appears to have had some effect on turnout patterns.

PATTERNS OF PARTY SUPPORT

In broad terms, few people (among the 'attentive public', at least) could have had any doubts about what the outcome of the European elections would be. Only a month previously, in the Regional Council elections, the Conservatives had suffered a humiliating defeat (see article by Denver and Bochel elsewhere in this issue of **Scottish Affairs**), and there was no doubt that in European terms Scotland would remain a 'Tory-free zone'. Labour, as usual, would be predominant in the central belt where the SNP was too far behind to pose a serious threat. Given that Mrs. Ewing was impregnable in the Highlands and Islands on behalf of the SNP, the only doubt was whether Labour could hang on to North East Scotland where the Regional election results suggested that the SNP were poised to take the seat.

The shares of the votes gained by the various parties in each constituency and over Scotland as a whole are shown in table 3 and it is clear that expectations were largely fulfilled. With only 14.5% of the votes the extreme unpopularity of the Conservatives in Scotland is manifest - especially in Glasgow and Strathclyde East, where their vote share was close to what one would expect a fringe party to receive. There was only one European constituency (South of Scotland) where they managed even second place - and then only by a whisker. Labour received most Scottish votes and comfortably retained all seats in the Central belt. In the Highlands and Islands, Mrs. Ewing had the largest vote share of any candidate in the election (58.4%). The only surprise in the results was the scale, if not the fact, of the SNP's victory over Labour in North East Scotland. This was the only Euro-seat that Labour lost in the entire UK and, as the figures show, it was lost in convincing fashion. In terms of overall share of votes, the SNP's performance was their best-ever in a national election in Scotland.

A small indication that the voters treat European elections differently from general elections is given by the fact that in the former they are more willing to give their votes to 'other' parties - the Green party, the Natural Law party and so on. This was demonstrated spectacularly in the 1989 election when the Greens appeared from nowhere, as it were, to take 7.2% of the Scottish vote.

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In 1992, Green and 'other' candidates obtained 3.2% of the European vote. For comparison, in the general elections of 1987 and 1992 these 'fringe' candidates received only 0.3% and 0.8% respectively. The large 'other' vote in the Glasgow constituency was mainly for the Militant Labour candidate who came third, pushing the Conservatives into fourth place.

An even more striking example of the difference between the two sorts of elections is Mrs. Ewing's success in the Highlands and Islands. She obtained more than 50% of the votes for the second successive election despite the fact that, of the seven parliamentary constituencies that make up her seat, five are held by the Liberal Democrats, one by Labour and only one by the SNP.

Table 3

Party Shares of Votes (%)

	Con	Lab	Lib Dem	SNP	Green	Other	Winner
Glasgow	6.8	52.6	4.6	25.6	1.4	9.1	Lab
Highlands & Islands	12.3	15.6	10.1	58.4	2.4	1.3	SNP
Lothians	16.6	44.9	8.9	26.5	2.6	0.6	Lab
Mid Scotland & Fife	13.5	45.8	8.2	30.8	1.4	0.3	Lab
North East Scotland	18.6	28.4	8.3	42.8	1.2	0.8	SNP
South of Scotland	22.7	45.2	6.6	22.4	1.2	1.9	Lab
Strathclyde East	7.6	58.0	3.5	29.5	1.0	0.4	Lab
Strathclyde West	14.5	44.4	7.5	31.6	1.5	0.5	Lab
Scotland	14.5	42.5	7.2	32.6	1.6	1.6	

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The pattern of changes in party support from the 1989 European election are shown in table 4. The Conservatives lost support in every constituency and the Green party's remarkable performance in 1989 was not repeated. On the other hand, the Liberal Democrats recovered somewhat from their nadir at the last Euro-election, although their performance was well below what they achieve in general elections, for reasons mentioned later. Overall, Labour advanced only slightly. Their loss of support in Glasgow is explained, no doubt, by the intervention of Militant Labour but even elsewhere they did not cash in on Conservative unpopularity. There seems to be a 'ceiling' to Labour support in Scotland - just below 45% - beyond which it is difficult to make further progress. The biggest gains in support were made by the SNP and, as with the turnout figures, North East Scotland stands out. The increase in the SNP vote there was well into double figures and Labour declined significantly. For whatever reason, electors in this seat clearly behaved differently from those in the rest of the country as compared with 1989.

Table 4

Change in Party Shares of Votes 1989-94 (%)

	Con	Lab	Dem	SNP	Green	Other
Glasgow	-3.9	-2.8	+2.6	+0.6	-4.9	+8.4
Highlands & Islands	-4.5	+1.7	+1.8	+6.8	-7.1	+1.3
Lothians	-7.0	+3.6	+4.7	+6.1	-7.9	+0.6
Mid Scotland & Fife	-7.5	-0.3	+4.2	+8.2	-5.0	+0.3
North East Scotland	-8.1	-2.3	+2.3	+13.4	-6.1	+0.8
South of Scotland	-9.5	+5.4	+1.5	+5.2	-4.5	+1.9
Strathclyde East	-3.8	+1.8	+1.3	+4.3	-4.0	+0.4
Strathclyde West	-7.3	+1.7	+3.6	+7.8	-6.3	+0.5
Scotland	-6.4	+0.6	+2.9	+7.0	-5.6	+1.5

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As noted above, it is arguable that the important point of comparison in analysing the 1994 European elections is not the previous European elections but the general election of 1992, and table 5 provides this comparison. The modest recovery in Conservative fortunes in Scotland at the 1992 general election has clearly proved to be short-lived. If the swings in the relevant Euro-constituencies were repeated in the parliamentary constituencies that comprise them then the Conservatives would be left with just two Westminster seats in Scotland (on current boundaries) - Eastwood and Kincardine and Deeside. It is, of course, the case that mid-term swings are not repeated in subsequent general elections but, even so, this shows the depths to which the Conservatives have sunk. It is almost inconceivable that in the foreseeable future they can return to the standing that they once enjoyed in Scotland.

Labour has recovered somewhat from their disappointing performance in 1992. But the recovery is not spectacular. Their near-hegemony in terms of seats in elections at all levels in Scotland is not seriously threatened, but their failure to substantially increase their share of the vote at a time of severe government unpopularity and the steady advance made by the SNP all over the country may be worrying signs for the future.

The Liberal Democrats lost support as compared with the general election but this is not as worrying for them as it might appear. In the first place, Liberal Democrat performance in Westminster elections is substantially boosted by the presence of a number of well-known MPs who attract a great deal of support in their constituencies - people such as Charles Kennedy, David Steel and Archie Kirkwood. Secondly, the tactical situation in a number of parliamentary constituencies means that the Liberal Democrats have a good chance of winning or are in the best position to challenge the incumbent (Edinburgh West, for example). In European constituencies these factors peculiar to Westminster constituencies are not present and the Liberal Democrats suffer accordingly.

The party with most to feel pleased about after the European elections was the SNP. They not only won a second seat in the European Parliament and their best-ever share of the vote, but also improved on their general election performance across all Euro-constituencies. As ever, pleasure and optimism must be tinged with caution, however. While they are firmly ensconced as Scotland's second party, the SNP are still some way from being in a position to take seats from Labour in the Central belt and the dilemma of how to do that while at the same time holding or winning seats from the Conservatives elsewhere remains a real problem.

Table 5

Party Performances in the 1992 General Election and the 1994 European Election

<i>Share of Votes in Scotland</i>	Con	Lab	Lib Dem	SNP
General Election	25.6	39.0	13.1	21.5
European Election	14.5	42.5	7.2	32.6
 <i>Change in Vote Shares</i>				
Scotland	-11.1	+3.5	-5.9	+11.1
Glasgow	-7.0	-2.4	-3.1	+4.9
Highlands & Islands	-13.0	-3.6	-18.1	+32.0
Lothians	-10.7	+7.1	-5.2	+7.5
Mid Scotland & Fife	-12.8	+6.6	-4.2	+8.9
North East Scotland	-14.9	+5.0	-7.5	+15.9
South of Scotland	-8.8	+9.6	-7.6	+4.0
Strathclyde East	-8.5	+3.0	-3.5	+7.6
Strathclyde West	-13.8	+1.0	-2.4	+13.5

CONCLUSION

Too much should not be made of European elections. The turnout figures alone indicate that the electorate do not take them very seriously and, with the exceptions of the results in the Highlands and Islands and North East Scotland, there is little evidence that the particular context of the elections influences the voters. On the whole, the election results are determined by the point at which they occur in the national inter-election cycle; they indicate the

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feelings of the electorate at a particular point in time. In that sense they are ephemeral, soon to be eclipsed by the next set of opinion polls or the next round of local elections as the best current indicator of electoral opinion. Although the results sent seven men and one woman to represent Scotland in Europe for the next five years, the European elections are seen by voters as elections of secondary importance. So far, the timetable of European elections has meant that they have occurred, rather conveniently for commentators and analysts, roughly in the mid-term of UK governments. They are, therefore, quite rightly, mainly interpreted as useful indicators of the popularity of the parties between the really important elections which determine which party forms the national government.