

THE LAST ACT: THE REGIONAL ELECTIONS OF 1994

David Denver and Hugh Bochel

From one perspective the latest round of elections to the Scottish Regional Councils, which took place on May 5th 1994, were meaningless. Over most of the country, voters were being asked to elect councils which will shortly be abolished as part the government's proposed reorganisation of local government in Scotland. Indeed, the elections were fought on the basis of newly revised electoral divisions which will themselves soon cease to have any meaning. Normally, political parties contest local elections in order to try to get control of local authorities so that they can attempt to implement their distinctive policies in the areas concerned. The whole rationale of local democracy is that the electorate can hold a party or individuals responsible for their stewardship of local affairs and vote to throw the rascals out or confirm them in office. On the face of it, however, these considerations did not apply in 1994. There was little incentive for parties to seek control of a local authority that would shortly be consigned to history, and little point in electors seeking to reward or punish their local representatives.

From another perspective, however, the 1994 elections had as much importance as ever. They were widely signalled in advance as a major test of the popularity (or, perhaps more accurately, the level of unpopularity) of the government. Local elections are always interpreted in terms of the light that they throw on the national standing of the parties. They are good indicators of party popularity, more reliable than opinion polls because they involve millions of electors and real votes rather than hypothetical voting intentions.

David Denver is a senior lecturer in Politics at Lancaster University. Hugh Bochel is a lecturer in Politics at the University of Humberside. Their full report on the Regional elections, including detailed results for all divisions, can be purchased from Mr. J. M. Bochel, Election Studies, Department of Political Science and Social Policy, University of Dundee, Dundee, DD1 4HN

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But in early 1994 the extreme unpopularity of the government over Britain as a whole, the strains within the Conservative party and the parlous position of the Prime Minister combined to give the local elections even more significance than usual in this respect. It is over-simple to view the elections as a 'referendum' on John Major's leadership, as claimed by some media correspondents, but there is no doubt that voters use local elections as a vehicle for registering discontent with governments, and it is certainly realistic to interpret local results as, to a large extent, a verdict on the performance of the government.

Politicians and others sometimes bemoan the fact that, in broad terms, the results of local elections do not generally hinge on the activities of local councils or the qualities of candidates and councillors. Even disregarding the imminent abolition of Regional authorities this is unrealistic. Small local authorities in Scotland, in particular the burghs, in which a substantial proportion of the voters would know a councillor or councillors personally, were swept away in 1974 and replaced by much larger Districts and the huge Regions. Inevitably these are more remote from the electorate; councillors have many more voters to represent and fewer voters have a chance of knowing a councillor. It is not surprising, therefore, that in most areas it is the party label of candidates that voters look to when deciding how to vote, rather than their personal qualities or the record of the council.

In advance of the elections it was not difficult to guess what the verdict of the Scottish electorate would be. The government was very unpopular, and appeared to be floundering over internal divisions on Europe, recently implemented increases in direct taxation, the imposition of VAT on domestic fuel and the hugely unpopular railway privatisation. In Scotland these problems were compounded by two other issues. Firstly, the government's proposals for restructuring local government appeared to have as its primary purpose the creation of authorities in which the Conservatives would have a chance of gaining control. Moreover, they were imposed by government fiat without any consideration by a commission, as was happening in England. This was interpreted as typical Conservative insensitivity to Scottish opinion. **The Herald** (9 July 1993) said that the proposals 'demonstrated the Government's determination to carve up the Labour heartlands..and preserve Conservative enclaves' and, in a hard-hitting editorial, argued that the proposed structure could have no lasting legitimacy. Secondly, there was an outcry over the government's proposals for altering the management of the Scottish water industry. Their claim that these did not amount to privatisation were simply not believed, and a few weeks before the local elections a referendum organised by Strathclyde Regional council produced a very high

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participation rate and a massive vote (97 per cent) against any attempt at privatisation. The referendum was simply dismissed by the Conservatives, although they held back from immediate privatisation. The government's handling of this issue appeared to betray, yet again, either a profound lack of understanding of Scottish sensibilities or a willingness to ride roughshod over them.

There was little doubt, then, that the mild recovery in Conservative fortunes seen in the 1992 general election, and the District elections which followed shortly after, would be reversed. What was less clear was how the other parties would perform. Labour had dominated Scottish local politics for two decades but had begun to look a little vulnerable in 1992 when, in the aftermath of their fourth consecutive general election defeat, they received their second-lowest ever share of the vote in the District elections. On the other hand, the SNP quickly recovered from the disappointment of not gaining seats in the general election and, according to Scottish opinion polls, were once again securely in second place in terms of popular support. The Liberal Democrats have never had the local election success in Scotland that they have enjoyed elsewhere. Their share of the vote in Regional elections peaked in 1982 but had then declined sharply in 1986 and 1990. In 1994 they must have hoped to benefit from their improved British national standing and from the unpopularity of the government.

Before analysing the performances of the parties, however, we first consider the pattern of candidatures and contests and the turnout of electors.

CANDIDATES AND CONTESTS

A new record number of 1522 candidates contested the 1994 Regional elections. Details as compared with 1990 are shown in table 1. As well as for Scotland as a whole, figures are shown separately for 'partisan' Regions (Grampian, Tayside, Fife, Lothian, Central, Strathclyde) which comprise about 91% of the Scottish electorate, and in which political parties dominate Regional elections, and for the 'non-partisan' Regions of Highland, Borders and Dumfries and Galloway, in which Independent candidates predominate.

In non-partisan areas all four major parties extended their electoral activity in 1994. Even so, these three Regions end their existence in the present structure as they began - still characterised by predominantly non-partisan local politics. In partisan areas, there was an increase of 45 in the number of Liberal Democrat candidates and smaller, but still significant, increases on

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the part of the Conservatives and the SNP. Labour showed little change but there was a big drop in the number of 'other' candidates - mostly due to a sharp reduction in the number of Green party candidates. Overall, the Conservatives, Liberal Democrats and SNP had more candidates than ever before and Labour was only one short of its previous high, achieved in 1990. Clearly the parties were not deterred from putting up candidates by the fact that winning or losing control of the Regional authorities did not, on the face of it, matter very much.

Table 1
Candidates in Regional Elections, 1990 and 1994

	Partisan Regions		Non-Partisan Regions		Scotland	
	1990	1994	1990	1994	1990	1994
Con	294	315	28	34	322	349
Lab	311	308	31	33	342	341
Lib Dem	190	235	22	25	212	260
SNP	313	330	35	41	348	371
Ind	27	28	105	106	132	134
Other	147	60	12	7	159	69
Total	1282	1276	233	246	1515	1522

The number of women candidates (341) also reached a new high in 1994, but as a proportion of all candidates (22.4%) women made only a small advance on 1990 when the figure was 21.3%. Among the parties the Liberal Democrats had the largest proportion of women candidates (30%, as compared with 25% for the Conservatives, 20% for Labour and 18% for the SNP).

Given the record numbers of party candidates it is not surprising to note that the proportion of divisions which were uncontested fell to a new low. There

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was a contest in every single seat in the partisan Regions and only 29 divisions in non-partisan Regions were taken without a contest - the bulk of them (20) going to Independents. Over Scotland as a whole, 94% of all divisions were contested in these elections. When contrasted with elections under the previous Scottish local government structure, in which only around half of council seats were contested, it would appear that in this respect at least the Regional authorities can be deemed to have been a success.

Table 2

Regional Turnout, 1990 and 1994 (%)

	1990	1994	Change
Highland	42.9	45.3	+2.4
Grampian	41.0	41.6	+0.6
Tayside	47.8	45.5	-2.3
Fife	46.5	45.7	-0.8
Lothian	50.2	47.8	-2.4
Central	49.1	49.7	+0.8
Borders	42.6	42.0	-0.6
Strathclyde	45.0	44.4	-0.6
Dumf. & Gall	44.5	47.9	+3.4
Scotland	45.9	45.1	-0.8

The figures for candidates and contests suggest that Regional councils are characterised by thriving party competition. This is also suggested by analysis of the pattern of party contests in electoral divisions in partisan areas. In the first Regional elections in 1974, only 5% of these divisions had four-party contests; in 1994 the figure was 60%. By contrast, in 1974, 61% of contests involved only two parties (41% being Conservative versus Labour) while in 1994 only 6% were straight fights (and only 1% Conservative versus Labour). These figures attest to major changes in the Scottish political landscape over the past twenty years.

TURNOUT

Overall turnout in the Regional elections, at 45.1%, was very slightly down compared with 1990 (45.9%) and close to the average for elections at this level since 1974. Table 2 shows figures for the different Regions and the range is relatively small - Central had the highest turnout (49.7%) and Grampian (as ever) the lowest (41.6%). There does not seem to be any clear Regional pattern to turnout change. There were increases in Highland and Dumfries and Galloway - possibly due to increased party activity - and relatively large decreases in Tayside and Lothian, which are difficult to explain, but otherwise turnout in 1994 was very close to the 1990 figure.

PATTERNS OF PARTY SUPPORT

In interpreting the results of local elections, media commentators frequently concentrate on the numbers of council seats won and lost. In part this is because these data are relatively 'hard' and easy to obtain rapidly. Until recently, because of the sheer number of wards and electoral divisions involved over Britain as a whole and the complexities arising from the various local election cycles (and also because there was no systematic collection of local election results) it was impossible to get accurate figures for the shares of vote obtained by the parties. Nonetheless, the distribution of votes is a much better indicator of party popularity than gains and losses of seats, and Table 3 summarises the relevant figures for the 1994 Regional elections as compared with the last round in 1990.

As can be seen, the Conservative share of the vote fell to only 14.1% in partisan Regions, 8.3% in non-partisan and 13.7% in Scotland as a whole. This was their worst-ever performance in local elections. While Labour continued to be easily the largest party, its share of the vote in partisan areas declined slightly as compared with 1990. The major beneficiaries of the Conservative slump were the SNP, which was yet again clearly in second place in partisan Regions and over the country as a whole, and the Liberal Democrats. In non-partisan Regions the long slow decline of Independents continued with a further fall to 41.6% of votes. Table 4 gives further details of patterns of party support in Scotland, showing the shares of votes received by the parties in each of the nine Regions.

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Table 3

Party Shares of Votes 1990 and 1994 (%)

	Partisan Regions		Non-Partisan Regions		Scotland	
	1990	1994	1990	1994	1990	1994
Con	20.0	14.1	12.5	8.3	19.5	13.7
Lab	44.6	43.0	12.3	16.8	42.7	41.8
Lib Dem	8.4	12.0	11.6	14.3	8.6	12.0
SNP	22.2	27.6	16.2	17.2	21.8	26.8
Ind	2.0	1.8	43.2	41.6	4.5	4.2
Other	2.9	1.5	4.2	1.9	2.9	1.5

Table 4

Party Shares of Votes in Regions, 1994

	Con	Lab	Lib Dem	SNP	Ind	Other
Grampian	20.9	19.8	24.6	31.9	2.2	0.6
Tayside	20.9	25.7	9.4	39.6	1.7	2.5
Fife	9.8	42.7	21.6	20.9	2.7	2.3
Lothian	18.4	40.7	15.9	23.6	0.1	1.2
Central	13.1	47.3	2.1	32.2	5.0	0.1
Strathclyde	10.7	51.5	8.0	26.3	1.8	1.6
Highland	1.6	14.5	9.5	16.2	55.2	2.9
Borders	15.2	-	26.3	25.7	32.7	-
Dumfries & Galloway	11.3	30.4	11.9	12.6	31.6	2.1

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Clearly the Conservatives did very badly in these elections. Their slight recovery in 1992 was not a new beginning for the party but a false dawn. As compared with 1990, the Conservative share declined in every partisan Region (most in Tayside, -9.0%, and least in Grampian, -2.4%) to the extent that they received only 9.8% of the vote in Fife and 10.7% in Strathclyde. These are staggeringly low figures for a major party in populous Regions. But Labour's failure to capitalise on government unpopularity is also clear. Their share of the vote over the country as a whole declined and this was also true in every partisan region except Central, where the Liberal Democrats have historically been very weak. While Labour remains dominant, and still had more than half of all votes in Strathclyde, there appears to be a ceiling to Labour support in Scotland - just below the 45% mark - beyond which it is difficult to go. The SNP made progress in all the partisan Regions, and was clearly the most popular party in Grampian and Tayside, but they were still far behind Labour in the central belt. Hopes of an improved Liberal Democrat performance were also fulfilled, especially in Grampian and Fife, but the Liberal Democrats remain almost non-existent in Central and parts of Strathclyde. In non-partisan Regions, these data suggest that perhaps Borders and Dumfries and Galloway might now be better described as having a 'mixed' form of local politics. The parties have slowly encroached in these Regions and votes for Independents now comprise only about a third of the total. The non-partisan style appears most tenacious in Highland Region where Independents retain more than half of the vote.

The distribution of votes and changes in vote shares in local elections are significantly affected by variations in the number of candidates put forward by the parties. Normally we would take account of this by considering changes in support only in those divisions where all four parties had candidates in successive elections. As noted above, however, the Local Government Boundary Commission undertook its second statutory review of electoral division boundaries after the 1990 elections and its recommendations came into force in 1994. As a result, there are many fewer comparable divisions than usual. There were only 40 divisions where boundaries were unaltered or only slightly changed and where there was a four-party contest in both elections. Nonetheless, these divisions contain a 'sample' of more than 200,000 voters and the election results here are probably the most accurate indicators of the swing in Scottish opinion since the 1990 elections. The distribution of support in the 40 divisions is shown in table 5. The message of the 'raw' figures in table 3 is confirmed so that we can be confident that the declines in support for the Conservatives and Labour and the gains in popularity made by the other two parties were not artefacts of changing numbers of candidates.

Table 5
Party Support in 40 Four-Party Divisions, 1990-94 (%)

	Con	Lab	Lib Dem	SNP
1990	24.9	40.7	16.8	17.7
1994	17.2	39.1	20.0	23.6
Change	-7.7	-1.6	+3.2	+5.9

Measuring movements in electoral opinion since the 1992 general election is even more problematical. If, however, we take as our 'sample' all 201 divisions in which there was a four-party contest (involving some 970,000 voters) and compare the distribution of votes in these with the general election result in partisan Regions, the changes are Conservative -9.4%, Labour -0.5%, Liberal Democrats +6.1% and SNP + 2.7%. Changes of this order would leave the Conservatives with only three of the current parliamentary constituencies - Eastwood, Edinburgh Pentlands and Dumfries.

COUNCIL SEATS WON

As we have suggested, there is a sense in which winning council seats was irrelevant in 1994 - for the parties if not individual councillors and candidates. It may be, however, that, by controlling the existing authorities, parties might hope to have some influence in the transition to the new structure. In any event, we show in table 6 how the trends in party choice among voters described above were translated into Regional council seats, again distinguishing partisan and non-partisan Regions.

Table 6

Regional Council Seats Won, 1990 and 1994

	Partisan Regions		Non-Partisan Regions		Scotland	
	1990	1994	1990	1994	1990	1994
Con	48	23	4	8	52	31
Lab	213	201	20	19	233	220
Lib Dem	29	42	11	18	40	60
SNP	34	60	8	13	42	73
Ind	9	8	64	57	73	65
Other	2	2	2	2	4	4

Despite losing 13 seats Labour's dominance of Regional councils remains impressive, with 60% of the seats in partisan Regions. Perhaps the most notable feature of the table, however, is the tale that it tells of Conservative weakness. With just 31 seats in total the Conservatives were clearly in fourth place (fifth if Independents are counted as a party), winning about half of the number taken by the Liberal Democrats and fewer than half of the seats won by the SNP. In this respect, the decline of the Conservatives in Regional elections has been startling. In 1978 they held 136 seats and in 1982 they had majority control of Grampian and Tayside. Just 12 years later in these two Regions they mustered only 8 seats out of 57 and 4 out of 46 respectively. In Grampian they have lost out mainly to the Liberal Democrats, who increased their seats total by 7 to become the largest party, while in Tayside the SNP advanced by 12 seats, also becoming the largest party.

MINOR PARTIES AND OTHERS

At the 1990 round of Regional elections the Green Party made something of an impact, fielding 109 candidates, garnering just over 35,000 votes (the highest-ever total for a minor party in Regional elections) and winning their

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first-ever seat on a Scottish local authority, in Highland. In 1994, however, the Greens withered somewhat, putting forward only 36 candidates and gaining just over 6,000 votes. In terms of votes the most successful minor party was Scottish Militant Labour with just over 11,000 votes, but only four 'Others' won a seat - an independent Labour candidate in Tayside, an independent Liberal Democrat and a 'Liberal' in Highland, and a Communist in Fife. This seat in Fife has been held continuously by the Communist party since 1974. The Natural Law Party's first appearance in Regional elections with five candidates (all in Edinburgh) did not give rise to any great excitement. One of their candidates achieved the distinction of gaining the fewest votes of anyone in the election (seven).

CONCLUSION

Looking back over twenty years of Scottish Regional elections there are some clear conclusions that can be drawn. It is certain, for example, that the structure of local government introduced in 1974 helped to hasten the demise of non-partisan local politics in many parts of the country. The number of Independent candidates, the share of votes that they won and the number of council seats that they held have all declined steadily over the period and are certainly very much smaller than was the case under the old system. Even in the three remaining non-partisan Regions change is apparent. In 1974 there were 185 Independent candidates in these three Regions, they won 83 seats and took 69% of the votes. By 1994 there were 106 candidates who won 57 seats and 42% of votes. In partisan Regions Independent candidates and, even more so, councillors have all but been eliminated. It is also clear, as we have already noted, that the number of candidates seeking office at Regional level has steadily increased, electoral competition among the parties has become more complex and the number of seats taken without a contest reduced. In fact, however, the point about increased party competition is more ambiguous than it appears at first sight. While it is true that more individual electoral divisions are now contested by the major parties, the fact is that Labour has completely dominated Scottish local government and politics. As in 1994, they have usually far outstripped their opponents in terms of votes won and seats gained. If we look at party control of the Regions, the impression that there has been a trend towards competitive four-party politics seems over-simple. Between 1974 and 1994 no Region has been controlled with an overall majority by two different parties. Labour has had a majority in Strathclyde and Fife throughout the period, in Central at every election except the first (when they were the largest party) and in Lothian at four of the six elections (the other two producing no overall

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majority). Grampian and Tayside have been more competitive. The former had a Conservative majority in 1974, 1978 and 1982 but has had no party in overall control since then (Labour was largest in 1986 and 1990 and the Liberal Democrats in 1994). The latter also had Conservative majorities in 1978 and 1982 and no overall control thereafter (Labour being the largest party in 1986 and 1990 and the SNP in 1994).

Nonetheless, almost three-quarters of the Scottish population live in Regions that have been either always or almost always controlled by Labour. It is perhaps more accurate to view Regional councils in the central belt of Scotland as comprising four large Labour fiefdoms rather than as arenas of serious party competition and it may be precisely this perception that lies behind the latest government moves to alter the structure of local government yet again. But given Labour's hold on the electorate it is doubtful whether any structure of Scottish local government will make very much difference. No matter how local authority boundaries are drawn, the vast majority of the population will continue to be governed by Labour at local level.