

OPINION POLLS IN SCOTLAND
July 1987 - September 1988

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We are indebted to System Three and their sponsors, the Glasgow Herald, and to MORI and The Scotsman, for permission to use their polls. This year, we are using their data more extensively to make sense of political and public opinion in Scotland. While we will maintain continuity with previous presentations in the *Yearbook*, greater use will be made of the opinion polls in what promises to be an important era in Scottish politics.

Voting Intention

Despite the ructions within the erstwhile 'Alliance' (a.k.a. Social and Liberal Democrats, Social Democrats, Democrats, Liberal Democrats), the opinion polls of the last twelve months show considerable surface calm (figures 1-2). Labour and Tory fortunes have shifted little, probably to the disappointment of the government and the surprise of Labour. The S.N.P. appears to be the main gainer in the polls, and it now stands in third place behind the Tories with a healthy 17 or 18 per cent. Since the General Election of June 1987, the old Alliance parties have seen their vote halved, so that they barely share 10% between them. We cannot be sure, of course, what shifts of support have been occurring beneath the surface, and there is likely to have been considerable shifting across parties over the last year or so.

The MORI polls for *The Scotsman* cross-tabulate voting intention against key social variables such as sex, age, class, housing tenure, trade union membership and pensioner status. The 'gender gap' in Tory voting has all but disappeared, although more men proportionately than women vote Labour (on average 4 percentage points difference) and for the S.N.P. (on average 5 percentage points difference). The former probably is explained by the continuing (but diminishing) differential in employment participation rates in employment, and by the fact that women live longer than men (age remains a political discriminator). The failure of the S.N.P. to attract women voters remains one of the conundrums of Scottish politics. The Tories do best among the over 55s (though still outvoted by Labour), and the S.N.P. among the under 24s (attracting 20% of the age category 18 to 24 according to the April poll), although Labour is supreme in all age categories.

FIGURE 1: VOTING INTENTION (SYSTEM THREE POLLS) 1987-88

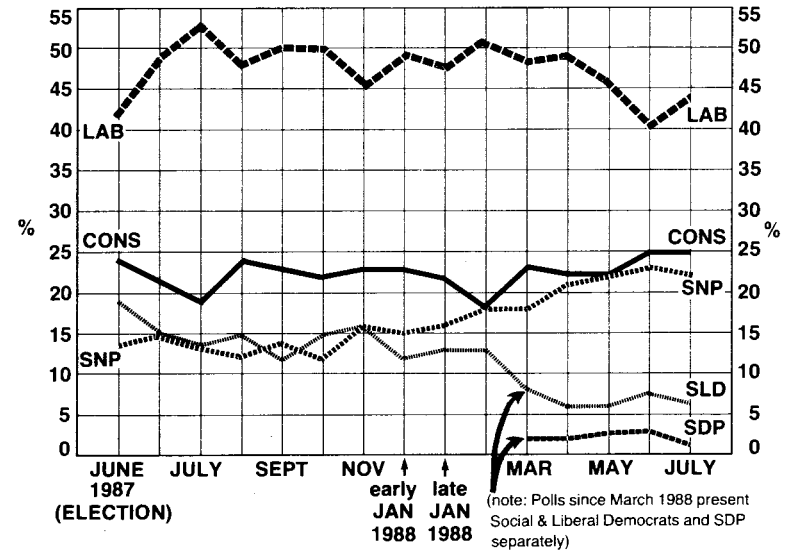
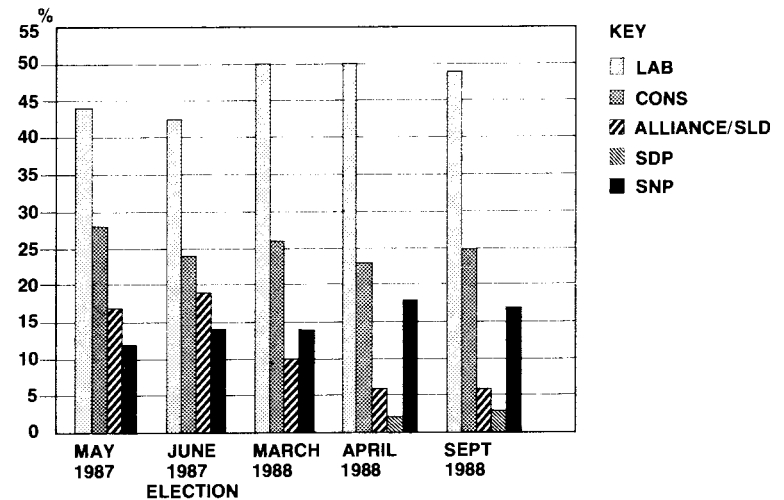


FIGURE 2: VOTING INTENTION (MORI POLLS) 1987-88



As expected, the top 'social class' (accepting for the moment the AB to DE scheme) votes Conservative, but only in a ratio of less than 2 to 1 over Labour (36% to 20%). The capacity of Labour to attract sufficient of Scotland's 'middle classes' (and Labour almost matches the Tories in the C1 category - the lower professionals and managers) is reinforced by the party's success among the owner-occupiers. Twenty four per cent of home owners express an intention to vote Labour, only 4 percentage points behind the Tories. So much for the political 'property gap', although it is very much in evidence among council tenants where Labour has a lead of 5 to 1. The class character of the other parties is less striking, albeit the Alliance etc. parties still draw their support from the middle class. The S.N.P., interestingly, does better among manual workers than among the AB/C1 groups, a feature in contrast to the 1970s when it appealed to broadly equal sections of all classes.

Constitutional Options

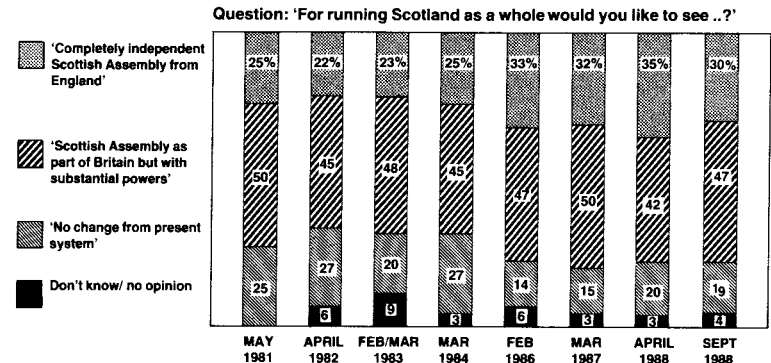
The polls continue to show strong support for constitutional change (figure 3), although the pollsters persevere in using the supremely ambiguous category 'completely independent Scottish Assembly from England' as a surrogate for Independence. It has been plain for some time that the term 'Assembly' is equated with some version of Devolution, and that the distinction between this and the second option 'Scottish Assembly as part of Britain but with substantial powers' is far from clear. We hope in the interests of clarity that the polling companies will make the distinction more obvious, perhaps by using the word 'Parliament' rather than 'Assembly' in the first category.

Nevertheless, we would be correct in concluding that around three-quarters of Scottish public opinion desires constitutional change (September poll). Even Tory supporters seem to be demanding change - 47% want 'devolution' (compared with 42% of all respondents) - though 42% are happy with the status quo. Undoubtedly there is a groundswell for constitutional reform in Scotland, which runs across party affiliation and across social class. Sixty seven per cent of people in the AB category want change compared with 79% in class DE.

Political Attitudes

Scots remain unconvinced that the government is doing a good job. Just over a quarter of voters claim to be satisfied with its performance, broadly in line with support for the Conservatives north of the border (September 1988).

FIGURE 3: PREFERRED GOVERNMENT for SCOTLAND (MORI POLLS) 1987-88



Unemployment remains the issue worrying Scots most, fully two-thirds citing it as their foremost concern (September poll). This varies little by sex, age, class and even voting intention, for 65% of putative Tories mention it. Between March and September 1988, the N.H.S. receded in salience (from 46% to 21% of mentions), and the Poll Tax rose from 25% to 30%. Education and housing remain on the agenda at between 8 to 14%. All sectors of Scottish society share a similar view of the main issues facing Scotland today.

'State dependency': MORI asked in March 1988 whether Scottish people were too dependent upon State provision, as members of the Government have suggested. Only 27% thought so, and 63% disagreed, a fairly unsurprising finding north of the border. The government could take some comfort from the fact that 23% thought that there was too much reliance on the state for housing, but could take little solace from the view that, as regards education and employment, there was too little (34% and 48% respectively).

While a mere 27% of Scottish households were not in receipt of any benefits, much of the rest held child benefit (32%), or the old age pension (24%) according to the April poll. Changes in the benefit system left more losers than winners. While 12% claimed they would be better off, 33% thought they would be worse off, while 42% said it would make no difference. Fewer still thought the changes were 'fair' (8%) compared with 62% who thought them 'unfair'. Even Conservative voters viewed them as unfair (30%) rather than fair (26%). All in all, changes in the system of social benefits were winning few friends in Scotland.

Privatisation: The commitment to public provisioning remains strong among Scottish public opinion across a range of issues. The privatisation of *electricity* would bring a better service, thought only 11% of respondents (March poll), and only 27% of Conservative voters agreed with the policy. The privatisation of *local authority rubbish collection and public parks* was more popular (April poll), but still a minority taste. Forty four percent thought that services would improve, but 32% that they would deteriorate. A majority of Tories (52%) took the optimistic line, but the rest were unconvinced. Extending *private health insurance* was supported by only 20% of people, and Conservatives were roughly evenly divided between those who supported the measure (49%) and those who opposed it (43% in March 1988). Fifty eight percent of respondents thought that privatising *hospital services* would make things worse; 21% that they would improve. Nor does Scottish public opinion believe that there is too much reliance on state provision in health (a mere 14%). Equal proportions (38%) viewed it as 'too little' or 'just right'. The generally gloomy view of health provision in Scotland is manifested by the fact that only 8% believed that the standard of health care had improved over the last two years. Since 1986 when MORI asked the same question, seven percent fewer (37%) thought it had remained the same, and seven percent more (45%) that it had deteriorated.

Education: Despite the disruption in Scottish schools over the last few years, the education system remains well thought of (April poll). Sixty five percent thought that their local secondary schools did a very good or fairly good job, and only 10% that they performed poorly or badly. This ratio of over 6 to 1 favourable to the schools performance was remarkably stable across social class, housing tenure, and even political preference. Among Conservatives, the secondary system was judged to be performing well by 64%, and only 9% took a negative view. The Government's own performance in education was quite another story. Only a quarter thought that it was doing a good or fairly good job, and 51% that it was performing badly. Even professional and managerial workers (ABs) were fairly positive, although half of Conservative voters approved of their party's handling of education.

The opportunity to '*opt out*' of the state education system was supported by 31% of people, and opposed by 51%. Fully 49% of social class 'AB' and the same proportion of Tories opposed the opt out option. Asked if they would send their children to private schools if they could afford it, only 34% said 'yes', and 58%, 'no'. Even a majority of Conservatives (51%) said they would not, and class AB was evenly split 44% each. These results seem to reflect the abiding commitment of Scots to their education system, and suggests that plans to privatise the service has little support north of the border. The government can take some comfort from the finding that testing in schools at the ages of 8 and 12 has some support. Forty six percent approved, and 39% disapproved. Perhaps old attitudes to education in Scotland die hard.

Another maligned institution, *local government*, also received some support. In the poll in April 1988 prior to the District Council elections, respondents were asked to indicate how satisfied they were with their council. Fifty six percent expressed satisfaction, and 32% dissatisfaction. As regards the policy to transfer council houses, the main resource of the Districts, to private enterprise, 29% were in agreement, and 46% opposed, although a quarter were unaware of the policy.

The *Poll Tax or Community Charge* was carefully monitored by the pollsters. In March 1988, 17% approved and 75% disapproved. One month later, 21% were giving their approval and 72% were opposed. In September of 1988, 24% supported the policy, and 70% opposed it. Government supporters increased their approval from 47% in March to 61% by September.

Asked whether people themselves would be better off under the system, the figures were constant at 18%, with 52% saying they would be worse off, and 22% that it would make little difference. Interestingly, of those who would gain financially, 47% said they approved of the Tax, and 46% that they did not. Would they be prepared to withhold the money? In April, 42% said they would (44% would not); but by September, 37% were still prepared to resist (54% would pay).

Conclusion: What, then, are we to make of these polls of public opinion? Firstly, Scots are very reluctant Thatcherites. Even Scottish Conservative voters have considerable doubts about the more radical of government policies. The Poll Tax, education, privatisation of electricity, health care, local government services – all seem to indicate a reluctance to toe the government line. If the Scottish Conservatives believe that their task is merely to explain policies more fully so that people will believe, then they should pay more attention to what Scottish opinion, as reflected in these polls, is saying. Scots, the polls show, are not among Mrs Thatcher's natural bedfellows.

Technical Details:

MORI carried out three representative quota samples as follows:-

March 1988: 1,119 adults aged 18 in 55 constituency sampling points throughout Scotland;
 April 1988: 1,108 adults aged 18 in 55 constituency sampling points throughout Scotland;
 September 1988: 1,085 adults aged 18 in 54 constituency sampling points throughout Scotland.

System Three Scotland carry out monthly quota samples of around 1,000 adults in 40 constituency sampling points in Scotland.