



Findings from the Economic and Research Council's  
Research Programme on *Devolution and Constitutional Change*



*Devolution Briefings*

***Do Devolved Elections Make Scotland's Politicians Accountable and Representative?***

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**Key points**

- Though Scottish elections may be elections *to* the Scottish Parliament, they are not necessarily elections *about* the policy record and leadership of the Scottish Parliament; voters may vote instead on the basis of how they think the UK government has performed
- Labour voters in the 1999 were more likely to switch away from Labour in 2003 if they felt that standards in the NHS, education and the standard of living had fallen – but they did not have a clear picture that the Scottish Executive was accountable for any change in standards
- Evaluations of the performance of the UK Prime Minister, Tony Blair had more impact than evaluations of the performance of the Scottish First Minister, Jack McConnell, on the decision of Labour voters in the 1999 Scottish Parliament election to vote Labour again in 2003
- There is little evidence from the 2003 Scottish Parliament election that voters' attitudes on issues which distinguished the parties' manifestoes in Scotland – like free bus passes and free school meals – were reflected in how they voted
- There is however evidence from the 2003 Scottish Parliament election that voters' attitudes on issues reserved to Westminster – the Iraq War and the asylum question – did impact on how they voted
- The 2003 Scottish Parliament election on balance appears to have been more successful in registering voters' views of the performance of the UK government at Westminster than their policy preferences on devolved matters

## **Introduction**

One of the aims of having an elected, separate Scottish parliament was that Scots themselves would be charge of deciding who runs their government. No longer could who runs Scotland be determined by who won most votes in England. No longer could a policy like the poll tax be foisted on an unwilling nation as a result of votes cast further south.

But creating a separately elected Scottish Parliament does not guarantee that the country's politicians become accountable to the public for their record in office or that the balance of opinion within the body will be representative of public opinion north of the border. For this to happen not only do Scottish Parliament elections have to be elections *to* the Scottish Parliament but also elections *about* the Scottish Parliament. Voters need to vote on the basis of how well they think the Executive and the opposition parties have performed over the last four years. They need to take into account too the policy proposals of the parties for the next four years.

Why might voters not do so? One possibility is that they do not think the Scottish Parliament is very important. As a result they regard Scottish Parliament elections as an opportunity to express their views about something they consider more important, that is how well they think the UK government is doing at Westminster. This, after all, is what it is often argued voters do in European Parliament elections.

There is certainly good reason to think that voters may not consider Scottish Parliament elections to be particularly important. At the time of the 2003 election just 17% reckoned that the Scottish Parliament had most influence over what happened in Scotland whereas no less than 64% reckoned that the UK government did. And although as many as 41% said that it mattered a 'great deal' or 'quite a lot' who won a Scottish election, this was still less than the 48% who said the same thing about elections to the House of Commons.

This briefing looks at how voters behaved in the 2003 Scottish Parliament election in order to establish whether such elections are indeed occasions when voters in Scotland hold Scottish politicians to account or give them a mandate to pursue new policies in future. Did they vote on the basis of how well they think the Scottish Executive has performed over the last four years, or was it what the UK government has done that was uppermost in their minds. And do voters use Scottish elections to register their policy preferences on topics that lie within the parliament's competence, or are they as likely to be influenced by issues confronting the Westminster parliament as they are anything that might be facing Holyrood?

## **Are Scotland's Politicians Held Accountable?**

Our first question then is whether voters' evaluations of what had been happening over the previous four years to the economy in Scotland or to public services such as health and education make any difference to the way they voted. More especially was it those who felt that the Scottish Executive had been responsible for what had been happening who voted on the basis of their evaluations? After all, if those voters who believed the UK government was responsible allowed their vote to be influenced by

their evaluations this would seem to be evidence that in fact voters were using the Scottish election as an opportunity to protest at the record of the UK government.

Table 1 presents one way of answering these questions. It shows the proportion of voters who voted for the Labour party on the constituency vote in 1999 who backed Labour again in 2003. In so doing it separates voters according to their evaluations of what had been happening to the health service, education and living standards in Scotland and according as to whom they regarded as responsible, the UK government or the Scottish Executive (including those who felt both were responsible).

**Table 1 How Labour voters responded to the Executive's record**

	% 1999 Lab supporters voting Labour in 2003		
	Responsibility lies with		
	All	UK govt.	Scot Exec
<b>Standard of NHS</b>			
Increased	60	83	50
Stayed same	63	70	52
Fallen	49	50	46
<b>Education Standards</b>			
Increased	57	63	57
Stayed same	59	57	62
Fallen	45	40	55
<b>Standard of Living</b>			
Increased	58	57	69
Stayed Same	62	67	59
Fallen	50	47	44

Those 1999 Labour voters who felt that standards had fallen were less likely to back the party again than were those who felt that standards had at least stayed the same. For example, while 63% of those 1999 Labour voters who felt that the standards of the health service had stayed the same supported the party again in 2003, only 49% of those who felt those standards had fallen did so, a gap of 14 points. There are similar gaps of 14 and 12 points in respect of education and living standards.

On the other hand it would appear that while voters were inclined to blame Labour when they felt that things were going wrong, they did not give them credit when they felt they were doing well. In each case slightly fewer people voted for the party again if they felt standards had increased than if they merely felt they had stayed the same.

But there is little evidence that it is the Scottish Executive that is being held to account rather than the UK government. In fact, amongst those who felt that it was the Scottish Executive that was mainly (or least jointly) responsible for what had happened over the last four years, people's evaluations seem to have made relatively little difference to the likelihood that they would vote Labour again. Only those who believed that living standards had fallen stand out as markedly less loyal to Labour.

In contrast, there are clear differences in the level of Labour loyalty on all three sets of evaluations amongst those who regarded the UK government as principally responsible. In short, it appears that, if anything, former Labour voters were more

inclined to hold the UK government accountable at this election than they were the Scottish Executive.

However, acting on their evaluations of trends in health, education or the economy is not the only way in which voters might hold their politicians accountable. Perhaps they are more moved to act on their judgements as to how well their rulers have performed. In table 2 we look at the behaviour of 1999 Labour voters in 2003 according to how well they thought the Prime Minister, Tony Blair, and the First Minister, Jack McConnell, had done their jobs so far (as measured by how many marks out of ten they were willing to give them).

**Table 2 How Labour voters responded to their two leaders**

Mark out of 10	% 1999 Labour voters who in 2003		
	Voted Labour	Abstained	Voted for Another Party
Tony Blair			
7-10	68	22	10
4-6	48	33	20
0-3	6	50	44
Jack McConnell			
7-10	67	22	11
4-6	57	26	17
0-3	30	40	30

These evaluations do seem to have made a difference. Those 1999 Labour voters who gave Tony Blair a good mark (of seven or more) were more than ten times more likely to back Labour again than were those who gave him a bad mark (of three or less). Equally, those who gave Jack McConnell a good mark were more than twice as likely to vote Labour again than were those who gave him a bad mark. However, this means evaluations of Tony Blair had more apparent impact than did evaluations of Jack McConnell. Voters in the 2003 Scottish election may have held the First Minister to account to some degree, but their vote was even more likely to reflect their judgement of the Prime Minister.

### **Producing a Representative Parliament**

Now we look at the extent to which the way people voted reflected their views about some of the key policy differences between the parties. Three differences on matters that lay within the competence of the Scottish Parliament to determine that emerged during the 2003 campaign were:

- first, the provision of free bus passes for all over 60s (backed by Labour and the Liberal Democrats together with the SSP)
- second, a reduction in taxes on business (proposed by both the Conservatives and the SNP)
- and, finally, the introduction of free school meals for all children (advocated by the SSP).

But the election campaign was not confined to the discussion of devolved matters. For the second time in a row a Scottish election campaign was conducted against the

backdrop of war. The second Gulf War in Iraq began in the middle of March and the legitimacy of Britain’s involvement in the conflict was hotly debated. Labour’s actions were backed by the Conservatives but opposed by the Liberal Democrats and the SNP as well as the Greens and the SSP. At the same time another potentially emotive issue, asylum seekers, was also debated; in particular the UK Conservative party proposed that all asylum seekers should be placed in a detention centre until their applications had been determined. Here were two issues reserved to Westminster that might have had more impact on how people voted than any debates about devolved matters.

Table 3 shows how those with differing views on our three devolved matters divided their votes. It provides very little evidence that voters’ attitudes on these issues were reflected in how they voted. True, those who supported free bus passes for all over 60s were seven points more likely to vote Labour, while opponents were inclined to support the Conservatives. But equally supporters were four points *less* likely to back the Liberal Democrats, even though that party backed the proposal. Meanwhile attitudes towards cutting business taxes hardly seem to have made any difference at all. At the same time support for the SSP was only two points higher amongst those in favour of free school meals than it was amongst those who were opposed.

**Table 3 Policy Preferences and Vote Choice on Devolved Matters**

Vote	Free Bus Passes		Free School Meals		Cut Business Taxes	
	Agree %	Disagree %	Agree %	Disagree %	Agree %	Disagree %
Conservative	19	28	18	21	21*	20
Labour	37*	30	38	33	38	36
Liberal Democrat	13*	17	12	18	12	10
SNP	24	21	24	21	24*	24
Other	8	4	8*	6	6	11

\* shows which party(ies) in support of proposition.

In contrast there are some rather clearer differences between those on the two sides of our reserved policy debates. Those who opposed the war were fifteen points more likely to vote for an anti-war party (with the SSP doing particularly well), while Labour in particular received a much lower level of support amongst the war’s opponents. Equally, support for the Conservatives was more than twice as high amongst those who favoured the detention of asylum seekers than it was amongst its opponents, though the SNP also did rather better amongst the supporters of detention despite the party leadership’s opposition to the policy.

**Table 4 Policy Preferences and Vote Choice on Reserved Matters**

Vote	Britain wrong on Iraq		Detain Asylum Seekers	
	Agree %	Disagree %	Agree %	Disagree %
Conservative	18	23	23*	11
Labour	30	41	34	41
Liberal Democrat	17*	12	12	17
SNP	24*	21	25	20
Other	11*	4	6	11

## Conclusion

On the evidence of the 2003 election at least Scottish Parliament elections do not look like an effective mechanism for holding devolved politicians accountable for their actions, or at registering the policy preferences of Scottish voters on devolved matters. Indeed the 2003 election seems to have been rather more successful at registering voters' views of the performance of the UK government at Westminster and their stance on at least one key reserved matter of the day, Iraq. The degree to which Scottish elections will provide Holyrood's politicians with a clear independent mandate is open to doubt.

*This briefing was written by John Curtice. It is based on data collected by the 2003 Scottish Social Attitudes Survey conducted by the Scottish Centre for Social Research and funded by the Devolution and Constitutional Change Research Programme. A random sample of 1,508 adults aged 18 plus and resident in Scotland were interviewed between May and September 2003. Further details about the survey are available at [www.scotcen.org.uk](http://www.scotcen.org.uk)*

The Devolution and Constitutional Change Programme was set up by ESRC in 2000 to explore the series of devolution reforms which have established new political institutions in Scotland, Wales, Northern Ireland, London and the other English regions since 1997. It has commissioned 35 projects around the UK to carry out top-class academic research and to contribute to the policy debates surrounding devolution.

For more information see the Programme website at [www.devolution.ac.uk](http://www.devolution.ac.uk) or contact the Programme Director, Professor Charlie Jeffery at ESRC Devolution Programme, School of Social and Political Studies, Adam Ferguson Building, George Square, University of Edinburgh. Tel 0131 650 8489, Fax 0131 650 6546, Email [charlie.jeffery@ed.ac.uk](mailto:charlie.jeffery@ed.ac.uk)