

The Scottish and Welsh Elections 2003

The devolution of power to [Wales](#) and [Scotland](#) that took place in 1998 included the creation of the 129-member Scottish Parliament and the 60-member Welsh Assembly (both referred to as parliaments in this Research Note) for which the first elections were held in May 1999. The second round of elections was held in May 2003.

These elections are of interest because:

- there was intense pressure and turmoil within the Scottish Labour Party regarding its position on Iraq, and there has been interest in the effect of this on its electoral fortunes
- they are a test of the ongoing strength of parties advocating self-government, and
- they reveal issues resulting from the decline in voluntary voting.

The Electoral System

Both the Scottish and Welsh parliaments are elected using a system of proportional representation. Their chambers comprise representatives of single-member constituencies elected using first-past-the-post voting, as well as list members, chosen using a form of proportional voting that 'compensates' parties that received fewer seats than votes in the single-member constituencies.

The result is that the Scottish and Welsh chambers have a membership that, like the New Zealand Parliament, closely reflects the proportion of votes received by the parties. Both Scotland and Wales have four major parties and a number of minor parties.

The 1999 Elections

Labour was most successful in the inaugural elections, as it was in the

UK general election two years earlier, but could not achieve a majority of seats. This resulted in coalition governments between Labour and the Liberal Democrats in both jurisdictions, though not before a year of unstable minority Labour government in Wales.¹

A distinctive feature in both Wales and Scotland has been the failure of the Conservative Party to emerge as the main opposition force. In both cases, the nationalist parties (the Scottish National Party (SNP) and Plaid Cymru (PC)) were the biggest winners after Labour in 1999 (Figure 1).

The Issues

The 2003 Scottish and Welsh elections were overshadowed by the war in Iraq. Just weeks before the polls, there was no sign of an imminent election campaign, and no media discussion of the parties or the likely results.

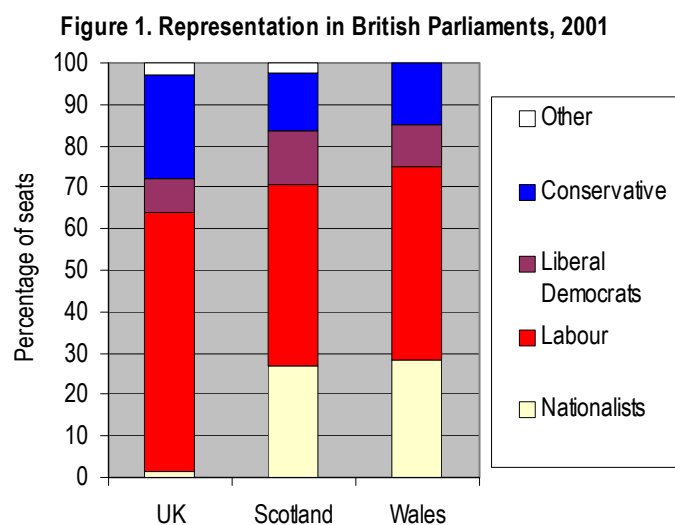
debate caused significant divisions within the Labour party less than two months before the election. Several Labour Members defied their party to support an anti-war motion moved by one of their own party members.² The motion almost succeeded, failing by just 57 votes to 62.³

A few days later, Scottish Labour's trouble was compounded by an equally bitter row between the party and the unions at the Scottish Labour conference.⁴

These difficulties, together with public opposition to the war, raised the possibility that Scottish Labour would suffer in the elections, particularly since every other party except the Conservatives opposed the war.

The Welsh election had no major themes; rather, the war, economic development, service delivery and party leadership were all issues in different local areas and for different parties.

As in virtually every country with non-compulsory voting, turnout was itself a political issue, with the Labour Party in particular urging its supporters not to stay at home on polling day.



In fact, the biggest issue in Scotland looked to be the war itself. Although the devolved parliaments have no foreign affairs role, this did not prevent the Scottish Parliament debating motions on Iraq. The

The Results

Figures 2 and 3 show the results for the two regional parliaments. Labour gained enough ground in Wales to

government alone.⁵ In Scotland, Labour and the Liberal Democrats retained enough seats to govern in coalition. The Conservatives made no significant gains in either parliament.

Voter turnout declined, in Scotland from just over 58 per cent in 1999 to around 49.5 per cent in 2003, and in Wales from 46 per cent to 38 per cent.

Figure 2. Seats in the Scottish Parliament

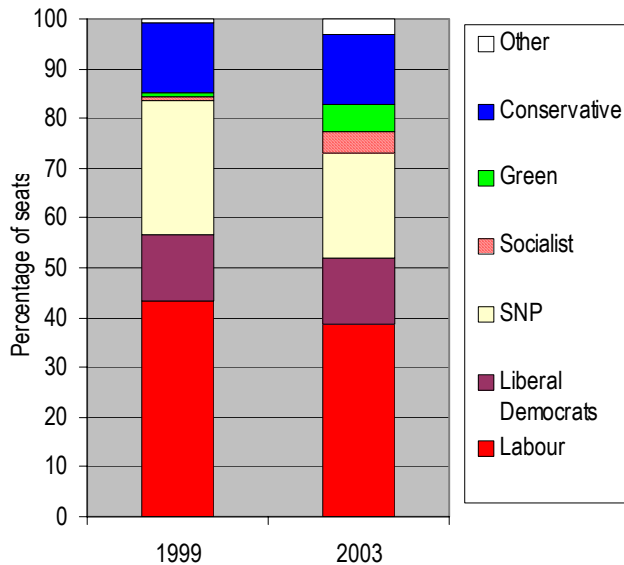
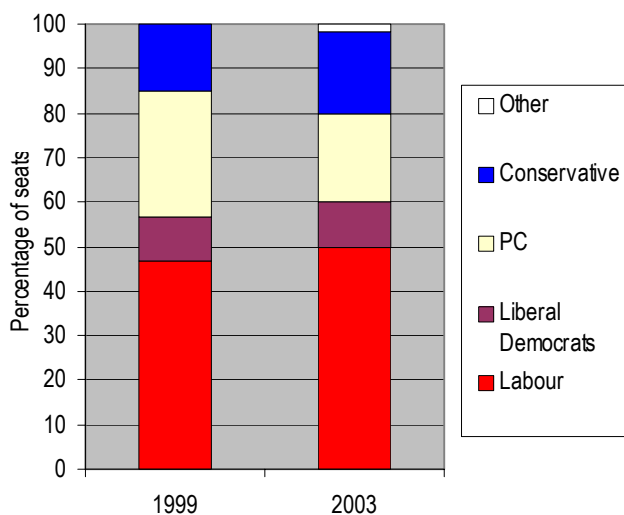


Figure 3. Seats in the Welsh Assembly



The most remarkable result was that the Welsh Assembly became the first parliament in the world to achieve 50 per cent female representation. It also produced a cabinet the majority of whom were female.⁶

Analysis

A [detailed analysis of the Scottish result](#) is available from the Scottish Parliamentary Information Centre.⁷

A swift result in the war in Iraq meant Labour took less of a beating than initially anticipated. Nevertheless, Labour lost seats to the war's harshest critics in Scotland. The standout performers were the Scottish Socialist Party and the Greens, between them gaining 11 seats to hold 13 in the new Parliament. In Wales, where the war had not been as much of an election

issue, Labour actually gained two seats. This may also have been because nationalist support was weaker in Wales, lessening the swing against Labour.

The decline in turnout appeared to assist the minor parties. As turnout falls, parties with small numbers of highly motivated followers seem to gain at the expense of parties that rely on a broad base of less committed supporters. The effect is most evident where elections are based on proportional representation. The implication for the Australian Senate, if voters behaved as they did in Scotland, would be that voluntary voting might strengthen the position of minor parties in the Senate.

Nationalist parties suffered the most in these elections. In both regions, they

lost ground to those on the left. Welsh Labour explicitly and successfully positioned itself to the left of Tony Blair.⁸ In Scotland, nationalist losses were almost entirely picked up by the Socialists and the Greens. Both results suggest an electorate focused on social issues and service delivery, rather than on the autonomy of the jurisdiction doing the delivering. The electorate appeared to favour messages from

the left rather than the right on social issues (reflected also in the Liberal Democrats' good performance in the UK election of 2001). It may be that, as devolution beds down, the nationalist parties that fought for it are having trouble showing their relevance in the new parliaments.

Endnotes

1. Rhodri Morgan, ['Putting Wales first'](#), *Tribune Wales*, 10 November 2000.
2. ['Labour defeats party rebels'](#), *Glasgow Herald*, 18 March 2003.
3. Scottish Parliament, *Official Report*, [13 March 2003](#), Col. 19550.
4. ['Union anger forces Iraq debate U-turn'](#), *The Scotsman*, 22 March 2003.
5. ['Morgan pledges to govern alone'](#), BBC News, 7 May 2003.
6. ['At last!'](#), *The Guardian*, 9 May 2003.
7. Ross Burnside, Stephen Herbert and Stephen Curtis, ['Election 2003'](#), *SPICe briefing no. 03/25*, May 2003.
8. ['Clear red water and coalitions'](#), BBC News, 4 April 2003.

The author extends special thanks to Michael Howes (University College London and Griffith University) and Mark Shephard (Strathclyde University) for their helpful suggestions.

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ISSN 1328-8016