

Traffic Light Politics? Assessing Electoral Volatility and its Implications for Party System Change in Scotland

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Introduction

Understanding the nature of a country's party system is a crucial first step in understanding government in the country in question. The dynamics of electoral competition feed into parliamentary behaviour and coalition relationships. In turn, these can impact upon the policy direction that a country takes. This paper therefore aims to assess electoral and party system change in Scotland's post-devolution party system from 2003 and to situate this in broader comparative perspective. Discussion proceeds in a number of sections. Firstly, to provide context to discussions on change, comments from party leaders and the media are briefly outlined. The second section assesses the post-devolution volatility or otherwise of the Scottish electorate. The third section broadens this discussion by deploying a variety of data to examine party performance in the run up to the 2007 elections. Using the available data, the fourth section examines voters' preferences and views towards potential coalition options. The fifth section discusses the parties' coalition manoeuvrings and assesses what this might mean in relation to questions of competition and co-operation. Are there prospects of a German-style 'Grosse Koalition' or 'Ampel Koalition' – Traffic Light coalition – politics in Scotland? The conclusion attempts to situate developments in the Scottish party system in comparative perspective.

A Forthcoming Earthquake Election?

Relying solely on listening to, or reading, recent commentary on electoral politics in Scotland, one could expect the forthcoming 2007 Scottish parliament and local government elections to be akin to a political ‘earthquake’. Much of this is driven by comments by party leaders in the aftermath of political events. The media report these comments, often uncritically. Thus, in the aftermath of the Dunfermline and West Fife by-election for Westminster, the Scottish Liberal Democrat leader, Nicol Stephen claimed the result to be ‘sensational and historic’ and that it gives the Liberal Democrats the chance to become ‘the single largest party in the Scottish parliament’ (Hutcheon, 2006). Similarly, SNP gains have been heralded as great leaps forward. Thus, a swing to the SNP of 24.5 per cent in the West Dumbarton ward in a West Dunbartonshire Council by-election, which the party only won by four votes, was claimed to be evidence of an ‘enormous victory’ and ‘huge progress’ for the SNP (Tinning, 2006). The Scottish parliament by-election for Moray, caused by the death of the SNP MSP Margaret Ewing, was held by the Nationalists with a swing of 4 per cent to the party. SNP leader Alex Salmond claimed this to be a ‘seismic victory’ and went on to say that ‘it is unprecedented in modern political history to achieve such outstanding success’ (Gray, 2006).

In this commentary, Labour are portrayed as being on the back foot. Thus, the leader of the Liberal Democrats on Glasgow City Council talks of a ‘catastrophic collapse of confidence in Labour’ after winning a council seat from Labour (MacDermid, 2006), and a relatively measured article on the Dunfermline and West Fife by-election indicates that it was a ‘massive blow for Labour’ (MacLeod, 2006).

Although it would be misleading to say there are no critical voices,¹ when added to a reporting environment regularly claimed to be hostile to the Labour Party and the achievements of the Scottish Executive, the impression given is one of a Scottish party system awaiting major change in 2007.

Individual results may well be dramatic. These stories may consequently represent an accurate picture of reality. Nevertheless, it is worth bearing in mind that the long-campaign for the 2007 elections is well underway. Parties therefore have an incentive to play up their successes and seek to undermine their opponents. As with much party campaign literature, much of the data used to substantiate parties' electoral claims are either used selectively or open to a number of interpretations and can therefore be seen as part of this 'long-campaign'. For example, the 'huge progress' claimed by the SNP after the West Dumbarton council by-election was based on winning nine of the previous nineteen local government by-elections in Scotland (Tinning, 2006). However, there have been more than forty such contests in Scotland since the 2003 elections, analysis of which shows a different pattern; SNP candidates have been elected in only 13 of these contests. Similarly, the Liberal Democrats' claims were made after only one particularly impressive by-election victory for a Westminster seat. Finally, the process of weakening Labour party ties to the electorate has been underway for some time. Both Denver (2003) and Saren and McCormick (2004) observe declining voteshare in traditionally strong constituencies. Using the available evidence, the following sections attempt to put these claims in broader perspective and to draw out their possible implications for the forthcoming 2007 elections in Scotland.

¹ See for instance: Fraser (2006a) and MacLeod (2006).

Parties and the Electorate

Table 1 demonstrates that in UK General elections, the dominant party in Scotland for some time has been the Labour Party. From 1964 onwards, the party opened a sizeable gap between to its nearest competitors, the Conservative Party, to the point where there is currently only one Scottish Conservative MP at Westminster. Since the rise of the SNP, Labour has also been able to maintain a sizeable gap to the Nationalists. Labour's blunting of the SNP challenge was primarily achieved by being adept at playing 'the Scottish card'. In relation to general elections in Scotland, this translated into Labour being the central party in what Sartori (1976: 192-201) might call a pre-dominant party system; on the whole, from 1964 onwards Labour were able to win the majority of Scottish seats at Westminster (Hassan and Lynch, 2001: 349-352).

Table 1: UK General Election Results in Scotland, 1945-2005

	Con %	Lab %	Lib %	SNP %	Other %
1945	41.1	47.6	5.0	1.2	5.1
1950	44.8	46.2	6.6	0.4	2.0
1951	48.6	47.9	2.7	0.3	0.5
1955	50.1	46.7	1.9	0.5	0.8
1959	47.2	46.7	4.1	0.8	1.2
1964	40.6	48.7	7.6	2.4	0.7
1966	37.7	49.9	6.8	5.0	0.6
1970	38.0	44.5	5.5	11.4	0.6
1974 (F)	32.9	36.6	8.0	21.9	0.6
1974 (O)	24.7	36.3	8.3	30.4	0.3
1979	31.4	41.5	9.0	17.3	0.8
1983	28.4	35.1	24.5	11.8	0.3
1987	24.0	42.4	19.2	14.0	0.3
1992	25.6	39.0	13.1	21.5	0.8
1997	17.5	45.6	13.0	22.1	1.9
2001	15.6	43.9	16.4	20.1	4.0
2005	15.8	39.5	22.6	17.7	4.1

Sources: Hassan and Lynch, 2001: 349-352; Brown, 2001: 140; *The Scotsman*, 2005; *The Herald*, 2005.

The first Scottish parliament elections in 1999 saw Labour emerge the largest party, achieving 38.8 per cent of the vote in the constituency contest and 33.6 per cent in the list contest, a result which saw the party's leading position in Scotland pre-devolution maintained. The SNP came second with over a quarter of the vote in both sections of the contest, while the Scottish Conservatives achieved a slightly better result than the Liberal Democrats. Policy overlaps between Labour and the Liberal Democrats saw both parties agree a formal coalition agreement to form the first post-devolution Scottish Executive.

Table 2: Scottish Parliament Election Results, 1999 and 2003

	1999				2003			
	FPTP %	Seats	List %	Seats	FPTP %	Seats	List %	Seats
Labour	38.8	53	33.6	3	34.5 (-4.3)	46 (-7)	29.4 (-4.2)	4 (1)
SNP	28.7	7	27.3	28	23.7 (-5)	9 (2)	20.9 (-6.4)	18 (-10)
L/Dem	14.2	12	12.4	5	15.3 (1.1)	13 (1)	11.8 (-0.6)	4 (-1)
Cons	15.5	0	15.4	18	16.6 (1.1)	3 (3)	15.6 (0.2)	15 (-3)
SSP	1.0	0	1.99	1	6.0 (5)	0	6.7 (4.7)	6 (5)
Green	N/A	0	3.59	1	N/A	0	6.9 (3.3)	7 (6)
Ind/Other	1.69	1	5.69	0	3.8 (2.1)	2 (1)	5.4 (-0.3)	2 (2)

Sources: Bennie and Clark, 2003: 138; Leeke and Cracknell, 2003: 8.

In the 2003 Scottish parliament elections, both Labour and the SNP lost voteshare and seats, a pattern repeated in the council elections held on the same day (Clark, 2005a). Both the Liberal Democrats and the Conservatives essentially held station in 2003, with the Conservatives arguably advancing furthest by winning three constituency seats. The main beneficiaries of Labour and SNP misfortune were the Greens and Scottish Socialist Party (SSP), and a number of 'independents'. The Green vote increased from just under 4 per cent to 6.9 per cent thereby giving the party 7 MSPs, while the SSP vote jumped from just under 2 per cent to 6.7 per cent thereby leaving the party with 6 representatives. The Labour-Liberal Democrat coalition continued, albeit with a narrow majority.

In delivering such a ‘wake-up call’ to the main parties (Denver, 2003), the results of the 2003 election suggest that the electorate were relatively volatile and were prepared either not to vote at all, or to vote for smaller party options. One indicator of volatility widely used in comparative party systems analysis is the Pedersen index. This measures net electoral volatility and can be calculated by adding the percentage point change in all parties shares of the vote and then dividing this by two (Ersson and Lane, 1998: 29; Pedersen, 1990: 198-199). Elections to the Scottish parliament under AMS provide an opportunity to compare two contests, that for the constituency vote and that for the regional list vote. Moreover, to facilitate comparison between different levels of Scottish government, electoral volatility can also be established for general elections in Scotland.

Given the semi-proportional electoral system and the different range of issues for voters to consider, it might be expected both that Scottish elections are more volatile than Scottish results for Westminster elections, and that the list element of the Scottish parliament vote is more volatile than the constituency element.² Table 3 below therefore establishes the net volatility both before and after devolution by examining the 2001 and 2005 general elections in Scotland as well as the 2003 Scottish parliament elections. Net volatility in 2001 vis-à-vis 1997 in Scotland was 5.5. This increased in 2005 to 8.3. In the equivalent vote, the Scottish parliament constituency contest, net volatility was somewhat higher at 9.1. When the list contest for the Scottish parliament is considered however, net volatility rises further to 11.4. This is more than double the level of volatility found in the 2001 general election. This snapshot would therefore appear to demonstrate a trend towards increasing volatility in parliamentary elections in Scotland. Moreover, it suggests that Scottish

² Wyn Jones and Scully (2006) for instance note that Scottish and Welsh voters are often guided by specifically Scottish and Welsh issues when voting in devolved elections. These issues are often substantially different from those to the fore in Westminster elections.

parliament elections are more volatile than those for Westminster. Both sets of expectations are therefore confirmed.

Table 3: Net electoral volatility in Scotland 2001-2005

Election	Net volatility
2001 Westminster	5.5
2005 Westminster	8.3
2003 Holyrood Constituency	9.1
2003 Holyrood List	11.4

Sources: Butler and Kavanagh, 2002: 262; Denver, 2003: 34.

Volatility can also be assessed in relation to the number of seats won and lost in parliament (Ersson and Lane, 1998: 29-33). This is calculated using the same formula as the Pedersen index for electoral volatility (Ersson and Lane, 1998: 29; Pedersen, 1990: 198-199). Seat volatility however substitutes change in a party's number of seats won for gains and losses in voteshare. Only one Westminster seat changed hands in 2001, the Conservatives winning Dumfries and Galloway from the Nationalists, and therefore this measure cannot be deployed effectively for the 2001 General Election in Scotland. Nor, given the large scale redistricting required by the Scotland Act, can it be used for the 2005 General Election. However, as more seats changed hands and there were no boundary changes in 2003 this measure can be deployed for the second Scottish parliament election. As table 4 demonstrates, seat volatility in the list contest was double that of the constituency contest.³ This underlines the findings of table 3 that the main development of competition in relation to parties in the Scottish parliament has been because of the introduction of the proportional regional list element of the AMS electoral system. It also points to the

³ These figures quoted for net seat volatility do not represent the actual numbers of seats that changed hands. Instead, they are merely an index of the level of change in each section of the vote.

fact that voters now have the opportunity to cast their vote for different parties in each of the constituency and list sections of the vote.

Table 4: Net seat volatility in the Scottish parliament 2003

Election	Net seat volatility
2003 Holyrood Constituency	7
2003 Holyrood List	14

Source: Denver, 2003: 34.

The proportion of voters ‘ticket splitting’, or switching their party choice between the constituency and regional list votes is therefore a key indicator of volatility. Denver (2003: 49-50) points to the *minimum* number of ‘switchers’ being 17.1 per cent between the two contests, a sizeable increase from the 1999 figure of 11.6. This figure of 17.1 is reminiscent of Paterson et al’s (2001: 78; see also Johnston and Pattie, 2002) suggestion that in 1999 the figure of ‘switchers’ was around twenty per cent with Conservative voters more likely to remain loyal to the party in between the two contests but that otherwise there was no discernable pattern. In 2003, this switching is largely attributed to ‘the range of choices available in both constituencies and lists and a general mood of disaffection from the larger parties’ (Denver, 2003: 50).

Underpinning this more volatile electorate is a picture of eroding party loyalties. For instance, 62.6 per cent of respondents to the 2003 Scottish Social Attitudes Survey did not think themselves a political party supporter, and 38 per cent of these respondents did not see themselves as closer to one party than another. Using Scottish Social Attitudes and British Election Study data, table 5 tracks party identification between the 1999 and 2003 Scottish parliament elections for the four main parties. Conservative and Liberal Democrat identification declined by less than half a percentage point between the two elections, thereby suggesting that both parties

Table 5: Party identification in Scotland, 1999-2003⁴

	1999	2001	2003	+/- 1999-2003
Labour	42.2	39.1	32.0	-10.2
SNP	19.6	17.8	16.8	-2.8
Liberal Democrats	11.2	5.6	10.8	-0.4
Conservatives	15.6	15.7	15.3	-0.3
(Base N)	(1482)	(713)	(1508)	

Sources: National Centre for Social Research, 2001; British Election Study, 2001; Scottish Centre for Social Research, 2005.

have a bedrock of support upon which they can rely. SNP identification also declined between 1999 and 2003, but by less than three points. Table 5 demonstrates clearly that it is amongst Labour identifiers voters that the greatest volatility is to be found; identification with the party declined by 10.2 points between 1999 and 2003, thereby partially explaining the party's loss in voteshare and seats in the second Scottish election.

Post-2003 Developments

What might this mean in terms of post-2003 party performance? Regular monthly opinion polls have not been undertaken in Scotland since *The Herald* discontinued its series of polls in December 2003. Analysts are therefore forced to pursue other methods of monitoring party performance. One method is to examine the results of the constant stream of local government by-elections for clues as to the direction of public opinion and voting intentions. While the results of such elections may be determined by specific local factors, Rallings and Thrasher (1999) point to the utility

⁴ The British Election Study contained panel data from Scottish respondents in 2001. See: <http://www.essex.ac.uk/bes/data.html>. Although responses for Labour, the SNP and the Conservatives clearly fit with the SSAS pattern, Liberal Democrat identifiers were clearly underrepresented in the Scottish BES data.

of such a source, particularly since they are based on what voters actually did, instead of what they say they will do.

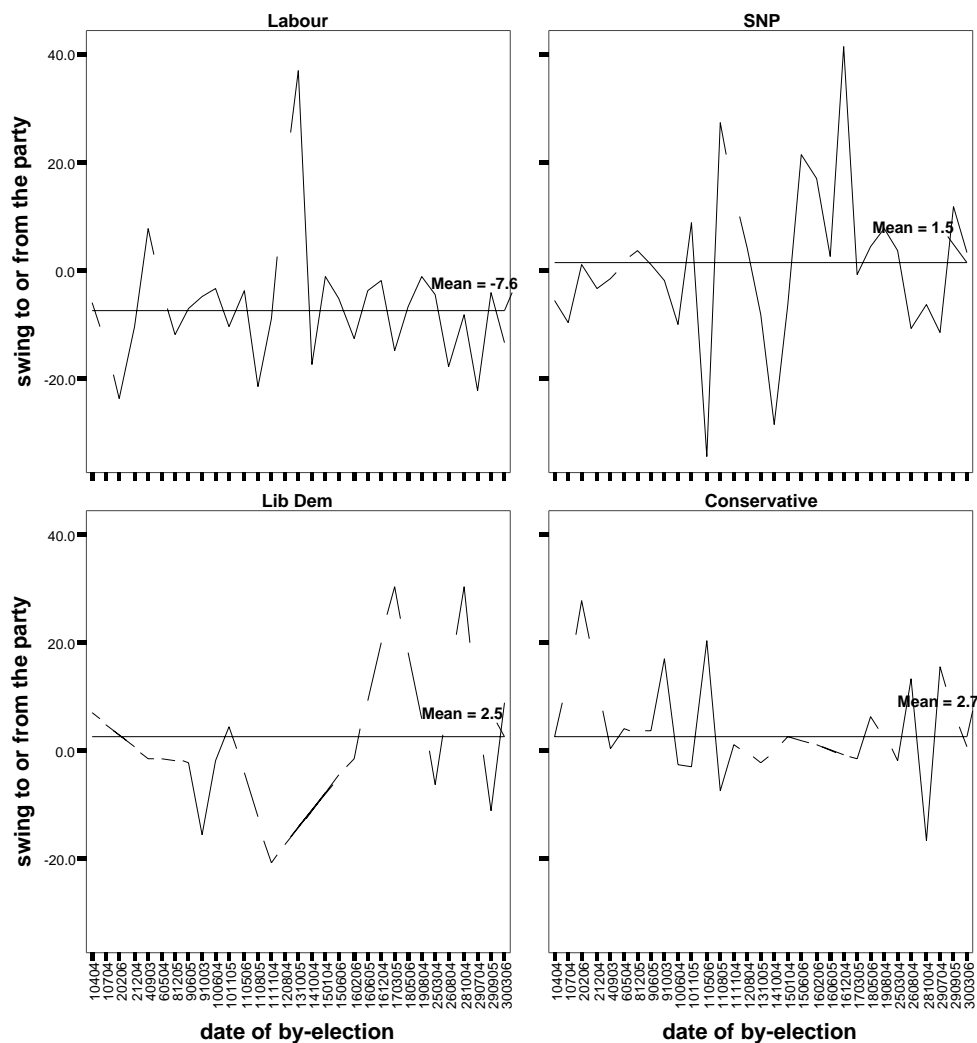
Since the 2003 local government elections, there have been forty-two such contests.⁵ In only three of the thirty-six contests where Labour also stood in 2003 was the swing towards the party positive. The Nationalists have also stood in thirty-six wards that they contested in 2003, and in eighteen of these the swing towards the SNP was positive. In the eighteen wards contested by the Scottish Liberal Democrats in 2003, only six had a swing towards the party. The picture offers some succour to the Scottish Conservatives. Of the twenty-eight wards contested in 2003, fourteen showed a swing to the party.

Looking at this in terms of average swing gives some broader perspective to discussions of electoral volatility. It also highlights the challenge that Labour is facing.⁶ Figure 1 tracks the swing to and from the main four Scottish parties in local government by-elections from May 2003. In the thirty-six wards Labour contested since 2003, the party's share of the vote went down by 7.6 per cent on average. By contrast, none of the other parties has performed so badly. Despite the party's recent rhetoric, the mean swing to the SNP since 2003 is positive by only 1.5 percentage points. Bigger beneficiaries of these by-elections in terms of mean voteshare have been the Liberal Democrats and the Conservatives; on average the Liberal Democrat vote increased by 2.5 per cent, while the Conservative share has increased by 2.7 per cent. Unfortunately the low numbers of seats contested by the small parties mean that

⁵ These figures are based on contests up to and including the by-election on 15th June 2006 for West Dunbartonshire Council's Dumbarton West ward. By-elections where the party did not stand in 2003 are excluded from this analysis in order to prevent the results being skewed by results in wards that were not contested by the party in 2003. This would make swings to and from parties either artificially high or artificially low.

⁶ Given Labour's current domination of Scottish local government (Clark, 2005a), it is also possible that this by-election performance is an indicator of dissatisfaction with the party's performance in delivering local services.

Figure 1: Mean Local Government By-election Swing, 2003-2006



little can be gleaned as to their performance since 2003, although the ten wards contested by the SSP in both 2003 and the subsequent by-election have shown on average a decline of 4.2 points. It is therefore Labour that has performed least well in local government by-elections during 2003-2006, while the other three main parties can take some reassurance from their performance to date.

This pattern changes when parliamentary by-elections are considered. Since 2003, there have been four parliamentary by-elections in Scotland, two each for

Westminster and Holyrood. In three of those, the incumbent party held the seat. In the fourth, Dunfermline and West Fife, the Liberal Democrats overcame a 27.2 per cent Labour majority to win the seat with a 15.6 percent swing to the party, with the Labour share declining by 16.8 per cent. Table 6 reports the swing to and from the four main parties in these by-elections. In terms of overall mean swing, Labour have again performed poorly in by-elections to both parliaments. The Conservative voteshare declined by just under 1 percent across the four by-elections, but the fact that there is a swing away from the party in the Westminster contests hides the small but positive swing to the party in Scottish parliament by-elections. With the Liberal Democrats, this underlines the positive swing towards the party in local government by-elections; only in the Livingston contest has the Liberal Democrat voteshare declined. These are also very positive results for the SNP with an overall swing to the party of 5.8 percentage points.

Table 6: Parliamentary By-election Swing in Scotland, 2003-2006

	Glasgow Cathcart	Moray	Mean swing	Livingston	Dunferm. & W. Fife	Mean swing	Mean overall swing
Parliament	SP	SP	SP	W	W	W	-
Labour	-1.5	-9.3	-5.4	-9.3	-16.8	-13.1	-9.2
SNP	5.8	4.0	4.9	11.1	2.1	6.6	5.8
Lib Dem	2.3	7.2	4.8	-0.6	15.6	7.5	6.1
Cons	2.1	0.4	1.3	-3.3	-2.5	-2.9	-0.8

It will nevertheless be sobering for the SNP to see that its largest gains came in Westminster, not Holyrood, by-elections. Moreover, in parliamentary by-elections the Liberal Democrats also appear to be running the SNP close in overall terms and in both types of contest, with variations according to the electoral geography of the seat. Thus, the SNP would be expected to fare better in the urban areas of Glasgow

Cathcart and Livingston, while the Liberal Democrats might be expected to do well in Dunfermline since Fife has to some extent become a stronghold for the party.⁷ Both make the SNP's goal of 20 *additional* constituency seats in the 2007 elections seem highly ambitious.⁸

Rare polls also underline the challenge to Labour. A YouGov survey of Scottish voting intentions for Westminster carried out prior to the 2005 general election showed Labour down on its 2001 position from 44 percentage points to 36, with the SNP on 20 per cent. The Scottish Liberal Democrats were up 6 points from 16 to 22 and the Scottish Conservatives up from 16 to 19. Asked how they would cast their regional vote in a Scottish parliament election, respondents gave a slightly different response pattern. Labour is down 2 points to 27 from the actual result in 2003, while the Scottish Tories also decline by 1 point to 15. By contrast, the Liberal Democrats increase their support by 7 points to 19, while the big winners were reported to be the SNP with an increase of ten points on the 2003 result to 31 per cent (King, 2005). Another YouGov poll carried out for the SNP in April 2006 examined Scottish Parliament voting intentions for the constituency vote. This echoes the theme of Labour under pressure, with the party at 30 per cent, the SNP at 26 per cent, the Liberal Democrats and Conservatives essentially holding station at 20 per cent and 14

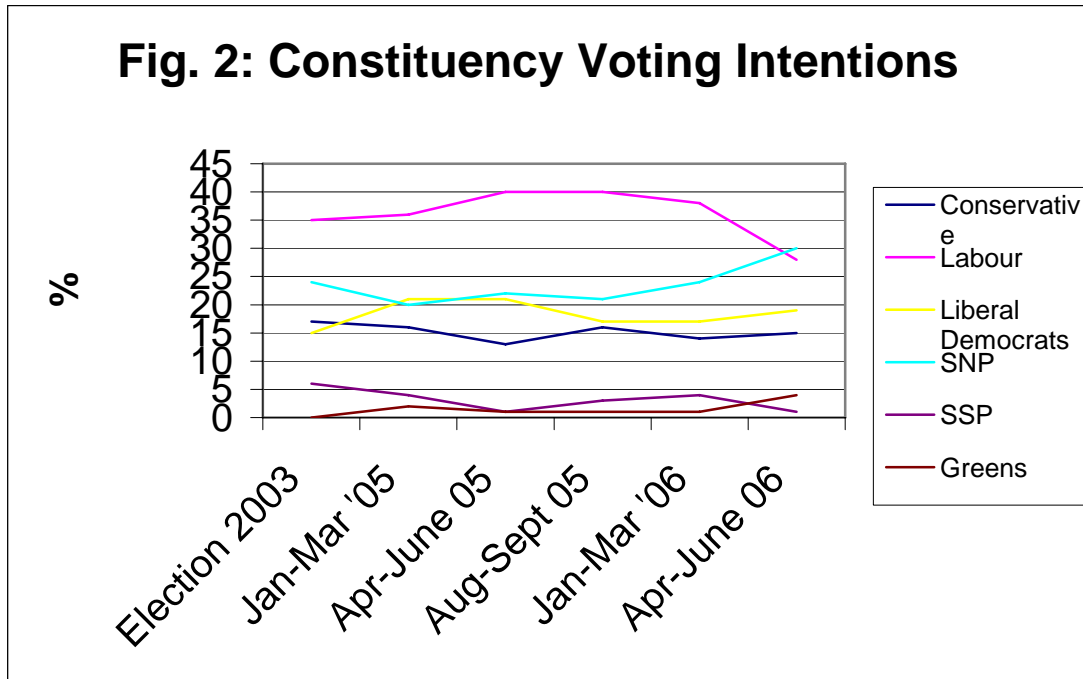
⁷ Current party leader Sir Menzies Campbell holds the nearby seat of Fife North East, which is also held by Iain Smith MSP in the Scottish Parliament.

⁸ Constituency analysis also suggests that this is a highly ambitious target for the SNP. A standard conception of marginality is where the party concerned came first or second and the gap was less than 10 per cent, or third and less than 10 per cent behind the winner. Post-2003, only 25 constituencies are classified as marginal across Scotland. Including those that the SNP hold already, the SNP is only a factor in sixteen of these. These break down into 13 Labour/SNP contests, 2 SNP/Conservative contests and a three-way Liberal Democrat/SNP/Labour contest in Tweedale, Ettrick and Lauderdale. However, in only 7 of these seats where the SNP is currently second is the gap to the incumbent in the range of the swing achieved in Scottish parliament by elections (i.e. less than 6 per cent). This includes seats like Glasgow Govan, which, despite consistent marginality, the SNP has failed to take at a successive Scottish and General elections. Moreover, the SNP holds five seats with a majority of less than 2.3 per cent which are likely to be vulnerable to a challenge from competitors. For further discussion see Clark (2005b: 40-45).

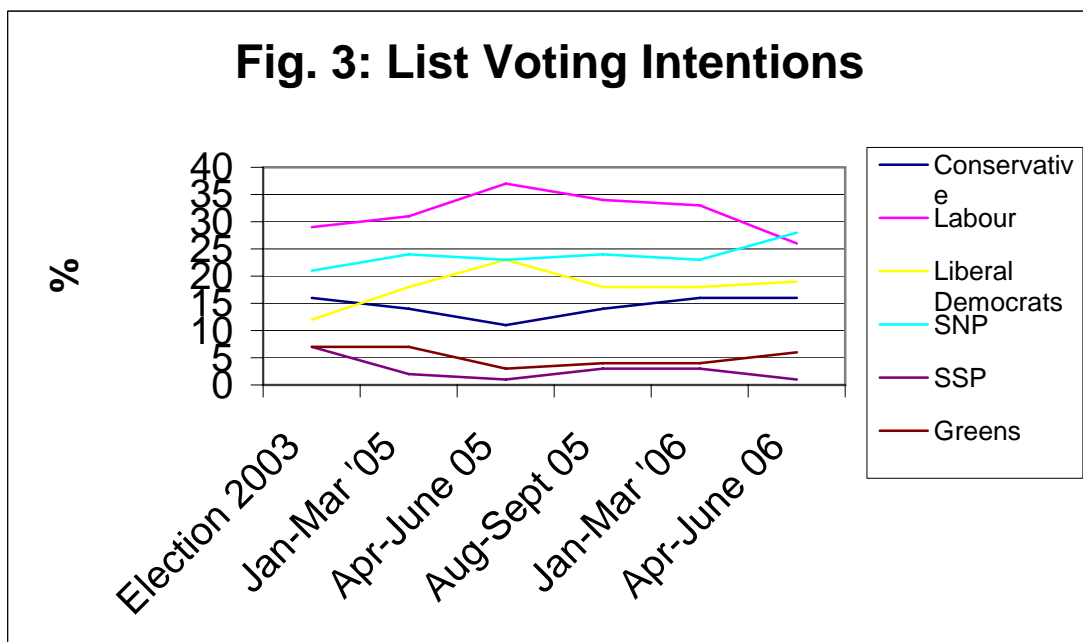
per cent respectively, while both the Greens and the SSP record 4 per cent each (YouGov, 2006).

Private polling in May 2006 confirmed these results for Labour; the party polled 30 per cent in the constituency vote, and 27 per cent for the list vote. The SNP polled similar results to Labour, 29 per cent on the constituency vote and 26 per cent for the list. The Liberal Democrat results were 17 per cent and 21 per cent respectively, while the Conservatives polled 15 per cent and 14 per cent in both elements. Translated into seats, the projection from these results is that Labour could lose up to nine seats, the SNP would gain ten seats, while the Liberal Democrats would gain nine seats and the Conservatives lose three. Aside from Labour, the main squeeze would be on the smaller parties and independents; taking them together, the report projects they would lose eleven seats in total (Allardyce, 2006a; 2006b). Based on projections from the Moray by-election result, an alternative seat prediction suggests that Labour would lose fifteen seats, the SNP gain six, the Liberal Democrats ten, while the Conservatives would gain three (MacDonell, 2006).

In an attempt to plug the Scottish opinion poll gap, Ipsos-MORI have recently published the findings of questions on vote intentions contained in their Social Policy Monitor research (Ipsos-MORI, 2006). These findings only contain three sets of results for 2005 and two for 2006. Consequently, unlike the local government by-election data, they fail to provide any detailed context on developments, particularly from the 2003 elections until early 2005. The Ipsos-MORI results are tracked in figures 2 and 3.



Source: Ipsos-MORI, 2006.



Source: Ipsos-MORI, 2006.

Figures 2 and 3 largely confirm recent developments. Labour and the SNP are competing to be largest party with the SNP marginally ahead at the time of writing on 30 per cent in the constituency vote and 28 per cent in the list vote. Labour by contrast

has declined steeply from its mid-2005 highpoints of 40 per cent in the constituency vote and 37 per cent in the list vote. These falls mirror the pattern found in voting intentions for Labour at the British level post-2005 (Guardian, 2006). Although still sizeable, these falls are not so large when the current position is tracked back to the 2003 elections. Using 2003 as the starting point, it is also worth noting that the SNP's progress is a relatively recent phenomenon.

In the next rank of competition, the Liberal Democrats have been consistently above the Conservatives since 2005. The Liberal Democrats are currently reported to be polling 19 per cent in both votes, with the Conservatives on 15 per cent in the constituency vote and 16 per cent in the list vote. The two small parties also appear to be competing with each other, with the Greens opening a lead on the troubled SSP in both sections of the vote. In the list competition, which is most relevant for the small parties, the Greens polled 6 per cent in April-June 2006, as compared with 1 per cent for the SSP.

Co-operation and Coalition: Voters' Views

Since the introduction of the AMS electoral system, parties have to some extent been forced to face the prospect of co-operating with their competitors (Bennie and Clark, 2003). The introduction of the single transferable vote (STV) for local government elections ought to further temper the competitive urges of Scottish parties, not least because STV is predicated upon the allocation of voters' alternative preferences. How voters' second preferences line up are a key element of this and are therefore of interest. The 2003 Scottish Social Attitudes Survey asked voters which party would have been their first and second preferences in 2003. Table 7 reports the second

Table 7: Voters' second party preferences, by party (percentages)

	Second		Prefs					N
	Lab	SNP	Lib Dem	Con	Green	SSP		
First Preference	Lab	-	31.7	28.9	5.6	6.6	3.8	287
	SNP	33.5	-	19.9	8.9	6.8	13.6	191
	Lib Dem	29.5	13.9	-	16.4	17.2	5.7	122
	Cons	11.3	18.8	36.9	-	6.3	1.9	160
	Green	6.3	12.5	18.8	6.3	-	37.5	16
	SSP	17.9	17.9	14.3	0.0	35.7	-	28

Source: Scottish Centre for Social Research, 2005.

preferences of voters broken down by their first preference choices. Overlap between Labour, SNP and Liberal Democrat supporters is clearly evident. Of those who stated Labour would be their first preference, 31.7 per cent indicated that the SNP would be their second preference, while a further 28.9 per cent stated the Liberal Democrats would be their second preference. Similarly, a third of voters whose first preference is the SNP stated that their second preference would be Labour, with a further fifth opting for the Liberal Democrats. Labour also benefits from second preferences from Liberal Democrat voters, 29.5 per cent of whom gave Labour as their second preference. Of the other parties, 36.9 per cent of Conservative voters suggest the Liberal Democrats would be their second preference. By contrast, the Conservatives do not appear to benefit to any great extent from the second preferences of any of the other three parties.

It is too early to predict how these preferences will translate in relation to the council elections.⁹ Nevertheless, STV is expected to lead to a decline in the number of Labour councils and the rise of coalition and minority administrations. Returning to the parliamentary level, the importance of highlighting voters' second preferences is

⁹ For detailed discussion of the introduction of STV for Scottish local government and its implications, see Bennie (Forthcoming 2006), and Curtice and Herbert (2005).

to shed some light on attitudes to the parties and underline areas where there might be overlap between them. Parties' policy overlaps have already been highlighted by Bennie and Clark (2003). Although there has been policy movement since, for instance the much heralded concession by First Minister McConnell that there might be some positive arguments for independence, these moves have tended to develop areas that there were already some policy overlaps in.¹⁰ Overlaps in both policy and parties' electorates have the potential to feed into coalition building post election. As discussion of electoral volatility demonstrates, the decline of Labour and the recent rise of the SNP suggest that there may be potential for a different coalition format in the aftermath of the 2007 elections.

What about voters' views of overlaps between the parties? Little recent data is available on the voters' perceptions on differences between the parties or as to their preferences for coalitions. Although the response options are limited, Scottish Social Attitudes data from 1999 and 2003 offer some tentative insights into these areas. Two questions are consistently asked: whether the respondent felt there were differences between Labour and the SNP; and which coalition the respondent preferred between the two options of Labour/Liberal Democrat and SNP/Liberal Democrat.

Table 8 reports how voters perceived the difference between the SNP and Labour during the first Scottish parliament. This suggests that, whatever the efforts of party campaigns and communications to differentiate between the two parties, voters have been inclined to see Labour and the SNP converging. Thus, the proportion that saw a great difference between the two parties fell by 10 percentage points between 1999 and 2003, while the proportion seeing not much difference between them rose by 6.7 points.

¹⁰ First Minister McConnell for instance is seen as belonging to the pro-nationalist wing of the Scottish Labour Party.

Table 8: Perceptions of difference between Labour and SNP (percentages)

	1999	2003	-/+
Great difference	40.4	30.4	-10.0
Some difference	39.0	42.2	3.2
Not much difference	15.9	22.6	6.7
Don't know	4.8	4.8	-
(Base N)	(1482)	(1508)	-

Sources: National Centre for Social Research, 2001; Scottish Centre for Social Research, 2005.

This can be broken down by respondents' party identification. Thus, the 2003 data show that 35.8 per cent of Labour identifiers thought there was a great difference between Labour and the SNP, 43.5 per cent thought there was some difference and 16.8 per cent felt there was not much difference. The figures for Liberal Democrat identifiers are remarkably similar, with 35 per cent seeing a great difference, 44.8 per cent seeing some difference between Labour and the SNP, and 17.8 per cent seeing not much difference. By contrast, 31.9 per cent of SNP identifiers saw a great difference between their party and Labour, just under half, 49.2 per cent, saw some difference, and 18.5 per cent indicated there was not much difference between the two parties.

In relation to voters' coalition preferences, a degree of fluidity can be inferred from table 9, even if the differences are not necessarily large and only two options were offered to respondents. Thus, the proportion favouring a Labour-Liberal Democrat coalition has declined by 6.7 points to just over half of the electorate. The recent decline in the Labour vote might suggest that such a proportion has fallen further. By contrast, those favouring a SNP-Liberal Democrat coalition rose by 2.7 percentage points between 1999-2003. Similarly, the proportion of respondents

Table 9: Coalition preferences (percentages)

	1999	2003	-/+
Labour/Lib Dem	57.2	50.5	-6.7
SNP/Lib Dem	32.1	34.8	2.7
Don't know	10.7	14.6	3.9
(Base N)	(1482)	(1508)	-

Sources: National Centre for Social Research, 2001; Scottish Centre for Social Research, 2005.

indicating they didn't know rose by 3.9 percentage points. Views of Liberal Democrat identifiers are particularly of interest here since continuation of the coalition was a central issue of the Liberal Democrat leadership campaign and the Liberal Democrats are a potential 'hinge' party in coalition building; 63.2 per cent favoured a Labour – Liberal Democrat coalition in 2003, as opposed to the 31.9 per cent that favoured a SNP – Liberal Democrat administration.

The Coalition Dance: Flirtations or Promiscuity?¹¹

So far, this highlights a degree of fluidity and areas of overlap on the part of voters which might allow parties to feel they can co-operate with each other without facing a major electoral penalty. Participation in government can be classified in three ways. Firstly, parties have a presence in cabinet. Secondly, parties may not have joined cabinet, but provide necessary external support for legislative measures they are in agreement with. Thirdly, parties can be in opposition. This typology leads to a five-fold categorisation of governments. These are the single party majority, the minimum winning coalition, the surplus or minimum policy connected winning coalition, the single party minority, and the multi-party minority (Bartolini, 1998: 49; Laver and Schofield, 1990; Ch. 5). Moreover, Laver and Schofield (1990: 91-92) distinguish

¹¹ Bartolini (1998: 42) notes 'a growing promiscuity in coalition formation' across Europe in terms of the variety of parties who succeed in forming administrations.

between 'policy-blind' office-seeking parties and parties that are primarily policy seeking in nature. However, in the way that Laver and Schofield cast it, none of Scotland's parliamentary parties are 'policy-blind'. Policy is therefore important to coalition formation. When combined with the semi-proportional electoral system the sources used above to discuss party performance suggest that both a single party majority administration, and a 'policy-blind' minimum winning coalition can be ruled out.

This leaves the potential outcome of the Scottish parliament election either being a minimum connected coalition, or a single or multi-party minority administration governing with legislative support on a policy-by-policy basis from other parties. It is worth bearing in mind that of all the Scottish parliamentary parties, only Labour and the Greens have not had the upheaval of a leadership change. Combined with the impending elections, this has opened up debate on the composition of the next Scottish Executive.

One option would be continuation of the current Labour-Liberal Democrat Executive. However, significant sections of both parties have been vocal in their criticism of the current coalition. From the Labour perspective, this is because the Liberal Democrats are perceived to have done well out of the current coalition (for instance: Roddin, 2004). The main example used in this argument is the extension of STV to local government elections, something which is likely to cost Labour councils and councillors. Similarly, Labour MPs have pointed to Liberal Democrat 'opportunism' in opposing and defeating the Labour candidate in the Dunfermline and West Fife by-election. Moreover, Labour's 2007 campaign strategy will explicitly target the Liberal Democrats in areas where the two parties can gain from each other (Fraser, 2006c). Some voices within the Labour party, notably Welsh First Minister

Rhodri Morgan, have also suggested that if the party is the largest post-2007, it might seek to govern as a single party minority administration (Gordon, 2006). This notwithstanding, while the coalition has had occasional in-fighting between the two parties, on the whole it has been relatively stable. There is a clear overlap in policy terms between the two parties and in the preferences of their voters. Indeed, almost two-thirds of Liberal Democrat identifiers preferred a coalition with Labour in 2003. Labour's electoral decline nevertheless suggests that the Liberal Democrats would be in a stronger position in such a coalition.

The Liberal Democrats could also feature as the hinge party in coalition with the SNP. Nicol Stephen's campaign for the party leadership seemed to open this possibility by not ruling out coalition with any party unlike his predecessor, Jim Wallace, who ruled out coalition with the SNP (MacDonell, 2005a). There is some overlap between the preferences of each party's voters and, in policy terms, both parties are of the centre-left.¹² Like the SNP and Labour, Stephen has also adopted a policy of cutting business tax in order to stimulate the Scottish economy. However, less than a third of Liberal Democrat identifiers prefer a SNP-Liberal Democrat coalition. Furthermore, this potential overture to the SNP has appeared to founder on the issue of independence, with Stephen indicating that as a party which believes in a federal UK, it was opposed to an independent Scotland and consequently to a referendum on independence (MacMahon and MacDonell, 2005). While some Nationalist circles had been reported as suggesting the party move away from insisting on a referendum, the SNP has since indicated that a referendum on independence within four years was a 'non-negotiable' condition of its participation in an executive coalition (Gordon, 2005; SNP, 2005: 22).

¹² Although interestingly Mitchell (2006) characterises the party as belonging to the centre-right and Dunleavy (2005: 508) indicates the Liberal Democrats are centre-placed but to the right of both Labour and the SNP. Space unfortunately prevents this positioning from being assessed further here.

The Conservatives have made overtures to both the SNP and Labour. Both Scottish leader, Annabel Goldie, and the MEP, Struan Stevenson, have suggested coalition and co-operation with the SNP.¹³ The Conservatives have been keen to stress devolutionary themes with British Conservative leader, David Cameron, going so far as to suggest that full fiscal autonomy could be given to Scotland should it be desired (MacDonell, 2005b). This is a clear overlap with some SNP thinking, as is the Conservative stress on cutting bureaucracy and government waste; the SNP have also declared that they will reduce bureaucracy and the number of Scottish quangos if elected. SNP leader Alex Salmond has however restated party policy by categorically ruling out any coalition with the Conservatives. Goldie has also suggested that Labour should look to govern as a single party minority administration, but with legislative support from the Conservatives, particularly on issues where both parties' interests and policies overlap. This echoes a suggestion made by former party leader, David McLetchie, prior to the 2003 elections. However, it has been roundly criticised by senior party activists and has led to criticism of Goldie's leadership (Barnes, 2006).

Based on the polling evidence above, the Greens could potentially find themselves in a central position in debates on coalition formation. The party held talks with the SNP in late 2005. While there are areas of agreement between the parties, for instance over independence and nuclear dumping, there would also seem to be a number of areas of disagreement between the two parties, for instance over exploitation of Scotland's oil reserves. The party has also stressed overlaps between its policies and those of both Labour and the Liberal Democrats, and has gone so far as to point out common areas of concern between it and Conservative commitments to local economies and business.

¹³ This has previously been suggested by the former Conservative MSP Brian Monteith in 2002 (see Bennie and Clark, 2003).

One coalition option being given some credence is the prospect of a ‘grand coalition’ between Labour and the SNP. A paper circulated by a SNP West of Scotland list candidate has ensured that such an idea is discussed within the party. The analysis notes overlaps in both parties’ policies and electorates, while also observing that some Labour politicians, Jack McConnell in particular, are perceived as sympathetic to the Nationalist cause (Fraser, 2006b). McConnell’s admission that there might be some positive arguments in favour of independence would seem to feed into this, although he has also been at pains to align the Scottish Labour Party with London. The argument for a ‘grand coalition’, labelled the ‘rhubarb and custard’ coalition by *Scotland on Sunday* (2006), has been given added weight by Mitchell (2006). Noting the similarities between the parties, he argues that ‘a Labour-SNP bloc would be a serious force, capable of tackling Scotland’s underlying problems, including when painful and difficult decisions are required’. He cites the precedent of co-operation between the two parties in the run up to the 1997 devolution referendum to suggest that such an arrangement could work, particularly when, as is inevitable, Scotland faces a Conservative government at Westminster again. He acknowledges that such a deal faces obstacles, not least the many years of competition between the two parties, and the ‘shibboleth’ of an independence referendum for the SNP. Such a coalition however also risks confusing lines of political accountability in Scotland in the longer term. How would voters know which of the two main parties were responsible for policy successes and failures? Where would opposition come from, and what would then be the alternative governing line-up should voters decide that both parties were complicit in failure?

Coalition building will depend on the parliamentary arithmetic post-election. However, the contours of the debate suggest that the tri-polar policy space noted by

Bennie and Clark (2003) will continue to complicate matters for parties seeking agreement. While the left-right spectrum may not be overly problematic for the parties, the cross-cutting independence issue looks likely to remain a sticking point. If the SNP is to form part of an administration, there will have to be movement on the issue of an independence referendum on the part of either it, or its potential partners. This would require a fundamental shift from Labour, the Liberal Democrats and the SNP. Indeed, holding to the 'non-negotiability' of a referendum rigidly suggests that even were the SNP to be the largest party post-2007, they would continue to swell the ranks of European nationalist and regional parties that have failed to gain a governing position (Bartolini, 1998: 41).

Conclusion: The Changing Scottish Party System in Comparative Perspective

Some cautious conclusions can be drawn. Firstly, a range of sources indicate that Labour's vote is in decline, while the SNP is advancing. If this continues beyond the 2007 elections, then the rhetoric used by Alex Salmond will be justified, since it will mark the first time the Nationalists have won a plurality of Scottish votes. However, it is worth noting that this is a relatively recent phenomenon mirroring Labour's decline at the British level. At both the 2003 and 2005 elections in Scotland, Labour remained the largest party. The SNP surge might conceivably be a protest against Labour nationally, but traditional loyalties could win through in the election. It is too early to tell. Nevertheless, the decline in the polls both North and South of the border is suggestive of the fact that to be too closely associated with the national Labour line is increasingly hazardous and a potentially serious liability for the Scottish Labour Party. With the other parties, the Liberal Democrats appear to be winning in the next

level of competition with the Conservatives, while the Greens have opened a steady lead over the highly troubled SSP.

This is one reason to qualify some of the hyperbole of party leaders and the Scottish media, whose commentary often seems to see Scottish electoral politics as somehow exceptional. A second reason to temper the ‘Scottish exceptionalism’ narrative is that Scotland is not actually that exceptional in terms of indicators of party system change. In Ersson and Lane’s (1998: 31) review of 18 European party systems between 1980-1997 net electoral volatility ranges between 3.9 and 28.6, while mean net volatility ranges between 10.2 – 12.9. While Scotland may be getting more electorally volatile, in comparison with other West European party systems, the results here essentially put it in the centre of the volatility spectrum, and with similar degrees of volatility to comparable party systems such as Denmark and Sweden. In terms of net seat volatility, Ersson and Lane’s (1998: 32) analysis ranges from 2.8 to 40.8, with means through the period ranging from 10.6 to 15.2. In terms of seats, Scotland in 2003 was therefore at the low end of the range of volatility found in Western Europe.

The major change that has come about is the fact that Labour’s Scottish predominance has begun to be challenged since the extension of devolution (see for instance: Denver, 2003; Saren and McCormick, 2004). With the help of the semi-proportional AMS electoral system, this means that the predominant party system that existed pre-devolution has developed into one of tri-polar moderate pluralism at Holyrood with the independence issue cross-cutting the left-right spectrum (Bennie and Clark, 2003; Sartori, 1976). In becoming moderate pluralist, the dynamics of the Scottish party system are now displaying similarities with those of party systems across Western Europe. Where Scotland remains exceptional however is that it still

lacks a sizeable and credible right wing party; the main opposition is currently the centre-left Nationalists, not the centre-right Conservatives. The idea of competition between left-right blocs is therefore less relevant in Scotland than in other West European party systems.

How then might change be classified in the Scottish party system? Smith (1989) offers a typology for doing so. The first step, he argues, is to identify the 'core' of the system. This consists of the party or parties that over time have been in leading positions, that have been especially influential for the functioning of the system, and considers the pattern of party alignments and coalition formats that have evolved. Change is therefore defined by how it affects the system's 'core' and comes in four categories: temporary fluctuations; restricted change; general change; and transformation. Transformation is signified by 'one of the leading parties going into a steep and irreversible decline', while temporary fluctuations are 'short term variations in support ... which have no long-lasting effects on the core structure' (Smith, 1989: 166-167). A three-election time-span is proposed for deciding whether change is more than temporary. Neither general change nor restricted change is defined adequately however, although general change is suggested to mean more complex relationships between parties, including a potential increase in the number of possible party alignments in relation to co-operation and coalition possibilities.

On the one hand, the recent current volatility and decline in Scottish Labour's performance does not mark the 'steep and irreversible decline' of a party which marks party system transformation. Combining the gradual decline of the Labour vote in the party's core constituencies with the onset of a more pluralist set of party system and electoral dynamics, it is more reasonable to suggest Scotland is passing through a period of temporary fluctuations which, should it pass the three election time span in

2007 as appears likely, can be categorised as restricted change. The ‘core’ of the system – Scottish Labour – is still one of the major actors and is likely to remain so post-2007 albeit with the SNP as a closer competitor. In other words, the fluctuations over the last two Scottish elections have served to weaken Labour’s position in the longer term. The competitors may be the same, but their relative positions have changed.

This notwithstanding, it is equally possible to argue that the Scottish party system has undergone general change. The dynamics of party competition have been fundamentally altered in post-devolution Scotland. Parties now have a much more complex environment in which competition must be tempered by the need for co-operation since the electoral system means that it is highly unlikely that any party will be able to form a single party majority administration (Bennie and Clark, 2003). Parties’ competitive urges are likely to be tempered further by the extension of the single transferable vote to Scottish local government elections. Consequently, even if minority administrations have been talked of by some parties, coalition administrations are the most likely outcome of Scottish parliamentary elections. Until now, the Scottish Executive has consisted of Labour and the Liberal Democrats. However, multi-party coalitions are the normal elsewhere. Thus the ‘traffic-light’ option of the SPD, FDP and Greens was seriously talked about in the aftermath of the German Bundestag election of 2005, as were the ‘Jamaica coalition’ of CDU/CSU, FDP and Greens, and the eventually agreed ‘Grosse Koalition’ of the SPD and CDU/CSU. An equally diverse range of options is being talked about in the run up to the 2007 Scottish elections. Whether becoming more like other West European party systems manages to enthuse, or confuse, Scottish voters in 2007 remains to be seen.

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