

What might the Scottish local elections tell us about the state of Scottish party politics in the run up to the 2014 referendum on independence?

Blog Admin

Alistair Clark argues that the upcoming local government elections in Scotland will indicate how the referendum might turn out. Turnout and the still relatively new STV electoral system will be important determinants of the vote, and momentum following the results will be of crucial significance.



In light of ongoing debates over Scottish independence and the mechanics of holding an independence referendum, the Scottish local government elections of May 2012 take on an importance not normally attributed to such elections. Indeed, the 2012 local elections are the last big Scottish test of electoral support in advance of any referendum being held. They will therefore provide a number of clues as to how events in the referendum might play out and there are some important questions that they will answer.

One key question is to what extent has the SNP's momentous levels of support in the 2011 Scottish parliamentary elections carry through to the local level, and indeed, how Scottish voters will decide how to vote in the first place? While the SNP's council tax freeze may be popular at one level, it has also led to some controversial spending decisions at local level as councils are forced to tighten their belts accordingly. Where such decisions have been taken by SNP councillors, this has mostly been in coalition with other parties, and particularly the Liberal Democrats. The extent to which voters make their choices and attribute reward or blame based on local issues, rather than national, will therefore be crucial. That most SNP administrations are with the Liberal Democrats also plays into SNP hands however, since the Lib Dems have suffered in Scotland for their participation in coalition with the Conservatives at Westminster.

The salience of the debate over independence would appear to play into SNP hands, motivating the party with a much bigger issue than solely the delivery of local public services. Momentum matters in other words. The signs are that the SNP will run the most extensive campaign of all the parties with over 600 candidates. Labour by comparison are reported to be running under 500 candidates. If the independence referendum is to be won however, the pro-independence campaign will require broad cross-party support and evidence of parties, groups and individuals working together to achieve that.

The single transferable vote electoral system used since 2007 for Scottish local elections provides some evidence from voters as to the potential for how such cross party alliances may work in practice. Under STV, voters can transfer their second and lower preferences to other parties and candidates should they wish to do so, putting the voter very much in the driving seat. In 2007, for instance, the average number of preferences used by voters was around 3. Where the other parties offered only one candidate, the SNP received approximately 13 per cent of the second preference transfers from Labour, Conservative and Liberal Democrat voters. Even where those parties did offer more than one candidate, around 7-8 per cent of their voters' second preferences still went to the SNP. Under the Scottish version of STV, such transfers are even more important. With district magnitudes of 3 and 4, the share of the vote needed to reach more than one quota and have more than one candidate elected is high. Even given the party's success in the 2011 Scottish parliament elections, to ensure its candidate strategy pays off, the SNP will need preference transfers from other parties to help it be elected.

How the SNP and Labour campaign on the ground where they field multiple candidates is likely to have some impact on the result. Although the extent to which voters pay attention to parties' efforts to run

'vote management' campaigns in other STV systems such as Ireland or Northern Ireland has never been extensively investigated, parties nevertheless think such strategies are effective, pointing to their successes (if not their failures...). Scottish parties very much felt their way with the new campaigning techniques required by STV in 2007. While candidate figures show that the Liberal Democrats and Conservatives will repeat their single candidate per ward strategy from 2007, both Labour and the SNP will be fielding significant numbers of candidate teams across the country. Labour ran some of the most effective 'vote management' campaigns in 2007, and there are signs that the SNP have undergone a significant learning process in this regard having been criticised for running too few candidates in the last round of Scottish council elections.

These elections also raise questions for the other main parties. Labour's decline may have seemed dramatic in the 2007 and 2011 Scottish parliament elections, but in reality this began to set in earlier and can be tracked back through previous rounds of local elections from 1999 onwards if not before. To what extent can the party begin to show it is making inroads to the SNP vote, not least in areas that were previously solidly Labour? With a new leader, Labour will want to make some impression, and being able to attract preference transfers from other parties' voters will also be vital for its campaign. However, the party has been beset by infighting over high-profile candidate selection issues in Glasgow which is likely to see former councillors standing as independents. The Conservatives and Liberal Democrats also face similar questions. Both have new leaders keen to make a mark. Both also have the misfortune to also be serving together in a Westminster coalition government which is, to say the least, unpopular in Scotland.

The final factor that could play a decisive role, and is seldom mentioned, is the role that turnout will play in these elections. This is the first round of Scottish local elections since devolution not to be held concurrently with elections to the Scottish parliament. Turnout will as a result drop somewhat. While some suggestions of around 40 per cent have been made, this appears highly optimistic given the experience of local elections elsewhere in Britain. There is no reason to expect Scottish voters are any different. Mobilising the vote could therefore potentially pay dividends for some parties. While the SNP have benefited from an influx of members over recent years, Scottish party organisations have low levels of membership by comparison with their counterparts in other European democracies. Whether the parties' local organisations have the capacity to do this extensively across Scotland must at least be open to question.

These Scottish local elections have a significance not normally associated with council contests, feeding into debates about momentum in the run up to the 2014 independence referendum. How the parties deal with them, the issue of turnout, and with the still relatively new STV electoral system, will be crucial and provide a number of further clues about the current state of Scottish politics

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