Local Party Organisation, Activism and Campaigning in Post-Devolution Scotland

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Abstract

Given the centrality of parties in modern democracies, their penetration of society is a key indicator of the democratic health of a country. Using data from an extensive survey carried out in the aftermath of the 2003 Scottish parliament elections, this paper examines the state of constituency party organisation in Scotland in order to assess how rooted parties really are to the communities they aspire to represent. Discussion proceeds in four main sections. Firstly, the functions of grassroots political parties are briefly outlined and the importance of local organisation highlighted. The second section examines the development of constituency party membership in Scotland. The third part expands this discussion to examine the level of activist density and activity between elections. The fourth and fifth sections discuss constituency party campaigning efforts in relation to the 2003 Scottish parliament elections and the relative impact of these efforts. The conclusion assesses the implications of these findings for the operation of Scottish representative democracy. Indeed, declining grassroots membership, and low rates of local activity both between and during elections point to considerable grounds for concern in Scotland.
Local Party Organisation, Activism and Campaigning in Post-Devolution Scotland

Although political parties are central actors in representative democracies, in many countries they are faced with a paradox. On one hand, they are declining in membership (Mair and van Biezen, 2001) and have been argued to be moving further from their original base in civil society to become more dependent on the apparatus of state (Katz and Mair, 1995). On the other, parties at the local level have been argued to be crucial. Higher levels of activity are associated with both higher levels of turnout and positive electoral effects for parties, thereby bringing benefits to the political system, but also to the parties themselves (for instance: Denver and Hands, 1997; Denver et al., 2004; Pattie and Johnston, 2003; Seyd and Whiteley, 1992; Whiteley et al. 1994; Whiteley and Seyd, 2003). How, and to what extent, parties are organising at the grassroots is therefore important, not least because it provides an indicator of the democratic health of the country in question. The larger and more active local parties are, the better they can be said to have roots in their communities with which to communicate directly with electors.

Often missed in this debate is the relationship between grassroots political parties and the effect of their efforts upon sub-national institutions such as local or regional government. A case in point is Scotland. The campaign for devolution to the Scottish Parliament was underpinned by a narrative of ‘bringing politics closer to the Scottish people’. In a geographical and institutional sense this certainly happened; power was devolved in 1999. Although this has stimulated numerous analyses of post-devolution public policy (for example: Marnoch, 2003), there have nevertheless been remarkably
few comparative analyses of the main Scottish parties since 1999, how they organise and relate to the communities that they claim to represent. In other words, how close are they really to the Scottish people? Given the centrality of parties in democracies, this is a major gap in knowledge about the post-devolution Scottish political system.

Based on a survey of Scottish constituency parties carried out in the aftermath of the 2003 Scottish parliament election, this paper provides an initial assessment of the extent of local party organisation and activity in post-devolution Scotland. Three main questions are addressed. These are:

- Through the indicators of party membership and party activist density, to what extent can local parties be said to have penetrated society in Scotland?
- How does local party campaign activity impact upon electoral outcomes in sub-national elections, in this case for election to the Scottish parliament?
- And, what are the differences between the four main Scottish parties (Labour, Scottish National Party (SNP), Liberal Democrats and the Conservatives) in terms of membership, activism and campaigning?

Discussion proceeds in four main sections. Firstly, the functions of grassroots political parties are briefly outlined and the importance of local organisation highlighted. The second section examines the development of constituency party membership in Scotland. The third part expands this discussion to examine the level of activist density and activity between elections. The fourth and fifth sections discuss constituency party campaigning efforts in relation to the 2003 Scottish parliament elections and the relative impact of these efforts. The conclusion assesses the implications of these findings for the operation of Scottish representative democracy.
The Importance of Local Organisation

Parties carry out a range of functions in representative democracies. In the electorate, they simplify choices for voters, educate citizens, generate symbols of identification and loyalty and mobilize people to participate. As organisations, parties recruit political leadership, seek governmental office, train political elites, and articulate and aggregate political interests (Dalton and Wattenberg, 2000: 5). Closer to communities, Geser (1999: 6-13) argues that local parties carry out six key functions. These include: acting as political ‘training grounds’ and political recruitment agencies; providing a mechanism for ‘collective learning’ for party organisations; the provision of incentives to encourage participation; providing the party with much-needed voluntary labour; acting as ‘local marketing agencies’ to communicate the party’s ideology and policies; and translating party policy into specific local issue positions. Both parties and communities benefit from the fulfilment of these functions (Clark, 2004).

At the most basic level however, the primary function of local parties is that they contest elections (Denver et al., 2004: 290). Given that representation for governing institutions in most states is divided into electoral districts, parties, particularly those aspiring to govern, are forced to run campaigns and place candidates at local levels. This necessitates a degree of local organisation. Having stable and relatively permanent organisation is central to a number of conceptions of party-based representative democracy. As part of their definition of political parties, LaPalombara and Weiner (1966: 6) highlighted the need for ‘manifest and presumably permanent organisation at
the local level’. Similarly, Gibson et al. (1985: 147) argue that ‘[t]he organisation must have continuity. Party organisations having only seasonal existence, with inter-election dormancy, are severely constrained in their ability to develop’.

An eloquent exposition of what parties do with this organisation is provided by Sartori (2005: 8). He argues that:

Organisation is not only a matter of structural forms but also of organisational density, of organisational pressure and coverage. From this latter angle, the focus is on the power of penetration of a given party, both in terms of intensity and reach. Correlatively, the central concept is no longer structure, but becomes organisational network ... In terms of the organisational network, the emphasis is not on the exercise of power, but rather on the techniques for extending and entrenching a ‘power coverage’ at the grassroots level, by means of a nationwide, systematic spread.

In similar vein, Carty (2004) suggests that parties can be conceived of as ‘franchises’. In this model, national-level parties are responsible for broad themes and strategy while ‘local units more often provide the basic organisational home of most party members, and are typically charged with delivering the product, i.e. creating organisations that can find and support candidates as well as mobilising campaigns to deliver the vote on the ground’ (Carty, 2004: 11).
The level of party organisational coverage is therefore important, as is the question of what parties do with their organisation. Based on a survey of constituency organisations of the four main Scottish parties (Scottish Labour, the Scottish National Party, the Scottish Liberal Democrats and the Scottish Conservatives) carried out in the aftermath of the 2003 Scottish parliament elections, this paper aims to make a modest initial contribution to assessing the level and effects of local party organisation in Scotland. The survey covered a range of areas central to constituency party life, such as campaigning in the 2003 elections, local party activity between election campaigns, membership and recruitment, and issues related to intra-party politics. The overall response rate was 42 per cent. Of central interest to the questions at hand are membership and activist density, and levels of activity both between and during elections. To track local party membership size over time, additional Scottish-level data is deployed from studies of constituency campaigning in the 1992, 1997, 2001 and 2005 general elections (Denver and Hands, 1996; 1999; Denver et al. 2002). Throughout, sub-national comparative method is deployed. This is akin to deploying a most similar systems research design (MSSD) where the object is to compare a number of similar entities, in this case the four main Scottish parties, in order to establish any similarities and differences between them (Landman, 2000: Ch. 2; Pennings et al., 1999: Chs. 1-3).

**Grassroots Party Membership in Scotland**

At the national level, Scotland has been no exception to the decline in party memberships in recent years across a range of democracies (Mair and van Biezen, 2001). Scottish
Labour’s membership rose to around 30,000 in 1997 as part of the membership boom associated with ‘New Labour’. By 2004-2005, this had fallen by approximately a third to between 19-20,000 (Hassan, 2004a: 4; MacDonnell, 2005). Party accounts claim that the SNP had 16,122 members in 2002, and 13,382 in 2003, although reports at the time indicated that the true level of membership was between 8-10,000. These lower figures were admitted by contenders in the party’s 2004 leadership contest, while party accounts claimed 10,854 members (Rafferty, 2003; SNP, 2002: 4-5; SNP, 2003: 7; SNP, 2005: 2). Although the picture of development is slightly unclear, the Conservatives have seen a drastic fall in membership. Seawright (1998: 70) attributes a membership of 40,000 to the Conservatives in 1998. Elsewhere he attributes this figure of 40,000 to 1992, and suggests the party had between 15-20,000 members in 1998 (Seawright, 1999: 67). More recent accounts attribute memberships of approximately 17,000 to the party in February 2004 (Settle, 2004) and 15,000 in late 2005 (Gordon, 2005). Although Liberal Democrat membership has fluctuated, party accounts nevertheless suggest that, unlike the other three parties, the Liberal Democrats have had a relatively stable membership between 2001-2005 of between 4-4,500 members (Scottish Liberal Democrats, 2002; 2003; 2004; 2005). This has however fallen from the 6,000 members attributed to the party pre-devolution (Lynch, 1998: 23). Combined, Scotland’s four main parties have a penetration of the national electorate of around 1.26 per cent.6

Figure 1 demonstrates that these national patterns are largely replicated in Scottish constituencies between 1992 and 2003. Labour’s local membership rose from 285 in 1992 to peak at a mean of 388 in 1997. This has fallen back to an average of 228 in 2003. SNP membership peaked either side of devolution, with a maximum of 204 in
2001. This fell back to 174 in 2003. Liberal Democrat membership has fallen from 106 in 1992, to stabilise at 90 in 2001 and 89 in 2003. Conservative membership has fallen steeply in constituencies, from an average of 872 in 1992 to a mean of 262 in 2003. Such a decline would appear to underline Seawright’s (1999: 67) statement that the Conservatives had around 40,000 members in 1992. Redistricting means that average membership data for 2005 are not directly comparable with 1992-2003 data; the number of Scottish Westminster constituencies was reduced to 59 for the 2005 general election while there are 73 constituencies, essentially based on the old Westminster boundaries, for Scottish parliament elections. Adjusting for this suggests that Labour and Liberal
Democrat membership in 2005 remained roughly at the level both parties had in 2003. However, SNP membership demonstrated evidence of a further decline. Even based on the larger 2005 Westminster constituencies, the mean SNP constituency membership was 130, while adjusted for the old constituency boundaries the 2005 average is around 105. Both estimates are sizeable reductions from 2003.8

These raw membership figures suggest that Scotland’s constituency parties have a low penetration of their communities. Two measurements provide indicators of the level of societal penetration which are comparable regardless of constituency redistricting. The first is M/V. This represents the proportion of members expressed as a proportion of the party’s vote in constituencies. The second measurement is M/E which expresses the proportion of constituency party members to the total electorate in the constituency. There are advantages and disadvantages to both measures.9 Consequently, both are deployed here.

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<tr>
<th>Table 1: Mean Constituency M/V Ratio, 1992-2005.</th>
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<td>Lib Dem</td>
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<td>Cons</td>
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Table 1 reports the average M/V ratio in Scottish constituencies between 1992-2005. The paradox with M/V is that the better a party does electorally, the lower the resulting ratio (Katz et al., 1992: 331). Throughout this period, the Conservatives have
had the highest M/V ratio. This reflects the party’s historically higher memberships. However, it also reflects declining electoral performance. The party has faced a hostile political environment since the mid-1980s, with the party not able to achieve one Scottish Westminster seat in 1997, only achieving one in 2001 and 2005, and three first-past-the-post Scottish Parliament seats in 2003. Consequently, it can be argued that the Conservatives are only converting core supporters to membership. Equally, Labour’s relatively high M/V ratio in 2003 and the SNP’s relatively high ratios in 2001 and 2003 can be attributed to periods of declining electoral performance for both parties. By contrast, the Liberal Democrat ratio fell in 2005 to below 1 per cent in a Westminster election where the party became the second largest electorally in Scotland. Despite these fluctuations however, for all four parties the proportion of members to voters has declined between 1992 and 2005. If, as Bartolini (1983: 189) suggests, M/V means close ties between parties and their voters, the picture that emerges from table 1 is that these ties are weakening in the Scottish constituencies. While electoral performance is certainly a factor in this, the steady decline in membership is equally an important component of these weakening ties.

M/E is not dependent on electoral success, but a party’s penetration into the constituency electorate. It is therefore more easily comparable. Table 2 reports the mean M/E for the four parties between 1992-2005. This underlines the picture presented in figure 1 of declining membership penetration of society. The only party to achieve more than 1 per cent were the Conservatives in 1992 when the party had an average M/E ratio of 1.57 per cent thanks to its large constituency memberships. By 2003, this had declined considerably to 0.48 per cent. The Liberal Democrat M/E performance has been
Table 2: Mean Constituency M/E Ratio, 1992-2005

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<th>1992</th>
<th>1997</th>
<th>2001</th>
<th>2003</th>
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<tr>
<td>Labour</td>
<td>0.51</td>
<td>0.69</td>
<td>0.61</td>
<td>0.44</td>
<td>0.42</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>SNP</td>
<td>0.31</td>
<td>0.35</td>
<td>0.36</td>
<td>0.31</td>
<td>0.19</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lib Dem</td>
<td>0.2</td>
<td>0.19</td>
<td>0.16</td>
<td>0.17</td>
<td>0.18</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cons</td>
<td>1.57</td>
<td>0.84</td>
<td>0.58</td>
<td>0.48</td>
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</tbody>
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essentially stable between 1992-2005 at between 0.18-0.2 per cent. Labour M/E ratios have declined from the party’s peak in membership in 1997 to 0.42 per cent in 2005. Declining SNP membership is confirmed by the SNP’s mean M/E ratio falling by close to half between 2001 and 2005. Indeed, in 2005 the SNP’s M/E performance is only just above that of the Liberal Democrats, in a Westminster election where the Liberal Democrats edged ahead of the Nationalists to become the second-placed party in Scotland. In addition, it is worth noting that although membership and the mean constituency M/E ratios may have declined, they were never that high in the period from 1992 in the first place.

**Local Party Activism**

While membership numbers are an indicator of a party’s penetration of society, they are not necessarily an indicator of the proportions of members that are active for their parties. Indeed, membership estimates can be little more than an ‘emergency operationalisation’ when data on activity is non-existent (Widfeldt, 1999: 135).
A simple way of estimating the level of activism is to establish the approximate number of members that are active within their constituency parties, for instance by attending meetings, or as volunteer workers for the party. Consequently, the 2003 survey asked respondents to estimate the proportion of their members that are active. Widfeldt (1999: 138) refers to this as the A/M measure. The party reporting the highest proportion of its members as active is the Liberal Democrats, with just over a quarter (25.7 per cent) of members claimed to be active. This may seem a high proportion. However, as Scarrow (1996) has argued, even if membership is in decline, it is often the most active members that remain. Given the Liberal Democrats’ small but steady membership, it is not implausible that the party has highly motivated members willing to be active. Moreover, the party’s size means that members cannot free-ride as easily as may be possible in the other parties. By contrast, the three other parties all count around nineteen per cent of their membership as being active.

Activist density can also be estimated in relation to the proportion of activists to the electorate (A/E). The small numbers involved mean that this indicator must be treated with caution. Nevertheless, this provides a useful benchmark indicator of the level of party activist penetration in Scottish society. Across all four parties, the mean proportion of party activists to electors is below 0.1 per cent of the electorate at 0.06 per cent. Both Labour and the Conservatives are just above this average at 0.08 and 0.07 per cent respectively. By contrast, the SNP and Liberal Democrats have below the average proportion of activists at approximately 0.05 per cent each.

While understanding levels of activist density is essential as an indicator of party penetration of Scottish society, equally crucial is the level of organisational activity
In order to assess levels of organisational activity between elections across the four parties, the 2003 survey asked how often constituency parties undertook thirteen different activities. These included organisational maintenance activities such as holding constituency party meetings, social functions and fundraising events, arranging visits by senior party members and sending motions to party policy-making bodies. Electoral activities focused on the extent to which constituency parties undertake any telephone or doorstep canvassing between elections in order to maintain the organisations’ electoral records. Finally, communication activities between elections examined were public meetings, leaflet delivery, organising street stalls, maintaining a website, attracting local media coverage and publishing a newsletter. Response categories offered were not at all, rarely, occasionally and frequently.

High proportions of each party’s local organisations undertake organisational maintenance activities. Indeed, from around four-fifths upwards of all local parties hold constituency party meetings, social functions and fundraising events either occasionally or frequently. Around three-quarters of CLPs send motions to party policy-making bodies occasionally or frequently, as do more than four-fifths of SNP associations and just over half of Conservative organisations. However, the only party that claims to put regular effort into inter-election canvassing is the SNP; 70 per cent of Nationalist organisations report occasional doorstep canvassing between elections.

Three main activities dominate local party efforts to communicate with electors between elections. These are publishing newsletters, delivering leaflets and attracting local media coverage. Taking newsletters first, 89 per cent of Liberal Democrat organisations, 78 per cent of SNP associations, 70 per cent of Conservative associations
and 53 per cent of CLPs publish newsletters either occasionally or frequently. Delivering leaflets is undertaken either occasionally by 93 per cent of SNP organisations, 78 per cent of Liberal Democrat local parties, three quarters of Conservative associations, but only 47 per cent of CLPs. Constituency parties also put regular effort into highlighting their activities through local media coverage. For instance, just over 70 per cent of SNP and Conservative associations indicate attempting to attract local media either occasionally or frequently, while just under two thirds of Liberal Democrat local parties and 57 per cent of CLPs do so either occasionally or frequently. The only other activity which some party organisations claimed to put regular effort into was organising street stalls. Thus, just under two-thirds of CLPs indicate organising these on either an occasional or frequent basis, as did 52 per cent of SNP constituency associations.

How might local party activity between elections be classified? In his study of Canadian constituency parties, Carty (1991: 98-101) discusses the idea of ‘paper branches’. By contrast with active local parties, these are constituency associations which are both poor and self-confessed to be largely inactive. This is a crucial distinction, because although the electoral system necessitates that serious parties stand candidates in virtually all electoral districts, this does not necessarily equate to a party being active. Indeed, in many districts the party will be largely non-existent and only come to life for election campaigns.

Although the 2003 survey does not have data on constituency income, it is nevertheless possible to deploy this idea in relation to Scottish party organisations. To do so, an additive index of constituency party inter-election activity was created from responses to the battery of questions on frequency of activity. Scores on this index
varied from 13 at the low end to 52 at the highly active end. This was then subdivided into two categories. ‘Paper branches’ equated to scores between 13 and 32.5 on this scale, which related to the not at all and rarely active categories in the survey, while local organisations deemed to be at least occasionally active fell into the range 32.5 to 52, which equate to the occasionally and frequently categories in the survey. At a score of 33, the mean level of organisational activism amongst all responding local parties is essentially at the middle of this scale.

Table 3: Paper Branches: Proportion of inactive constituency organisations

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Party</th>
<th>%</th>
<th>N</th>
</tr>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Labour</td>
<td>52</td>
<td>29</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>SNP</td>
<td>23</td>
<td>26</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Liberal Democrats</td>
<td>65</td>
<td>34</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Conservatives</td>
<td>48</td>
<td>23</td>
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Table 3 breaks the proportion of ‘paper branches’ down by party. The Liberal Democrats appear to be the least active grassroots party with almost two-thirds of their local organisations classified as ‘paper branches’. The corollary of this is that just around a third of Liberal Democrat local parties can be argued to be regularly active. By contrast, just under a quarter of responding SNP associations fall into the relatively inactive ‘paper branch’ category, thereby suggesting that Nationalist local organisations were the most active local parties in the run up to 2003. With Labour and the Conservatives, around half of both parties’ organisations were classified as ‘paper branches’, which equally means that around half of each party’s organisations could be categorised as to some degree regularly active.
This categorisation of organisational activity levels needs to be seen in conjunction with estimates of activist density for a fuller picture of Scottish constituency party activity to emerge. To recap, around 19 per cent of Labour, Conservative and SNP members are active, while around 25 per cent of Liberal Democrat members are estimated to be so. Labour and the Conservatives have a higher than average A/E ratio, while the SNP and Liberal Democrats have a lower than average ratio.

With the SNP, although the party is below average in A/E, only 23 per cent of the party’s associations were classified as ‘paper branches’. This would seem to indicate that the party’s activists appear to work harder across a range of activities than those from other parties, perhaps because they feel the need to push the party’s arguments to an electorate which was then somewhat sceptical of the benefits of independence (Bromley and Curtice, 2003: 19; McCrone and Paterson, 2002; Paterson et al. 2001: 84-92). However, given the SNP’s poor performance in the 2003 elections, it may be that constituency parties are wasting their efforts between elections and may instead have been better waiting until the election and running strong local campaigns.

The Liberal Democrats, while doing relatively well in converting their members into activists, have not been able to convert this into high levels of activity. This means that the Liberal Democrats are therefore effectively the least active of the four main Scottish parties on the ground between elections. As the smallest membership party, this may not be overly surprising. Nevertheless, for a party that relies on local activity both through necessity and principle to build its profile (Russell and Fieldhouse, Ch. 4), this should be some cause for concern not least because, as an influential part of the Scottish
Executive from 1999, it raises some questions about the party’s ability to maintain its profile across Scotland between elections (Clark, 2007 Forthcoming).

While Labour may perform well in relation to A/E, the finding that more than half of Scottish CLPs are ‘paper branches’ between elections suggest that this does not necessarily equate to high levels of inter-election activity in CLPs. This largely confirms the speculations of some who tend to assume rather than demonstrate low levels of organisational activity (Hassan, 2004a: 7; Lynch and Birrell, 2004:182-183). The Scottish Conservatives are just above the average on A/E measures and have just under half of their associations classed as ‘paper branches’. These are relatively surprising findings in a party where the membership has fallen so dramatically since 1992. Nevertheless, it is likely that the members who left the Conservatives were at the less active and committed end of the spectrum, while those who are more committed remain in the party and are active between elections.

Constituency Campaigning in the 2003 Scottish Parliament Election

Even if the constituency organisations of Scotland’s four main parties do not have high levels of activist penetration of the electorate and do not appear overly active between elections, the fact remains that the pinnacle of local party activity remains election campaigns. Indeed, this can be argued to be the main function of local parties to which all other functions are subordinate (Denver et al., 2004: 290). It might intuitively therefore be expected that local parties display high levels of activity in order to get their candidates elected. Moreover, given the Scottish Parliament is elected on a four-year
fixed term, knowledge of the date of the election means that local parties should be relatively well prepared prior to the commencement of the campaign.

How prepared were Scottish constituency parties for the campaign? One way of examining this is to assess how far in advance constituency organisations started campaign planning for the 2003 elections. Although this is admittedly a proxy indicator with no detailed information on campaign preparations, it can be argued that the further in advance local parties began planning, the more likely they are to have been well prepared for the election to come.

Table 4: When did the constituency party start campaign planning? (per cent)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Just before</th>
<th>6 months before</th>
<th>6-12 months before</th>
<th>More than a year before</th>
<th>N</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Labour</td>
<td>17</td>
<td>43</td>
<td>33</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>30</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>SNP</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>36</td>
<td>43</td>
<td>28</td>
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<tr>
<td>Lib Dems</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>28</td>
<td>30</td>
<td>23</td>
<td>40</td>
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<tr>
<td>Cons</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>32</td>
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<td>52</td>
<td>25</td>
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Table 4 reports when constituency organisations started planning for the 2003 Scottish parliament elections. Just over half of Liberal Democrat and Conservative associations claim to have started campaign planning between 6-12 months or more than a year beforehand. The majority of SNP associations claimed to have started planning more than 6 months ahead; 75 per cent of Nationalist constituency parties indicated starting planning between 6-12 months or more than a year ahead. By contrast, three fifths of CLPs only started campaign planning in the 6 months immediately prior to the
election. In other words, the dominant party in Scotland, the Labour Party, by this indicator would appear to have been the least prepared for the 2003 campaign.

Variation exists in the levels of sub-constituency organisation found within local campaigns. Despite appearing unprepared, Labour nevertheless seemed well organised during the campaign at sub-constituency level. Thus, 70 per cent of CLPs had appointed sub-agents responsible for particular areas of the constituency. Similarly, 74 per cent of SNP associations had also appointed local organisers at sub-constituency level. This compares with only 38 per cent for the Liberal Democrats and 40 per cent for the Conservatives. By party, the mean number of sub-constituency organisers within local parties was 6.4 for Labour, 3.9 for the SNP, 4.9 for the Liberal Democrats and 5.7 for the Conservatives. Respondents were also asked about the proportion of the electorate covered by active local campaigns. Echoing the sub-constituency organisation finding, both Labour and the SNP appeared best organised with respective averages of 63.6 per cent and 54.6 per cent of the electorate covered. By contrast the Conservatives claim to have covered on average 39.4 per cent, while only a mean of 30.7 per cent of the electorate was covered by Liberal Democrat organisations.12

At constituency level, few constituency parties had special organisers appointed by party HQ. At most around a fifth of both Labour and Conservative local parties had such an organiser. Similarly, the phenomenon of constituency parties being ‘twinned’ with neighbouring local parties was not widespread in 2003. Only 13 per cent of CLPs, 15 per cent of Liberal Democrat local parties and 28 per cent of Conservative Associations co-operated in this way during the campaign. By contrast, such ‘twinning’ is not an official SNP campaign technique and therefore any such co-operation is undertaken informally.
Despite this, 52 per cent of Nationalist organisations claim to have co-operated with neighbouring organisations during the 2003 elections.

Figure 2: Mean number of election workers, by party.


A key responsibility of local parties is to provide volunteer labour for the party during election campaigns. Figure 2 tracks the mean number of volunteer workers that each party had at three stages during the campaign. It should be expected that more members will volunteer as polling day gets closer and the local party intensifies its efforts. With the exception of the Liberal Democrats, such a dynamic is evident across all the parties. Labour’s volunteer workforce increased from a mean of 11 at the start of the campaign, to 25 at the end and 36 on polling day as the party attempted to get out the vote. Similarly, the SNP increased its average constituency workforce from 11 at the
start, to 22 at the end and 29 on polling day, while the Conservatives increased from 25, through 40 to 47 on election day. The only party to buck this trend were the Liberal Democrats who rose from an average of 22 activists at the start, to 26 at the end of the campaign before falling back to 22 on polling day.

Which activities did local parties put most effort into during the campaign? The survey asked how much effort local parties had put into sixteen different aspects of campaigning. These ranged from traditional activities such as sending out election addresses, holding meetings and delivering leaflets to newer campaign techniques like maintaining a website, constituency-based telephone canvassing or organising postal vote applications.

The data indicate that Scottish constituency parties ran essentially traditional campaigns in the 2003 election. The dominant activities across all four parties in 2003 were both delivering leaflets and sending out election addresses. Around ninety per cent of Labour, SNP and Conservative organisations indicated substantial levels of effort in delivering leaflets, while around three-quarters of Liberal Democrat organisations also did so. Similarly, around four-fifths of each party’s local organisations put substantial effort into sending out election addresses. Such activity seems to register with Scottish voters. One survey found that in the 2003 elections, 78.7 per cent of voters recalled reading leaflets from candidates (Electoral Commission/ICM, 2003). In terms of other campaign activities, Labour was most active at constituency level in organising postal votes for electors, with around two-thirds of CLPs reporting doing so, while a similar proportion of SNP CAs put substantial effort into attracting local media coverage.
So-called ‘new’ methods of campaigning received much less effort. Far from the internet being a new form of constituency interaction, the vast majority of local parties put little or no effort into maintaining a website during the 2003 election; this varies from 87 per cent of CLPs putting in little or no effort, to 68 per cent of SNP associations putting in little or no effort, with the other two parties falling between these extremes. Similarly, telephone canvassing, theoretically a cost effective way of identifying voters, did not appear to be deemed worth much effort in constituencies. Half of SNP associations put little or no effort into telephone canvassing, as did 84 per cent of Liberal Democrat organisations and 65 per cent of Conservative Associations. Labour appears to have been slightly more active in this since only 45 per cent report little or no effort. The lack of effort in telephone canvassing may reflect two things. First, it may be a reflection that telephone canvassing and voter identification was being run centrally by the party. Indeed, both Labour and the SNP ran such ‘phone banks’. However, it may also reflect an assessment that such efforts are essentially unsuccessful in constituencies; studies have shown that doorstep canvassing is more successful than unsolicited telephone calls (for instance: Pattie and Johnston, 2003). Activists may therefore be better occupied delivering leaflets than making cold telephone calls. Consequently, ‘post-modern’ methods of campaigning were barely evident in Scottish constituencies in 2003 (Clark, 2006).

To judge overall levels of campaign activity across the parties, an additive index of campaign effort was created. This ranges from a score of 16 at the low end to a score of 80 at the high end. The mean score on this index across the parties is 43.5. For comparability, the index was then sub-divided into three categories, low, medium and
high effort.\textsuperscript{13} Table 5 sets out the proportions of each party’s local organisations falling into these categories. Across all parties, the mean score falls into the medium effort category, and, with the notable exception of the Liberal Democrats, the vast majority of each party’s constituency associations also fall within the medium effort category. That just under half of Liberal Democrat organisations fall into the low effort category indicate that in terms of campaign effort it has what must be for party officials a worrying number of inactive organisations, particularly since this low level of activity has also been noted in relation to the party’s 2001 general election campaign in Scotland (Denver and MacAllister, 2003: 137-138).

Table 5: Campaign effort categorisation

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Mean score</th>
<th>Low effort %</th>
<th>Medium Effort %</th>
<th>High effort %</th>
<th>N</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Labour</td>
<td>44.7</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>82</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>27</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>SNP</td>
<td>46.4</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>75</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>28</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lib Dems</td>
<td>39.1</td>
<td>49</td>
<td>46</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>35</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cons</td>
<td>45.4</td>
<td>27</td>
<td>59</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>22</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: 2003 Survey of Scottish Constituency Parties

How does this break down when the electoral geography of the seat in question is taken into account? The expectation in previous work on local campaigning is that parties run stronger campaigns in marginal constituencies they can win or are defending (Denver and Hands, 1997). In some ways this is almost a redundant question in Scotland since in the 2003 elections, Labour dominated the constituency section of the vote and therefore only 20 out of 73 constituencies, or 27 per cent, could be considered marginal. These included 11 Labour/SNP contests, three Labour/Conservative battles, three Labour/Liberal Democrat marginals, one Liberal Democrat/SNP contest, and two SNP/Conservative battles.
Figure 3: Marginality and Campaign Effort in the 2003 Scottish Parliament Election

![Figure 3: Marginality and Campaign Effort in the 2003 Scottish Parliament Election](image)

Source: 2003 Survey of Scottish Constituency Parties

It is nevertheless important to assess the effort expended against the competitiveness of the constituency since this gives an insight into overall campaign effort in Scotland in 2003. Figure 3 charts the level of campaign effort against constituency marginality. Labour organisations ran their strongest campaigns in very safe
and marginal constituencies. The SNP, Liberal Democrats and Conservatives by contrast all put most campaign effort into constituencies classified as comfortable for their respective parties. Both the Liberal Democrats and Conservatives put slightly less effort into marginal constituencies, while Nationalist efforts in marginal constituencies appear to have declined considerably from efforts in comfortable seats, although they were still higher than the effort Labour expended on comparable constituencies. In one sense, all four party organisations were rational actors; little effort was spent on hopeless constituencies. Indeed, Geekie et al. (1993: 2-3) argue that, given the lack of marginal seats in Scotland, it is therefore constituencies which would be classed as very safe, comfortable, possible or hopeless that provide more representative examples of campaigning than those in marginal seats in Scotland. Given that most constituencies were not close contests in 2003, these findings point to low levels of local campaign activity across Scotland during the election. This is underlined by levels of constituency candidate campaign spending. Scotland’s local parties were not particularly big spenders in 2003; 67 per cent of all four main parties’ candidates spent less than 50 per cent of their permitted limit. Labour candidates were more likely to spend closer to their limit, Liberal Democrat candidates least likely (Electoral Commission, 2004: 45).

What Difference Does Local Party Activity Make?

The expectation of many central party officials who advocate active local parties between elections is that this activity will benefit the party at election time (for instance: Hain, 2004: Chs. 2 and 6; Richards, 2000). Similarly, the idea that local party activity makes a
positive difference to parties’ electoral fortunes has been argued to have become a ‘new orthodoxy’ in electoral studies (Pattie and Johnston, 2003: 306). If both these arguments are correct, it should be expected that higher levels of inter-election organisational activity and campaign effort are both positively associated with better electoral outcomes for Scottish constituency parties.

Table 6: Local Party Activity and Change in Share of the Electorate

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Labour</th>
<th>SNP</th>
<th>Lib Dems</th>
<th>Cons</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Inter-election activity</td>
<td>.307</td>
<td>.015</td>
<td>.454*</td>
<td>.057</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Campaign effort</td>
<td>-.288</td>
<td>.526***</td>
<td>-.389</td>
<td>.273</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>R²</td>
<td>.09</td>
<td>.28</td>
<td>.13</td>
<td>.10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(N)</td>
<td>(26)</td>
<td>(26)</td>
<td>(30)</td>
<td>(21)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: 2003 Survey of Scottish Constituency Parties. * p<0.10, ** p<0.05, *** p<0.01.

Table 6 reports the standardised beta coefficient results of an OLS regression of the relative effects of inter-election activity and campaign effort in 2003. Although missing data does not allow complex modelling of constituency contests between parties, and statistical significance is hard to achieve with such small Ns, the strength and direction of the coefficient nevertheless provides a tentative insight into the relative importance of different types of local party activity. The dependent variable is change in the share of the constituency electorate between 1999-2003.14

The first thing to observe is that campaign effort for the SNP is strongly statistically significant at the .01 level, while the level of inter-election activity is only just in a positive direction. This means that, as suggested above, the high levels of effort expended by SNP associations prior to the elections did not make much difference to
outcomes for the party, but stronger campaigns by responding associations did actually lead to better results for the Nationalists. Had SNP organisation been stronger in 2003, the party may therefore have done better than it actually did, not least in seeing off the combined challenges of Labour and the SSP. A similar pattern is evident for the Conservatives, although neither co-efficient is statistically significant.

By contrast, Liberal Democrat efforts between elections are positively related to better constituency results for the party and this is statistically significant, albeit at the slightly relaxed level of 0.1.15 Russell and Fieldhouse (2005) talk about such ‘community politics’ as creating ‘credibility’ for the party and this finding provides some support for this line of argument. However, using these measures, the party’s campaign activity in 2003 appears to be negatively related to constituency results when inter-election activity is controlled for. Labour displays a similar pattern of results but neither coefficient is statistically significant. Nevertheless, this suggests that inter-election activities were more important in explaining constituency electoral outcomes for the two then Scottish Executive partners than their campaign efforts.

Caution is necessary in interpreting these findings. With all four parties, the R² values are small and therefore more research into the variables that explain constituency electoral results in Scotland is clearly needed. This notwithstanding, and albeit tentatively, this does suggest that local party efforts both between and during elections do make a difference to electoral outcomes. They just do so in different ways to each party. Consequently, advocates of both inter-election and campaign activity by local parties find some support in evidence from the Scottish constituencies.
Conclusion

Sartori (2005: 8) highlights the importance of the power of penetration of grassroots party organisations and the intensity of their activities as an indicator of the health of political parties. More colloquially, it is important to a society’s political life that parties are close to the people they serve. Indeed, the Scottish parties used the rhetoric of ‘bringing politics closer to the people’ to justify the case for devolution. When the parties’ own organisation is examined however, it would appear that they are not particularly rooted to the communities they aspire to represent. This adds further evidence to the argument, evident elsewhere, that parties are increasingly rooted in civil society, but instead have come to penetrate the institutional apparatus of state (Katz and Mair, 1995). On the other hand, it also adds evidence from a sub-national election, in this case for the Scottish Parliament, to the case that local party activity does make a difference to party performance.

There are some specific grounds for concern in the Scottish case. Firstly, the only country with a substantially lower ratio of party members to electors, and not therefore likely to be accounted for by measurement error, in Mair and van Biezen’s (2001) overview of membership developments is Poland. There parties’ weak roots in society can be accounted for by the legacy of communism (Szczerbiak, 1999). Scotland has no such legacy and this low level of penetration is a sign that Scotland performs poorly against other advanced democracies. Secondly, it also raises questions about the democratic legitimacy of parties and party candidates when so few activists campaign for them during key sets of elections. Particularly with Labour in 2003, and with the other
parties in the aftermath of the May 2007 Scottish council elections, many of these activists will also be elected council representatives thereby leading to a potential conflict between their council representative and party political roles. Whether councillors or not, small proportions of activists hinder the ability of voters to make electoral choices based on direct contact by parties. It also hinders the ability of parties to campaign extensively across their constituencies. If, even during elections, parties have few and relatively inactive grassroots organisations to act as ‘ambassadors in the community’ (Scarrow, 1996), then the primary experience Scottish voters have of party politics is through the highly critical Scottish media. Although calling this a ‘crisis’ may be to overstate the case, it does not do so by much. This is a cause for considerable concern in a society where political parties are a central part of the mechanism of representation and government through a new institution, yet where electoral participation declined to less than half of the Scottish electorate, around 49 per cent, in the 2003 parliamentary elections. If the party-based aspects of Scottish representative democracy discussed in this paper are not to decline further, each of the four main parties, and Scottish policymakers, ought to actively consider how this situation might be stabilised and reversed. They are all likely to benefit from doing so.
References


Rare comparative exceptions tend to be focused on general elections, for instance Denver and MacAllister, (2003) and Mitchell (2005), and party competition (Bennie and Clark, 2003). The focus is seldom grassroots party organisation. The tendency post-devolution has been for single party studies, particularly of Labour. These include the studies in Hassan (2004b), and others such as Laffin and Shaw (2007). Other party studies include: Bennie (2004), Lynch (2002b), McEwen (2002) and Seawright (2002).

Although the words constituency, local and grassroots are used interchangeably throughout, the focus of the analysis is Scottish constituency parties, not parties based on municipality, ward or any other conception of locality.

The Scottish Socialist Party and Green Party both made breakthroughs in this election and it would have been desirable to include them in the survey. This was investigated. However, neither has organisation which would allow them to be comparable across constituencies with the four main parties and therefore they were not part of this research. SSP membership was around 2,800 at the time of the 2003 survey, while membership of the Greens stood at 780 (Bennie, 2004: 40).

41.1 per cent of Constituency Labour Parties (CLPs) responded, 38.4 per cent of SNP Constituency Associations (CAs), 54.8 per cent of Liberal Democrat local parties, and 34.2 per cent of Conservative Constituency Associations (CAs). Respondents were constituency party secretaries. The small N nature of the study means that data in the following tables are rounded up to the nearest whole number.

I am grateful to the 2005 constituency campaigning team for access to their Scottish-level 2005 data.

Based on an electorate of 3,857,631. The figure is Crown Copyright and provided by the General Register Office for Scotland.

Orkney and Shetland are treated as two separate constituencies in Scottish parliament elections, but as one constituency in general elections. Constituency boundaries on the mainland prior to 2005 were the same for both parliaments.

Adjusted by multiplying the mean 2005 figure by 59 (the number of 2005 Westminster constituencies) and then dividing by 73 (the number of 2003 Scottish Parliament constituencies). The Conservatives are not reported since only three constituency associations responded to the 2005 survey.

M/V arguably means close contacts between the party and its electorate (Bartolini, 1983: 189). However, this assumes parties have stable electorates. Consequently, a rise in the M/V ratio might actually be triggered by a decline in a party’s votes share (Katz et al., 1992: 331), not something that vote-seeking parties would normally prefer to see happen. The M/E ratio is preferred by Katz et al. (1992: 333-334) because it allows comparison across countries, between parties and over time. Nevertheless, one argument against M/E is that, because it cannot recruit members from the voters of other parties, it does not provide a realistic impression of a party’s penetration into society (Widfeldt, 1999: 109). There are therefore arguments in favour of each measure (Scarrow, 2000: 87).

The sole exception to this is the Conservatives, where 71 per cent hold fundraising events on an occasional or frequent basis.

The first step in doing so was to assess whether the level of reliability in the variables to be included in the index is internally consistent. In this instance, they produce a Cronbach’s alpha of .8474, thereby indicating that they do indeed have a high degree of internal reliability and are suitable for index creation. For the use of a similar additive index technique see Whiteley and Seyd (2003: 310).

These figures are interesting because the 2003 local government elections were held on the same day as those for the Scottish parliament. Consequently, both campaigns ran concurrently. Arguably these sub-constituency figures provide a snapshot of the extent of campaigning for council seats. Indeed, they echo the pattern of candidates forwarded by the four main parties that contested the 1,222 council seats. Labour and the SNP had most with 920 and 969 respectively, while the Conservatives fielded 798 and the Liberal Democrats forwarded least with 676. The outcome of the parliamentary election was very similar to the results of the local government elections (Clark 2005).

Low effort relates to a score between 16 and 21.73, medium effort to a score of 21.73 to 58.7 and high effort to a score of between 58.7 to 80. Reliability analysis was carried out prior to creating this index and a Cronbach’s Alpha of .845 achieved thereby indicating that these are suitable variables for creating an index.

Denver and Hands (1997: 276-278) argue that this a more appropriate measure than change in votes share. This is because local parties are actually trying to maximise their share of the electorate, which includes
new voters, previous abstainers, those who have moved to the constituency and so on. Moreover, it also provides a control for turnout; voteshare is dependent on the actual number of people who voted, not those who were eligible to vote.

15 This was relaxed in order to highlight any coefficients that were close to significance but not quite achieving the standard levels of .05 or .01 because of the small N nature of the study.

16 In May 2007, the electoral system for Scottish council elections changes from first-past-the-post to the Single Transferable Vote (STV). The likely outcome at the time of writing (March 2007) is a substantial decline in the number of Labour councillors, an increase in the numbers of councillors for the other three main parties. Consequently, it is likely that there will be fewer Labour controlled councils and more which either require coalition or some other form of administration.