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## ***The Lost Voters of Scotland : Devolution Disillusioned or Westminster Weary?***

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## **Abstract**

This article examines the reasons behind the low turnout in Scotland in the 2001 UK general election. While turnout was uniformly low across Britain a number of Scottish specific factors could potentially explain what happened north of the border. We start by investigating the extent to which Westminster is still thought to matter in Scotland. This is followed by a discussion of attitudes towards devolution itself. The final part looks at whether devolution has failed to stem a growing voter disinterest in elections that is to be found both north and south of the border. The importance of Westminster has by no means diminished with the advent of devolution, and while there is considerable unease about the parliament's performance this is not found to have an impact on turnout. Therefore we conclude that devolution has not acted as a buffer to the Britain wide malaise that existed at the 2001 general election and that Scottish politics is still very much affected by UK-wide influences.

## **Introduction**

One of the aims of devolution was to increase Scots' sense of trust and confidence in their system of government (Dewar, 1998). Yet far from strengthening the bonds between voters and politicians, the immediate advent of devolution has seen voters stay away from the ballot box in record numbers. In the first election to the Scottish Parliament in 1999, the turnout was just 58.2%, down no less than 13 points on the already relatively low figure recorded in the 1997 UK general election. And then in the 2001 UK general election, the experience was repeated with just 58.1% going to the polls. Such voter disinterest was hardly the outcome devolution was meant to deliver.

So it appears that perhaps devolution should be put in the dock. Rather than strengthening the bonds between voters and politicians, perhaps devolution has weakened them. There would appear two alternative explanations why this might be so. The first is that the decline in voter turnout is an unintended consequence of the success of devolution. If the Scottish Parliament has come to be regarded as the political crucible of the nation, then perhaps Westminster, and thus a Westminster election, is no longer regarded as relevant. True, turnout was no higher in the first Scottish Parliament election in 1999 than it was in the 2001 Westminster election. But perhaps the relative importance of the Scottish Parliament has only become apparent to voters since it has been up and running. Or perhaps some voters think that Westminster matters, others the Scottish Parliament, and as a result little more than half the country think it is worth turning up for either kind of election?

The alternative explanation runs along almost the opposite lines. Perhaps devolution has come to be seen as a failure in the eyes of the Scottish electorate, the perceived reality falling far short of the high expectations they had when they voted for it in the 1997 referendum (SurrIDGE and McCrone, 1999)? If so, then whatever trust and confidence they had in politics and the political system before the advent of devolution may have been completely eroded. Disillusioned and cynical about politics, many Scottish voters may have simply decided it is not worth turning out to vote for any kind of election at all.

But perhaps these charges against devolution are misplaced. After all the low turnout in 2001 varied little across Britain (at 59.1% the turnout in England was almost as low as it was north of the border, and the fall in turnout since 1997 was almost as great as well). So if devolution has not achieved the aspirations of its advocates, then perhaps this is because it has not made much impact one way or the other. As a result, far from devolution bringing about a radical and distinctive change to the Scottish political landscape, perhaps it has left voters in Scotland subject to much the same influences on their propensity to vote as their counterparts south of the border? If so, then the challenge is to find what those influences might have been.

So the aim of this article is to establish what clues the low turnout in the 2001 UK general election gives us about the impact of devolution on the mind of the ordinary Scottish voter. We start by investigating the extent to which Westminster is still thought to matter in Scotland. This is followed by a discussion of attitudes towards devolution itself. The final part then looks at whether devolution has simply failed to stem a growing voter disinterest in elections that is to be found both north and south of the border.

## **Data**

Our evidence about voter attitudes north of the border at the time of the June 2001 UK general election comes from the 2001 Scottish Social Attitudes (SSA) survey. Conducted by the National Centre for Social Research Scotland, this survey interviewed a random sample of 1,605 adults aged eighteen plus in the period between June and October 2001. Funding from the ESRC Devolution and Constitutional Change research programme enabled the survey to carry a wide range of questions on attitudes towards devolution and voting behaviour.

Of course, we cannot examine whether devolution has lived up to expectations or why turnout was lower in 2001 than in 1997 simply by looking at voter attitudes in 2001. Many of our key questions had however previously been asked on the 1997 Scottish Election Study (SES) (Brown et al, 1999), the 1997 Scottish Referendum Study (Taylor and Thomson, 1999), the 1999 Scottish Parliamentary Election Study/Scottish Social Attitudes survey (Paterson et al, 2000), and the 2000 Scottish Social Attitudes survey

(Curtice et al, 2001). We thus make extensive use of these surveys in our analysis as well. In addition we also take advantage of the fact that a number of our key questions were also asked on the 2001 British Social Attitudes survey (Park et al, 2002), as a result of which we are able to discern how far the patterns we find in Scotland are different from those in England.

One problem faced by all surveys is that typically they find a higher proportion of people saying they voted than is recorded in the official turnout statistics. Indeed, 70% of the respondents to our 2001 survey said they voted in the general election. This does not, however, simply mean that respondents lie about whether they have voted (Swaddle and Heath, 1989). Indeed, the ‘official’ turnout figure is an underestimate of the proportion of the electorate that votes because of redundancy on the electoral register. But it does mean that surveys tend to be more successful at obtaining interviews with those who did vote than they are with those who did not. However, what is important for our ability to explain why turnout was so low in 2001 is that the trend in turnout across our surveys should mirror the official figures. This it largely does. The 1997 Scottish Election Study recorded a 81% turnout, so the difference between our 1997 and 2001 surveys of eleven points is close to the thirteen point drop in the election result. Meanwhile, the turnout in our 1999 survey is, at 72%, largely in accordance with our expectation that it should be the same as in 2001.

### **Westminster no longer matters**

So we begin by analysing the possibility that Westminster has been rendered irrelevant in the eyes of people in Scotland. The 1999 Scottish Social Attitudes survey asked the following questions:

*When the new parliament starts work, which of the following do you think **will** have most influence over the way Scotland is run . . .*

*And which do you think **ought** to have most influence over the way Scotland is run*

*. . .*

*. . . the Scottish parliament,  
the UK government at Westminster,  
local councils in Scotland,  
or, the European Union?*

These questions were asked again in the 2000 and 2001 surveys, but with the wording updated of the first question changed to ask which institution **does** have most influence. The table below reveals the existence of a significant mismatch between expectations of which body would have the most influence and perceptions of what has actually proved to be the case. In 1999 four in ten thought that the Scottish Parliament would be the main show in town, whereas in 2000 and 2001 just one in six thought this was actually the position. In fact, as many (if not slightly more) have come to think that the EU or local councils have most influence as think the parliament does.

Saying that you think the new parliament *will* have most influence does not of course necessarily imply that you think it *ought* to. So, it could be that back in 1999 more people actually said it would have most influence than wanted it to. However, the table suggests that quite the opposite is true. In 1999 almost twice as many people said that the parliament *ought* to have the most say than said they thought it would have, and the proportion who think this – around three-quarters - has remained static ever since. So, perceptions of which body has the most influence in Scotland are significantly lower than the expectations people held in 1999, and are far short of what people currently think ought to be the case.

**Table 1**  
**Attitudes Towards the Influence of Different Political Institutions in Scotland, 1999-2001**

	<b>Which will have most influence?</b>		<b>Which does have most Influence?</b>
	<b>1999</b>	<b>2000</b>	<b>2001</b>
Scottish Parliament	41	13	15
UK Government	39	66	66
Local Councils	8	10	9
European Union	4	4	7

**Which ought to have most influence ?**

	<b>1999</b>	<b>2000</b>	<b>2001</b>
Scottish Parliament	74	72	74
UK Government	13	13	14
Local Councils	8	10	8
European Union	1	1	1
<i>N</i>	<i>1482</i>	<i>1663</i>	<i>8</i>

*Source: SSA 1999-2001*

We have then two contradictory pieces of information. Scots would prefer the Scottish Parliament to be the most influential body in Scotland, but Westminster is still seen to be pre-eminent in practice. But perhaps we can paint a clearer picture if we look at people's perceptions of whether the outcome of Westminster and Scottish Parliament elections matter. Perhaps the former are no longer regarded as important despite Westminster's perceived pre-eminence? We can examine this by looking at the answers to the following questions:

*Some people say that it makes no difference which party wins in elections, things go on much the same. Using this card, please say how much of a difference do you think it makes who wins in elections to the Scottish parliament?*

*And how much of a difference do you think it makes who wins in general elections to the UK House of Commons?*

- A great deal*
- Quite a lot*
- Some*
- Not very much*
- None at all*

If Westminster has become secondary to Holyrood in the public's mind then we might expect people in Scotland to think that the outcome of general elections to the UK House of Commons makes less of a difference than do people in England. Moreover, they could be expected to think that the outcome of Westminster elections is less important than that of Holyrood elections. But, as the next table highlights, this is not the case. Rather, three points stand out. Firstly, the proportion of people in Scotland who in 2001 thought that who wins elections makes a difference was practically the same for Westminster elections (45%) as it was for Holyrood contests (43%). Secondly, the proportion of people in Scotland who said that the results of elections make a difference declined (by similar amounts) in respect of both Westminster (nine points), and Holyrood (13 points) contests. Lastly, the outcome of Westminster elections is thought to be just as important by people in Scotland (43%) as it is by people in England (44%). In short, although Holyrood is very much the people's choice when it comes to who should decide policy within Scotland, there is nothing to suggest that the perceived importance of Westminster in practice has been relegated as a result.

**Table 2**  
**How Much Difference it Makes Who Wins Elections**  
**Scotland and England, 1999-2001**

	<b>% Who think it makes a great deal/quite a lot of difference who win</b>		
	<b>1999</b>	<b>2000</b>	<b>2001</b>
Westminster Elections	54	45	44
Holyrood elections	56	43	na
<i>N</i>	<i>1482</i>	<i>1605</i>	<i>2761</i>

Na = not applicable

*Source : SSA 1999, 2001; BSA 2001*

But do people's stated views on the question of how much difference it makes who wins elections make any difference to whether they vote or not? Could it be that although views on this matter are identical north and south of the border, those who think that the outcome of Westminster elections does not matter are less likely to vote in post-devolution Scotland than are voters in England? The following table looks at the relationship in Scotland and in England between turnout in the 2001 general election and attitudes towards the outcome of Westminster elections. It shows that the pattern of

association between turnout and perceptions of the importance of election outcomes was largely the same on both sides of the border. In both countries eight in ten of those who said that the outcome of Westminster elections makes a great deal or quite a lot of difference voted in 2001 compared with around half of those who said that the results make very little difference. It is perhaps then little wonder that the turnout in both countries was so similar.

**Table 3**  
**How Much Difference it Makes Who Wins Elections, by Turnout in England and Scotland, 2001**

<b>How much difference it makes who wins Westminster elections...</b>				
<b>% Who Voted in 2001 GE</b>				
	<b>Scotland</b>	<i>N</i>	<b>England</b>	<i>N</i>
Great deal/quite a lot	78	713	79	1203
Not very much/none at all	55	562	52	936

*Source ; SSA, BSA 2001*

### **Devolution Disillusion?**

So Westminster is still very much in the minds of voters in Scotland, or at least it is to the same extent that it is south of the border. But could the low turnout in 2001 in Scotland be – in part at least – a reflection of disillusion with devolution? During the Clause 28 debate in the summer of 2000 one Scottish Labour MP certainly voiced concern that voters would use the record of Labour’s MSPs in Holyrood to pass judgement on Westminster MPs at the next general election (Hassan, 2002). And we have a number of measures to test whether assessments of devolution in Scotland were in any way connected to participation at the 2001 general election. We begin by looking at expectations of the Scottish Parliament.

#### *Expectations versus Reality*

The 1997 Scottish Referendum Survey carried a number of questions designed to tap people’s expectations of the proposed Scottish Parliament. Some of these have

subsequently been repeated on a number of occasions with very little alteration to the wording. Two examples of these questions are:

*As a result of having a Scottish parliament, will **Scotland's economy** become better, worse or will it make no difference?*

*And as a result of having a Scottish parliament, will the **standard of the health service** in Scotland become better, worse or will it make no difference?*

*IF BETTER/WORSE: Is that a lot better/worse or a little better/worse?*

*A lot better*

*A little better*

*No difference*

*A little worse*

*A lot worse*

At the same time we can also examine the answers to another set of questions where at the time of the 1997 referendum people were asked what impact they thought having a Scottish Parliament would have but subsequently were asked about what impact they thought it actually had had.<sup>1</sup> In 2001 these questions read:

*From what you have seen and heard so far, do you think that having a Scottish parliament is giving Scotland a stronger voice in the United Kingdom, a weaker voice in the United Kingdom, or, is it making no difference?*

*Do you think that having a Scottish parliament is giving ordinary people more say in how Scotland is governed, less say, or, is it making no difference?*

*Do you think that having a Scottish parliament is increasing the standard of education in Scotland, reducing the standard of education in Scotland, or, is it making no difference?*

The following table shows the answers these questions elicited between 1997 and 2001. In 1997 expectations were very high. Between two-thirds and eight in ten expected devolution to deliver a positive outcome across the range of subjects covered. Thereafter expectations have fallen while perceptions of actual outcomes do not match the expectations held in 1997. By 2001 less than half of people in Scotland thought that having a Scottish Parliament would mean that Scotland's economy or its health service would become better. And while slightly more than half felt that devolution had given Scotland a stronger voice in the UK, little more than a quarter felt that it had brought

about an improvement in education standards. In short disillusion with the Scottish Parliament appears to have been widespread by the time of the 2001 election, at least as compared with the expectations held by many people in Scotland just four years previously.

**Table 4**  
**Expectations and Perceptions of the Impact of the Scottish Parliament, 1997-2001**

<b>Expectation/Perception</b>	<b>1997 Referendum</b>	<b>1999</b>	<b>2000</b>	<b>2001</b>
Scotland's economy becomes better	64	43	36	43
Standard of NHS become Better	65	49	Na	45
Scotland have a stronger Voice in the UK	70	70	52	52
Ordinary people have more say in how Scotland governed	79	64	44	38
Education standards in Scotland in increase	71	56	43	27
<i>N</i>	<i>676</i>	<i>1482</i>	<i>1663</i>	<i>1605</i>

Na – not asked

Source : 1997: SRS, 1999 – 2001 : SSA

*Evaluations, trust and turnout*

But what impact has this disillusion had? Has it reduced levels of political trust and efficacy? Does it in any way, either directly or indirectly through its impact on levels of trust and efficacy account for the low turnout in the 2001 election, thereby providing a distinctly Scottish account of why so few people voted? As a first step in assessing this proposition we have constructed a political trust scale from respondents' answers to the following three questions<sup>2</sup>:

*How much do you trust British governments of any party to place the needs of the nation above the interests of their own political party?*

*How much do you trust the UK government to work in Scotland's best long-term interest? Please take your answer from this card.*

*Still using the card, how much do you trust the Scottish parliament to work in Scotland's best interests?*

The next table shows the relationship between three measures of perceptions of the Scottish Parliament's performance to date and levels of trust as measured by our scale. It quite clearly demonstrates that those who think that the Scottish Parliament is performing well have higher levels of trust than those who think it is making no difference. For example, nearly half (47%) of those who think the Parliament is giving ordinary people more say in how Scotland is governed have a high level of trust, compared with just over a quarter (27%) of those who think it is making no difference. A similar analysis of the relationship between levels of political efficacy and evaluations of devolution (not presented here) reveals the same pattern: those with positive evaluations have high levels of efficacy while those with negative views have lower levels (see Curtice 2001 for previous examples of this kind of analysis).

**Table 5**  
**Perceptions of the Scottish Parliament, by Level of Trust, 2001**

<b>Scottish Parliament is :</b>	Level of Trust		
	High %	Medium %	Low %
Giving Scotland stronger voice in UK	41	56	4
No Difference	24	64	12
Giving Scots more say in Govt	47	51	4
No Difference	27	64	9
Increasing education standards	46	61	3
No Difference	29	62	9
<i>N</i>	<i>507</i>	<i>907</i>	<i>116</i>

*Source : SSA 2001*

But if disillusion engenders distrust does it also encourage abstention? The next table explores this possibility by looking at the relationship between turnout and both perceptions of the Scottish Parliament and levels of political trust. While the differences in the table appear relatively small they are nevertheless in a consistent direction and are statistically significant, so it would appear that people who said that the Parliament was not making a difference were less likely to vote in the 2001 UK general election than were those people who said it was making an impact. Equally, those with low levels of trust were much less likely to have voted.

**Table 6**  
**Perceptions of the Scottish Parliament and Level of Trust, by Turnout in 2001**

<b>Scottish Parliament is :</b>	<b>Voted in 2001</b>	<b>N</b>
	<b>%</b>	
Giving Scotland stronger voice in UK	70	836
No difference	65	643
Giving Scots more say in Govt	73	604
No difference	66	899
Increasing education standards	75	436
No difference	67	932
<b>Level of trust</b>		
High	75	507
Low	58	116

Source : SSA 2001

*Evaluations of the political system – England and Scotland*

But to demonstrate that disillusion with devolution provides a distinctly Scottish account of turnout in the 2001 election we need to show two things. Firstly, we need to demonstrate that political trust and efficacy have fallen more in Scotland than in England. And secondly, we need to show that evaluations of devolution are still significant once other factors associated with turnout are taken into account. The following table looks at trends in England and Scotland in three key measures of political trust and system efficacy. The first row shows the trend over time in the proportion of people who say they trust governments to place the needs of the nation above the interests of their own political party ‘just about always’ or ‘most of the time’. The next two rows look at the proportions who strongly agree with the following statements:

*Parties are only interested in people’s votes, not in their opinions.*

*Generally speaking those we elect as MPs lose touch with people pretty quickly.*

In order to provide a longer time series readings for the mid 1980s and 1990s were calculated by combining the Scottish samples within the British Social Attitudes surveys in 1986 and 1987, and 1994 and 1996 (the overall responses in these years were very similar).

Two key trends stand out. Firstly, both countries have experienced a similar decline in political trust and increase in cynicism. In particular, despite the advent of the Scottish Parliament political trust fell as sharply in England as it did in Scotland between 1997 and 2000. Meanwhile, so far as system efficacy is concerned, Scotland and England were even more similar in their views in 2001 than had been the case in the mid 1980s.

**Table 7**  
**Trust in Government and Political Efficacy, 1980s-2001**

	Mid 1980s	Mid 1990s	1997	2000	2001	Mid 1980s- 2001 Change
<b>% Trust Government always/most of the time</b>						
Scotland	37	29	29	13	27	-10
England	38	23	34	17	29	- 9
<b>% strongly agree that parties are only interested in votes</b>						
Scotland	11	29	16	24	21	+10
England	18	26	16	26	26	+ 8
<b>% strongly agree that MPs lose touch pretty quickly</b>						
Scotland	11	26	Na	24	22	+11
England	17	25	Na	23	24	+ 7
<i>N Scotland</i>	276	216	882	1663	1605	
<i>England</i>	2511	1972	3150	2887	2761	

*Source: Mid 1980s: BSA 1986 & 1987. Mid 1990s: BSA. 1994 & 1996: BES/SES. 2000 & 2001: SSA*

So it seems that so far as political trust and efficacy are concerned, disillusion with devolution has not made any difference. Although disillusion with devolution may be associated with political trust and efficacy the fact remains that levels of trust in Scotland and England are almost identical, so devolution *per se* cannot be held responsible for any of the trends in the table above.

But what of our finding that disillusion with devolution appeared to have an impact on turnout in 2001? What happens if we put this finding into an appropriate multivariate analysis that also takes into account the impact of perceptions of the importance of the outcome of elections? In the following logistic regression we examine the relationship between turnout and each of: trust; efficacy; perceptions of how much difference Holyrood and Westminster election results have and three evaluations of devolution<sup>3</sup>. As the table demonstrates, efficacy and the perceived impact of election results were significantly associated with turnout in 2001. In contrast our measures of the performance of the Scottish Parliament that had appeared to be significant in the earlier bivariate analysis no longer feature. However, this model explains very little of the overall variance (note the low  $R^2$ ), and in any case recent changes in levels of efficacy, or indeed in any of the other measures we have examined so far, have not been large enough to alone account for the low turnout in 2001. We evidently need to look elsewhere to understand why so few people voted in 2001.

**Table 8**  
**Model of Scottish Turnout at UK 2001 General Election**

	Coefficient	Standard Error
<b>Difference who wins Westminster elections</b>		
Great deal/quite a lot	0.295	0.093 **
Some	0.009	0.101
Not very much/none at all	-0.304	0.095
<b>Difference who wins Holyrood elections</b>		
Great deal/quite a lot	0.293	0.092 **
Some	-0.109	0.096
Not very much/none at all	-0.184	0.096
<b>Level of efficacy</b>		
Very low	-0.450	0.136 **
Low	-0.067	0.098
High	0.073	0.110
Very high	0.444	0.180 *
<b>Scottish parliament is :</b>		
Giving Scotland stronger voice in UK	-0.162	0.172
Weaker voice	0.398	0.266
No difference	-0.089	0.173
Giving ordinary people more say in how Scotland is run		
Less say	-0.361	2.166
No difference	-0.401	2.179
	-0.460	2.166
Increasing education standards		
Reducing education standards	0.136	0.127
No difference	-0.039	0.203
	-0.004	0.106
<b>Level of Trust</b>		
High	0.057	0.111
Medium	-0.005	0.093
Low	-0.052	0.154
Constant	1.312	2.167
Pseudo R <sup>2</sup>	0.073	

Source: SSA 2001

\*\*=Significant at 5% level

\*=Significant at 1% level

N=1482

### **Westminster Weary?**

So far then we have found little evidence that the low level of turnout in the 2001 UK general election in Scotland can be blamed on the advent of devolution. It is certainly not the case that the Scots no longer care what happens at Westminster: two-thirds of Scots believe that Westminster still has most influence on what happens in Scotland anyway, while Scots in general were no less likely than people in England to think that the outcome of the election mattered. True, Scots' expectations of their parliament have not been met and they were slightly more cynical about the political system in 2001 than they were four years previously. But it appears that there is no particular connection between the Scottish Parliament's failure to meet expectations and the decline in Westminster voting, at least not once other factors that influence turnout are taken into account. As for the increase in cynicism about the political process in general, this has affected England as much as Scotland.

In short, it is beginning to appear that, in practice, devolution made little difference to the propensity of Scots to turn out and vote in the 2001 UK general election. Indeed, as the next table shows, this appears even to be true of the relative willingness of supporters of the different parties to turn out and vote. It might have been thought that SNP voters would be particularly likely to see less reason to vote in a UK general election now that the Scottish Parliament is in place. Not only could they be expected to find voting in a Scottish election a more congenial experience, but they are likely to be aware that their party's prospects of winning seats are much lower in a UK general election. And, indeed, we can see that, compared with other parties' identifiers, SNP supporters were relatively less likely to vote in 2001, while this had not been the case in the 1999 Scottish Parliament election. However, we can also see that SNP identifiers were already less likely to vote in the 1997 UK general election, held before the Scottish Parliament was in place.

**Table 9**  
**Turnout in Scotland by Party Identification, 1997-2001**

	1997	<i>N</i>	% Voting 1999	<i>N</i>	2001	<i>N</i>
Conservative	86	140	74	231	75	164
Labour	83	406	71	625	75	735
Liberal Democrat	90	104	81	166	83	154
SNP	78	151	79	290	70	253

*Source 1997 : SES, 1999 & 2001 : SSA*

So, why was turnout so low in 2001 by the standards of previous UK general elections? What made Scots imitate the behaviour of people south of the border? Can we identify one or more apparently Britain-wide influences that might have been responsible and to which devolution did not make Scotland immune? There would appear to be two possibilities. The first is that, perhaps because of social changes they have experienced in common, voters have changed on both sides of the border. We have already seen that they have become more disillusioned even if we have also seen that this does not appear to be an adequate explanation of the low turnout in 2001. But perhaps voters on both sides of the border have become disengaged from the political process and perhaps this accounts for the low turnout?

The second possibility is that, while the propensity of voters to turn out and vote has not particularly changed, what was different in 2001, and perhaps in 1999 too, was that voters in England and in Scotland simply did not receive sufficient stimulus or encouragement to vote. In particular, they may have decided there was little difference between the parties, and thus it did not matter who won. In addition, they may have formed the impression from the opinion polls that the outcome of the election was already a foregone conclusion. In other words, both Scottish and English voters might well have been as engaged or disengaged in the political process as they ever were, but they lacked sufficient political stimulus to persuade them that it was worth going to the polling station.

There is in fact no consistent evidence, as indeed there is not for Britain as a whole (Bromley and Curtice, 2002), that the Scottish electorate was significantly less engaged

in 2001 than it had been in 1997. The next table shows what people said when they were asked after the last two UK elections and the last Scottish election:

*How much interest do you generally have in what is going on in politics...  
... a great deal,  
quite a lot,  
some,  
not very much,  
or, none at all?*

On each occasion around a quarter said that they had a ‘great deal’ or ‘quite a lot’ of interest.<sup>4</sup> It thus seems unlikely that disengagement accounts for the low turnout in 2001.

**Table 10**  
**Trends in Political Interest 1997-2001**

	<b>1997</b>	<b>1999</b>	<b>2001</b>
Great deal	9	6	7
Quite a lot	18	17	19
Some	35	36	33
Not Very Much	30	31	27
None	7	9	13
<i>N</i>	882	1482	1605

*Source : 1997 : SES 1999 & 2001 : SSA*

What then of the stimulus that voters received? Did they form the impression, as content analysis of the British party manifestos suggests they might reasonably have done (Bara and Budge, 2001), that there was in fact little difference between the parties? Or should we bear in mind that Scotland now has a different party system than England, that the main contest is between Labour and the SNP, and whatever narrowing of the difference may have happened to Labour and the Conservatives across Britain as a whole, Scotland’s two main protagonists are still seen as fundamentally divided because of their differing stances on the issue of independence?

**Table 11**  
**Perceived Difference between the Parties, Scotland, 1992-2001**

	<b>1992</b>	<b>1997</b>	<b>1999</b>	<b>2001</b>
<b>Conservative and Labour</b>				
Great	53	32	30	21
Some	28	44	35	39
Not Much	17	20	32	38
<b>SNP and Labour</b>				
Great	na	na	41	33
Some	na	na	40	42
Not Much	na	na	15	19
<i>N</i>	957	882	1482	1605

*Source: 1992, 1997: SES*

The above table indicates that voters in Scotland were certainly less likely to think there was much of a difference between the parties than they had done at any other recent election, including the 1999 Scottish election. Just one in five thought that there was a great difference between them whereas over half took that view as recently as 1992. Moreover, this drop is almost exactly in line with the trend across Britain as a whole, as shown in the next table. Any expectation that perhaps the Conservatives' opposition to devolution up to and including the 1997 referendum would have made Scottish voters more likely to think there was a big difference between them and Labour proves to be erroneous. Instead we find that, as was the case across Britain as a whole (Bromley and Curtice, 2002), the perception that there is much of a difference between Britain's two main governing parties reached an all time low.

Moreover, it is far from clear that the perceived difference between Labour and the SNP gave Scottish voters an alternative reason to go to the polls that their English counterparts lacked. True, appreciably more Scots, one in three, felt that there was a great difference between the SNP and Labour, than felt the same about Labour and the Conservatives. But this figure is not only down on what it was two years' earlier at the time of the first Scottish Parliament election, but is much lower than the 53% recorded for the perceived difference between Labour and the Conservatives in 1992. In short, even the SNP/Labour battle has come to be seen as something of a sideshow.

**Table 12**  
**Perceived Difference between Conservative and Labour, Britain, 1992-2001.**

	<b>1992</b>	<b>1997</b>	<b>2001</b>
	%	%	%
Great difference	56	33	17
Some	32	43	39
Not Much	12	24	44
<i>N</i>	1794	2836	1076

*Source: 1992, 1997: BES; 2001: BSA*

That feeling there is not much difference between the parties does actually influence the probability that someone will vote is shown by the next table. Indeed, such a perception seems to have been particularly important in 2001. Still it might be thought that even the 17 point difference between those who thought there was a great difference and those who did not recorded in 2001 is not particularly large.

**Table 13**  
**Turnout by Perceived Difference between Conservative and Labour 1997-2001**

<b>Difference between Con &amp; Lab</b>	<b>% Voted</b>						<b>Change 1997 - 2001</b>
	<b>1997</b>	<i>N</i>	<b>1999</b>	<i>N</i>	<b>2001</b>	<i>N</i>	
Great	88	286	79	452	78	356	-10
Some	78	383	73	497	70	588	- 8
Not Much	78	177	68	482	61	626	-17

*Source : 1997 : SES, 1999 – 2001: SSA*

One reason why this is so, is because not seeing much of a difference between the parties really only makes a difference to whether someone votes if they do not have strong prior predisposition to go to vote. In other words, a voter needs more stimulus and encouragement to go to the polls the less he or she is politically engaged. We can see this in the next table which shows that amongst those with a great deal or quite a lot of interest in politics, those who did see much of a difference between the parties were

almost as likely to go to the polls as were those who thought there was a great difference. In contrast amongst those with little or no interest in politics, not seeing much of difference between the parties reduced the likelihood of someone voting by around 20%.

**Table 14**  
**Turnout by Perceived Difference and Interest in Politics, 2001**

% Who Voted	Perceived Difference between							
	Con and Lab				SNP and Labour			
Political Interest	Great	N	Not Much	N	Great	N	Not Much	N
Geat Deal/ Quite a Lot	79	115	79	138	83	195	78	53
Not Very Much/None	69	125	50	308	67	149	48	190

*Source: SSA 2001*

This result can be generalised more widely. If indeed, voters in Scotland, like their counterparts in England, failed to go to the polls in 2001 because they did not think enough was at stake – or indeed that the polls were saying that the result was a foregone conclusion – then we should expect to find that turnout should have fallen most amongst those who are least engaged. And the next table lends some support to this argument. Turnout fell by 15 points between 1997 and 2001 amongst those who no interest in politics, but by only ten points amongst those who have a great deal or quite a lot of interest. True, this pattern was even more apparent at the time of the Scottish Parliament election, when turnout was down on 1997 by only two points amongst the politically interested, but by thirteen amongst those with no interest in politics at all. Equally, the pattern is not as strong as it was across Britain as a whole in 2001 where there was only a six point drop in turnout amongst the politically interested and no less than a 28 point drop amongst those with no interest at all. But even so it appears that lack of stimulus did play a role in depressing turnout in Scotland much as it did in the rest of Great Britain.<sup>5</sup>

**Table 15**  
**Turnout and Political Interest, 1997-2001**

<b>Political Interest</b>	<b>% Who Voted</b>						<b>Change 1997-2001</b>
	<b>1997</b>	<i>N</i>	<b>1999</b>	<i>N</i>	<b>2001</b>	<i>N</i>	
Great Deal/ Quite a lot	90	240	88	350	80	413	-10
Some	85	309	75	527	75	525	-10
Not Very Much	75	268	67	467	63	439	-12
None	54	64	41	138	39	226	-15

*Source: 1997: SES; 1999-2001: SSA*

So it appears that neither Scotland's different party system nor the advent of devolution was able to insulate the country from the impact of a perception that grew throughout Britain that there was too little at stake for it to be worth voting. To this perception may well have been added – though we cannot test it directly from our survey evidence – that the result was a foregone conclusion. The final British polls gave Labour on average no less than a fourteen point lead over the Conservatives, while those taken north of the border only reinforced the message by putting Labour as much as 20 points ahead. True, voters had received much the same message from the polls as in 1997, but this time around it had the added disadvantage of signalling that little or nothing was going to change. Little wonder perhaps that despite devolution politics seemed so dull.

## **Conclusion**

Our analysis fails to uphold the most serious of the possible charges against devolution. It may not have lived up to expectations, but the failure of voters to go to the polls in the 2001 UK general election cannot be blamed on their disillusion with devolution. Those who now think the Scottish Parliament is not achieving very much were only slightly less likely to vote in the general election than were those who think it is and once other factors are controlled for this relationship disappears. Despite the fears of the critics of devolution, it does not appear to have done any damage to the bond between Scotland and Westminster.

On the other hand devolution does not appear to have done much good either. It has evidently failed to insulate Scottish voters from adverse trends that were taking place in the rest of Britain. Scottish voters were less likely to trust their government or feel efficacious about their political system in 2001 than they had been in 1997, and in this they were similar to the voters in England. Meanwhile, despite the potential drawing power of an alternative battle between Labour and the SNP, Scottish voters, just like English voters, were less likely to think that there was much difference between the parties, and this appears to have been one reason at least why those voters who needed some encouragement to go to the polls were particularly likely to stay at home. It appears that after all Britain-wide politics is still alive and kicking in the post-devolution world (see also Curtice, 2002).

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<sup>1</sup> Taking the example of education standards, the wording has altered as follows: 1997: "Would a Scottish Parliament improve the standard of education in Scotland, reduce the standard of education, or would it make no difference?"  
1999: "Will a Scottish Parliament increase the standard of education in Scotland, reduce the standard of education, or will it make no difference?"  
2000: "From what you have seen and heard so far, do you think that having a Scottish Parliament is going to increase the standard of education in Scotland, reduce the standard of education in Scotland, or will it make no difference?"  
2001: "From what you have seen and heard so far, do you think that having a Scottish parliament is increasing the standard of education in Scotland, reducing the standard of education in Scotland, or, is it making no difference?"

<sup>2</sup> The scale was constructed by adding the respondent's scores for each item (ranging from 1 = just about always to 4 = almost never) and dividing by the total number of items. These results were then rounded to the nearest integer. As just two people had the highest score those with scores of 1 and 2 were combined. The reliability of this scale as measured by Cronbach's alpha was 0.72.

<sup>3</sup> The three items were: standards of education; ordinary people having more say in how Scotland is run; Scotland having a stronger voice in the UK.

<sup>4</sup> Another potential indicator of engagement is strength of party identification, which it has long been recognised is in long-term decline (Crewe and Thomson, 1999). Although the same question about strength of party identification was asked on the 1997 Scottish Election Study, and the 1999 and 2001 Scottish Social Attitudes surveys, in 2001 it came after a different question about the direction of a respondent's identification than it did in 1997 or 1999. This same difference also exists in the British Election and British Social Attitudes surveys, and the evidence of those surveys suggests that the sequence of questions used on the 2001 survey regularly reports a lower incidence of strong party identification than that used

on the 1997 and 1999 surveys (Bromley and Curtice, 2002). As a result we do not attempt to report a trend for strength of party identification. We can however look at the figures obtained by the Scottish booster to the 2001 British Election Study which did use exactly the same sequence of questions as the 1997 and 1999 surveys. This suggests that between 1997 and 2001 there was no more than a gradual continuation of the long-term decline that has occurred in strength of party identification. 52% reported a very or fairly strong identification, down five points on 1997 but up one on 1999.

<sup>5</sup> For example, turnout fell by no less than 33 points compared with 1997 amongst those with no party identification, but by only seven points amongst those with a very or fairly strong party id, a not dissimilar pattern to that across Britain as a whole (Bromley and Curtice, 2002)