



Scotland's volatile political and electoral geography

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This issue features three thought-provoking and insightful essays on Scottish politics. Two of them are by world-leading political geographers, John Agnew and Ron Johnston (and his research team). The third, engaging with the first two, is by the equally distinguished political scientist and polling expert John Curtice. Each sheds intriguing fresh light on the rapidly unfolding landscape of Scottish politics. *Scottish Geographical Journal* has long been a home for scholarship and debate about issues that matter to Scotland and its relationship with the other parts of the United Kingdom and a wider world. Indeed, the journal furnishes a natural home in this regard because most if not all of these issues – land management and conservation, energy and resources, urban and rural change, migration, political governance, and more – are geographical problems through and through. They revolve around geographical questions of place and location, connection and isolation, difference and inequality, actual and perceived borders, and around histories, loyalties and grievances that are articulated as peculiarly Scottish. Politics is one of the most geographical – and as the suite of essays in this issue show, most geographically complex and fraught – of ‘Scottish’ issues, and indubitably brings with it questions of locality and nationality, and communal and sectional identity – of what ‘Scotland’ means, where it belongs, and the direction in which it sees itself moving. If, as a large literature maintains, all politics are at one level or another identity politics, then this maxim has had particular resonance in Scotland since the Devolution Referendum of 1997 and Scotland Act the following year which established the devolved Scottish Parliament (residing since 2004 at Holyrood), and an acute timbre over the last 10 years through a string of elections and plebiscites: the British General Elections of 2010, 2015 and 2017; the Scottish Parliament Elections of 2007 and 2016; the Scottish Independence Referendum of 2014; the EU Membership (‘Brexit’) Referendum of 2016; and the Scottish Local Elections of 2012 and 2017.

Each of these elections produced its own electoral map, and the map has been a prime means of tracking, representing and debating political opinion and trends, and of discerning the relationship between voting behaviour and wider geographical patterns and processes of economic, environmental and social change, for which other maps – of environmental degradation, social deprivation, employment, health, housing, income, investment, public services, for example – have been drawn. The 2016 Scottish Index of Multiple Deprivation, an ‘interactive map’ and the work of geographers working closely with government, is one of the most incisive attempts to bring a range of economic and social variables into a unitary cartographic frame. Maps are now made, used and strewn far and wide across the news and social media, and have created a direct line between academic inquiry, public opinion, and policy and planning arenas. The BBC’s largely cartographic presentation and analysis of the Scottish National Party’s (SNP) landslide in the 2015 General Election – with virtually all of Scotland painted yellow – demonstrated the power of maps to shape public understanding of a country and its political mood, even if the voting maths underlying the map were complex and in some ways ambiguous (Election results, 2015). ‘Maps are a mix of geography, politics and practicality’, a Leader Comment (2018) in *The Scotsman* observed more recently, in connection with Shetland Liberal Democrat MSP Scott Tavish’s argument that locating the islands on a map

of Scotland only served to reinforce their distance from the Scottish mainland and seemingly licensed the Scottish Government's treatment of them as an 'afterthought'. In recent years, and helped by advances in digital cloud and geographical positioning technology, the UK and Scottish offices for national statistics have turned increasingly to maps as means of disseminating information, and thus of fulfilling their public outreach and transparency, and equality and diversity, remits. The [STATISTICS.GOV.SCOT](https://www.statistics.gov.scot) website, for instance, allows one to 'Explore, filter and visualise all our datasets', and find 'data about geographic areas'. It is certainly the case, Tung-Hui Hu avers, that the image of the digital cloud as placeless and unmediated, and even utopian, is contradicted by the fact that data are secreted in vast data banks and centres, behind which darker clouds lurk (2015). In recent weeks we have been reminded by the Cambridge Analytica and Facebook data scandals, which may have influenced the outcome of the 2017 American Election, that these technologies instil cultural and political norms, and mediatise politics, as well as breach privacy, in the process of tracking behaviour and taste in the quest for more 'efficient' and 'personalised' marketing and voting sensors.

These are not entirely new sensibilities and concerns. More than 60 years ago, J. Wreford Watson argued, in this journal, that 'geography is a discipline in distance' which looks to maps and distributions for its measure of the world. 'Human watersheds', he continued, were just as important as natural watersheds, 'channelling the flow of ideas, interests, associations, customs and activities now to one side of them and now to the other', and geographers 'should [thus] concern themselves with the social Himalayas of the world as much as with the physical ones' (1955). Social – and we might add national – barriers are both real and perceived, he insisted, 'may be immense', and a good deal hangs on how they are discovered, analysed, respected or ameliorated. Academic and policy work on political questions in Scotland and elsewhere still pivots on the disclosure and analysis of watersheds and distributions – of what divides and connects groups and localities, and how issues move from one side of a map to another, and often quite quickly. Maps, and the data they generate and upon which they draw, can be both a help and a hindrance in this regard, fostering new interpretative opportunities and augmenting public opinion as well as heralding and fuelling new (and for many 'dark') arts of persuasion and manipulation (spin and surveillance).

As the three essays on Scottish politics in this issue intimate, the fluid map of Scottish elections has kept scholars and pundits guessing, and underscores the humility of the fields – political geography and political science – from which such maps arise, and how far these fields have come since the dark days of Nazi and then Cold War geopolitics. Whether they are invoked or used literally or metaphorically, election maps and statistics are difficult to work with. Political results are now routinely mapped, generally in terms of elections and constituencies. However, and as Jeremy Black explains, 'these results, the aggregations, decisions reached by individuals in precisely known locations on a particular day, are only a guide to the dynamics of politics, [and] more particularly the reasons why people vote' (1997). Each of the three essays in this issue has scientific rigour and policy relevance, and each is alive to both the tendencies and ambiguities in the data they scrutinise, and the maps and figures they use and create.¹ Each provides timely and important examples of the relevance of academic argument and reflection to the realms of government policy and political punditry, and of the significance of geography to both.

Agnew situates the recent spate of elections and task of how to interpret them in a longer historical geography of Scottish nationalism, and in so doing reflects poignantly on the claim he made in his influential 1987 book *Place and politics*, that 'Regional analysis ... suggests that there are numerous "Scotlands"'. He now asks whether there are 'too many Scotlands', and sees this plurality and proliferation partly as an artifice of recent elections and polls (and the sometimes confusing political messages and statistics they have spawned), but also as a material

expression of Scotland's changing and in some ways now fragmented political economy. He argues that it is through a geographic lens that the issue of what has endured and what has changed in the SNP's stake in Scottish nationalism might be addressed, and how its connection with class, regional and religious divides might be gleaned (Agnew, 1987, this issue). Honing to a Scottish scene their geographic analysis of UK elections over the last 30 years, and adding to the important contributions they have made to a literature on electoral geography that goes back to Graham Gudgin and Peter Taylor's landmark 1979 *Seats, Votes, and the Spatial Organisation of Elections*, Johnston and this team (Charles Pattie, Todd Hartman, David Manley, David Rossiter and Kelvyn Jones) sift through Scottish voting statistics between 2010 and 2017. They generate a set of maps, tables and figures which suggest that the shifting fortunes of the SNP might be put down to 'the nature of the competition in individual seats', and note that the Scottish electoral component of the 2017 UK General Election had a significant impact on the composition of the House of Commons (2017). We invited Curtice – one of the UK's leading political pundits, and the academic and media commentator for the influential blog *What Scotland Thinks* (which describes itself as a provider of 'non-partisan information on attitudes to how Scotland and the UK should be governed') – to comment on these two papers. He uses them to support his own take on voting behaviour since the SNP landslide of 2015, which he has also developed in various notable blogs and essays (<http://whatscotlandthinks.org/about-what-scotland-thinks>). With a tighter focus on the 2017 General Election, he explains how, in short order, Scotland has gone from a being country painted SNP yellow (in 2015) to one that is now 'full of marginal seats whose outcome can potentially be decisive in the Britain-wide battle between Labour and Conservative' as a consequence of 'the increasingly even spread' of the SNP vote and 'increased fragmentation of the unionist vote' (Curtice, 2017). He adds that the impact of the Scottish Brexit vote (62% Remain) on the country's future relations with Britain and the EU is still unclear.

Curtice stresses just how unstable the political map of Scotland now is, and this neatly summarises the sentiment of the other two essays. At the same time, it is interesting to track the different ways and extent to which the three essays bring wider economic and social considerations into focus. The maps, diagrams and discussions of voting found in these three essays serve as means not only to understand Scotland's volatile political and electoral scene better, but also to recognise – and both honour and challenge – the conflicting and shifting convictions that this vista harbours and reveals.

Note

1. On some of the wider ways in which a critical – human and environmental – geography now revolves around this quest, and how it breaks down an older and in many ways misleading dichotomy between a 'positivist' (scientific, empirical, data-driven, putatively objective and politically naive) geography and a 'post-positivist' (interpretative, subjectivist and politically savvy) one, see Wylie (2009). Over their long careers Agnew and Johnston have both been instrumental in carefully and resourcefully breaking down this divide.

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