3
Parties and Leaders

Although the Scottish Parliament has often been presented as a form of ‘new politics’, it is essentially a Westminster-style Parliament (Mitchell 2010b). Its electoral system is its most obvious distinguishing feature but in terms of the classic functions of parliaments (Copeland and Patterson 1994: 154), Holyrood is part of the Westminster family. This is evident in its linkage function, the relationship between the electorate and the government – in choosing the legislative branch, Scottish voters also (indirectly) choose the executive branch.

Voters’ attitudes to the contending parties are therefore crucial. Indeed, while all of the chapters in this book are, in some way, shape or form, concerned with voters’ attitudes to parties – to the social groups that they defend, to their policies and broader ideologies, to their records in office, to their relationships with Westminster – the particular focus of this chapter is on voters’ impressions of the parties themselves. Do voters feel allegiance to one of the competing parties and, if so, does that loyalty translate into a vote for that party? Do they at least like some parties more than other parties, and what does the pattern of likes and dislikes tell us about the nature of party competition in Scotland? What images do the parties project to the electorate? Which – if any (amid general public scepticism about politics) – are seen as trustworthy or positive, or in touch with ordinary Scots?

Voters’ impressions of a party are often affected by their impressions of its leader. Butler and Stokes highlighted the importance of party leaders in British elections (Butler and Stokes 1974: ch.17).
This is particularly relevant in a system of government in which the executive is chosen from within the legislature and electoral competition is often presented as a competition to become chief executive between different party leaders. It has become customary within the Westminster system for the leader of the largest party to form the government. In strict constitutional terms, as is the case in practice in many multi-party polities in which no single party dominates, this need not be the case. Indeed, Gordon Brown as leader of the Labour Party sought to hang on to office as Prime Minister despite his party coming second to the Conservatives after the 2010 UK general election. Nonetheless, the general expectation as expressed in media commentary was that the leader of the largest party would form the government. The Scottish Parliament’s electoral system created opportunities for a break with the British tradition; however, to date it has proved no less British than Westminster in that the leader of the largest party is assumed to have the right to become First Minister.

Holyrood does break with Westminster’s tradition through an electoral system (described in Chapter 1) that dramatically increases the likelihood that the largest party in the parliament will not secure a majority of seats, resulting in coalition and even minority governments. Under successive Labour-Liberal Democrat coalition governments between 1999 and 2007, Labour, the larger party in both sessions, held the office of First Minister with the Liberal Democrats having the post of Deputy First Minister as the junior partner. From 2007 to 2011, Alex Salmond’s position within his party as First Minister leading a minority government (Mitchell et al. 2012: 46–49), combined with media coverage that portrayed the SNP leader as presidential, may have enhanced the importance of ‘leadership’ in the 2011 election.

A leader perceived to be capable and honest helps convey an image of his or her party sharing those characteristics. Strictly speaking, the electoral choice is between constituency candidates or party lists; however, given their roles in electioneering and as potential chief executives, in modern politics party leaders have become the focus of choice themselves. This may be actively encouraged by the parties: in 2007 and again in 2011, the SNP appeared on the list ballot paper in each region as ‘SCOTTISH NATIONAL PARTY Alex Salmond for First Minister’. Each of the main parties arrange media events with