From before the first devolved contest in 1999, there have been concerns about the extent to which Scottish voters would use Holyrood elections to focus on the stuff of domestic politics, and to hold the Scottish government accountable, rather than to pass comment on the performance of the Westminster government or to express their views on recent or future constitutional change. In the terms introduced in the opening chapter, the question was whether these were first- or second-order elections (Reif and Schmitt 1980). We also noted in Chapter 1 that subsequent work has long since refined that simple dichotomy, instead positing a continuum from purely second order to purely first order. In this context, the second-order extreme of that continuum would be a Scottish election entirely driven by events and personalities at Westminster, while the first-order extreme would be one in which politics at the UK level was entirely irrelevant and voters chose purely according to what was going on at Holyrood. Put simply, the question concerns the ‘Scottishness’ of this election.

Borrowing from the scale conventionally used (including in Chapter 2 of this book) to measure national identity, Denver and Johns (2010) characterized the 2007 election as ‘More Scottish than British’ – that is, closer to the first- than to the second-order end of the continuum sketched above. It was also appreciably more Scottish than the first two devolved contests. Voting in those elections, as described by Paterson et al. (2001) and Curtice (2006), was considerably influenced by evaluations of the UK government but, even more so, by attitudes to devolution itself. In both elections, party
choice reflected above all voters’ attitudes towards the Parliament and towards the possibility of further constitutional change, and seemed to have rather little to do with goings on at Holyrood.

There is an obvious reason why 2007 was a more Scottish election. Devolution had had another four years to bed in and so the elected Scottish government was a more familiar, a more powerful and a more prominent player. For the same reasons, we would expect the 2011 election to be still more Scottish – that is, to fall closer to the first-order end of the continuum. The impact of the Scottish government’s policies and performance on the average voter is strengthening with each election. Moreover, the devolved arena is the focus of considerable media attention. Coverage such as the televising of First Minister’s Questions is a specific example of a more general commitment to cover Scotland not just as a region with distinctive attitudes and reactions to Westminster politics but as a polity in itself. In sum, devolution has enhanced a Scottish political arena that, though sharing reciprocal influence with Westminster’s events and personalities, is increasingly distinct from the UK political arena. Scottish voters inhabit two political worlds (Blake et al. 1985).

Adopting this notion of two worlds, or two parallel arenas, the relevance of the first- to second-order model of elections becomes more questionable. We have already noted in Chapter 1 that Scotland’s semi-proportional electoral system and distinct party system thus make it difficult to assess the ‘order’ of Scottish Parliament elections (Reif and Schmitt 1980). Holyrood and Westminster are not simply two alternative arenas in which the same politics are played out. The rules, the players, and above all the relative strength of those players are all quite different. The SNP did not edge the 2007 election because they were a suitable channel for protest voting against Labour’s record at the UK level. It was because, in a Scottish-only election, the SNP becomes a viable contender for office and was marginally preferred to a Labour-led Scottish government whose record left voters generally unimpressed (Johns et al. 2010).

There is another reason why, if we think of Scottish elections as taking place in a distinct political arena, assessing whether these are first order, second order or something in between may be to address the wrong question. The notion of the ‘order’ of an election gives primacy to relative importance – how much voters see at stake in these elections compared with those to Westminster or to local councils.