

NATIONAL ARCHIVES

IRELAND



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Northern Ireland Election Results, 1979

1. With the significant exception of the DUP the election results will have disappointed all of the North's established political parties. On the unionist side the OUP which had been hoping to maintain its influence in another 'hung' Parliament found itself at the loss of two of its three Belfast seats. In the city only the Rev. Bradford's seat in South Belfast, in which there was no DUP candidate, remained in OUP hands.

2. While the DUP did very well in terms of seats it would be wrong to deduce that there has been any significant increase in the party's level of popular support. Comparisons with previous general elections are difficult because of the operation in 1974 of the UUUC pact. However in Paisley's own constituency of North Antrim his own share of the vote which rose from 63.5% in February, 1974 to 72.6% in October of that year (when there was no other unionist candidate) fell back to 51.7% on this occasion. The overall DUP share of the vote at 10.2% compares with 12.6% in the '77 local elections and 14.7% in the Convention elections (differences in number of constituencies contested etc. must however be taken into account).

3. The OUP share of the poll was 36.6% which was very evenly distributed between Belfast and rural seats. The combined OUP/DUP/UUUP vote at 52.5% compares with 51.1% for the UUUC in February 1974 and 58.4% in October of that year. OUP anguish at the unexpected loss of 2 seats is however unlikely to be assuaged by these figures. The rivalry between the Official Unionists and Paisley is likely to be greatly intensified and the European election on 7 June will provide an early rematch.

4. Alliance hopes of a major break-through at this election were not realised despite it being the only party to offer candidates in all 12 constituencies. The Party will however derive considerable satisfaction from the 29.5% share of the vote obtained by the party leader, Oliver Napier, in the, for Alliance, previously uncontested North Belfast constituency. While the party's overall share of the vote rose from 6.4% in October 1974 to 11.9% this was largely due to an increase in the number of candidates and represented a cut-back from the 14.2% vote in the 1977 local elections. The results in North and South Belfast with increases of 1.6% and 2.0% on October 1974 are perhaps more indicative of the party standing in the Belfast area; in South Antrim their share of the poll increased by 0.9% while in North Antrim the intervention of an OUP candidate was probably responsible for a fall of 2.7%. These results would appear to indicate that the Alliance effort to squeeze the vote of the other parties, particularly on the unionist side, has reached its limit in the North's present political climate.

5. From the SDLP point of view the results were very much a mixed bag. On the one hand the expected assault on the SDLP vote in the Belfast area by the Republican Clubs failed to materialise in anything like the strength expected. The party's share of the Belfast vote nevertheless fell from 18.2% in October 1974 to 16.2%. This would appear to be mainly due to a poor performance by Pascal O'Hare in North Belfast. The SDLP vote in this constituency fell from 24.1% to 18.5%. The Republican Clubs, which did not contest this constituency in 1974, only got 4.5% of the vote; there was obviously an element of abstention on the part of previous SDLP voters. In West Belfast, Gerry Fitt slightly increased his share of the vote from 49.0% to 49.5% on a smaller poll. Outside Belfast interest was concentrated on how Austin Currie would poll as an 'Independent SDLP' in Fermanagh-South Tyrone. In the event he did very badly securing only 10,785 votes (17.3%).

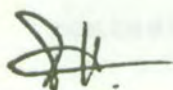
Overall the SDLP's share of the vote in the eight rural constituencies (including Currie) fell from 23.4% to 20.9%. This was attributable in the main to the IIP vote which was 3.3% of the total Northern Ireland vote.

6. Apart from West Belfast where the SDLP share rose very slightly on a substantially reduced poll and South Belfast where a small increase was secured from a tiny base the only constituency in which the SDLP improved its share of the vote was Armagh. Here Seamus Mallon pushed his vote up from 19,855 (31.8%) to 23,545 (36.1%) largely at the expense of the Republican Clubs. In Derry, North Antrim, South Antrim, South Down, Mid Ulster and North Belfast the party's share of the vote fell both in absolute and percentage terms. With the exception of the Belfast seat and South Antrim this was in each case attributable to the votes polled by IIP candidates. The extent of the reduction in the percentage of the vote was as follows: Derry 10.2%; North Antrim 5.4%; South Antrim 3.1%; South Down 8.1%; Mid Ulster 10.7% and North Belfast 5.6%.

7. The IIP contested four constituencies - Derry (McAteer); North Antrim (Turnley); South Down (Markey) and Mid-Ulster (Fahey). As indicated above the IIP got 3.3% of the total vote or 4.4% of the vote in the eight rural constituencies which of course is where the four party candidates were standing. In all cases this was to the detriment of the SDLP's share of the poll. It was only however in the Mid-Ulster constituency that the party's vote materially affected the result. Fahey got 12,055 (18.4%) which was 2,072 votes more than Dunlop's majority over the SDLP's Paddy Duffy. The IIP's share of the vote in the other constituencies was Derry 8.6%; North Antrim 5.6% and South Down 2.9%.

8. As mentioned above the Republican Clubs did less well than expected. With 7 candidates they secured 1.7% of the vote (2.4% in Belfast). The party's most successful candidate was Brian Brennan in West Belfast who got 6.9% of the vote; this was 1.1% less than the party's vote in October 1974. The Clubs did particularly badly in the eight constituencies outside Belfast. In these areas its share of the vote fell by more than half from 3.6% to 1.5%. While in Armagh the votes probably went to the SDLP, in Derry, South Down and especially in Mid-Ulster they appear to have gone to the IIP.

9. The other minor parties UPNI and NILP both had their share of the vote reduced even more than in previous elections to 1.2% and 0.6% respectively. In North Belfast UPNI leader Mrs. Dickson had 4,220 votes which it could be argued would in the absence of a UPNI candidate have been most likely to split in favour of Alliance and perhaps have given them victory in that seat. Otherwise candidates for these parties had no impact on the results.



P. Hennessy

9 May 1979