

An Chartlann Náisiúnta
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NI Local Elections Results 1997

General Assessment

1. The Local Elections results show a continuation of trends evidenced in the recent Westminster and Forum elections i.e. a growing Sinn Féin vote and a rise in the Nationalist share of the overall vote.

2. Sinn Féin made its big electoral breakthrough in the Forum and Westminster elections and the results from the local elections show that the new higher level of Sinn Féin support has also carried through on this occasion.

3. There has clearly been a major shift in the relative positions of Nationalism and Unionism at local government level. Unionists now control fourteen of the twenty-six Councils, Antrim, Ards, Armagh, Ballymena, Ballymoney, Banbridge, Carrickfergus, Castlereagh, Coleraine, Craigavon, Larne, Lisburn, Newtownabbey and North Down. The net result is that only 49% of the population now live in District Council areas which are Unionist controlled. Nationalists control nine Councils (Cookstown, Derry, Down, Limavady, Magherafelt, Moyle, Newry and Mourne, Omagh and Strabane) while three (Fermanagh, Belfast and Dungannon) have no group in overall control.

4. The headline of this election is undoubtably the loss of Unionist control in the North's largest council, Belfast City. Demographic changes within the city boundaries had made the eventual loss of Unionist control inevitable but it was not expected to occur at this election. There was an extra-ordinary rise in the Sinn Féin vote in the relatively prosperous Castle ward in North Belfast. The party's vote rose by more than 200% in Castle and SF's Daniel Lavery was elected to the Council. The SDLP made its expected gain in Balmoral in the south of the city and the two Unionist loses tipped the Council out of Unionist control.

5. This was always going to be a difficult election for the SDLP which had to contend with a more powerful Sinn Féin. It is in overwhelmingly Nationalist areas that Sinn Féin do well and consequently they are in direct competition with the SDLP for seats in these areas. The SDLP, however, has managed to broaden its base and is now represented in 3 new Councils, Larne, Castlereagh and Ards. However, this expansion in strongly Protestant areas was not enough to stop the party suffering a small loss in its vote and a net loss of seats.

6. As with the Forum and Westminster elections, these results represent a triumph for Sinn Féin which has greatly increased its number of seats. The new SF seats came from across the political spectrum, with gains from the Unionists as well as the SDLP. Sinn Fein possess the best electoral machine in Northern Ireland which targeted seats in key areas in Belfast, Cookstown, Fermanagh and Strabane. It was largely through the efforts of Sinn Féin that these Councils have been taken out of Unionist control. Sinn Fein also benefited from a greater tendency of SDLP voters to transfer to SF. In previous local elections, SDLP voters favoured the Alliance party with its transfers but Sinn Féin has now taken over as the party which received the highest proportion of SDLP transfers.

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7. For the two large Unionist parties the results have been very disappointing and they have seen large areas of Northern Ireland slip from their control. There has been a common trend among Unionist spokespersons of blaming the Secretary of State, Mo Mowlam and Unionist voter apathy for their relatively poor showing. The Secretary of State was portrayed as trying to influence the vote in Sinn Féin's favour by arranging talks between her officials and SF on election day and compounding this "error" by visiting resident groups in Garvahey road, Lower Ormeau and Dunloy on the same day.

8. The UUP suffered badly in Belfast where it lost seats to Nationalists and to the PUP. It failed to retake Limavady and suffered from the low Unionist turnout. However, it remains the largest party in Northern Ireland and retained the bulk of its seats. The longer terms trends are more worrying for the UUP. The party's vote has fallen by 3.5% since it secured 31.4% in the 1989 local elections.

9. The DUP failed in its goal of re-taking Ballymena and saw an overall reduction in the number of seats it secured, as well as its share of the vote. The DUP has been in decline since 1981 when it secured 26.5% of the vote. In 1985, it secured 24.3%; in 1989 it managed 17.8%; in 1993 its vote fell to 17.3% and in the 1997 local elections it had fallen further to 15.8%. Both the main Unionist parties will be disappointed at their failure to motivate their own electorate.

10. The Loyalist parties will be delighted with their showing in the elections. The PUP now have 6 seats overall including 3 on Belfast City Council and 2 in North Down. The party will be satisfied with impressive high personal votes for its leading figures, David Ervine, Billy Hutchinson and Hughie Smyth. The UDP took 4 seats. However, while they have undoubtably been strengthened by the results, the PUP and UDP still only have a small fraction of the overall Unionist vote.

11. The Alliance party fared reasonably well, with an important gain in the Castle ward in Belfast from the SDLP. Party Chairman, Philip McGarry, lost his seat to his running mate in Balmoral. The party suffered a small loss of % voting share and seats.

12. The Labour party had a good election with Mark Langhammer and Johnny McLoughlin returned with good personal votes. The Women's Coalition won its first seat on a Council when Monica Carr was elected in Down.

Individual Councils

The following is a detailed examination of the results in each District Council. The figures in brackets relate to the 1993 election.

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