

An Chartlann Náisiúnta
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Westminster Election, 1997: Northern Ireland Constituencies
Summary Analysis

1. A statement of the overall position of the parties, and an analysis of each constituency, including an indication of percentage changes in party performance in comparison to the 1996 Forum election and the 1992 General Election, are attached.

2. Total turnout, at 67.1%, was slightly below the recent average.. However, this conceals substantial variation in the levels across the constituencies, which ranged from 57.8% (South Antrim) to 85.7% (Mid-Ulster). Average turnout in unionist-won constituencies was 64.2% (lower in the east), while it reached 75.3% in those won by nationalists. Even in those constituencies where keen intra-unionist battles were predicted (North Down, Strangford, East Belfast) turnout was not high.

3. The total percentage of the vote won by the two main nationalist parties, 40.2%, may have been slightly inflated by turnout factors, but it nonetheless breached the 40% barrier for the first time in any election. The combined vote of the two largest unionist parties fell slightly from 1992, to 46.3%. Sinn Féin, which contested a greater number of constituencies, for the first time came third ahead of the DUP.

4. Of the eighteen seats contested, 10 were won by the UUP (gain in West Tyrone), 3 by the SDLP (loss in West Belfast), 2 by the DUP (loss in Mid Ulster), 2 by Sinn Féin (gains in Mid-Ulster and West Belfast) and I by the UKUP (no change).

5. Undoubtedly the main focus of media attention will be on Sinn Féin's gains. In West Belfast, the redrawing of constituency boundaries had left Joe Hendron with a huge task, and despite tactical voting by unionists (the UUP vote collapsed), which pushed up Hendron's vote, Gerry Adams won comfortably. In Mid-Ulster, a combination of an extraordinarily high turnout and tactical voting by SDLP supporters saw Martin McGuinness oust William McCrea. Moreover, in overall terms, Sinn Féin not only held its 1996 share of the vote, but actually increased it by 0.6%, to 16.1%.

6. The most relevant basis for comparison of the votes of the SDLP and Sinn Féin is probably the 1996 election. In fact, despite Sinn Féin's high profile successes, the SDLP actually widened the margin between the two parties by 2.1%. Its total vote of 24.1% was its best ever performance in a Westminster election. Its three surviving MPs all polled well, and while Sinn Féin did better in each of these constituencies than in 1992 they fell back by comparison with 1996. The SDLP performed solidly in constituencies such as Upper Bann (Bríd Rodgers), South Belfast (Alasdair McDonnell) and South Antrim (Donovan McClelland). They will have been pleased that in North Belfast Alban Magennis came ahead of Gerry Kelly. The SDLP's major disappointment would be West Tyrone, where its failure to attract sufficient support to its candidate, Joe Byrne, as the leading nationalist, allowed the UUP's William Thompson to slip through.

6. On the unionist side, given the numerous constituency pacts between the parties in general elections, the 1996 Forum result is a less accurate basis of comparison than the 1992 Westminster election. By this latter measure, the UUP saw a fall of 1.8% in its vote, and the DUP a gain of 0.5%. However, David Trimble will be able to point to his

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gain of one seat, and the DUP's loss of Mid-Ulster, and this result represents a steadying of the ship for the UUP after the poor performance in 1996. The UUP managed to reassert itself in constituencies such as East Antrim and East Londonderry. However, hoped for gains at the expense of other unionist parties did not materialise.

7. None of the potentially close races in unionist seats actually produced an upset. Peter Robinson and John Taylor both won emphatically, while Robert McCartney's margin of 1500 votes, if not impressive, was more comfortable than rumour had suggested. In summary, therefore, the race on the unionist side was characterised by conservatism and a large measure of apathy.

8. Alliance, with 8.0%, fell short of its 1992 vote by 0.7%, but improved by 1.5% over 1996. It did not collapse in East Belfast or North Down, and did creditably in other parts of the east. Its best performance, in relative terms, was that of Séamus Close in Lagan Valley, but it will have been disappointed that Steve McBride could do no better than fourth in South Belfast.

9. David Ervine did well to come third in South Belfast, but the two other PUP candidates did not make a significant impact - in East Antrim Billy Donaldson came behind the Conservative. The result in East Belfast suggests that supporters of the loyalist parties were disinclined to follow the advice of their leaders to support Reg Empey against Peter Robinson.

10. The Conservatives, who had virtually vanished at the Forum elections, did surprisingly well in some constituencies, with a selection of young, mostly British-based candidates, some of whom reached four figures. While a long way short of their 1992 high-water mark, they could be said to have provided the only swing towards their party in the whole election.

11. The Northern Ireland Women's Coalition met their modest target of 1% of the vote in each of the three constituencies contested by them. The Workers' Party and other minor groupings did as poorly as in the Forum elections.

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